

## Eighty-Nine Years of Collective Living

Most collectivist colonies not practicing physical nudity seem to rest for their challenge on a kind of intellectual or spiritual nudism. If one were obliged to attempt to strike a common denominator of objectives it could probably be stated in the quotation, "The proper study of mankind is man." Collectivists complain of barriers existing between individuals under the competitive system of life, and determine that through a close knit collective life they will break down these barriers and expose the real people behind them. Many of them seem to be searching for a catalyst which will precipitate the essence of human personality, so that they may analyze it and separate it into its basic elements. They appear to object to the complexity of present-day life and yearn for something different and more real and earnest.

Perhaps the best recent brief summary of the aspirations and aims of the advocates of collective living is made by Mr. John Hyde Preston, discussing, in *Harper's* for May, 1938, his own five-months experience in collective living. He declares, "The doctrine of individualism has played havoc with the soul of man. That soul must be set free again. It can be free only when the basic needs of



food and shelter can be met without strain . . . when constructive competition has displaced the old destructive kind, and when the individual feels himself to be a single but integral animation of the greater life force of the community."

There are three principal ideas or ideals round which collective colonies are built. These are the purely physical; the intellectual, which includes the economic and social; and the religious-emotional. Undoubtedly the strongest of these is the religious-emotional. It is stronger either than the purely physical excitement of nudity or the purely reasonable challenge of the intellectual ideal. For that reason, those collective experiments which have endured the longest have been those built around an emotional appeal. Such as these is Amana, in Iowa. The collective ideal survived there for seventy-eight years, and had been established in a prior location eleven years before the colony was moved to Amana for reasons which had no bearing upon the workability of the idea itself.

Amana has frequently been pointed out in the Sunday supplements and elsewhere as the classic example of the failure of communism. That is a superficial view of the matter. Whatever communism was practiced at Amana was certainly not Marxist or theoretical in its origin. It lay deeper than that. It was a pooling of all resources for a common religious purpose, and that it happened



to coincide in part with an economic and social theory was incidental. The ideal here was emotional and religious.

Because Amana colonists abandoned the collectivist ideal in 1932, after eighty-nine years of life under it, it is interesting to trace some of the steps leading to the abandonment. This is admittedly a difficult task for an outsider, and no member of the community has discussed the subject in print. If a religious-emotional ideal such as that which held the Amana colonists together for so long could fade, then the fate of collectivist colonies less deeply rooted must certainly hang by slender threads. Perhaps Amana can serve as a yardstick for measurement of the effectiveness and permanency of collectivist colonies and as an illustration of their actual worth.

The depth of the religious ideal behind Amana is at once apparent from the history of the movement. It began in Germany, in 1714, with the preaching of two fervent souls, Eberhard Gruber and Johann Rock. The kernel of their doctrine was that divine inspiration was a present, living thing; and that to certain pious persons, known as *Werkzeuge*, or Instruments, was given the power of Revelation and Inspiration. Sufficient numbers joined the True Inspirationists, as the groups termed themselves, to attract notice and then persecution by civil and religious authorities.

Death and defection during the first century of



existence reduced the *Werkzeuge* to one good, wise, and able man, Christian Metz. Under him the communities of True Inspiration increased in number and strength in spite of persecutions. But even the nonresistance of the Inspirationists could not, in time, longer endure the persecutions of church and state. A divine revelation through Metz counseled emigration to America, and in 1842 five thousand acres of the Seneca Indian Reservation near Buffalo were purchased. This was given the name Ebenezer.

At Ebenezer, in 1843, the True Inspirationists adopted a constitution which laid the foundation for the collectivist colony which was to continue until 1932. They desired above all else to hold themselves apart from the world so that they might worship as a compact group entirely as they wished. Some of the colonists were well-to-do; some were poor. It was very evident that without mutual aid many of the poorer Inspirationists would be forced to leave, with consequent break-up of the compact organization. So strong was the religious zeal of all, and so great was the feeling of brotherhood engendered by the persecutions all had suffered, that the stronger and more able consented, after some hesitation, to pool all resources for the common good. True, it required a special divine revelation through Metz to accomplish this—a revelation which included an eternal curse of material and spiritual poverty upon all who



should ever advocate the dissolution of the community—and considerable urging based upon the description of the early church in the Fourth Chapter of Acts, wherein all believers are declared to have "had all things common."

