

Life In the Amana Colony

The co-operative village, with diversified industries based upon agriculture as the main industry, has been the ideal of many social reformers and is still the fond anticipation of not a few practical men. The organization of industry and the domestic economy of a communistic society whose basis is agriculture, yet whose industrial life is varied and so far as possible complete within itself, may bear very importantly upon the question whether purely co-operative village life could be made feasible and profitable. Every trace of communism might be eliminated from the constitution of a society like Amana and co-operation substituted therefor, without visibly affecting the mechanism of social and industrial life. So radical a change in the *motif* of the association, which is held together by a peculiar religious creed, might cause rapid disintegration. But in outward form Amana is a miniature co-operative commonwealth; and some account of its structure and arrangements may be permitted, especially in view of the fact that from the standpoint of co-operation this particular society is by far the most important of the communistic groups of the country.

The Amana community occupies an irregularly

bounded tract of land ten or twelve miles long and five or six miles wide, containing about twenty-six thousand acres, and lying on the line of the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railway, principally in Iowa County, Iowa, at a point about midway between Davenport and Des Moines. The people are Germans. They came to America in 1842 and acquired a tract of land near Buffalo, New York, which they called Ebenezer. They are known as "Inspirationists," having come from a peculiar sect which originated in Germany early in the last century and which has much in common with the Quakers. They believe in the continuance of direct inspiration, and have generally possessed a religious head whose utterances were believed to be those of an inspired instrument.

In Germany they did not attempt communal life; but after coming to this country they were directed by "inspiration" to have all things in common. Their land at Ebenezer was a tract of about eight thousand acres. They came from the thrifty middle class of German society, and brought with them much skill in certain kinds of manufacture. In order that the immigrants might do the sort of work they were accustomed to do, and still remain together, a co-operative organization became a practical necessity. The deep religious conviction which was the bond that held them together as a peculiar people, made it easy to superimpose the communistic mode of distribu-

tion upon the co-operative organization of production. Every family contributed its capital to the common stock, in sums ranging from two thousand to sixty thousand dollars. Those who found agriculture distasteful were allowed to work in the woolen factory and the various shops. The society prospered steadily. It was soon found that more land was needed, and that it would be profitable to sell the valuable tract near Buffalo and acquire government land beyond the Mississippi. In 1855 a gradual migration to Iowa began, an excellent location on the Iowa River having been chosen. From time to time the domain of the colony has been extended by purchase until it now includes twenty-six thousand acres.

The present population of Amana is about two thousand, of whom nearly two hundred are hired helpers and their families, while more than eighteen hundred are members of the society. For the sake of convenient access to the land, the people are grouped in seven villages. For convenience in administration, all of the villages, and nearly all of the land owned by the society, have been included in one civil township. The villages, with their membership population given approximately, are as follows: Amana, 550; East Amana, 140; Middle Amana, 400; High Amana, 140; West Amana, 220; South Amana, 200; and Homestead, 180. From the east to the west village the distance is about six miles. Homestead is a station on the

Rock Island road. Amana (village) is on a new division of the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul road. South Amana has two village centers a mile apart, one being on the Rock Island and the other on the Milwaukee road. The villages are all connected by good wagon roads and by telephone lines.

About five thousand acres of the colony's domain is timber land. Each village has assigned to it a definite area for cultivation and pasturage. The village is a social and industrial unit, for all ordinary purposes. The colony as a whole is governed by a board of thirteen trustees, of which Amana, as the largest village and headquarters of the colony, chooses three, while two small villages elect one each and the other four villages elect two each. This board manages all the general affairs of the colony. Each separate village is governed by a board of elders, the number varying from seven in the smallest village to eighteen in the largest. The village elders have spiritual as well as temporal functions, and they were formerly appointed by the inspired spiritual head of the colony. Vacancies are now filled by the central board of trustees, appointments being for life.

The elders order the industry of the village, appointing the foremen and designating the duties of individuals, always consulting their preferences so far as possible. The village work seems to proceed smoothly and harmoniously, the machinery

of organization being never visible to the spectator.

The central institution in each village is the "store," the small farming village of East Amana alone being without it. The store is a large general retail establishment, with a stock of groceries, dry goods, clothing, hats and caps, hardware, drugs, etc. Its bookkeeping is very elaborate. Except in dealings with outsiders, the colonists do not ordinarily use money. Everything is done by a system of accounts which are kept at the store. The blacksmith shop and the carpenter shop have accounts against the farm department, which are duly recorded on the village books. Every family or adult individual has an account at the store. At the beginning of each year certain credits are allowed to all members by the village elders, and purchases against those credits are made at the store.

