

A NATURALIST'S PILGRIMAGE TO NEW HARMONY

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To a naturalist, the place where Thomas Say—"Father of American Zoology"—lived for eight years of his short life, where he did much of his best work, died and is buried, takes the aspect of a shrine to which pilgrimage sooner or later must be made. That place is New Harmony, Indiana, and keeping a promise made to myself long ago, I journeyed thither in the late summer of 1936 to acknowledge my debt to a great pioneer naturalist, a man who blazed the way that I and many of my kind have joyfully followed.

What manner of town New Harmony is, I had but the haziest notion and my three-day stay within its charming environs proved a delightful surprise for much of the place is today as it was more than a century ago when Thomas Say, together with a brilliant company of men and women, walked its quaint and peaceful streets.

New Harmonie was founded by George Rapp in 1814. Hailing originally from Würtemberg, Germany, Rapp, heading a group of sectarians, migrated to Butler County, Pennsylvania, and there in Harmonie, according to the dictates of a peculiar belief set up a thriving community.

The singularities of the Rappite religion and philosophy need not concern us, but the fact that these fearless Germans were gifted with heroic capacity for creative work and possessed admirable talents for constructive progressiveness does have a direct bearing on what I shall attempt to narrate.

Becoming dissatisfied with their Pennsylvania environment the Rappites decided to move elsewhere. In 1814 George Rapp discovered the rich lands on the banks of the Wabash River and concluded, that, wilderness though it was, the beautiful tract in what is now Posey County, was the Promised Land that he and his followers needed for the ultimate success of their communal pursuits. Accordingly, he acquired some thirty thousand acres and in 1815 the whole colony left the Keystone State, migrated to their new domain and forthwith began the building of a new town which they named in memory of their old home in Pennsylvania.

For ten epic years they toiled, clearing the land used for laying out their village, which they threaded with streets

admirably planned and intersecting at right angles. Here they erected dwellings and community houses of wood, hand-made brick and stone, factories, churches, hospital and fort. So well did they build, indeed, that most of the structures they created remain today virtually unimpaired by usage and time. Then in 1824, a mighty spirit of unrest, which seemed periodically to take hold of George Rapp, again became predominant, and he was inspired to dispose of his Indiana property and return with his following to Pennsylvania.

It happened that the Welsh philanthropist, Robert Owen, who had established his unique social colony at New Lanark, Scotland, was contemplating an extension of his educational work at a time when the agent sent out by George Rapp met him. The proposal to sell the New Harmonie estate entire, was made and Owen at once lent a receptive ear.

The associates of Robert Owen were not in sympathy with his philosophy of education and reform and their interference hastened his resolve to carry on elsewhere and preferably in a region remote from the place where his philanthropy had met obstruction and destructive criticism. So it came about that Robert Owen purchased the Rappite-created New Harmonie and thirty thousand acres of land for \$150,000.00.

In an energetic way, soon after the Rappites had left, Owen set for himself the task of peopling his newly acquired possession which he rechristened *New Harmony*. With the gifts of genius that characterized him, he quickly drew to the picturesque estate on the Wabash some eight hundred individuals of varied talents and disposition. With many thinking folk, there came men with mental quirks and strange notions.

Among others, he interested William Maclure, who besides ranking as a pioneer geologist of great ability, was an original thinker and a man of outstanding influence in his time. Maclure was not only associated with Owen in the business of purchasing New Harmony, but, in the educational direction, he was a magnetic figure who influenced a host of brilliant people to try their fortunes in the novel social experiment about to be launched.

Thus it occurred that on a boat fitted out for the express purpose of transporting the company, there arrived in

New Harmony on January 26, 1826, a group of people, that, because of high attainments in the arts and sciences, has come to be known as the Boat Load of Knowledge. The boat was known as the *Philanthropist*. Among the future stars of the community were: Robert Owen, Robert Dale Owen, William Maclure, Thomas Say, Gerald Troost, Charles Alexander Lesueur, Mme. Marie D. Fretageot, Cornelius Tiebout and others of noted name and accomplishments. Joseph Neef, a disciple of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, joined the group but did not come on the *Philanthropist*. The educational experiment out of which grew the *first Kindergarten*, *first free school*, *first Co-educational School*, and *first Industrial School* in the United States had fairly begun.¹

New Harmony today has a population of about twelve hundred. I arrived in the town on my pilgrimage early on a bright September morning. The spell of the quiet loveliness of the place immediately took hold of me. Quaintness, that harks back to Rappite times, plucks at you at every turn and the famous Gate Trees (*Koelreuteria paniculata*) make the serene streets extremely alluring when they hang heavy with fruit, as thy did at the time of my visit. I knew at once that my visit was going to be a stimulating mental and spiritual experience.

