

## **ROBERT OWEN AND THE OWEN-MACLURE PERIOD**

George Flower was a successful English farmer who sold his estate and migrated to the future site of Albion, Illinois, in 1816 with hopes of preparing the way for the establishment of an English settlement. He was joined two years later by his father, Richard Flower. The Flowers became close friends with the Rapp family and frequent visitors to the young community in New Harmony, some twenty-five miles distant.

When George Rapp decided in 1824 to sell New Harmony and move his community east to Pennsylvania, he commissioned Richard Flower to offer New Harmony for sale in Europe. Flower visited the industrialist and social reformer Robert Owen in New Lanark, Scotland, and persuaded him to come to New Harmony.

Owen was born in Newtown, Wales in 1771, the sixth child of a father who made his living as a saddler, ironmonger, and local postmaster. After a few years of formal schooling, Owen left home at age ten to work in London. By the 1790s Owen was a successful manufacturer in the Manchester area. It was while working as superintendent at a Manchester cotton mill that Owen witnessed the deplorable conditions of the day, and became interested in bettering the lives of working men, women, and children.

The Industrial Revolution of the late 18th century had created these conditions. Fewer factory jobs were available as machinery began to replace labor. Meanwhile an agricultural depression caused the rural population to seek factory work. Thus there were more workers but fewer jobs. Employers could only pay very low wages. Smaller establishments gave way to larger ones, due to the expense of purchasing machines. Thus relations between employer and employee became less personal; the employer had less concern for employee welfare. Child labor was prevalent, with no education provided for such children.

While managing the Chorlton Twist Company in 1794, Robert Owen met Ann Caroline Dale while on business in Glasgow; she invited him to visit her father's cotton mills at New Lanark. In 1799, Owen and Dale were married and Owen purchased the New Lanark mills for \$300,000 from David Dale, Caroline's father. Owen assumed the position of manager and principal partner of the largest cotton spinning mills in Great Britain. The mills employed about 1,500 workers, many of them women and children.

Owen soon established a reputation as a progressive thinker. He was convinced, and demonstrated in his own mills, that a concern for the health and happiness of the worker was not only morally right, but profitable as well. At his mills, Owen raised wages and shortened working hours; he provided educational opportunities for children; and he provided better housing, sanitation, and food to his workers. He won over his employees for good when he continued to pay them even though a cotton embargo forced the mills to shut down for a time. Owen pushed for laws limiting child labor and reducing the working day, but he was unsuccessful for the most part.

In 1816, Owen opened a new building in New Lanark called The Institute for the Formation of Character, which contained schools, public halls, community rooms, and a nursery school. Here children were taught natural history, chemistry, ancient and modern history, geography, music and dancing, and military drill.

About this time Owen concluded that society as a whole needed drastic reformation. He believed that the three greatest evils of society were the institution of marriage, private property, and irrational systems of religion. Owen also believed that man's character was environmentally determined; thus the emphasis on infant education. He insisted on taking children from their parents at age two and putting them in the controlled environment of the school.

Meanwhile, Robert and Caroline Owen had eight children; seven survived infancy. In 1808 the family moved to Braxfield. Caroline was not Owen's equal intellectually; in addition, she was a strict Presbyterian, whereas Owen regarded religion as unimportant. He was not necessarily an atheist; his quarrel was with the established church. What he objected to was the negative effect of religion on man: "By the errors of these systems, he has been made a weak, imbecile animal; a furious bigot and fanatic; or a miserable hypocrite..." Despite their differences, however, Owen and Caroline Dale had a reasonably happy marriage, though in later years, when the children were grown, they lived mostly separate lives.

By 1824, Owen wished to give his social theories a practical trial in an experimental community. The New World seemed, as it did to many reformers, more receptive to new ideas than did the Old; thus when Richard Flower approached Owen about New Harmony, Owen was receptive to the idea.

Leaving Robert Dale Owen in charge of the mills, Owen sailed from Liverpool on October 2, 1824, accompanied by his second son William. Enroute to New Harmony, Owen stopped in New York, Philadelphia, and Washington D.C. to discuss his ideas. Using his own money Owen purchased the town of New Harmony, 180 buildings plus 20,000 acres, for \$125,000. Leaving William in charge, Owen left for Philadelphia and Washington D.C. There he gave enthusiastic speeches and issued an invitation for all in agreement with his ideas to join the New Harmony community.

Back in New Harmony, policies regarding property ownership and conditions of membership were unclear, and the population had grown to nearly 800 residents. Owen arrived on April 13, 1825, announcing that Utopia must be achieved in two steps instead of one. A constitution for the Preliminary Society, intended to last three years, was adopted on May 1. On June 5, 1825, Owen left to settle his affairs in Scotland. In October of 1825, he returned to the United States with Robert Dale Owen and contacted Mme. Marie Louise Duclos Fretageot, Pestalozzian educator, in Philadelphia. She persuaded William Maclure, a geologist and philanthropist, to join Owen's experiment. Maclure was interested in New Harmony as place in which to put into action some social reforms of his own including an opportunity to establish a labor school. Maclure

eventually invested capital in New Harmony equal to Owen's. He contacted Pestalozzian educators and natural scientists encouraging them to join the utopian experiment.

