

## Utopia, USA

Efforts to reshape society flourished in the 19th century

BY BETTY JOYCE NASH

**T**win Oaks community near Louisa, Va., made and sold record amounts of tofu in 2009, leading to a 15 percent increase in members' monthly allowance: \$86.

The income-sharing community has operated continuously since 1967, originally inspired by B.F. Skinner's novel, *Walden Two*, and the principles of equal pay and a 42-hour workweek. Today, Twin Oaks' credo is to live in cooperation — and in equality — using as few resources as possible. Tofu-making is only one of Twin Oaks' enterprises. Those range from book-indexing to hammock-making; members also grow most of the vegetables and fruit they eat.

Utopian efforts in the United States began with early religious settlers, such as the Puritans in the early 17th century. Many of the earlier religious groups remain today; celibate Shakers are few, dependent on conversion to replenish numbers, the Hutterites and Amish are thriving. The Amish population has doubled since 1991, according to a new report from the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania. A handful of Amish and Mennonite communities dot the landscape in nearly every Fifth District state.

But in the first half of the 19th century, the United States incubated many and myriad utopian experiments, against the backdrop of the industrial revolution. Despite differences in philosophy or doctrine, idealists often migrated among groups, and communities sometimes located near and learned from each other. In some cases, they even bought each other's property. Scholar Maren Lockwood in 1965 described the idealists' motivations: "Like those politicians who devised the Constitution, like the pioneers who grappled with their new land, like Franklin experimenting with electricity, they promised a demonstration of the better life. They would detach themselves from the worldly society. Freed of its imperfections, they would create an ideal social system composed of truly moral men."

### Perfect Place — No Place

Sir Thomas More introduced the literary genre in the 16th century, and, with it, the word: "Utopia" derives from the Greek "eutopos," which means perfect place, and "outopos," no place. Utopian thinking may be as old as mankind, certainly as old as Plato's *Republic*, dating from the fourth century B.C.

The United States was founded on the idea that people had a right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." In the wake of independence, the country became utopia's proving ground. The purpose of shared resources, for reli-

gious sectarians, was to free up time so they could live more holy lives, while the social reformers wanted to demonstrate superiority of communal work and living, according to Clifford Thies, an economist at Shenandoah University.

Some communities sprang from native soil, but many were transplants. Science and reform ideas turned tradition inside out during the Enlightenment, as science focused its new tools and theories on society's ills. Among the influential post-Enlightenment thinkers were English philosophers Jeremy Bentham and father and son James and John Stuart Mill, who advanced the concepts of utility and individual freedom. They sought to organize society using the principle of the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people.

The industrial revolution and ensuing urbanization of society inspired, among others, Scottish textile magnate Robert Owen. Influenced by his friend and business partner Bentham, Owen bankrolled his Indiana utopia when he purchased New Harmony, a prosperous town on the frontier, in January 1825. The community, purchased from the entrepreneurial, religious Rappites, was an early secular utopian effort. Ultimately, Owen founded 19 lesser-known communities in the United States and nine in Britain. All eventually folded, but his ideas were widely promoted and lauded.

By the 1820s, reform was rolling out. Americans experimented with forming public schools, promoting women's rights, and improving sanitation, among other efforts. Original American philosophy, art, music, and literature also began to flourish.

The utopias were as unique as the founders, often ego-driven, charismatic, and controlling. Sometimes founders' beliefs and idiosyncrasies helped doom their efforts. German Pietist leader George Rapp's Harmony Society grew three prosperous communities in Pennsylvania. But in the end, Rapp's insistence on celibacy, and his growing reluctance to return property to withdrawing members ultimately contributed to the society's demise.

The experiments tested ideas about private property, work and remuneration, education, entrepreneurship, and the expansion of family beyond its traditional confines. Communities had problems, though. Participants could coast on the work of others, where public goods were produced and distributed equally, and communities solved the free-riding in a variety of ways — or not. Historians have suggested that religious communities were more likely to endure because they shared commitment, worship practices, dress, and conduct. Absent that sense of purpose, many utopias floundered.

## Science of Society

America's original secular, social-reform attempt at utopia was Owen's New Harmony. Unlike some "communitarians," Owen was less interested in self-sufficiency than in a "new view of society." In his book of the same name, he wrote: "Train any population rationally, and they will be rational. Furnish honest and useful employments to those so trained, and such employments they will greatly prefer to dishonest or injurious occupations. It is beyond all calculation the interest of every government to provide that training and that employment; and to provide both is easily practicable."