However, the colony location near Buffalo left much to be desired, and it was finally decided, again through divine revelation via Metz, to move. After much search, the new location was made in Iowa, in 1854, and given the Biblical name, Amana, signifying "believe faithfully."

Each man and woman was expected, voluntarily, to do a proportionate share of the work of the colony as natural ability made it possible. In return, it was the privilege and right of each to be housed by the collective, fed and clothed by it. Those who had special skills found employment in the woolen mills, furniture factories, and other industrial enterprises which were established. The farmers worked on the land, in the dairies, the vineyards. Bakers baked bread, butchers cut meat, foresters cut and sawed timber; every man found, as nearly as possible, his niche in the life of the community. The products of each man's hands became the common property of all. Food products were prepared by the women in the common kitchens from which all were served. Living quarters were assigned to each family by the elders according to the size and needs of each. Goods made in the factories were sold, and with the pro-



ceeds were purchased those necessities not produced in the colony. Amana woolens are today known and sold nationally; Amana furniture likewise, though it is less well-known.

Under the deep and all-pervading spell of the Amana Church, the members of the community did, for long, do their fair and proper share of the work. The more able and intelligent of the group were educated in the professions or trained as foremen and managers—at the expense of the community—and returned to it to serve their fellows with their special talents. Nor did these stronger brethren expect or receive more than the humblest. Collectivism is the great leveler.

But the prophets passed to their reward and, perhaps inevitably, the religious fervor of the community relaxed. The change came slowly, but it was none the less certain. The old admonition of the founders, "have no intercourse with worldly-minded men," was no longer strictly heeded. The plain garb which for so long had distinguished the True Inspirationists—particularly the women—was gradually abandoned. The shoulder shawl and the little black cap, designed to hide feminine graces and keep pride in subjection, disappeared except at church services. And when plain garb was worn it sometimes concealed such modern adjuncts as bobbed hair, wrist watches, or beads. The innumerable church services were no longer so well-attended. Cameras, bicycles, pianos,



radios, occasional automobiles, and a few private bank accounts had come into Amana—evidence that the old order was passing.

This history and these manifestations of change are in the record. It is much more difficult to get beneath the surface to understand what was going on in the minds of the individual members of the community. For in the end it is the individual who seems to matter most seriously with the collectivists—which is something of a paradox in itself.

It is quite evident, as I have already mentioned, that there was no conscious desire on the part of the True Inspirationists to set up a collective colony purely for its own sake. The collective way of life was set up as a solution to a pressing problem. It had, therefore, a very real purpose and a very definite place in the life of the people it affected. Moreover it had behind it the force of the only constituted worldly authority the colonists recognized—the great *Werkzeug*, Christian Metz. Metz had not only counseled and established the collective life but had placed a curse upon anyone who would dissolve the colony.

If the intimate daily religious records of the community were available to the outsider, it might be possible to trace a subtle change in the life of the colony. But these are not available, and I think rightly so. Therefore, the change which took place was not apparent to the outsider until it became so decided that he might notice it. Were these



people growing a little tired of one another, and hence a little more willing to have intercourse with the "outside?" Was the solemn admonition to have nothing to do with worldly men beginning to seem unreasonable? It seems so, yet this was the essence of the collective idea. The seven villages which compose the Amana colonies had long discouraged automobiles by the effective means of raising their street crossings above the level of the street. These were lowered about two decades ago.

Before these traffic curbs were removed, however, there were other changes apparent. One of these was the employment of "outside" labor. The Amana collective had rested upon the idea that all members of the community would give their best abilities to the community. The Marxist ideal of "from each according to his abilities; to each according to his needs" might be said to define the Amana idea. Indeed, it is doubtless here that the Sunday-supplement comparison of the Amana colonies with Marxist communism has arisen. This employment of outside labor was due to the fact that some colonists were beginning to shirk their responsibilities. The religious ideal was losing its hold, and this lost idealism was reflected in the attitude of some colonists toward their obligations under the collective.

