

THE DAWN OF ECONOMY'S GOLDEN DAY

JOHN S. DUSS

[The following is part of a chapter from an unpublished book by the author, entitled "The Harmonists—A Personal History." By way of background here, it may be recalled that the Harmony Society was an organization of German Pietists who came to America under the leadership of George Rapp, in 1804, to escape religious persecution. They settled in Butler County, Pennsylvania, at a place they called Harmony, and there formally organized their communal Society. In 1814-15 they moved to Indiana and founded New Harmony. Moving again in 1824-25, they settled finally at Economy, Pennsylvania, on a tract embracing the site of present-day Ambridge. There, after prospering greatly for many years, the Society died a lingering death.

Mr. Duss grew from childhood to adolescence in the Society, and knew the members, among them some of the original stock. After attending college and obtaining business experience in the world at large, he returned to Economy, joined the Society in 1890, and in the same year was elected a member of the Board of Elders and Junior Trustee. Upon him fell the extremely heavy and complicated task of straightening out and winding up the affairs of the experiment so nobly and hopefully started by its idealistic founders.

Here he tells the story of the Harmonists' most prosperous years, beginning with their removal from New Harmony, Indiana, to Economy, Pennsylvania, in 1824-25.—*Ed.*]

IT was no easy task to move seven hundred people and a large amount of freight six hundred miles up river to the new Eden. The manager par excellence, Frederick Rapp, was as usual superintendent of this gigantic task. He tried to get a steamboat large enough to carry the cargo, offering a thousand dollars in hard money for the hire of one. But finally, discovering that the other boats could hardly be trusted, he

put his old dream into effect—the building of a Society steamboat. In November, 1824, Father Rapp at Pittsburgh, breaking a bottle of Wabash wine on the prow, christened it the “William Penn.” With this and several other steamboats, the moving was soon accomplished.

When the last unit arrived at the new home on June 6, 1825, they found that the advance guard had already built thirty-three “roomy and convenient frame buildings, besides twenty comfortable log houses,” not to mention a large brick L-shaped four-story manufacturing building with wings eighty feet long—the woolen mill. Building went on with astonishing rapidity. Soon a steam grist-mill was added, and a large hotel for visitors, the large handsome brick Music or Feast Hall, a school-house, a store with apothecary shop and post office, some eighty two-story brick and frame dwellings, and in 1831 a brick church with its lofty, graceful, well-balanced steeple.

About three thousand acres of good land had been purchased from nine different owners. Part of this tract was called Legionville—in memory of General Anthony Wayne’s “legions” consisting of fifteen to eighteen hundred men quartered here in the winter of 1792–93, before he started on his campaign against the Ohio Indians, which resulted in the Battle of Fallen Timbers and opened the entire Northwest Territory to white settlement. About twenty stone chimneys were still standing when the Harmonists took possession.

The selection of this pleasant site furnishes strongest proof of Frederick’s managerial wisdom. Old Harmony in Butler County and New Harmony on the Wabash were chosen by the elder Rapp with a view toward a self-sufficing agricultural economy. If the industry of the people produced marketable surpluses of industrial products, well and good, but that was not his major objective. Frederick, however, preached “the diversification of industries,” believing that every possible industrial talent should be given full opportunity for development.

The site of the new settlement compared in no way either in size or fertility with the New Harmony location. But, these new three thousand acres were more than adequate to supply the Society’s agricultural needs; and other advantages more than compensated for the smaller acreage. Pittsburgh, only sixteen miles up river, was now a booming city, “the Gateway to the West,” as everybody called it. People were flocking

westward from the eastern seaboard cities, looking for new land, new opportunities, and greater freedom. And the Harmonist settlement was located on the main highway to the western country. River traffic on the Ohio passed along five miles of the Economy tract. To the weary traveler the new settlement seemed like an oasis, and the westward moving peoples remembered what they heard in Pittsburgh about the industry and the honest dealings of the Harmony Society. Its wines and whiskeys, its textiles and cloths, its grains and food products—all of them the best that money could buy. This, travelers did not forget. Wherever they settled, Harmony products followed.

The Society named its third settlement, Economy. This is significant. They did not use the term in the ordinary sense of saving but as embracing the science of economics. The new name also indicated a slight but fundamental shifting in the subconscious ideals of the Society, from the intangible mystic unity of old to the tangible practical life of the new "heaven on earth." The name also establishes in concrete form the shift from a predominantly agricultural community to a predominantly industrial one.