On his second trip to the United States, Owen displayed a model for New Harmony designed by English architect Stedman Whitwell. This elaborate model, The Phalanstry, represented a proposed 1000 square foot rectangular enclosure with dramatic towers, social rooms, and living quarters. None of these designs was ever erected; however the site was established and the manufacture of bricks begun.

In January of 1826, a keelboat named the *Philanthropist* arrived in Indiana. It was called by some the "Boatload of Knowledge" due to the many internationally-known scientists and educators, such as Maclure, Thomas Say, Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, and Mme. Fretageot, on board. When the party arrived in New Harmony, they found a community beset with difficulties. The Preliminary Society numbered nearly 1000 people, representing nearly every state in the Union and most nations of Northern Europe. Membership was open to anyone who would sign the constitution; the members had not been selected with any thought for providing the community with the professional skills it would need or the compatibility between members that would make cooperation likely. A report of October 1825 listed only 137 members "in the employed professions." The Preliminary Society consumed far more than it produced, and though it existed only nine months, Owen had serious shortages of food because hardly any crops were harvested, and a shortage of housing. In addition, many of the Harmonist buildings were in need of maintenance which few members were qualified to perform, and this helped to create a shortage of housing.

Blind to the problems of the community, Owen announced that because the Preliminary Society had made so much progress, the time had come to begin the Community of Equality. A new constitution was adopted on February 5, 1826. The constitution had lofty and worthy ideals, but was lacking in practical plans for organizing labor and distributing goods. The community was clearly in trouble and members asked Owen to suspend the new constitution and take over himself from March 4, 1826 to January 1, 1827. Owen had already invested an estimated \$150,000 on the New Harmony experiment and he still owed the Harmonists \$40,000.

Ownership of property was never communal; it remained with Owen, even though the constitution for the Community of Equality stated that it was "to be held in perpetual trust for the use of the community." Owen decided that he would have to sell property to the community, and he announced his terms: 5% interest over 12 years. Many had believed that Owen would merge his property with that of other members, and when the property to be sold was valued at over \$126,000, members were outraged. Though two splinter communities made modest purchases, the parent community never purchased the property from Owen.

On February 15, 1826 a group of Methodist backwoodsmen who objected to Owen's views on religion purchased property from him and established Macluria. Composed of about 150 members, the community lasted only until November 1826. In

March of 1826, English farmers from the Albion area established Feiba-Peveli with about 75 members. This splinter community was moderately successful and eventually the land passed into individual ownership. Both of these groups had Owen's blessing.

However, when a group of young intellectuals, the Literati, wished to split from the parent community, separating those who worked with their heads from those who worked with their hands, Owen put his foot down, believing this would destroy the entire experiment. Owen would not allow the group, led by Robert Dale Owen, William Owen, and Robert Jennings, to take over any of the town's property, but offered them some wooded acreage where they could build their community; this attempt failed quickly.

Despite economic troubles, New Harmony's social life and intellectual climate prospered. Up to 400 children were receiving an education outstanding for the time and place. Scientific research began, and lectures, balls, and concerts were frequent. The New Harmony Gazette, Posey County's first newspaper, appeared on October 1, 1825.

In May of 1826, New Harmony was reorganized into three separate communities: the Educational Society, the Agricultural and Pastoral Society, and the Mechanic and Manufacturing Society. They were to trade with each other by labor notes.

By late summer 1826, Pestalozzian teachers Joseph Neef, Mme. Fretageot, and Phiquepal d'Arusmont, unable to work together, were each teaching separate schools. Owen was critical of the educators, and began to blame the Educational Society and Maclure for New Harmony's problems. The three societies were in constant disagreement, and relations between Owen and Maclure deteriorated. Maclure was absent from New Harmony in the winter of 1826-27. When he returned in the spring of 1827, Owen asserted that Maclure was a full financial partner in the New Harmony venture and owed \$90,000; Maclure claimed he owed only \$11,000 on the Education Society's lease and \$10,000 as a forfeiture on his guarantee of Owen's losses. A crisis occurred when Frederick Rapp arrived on May 1, 1827 to collect an installment of \$20,000 on the \$40,000 still due the Harmonists. It was Maclure who paid Rapp the \$40,000, then filed suit against Owen for the amount. Owen filed a countersuit against Maclure for \$90,000. An out-of-court settlement was eventually reached, and Owen deeded Maclure 490 acres of New Harmony property, including half of the town of New Harmony. When the community organization was abandoned, Owen and Maclure divided the property, Maclure acquiring the property on the north side of Church Street.

In a March 1827 issue of The New Harmony Gazette, Robert Dale and William Owen admitted that they regarded the community as a failure. On May 26, 1827, Owen gave a farewell address, and on June 1 he departed. Owen's utopian experiment was over.

Owen revisited New Harmony on rare occasions, including April to June, 1828, March 1829 and October 1844. By the fall of 1827, Owen was full of plans to set up a community system throughout Texas, then part of Mexico. His idea was not well received, however, and nothing came of it. In 1828, Owen sold his New Lanark shares.

In 1830 his daughter Anne died, in 1831 his wife died, and in 1832, his youngest daughter Mary died. Owen became active in the trade union movement in England and continued to expound his views at every opportunity. In 1858, he died in his birthplace of Newtown, Wales.