

UTOPIA AT COMMUNIA

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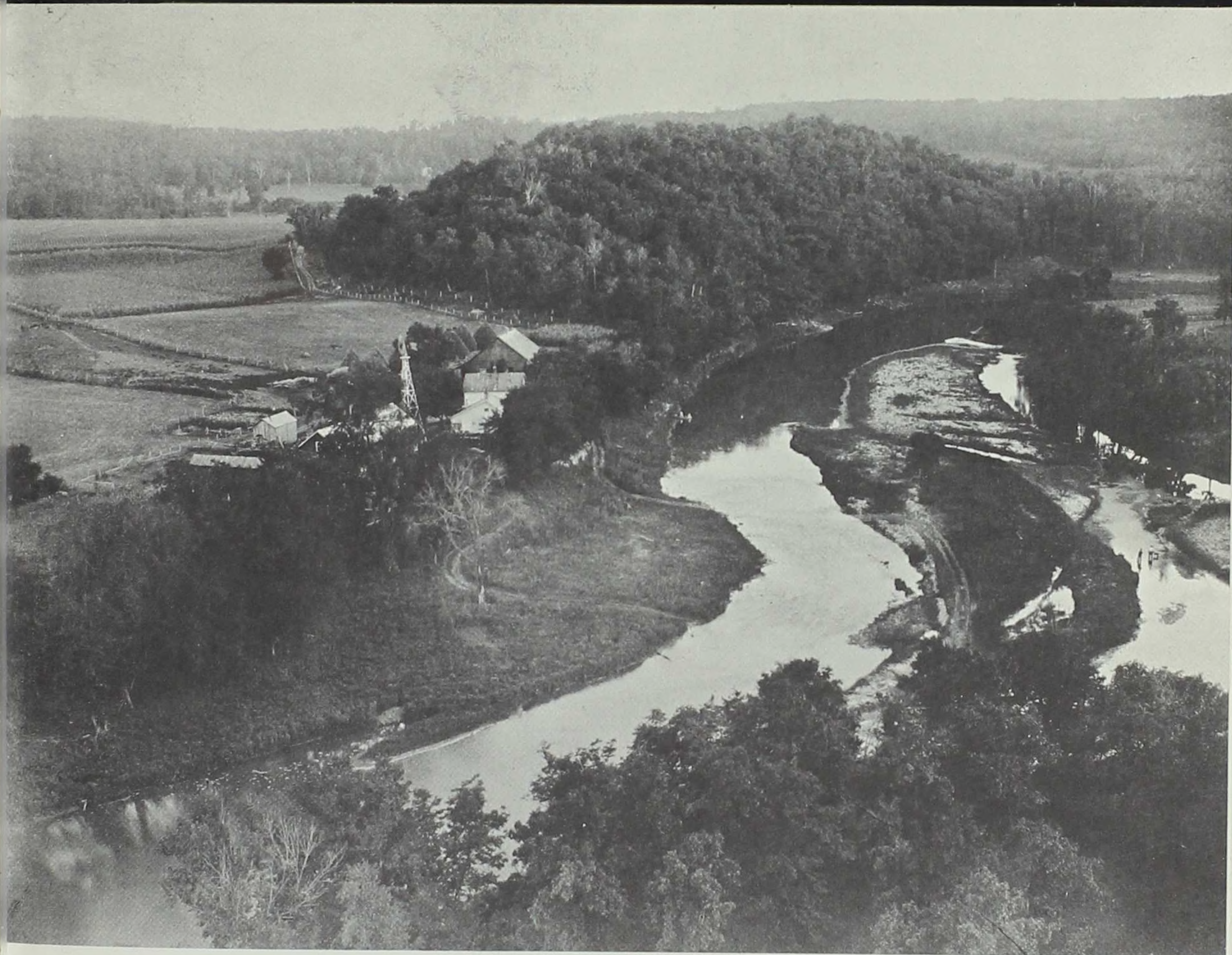
While Iowa's most important utopian colonists—the sectarian Inspirationists of Amana and the secular French Icarians—are known generally to scholars and the public alike, one small group of mid-19th century communitarians is barely remembered. In 1847, a band of German- and Swiss-American veterans of the Mexican War, several of whom had participated earlier in the ill-fated Christian communist experiment at New Helvetia, Missouri, organized a utopian settlement in the hilly area between the Turkey and Volga rivers in the northeastern part of the Hawkeye State. These visionaries and their families acquired more than a thousand acres in Volga Township in Clayton County, six miles south of Elkader and approximately 50 miles northwest of Dubuque. These people of good hope named their colony Communia City or Munzerstadt, but they soon called it simply “Communia.”