As a whole, the new town was quite similar to the previous settlements, but most of the shops and homes were on a larger, better, more comfortable scale. The huge woolen mill, the equally large cotton factory, and the five-story grist and flour mill were all equipped with the best steam driven machinery. All this activity and progress augured the dawn of the Golden Day.

But these people were never merely dull utilitarians, as represented to the world by careless scribblers. For example, the Harmonists took a deep interest in the cultivation of flowers and they were always fond of music; it was a necessary part of their life and much more than a social indulgence. Their choral singing with its modulated beauties surprised the most cultured visitors, and though their orchestra lacked the symphonic proportions of those of the present day, many came to hear its regular concerts. There were about thirty instrumentalists—eighteen violins, five flutes, two clarinets, a bassoon, two horns, a trombone, a trumpet, and a bugle. One of the young men even *made* a piano, which was later sold, but soon Frederick saw to it that several handsome pianos and organs were purchased.

Frederick spent thousands of dollars in collecting works of art and museum curiosities. Among the fine paintings that decorated the walls of the Great House, the home of the Rapps, was a splendid copy of Benjamin West's "Christ Healing the Sick." The natural history museum located in several apartments of the Music Hall was Frederick's special pride and joy. It contained rare minerals, specimens of meteoric iron, collections of mounted birds, insects, shells, and numerous Indian antiquities. William Harrison of Brighton, in writing to Jacob Henrici for a loan of a meteoric iron specimen declared: "You are, I know, a friend of science and the progress and the development of the Valley." The same might be applied to all the leaders of the Society. Later, many valuable specimens were stolen from the museum, and the remainder, I believe, was sold to the University of Pittsburgh.

Of course the new town was as beautifully planned as the former ones. Frederick, in a general way, not only designed the leading houses, the graceful church, and the music hall, but also laid out the town and part of the Great House garden. The latter, with its winding walks, its beautiful flowers and shrubs, its cool and cozy arbors, and its tempting fruit trees blossoming beautifully in springtime, came to a focal point at the large round fishpond. In the center of this rose the graceful, stately arches and columns of a sexagonal structure, Frederick's masterpiece of design. From here the narrow, tangled paths led to a distant corner where a small, round, rude structure, built of roughest stone and with a door of rough bark, was overgrown with wild vines. The Grotto, so rough and crude on the outside, was decorated within, and the leading events of the Society were recorded on its walls. It was symbolic of man—no matter how crude he be without, so long as he be beautiful within. The Deer Park and the winding Labyrinth at the outskirts of the village added to the quaint interests of the community.

It was not long before romantic tourists and travelers began to speak and write of Economy as a place of Arcadian charm and beauty. Its fame spread throughout America and Europe. Travelers made special journeys to visit it, and generally went away believing that Economy was as near a Utopia as one might ever find on earth. In 1826, within two years after Economy's birth, came two of the most distinguished

travelers from Europe. Both left glowing written records of Economy's simple utopian life.

First came Friedrich List, the famous German economist who later led the movement for the construction of railroads in that country. In Württemberg he was expelled from the Chamber of Deputies in 1821 for the expression of ideals too liberal for his time. For this he suffered ten months of imprisonment at hard labor. Fleeing to France, he became a close friend of Lafayette, who in 1824 invited List to join him in his visit to America. Circumstances arising which prevented List from going at that time, he followed a year later and joined the great French hero of the American Revolution in Philadelphia.

Tired of old world tyrannies, List decided to look for a permanent abode in America. Thus seeking, he came to Pittsburgh, and from there visited Economy.

"It was evening when I arrived," he wrote, "and evening bells were tolling as in the Swabian homeland." The next day he inspected the factories, the workshops, the barns and the fields of the Society, amazed that in fourteen months these people had been able to transform a forested frontier into a beautiful village. He was quite pleased with Father Rapp and the other leaders, and was especially impressed by the wonderful spirit of harmony among the people. With all these evidences of cooperative community life before him, List here conceived his plan for youth education in practical living, built upon the idea of combining theoretical learning with productive group labor. Many years later this idea found its way into the educational systems of the world.