Hoping to be housed in an old Rappite dwelling, I was fortunate in having my wish granted by finding rooms in the home of the Robb family on Church street, directly opposite the Tavern which is the ancient Community House No. 3 of the Rappite period. Furthermore, Mr. Winfield W. Robb proved to be a genial gentleman, who, like most of the older residents of the town, was thoroughly versed in the historical aspects of New Harmony and not adverse to imparting freely from his seemingly inexhaustible fund of information. Without further delay, it should be stated that nowhere can one hope to meet more hospitable and charming people than here, where refinement and open-hearted geniality seem to be the spontaneous gift of an entire community.

Established, I set out immediately to visit the office of a typical citizen, a man of no inconsiderable reputation. I walked into the printing establishment of the New Harmony *Times* to meet Clarence P. Wolfe, the editor and publisher.

¹ The history of this remarkable town on the Wabash has been told in fine fashion by George B. Lockwood in his absorbingly interesting book, *The New Harmony Movement* (New York, 1905.)

To miss the *Times* would be an utter calamity. It carries news items in an inimitable Hoosier way, such as this comment on the excessive aridness of 1936: "It was so dry they wouldn't let a person open a water blister, as it seemed so wasteful."

To miss the editor of the *Times* would also be a mishap, for he immediately insisted upon taking me on a personally conducted tour through the historic parts of the town. His philosophical and sympathetic comment, as we walked, he talked and I listened, revealed the profound interest he has in these tokens of the town's past greatness. He voiced a keen hope that a revival of the spirit that made New Harmony illustrious might again enkindle. Indeed with men like Editor Wolfe, and other fine souls met there, pointing out the advantages of the historic town as a desirable site for a university, one is led to hope that such a turn will one day come to pass. The settlement of William Maclure, Robert Owen and Thomas Say would indeed make noble ground for the rise of a college or university.

We walked to the home built on the site of the old mansion built by George Rapp about 1821. The original building was burned in 1844, but in the days of the Owen Community it was inhabited by William Maclure and Thomas Say. The present imposing building faces on Main Street and in the spacious tree-planted grounds to the north may be found the grave of the famous Say. There, in a sod covered valut above which rises a simple marble monument, reposes the dust of one of the very great American scientists of an earlier day. On the north face of the stone these telling lines, half obliterated, were recited by Mr. Wolfe:

Votary of Nature even from a child,
He sought her presence in the trackless wild;
To him the shell, the insect, and the flower
Were bright and cherished emblems of her power.
In her he saw a spirit all divine,
And worshipped like a pilgrim at her shrine.

A truly beautiful tribute to a truly great soul.

On the east face of the monument there was this inscription:

Thomas Say, The Naturalist, Born in Philadelphia, July 27, 1787,
Died at New Harmony, October 10, 1834.

Of French extraction Thomas Say was, nevertheless, all

American. In his forty-seven years on earth he produced a mass of fundamental literature that rightly entitles him to the honor of being called the "Father of American Zoology." With indefatigable effort, in spite of much trouble with poor health, he described more than 1575 species of insects beside the notable work he did in Conchology, Paleontology, Ethnology, and to a lesser degree in other branches of Natural History—a vast work for one man to accomplish.

In the Library of the Workingmen's Institute, founded in 1838 by William Maclure in New Harmony, I saw among its treasure of twenty-six thousand volumes, some of the precious works of Say, such as his *American Conchology* with its handsome colored plates, which was printed and published in the famous town.

Continuing my walk with New Harmony's editor, we visited in succession the old Rappite Community House No. 2, with the noted sun-dial. Back of this stands the gigantic Hackberry tree that must have been a sizable tree in Rapp's day, the ancient fort, the strange markerless Rappite cemetery and the castle-like laboratory of David Dale Owen, the first Geologist of the United States. Our long and pleasant perambulation ended at the library where our guide turned us over to Miss Louise M. Husband, one of the librarians, whose personal charm and stimulating reminiscences of the New Harmony picture I shall always remember with keen pleasure.

The Library is a treasure house of inestimable value containing as it does in its archives a wealth of documentary records having to do with the extraordinary social experiments of the town and the men who figured in them. In addition the library building contains a notable art collection and a museum of natural history.

Under Miss Husband's guidance I was treated to a bewildering feast. Residents of Buffalo² will be interested to learn that Charles Alexander Lesueur, a celebrated Zoologist and artist of New Harmony, left among other pictures one of Niagara Falls, and mention of Niagara, serves to recall the fact that Thomas Say collected insects there as well as in adjacent parts of Canada.