Owen bankrolled his own ideas with his mill fortunes. His spinning mills in New Lanark, Scotland, became a prototype for raising up the poor and working classes. His "Institution for the Formation of Character," started in 1816, encouraged cradle-to-grave learning.

Owen sought to form a communal organization that could mold character and solve social problems. He decried the evils of individual property, irrational religion, and traditional marriage, yet he used religious arguments, referenced to "Millennialism," and the Second Coming, and quoted from the Bible to attract people to his crusade. Robert Owen and his wife separated; he and five of the couple's eight children helped spread "Owenism" in America.

What a town it was that Owen got for his money. There were 2,000 acres of cultivated land, including a vineyard, apple and pear orchard, four brick homes, a steam engine, two granaries, wool and cotton factories, a thresher, a five-acre vegetable garden, and 126 family homes. So what could go wrong? Owen's paternalistic ideas met resistance among the pioneering types at New Harmony, and there was great dissension among the residents, as well as between Owen and his partner William Maclure. The community eventually splintered into small groups. Problems included the lack of an inspired purpose and the absence of a self-sustaining economic base and stable governance.

Even by opening day, April 27, 1825, Owen had not determined how the economics would work. Beyond giving members access to the community store and housing, there were no guidelines. Free-riding was rampant. A year later, he spelled out obligations, including a time store in which people were paid in local scrip based on their labors. The currency could then be exchanged for goods at the time store. That led to further disagreement. According to the *New Harmony Gazette*, a letter from his partner, Maclure, on May 17, 1826, stated: "The thing most wanted is to protect the industrious, honest members against the unpleasant, mortifying sensation of working for others who are either unwilling or unable to work their proportion necessary." The idea was that residents should take turns laboring at tasks, especially disagreeable ones.

Despite Owen's bias against private property, he never espoused communalism. "Neither he nor his wealthy partner found it in their nature to turn over their New Harmony property to the otherwise communitarian citizenry any more than Owen would have given his mill town to the

laborers of New Lanark," according to historian Donald Pitzer of the University of Southern Indiana.

New Harmony folded in two years, as Owen was largely absent day-to-day. Instead he had hit the road to promote his prototyped vision. While the community disintegrated, many of its intellectuals stayed in New Harmony and kept up the historic buildings. An agricultural boom in the late 19th century, followed by an oil boom in the 1930s and 1940s, also attracted investment to the town. Ultimately, Kenneth Dale, a great-great grandson, and his wife Jane, invested and helped preserve New Harmony. Jane Owen died just last summer. Today, New Harmony is home to a conference center and quiet small town. Last fall, the Communal Studies Association held its annual conference there.

While Owen's community flopped, at least one New Harmony resident, Josiah Warren, employed the knowledge he witnessed firsthand. He had noted faltering cooperation in New Harmony, and that confirmed his belief that suppressing individuality stifled initiative and responsibility. He is particularly known for his views on labor; and he founded the Cincinnati Time Store.

"All labor is valued by the Time employed in it," he wrote. People who worked in the service of another received an equal amount of time in return. "The estimates of the time cost, of articles having been obtained from those whose business it is to produce them, are always exposed to view, so that it may be readily ascertained, at what rate any article will be given and received."

Warren later extended his Time Store cooperative movement in Equity and Utopia, two individualist communities he founded in Ohio, and also Modern Times in New York. Modern Times lasted about a decade, from 1851 to the early 1860s. To varying degrees, these communities strived to eliminate discrimination by class, sex, and race, and fostered education and scientific inquiry.

## Entrepreneurs in Utopia

A contemporary surviving corporation grew out of John Humphrey Noyes' Oneida community in central New York, founded in 1848. A graduate of the Yale University Divinity School, Noyes abhorred the Jacksonian-era capitalism that had emerged in the 19th century. In an ideal society, he believed, individual interests were less important than those of the group. Noyes and his followers believed Christians could attain perfection — spiritual, intellectual, and emotional. At its peak, the Oneida community counted 300 members.

