

## New Harmony's Golden Years

*Richard E. Banta\**

Some knowledge of the recorded history of the town of New Harmony, Posey County, Indiana (it is definitely *not* in "Hoop-pole Township"), is possessed by most reading Midwesterners. The trouble is that so much of the *history* of the place remains unrecorded—and so much more of that which purports to be history is, to put it gently, a bit dis-tempered.

Writing on New Harmony has been voluminous and (always excepting George Lockwood's history, *The New Harmony Communities*) has been usually either tinted by high romance or tainted by downright misrepresentation. Most of it has been designed to glorify an ancestor or to render palatable or unpalatable some preserved morsel of gossip about Rappites or Owenites—with no special regard for its truth or untruth.

The original Harmonie Community was planted by the followers of George Rapp; a people who seem to have been well below the intellectual average of nineteenth century North European emigrants, who liked to eat well, who were clanish, fearful of an all-avenging God, and willing to confide their lives to the care of any earthly representative of such a God who might be able to convince them of his authenticity by an ability to read, to write, to play upon their own mental incapacities, and to guide them toward material comfort.

Dull as most of them may have been, they were a people unquestionably skillful in the arts of husbandry, and given such an astute worker upon their superstitions as Father George Rapp and such competent direction in matters temporal as could be supplied by his adopted son, Frederick, they were almost bound to prosper in the fertile Wabash River bottom land. They did that—enormously.

After they had prospered for a few years and had built up such a small agricultural paradise as existed no where else west of the Alleghenies, their leaders decided to sell it—and there was a buyer ready. He was thousands of miles away, his knowledge of the Wabash and its valley could have

---

\* Richard E. Banta is a resident of Crawfordsville, Indiana. The paper was read at the meeting of The Indiana Academy of the Social Sciences at Terre Haute, Indiana, on November 1, 1947.

been only the sketchiest, his plans for the use of such a property as the Rappites' were as nebulous as might well be imagined, and his own formerly remarkable administrative talent had already begun to degenerate. But he still had money, fruit of his early industrial success and of the providence of his wife's father, and he bought the Rappites' Harmonie, lock, stock, and barrel. The buyer was Robert Owen, a character as singular as the nineteenth century produced.

Thus Harmonie, rechristened *New Harmony*, had its second proprietor. Rapp, who had been its first and had proclaimed himself a *spiritual* leader, had an enormous talent for capitalistic exploitation; professedly Godless Owen, second proprietor, bred if not born a capitalist, had a supreme and blind faith in the innate goodness of all men, but of practical ability to *operate* or to *govern* not a whit remained! No wonder, under such disparate leadership, that New Harmony developed features not common to her sister communities in the Midwest!

When George and Frederick Rapp sold to Robert Owen their followers left—possibly with regret, but promptly upon order. When the fact became evident that Robert Owen no longer had either the cash or the intent to feed and entertain the lazy, incompetent and the unfit, who had flocked to the new community at *his* call, this yeasty body of undesirables left also, though with none of the order which had signaled the departure of the Rappites. When, by 1827, both Rappites and original Owenites had departed, there was left behind only an interesting tithe of citizens who were to make the *real* contribution of New Harmony to American culture.

They—and those whom they later attracted—had little interest in the theories of Robert Owen, although they had originally accepted them and endeavored far more zealously to carry them out than did the majority of Owen's avowed and vociferous followers. They had been, with the exception of Robert Owen's sons, mainly followers of that remarkable Americanized-Scot philanthropist, geologist and educational theorist, William Maclure. They were brought to New Harmony at his expense and settled there to carry on the educational phase of the program which, at Robert Owen's invitation, Maclure had claimed for his own.

They were mostly the distinguished people who had filled the passenger list of the so-called "Boat load of Knowledge," a vessel and a cargo which not even a century and a quarter

of home-talent pageants, sugary novels, and Sunday-supplement stories have made ridiculous. There were, among others, Thomas Say, already a distinguished naturalist; Marie Duclos Fretageot, Pestalozian teacher who had conducted a successful Philadelphia school for young ladies under Maclure's patronage; Cornelius Tiebout, engraver; Lucy Sistaire, later Thomas Say's wife; and Frances Wright, emancipated woman whose gaudy doings filled the press of her day as did those of Isadora Duncan and Aimee Semple McPherson a century later. There was the artist and naturalist, Charles Alexander Lesueur, a survivor of the ill-fated exploring French scientific expedition of the "Géographe" and the "Naturaliste," who had spent his life in sketching strange lands and describing antiquities, mollusks, birds, and fish; there were also Phiquegal d'Arusmont, alienist and teacher who later married, effectually tamed, and eventually impoverished the spirited Miss Wright; Joseph Neef, Napoleonic officer turned teacher; and Gerard Troost, mineralogist.

