UTOPIAN COMMUNITIES IN WARREN COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA

Ernest C. Miller

Dreams of a better and more perfect life, and the gaining of these through purer forms of communities and communal living, are nearly as old as man. In recorded history, utopias start with Plato's Republic and continue to the present. The greatest influx of such actual communal organizations in the United States came during the last three-quarters of the nineteenth century but Pennsylvania was heavily blessed with attempted utopias dating as early as 1663.1

Author Carl Carmer wrote a chronicle of New York state a few years ago titled Listen for a Lonesome Drum and in it he said that there seemed to be a broad psychic highway running across that state along which spirits spoke to men and near which men built communities in the hope of improving their lot.2 He might well have added that when that highway reaches southwestern New York, in the vicinity of Jamestown, it veers sharply south and continues across the line into Warren County, Pennsylvania.

This is the initial attempt to present the history of the four communities of such a nature that were projected or actually came into existence within that county.

For many years Warren County was part of Pennsylvania's western frontier and retained all the attributes of a frontier area long after some of our western states had been rather well settled. The region was hampered by a sparse and slowly increasing population, desultory farming on poor soil, a great lack of money, and poor or non-existent transportation facilities. But there was plenty of land available at bargain prices and lumber was plentiful on much of it. Land

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Ernest C. Miller of Warren, Pennsylvania, is President of the West Penn Oil Company, Inc., and an historian by avocation. He has written much on early oil history. This is his sixth article to appear in this magazine.—Ed.

1 This initial Pennsylvania community was under the leadership of Peter C. Plockhoy, a native of the Netherlands, who had spent some time in England before arriving on the Delaware River in 1663. Peter Cornelius (Peter C. Plockhoy), A Way Propounded to Make the Poor in These and Other Nations Happy, Etc. (London: 1659).

availability, plus some coincidences, had a great deal to do with the four communities connected with Warren County.

Organized communities or groups, with the goal being the establishment of a utopia, seemed to be gripped by land-mania. Among such groups interested in settling in northern Pennsylvania, the holdings listed were quite amazing, as follows:

- The Sylvania Association had 2,394 acres
- The Peace Union Settlement had 10,000
- The McKean County Association had 30,000
- The Social Reform Unity had 2,000
- The Goose Pond Community had 2,000
- The Leraysville Phalanx had 1,500
- The One-Mentian Community had 800

Total for seven associations 48,694

Obviously the district was a paradise for cheap lands for some of the acreage had cost as little as sixty-five cents an acre, but unfortunately most of the holdings were made up of land with poor soil and located in wild regions.

Peace Union

The Peace Union Community was the dream child of Andreas Bernardus Smolnikar, who was, by his own definition and statement, a Benedictine monk in Austria from 1820 to 1838, and also Imperial Professor of Biblical Literature. He maintained that in January 1837, Christ had appointed him as the messenger to form a universal republic and to prepare for the millennium.\(^4\)

As his pleas to European rulers fell on deaf ears, he came to the United States and propounded his views in five volumes written in German and printed between 1838 and 1842.\(^5\)

In this country he traveled in more than twenty states, most often on foot, and while he always found a few followers, he was never successful in establishing any permanent settlement. His first attempt was in 1843 in Limestone Township, Warren County, Pennsylvania.

4 Andrew B. Smolnikar, Secret Enemies of True Republicanism (Donnally's Mills, Pa.: Published by Robert D. Eldridge, 1859). The title page clearly states his former position and new calling.
5 Ibid., 174. Smolnikar says he wrote five volumes in German. The Library of Congress has a record of only three such books.
View of the last oval house at Spiritual Springs. The last house stood until 1907.
View of the last oval house at Spiritual Springs.
Previous to this time, he had met J. A. Etzler, another German, and had been impressed by his two books. The first, *The Paradise Within the Reach of All Men*, presented a plan for creating a paradise within a decade by harnessing the powers of nature through a machine he would design. Etzler's second volume, *The New World or Mechanical System*, demonstrated an elaborate machine he had conjured up which he claimed would cultivate 20,000 acres of land with the labor of only three or four men and capital of less than one dollar an acre. This seemed to appeal strongly to Smolnikar.

