

# The two sides of utopia in Harmony



Roofless Church, above, and inner courtyard, inspired by author George Sand.

by Hunter Drohojowska

**NEW HARMONY, Ind.** — Utopia then and now, that's New Harmony. This village in the southeastern corner of Indiana — midway between Vincennes and Evansville — was the home of two separate utopian communities during the first decades of the 19th century, the Harmonist Society and later the Owen-Maclure community. But anyone visiting the town today can still experience a rare sense of peaceful well-being that is the closest thing to 20th century utopia.

The congeries of red brick and cobble buildings rise like a range on the banks of the Wabash river, a spot preserved in space and time from the afflictions of progress.

The historic architecture is simple but elegant, each building a milder of the town's noble origins. From the porch of a 1775 log cabin, once the home of a fur trader, you gaze at the magnificently modern Athenaeum, a learn-



ing center designed by the eminent architect Richard Meier in 1979. After a day of walking tours through historic structures, you come back to the New Harmony Inn, to a room with blond wood-

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Hedge labyrinth in New Harmony, Ind., a community settled by two major sects.

floors and Shaker rocking chairs, a fireplace and a balcony view of the Wabash. The atmosphere is both monastic and luxurious.

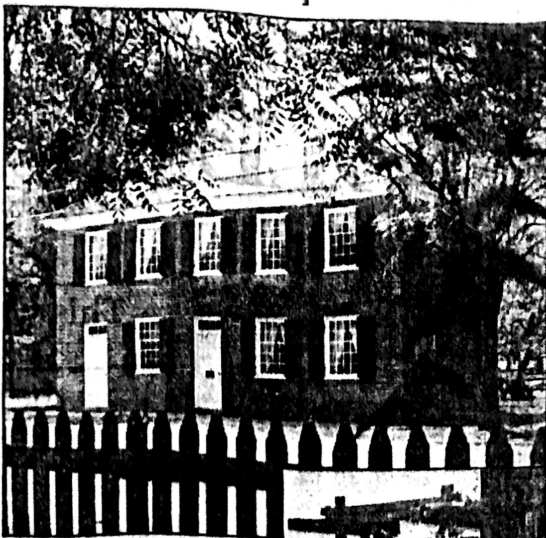
New Harmony was founded in 1814 by a German sect of Lutheran separatists led by Father George Rapp. From Harmony, Pa., they came to Indiana to await the Second Coming of Christ and their future as the "chosen people." They planned the entire city with Teutonic efficiency. New Harmony is built on the original grid with the streets named after their original landmark establishments: Brewery, Church, Tavern, and so forth.

The Harmonists worked hard to raise money for their journey to Jerusalem where they believed Christ would transport them to the next world. They practiced celibacy fearing children would not be able to make the journey, and also because the women could not work in the fields if they were pregnant. Their dedication resulted in 150 buildings and a 35-acre apple orchard, much of which still exists today. Although a prosperous and cosmopolitan community, in 1824 the group decided to return to Pennsylvania. Rapp sold the town to a Welsh-born industrialist, Robert Owen, of New Lanark Scotland. Owen hoped to create a model community of scientists and educators and imported to the town eminent geologist and co-financier William Maclure, American naturalist Thomas Say, French naturalist Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, and other figures in geology, education and philosophy. Owen returned to Scotland in 1827, but the scholars and their utopian ideals remained to provide much of the first scien-

tific data on the flora, fauna, and natural resources of the Mid-West.

The reason for New Harmony's remarkable preservation is as unusual as its origins. Although the community and the state of Indiana had historically taken care of the town, in 1959 New Harmony found its patron saint. Texas oil heiress Jane Blaffer Owen was brought to New Harmony in 1941 by her new husband Kenneth Owen, a descendant of Robert Owen. Over the next two decades, she slowly adopted her husband's birthplace as her cause celebre. Today, they both have houses and spend at least half their time in New Harmony.

Known as a woman with strong spiritual interests, in 1960 she commissioned modernist architect Philip Johnson to create a non-denominational Roofless Church. Red brick walls surround a plaza where a strange umbrella as tall as a tree and covered with shake shingles droops over Jacques Lipchitz's sculpture of the Madonna. At noon, the umbrella casts the shadow of a rose, the Harmonists' symbol. Lipchitz also designed the entry gates, while along the long north wall there are niches with benches where you can sit for a meditative gaze at the river. In 1963, Blaffer Owen created a small park wooded with pines and dedicated to the philosopher/theologian Paul Tillich. (He was later buried there.) His writings and those of Thomas Merton are engraved on boulders placed around the restful park. In 1978, Blaffer Owen had Richard Meier create a ceramic studio, and the next year the Athenaeum, which received the coveted American Institute of Architects award in 1982.