Famous literary figures were casual visitors in New Harmony, too—more, probably, in the thirty years following 1827 than favored any other two American towns of similar size. A majority of the diarists, journalists, novelists, and publicists who made the popular Niagara-to-the-Ohio-to-the-Mississippi-to-New Orleans tour and reported its invariably rigorous hardships detoured from Evansville to see the site of Owen's venture.

Individuals as important as any to the New Harmony scene after the collapse of Owenism were, oddly enough, the sons of Robert Owen himself. The young men, with the exception of Robert Dale Owen, had demonstrated no great enthusiasm for their father's more radical plans. After he turned to the greener fields for reform in Mexico and England, they stayed on in New Harmony, salvaging what they could of his properties and following their own intellectual pursuits as their varying fancies dictated.

They were all interested in science, in writing, in educating, and in the general betterment of mankind, and each of those who lived past early manhood—Robert Dale, David Dale, and Richard—made an important contribution in more than one field of activity. During community days, they had been engaged in editing, publishing, and teaching under their father; now they fitted perfectly into William Maclure's program.

After some bickering with Robert Owen as to the extent of the property involved, Maclure had announced himself prepared to take over specific buildings and grounds and to carry on the educational experiments which he had planned as his contribution from the beginning.

The complexion of the village of New Harmony had undergone an immediate change upon the departure of the parasitic hundreds who had been the most enthusiastic Owenites, and Maclure and his associates now found themselves with a clear field. The almost nightly meetings for the purpose of wrangling over the manner in which Robert Owen's money should be expended to produce the greatest comfort and to entail the least labor for all had ended when there was no longer ready cash enough in Robert Owen's personal till to stir the cupidity of the grasping or to inspire debate in the hearts of the parliamentarians. Now, these classes being happily departed, those who stayed on had welcome time for work.

Maclure's "School of Industry" was organized, and scholars were solicited and enrolled from most of the Western states who, under as brilliant a faculty as might well be imagined, studied the fine and the graphic arts. The "Maclurian Seminary" announced itself prepared to offer advanced students the classical curriculum of the day. "The Orphan's Manual Training School" provided training in a trade for promising parentless children. The adult educational project, "The Society for Mutual Instruction," began a comprehensive program which appealed, it is to be feared, more to the people of New Harmony than to the neighboring backwoodsman whom it was intended to elevate.

It was probably not always as easy to secure patrons of the schools as it might have been. To many a God-fearing Midwestern parent the name "New Harmony" still meant anathema, but many of the students who did enroll certainly received extraordinary intellectual stimulation, both within and without the classroom, and many of them gained distinction in the arts and sciences during the years to come. One pupil probably not in the least affected by his short stay was Henry Trollope, enrolled by his mother, the Madame, during their Cincinnati residence and removed by her almost at once because young Henry failed to receive the consideration due his elevated station.

In New Harmony, instruction and inspiration enough and

to spare was to be had in almost every field of human endeavor. Much as the average ten-year old of the thirties might despise it at the time, the military drill administered by "Old Neef" along with his teaching of mathematics, was likely to prove thirty years later to be the deciding factor which gained immediate rank for him as a soldier in the Civil War.

Children were actually encouraged to attend the theatre and the boy who went to see a performance by the Thespian Society in 1828 saw, not a poor backwoods revival of a second-rate New York production (probably snatched originally from London) but a performance of an original American play—"Pocahontas," for instance. It was written by the local editor, Robert Dale Owen, and its scenery painted by Charles Alexander Lesueur, a man who had seen most of the scenery the world had to offer, real and theatrical. If the boy possessed a ticket—not an absolute necessity—it was printed, perhaps by the boy himself, on the Maclure School Press from a woodblock cut by Cornelius Tiebout. The theatre, a wing of what had been originally the Rappite cathedral and later the arena of the Owenite wrangles, featured a curtain upon which Lesueur had painted a scene from New Harmony's own Cut-off River.

Inspired by such spare-time activities, it is no wonder that other twelve and fourteen-year olds were ready to follow the leadership of young George Banvard in painting a diorama of the Wabash, building a flatboat upon which to display it and running off to entertain and amaze the river-bottom squatters. This first effort of Banvard's was a forerunner of his gigantic diorama of the Missouri River which continued a major feature of entertainment in both Europe and America through thirty years. Theatricals, concerts, and entertainments were constant, but they did not interfere with the more important projects of research, study, writing, and educating the young and old.