During Communia's formative period, residents practiced the agrarian communism of their late mentor, Andreas Dietsch, the founder of New Helvetia. In *Das Tausendjährige Reich (The Millennium)*, published in Switzerland in 1843, Dietsch depicted the ideal society as one based economically on agriculture and spiritually on the “Golden Rule.” All property was to be held in common, thus preventing man's greed from destroying the good life.

The over-all complexion of Communia changed drastically in 1850 when Andreas Dietsch's old friend, Wilhelm Weitling (1808-71) became associated with the Iowa utopia. This poor, self-educated native of Magdeburg,

Prussia was a tailor by trade. By the 1840s, however, he was a passionate champion of the laboring class. Weitling came to the United States, a refugee of the Revolution of 1848, and organized German-American workers in several Eastern cities into a “Workingmen's League.” He also launched the League's official organ, *Die Republik der Arbeiter*. A convert to utopian socialism, Weitling, like so many communitarian thinkers of the antebellum era, dreamed of founding a series of model communities that would initially offer the artisan a haven from the vicissitudes of industrial capitalism and eventually provide a blueprint for the greater society to copy.

In October 1851, Wilhelm Weitling made his first visit to Communia. Immediately the original colonists agreed officially to join his Workingmen's League; the charismatic Weitling had an instant “utopia.” Not only did funds and new members come to Communia after the union, but in 1853 the final revised constitution of the “Communia Working Men's League” appeared. No longer a purely communal agricultural experiment, the colony's objective became that of a workers' cooperative: “The association is to carry on every kind of agricultural, industrial, commercial, and other business and to conform and distribute it amongst themselves, according to the proportionate equal interest of all the Members and Shareholders thereof for becoming thereby enabled to promote these interests and to the comfort and well-being of all the Members and Shareholders, to give them benefits in sickness and infirmity and old age.” As one historian of Communia correctly observed, “Of the rather



The Turkey River in 1895 near the colony site

simple agrarian communism of the Swiss Utopians, not much was left.”

By the end of 1853, numerous problems confronted the 61 Communia colonists. Those of particular importance included personality squabbles, especially among female members, urbanites unable (or unwilling) to adapt to pioneer life, inadequate financial resources, unhappiness among some with the new constitution, and Weitling's repeated absences and general lack of administrative skills. In fact, similar factors often led to the demise of utopian experiments elsewhere.

Conditions at Communia failed to improve. In 1854, the experiment began to drift toward final liquidation. Weitling himself be-

came disillusioned, and few sincerely cared to maintain the colony. Following lengthy and expensive litigation, a Clayton County court finally dissolved Communia in 1864.

After the Civil War Communia was officially dead, but most of the former communitarians were not. They continued to live either in the colony buildings or on farmsteads in the immediate vicinity. Moreover, there remained a strong sense of community; collapse of utopia failed to kill this spirit totally. The group affinity is perhaps best seen in the formation of the Turnverein Society, an organization dedicated to the cause of physical culture and conviviality.

No known photographs of Communia during its days as a communal society exist; the art of

photography was then in its infancy. Fortunately, cameras later captured some of the structures and individuals once associated with the colony.

In the 1880s and 1890s August H. Muegge (1848-1911), a St. Louis, Missouri teacher and gymnast and accomplished amateur photographer, recorded the Communia area on film. Muegge's father, George Muegge, Sr., a native of Bavaria, had likely been a colonist, for his name appears in the 1860 manuscript census of Communia.

In 1969, the granddaughter of August Muegge donated a collection of Communia-area scenes to the State Historical Society of Iowa. The most historically significant photo-

graphs have been selected, ones that provide the best glimpse of this one-time Iowa utopia. □

Note on Sources

The best sources on the Communia colony are Carl Wittke, *The Utopian Communist: A Biography of Wilhelm Weitling, Nineteenth-Century Reformer* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), and George Schultz-Behrend, "Communia, Iowa: A Nineteenth-Century German-American Utopia," *Iowa Journal of History*, 48 (January 1950), 27-54. Also used for this study were the Communia documents in the A.J. Macdonald Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; manuscripts of the United States Censuses of 1860, 1870, and 1880, for Clayton County, Iowa; *Gould's St. Louis Directory, 1880-1910*; and a letter to the State Historical Society of Iowa from Dorothea Seibel, St. Louis, Missouri, May 5, 1969.