In the same year came Duke Bernhard of Saxe-Weimar, second son of Karl August who befriended Goethe and Schiller and made Weimar the cultural center of Germany. Duke Bernhard's career began in the Napoleonic wars, and he served under Napoleon with such distinction that the Little Corporal decorated him with the Legion of Honor. After Waterloo he traveled in the British Isles, and early in 1825 started on a fourteen months' visit to the United States. He was so well received, so frequently honored, and so impressed with the rising dignity of the young nation, that he even thought of settling here. But later, international affairs abroad called him back to the Old World. Twice, that is in 1825

and again in 1829, he rejected Russia's imperial plan to place him on the throne of Greece.

While in America, the duke visited both New Harmony on the Wabash and Economy on the Ohio. When in May, 1826, he appeared at Pittsburgh, intending to visit Economy on the next day, he was pleasantly surprised by a visit from Frederick Rapp who invited the duke to go home with him.

In a lengthy, enthusiastic description of his visit, the duke wrote: "As we neared the settlement, three hornists played a melody of welcome. At the large frame hotel, we were received by prominent men of the Society led by George Rapp—a dignified band of gray-heads." After dinner the duke and the patriarch wandered about the village. Like List, the nobleman was amazed at the progress made in less than two years' time. "It is astonishing," he wrote, "what united and properly directed powers can accomplish in so short a time." Then he writes of the neat dwelling houses, the large and active factories with their steam power and steam-heating pipes (an innovation which Frederick introduced), and he notices especially how "the bloom of health is on all the faces of the workers, especially on those of the women."

We get a charming glimpse of Economy entertainment from the duke's travel journal: "After supper Rapp called together the musicians of the Society to entertain with music. Miss Gertrude [Rapp's granddaughter] also played the piano, and three girls sang."

From the sound of horns echoing over the fields on the duke's arrival to his last farewell, music played a great part in his visit, and he no doubt realized the vast and integrating importance of this art to the Society. He writes further: "The following day we were shown the warehouse, where all their manufactured articles are stored, ready for shipment. I was simply astonished at the quality of all these things. Again, Rapp took me to the factory to hear the girls, some sixty or seventy, sing songs, first of a religious then of a gay character. Rapp takes great interest in music. . . Later, we again ate a hearty dinner, while the orchestra played really excellently; and it was with peculiar emotions that we departed at three o'clock, from the friendly and industrious town of Economy. . . . Through what I had read of Mr. Rapp and his Society, and what I had recently heard in New Harmony, I was really prejudiced

against him and his adherents. It pleases me all the more therefore that here through my own eyes I learned something different and became convinced of something better."

Somewhat later Nikolaus Lenau, one of the great romantic poets of Germany, made his abode at Economy. What the circumstances were that led him to Economy, I know not. Perhaps it was the Society's universal fame and its romantic and utopian quaintness. Perhaps the words of Duke Bernhard led him thither. At any rate, it appears that Lenau became seriously ill during his sojourn at Economy, and the good sisters of the commune nursed him back to health from the very gates of death. It is strange that only a tradition remains of his long stay. Could it have been from the Great House garden that he penned that lovely lyric?

*Diese Rose pflück' ich hier
In der fremden Ferne;
Liebes Mädchen, dir, ach dir
Brücht' ich sie so gerne!*

Other notables, from both Europe and the United States, stopped from time to time or made special visits to Economy. They always received the kind and generous attentions of Father Rapp, Frederick, or Romelius Baker, and the succeeding heads of the Society. In 1839 Chief Justice John B. Gibson and Judge Molton C. Rogers of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court came for a visit. Two years later General William Henry Harrison, after emerging victorious from his hot campaign against Van Buren, stopped at Economy on his way to his inauguration as President of the United States. Still later we read in the Society correspondence that President Zachary Taylor and his friend, William F. Johnston, Governor of Pennsylvania, were given a reception and entertainment at Economy.

The fame of Economy gradually spread to all the western world. Before his death in 1824, Lord Byron, wandering over Europe as the romantic scorner and as champion of freedom, heard of the Harmony experiment in communal life, and in the fifteenth canto of his greatest work, *Don Juan*, flung mockery at marriage by describing the celibacy of the Harmonists:

When Rapp the Harmonist embargoed marriage,
In his harmonious settlement, which flourishes
Strangely enough as yet without miscarriage,
Why called he "Harmony" a state *sans* wedlock?
Now here I've got the preacher at a deadlock.
Because he either means to sneer at harmony
Or marriage, by divorcing them thus oddly:
But whether the Reverend Rapp learned this in Germany
Or not, 'tis said his sect is rich and godly,
Pious and pure, beyond what I can term any
Of ours. . . .