Part I of Thomas Say's *American Conchology* came from the School Press in 1830. A Mr. Kellogg, the printer and teacher, supervised it, and the students worked on it. Lucy Sistaire Say drew most of the plates (she had come originally to New Harmony as a teacher of needlework, drawing, and other lady-like arts with Madame Fretageot), and Caroline Tiebout colored them by hand (making according to Madame Fretageot, two dollars per week thereby). I. Walker, Cornelius Tiebout, and others engraved the plates. Later parts

of Say's great work were printed under the supervision of R. Beck and William Bennett—the latter of whom must certainly have had, at least, a walk-on part in the mammoth production of "Pocahontas" since he became an ancestor to a theatrical family which still treads the boards with considerable distinction.

It was Maclures' plan to print editions of the classics at the School Press. They were to be "without frills," but the books produced at New Harmony were indeed beautifully printed. Work was already begun when his own ill-health shortly banished him to Mexico. After Maclure left, production continued under the able direction of Madame Fretageot. There was an edition of François A. Michaux's *The North American Sylva* printed from the French plates, Maclure's own rambling and wordy *Opinions on Various Subjects*, an almost mythical edition of *Aesopus*, and a number of pamphlets. In addition, there was the more or less periodical publication of Maclure's pet, *The Disseminator of Useful Knowledge*.

Only the *New Harmony Gazette*, which had attracted nationwide attention under the joint editing of Robert Dale Owen and his then fellow spirit, Frances Wright, was lost to Indiana. It, with Robert and Frances, removed to New York just before the end of the twenties, where, as *The Free Enquirer*, it advocated women's rights, easy divorce, the abolition of slavery, and other currently unsettling changes in established custom.

This beginning, in the post-Owenite period, of scientific research and publication and of the teaching of science drew more distinguished visitors to New Harmony and continued to draw them during the next three decades.

As soon as Say's work on Western conchology and entomology, Lesueur's on the river mounds and the ichthyology of the Great Lakes, and Gerard Troost's on mineralogy became known, these men began to receive frequent visits from a man named John J. Audubon, who left his Henderson, Kentucky, store (as he so loved to do) to call upon them, and from fabulous Constantine Samuel Rafinesque, then also of Kentucky. Very shortly, others and at *that* time far more famous scholars began to drop in for a week or a winter—Leo Lesquereux, Prince Maximilian zu Wied and his party, Sir Charles Lyell, Henry R. Schoolcraft, Karl Bernhard, Duke of Saxe-Weimar, and, after 1839, when David Dale Owen es-

tablished headquarters of the United States Geological Survey in the town, all manner of men of science, American and foreign.

Education, the theatre, the graphic arts, and science did not occupy all the time of all the citizens, however. Josiah Warren, former lampmaker, had tried Owenism in the twenties but had been dubious (even the hopeful Josiah!) of a society in which the contribution of the members was entirely on trust. He returned in the thirties, invented a press which was destroyed in 1840 by fearful Evansville printers and which printed from a continuous roll of paper, perfected the stereotyping process which was his most profitable invention, opened in an old Rappite dormitory one of his "Time Stores" (an early effort to exchange merchandise for promises of labor) and, in 1844, announced the perfection of his new system of musical notation.

In the forties, Robert Dale Owen, who was back in New Harmony, was elected to the Indiana state legislature, where he was soon deep in the fight for free schools in Indiana. In his spare time, he wrote and published a work on the construction of plank roads, later helped revise the Indiana state constitution, and was eventually elected to Congress, where his efforts resulted, among other useful things, in the setting up of the Smithsonian Institute.

Free libraries came to Indiana through New Harmony after William Maclure had found death rather than health in Mexico in 1840. One of his favorite projects had been the organization of The Workingman's Institute in New Harmony, for which he provided quarters and a library. He had also planned, through the instrument of his will, to set up similar institutions throughout the country and to provide them with libraries. His long-time friend and trusted chatelaine, Madame Fretageot (it may be that the terms "friend" and "chatelaine" do not fully cover the relationship), had died even before him. Upon his death Alexander and Anna Maclure (his hitherto dependent brother and sister) became executors of his estate. Through some almost-legal finagelling, they managed to convert most of the property to their own uses before anyone took sufficient interest to force the issue of the library bequests. But finally a brilliant young lawyer with time on his hands (he was Alvin P. Hovey, later governor of the state) took up the case and won it in favor of the free libraries. One hundred and sixty library societies were formed

in Indiana and Illinois and qualified to receive a grant of five hundred dollars each. They were more or less well organized, some dissolving and losing their accessions within a very short time and others surviving to become parts eventually of more permanent library organizations. They received a great many books in the period 1855 to 1865, probably some forty or fifty thousand volumes. Even today the Maclurian bookplate is frequently seen in public and private book collections in the Midwest—evidence, respectively, of careful or slipshod custodianship—but in either case certainly of the foresight and good will of William Maclure.