The residence of George Kopp was the principal building at Communia. The house, which dates from about 1850, contained the communal dining hall and kitchen as well as five separate family apartments. Two cellars and an attic provided addi-

tional sleeping space for single members and visitors. This photograph, taken in 1889, probably shows the George Kopp family; Mr. Kopp's father was a pioneer colonist.



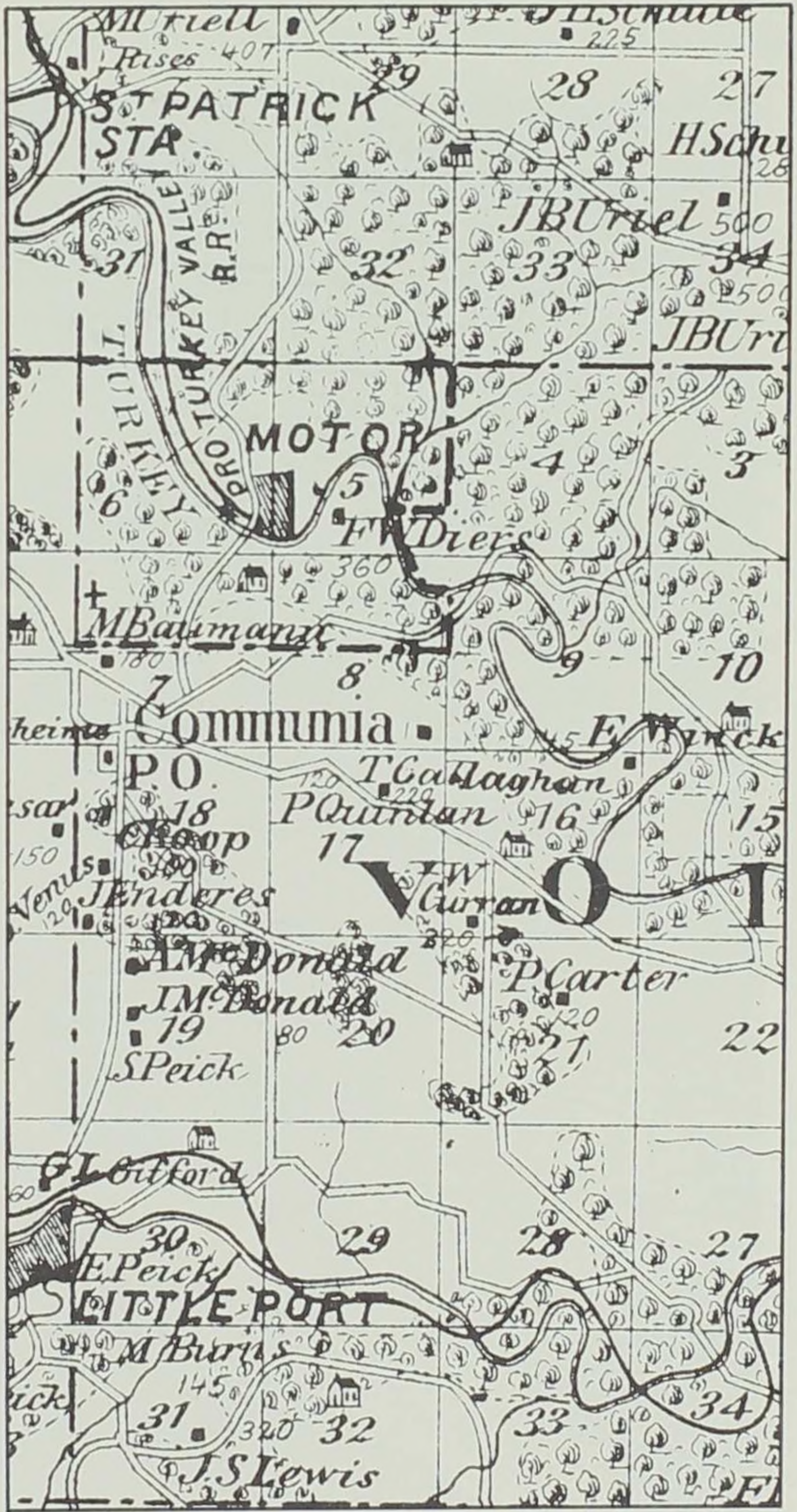
The older men and women attending this "Fish Picnic" in 1895 were undoubtedly ex-communitarians.



A group of "Active Turners" gathers at the former colony hall in 1895.



Threshing was an important community activity, during and after the colony days. This scene dates from 1888.



From A.T. Andreas, Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Iowa, 1875.