The Doktrin and Practis of William C. Talcott
Leonard Swidler*

In memory of Wm. C. Talcott, who was born Dec. 25, 1815, and Died Dec. 30, 1902. He hoped cooperative industry would prove a remedy for poverty. He was a spelling reformer since 1843 and prepared this epitaph in scientific spelling in his life. He early seemed to see the church theology to be mythology. The Jewish Bible teaches no immortal life. . . .

In the run-down city cemetery of Valparaiso, Indiana, there stands a large tombstone on which is chiseled in phonetic characters a long inscription beginning with the information quoted above in the standard alphabet. It is the final message of William Cole Talcott, a reformer’s reformer, who lived during a time frothing with reform. During his long lifetime he espoused a number of the major and minor reforms produced by nineteenth-century America. In religion he swung from a strict Calvinist position to that of Universalism, and from Universalism to a sort of pantheistic humanism; he was a strong advocate of temperance and vegetarianism; in politics he began as a Free-Soil Democrat and ended an ardent Republican; his economic views were strongly socialistic, so much so that he even founded a Fourieristic community. All these reforms, besides many others such as feminism, land reform, judiciary reform, educational reform, and tax reform, he fostered in newspapers which he published over a fifty-year span, at times printing them in his own phonetic characters, for he was a spelling reformer too.

William C. Talcott was born December 25, 1815, in Dalton, Berkshire County, Massachusetts. Little is known of his parents; they were said to have been of Puritan stock, and his father was born in England. The family moved from Dalton to Madison, Lake County, Ohio, via ox wagon before William was a year old. William’s life was apparently that of

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1 Weston A. Goodspeed and Charles Blanchard (eds.), Counties of Porter and Lake, Indiana (Chicago, 1882), 274.
2 Porter County Vidette (Valparaiso), January 1, 1903.
3 Porter County, Ind., Office of the Auditor, Porter County Death Record, Vol. 3, p. 32.
a typical farm boy in pioneer country until he was ten years old. At this time he is said to have been thrown on his own resources and worked on neighbors' farms. No more is known of his parents or brothers or sisters except that in 1835 he "found his brother Ezra" in Union Mills, Indiana. Young William attended the pioneer log school near his home from the time he was five until he was ten. After that he attended rural schools at irregular intervals, and at the age of seventeen he entered the Jefferson Academy at Jefferson, Ohio. A little later he was given a scholarship to Western Reserve College, at Hudson, Ohio, where he began studies preparatory to becoming a Presbyterian minister. According to one source, by 1834 Talcott had resigned his scholarship and left college. He taught school in Madison, Ohio, for a short while and then moved to Joliet, Illinois, only to leave there after three months to settle in northern Indiana, where he lived the remainder of his long life. After teaching school and learning surveying in La Porte County, Talcott moved to Porter County in 1837, only a year after the county seat, Valparaiso, had been founded. Here he was appointed by the state legislature to do some road surveying and to select swamp lands in the northern half of the county for state property. The former county surveyor of Porter County, now Valparaiso city engineer, is a great-grandson of William C. Talcott, and he states that as surveyor he occasionally ran across official notations in the hand of his great-grandfather.

At the age of fifteen Talcott had already begun to direct his studies toward preparation for the Presbyterian ministry, and, as previously indicated, he later received a scholarship to Western Reserve College for this purpose. But in the midst of his studies he found that he could no longer maintain a belief in endless punishment for part of mankind, and he consequently resigned the scholarship. He evidently soon turned toward the Universalist position that all men are

**Footnotes:**

4 Goodspeed and Blanchard, *Counties of Porter and Lake*, 274.
5 *Vidette-Messenger* (Valparaiso), October 23, 1934. This is one of a series of articles, entitled "Ramblings," on the early history of the area by Arthur J. Bowser, who was an elderly free-lance writer and had apparently known Talcott.
6 *Porter County Vidette* (Valparaiso), January 1, 1903.
7 *Vidette-Messenger* (Valparaiso), October 23, 1934. A letter from C. D. Russell, vice-president of Western Reserve University, to the author, October 14, 1957, however, states that "examination of University records fails to disclose any information whatsoever that this person ever attended Western Reserve College."
8 *Porter County Vidette* (Valparaiso), January 1, 1903.
9 Interview with William E. Morthland, September 30, 1957.
10 *Vidette-Messenger* (Valparaiso), October 23, 1934.
saved, for, after having preached in northern Indiana since 1837, William Talcott was ordained a Universalist minister at Valparaiso in 1840. He is said to have labored in this field for about ten years, and then he broke completely with Christian theology and made the Golden Rule the sole basis of his philosophy of life. Talcott alludes to this break in his own funeral discourse, which he wrote four years before his death.