Eighteen fifty-nine saw New Harmony institute another movement of significance. In 1826, Frances Wright had reorganized the Woman's Social Society of the earlier Owenite community days into a more select group who met for study and discussion. The organization had not survived the general exodus of 1827, but now, after more than thirty years, a few former members and daughters of members, lead by Robert Owen's granddaughter, Constance Fauntleroy Runcie, decided to revive it. On September 20, 1859, the Minerva Society began an existence as a woman's club which antedated its nearest rivals, the Boston Women's Club and the Sorosis of New York, by nine years.

With the coming of the Civil War, New Harmony came to life in other ways. Robert Dale Owen, in Congress, did yeomen service as a guardian of the Union against internal friction and as a member of the Freedman's Bureau; while kindly, tireless Colonel Richard Owen became famous as a reformer of military prisons. There was a revival of industry at home, too, which was somewhat reminiscent of the Rappite days. Boom-time pork packing for the Union forces brought quick private wealth to New Harmony which would have chilled the hearts alike of Father Rapp and Robert Owen, had either of those gentlemen then had hearts capable of further chilling.

New Harmony apparently survived the post-war readjustment without undue hardship. After the war, Richard Owen joined the Indiana University faculty (keeping his summer home at New Harmony) and through him the teaching of science in other institutions in the state received a new stimulus. New Harmony scientists, beginning with David Dale Owen while he was making his first geological survey of Indiana in the late thirties, had begun to exchange speci-

mens with interested instructors in Indiana colleges, and the extensive collections which resulted, developed an interest in the natural sciences, especially at Wabash and Hanover, far beyond that of most of the western country. Nevertheless, these colleges were subject to church influences and their instructors were mostly church men, and as such they hesitated somewhat to introduce all of the ideas which were beginning to become manifest to them and to their correspondents. Edmond O. Hovey of Wabash, for instance, might be convinced that certain geological phenomena gave evidence of having required something over seven days for creation, but as a Presbyterian minister he probably hesitated to say so publicly.

It was in the solution of this conflict that Richard Owen rendered one of his greatest services. He lectured on geology at Indiana University, and he stated the facts as he saw them. But with his ripening years, he had become as whole-heartedly religious as his father had been atheistic. Now, by an involved hocus-pocus far from logical or lucid but nonetheless effective, he managed to tie in the facts of his science with a scriptural interpretation designed to appease even the most primitive Baptist. Foolish as his writings on the subject may appear to us today, they unquestionably served a useful purpose—they made the teaching of science appear to most people to be a more or less respectable undertaking.

The seventies and eighties saw New Harmony the center of another interesting activity as the home port of showboat troops and traveling stock companies. This had its origin, certainly, in the cosmopolitan tradition of the little town and in its love for the theatre. There must have been an unfailing supply of amateur actors, for the New Harmony Thespian Society had begun production in the twenties and had continued—very frequently producing home-written plays—for almost half a century. In the seventies, apparently, most of the more talented members “went professional” and joined the traveling companies organized by Clint G. Ford, Martin Golden, J. P. Bennett, J. G. Stutz, Walter N. Hammett, Wilbur M. Williams, J. B. Negrotto, and other local impressarios. Some of those names became, and some continue, famous in the American theatre.

The winter season, when back-country stock companies prepared for the road, must have been lively. The various openings (any show could get an audience in New Harmony

and managers always thought it wise to try it on the home folks first) must have rivaled a current New York season in variety—possibly even some of the recent ones in quality. Twenty years went by before the last of this activity and with its passing, seemingly, went New Harmony's Golden Years.

For the proponents of the other arts and sciences were also almost all gone. Say, Lesueur, Neef, David Dale Owen, Troost, Tiebout, and the others were long since dead. Then, of those who survived longest, Robert Dale Owen, whose interest in spiritualism had become literally a mania, died at his home in the East. Presently, Richard Owen was selected as president of a new agricultural and mechanical college which was being organized at Lafayette, Indiana. He was instructed to present a plan of operation to the trustees. To their enormous embarrassment Richard Owen reached into the past and drew up an educational scheme worthy of his father in the latter's most opulently dizzy days. But shortly thereafter, he paid a visit to his old friend, druggist Achilles Fretageot, who, afflicted with what was called in that euphemistic day "softening of the brain," confused embalming fluid with mineral water and by his hospitality solved the threat to the future Purdue University's successful launching and the earthly troubles of Richard Owen with one and the same gesture.