I left the library and Miss Husband to visit what proved to be the rarest of the old Rappite dwellings in his-

² The writer is a resident of Buffalo, New York

toric interest, and spent a memorable afternoon with a brilliant woman, the hostess of the Old Fauntleroy Home, Miss Mary Emily Fountleroy. The fine old house was erected by the Rappites in 1815. It is beautifully preserved and faces a wooded yard of considerable size. It is marked by a dignity and repose that smacks of culture and chivalrous times. The names of those who have dwelt in this venerable building make a register to which the citizens of New Harmony point with justifiable pride. Here lived Thomas Say, the Naturalist; Lucy Way Sistaire, the artist; Louise Neef, the Pestalozzian teacher; Oliver Evans, the inventor; Robert Fauntleroy, astronomer; George Davidson, scientist; David Dale Owen, Geologist; Robert Dale Owen, author and statesman; and Cornelius Tiebout, artist. In this house, it should be added, Grace Golden, the *prima donna*, was born. In this house under Constance Owen Fauntleroy, the "Minerva," first Woman's Club in the United States *with a written constitution*, was formed in 1859. The Constitution is still proudly displayed. Due to the "Minerva", the Old Fauntleroy House has been purchased by the Indiana Federation of Women's Clubs and will now be preserved in all its exquisite beauty. The home is furnished throughout with pieces of rare workmanship and beauty and the visitor leaves with an impression of profound admiration for all that he has been privileged to see and hear.

The spirit of the home, however, has centered in the person of Mary Emily Fauntleroy whose conversation and bearing are perfectly attuned to the shrine over which she holds such charming sway. The spirit of cultured New Harmony in which the lofty figures of the past moved, is magically revived in the recital of its events by Miss Fauntleroy, who loves the story well.

I returned repeatedly to the Rapp Community House No. 2. In fact I dined there regularly during my stay. In the spacious dining room, which is much as it was in the days of Robert Owen, there is a gigantic fire-place. It was not difficult to vision Thomas Say, William Maclure, Maximilian, Prince of Wied, and others, residents and visitors, seated before the great blazing log fire far into the night discussing matters of scientific and educational interest. The top floor of the sturdy old building, indeed, was the Pestalozzian School over which Joseph Neef presided. Constantine

Raffinesque, John J. Audubon, Joseph Leidy, Leo Lesquereux, George Engleman and Henry R. Schoolcraft, to mention some notables, were all visitors to New Harmony at one time or another. In all likelihood, each in his day sat before the grand old fire place which was built in 1822.

A sketch of New Harmony without mention of a noble woman who enriched its early history would be sadly incomplete. That talented woman was Mme. Marie Louise Fretageot who did heroic service in the community when she bravely undertook the responsibility of managing important affairs for William Maclure, who headed the New Harmony movement after Robert Owen's withdrawal and who was himself frequently away from the colony for long periods of time. It was a difficult task as has been shown by the historians of New Harmony, but Mme. Fretageot met all obstacles with a characteristic fortitude, and the work at New Harmony went on. She had a deep seated affection for Thomas Say and his wife Lucy, and at one time she cared for both of them with the concern of a mother when sickness had smitten them simultaneously. Difficulties, and many there were in those days, seemed not to daunt the spirit of Mme. Fretageot.³

My pilgrimage to "The Town of the Fearless" was replete with interest at every turn, and I write this account of it with the hope that it may inspire others to make a like unforgettable journey thither.

Today's citizens of New Harmony live alertly proud of the historic figures that have dwelt within the confines of their lovely old town and glory in the events that have there transpired. They greatly desire to draw to their gates people whom they rightly believe will profit by coming.

With this idea uppermost, the first Festival of the Golden Rain Tree was held on June 17, 1936. At that time in each year the magnificent *koelreuteria paniculata* puts on a floral show that is said to be unique, for its falling blossoms then cover the streets with a veritable "cloth of gold". The Festival is to become an annual event and it is probable that it will in time bring hosts or visitors from far and near—visitors who

³ Mrs. Nora C. Fretageot was out of town during the writer's visit to New Harmony, which was a great disappointment to him, for he would have enjoyed hearing from her the story of her husband's illustrious ancestress. Mrs. Fretageot was a wonderful woman, who did much to help anyone interested in the early history of New Harmony. She died a few months after the writer's visit.

will revel in the spectacle offered by the trees and remain to find that they have come to a place that abounds in landmarks and historic lore which make it an appealing shrine. Students should visit this shrine, and, to those who may set forth on journeys to New Harmony, I wish happy pilgrimages.