In early life he really supposed, as he was taught,
That Nature was a plan ov powr designd and caused by tho't;
That some way unaccountable temptation came and sin,
And mankind lost the holy happy nature they were in;
That God was angry with them and so bitterly displeased,
By nothing but his Son's death cud his anger be appeased;
That, loving us, he gave his son to die for our salvation,
And, missing this, we suffer endless torment in damnation.
These terrible ideas he in riper years outgrew
And since has entertained a far more optimistic view.
He seemd to lern discretion and gain cheerfulness therewith
By seeing that the “hell and hevn theology” was myth.
So now he deems it duty and a privilege to giv
Some lessons that have made his life a happy one to liv.

He developed a view of the cosmos that was a type of dynamic materialism, according to which ultimate reality consisted of “force.” Ideas such as life after death and the reality of the spiritual were deleted from his philosophy. Talcott reflected the humanitarianism of his age when he insisted in his funeral discourse that:

So then the highest excellence that we can know or see
Must in our own imperfect race ov mankind prove to be.

But he would not allow himself to be tagged with the epithet “atheist”:

Such realistic statement is no atheistic creed,
But pantheistic—all Divine—the writer must concede;
Divine though in a sense entirely outside ov mythology,
Consisting but with natural and practical Theology.

William C. Talcott, however, did not let his humanitarianism reside merely in ideas. He early decided to translate ideas into action in a way that was typical of the time.

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11 Porter County Vidette (Valparaiso), January 1, 1903. For a list of Universalist ministers in Indiana in which the following appears: “TALCOTT, W. C. Michigan City 1844,” see Elmo Arnold Robinson, “Universalism in Indiana,” Indiana Magazine of History, XIII (June, 1917), 185.

12 A copy of this discourse is in the Valparaiso Public Library. It is entitled Live-Man's Funeral Discourse (n.p., n.d.); its text indicates that it was written at Valparaiso in 1898.
the winter of 1844-1845 he organized about fifty people into a socialistic industrial association of the Fourieristic type. The colony was located about two miles from South Bend, Indiana, on the land of William McCartney, who was made the first president of the "Philadelphia Industrial Association," as the colony was called. Though Talcott was prime mover of the project, he was given the title of secretary. The association was a joint stock corporation to which each member contributed as much money as he had, although those who lacked money were admitted for the labor they would perform. Although the association started with only fifty persons, there were over a hundred connected with it during its brief existence—never more than seventy-five at once, however. Oddly enough, the members were largely New Englanders who had migrated first to Ohio and then to Indiana just as Talcott had.

McCartney agreed to sell the association his farm along the river north of South Bend for $5,000, which was to be paid in twelve years. Of the money collected from the members, some was paid on the farm, and the rest was used to build a seventy-five-foot-long common dining hall, a kitchen, a storeroom, and fifteen dwellings, and to buy farming implements and horses.

In the spring of 1845 ten acres were cleared and seed was sown. From the beginning there apparently were those who did not do their share of work while doing their share of eating. Such shirking, of course, brought complaints from the women who were doing the cooking, and it was not long before people began dropping out. Nevertheless with the approach of winter the membership of the community was increased by an influx of new members. One member, Ephraim O. Trueblood, was quoted as complaining that the work was too hard for his women, that there was too much looseness in the relations of some of the families, and that the community was not a good place to bring up one's family. Therefore, he and his family decided to leave in 1846.

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13 Tribune (South Bend, Ind.), June 22, 1930. This is an article by Henry A. Pershing for which he obtained at least some information from an eyewitness and some from a person who heard reports from another eyewitness. The eyewitness was a Mrs. John Heath, then aged 90, who had visited the buildings of the community as a little girl. See also T.[imothy] G.[iman] Turner, Gazetteer of the St. Joseph Valley, Michigan, and Indiana (Chicago, 1867), 48-49; Richard L. Kilmer, "South Bend, 1820-1851: The Founding of the Early Community" (unpublished Master's thesis, Notre Dame University, 1947), 110.