Owen House, above, named after Robert Dale Owen, displays loom, right.

Made of snowy porcelain-covered steel panels, girded with railings and cables, surrounded by steel-floored ramps and balconies, the Athenaeum towers on the bank of the Wabash like an ocean liner. Here, visitors are introduced to the history of New Harmony by a short film, and from the balconies, there is a staggering view of the rolling plains, the Indian burial mounds from 800 A.D., and sycamore trees bordering the slow flowing river.

After a visit to the Athenaeum, you can continue on a tour of the Harmonist houses, to see the simplicity of their life style. The buildings were pre-fabricated and erected on the site, made of logs and mud then plastered and white-washed inside. The exteriors are finished with oil since paint was so costly. The kitchens are modest because all baking was done in communal ovens. The furniture, too, is plain except the beds, which were often painted in bright colors. In the "Salomon Wolf House," there is a bizarre miniature mechanized panorama of the historic town.

The tour then takes you to the later homes of the Owen-Maclure period, such as the George Keppler House with its collection of artifacts from Owen's son David Dale Owen, who did some of the first geological surveys for the state of Indiana. One of the most fascinating stops is the Lichtenberger Building of 1845 which houses the Maximilian-Bodmer Collection, documents of the frontier wilderness written and observed by the German Prince Alexander Maximilian of Wied and illustrated by artist Karl Bodmer. A scientific expedition of the Upper Missouri region between 1832 and 1834, brought this scholar-prince to New Harmony to meet the distinguished naturalists Say and LeSueur in March of 1833. He had to remain for four months indisposed with cholera. During the illness, Bodmer roamed South-Western Indiana, recording the plant and animal life he found. With the same exquisite accuracy of Audubon, he rendered scenes such as the mouth of the Fox River where the sky is filled with flocks of now-extinct Carolina parakeets. Bodmer's lithographs of the tribes of Indians which they encountered on their western journey are remarkable for their honesty, their absence of sentimentality, and their timeliness.

Sight-seeing is an obvious pursuit here and though Blaffer Owen has sponsored the restoration of most of the buildings, this is not a Williamsburg, so perfectly preserved that it seems to be under glass. Of course, there are festivals. In the summer, the city is in full bloom, floating in clouds of yellow flowers from the famed Golden Rain trees imported from Mexico by William Maclure in the mid-1800s. From June 20-22, the trees are celebrated at a festival called Golden Rain tree Heydays.

But there is an indolent, pamper-



ing ambiance in New Harmony encouraged by the natural beauty of flowering trees, balmy air, and rolling lawns, which lulls visitors into willing away hours, strolling around town, doing nothing much at all. You can visit the antique showrooms on Church Street, browsing their selection of American folk art and Victorian knick knacks, bargains for anyone accustomed to inflated city prices. The Red Geranium bookstore in the same building is stocked with an ambitious selection of volumes on arts, architecture, history, and folk lore of the Mid-West. A handful of cafes, taverns and restaurants provide visitors with good heartland fare — this is one of the few small Indiana towns which isn't hemmed in by McDonalds and Burger Kings — but the best dining experience is the Red Geranium adjacent to the New Harmony Inn. Beef is the speciality here, with dishes like Wellington, Chateaubriand, and Steak Diane.

The Red Geranium, however, was also the site of our greatest disappointment. At 5 p.m., as we stood on our balcony and watched a soft rosy sunset blush the sky, the river snaking along below us, the air perfumed by the blossoms of the apple trees and lilacs, listening to the sound of bird calls, there suddenly came a canon blast. Sixty seconds past and the explosion came again. And again. And again. And again. Every minute. A call to the desk, and a woman pathetically explained that these explosions are meant to deter the black birds from landing in the pine trees of the Paul Tillich/Thomas Merton memorial. They do this for four months in the spring, she said. The explosions will continue until 7 p.m., when the black birds are discouraged from nesting. We wandered over and found something which looked like a bazooka in the grove of trees, plugged into a timer and firing blank charges. An adjacent boulder was etched with Tillich's philosophy which, in the context of repeating blasts, took on an ironic twist: "Man and Nature belong together in their created glory, in their tragedy, and in their salvations."

Maybe they should move the trees. But then, if there were no such flaw, New Harmony would indeed be utopia.

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