Notice that Byron tacitly assumes that the reader has some little knowledge of the Harmony Society, also that the common, world-wide impression of Harmony and Economy was that of a communal society "rich and godly, pious and pure."

From Indiana the colony brought \$35,000 worth of manufactured goods, with which they supplied their trade until their factories were again in operation. The splendid \$30,000 wool factory was soon under way, and in 1826 the cotton factory was built at an estimated value of \$25,000. Manufactured woollen goods rose in value from \$35,000 in 1827 to \$84,000 in 1831. But due to cut-throat competition, cotton manufacture did not prosper so well, decreasing in value of product from \$22,000 in 1827 and 1828 to \$18,000 in 1831. Wool, moreover, seems to have been under a protective tariff.

This was the heyday of the Society's prosperity—the day of triumph for Frederick and his wise policies. In a short time the Society had agents or "factors" stationed throughout the country, watching and reporting on local market conditions, making sales, and handling the extensive business relations of the Society. Agents were stationed at Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, Pennsylvania, and Pittsburgh; at Steubenville and Cincinnati in Ohio; at Vincennes and Corydon, then capitol of Indiana; at Shawneetown, Illinois; at Louisville, at St. Louis and at New Orleans. Good David Shields, dear friend to Frederick and to Romelius Baker, kept the post at Washington, Pennsylvania, until removed to Sewickley Bottom. At Pittsburgh the firm of Abishai Way represented the

Society, and for a short time Ephraim L. Blaine, father of James G. Blaine (statesman and one time candidate for the Presidency), joined Way in partnership. And in Cincinnati Nicholas Longworth, great-grandfather of our former great Speaker of the House of Representatives, served as the Society's agent. These men were well chosen, and by their attentive watchfulness of the Society's interests contributed to the trade successes of these years.

The Harmony Society had become a little inland empire. Its industrial and trade success, beyond the wildest dreams of many of its own members, was so great that in certain instances the Society controlled the Pittsburgh market—and that probably meant a similar influence throughout the whole Ohio-Mississippi Valley market to New Orleans. Then too, Frederick Rapp, a true industrial and business genius, was a shrewd observer of market potentialities—knew the demand and knew how to meet it. Finally, these people were such excellent farmers and craftsmen that their workmanship, all directed toward one splendid harmonious effort, could hardly be equalled in the western country.

Competitors, knowing that they could not possibly outdo the efforts of the Society, resorted to propaganda against Economy. The newspapers of Pittsburgh began to raise the cry of MONOPOLY, "a great monopoly with which the individual manufacturer could not compete because he was forced to buy wool at Economy prices as well as to sell his wares at Economy prices." Moreover, the farmers who raised the fine Spanish wool had to sell it to Frederick because the small factories could not work up such a fine quality of wool. Nor could the Society be outdone in cotton manufacture. When the commodious cotton factory burned to the ground in 1829, Frederick at once built a larger and better one.

Press criticisms became still louder. The *Allegheny Democrat* in 1829 declared: "Economy has the power—and uses the same—to regulate the trade in our market. This is a fact too palpable to be permitted to pass unnoticed." And in conclusion the same paper advocated the total dissolution of the Society by act of legislature. To warrant such strenuous demands, Economy must indeed have been a powerful economic force.

Besides cotton and woolen yarn and cloth, the most important articles of Economy's trade were hats, raw wool, blankets, flannels, and whiskey. The bills of lading also show large shipments of leather, cider,

plants, apples, flaxseed oil, flour, fruit trees, hides, and wine. Shipments of these products went to New Orleans, St. Louis, numerous points in the Ohio Valley, Pittsburgh and western Pennsylvania communities, and to cities as far east as Boston. During the first fourteen years of Economy's trade, 1826 to 1843, sales totaled well over a million and a half dollars.

At the same time agriculture was continued, but on a more modest scale than in the flush days of New Harmony. At Economy most of the agricultural products were used by the community itself. However, men and women of Economy were specialists in the making of beer, wines, liquors, and whiskey. Vast quantities of these stimulating brews were kept in the Society's spacious wine cellars. The Economy label became a synonym for the best to be had in wine and whiskey.

One can but pause and speculate as to what might have been the outcome of such amazing industrial progress and prosperity, had it not been for certain misfortunes that beset the commune. With a throttle-hold on the trade of much of the western country, this stirring example of co-operative effort might materially have altered the course of the economy of most of the trans-Allegheny region. Without interference, Economy might have developed into a financial octopus of gigantic proportions.