

The Unique Little Town of New Harmony

By JULIE LE CLERC KNOX

New Harmony is interesting not only because of its unusual history, but also because of its present day atmosphere and quaint old houses that look as if they were built to see the stars out. Its founding was a sort of double-jointed communistic movement. First came the Rappites, stolid Germans, with extremely practical notions of the meaning of life, and then the Owenites, with their idealistic plans, their culture and their "Boat load of Knowledge." So this little town enjoys the distinction of being the birthplace of two of the most widely known communistic experiments ever tried out in the United States.

A German sect, whose leader was George Rapp, a peasant from Wurtemberg, came there in 1814, cleared the land, built many of the sturdy old buildings still to be seen and lived there until 1824. The Rappites named their settlement "Harmonie." They sold out to Robert Owen, a renowned reformer and philanthropist from Scotland, who associated with himself William McClure and other early men and women of scientific and literary culture. In 1826 the town was rechristened "New Harmony."

At first sight the town seems to a "stranger within the gates" almost a deserted village, though it has twelve hundred inhabitants, with nothing unusual to recommend it. However, one soon falls under the spirit of the place and its charm grows. More than forty of the old Rappite dwellings are still standing and when they have not been tampered with, they invariably have their entrances turned modestly away from the street.

Probably the most characteristic of the structures is the old fort and granary, with its heavy sandstone walls, its loopholes and iron-barred windows. Next of interest in regard to its original structure, is Rooming House Number 2, a large brick, bearing on its south wall the sun-dial that was first placed on the Rappite Mansion House, and which was saved from destruction when that building was burned in 1844.

The wonderful old "Steeple House" was also destroyed but its lovely doorway with fan-light, stone entrance, cherry doors and golden rose, surrounded by a wreath, and bearing

the date, 1822, adorns the west side of the school building that now occupies the same site. The beautiful rose carving is the work of Frederick Rapp, adopted son of the founder of the settlement. The labyrinth was also his idea but nothing remains of it save a sign marking its site on the edge of the present town.

Where the old Rappite Mansion House once stood, is now a one story building of grey stone, surrounded by pillared verandas. It was erected by Alexander Maclure, prominent in the Owenite régime. Prof. Richard Owen and David Dale Owen, sons of Robert Owen, both made it their homes at different times. In the yard is the famous "Footprint Rock" which the wily, old Rappite leader told his credulous followers showed the mark of the Angel Gabriel's feet when he came to warn the people of the end of the world. This house is in the same square as was once the old fort with which it is said to have been connected by an underground passage, used by Rapp to mystify his disciples. It seems that he was an ingenious leader who did not hesitate to stoop to guile when it suited his purposes.

In the side yard, is the grave of Thomas Say which forms a large hump in the ground like a small Indian Mound. It is a brick vault, in which were placed later the remains of Alexander Maclure, who built it, and his two sisters. At first David Dale Owen was also buried in this tomb but his remains were afterwards removed to Maple Hill. The marble monument on it was brought from New York by way of New Orleans, a slow and uncertain line of transit much used in early days. Thomas Say was one of America's most distinguished scientists. His book on conchology, illustrated by the water-color sketches of his wife, Lucy Sistaire, occupies a prominent place in the New Harmony library.

Next door to the Maclure residence is a strangely fantastic building, surmounted by a Dame-Trot cap sort of a tower, erected by David Dale Owen in 1859, to house his geological and other specimens, gathered during his work as United States Geologist. It is said to have cost \$10,000. Dr. Owen meant the building to serve also for a laboratory, but he died the year after it was completed. A part of his collection was sold to Indiana University for \$30,000 and is housed in Owen Hall, named for him. The remainder of it went to the

Smithsonian Institute in Washington. The house was for a period the dwelling of the family of H. Pestalozzi Owen, son of Richard Owen. Mr. H. P. Owen died in 1914.

One of the most interesting of the houses of New Harmony is the old Fauntleroy Home, now occupied by Miss Mary Fauntleroy, the heart and soul of New Harmony. This ancient frame building is the birthplace of what is claimed to be the oldest woman's club in America, with written constitution and bylaws. The document was drawn up by Robert Dale Owen, uncle of the organizer, Miss Constance Fauntleroy. He was very much interested in promoting the cause of women and he sponsored some of the more liberal of the early laws of the state along that line. The original manuscript minutes of the club and the original copy of the constitution are preserved in the old parlor where the "Minerva Club" held its initial meeting. A descendant of this club, called "The Daughters of Minerva," was founded in 1919 to carry on the ideals of the original.

