ONEIDA COMMUNITY

1848 1901
Historic Oneida Creek.
The Oneida Community.

THE Oneida Community, whose commercial products are favorably known all over the world, was a religious association which derived its example of life from the Bible, and was founded on the "Old Indian Reserve," near Oneida, N. Y., in 1848, by John Humphrey Noyes. Most of its pioneer members were rugged New England farmers and mechanics who were highly respected and influential members of their respective neighborhoods, but, like their Puritan forefathers, they chose to migrate with their families to a new and distant region in order to enjoy religious freedom. The place at which they settled on Oneida Creek was in a sparsely settled country with rough, miry roads, and was surrounded by the rude dwellings of the picturesque but decaying tribe of Oneida Indians. With the exception of a fertile and almost virgin soil, there was little in 1848 to attract a settler from snug New England to the Oneida Valley. For this reason the growth of the Oneida Community into business prominence is not unlike that of historic men of force and integrity, who, having begun life with few advantages, have struggled with poverty and the wilderness until they have reared for themselves, by their genius and labor, a stately home and an enduring name and fame.
BUT the genius of the Oneida Community was a very simple one, and might be described in the single word Agreement. It was the simple quality of Agreement that enabled its members to dwell together as one family for thirty years, to eat at one table, to hold a common purse and to change the wilderness into a garden. Agreement was prized above everything by the Community and was ardently cultivated from the beginning. No business move of any importance was ever made without practical unanimity. If this could not be secured at once the matter was held in abeyance until, by careful study and discussion, there came to be but a single mind among men, women and children.

The source from which the Community found that it could most surely catch the spirit of Agreement was the Bible, and its members, old and young, were from the beginning enthusiastic lovers of that book. No other literature ever threatened to compete with it in the affections of the Community. For this reason the followers of Mr. Noyes earned at a very early day the ever grateful title of "Bible Communists."

Perhaps the "raison d'être" of the Community could be explained most simply from its belief in regard to the Second Coming of Christ. It took Christ's words in their simplest meaning in regard to this event, and believed that it took place mainly in the spiritual world within the generation of His disciples. Christ being thus the practical present ruler of the world, the Community deemed it consistent in His followers to adapt themselves to the form of society which He approved when on earth.
MOREOVER, it seemed reasonable to the Community in 1848 that there should be something like the same liberty for experiment and invention in devising new and improved forms of social life that has been permitted, for instance, in the study of transportation. The difference between the antiquated stage coach and the Empire State Express is very great, and is due to unlimited opportunity to study, invent and experiment. The sincere effort of the Oneida Community, made at great cost, was to establish a better and larger Home, and one that would be both a Church and a Practical School for Improvement of Character.

Like the author of the Declaration of Independence, the Community considered at the outset that "a decent respect for the opinions of mankind" required that it should give its reasons for the Enlargement of the Home. It therefore explained that it regarded its society strictly as an EXPERIMENT in which the public could and should take a deep legitimate interest. It made no secret of its manner of life, but sent all its publications to the Governor and leading men of the State, and carefully gave its reasons for association to every candid inquirer. During thirty years, it spent over $100,000 in publishing an absolutely free paper, which contained a frank record of its daily life. This candid course met with generous approval, and the Community enjoyed for a long period of years the friendship of the best people in America.
The gathering of the Community at Oneida was due to the hospitable invitation of Jonathan Burt, who possessed a few acres of land and a rude saw mill on Oneida Creek. Of this man, who afforded the Community a building place, it might truly be said, that if Diogenes could have found him he would have blown out his lantern and put it away with certainty. Strong, like a piece of granite, and simple as a child, he combined a wonderful enthusiasm for an unselfish order of society with mechanical instincts of a high order.

But the cherished idea of the Community at the beginning was to make a livelihood from working the soil, and for several years the little paper, which, in spite of its poverty, it perseveringly published, bore like a banner on its title-page: “Horticulture the leading means of subsistence.” The foundation which the Community had for this idea at Oneida was the possession of a rich and fertile soil and a sterling man by the name of Henry Thacker, who had for fruit raising a practical and painstaking genius. Through his skill the Community had instant success in introducing and cultivating new varieties of fruit, and its apples, grapes and strawberries astonished the native farmers. But markets were distant and hard to reach in those days, so that the little capital of the forty or more families, who had sold their New England homes to gather at Oneida, steadily diminished, and they had sunk forty thousand dollars before they groped their way into manufacturing.
Here happened to be a rude blacksmith's forge on the Community land, and Sewall Newhouse, one of its members, a trapper and hunter by instinct and a man of fine mechanical skill, was accustomed to hammer out rude steel traps at this forge for catching the wild game which was plenty in the surrounding woods and streams. These traps, it was soon noticed, had a relentless grip and held whatever came into their jaws, so that the neighboring Indians and farmers' boys began to beg or barter with Mr. Newhouse to furnish them with the products of his skill.