15 Tribune (South Bend), June 22, 1930.

16 Ibid.
The Trueblood family's departure was undoubtedly not a unique incident since the whole community seems to have dissolved by late 1846 or early 1847. About 1867 Talcott gave his view of the reasons for the project's collapse:

"The main cause of... dissolution, I have ever believed, was that Mr. McCartney violated his promise to invest his whole tract of land; and after we were fully organized and on the ground ready to receive the title and use the land, he withheld all of the valuable and available portion, and turned us off with the broken, marshy land, lying between the road and the river, at twenty dollars per acre, the appraised price of the entire tract."\(^{17}\)

Timothy Turner, who apparently received the foregoing opinion in a letter from Talcott, goes on to say:

The cause of the failure, "in a nutshell," was probably this: McCartney, with his natural shrewdness, if that is the proper term, encouraged and co-operated with the association for the purpose of getting his land cleared up and improved for nothing. He succeeded, but the association did not.\(^{18}\)

After the community's collapse Talcott left for Valparaiso with his personal belongings, leaving some of the members with the opinion that he was "too liberal in the construction of what was his personal property."\(^{19}\) Despite the failure of the Philadelphia Industrial Association, Talcott's cooperative ideals did not die with it. In a book written toward the end of his life, he espoused these same ideals, extending them far beyond the level of a single community:

> The postal orders sent, as well as public moneys lent,  
> Exhibit public functions that admit of more extent;  
> Shop business can't be done unless by public rule it's run,  
> And this in case of strikes and boycotts is in fact begun.  
> At last land cultivation will adopt cooperation,  
> Each township as a farm and as a unit of the nation;  
> Avoiding by fruition of beneficent condition,  
> Oppression by monopoly and waste by competition.  
> When township corporation has a full cooperation,  
> And all its people live at its convenient central station,  
> The best will be achieved that can be hopefully conceived,  
> And life of much that's ill by much that's pleasant be relieved.\(^{20}\)

Prior to the cooperative community experiment, Talcott had bought an office in Valparaiso with the intention of

\(^{17}\) Turner, Gazetteer of the St. Joseph Valley, Michigan, and Indiana, 48-49.  
\(^{18}\) Ibid., 49.  
\(^{19}\) Tribune (South Bend), June 22, 1930.  
\(^{20}\) William Cole Talcott, Doktrin and Practis (Valparaiso, Ind., 1889), 72-73. This volume is written in Talcott's phonetic alphabet, but this and the following quotations from it have been transcribed into the standard alphabet. For a photographic reproduction of a
publishing a newspaper. He apparently changed his mind, though, for he leased the office that same year to James Castle, who had purchased a small press from Solon Robinson, of Lake County. Castle then began publication of the first newspaper in Valparaiso, a small six-by-twelve-inch folio sheet that came out "semi-occasionally" and was called the Republican. Talcott later sold the office to William M. Harrison, seemingly in preparation to go to South Bend to start the industrial community. Harrison started a paper called the Western Ranger, in which Talcott bought a half interest upon his return to Valparaiso when the Philadelphia Industrial Association ceased to exist. The new series under the joint editorship began April 24, 1847, and by this time the paper had grown to a five-column folio weekly. Although Talcott and Harrison differed on some political and social questions, they got along pleasantly in the beginning, and the paper prospered financially, as its growth in size during 1847 and 1848 attests.21

The initial harmony between the owners of the Western Ranger was not to be lasting, however. From the beginning Talcott and Harrison signed their initials to articles they wrote or edited. As time passed, there were even articles by one editor stating that he had nothing to do with an article written by the other editor in the same issue.22 The result of this growing difference was that in June, 1849, Talcott bought out his partner and on July 25, 1849, changed the name of the paper to the Practical Observer. His newspaper business flourished so well during the next few years that in January, 1853, Talcott began to issue a triweekly besides the regular weekly. In September of that same year, he started publication of the first daily in Porter County, while continuing the weekly and for two months the triweekly, which was then replaced by a semimonthly. All these publications bore the same name, Practical Observer. Actually the weekly consisted

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21 *Porter County Vidette* (Valparaiso), January 1, 1903.
22 *Western Ranger* (Valparaiso), January 10 and 24, 1849.
of the six previous issues of the daily; the triweekly was composed of two issues of the daily; and the semiweekly was made up of three daily issues. In the January, 1854, editions of the Practical Observer Talcott claimed that his paper (possibly he was considering all editions together) was the largest in Indiana and that it was the largest in the world published in so small a town. He also claimed that the semiweekly was the only such paper published in so small a town, in so sparse a country, and at so low a price. Near the close of 1853 the subscription price was $5 for the daily and $1 each for the semiweekly and weekly.