Aside from all this, the quaint, old domicile has a distinct charm of its own and would have, even if it had not been erected as far back as 1815 by the Rappites and if it had not been, at different times, the home of each of the following distinguished persons: Thomas Say, a great naturalist and his wife, a French artist; Robert Fauntleroy, astronomer and meteorologist in government employ and his wife, Jane Dale Owen, daughter of Robert Owen; Prof. George Davidson, eminent scientist and Ellinor Fauntleroy, his wife; Dr. David Dale Owen, our first United States Geologist and his wife, Caroline Neef; Robert Dale Owen, statesman, author, lecturer and diplomat, and Mary Jane Robinson, his wife. Seven of these came to New Harmony with the "Boat load of Knowledge" in 1826. It has been said by an eminent historian that if these different persons had lived in the east, and had occupied different houses there would have been a shrine for every one of them. This Fauntleroy house, so often honored as a home, was one of the forty-three erected by the Rappites, all built on the same architectural plan and measurements. The heart of the place seems to be a large hall sitting-room with glass doors at both ends. There is a wonderful old rosewood, James Stuart, grandfather clock with brass face, a dog table and quaint old couch and chairs. On each side of the

south door are old walnut cabinets built in the walls by David Dale Owen to display his geological specimens.

The parlor where the Minerva Club was born, is entered from the hall through three folding doors. This room could well sit for the picture of the typical parlor of one hundred years ago. The original walnut mantel, and large fire-place of hand-made brick, burnt mussel shells and sand, are still preserved. There are brass andirons, fender and kettle, all heir-looms. A mahogany pier-table with mirror, is more than one hundred and twenty-five years old. A handsome pair of divans, rose patterned chairs, an old rosewood, hand-carved piano, and priceless bric-a-brac (pottery, Wedgewood, and Bohemian glass) grace this dignified but homey old part of the house.

In these inspiring surroundings those thirteen cultured young women laid the foundation for the intellectual expansion of American women. Some were of the families of the early scientists and literati. Some had been educated abroad or at least had traveled abroad. Three had been presented at the Italian court. All were eminently fitted for this undertaking, far reaching in its influence.

The library, a small but intriguing room adjoins the parlor. The handsome old bookcase contains many volumes and some two hundred pieces of music, autographed by the authors. Portraits of the eminent people who lived in the dwelling house at various times, line the walls. A swivel-chair and library table, once the property of Robert Dale Owen, attract attention. But the *piece de resistance* is the Sheraton mahogany secretary, known to be one hundred and thirty-four years old. On its hospitable drop-leaf is the guest-book inscribed with many distinguished names. There are many names from many states of our own country, but also names from other lands.

The antique hand-carved side-board, silver and china and quaint old center-table of the dining room, invite you to pause and reverently think of the intellectuals who gathered there in times past.

A colonial stair, patterned after that of ancestral Virginia, leads to several upper bed-rooms. The one most filled with the spirit of the past is at the northeast. A four-poster of walnut, a secretary of the same wood, hand made by Josiah

Warren, a half-round table, the work of Robert Fauntleroy, a chest of drawers, once in the family of Joseph Neef, and a mirror three hundred years old brought over from England, in 1830, pique the fancy and charm the eye.

The old Fauntleroy Home stands as a monument to the sturdy Rappites, who builded better than they knew, as well as to the culture of the Owenites and to the pioneer women who, in organizing their Minerva Club, helped to blaze the intellectual trail. It owes much of its charm now to Miss Fauntleroy, who dispenses hospitality in her own inimitable way and pervades the place with the magnetism of her personality. Since 1919 the Indiana Federation of Clubs has owned this place and maintained it as a shrine.

Just a step away is the ancient Rappite cemetery. It occupies about two acres and is surrounded by a brick wall, one foot thick and five feet high, with heavy limestone coping and iron gates. The bricks of the old church were used for this when it was pulled down. Some Indian mounds within the enclosure show that this spot was sacred to the dead back in the time of the Redman's occupancy. There are no markers, as the ground was always leveled immediately after burial and one has a sort of eerie feeling and hesitates to step inside fearing to walk over the dead.