The nineties brought newly prosperous leaders and new standards of culture to New Harmony. Mr. and Mrs. Edward Murphy, for instance, made a tour of Europe and brought back a large collection of elegantly framed, genuine, hand-painted old masters for the Working Men's Institute Library. Rappite buildings had already sprouted President Arthur fronts, show folks began to be looked upon with the hoisted eyebrow, nice people were not interested in rocks, bugs, fish, or other "varmint," and it was no longer proper to discuss the days of the Communities—either Rappite or Owenite.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the picture changed a bit—but at first only a bit—when George Lockwood, an Indiana newspaperman, gathered all the material he could locate and wrote a serious book on the early history of the town.

At first the contemporary New Harmonists were not at all amused, but when, presently, American suffragettes occasionally mentioned Frances Wright, and once in a while some casual reference to Robert Owen, William Maclure, or Thomas Say in a magazine article reminded local grade school

teachers to tell their little charges that these people once lived in New Harmony, some of the citizens began to take notice.

After a few more years, a new generation of visitors began to drop in from far places. Some of the new rich of the nineties departed. Others became no longer rich and there began to be talk among the descendants of Maclure's followers and the signers of Robert Owen's many pacts of "the happy days of the past . . . the utopia in the wilderness," and so on. The writing of books followed as a matter of course. Among these were *Heart's Haven*, *The Town of the Fearless*, and others less authoritative but much more romantic and more widely read than Lockwood's book.

The stories of the footprint rock, the golden rain trees, and the vestal virgin (who must have been buried in a secret passage which certainly ought to have existed beneath Father Rapp's house) were enlarged and burnished for the amazement of the tourist trade. Romance was fostered, as is usually the case in old communities of old families, by little old ladies who were always ready to cut the throats of others and to compete in public debate on the ever-present question of whose ancestors had been chiefest in the early days.

Signs began to appear—sometimes duplicating and triplicating themselves in different locations—announcing the rate of admission to "The Only *Genuine* House Where This or That Took Place," parlor tearooms were opened, thoroughly inaccurate and horribly printed souvenir guidebooks came on the market, and, as in all such little villages with brilliance in their pasts, a race of strong women and fragile men carried on the old names.

By the late nineteen twenties, there was some prospect of a moderately prosperous twilight for Harmonie on the Wabash, but even as good roads and awakened interest in matters historical and sociological increased that promise, there came the financial crash and by the early thirties troubled times penetrated even to Father Rapp's meadow.

New Harmony's greatest damage seemed to come not so much from the depression as from the relief with which a benevolent government tried to alleviate its effects. Shantyboat families gave up their independence in favor of local relief funds, and an invasion of southern Kentuckians descended in search of higher Indiana "rockin' chair pay." There came to be plenty of residents of New Harmony who could not tell the difference between a Rappite and an Owenite

and few indeed could recognize any of the ancient buildings which did not presently house a beer parlor.

Through it all, however, the representatives of the old families stayed on. Most of them were desperately poor—existing, usually, almost entirely upon remittances from relatives who had gone away to seek their fortunes. On they lived, proud of their background of culture—if sometimes a bit optimistic as to the extent of its importance—a charming people existing in lavender, old lace, and an odor of musty Rappite brickwork.

At the peak of the confusion caused by this mingling of the new relievers and the proud but usually even poorer aristocracy, came new and far more serious complications. Some one drilled for oil in the valley, and the odor of raw petroleum was added to those of the transplanted shanty boaters, the lavender, and the musty bricks.

And trouble followed trouble as the state made a grant of funds for the purpose of restoring historic New Harmony sites and buildings. Then there was, indeed, a modern exemplification of the true import of the title of that ancient song "Hell on the Wabash," for the ever-smoldering intramural warfare between the contesting old ladies of the old families burst immediately into an open flame which made the doings of roistering oil-field hands and Saturday-nighting Kentuckians seem chill by comparison—the question to be decided being, of course, "Who'll get restored first?"

That battle still rages, some oil royalties come in, and there are quite a few people on New Harmony's streets who define a Rapp as something one serves at the penal farm—but it will pass, as eras have passed before in New Harmony. In the meantime, and as of today, give me that period from the departure of Robert Owen to the departure of the last showboat company as New Harmony's Golden Years.