Talcott continued the Practical Observer until, having been elected common pleas judge in the fall of 1856, he sold the entire office to Dr. R. A. Cameron in April, 1857. But Judge Talcott was not able to leave the newspaper business so easily. In July, 1858, his son Henry became an associate editor of the paper, which was by then called the Republican; later that year Henry inveigled his father to lend his experience as a veteran newspaperman and become a joint editor and proprietor. This arrangement lasted until the next March when the paper was resold to Dr. Cameron. In 1874 Judge Talcott again bought the paper, which he renamed the Vidette. Except for thirteen months during 1879 and 1880, he continued in partnership with his son Charles, who had secured a half interest in December, 1874, until 1888 when they sold the paper. Although he was in his seventies, William Talcott was unable to make a final break with newspaper publishing, for in 1890 he rebought interest in the Vidette, which he maintained until 1894 when he sold out his newspaper interest for the last time.

Throughout his long career as a publisher, Talcott used his papers as a pulpit from which to preach reforms of every sort. But of the changes he advocated, one of the most outstanding—in every sense of the term—was a reform of spelling. In an editorial in the Western Ranger on June 23, 1847, Judge Talcott reminded his readers that he had published several articles in the Ranger in 1843 on the subject of orthography in which he had proposed the formation of a complete alphabet for the spelling of all words by a scientific

24 These prices were run in the November and December, 1853, issues of all editions of the Practical Observer.
26 Porter County Vidette (Valparaiso), January 1, 1903.
method. He had, furthermore, constructed such an alphabet by arranging roman and italic letters so that there should be one, and only one, letter for each distinct sound in the language. Moreover, he had also given examples of the application of his proposed alphabet in spelling various words. Talcott went on to point out to his readers that in 1843 he had also mentioned the invention of a similar system in England. He explained that while the English system advanced a new, simple, and complete alphabet for writing, it appeared the adoption of the system in print had not been thought of. Talcott exulted in informing his readers that the very same system presented in the Ranger—27—with some variations in characters used—had been introduced in England, and more recently in America; that its use had been adopted by several popular publications in the East;28 and that it was highly recommended and strenuously urged by every person in the world that had become acquainted with its nature. For one that is fully conscious of the importance of this reformation, and its prospect of success, to withhold his voice, pen or influence from “giving aid and comfort” to its advocates, would be not only quite unpardonable, but utterly impossible.29

Talcott boasted that his paper was the first in the world to give rules and specimens of phonotypy and that in the future it would contain articles explaining and illustrating the subject.

In the Western Ranger's issue of June 23, 1847, Judge Talcott also gave his principles of phonotypy—principles of writing and printing reform. First, all words were to be spelled precisely as they were pronounced and pronounced precisely as they were spelled, so that one might know by the pronunciation of a word how to spell it and by the spelling how to pronounce it. Secondly, in order to make phonetic spelling possible, each sound in the language was to be uniformly represented by a distinctive letter, which was never to stand for any other sound. Thirdly, Talcott maintained that since the English alphabet had too few letters and since these letters were irregularly applied, it was inadequate for phonetic purposes and should be transformed into a genuinely phonetic alphabet—which Talcott then proceeded to give.

27 Talcott speaks as if the Western Ranger were founded in 1843, whereas it was actually founded in 1844. He may possibly be referring to the Republican, which was started in 1845. Unfortunately, nothing before 1845 in either of the papers seems to be extant.
28 The first issue of the Anglo-Saxon, a newspaper printed entirely in a phonetic type, came out in Boston in 1847.
29 Western Ranger (Valparaiso), June 23, 1847.
This phonetic alphabet is apparently the earliest of Talcott's several extant alphabets and has forty characters, including all the standard characters of the English alphabet with the exception of k, q, and x. Talcott added characters for eleven additional vowel sounds by using standard vowels with dia-critical marks, plus the "oo" sound printed as a double u—really an inverted m; the six additional sounds are represented by roman or italic type and by homemade characters apparently formed by modifying standard type. For example, the voiced "th" sound is represented by a lower case d with the back of its circular part cut away and looks something like an inverted question mark without the dot. A number of these characters are obviously makeshift, and when he presented them Talcott explained that he was expecting newly cut type very soon.