All members take meals at village boardinghouses, in groups of perhaps forty or fifty. These boardinghouses maintain each their own dairy, are supplied with groceries from the store, with flour from the colony's mills, and with meat from the village butcher shop. The villages are rather compactly built; with large, plain houses of wood, stone, or brick, the latter material greatly predominating. Each family is assigned its houseroom by the village elders. Most houses are occupied by more than one family. They are without kitchens and dining rooms, a boardinghouse being conveniently at hand for every eight or ten families.

The stores are well-stocked and admirably managed. They have a very large outside patronage, farmers often coming for twenty miles to sell their products to "the colony" and to buy their supplies from the fair-dealing storekeepers at Amana, South Amana, or Homestead. The store at South Amana carries a stock of goods worth not less than twenty thousand dollars, and its annual trade is very large.

The bookkeeping for each of these villages is as perfect as that of the best managed banks. It shows precisely what, in all directions, the village has produced in a given time, exactly what amount of its own productions it has consumed, just what has been sold to the other villages or marketed outside the colony, just what has been bought from other villages or from without, and just what the net gain or loss has been. At Amana, the central books of the colony are kept, and the accounts of the different villages are periodically cleared. The trustees are enabled thus to consider every feature in the financial situation of the colony. Balances between villages are not, of course, actually paid. The farming villages of East and West Amana may have suffered from a bad crop season or from cattle disease, and their income for the year may not equal their expenditures; while the manufacturing villages of Amana and Middle Amana, with two great woolen mills and the cotton print factory, may have made money hand-

somely. But profits and losses are equalized for the whole colony. The system of village industry only exists for convenience in organization; and no village suffers detriment or disadvantage from the fact that its resources may not be so productive as those of other villages.

Perhaps a further word should be said as to the method of distribution among families and individuals. First, the village elders provide shelter for all, taking account of the size and condition of families, and showing the utmost regard for the home sentiment and for reasonable preferences, and making no unnecessary stir on moving day. The simple furniture and stock of household goods are the private property of the families. The fruit of the numerous grapevines in the narrow door yards and trellised against the house walls, is appropriated by the occupants and is not accounted for.

Besides furnishing shelter, the village provides excellent and abundant food for all, in the numerous boardinghouses to which families are assigned. In lieu of clothing and sundries, credits for fixed sums are allowed and each person or family is provided with a passbook and allowed to purchase what he pleases at the store or the village tailor shop. The customs and religious principles of the village prescribe a very simple and somber garb, so that the clothing allowances are not large. They vary in amount according to circumstances.

Some kinds of work are comparatively destructive of clothing, and due recognition is given to all such facts. There is nothing punctilious or exacting about this distributive system. It is the desire that all shall be well-sheltered, well-nourished, and comfortably clad, and there is no suspicion of higgling or niggardliness. But luxury and vain display are religiously eschewed. The sick and aged are always tenderly cared for, and there is visible no harshness among these God-fearing and honest people.

The purpose of this sketch forbids a detailed account of the industries of the Amana colony, but they may be briefly described. Most important are the two large woolen mills, one in the central village and the other in Middle Amana. The yarns and flannels of these mills are not surpassed, and are in demand everywhere in the country. The annual output is said to be worth about half a million dollars. The operatives are all men, and a majority of them are past middle life. They are as hale and interesting a body of old men as can be found anywhere. Long practice has given them great skill. They have a fine pride in the perfection of their goods, and quality is their first object. The factories are supplied with excellent machinery. Everybody in them is industrious and cheerful, while nobody is overworked. I do not believe that so intelligent and well-conditioned a group of operatives can be found in any other

factories on earth. A cotton print factory at the Amana village also produces a famous line of goods. The colonists brought with them from Germany a process of cotton printing and indigo dyeing. The durability of their prints makes the demand for them constant and large. Most of them go to wholesale dealers in Chicago, New York, and Boston. At Middle Amana there is a starch factory and at Amana a soap factory, neither of which is very extensive.

Fifteen or twenty years ago flour milling was one of the leading industries of the colony. In those days Iowa was a large producer of wheat, and the new methods of milling which have built up flouring centers like Minneapolis were not in vogue. The colony had two large mills, and did a thriving business in the jobbing of flour. The mills still do some outside business, but are chiefly occupied with grinding for home consumption. The one at West Amana supplies three villages and the one at Amana supplies four. It is intended this year to rebuild the West Amana mill and equip it with rollers and the most recent machinery. There are sawmills in four of the villages, but they do not manufacture lumber for sale. They are used only as necessity requires. At High Amana there is a tannery. There are machine shops at Amana and Middle Amana, and blacksmith and wood shops in all the villages. At South Amana and Amana there are lumber yards, which are patron-

ized extensively by outside farmers. There are two or three grain elevators at the colony's railroad stations, and the grain or livestock of outsiders is freely purchased and shipped to the Chicago market. The head men of the colony are competent and prudent businessmen, and they manage their large business with system, skill, and profit. They are noted for their upright dealings.