From this small beginning the fame of the Newhouse Trap spread from the Trapper to the storekeepers in the nearby villages, and at last, after much experience of hardship and poverty, the Community perceived that it possessed, in trap-making, the seed of a great manufacturing industry. More forges were made, the young men of the Community were taught trap-making by Mr. Newhouse, and, finally, it was decided to send an agent to Detroit with a trunk full of traps. This was a great undertaking fifty years ago, and the man who took them started off with many misgivings. But the traps sold as soon as shown, so that the agent returned with an empty trunk and a pocket full of orders. This was followed by an unexpected letter from the Hudson Bay Company, containing an order the size of which gave the Community a long-remembered thrill. In the space of a few years the Community, from laboriously hammering out a few traps of a single size by hand at a forge, was making seven sizes by machinery, by the thousand dozen, and shipping them to all the frontiers of America.
URING fifteen of its early years the Community did not hire any helpers, but may be said to have been laboriously laying the foundation of its business education. It did all its own work on the farm and in the garden, barns, shops and household. Assignment of the various members to the different departments of industry, under a competent head, was always made early in the Spring by the Business Board, and was a period of lively interest. The tastes of each member were carefully consulted, and alternation of labor was provided, when desired, so that a high degree of enthusiasm was always maintained. This prevented labor from becoming irksome, besides giving each one an education in different occupations and stimulating his inventive faculties in many directions. Thus, a man who worked in the fruit growing one year, would, perhaps, be busily engaged in the trap shop during the following season, and in the third year might, if he chose, be assisting in the kitchen. The introduction of men as assistants to women in this latter department resulted in the invention of many labor-saving devices, such as dish-washers, vegetable-washers and revolving tables. Many of these things which the Oneida Community invented forty years ago are now, in slightly modified form, in general use.
These years in which the men and women of the Community did all their own work were the most interesting, as they were also the happiest, in their history. Amid their toil, they cultivated music, both vocal and instrumental, with astonishing enthusiasm, and a fine stringed orchestra of twenty-five members, which played classical music, and sweet singers, both male and female, did much to lighten the life of labor. The orchestra always played for half an hour at noon, and these entertainments, with the daily evening meetings in which the papers and correspondence were read aloud by a good reader and every occurrence which was of general family interest reported, made a day of far more than common interest.

There was one very popular and effective form of labor in the early years of the Community, which was derived from the New England custom of holding "bees" for "raising" barns. When there was a field of corn or some other crop to be gathered, and it was necessary that the work be done quickly, the whole force of the Community, men from the trap forges, women from the kitchen, and children from the schools, marched to the field to the stirring music of the fife and drum, and the work was done with as much enthusiasm as if it were a holiday pastime. In like manner when the Trap Department could not fill its orders fast enough, and called for help, there would be a grand rally of all hands for two hours in the evening to hammer and rivet together traps. These merry groups, which included men, women and the elder children, made a rarely picturesque scene under the lamplight.
As there could have been no harmonious and effective business organization without recognized and respected methods of self government, the Community established in its infancy an exceedingly simple but unique system, which it called "Mutual Criticism." As everyone knows, criticism of individuals is everywhere going on in all the relations of life. Nearly all of this is carried on behind the backs of the persons to whom it refers, and is, therefore, not only powerless to effect any improvement, but is a perpetual irritant. In "Mutual Criticism," every member of the Community submitted periodically and in silence to having his assembled associates tell him sincerely, but with kindness, all the points of his character which needed improvement. The single aim in doing this was not to find fault, but to remove all causes of dissatisfaction and to increase fellowship. This simple practice may be said to have been the right hand of organization in the Community, and a powerful regulator of all differences. The member who had submitted to this criticism felt that all cause of disfellowship had been thereby completely removed, and that he could begin a new record. His critics felt that, having had an opportunity to express themselves about him, there was no further cause for anything but good feeling. "Mutual Criticism" was not confined to pointing out faults in a subject; it took equal cognizance of good qualities, so that the recipient was often encouraged and stimulated to further improvement by the knowledge that he was possessed of unsuspected good.