Although it would require another study to determine whether Talcott's phonotypy was indeed a "first" as he claimed, it is evident that his was one of the early systems. He did much original work and was notable among advocates of phonetic spelling in that he spread principles of phonetic usage so early and so deep in the American frontier. Talcott utilized every means and opportunity to further this reform, making use of articles he published in 1843 and the Spirit of Reform, the first newspaper he personally published. The Spirit of Reform was published in connection with his Philadelphia Industrial Community. A prospectus for the Spirit of Reform in the St. Joseph Valley Register stated that the forthcoming paper would advocate the plan of industrial association as well as the principles of "phonography, a science which reduces spelling to a simple rule by which a person may become a perfect master of the art in a few hours, and a good reader in a few days." The paper was a monthly which ran only a few issues, however, and no copies seem to be extant. In the papers published in Valparaiso, Judge Talcott often ran columns of varying lengths in phonetic characters; he printed anecdotes, news items, letters written to him in phonetic script, or editorials. At times he included a key to the phonetic type, but very often not; he would even run poems and full columns on the front page or stray lines stuck in here and there in phonetic type. In the

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last few years of his newspaper career, 1890-1894, he published a daily edition, most of which was printed in this type. At the same time a very large portion of the paper was devoted to arguments on behalf of reforms of every nature. At this time he also published several books on reform in his phonetic type, at least one of which is written in rhyming iambic heptameter. Besides all these publications in phonetic characters—and Talcott experimented much over the years—he printed every piece of news he could find on spelling reform anywhere in the English-speaking world and periodically editorialized on the subject.13

Talcott used two main arguments for the employment of a phonetic system. First, he contended that a phonetic alphabet would save every child at least two school years which were ordinarily spent in learning how to spell, and then only poorly. Secondly, Talcott believed the system would save Americans at least $3,000,000 daily since a phonetic alphabet demanded less printed space for a given number of words than did the ordinary longer forms. Therefore, great sums would be saved by reducing the time needed to read material now containing many unnecessary letters—to say nothing of savings in school expenditures by eliminating the two unnecessary years of spelling study. Talcott very neatly summarized these arguments in some phonetic verses, which are here reproduced in regular type.

The saving is not vain, for two whole years are no small gain,
While present teaching tends to make one partially insane;
....................................................
For saving to each child one hundred dollars is not wild,
It is indeed an estimate considered very mild;
The saving then that follows for ten million English scholars,
Makes every year a saving of one thousand million dollars.

The gains however swell, for after learning how to spell,
One-fifth of future literary cost is saved as well;
For each mute is a laut which will hereafter be left out,
At saving of one-fifth of all expenses thereabout.32

31 For the prospectus for the Spirit of Reform, see St. Joseph Valley Register (South Bend, Ind.), February 6, 1846. Talcott began his practice of printing some newspaper items in phonetic type in 1847 in the Western Ranger. As for Talcott's books, only Doktrin and Practis (see note 20) has been located. In one of a series of articles entitled “Ramblings,” Arthur J. Bowser (see note 5) mentions a volume called General Welfare Possible, in which Talcott made suggestions for the promotion of human welfare. Vidette-Messenger (Valparaiso), November 8, 1934. What other books Talcott wrote is not known, although his great-grandson recalls that he wrote a “number of books . . . in phonetic spelling.” Letter from William E. Morthland, Valparaiso, Ind., to the author, September 26, 1960.
32 Talcott, Doktrin and Practis, 70. The page of Doktrin and Practis on which this quotation appears has been photographically reproduced on the next page.
DOKTRIN AND PRAKTIS

Sr skulz aford a sampl and a notebbl egzampl
Ov veri bad ekonomi hwar saviq yrz iz ampl;
We spend tu yerz pel-mel in teciq lurnrz hs tu spel,
Hwen fort-hand selpiq wud be tot in tu derjust az wel.

Suq simpl spelip ot, and wud in fakt be fuli kot,
Bij plcip wid de letr bloks, and ned not els be tot;
And suqjud be de trwli prijm ekarsz ov skul;
And redip yr old spelip bij resembins be de rul.