It was a very simple change. More people began going to the doctor to complain of ailments.



They felt themselves unable to perform the labor expected of them. The curve of illness based upon the number of colonists visiting the doctors pointed steadily upward. And yet, since food was dispensed without question at the collective kitchens, the shirkers continued to carry away full baskets. Their ailments were not reflected in their appetites. Since medical service cost nothing the visits to the doctor were not curtailed. One physician said to me that however much he might be convinced that a patient was healthy and sound, he could not exert authority he did not possess and mark out the patient as an imposter. There was no provision for shirkers in the community. It had been established on the ideal that there would be none.

This condition, which began to make itself felt during the last two decades of the last century, was eventually reflected in the finances of the colony. Its deficits began to increase, and by 1931 it was facing either receivership or reorganization on a plan which would compel those who would eat to work. This was true in spite of the fact that at no time did the number of shirkers exceed twenty-five per cent of the entire community. The fact is interesting as illustrating how at the mercy of a recalcitrant minority a collective community may become—or may always be.

It cannot be said that there were any barriers among the colonists at Amana which prevented a complete understanding of the aims and hopes and



personalities of each. The intense religious fervor which steeped the community; its simple, uncomplicated type of life; and the close physical contact among individuals in the work of the day, the community kitchens, the numerous church services, and even in the homes jointly occupied, all should have served to break down those artificial barriers between personalities which are the chief objections of the advocates of collective living. Here, certainly, was no lack of opportunity to understand and become acquainted with every other colonist. Moreover, the intellectual level of life was such that all believed rather implicitly in the semi-divine authority behind the community. Yet all these bonds failed to hold a minority to their duty under the collective system, and that minority proceeded to wreck the colony.

There was another disrupting factor: the desire for personal possession. It seemed to go deeper than the mere possession of an automobile, or a radio, or a bicycle, or a wrist watch, though these desires were natural enough when once they were aroused by contact with persons on the outside who did possess them. There was a desire to possess something which was the result of their own labors. Mrs. Bertha M. H. Shambaugh has been a sympathetic student of Amana for a number of years. In her book on the colonies, published by the State Historical Society of Iowa, Mrs. Shambaugh touches upon the subject of personal pos-



session. "Then too," she says, "contact with the outside world had aroused in some of the strong and capable of the younger generation a real desire for the competitive struggle." This is a strange desire to find among people whose way of life is traditionally collective. It is still more strange if collective living is the boon its advocates declare it to be.

I think of my conversation with a husky young fellow one warm summer afternoon at Amana. He was busy at a routine task of manual labor, and I approached him. He seemed willing, even a little anxious, to talk to an outsider. I asked him what he thought of life under the reorganization which went into effect in 1932. "I'm all for it," he said with a slight German accent. "I was for it long before it happened."

I make no effort further to reproduce his exact words, but the gist of what he said was this: He wanted something he could call his own. He had wanted it for a long time. His ancestors and himself had worked hard for the colony, and what had they to show for it? A man wanted to be free to come and go as he pleased. And how could he do that if he had nothing of his own? A fellow, especially a young fellow like himself, didn't want to be shut up too closely with a lot of his neighbors, no matter how good they were.

I asked him how life compared under the two systems. Well, he wasn't sure but that it had been



easier under the old system. Under that system, the elders, or managers, of the community had done all the worrying. Now he had to do his own. But now, also, he owned his own house—or was buying it from the new corporation—and he could do with it as he pleased. He was willing to do some worrying on his own account provided he had something to show for it at the end of a certain period. Moreover, he wanted a chance to live like people on the "outside." He was tired of having his way of life—he didn't use that term, but it was what he meant,—cut out for him.

This statement is perhaps the most significant of any made by this earnest young fellow who was willing to talk in spite of the habitual reticence of his oldsters. The collective community had been established in 1843 so that a way of religious-emotional life might be preserved from change. Yet here was a young man who was the product of years of such life repudiating the very objective which had become traditional with him. He said nothing about the slackers or shirkers. Although he seemed to be ambitious, both in outlook and in action, the shirkers of the community who had actually brought about the reorganization were apparently not uppermost in his mind.