Being fairly launched by trap-making into manufacturing, and perceiving that it was a much surer and quicker road to a competence than tilling the soil, the business men of the Community gradually added other branches. The first of these was the packing of fruits and vegetables which were raised from their own fertile gardens. Fruit packing was comparatively unknown in New York when it was
begun by the Oneida Community. It is now a great industry with the Community, giving employment to large numbers of people, both in raising the crops and in packing them at the exact moment when they are at their best. The exquisite flavor which distinguishes the asparagus canned by the Community is so celebrated that it has never been able to put up enough to satisfy the demand, and there is much rivalry among dealers to obtain it. For many years some of the highest class hotels in New York and other cities have made the Oneida Community preserves a feature of their cuisine.

There is a tradition that the first fruits that were put into bottles by the Community, fifty years ago, were packed at the solicitation of Mr. Thacker, and that the experiment was mainly an amiable concession for the sake of harmony, to what was considered a rather visionary idea. The number of bottles which Mr. Thacker was cautiously allowed to fill by the Community Business Board was 1,000, and after these were put up, everyone feared that a rash thing had been done. However, the goods being packed, an attempt had to be made to sell them, and one of the Community business men, who was accustomed to meeting the world, took a few samples to a distant city and timidly showed them to a large grocer, expecting to be rebuffed or laughed at. Great was his surprise, therefore, when the grocer, having tasted the contents of one of the bottles, said bluntly, "I'll take all you've got."
By this time the limits which enabled the Community to do all its own work had long been past, and its financial condition allowed it to reap some of the fruits of its labor. A commodious home, with park-like grounds, was built. Large factories, giving employment to hundreds of people, sprang up. Literature, Science and Art were cultivated, and many of the young men were sent to the best New England colleges.
HERE was one department which ordinary business organizations do not have, to which the Oneida Community was compelled to assign a man and a woman very early in its history. This was for the reception of visitors, who came daily, not only from neighboring towns, but from distant cities and foreign lands. The Community was always a source of deepest interest to the English. Members of the nobility, lords and ladies, and many well-known writers, like Hepworth Dixon and Wilkie Collins, were its enchanted guests. Celebrated musicians like Ole Bull and Remenyi turned aside unsolicited from their golden tours to play to the Community without price.

In the Park.

In 1870 the Midland Railroad, now the N. Y., Ontario & Western, built its line, which extended for more than a mile through the 700 acres comprising the Community domain, and a station (Kenwood) was established within a stone’s throw of the Community dwellings. This convenience made it very popular for the towns and cities on the line of the railroad to organize excursions to Oneida Community, and these parties numbered from 300 to 1,500 at a time. On such days it took nearly all the active members of the Community to look after its guests. All were made

There is an irresistible fascination about people who are working together in harmony
heartily welcome to picnic on the lawns of the Community, to visit its gardens and factories, and a free concert of instrumental and vocal music, furnished entirely by its own members, was given in the Community Hall. Many people in these parties ordered dinner, which was furnished by the cooks of the Community, and the exquisite flavor of the fresh fruits and vegetables, culled from its gardens and cooked with rich cream from its own thoroughbred dairy, gave the Community a high reputation as caterers.
The manufacture of Sewing and Embroidery Silk, which is one of the largest industries carried on by the Community, was due to the circumstance of one of the original Community men having been a humble peddler of silk thread. Through his knowledge of this business the Community eked out the uncertain subsistence of its first years by sending out its male members to peddle silk, from house to house, in all the villages within a radius of fifty miles. These silk peddlers were sent out two by two, for the sake of companionship. They journeyed only on foot and bought their food and lodging from villagers, or got them by an exchange for silk. The experiences and adventures of these peddlers, who usually returned after a week’s absence, were always a source of amusement and eager interest at the evening meeting.

Peddling, as the Community grew in business importance, was succeeded by the wholesale jobbing of silk, and this had reached large proportions when, in 1866, it was determined to begin silk-manufacturing. To do this safely, the Community sent one of its young men and two of its young women to learn the business of silk-spinning in a New England factory. After working several months as ordinary mill hands, these young people returned with the necessary education, machinery was bought, and the third large industry of the Community was successfully begun. One of the women who thus learned to spin silk in New England is now Superintendent of this business, which sells annually vast quantities of silk in New York City and the other markets of this country. A large new factory has just been completed to supply the increasing demand.
THE manufacture of Silver-Plated Ware was begun by the Oneida Community in 1877. These Works stand on the brink of the gorge at Niagara and their power is derived from that unfailing source. The Community was among the first to establish itself in manufacturing at Niagara Falls and was induced to go there by the liberal offers of the residents. The chief of these was the grant of 300 horse-power at a purely nominal price, which enables the Community to manufacture at the lowest cost. The capacity of its works is 80,000 pieces per day. It manufactures a variety of grades, ranging from the cheapest silver-plated spoons to the highest quality of triple-plated goods. Only the last are stamped with the name "Oneida Community." and any goods bearing that mark can be relied upon as being the best that can be produced.