Ekspurtz huv' kredit urnd, and huz advjs tud not be
Koldis de ceiling we for yr old redip tu br lurnnd; [spurnd,
Dus to trust de land, de mas wud bof stiiz understand,
And so fo fnik spelip in de peprz mck deamnd.

He saviq iz not ven, for tu hol yerz ar no smol gen,
Hwyl preznt teciq tendz tu mck wun porfl-i insam;
Bc spelz be, and hens c-b, in ornderi sens,
Xud spel, not ab, but ob, and dus in rezn we'd komena.

For saviq tu eq gild wun hundred dolrz iz not wylf,
It iz inded an estimet konsidred veri mjld;
He saviq den dat foloz fo ten milyen Inglij skolrz,
Maks evy yer a saviq ov wun bsznd milyen dolrz.

He genz hveev swel, for afgt lurniq hs tu spel,
Wun-filt ov fugr ltreri kost iz secv az wel;
For eq mut iz a lst hwig wil herafter be left st,
At saviq ov wun fift ov ol ekspenses darebst.

Sample Page (actual size) from Talcott's Doktrin and Practis
Although Talcott devoted much effort to publicizing phonetic spelling, perhaps the field in which his newspapers were most effective was that of politics, especially during the 1840's and 1850's. It was not until after about 1846 that the members of the Democratic party took a very decided lead in obtaining county offices in Porter County. According to one source, this swing was due in major part to the influence of the *Western Ranger* and its successor, the *Practical Observer*. As the slavery issue grew in importance, Talcott became an increasingly ardent supporter of Free-Soilism. Though he early thought slavery could be contained through the medium of the Democratic party, after the repeal of the Missouri Compromise in 1854, he found himself standing practically in the camp of the emerging Republican party. He then turned his and his paper's allegiance to the Republican party, and "through the influence brought to bear by the *Observer* upon the citizens, the new party immediately went to the front, and has since had control of the official patronage of the county." While it is true that factors other than Talcott's stand undoubtedly influenced the political complexion of Porter County, it is interesting to notice that in the presidential election of 1856 Porter County voted 1,054 for the Republican candidate and 712 for the Democratic one, whereas in the previous election the Whigs polled 236 and the Democrats 257. One writer later remarked: "Owing to the prominent part so bravely borne by Judge Talcott during the organization period of the Republican party he may well be called the father of the party in Porter county." Judge Talcott utilized his newspapers and books to advocate a variety of political reforms. For example, he believed that candidates for office should indicate the lowest salary they would accept, thus doing away with the spoils system.

Do office-spoils away by competition on the pay,
Requiring every candidate his lowest terms to state;
So voters at election may consider in connection
One's fitness for the service and his compensation rate."

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84 *Ibid.* See also *Porter County Vidette* (Valparaiso), January 1, 1903.
86 *Vidette-Messenger* (Valparaiso), November 8, 1934. This is another "Ramblings" article by Arthur J. Bowser; see note 5. See also *Porter County Vidette* (Valparaiso), January 1, 1903.
87 Talcott, *Doktrin and Practis*, 55.
Talcott also believed that all the states should be consolidated into one nation with all laws similarly applied in every place but by means of local law enforcement, thereby eliminating local legislation and saving much expense. He thought the legislature should have but one house—two houses merely added confusion and cost.

A meeting, to succeed, should have no other one to heed;  
A second house is but too oft a body to resist;  
A senate best accords with the British house of lords;  
And single bodies better with efficiency consist.

The reason one must state—that office pay is far too great,  
And office-seekers and the friends whose minds they educate,  
Consider it desirable and so of course requirable  
That number of such offices by no means should abate.88

William C. Talcott had quite a varied career as a jurist—fifteen years altogether—and from this experience he also evolved some definite ideas of reform. In 1840 Talcott was elected a justice of the peace; he was appointed probate judge in 1849 and elected to the same office in 1850. He resigned in 1852 to accept the Democratic nomination for assembly-man, but was defeated because of his strong antislavery and temperance position. In 1856 he was elected common pleas judge and was later re-elected to this office for two more terms, twelve years in all. Talcott practiced law for six years after his last term in office.39

Judge Talcott would have eliminated a number of legal practices he considered superfluous, such as judicial oaths and grand juries, which he regarded as merely a waste of time and an added expense. He also insisted that a majority decision of a jury should be sufficient to decide a case, for unanimity was, he felt, as unnecessary here as in any other democratic process.