There was no philosophical approach to the subject in the young worker's mind. He was not interested in the finer points of the matter at all. He did not say to me that there is a possessive in-



stinct in men. He merely said that he and his friends wanted something they could call their own. He did not say there is something in men which makes them want to be free from the shackles of other personalities and perhaps not too closely bound to other personalities. He said merely that he wanted to be free to go and come as he pleased; to live his life without having to think too much about what the other fellow was doing. For him, at least, the sharp impact of personalities held no interest.

The philosophical approach came to me from a very different member of the colony. He was one of the elders, the patriarchs of the community. I shall not embarrass him by identifying him too closely. Merely let me say that he is a man whose education had been broad and whom one finds pleasant and stimulating. With his permission I set down here a statement he made particularly for my benefit as summing up the attitude of the leaders of the community. "We are firmly convinced," he said, "that the collective idea is entirely impractical for the reason that it requires too large an element of sacrifice of all personal and selfish ideas. The only way in which collectivism can be practiced is as a religious ideal or a dictatorship."

In deference to his feelings I did not press the point bearing on the religious ideal. He told me that he retained it. He intends to go on living out his life in the community, working for the com-



paratively limited income which he will receive. This he does in spite of the fact that his education and experience are such, and he is engaged in such a type of work that he might go into the "outside" and earn several times what he will receive for his services to the community. By implication he told me that many had lost the religious ideal, which was the reason the community found itself reorganized into a purely business corporation with a high-salaried sales manager from the outside. He realized the completeness with which the religious ideal was at the mercy of a minority in the community, and of course the effect that abandonment of the ideal by a minority had had upon Amana.

What caused the loss of religious idealism? He was not so sure. The possessive instinct ran counter to the ideal as it was expressed in practice at Amana. It would run counter to any collective idea, for the two were natural opposites. Would that wreck every collective effort? He could not say of course, but he felt that it must inevitably unless there was some deep-seated cause for defection which he had overlooked.

Here, it seems to me, is testimony which gets close to the heart of the collective philosophy. This man's belief, based upon his experience, was that collectivism could be made to work only as a great ideal—or under compulsion. But the ideal itself could not withstand—in the minds of at



least a minority of any group—the impact of individualism. He said nothing about the thrill of exploring the personalities of his neighbors; of breaking through the barriers which surround their personalities. There should be no barriers in a community which had been collective for eighty-nine years. If some collectivists can break down these barriers in a matter of a few months, certainly Amana should have had none.

Here I express an opinion based purely upon observation. It is not something I felt I had any right to discuss with the more discerning Amanites. But I distinctly got the impression that there were more barriers of personality in Amana than in any competitive community I had ever seen. The colonists seemed to be trying hard to throw off these barriers, but they had not succeeded. I got the impression that here were a people beset by inhibitions. They were self-conscious. The waitresses who served us our meals, the girl who acted as cashier when we paid our bill, the receptionists at the general offices, the clerks in the stores, the children who sidled toward us here and there—all these seemed to be strikingly self-conscious. They had not, in my opinion, that frankness of approach and naturalness of behavior which one might expect from the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of collectivists.

I would not knowingly do the good people of Amana the slightest injustice, but I cannot help



but record an honest impression. That impression is this: that here is a group the majority of whose youth is nervously maladjusted. (I do not like to use a stronger term.) Allowance must always be made for the effect of a stranger and outsider in any group such as this, but after making due allowance, I cannot shake that impression. The lack of expression in so many faces; the talkativeness before—though not to—strangers; the too obvious playfulness in relationships between the sexes who were thrown together in work; all these and many other indications I translate into the impression I record. If collective living breaks down personal barriers, then these things should not be.

Perhaps, by the law of averages, a community of from fifteen hundred to eighteen hundred members should not normally be expected to produce anything of value in arts in eighty-nine years. But collective living, according to its advocates, is an elixir which liberates the soul. Might not some member, freed from the competitive struggle, imbued with a great religious ideal of humility and brotherhood, have found inspiration for some great religious prose or poem? The fact is that nothing of the kind was produced.

In the face of the evidence, one is justified in wondering whether collective living is—at least after eighty-nine years—the potent tonic its advocates declare it to be.

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