Fifty-one members chartered the original Oneida Association; they shared possessions and contributed \$108,000 toward the community in its first nine years. Children were raised by the group, committees oversaw its enterprises, and members rotated among work assignments. Oneida members grew, sold and canned fruit and produce, operated a saw and flour mill, and fabricated animal traps and chains. Oneida's substantial legacy has been obscured by emphasis on its "complex marriage" arrangement, developed to prevent attachment and loyalties, which Noyes feared

would work against community interests. Every man could marry every woman, a sort of “free love,” and Noyes promoted birth control to limit the community’s size.

Oneidans ensured community participation through daily meetings. They might discuss the amount of butter served at dinner or whether to open a New York City business office, according to Lockwood. By the late 1870s, Noyes’ age interfered with his responsibilities. With leadership in question and young members less willing to sacrifice, common values began to disintegrate. Remaining members formed a joint stock company in 1880 to retain the remaining property and businesses, the Oneida Community, Ltd. This joint stock company was owned and operated by its 226 members. The company’s finances deteriorated, however, until Noyes’ son returned in 1894 after working as a wholesaler in the outside world. He changed production methods, dropped trap manufacturing, and concentrated on brand marketing and good working conditions. The company, a major maker of flatware, remains headquartered there today.

Also among entrepreneurial utopias were the Amana Inspirationists, who emigrated from Germany in 1842, and were befriended by the Rappists. First established in New York, by 1855 the group had formed a network of villages in the new state of Iowa. These were purposefully designed for agricultural production. Most property and goods were held in common. The community pooled labor to grow and market agricultural and manufactured goods; its mills and factories were among the first in Iowa.

Today, about 1,700 people live in the colonies, however communal Amana ultimately dissolved during the Depression, as orders for goods dwindled. Fire destroyed flour and woolen mills in 1923. Young people were leaving, for work and higher education. To preserve its heritage, the members separated church and business interests. Amana Society Corp. was created to manage the community’s businesses, ending 100 years of communalism. Shares were doled out, which members were free to sell. People began to work for wages, cook their own meals, and establish individual homes. Today, the Amana Society manages profitable businesses in agriculture, tourism, furniture-making, and more. Until 1965, the society owned Amana Refrigeration Products, started by two community members; it is now part of Whirlpool Corp.

### The Utopian Urge

Though many utopian ideas backfired or died with their founders, their legacies influenced the thinking, develop-

ment, and settlement of the United States and its economy. Take the self-proclaimed prophet George Rapp, who formed the Harmony Society, from which Owen purchased New Harmony. The Rappites started out poor, and built wealth through an astonishing array of business enterprises, including silk production, in three locations between 1805 and 1916. They were also early investors in the oil and railroad industries. Ultimately, their substantial holdings were squandered when the original founders died, and the remaining property turned over to the state of Pennsylvania.

Thinkers like Owen, Rapp, Noyes, and Warren transformed dreams into lasting contributions to society: campaigns for women’s rights, birth control, growth of tax-supported public schools, and abolitionism. Owen, for instance, studied social behavior and put ideas into practice, offered infant care 30 years before the German Kindergarten came along, and insisted on “loving kindness” with no “contrived rewards or punishments.”

The most enduring communities in the 19th century used the marketplace to their advantage and realized gains from trade. Early utopian experiments also led to the kibbutzim of Israel and the latter 20th century communities such as Twin Oaks. Of the communities that date from the late 1960s and early 1970s, survivors may be small and few, but significant.

Founded in 1973, East Wind of Missouri is also an income-sharing group, dedicated to equality and cooperation; the group of 65 successfully markets nut butters. In Tennessee, The Farm was built from scratch by 320 San Francisco hippies, led by Stephen Gaskin, starting in 1971. Today, about 250 members either work in nearby towns to support themselves or work in The Farm’s cottage industries.

The Fellowship for Intentional Community lists more than 1,700 communities of various stripes in the United States, forming or existing. They range from a dozen people living together on land held in trust to urban co-housing to larger income-sharers such as Twin Oaks.

How long will they last, these communities, cooperatives, collectives, and eco-villages? It doesn’t matter, says Tim Miller, a professor of religion at the University of Kansas who is working on an encyclopedia of utopian communities. “It’s not longevity, it’s what does society learn from the experiment?” That’s a good question — the same one that feeds the urge to reinvent society, an urge that apparently never dies. While Robert Owen’s communities failed, his influence and image survive; there’s even a campaign on Facebook to use his picture on Scottish bank notes. **RF**

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### READINGS

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