Some centuries ago, as people versed in history know,  
The convicts of a petty crime were frequently beheaded;  
And law was hence made tender that not less than all should render  
A verdict for a penalty thus naturally dreaded.

88 Ibid., 57.  
39 Goodspeed and Blanchard, Counties of Porter and Lake, 274.
Few questions now in court are of a life-and-death import,
And these few are not final, hence in modern times the ground
That all twelve must agree in order that their verdict be
A valid one, can be in common sense no longer sound.40

Besides advocating a number of court reforms, Judge Talcott favored several then radical changes in criminal law. He believed that the list of acts considered crimes should be shortened, excluding all acts not injurious to others. He would have abolished vindictive penalties, making all punishment either reformatory or restraining in purpose. So he wrote in his Doktrin and Practis,

A theft was wrong before, and statute makes it so no more,
But even fails in the enforcement of due reparation;
And acts that no one wrong, condemned by force however strong,
Are rights that should be waived, avoiding unjust condemnation.

Prohibit execution of vindictive retribution,
As violating every righteous human constitution;
It brings no restoration or such other compensation,
And highest human sentiment forbids such expiation.

For their subordination and their hopeful reformation,
Take safeguard of the dangerous, with proper education;
This number must contain all who are vicious and insane,
And treatment should correct their bent and quietly restrain.41

In the area of civil rights Judge Talcott worked not only for the freedom of Negroes but also very earnestly for women's rights. He thought that divorce was something that should be used when necessary and that no stigma should be attached to it. He himself, however, lived with his first wife over sixty years until her death. His thoughts about the rights of women as human beings and their right to the vote is best summed up in the following stanzas:

Mohammedan monocracy, the ancient Jew theocracy,
And Mormon aristocracy agree in this idea:
That man may marry many, or, if he prefer, not any,
But woman to a single husband loyal must appear.

40 Talcott, Doktrin and Practis, 66-67.
41 Ibid., 58-59.
The rule of equal right is thus entirely lost from sight.
Or they would give the woman equal privilege with man;
Whatever right indeed we may to either one concede,
The same right has belonged to each since sense of right began.

But gentle women never can succeed in an endeavor
To graduate from present state of practical subjection,
Until their equal right be treated as an equal might
By making them full voters at a general election.42

Judge Talcott also had very definite ideas about education, which he would improve by introducing not only his method of spelling, but also a more utilitarian approach toward learning. His approach would have instituted a work-as-you-learn program and an arrangement similar to the Lancaster system, whereby the older, brighter students would assist in the teaching of the younger ones.43

From early in his career onward, Talcott was a strong defender of the temperance movement, supporting it in his newspapers and other writings. His position, however, was not so rigid as that of some members of the movement. He did not believe the sale of liquor should be completely prohibited but that allowance should be made for its medicinal and sacramental uses. As for punishment for the misuse of alcohol, Talcott believed the courts ought to make a decision giving both buyer and seller their just due.44 Abstinence from liquor was not the only aspect of temperance Judge Talcott practiced, for he would eat no meat. For one two-week period he subsisted on nothing but squash grown in his own back yard, insisting he had no desire for anything more.45 Apparently his diet did not adversely affect his health, which was excellent until his death of cerebral apoplexy in 1902 at the age of eighty-seven.46

William C. Talcott was one of those rare men who managed to combine thought and action, both in sizable quantities. His activities were amazingly varied, ranging

42 Ibid., 62-63.
43 Ibid., 70-72.
44 Ibid., 60.
45 Porter County Vidette (Valparaiso), January 1, 1903.
from surveying and organizing a cooperative community through practicing law, from serving in judicial positions and running for political office to teaching school, and from serving ten years as a minister to owning and editing several newspapers. Though he was considered eccentric, though part of his energies were fruitlessly expended, Talcott always vigorously tried to apply the yardstick of reason to all his thought and to his efforts toward the realization of his ideas in the society around him. If one word could sum up his character and life, that word would be "reformer," for almost every facet of his life reflects a different reform movement of his time. Apparently of all his activities only surveying, already a mathematical discipline, escaped the rationalist fever of reform. His cooperative community was an experiment in social reform. He wished to revise the legal system and the penal code and to revamp political institutions. He had progressive views on teaching school, and in the matter of religion he himself went through a long series of personal readjustments and reforms. And throughout his life his newspapers were the most important vehicles for spreading his ideas on reform.