The Library of the Workingman's Institute is a monument to the benevolent and far reaching plans of William Maclure to provide free education for the masses, and also to Dr. Murphy who came to New Harmony as a little, bare-foot Irish lad, and who, in gratitude for the kindly treatment he received there, lavished on the village, the wealth, he, in later years accumulated. The fine new auditorium next door was erected through his generosity and an annual lecture is given there through funds left by him for that purpose. A park of seven acres was also donated by him. On the upper floor of this Library is an art gallery, containing a number of so called "originals" brought from over seas by Dr. Murphy. There is also a museum with countless glass cases filled with all manner of shells, and all sorts of specimens. In the center of the room is the funny old fire engine brought by George Rapp from Pennsylvania in 1814. A smaller room down stairs is filled with Rappite relics—old furniture which they used and samples of things made by them. (They seem to have pro-

duced everything needed in the community). They were spinners and they were weavers. They braided and they built. As a final note there is a gruesome, old Rappite coffin, standing on end, like the ones that Tam O'Shanter saw in Alloway Kirk, and one is almost beguiled into feeling that a second look would reveal a grim old Rappite ghost within, holding in his "could hand a light."

One room contains nothing but books about New Harmony. In this there is what appears to be a bandbox, but which the librarian explains was an infant's coffin. An early settler, fearing her sick baby would die on the way over the ocean, fore-handedly provided herself with this camouflaged little casket for an emergency that fortunately did not occur. One can but wonder if she hoped to fool the sharks or the ship's officers. The Library is said to contain 24,000 volumes. Madame Fretageot, the librarian, a descendant of the pioneer of New Harmony by that name, was most courteous. In fact the entire town seems to feel itself host to a visitor. One of the twenty-six members of the Workingman's Club, organized on the plan of John Ruskin, constituted himself a guide to the writer and showed her about, telling bits of history that fitted in here and there.

One naturally stayed over night at the old Tavern, one of the original Rappite houses. It has the characteristic double stair, like those found in Shakertown, and a flavor of quaintness that must be seen to be thoroughly understood. As far as could be seen this hostelry was a strictly one-man affair, that is, one person appeared to constitute in himself, proprietor, clerk, cook, waiter, bell-hop, host, and whatnot. He carried it all off with efficiency and ease. An extremely interesting personality, he said that he was born in Ireland, spoke several languages, had traveled in far countries with Hagenback's Animal Show, and fought in the World War. His versatility was proved by his facility as factotum of the Tavern and one wondered if "Mine Host of the Tabard Inn" were not a similar personage.¹

No descendants of the Owens were found, and one heard none spoken of as among the present residents. We heard that as late as 1924 a Mrs. Neal, one of the family, had occupied

¹ To the immense regret of the writer, she was too early in the season to see the "gate trees" in bloom. They are from the Orient and were brought from their native habitat by William Maclure and planted at the gateway of his residence. Hence the name "gate trees" instead of the unpronounceable botanical term.

the house, built as a laboratory by David Dale Owen. Rosamond Dale Owen, a strange personality, with a strange career, who has written much that is strange, is the daughter of Robert Dale Owen. She lived at Haifi, in Syria, many years and related her adventures there in her book, *My Perilous Experiences in Palestine*. She claims that she once owned Armageddon. Miss Fauntleroy spoke of hearing from this representative of the Owen family. In speaking of Prof. George Davidson, famous occupant of the Fauntleroy Home at one time, and for whom Mt. Davidson on the western coast is named, Miss Fauntleroy told what a thrill she had enjoyed, sitting in the room, once his library, listening-in to an Easter service, at the foot of the Cross on this mountain, far away.

Stories about New Harmony, *Seth Way*, *The Beckoning Road* and *The Town of the Fearless*, are intriguing tales of this unique settlement from the pen of Caroline Dale Owen Snedeker, great-granddaughter of Robert Owen. This family of the Scotch philanthropist, by some historians, said to have originated in Wales, has proved to be especially gifted and unusual, and America is much indebted to it for the dissemination of culture in early pioneer days.²

² Some of these old buildings appear to have a strange sinking in the knees, as if, too feeble to stand up any longer, they were gradually slipping down into their graves. The ancient pest-house is a particularly pathetic barracks-like structure, shut up and empty, like an old, old person whose usefulness is long since a thing of the past. If it could but speak, no doubt it could tell tragic tales of sickness and sufferings patiently borne and death bravely met. It was with real regret that the writer left this little town, living in its old time traditions, and fascinating quaintness, with plenty of time to play the courteous host to all comers.