

## COMMUNISM IN EARLY IOWA

By AVA JOHNSON

It should not be surprising to find that Communistic ventures cropped up from time to time all over the United States. This was founded to be a free country where any experiments could be tried out without interference. Even that first Plymouth Colony, established by the Pilgrims, was founded as a communistic society. That's a little item we're likely to forget when we get anxious about whether our ancestors came in the Mayflower. Well, if they did, they were communists! To be sure their communism was forced upon them by economic necessity. As, in fact, most communism has its roots in the human economic need.

In Iowa there were a number of such ventures, but most of them were founded as religious, not political communities. And most of them were founded by Germans. One of the earliest of these was the Jasper Colony, west of Iowa City. The men and women came to Iowa from St. Louis, and they were followers of the New Church, the Swedenborg break from Lutheranism. The leader of the group was Hermann Diekhoner, a shoemaker, who was possessed by the religion of Swedenborg. He had courage, he had character, and he had conviction. It is more than probable that the Iowa Colony would never have been founded, but for him.

Hermann Diekhoner was a reader. He was a contemporary of Karl Marx, and he agreed with Karl Marx in the theory of absolute communism in life. But, he didn't get his ideas from Marx. He got them from the New Testament, for he could see no other way, but that communism was what Christ meant in his teachings.

Early in 1844 Diekhoner had left Germany for the new country, where he planned to build a Utopia in the wilderness. Diekhoner and his followers named their colony "Jasper," and they took the name from Revelations, where they read that in the Heavenly Jerusalem

the first foundation was Jasper. They were laying their first foundation for their "Heavenly Jerusalem" on earth, so they named it "Jasper."

These people were not unaware that trials might be ahead. They had studied the nine or ten other communistic settlements that had been established in the United States. But, none of them were right, none of them were established upon the sound philosophy of Swedenborg, as they saw it. They came to Iowa converted to the New Church, radiant in their belief in Swedenborg's philosophy, and in the communistic way of living.

#### THE JASPER AND AMANA COLONIES

Forerunners had settled upon a government-owned area west of Iowa City as the proper grounds. As soon as the ox carts were unloaded on their new grounds, and the first temporary tents had been put up, the men of the group were set to work building a large, log community house. Shortly after, four more such buildings were put up. Each house sheltered two families, with each having its own apartment including an upstairs. But a common kitchen and dining room served the whole colony. Heat, of course, was from fireplaces. Furniture was handmade, except for a few pieces that were brought from St. Louis. Beds were berths fastened to the side of the wall and folded up against it to make room in the daytime. Wooden benches were used for chairs. And during the summer all meals were served out of doors on long wooden tables.

It sounds rugged. But the colony had not been established for the purpose of material comforts. Christian Communism, divine brotherhood, was their key to life. So, in one of those log houses, in 1852, the first New Church in Iowa was established.

Things went well. The land was fertile. There was no trouble with Indians. Crops flourished. The colonists enjoyed all the blessings they lacked in Germany. Money was scarce, but everything else was with them.

And then a strange thing happened. These people, when they had little in Germany, found sense and good clear justice in the idea of communism. But, when they got where possessions were within their reach, a desire for private property sprung up in them.

They began reading their Bibles with a new light. They could find nothing in either the Bible or Swedenborg's interpretations of it to say that communism was compulsory. They debated the question in private and in public. And, in 1853—just two years after founding this New City of the Heavenly Jerusalem with a communistic approach to life as its foundations, the men and women themselves voted to disband, and each take his own chance alone. Diekhoner returned to St. Louis heartbroken.

Two years later, in 1855, the society of the True Inspiration came into Iowa, and settled the Amana Colonies very close to where the Jasper Colony had been. These settlers were Germans, too, but they depended upon inspiration, instead of the word of Swedenborg for their guidance. They had come to the states in the 1840's and were moving west from the earlier establishment in the east, because here they could have more grounds. This group remained Communist until 1932, when they, too, reorganized. They, however, did become a joint stock company, rather than returning to unqualified private property system. And theirs is the longest story of unbroken communism in Iowa—or in the United States, so far as I know.

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### THE KEY TO THE WORLD

Have you ever rightly considered what the mere ability to read means? That it is the key which admits us to the whole world of thought and fancy and imagination, to the company of saint and sage, of the wisest and wittiest at their wisest and wittiest moment? That it enables us to see with the keenest eyes, hear with the finest ears, and listen to the sweetest voices of all time?  
—James Russell Lowell.

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