The income of the society is large enough to provide a comfortable living for all, and to permit the constant improvement of its noble domain. A canal six or eight miles long has been constructed at considerable expense in order to furnish water-power for the woolen mills from the Iowa River. A fall of fourteen feet is thus secured. There are several good bridges across the Iowa River, and many miles of fairly good roads connecting the villages with one another and with outside places. The telephone connects all parts of the colony. A flowing artesian well, two thousand, two hundred feet deep, has been sunk at Middle Amana. A plain but suitable church is found in every village, and also a good schoolhouse. The dwelling-houses are solid and capacious. The barns and stables are excellent, and the supplies of farm machinery the best. The income of the society is thus absorbed in current expenditure and general improvements.

Advanced education is not appreciated at Amana. The people are not, as in the French

Icarian community, readers and philosophers. They have clear, practical intelligence, but apart from the Bible and their own religious records (many volumes of which they have printed) they do not hold literature in high esteem. But they believe in a common education, and send all of their children to their village schools. Life in the schoolroom begins very young and continues until the girls are thirteen and the boys fourteen. School keeps five and a half days in the week and fifty-two weeks in the year, and begins very early in the morning.

The teachers, of whom there are sixteen in the seven villages, are all men—typical old-fashioned German schoolmasters—and all members of the colony. Some of them have been teaching where they are for twenty or thirty years. Every schoolhouse contains a large, sunny work room, and the children spend part of each day in that room, boys and girls together, knitting and glovemaking, under the instruction of women. Great loaves of fresh rye bread are brought to the school from the village bakery, and the master dispenses generous slices of bread and butter.

German and English are both used in the schools—the latter somewhat painfully. The teaching is conscientious and thorough, in the old-fashioned way. The good old masters take pride in the fluent reading of their best boys and in the scrupulously neat copybooks of their best girls.

The little girls all wear long dresses, small black caps, and diminutive shawls religiously pinned across their breasts, and they look very fresh-faced and pretty. The courtesy and good manners of the Amana children are worthy of special note. These schools are occasionally visited by the county superintendent and are accounted as belonging to the public school system of the state. The colony is given its share in the apportionment of the state school fund. It is a question whether these quaint old German teachers are not accomplishing better work than some of the ambitious graded schools in the large towns of the state.

When they leave school at fourteen, the boys are assigned to some useful function in the community. The tastes and preferences of each boy and the opinions of his parents are, of course, consulted, and no practical difficulty is found in determining which boys shall farm, which shall be teamsters, which shall be mechanics, which factory operatives, and which businessmen.

The population of the colony grows at moderate pace, chiefly from within. Occasionally a German family is admitted from without, but no accessions are sought, and most applications are refused. It is remarkable that so few old members become discontented and withdraw, and that so few, comparatively, of the young people, seek escape from the monotony of life in the colony. It would be impossible to find any other Western neighbor-

hood, of like population, where changes are not five-fold, or ten-fold, more numerous. When occasionally a member does withdraw, he is paid the sum he originally gave to the society, or his legal share of the sum his parents may have deposited. But otherwise he receives no portion of the accumulated wealth of the society, except what the trustees may voluntarily bestow upon him.

This incomplete sketch must of necessity leave unsaid very many things that should have place in a full description of life at Amana. It is a community in which crime is absolutely unknown. In deference to the laws and institutions of the state, the colonists go through the form of electing a justice of the peace and a constable for their township; but these officers have nothing to do. Pauperism, of course, is a term that has no meaning in a communistic society. The even and wholesome life of the colony is conducive to good health and great longevity. If there are vicious and ill-disposed persons in the colony, I have seen none of them and have heard of none. I mean, of course, such persons as would be regarded in any good community as bad members of society. I have seen in the colony no faces that excited distrust and dislike. The life is unquestionably promotive of moral excellence. The average of physical comfort is high, but it might easily be higher. The wants of the people are few and simple, and they do not aspire to "all the modern conveniences." Their

intellectual standard also is low. They might have libraries and reading rooms and a central high school with the best appliances. But this is not what they want. They live under the restrictions of a narrow creed. Obviously their life has its unfavorable as well as its favorable side. There have been troubles and disagreements at times, undoubtedly. As society at large is now constituted, nothing could be more hopelessly impracticable, for general adoption, than the communistic program. But there is much in a community like Amana to strengthen faith in the feasibility of co-operation.

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