The Community has made a specialty of the manufacture of souvenir spoons. During the Spanish war numerous souvenirs were made illustrating its principal heroes and events. The first was made immediately after the sinking of the Maine, and was sold by the thousand gross. The
New York Journal bought fifty thousand of these and donated the proceeds of their sale to the Maine Monument Fund. Since the beginning of the Boer war the Community has also furnished dealers in London with a very popular "Tommy Atkins" souvenir.

People who toy daintily with spoons at five o'clock teas may never have heard that there are more than one hundred distinct operations in the manufacture of a tea spoon before it is ready for the cup. Prince George, the heir apparent to the English throne, who was visiting Niagara in 1885, called at the Oneida Community Silver-Plating Works one afternoon with his suite, and inspected these numerous processes of spoon making with the deepest interest.

The fifth and youngest industry of the Oneida Community, the Manufacture of Steel Chains, was an outgrowth of the early necessity for providing chains for its animal traps. These chains were made for many years by welding wire links at forges by hand, and these welded links were replaced later by those known as "Safety" links, which are now made by the Community in three different styles and are adapted to nearly all the uses to which chains can be applied. The most popular of these is the American flat link chain, which was introduced by the Community twenty years ago. This is a favorite with the hardware trade of the United States and Canada, besides being exported largely to Europe. The two other styles are made of wire and are known as the "Niagara" and "Eureka." The special attachments to these chains, such as steel snaps, swivels and other devices, are unique in their line and of distinguished efficiency. The steel chains made by the Oneida Community are worn by the cattle on the plains of Texas and in the stalls of Canada, as well as by the dogs and horses throughout the North and West. They form a part of the mechanism of the great labor-saving agricultural implements and are in use on nearly every one of the leading railroads of America.
In 1880, in accordance with the publicly expressed intention of a lifetime, the Oneida Community, by unanimous peaceable consent, closed the experiment which it had begun forty years before. The return by the Community to the ordinary forms of society was as sincere and complete as its original departure. The members intermarried and their families do not differ from those of any separate households, except, perhaps, in a deeper mutual respect and affection, based on many years of association. In that year, 1880, the Oneida Community was incorporated as a joint stock company, with a capital of $600,000 and has since been known as the "Oneida Community, Limited." The stock was divided among its members in the proportion of the number of years' service which each had contributed to creating the wealth of the Community. There was no distinction at the settlement. The women shared equally with the men. All were comfortably provided for, either through the dividends accruing from their stock or by remunerative employment. The stream of business prosperity rolled serenely on, and there was scarcely a ripple to indicate the change from a common purse to a divided household and separate accounts.

In making this radical change the education in harmony which had been gained by thirty years' experience, was demonstrated with signal effect. The entire property of the Community was divided without the loss of a dollar in litigation.
EARLY all of the original band of pioneers whose pious hands built up the Oneida Community are sleeping on a green hillside within sight of the home which they founded. The stock of the Community, which is at a premium and not in the market, is held almost entirely by the children and grandchildren of these pioneers. The young business men of the Community are collegebred, besides having a good commercial training which enables them to keep the products of the Community up to a high standard, and its methods of business thoroughly modern. Most of these young men, with their families, dwell happily at the old homestead, which retains many attractive co-operative features, such as a common dining room, library, golf and other recreation grounds. Those whose oversight of the Community business compels them to reside at Niagara Falls, Chicago, New York and elsewhere, look forward with pleasure to annual visits to the old home.
The President of the Oneida Community, Limited, is Theodore R. Noyes; the Treasurer is John S. Freeman, and the General Business Manager, Pierrepont B. Noyes. There are nine Directors, who supervise all the affairs of the Company. The general offices, as well as the factories for Trap and Chain making, Fruit Packing and Silk Spinning, are at the original home at Kenwood, Madison Co., N. Y. The Silver-Plated Ware Works are at Niagara Falls, N. Y., and there is a factory for the manufacture of steel chains at Niagara Falls in Canada. The New York office is at 413 Broadway, where all the products of the Community may be seen. There is also an office in Chicago at 79 Dearborn Street, one in St. Louis at 9th and Locust Streets, and one at 134 Sutter Street in San Francisco. Information and Catalogues relating to the Community's manufactures can be obtained from any of these points.