In April 1844, Smolnikar gained ephemeral fame for when the National Convention of Associationists assembled at Clinton Hall, New York City, he was one of six vice-presidents and sat in distinguished company with Charles A. Dana, Arthur Brisbane, and Horace Greeley.

At this same time he had an article in *The Phalanx* telling about his Peace Union settlement in Warren County and requesting anyone interested to write for details to him at Deerfield Post Office, Warren County, Pennsylvania. This means he must have been residing in Tidioute, Pennsylvania, a small village across the Allegheny River from his Limestone Township location.

He or some of his followers either purchased or agreed to purchase 10,000 acres of land in this region and Smolnikar tells us that the settlement attempt was unsuccessful, chiefly because when his followers built one of Etzler's machines, it broke down upon trial.

George Karle, one of Smolnikar's converts, reputedly had a vision as to how the machine could be repaired and made to operate successfully; however, he was drowned in the Allegheny River in July 1844.

6 J. A. Etzler, *The Paradise Within the Reach of All Men, Without Labor, by Powers of Nature and Machinery* (Pittsburgh: Etzler and Reinhold, February 1833). Etzler advocated an orderly trial of his scheme through "The Association for the Improvement of the Human Condition," each community to consist of not over 4,000 people. The power of the winds, tides, of falling water, and the sun, was to provide the energy to run his machine. When this volume was reissued in London in 1842, it was very critically reviewed by H. D. Thoreau in *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* (New York: November 1843), 451-463.

7 J. A. Etzler, *The New World or Mechanical System* (Philadelphia: C. F. Stollmeyer, 1841). Plates in this book show his machinery including a windmill, a well contrivance to raise water to use the full power of a waterfall from a great height, and the machine to break ground, remove trees and stumps, cultivate, plow, pulverize, sow, weed, reap, and cut crops.


9 Ibid., 100.
before he could rebuild the equipment.\\footnote{10}

Strange as it may seem, the records of Warren County do not show the name of Peace Union in any form, nor that of Smolnikar nor of the known names connected with his enterprise. There are also no records of the group in the extensive manuscript collection of the Warren County Historical Society which is very strong on county history and early events.

After leaving Warren County he was at various places in Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio, and in 1859 we find him back in Pennsylvania on 500 acres at Spring Hill, Donnally's Mills post office, in Perry County, still attempting to establish a permanent Peace Union community. From that date forward Smolnikar disappears and his movements have not been traced. The Library of Congress recently procured five pamphlets written by him between 1853 and 1865, all dealing with the millennium, but these have been misplaced for months and at this writing have not yet been located.

\textit{The Domain or Spiritual Springs}

The most unusual utopian settlement within the borders of Warren County was the handiwork of John Murray Spear and was a spiritualist colony which was located partly in Chautauqua County, New York, and partly in Warren County, Pennsylvania. Most often called the Domain by Spear himself, it came to be more commonly known in the region as Harmonia or Spiritual Springs. The nearest village to it was Kiantone, New York.\\footnote{11}

During the years preceding the decade 1840-50, a great deal of attention throughout this country and also in Europe had been given to the study of clairvoyance and mesmerism; it was this study that had

\\footnote{10} Smolnikar, \textit{Secret Enemies}, 176-178. He maintained that Karle was drowned "by the instrumentality of the departed Mormon prophet Joe Smith." It should be explained that the Mormon leaders earlier had rebuffed Smolnikar and his ideas.

\\footnote{11} Much of the information on the Domain and John Murray Spear, comes from the \textit{Sheldon Papers}, a group of 321 documents, some running over sixty pages and one containing more than eighty pages. These massive documents were discovered by Mrs. Margaret Fish of Syracuse, N. Y., a granddaughter of Thaddeus Sheldon of Randolph, N. Y., one of Spear's most faithful spiritualistic followers. The documents were given to this author by the late Mr. William S. Bailey of Jamestown, N. Y., and additional documents came from Mrs. Fish. They are now on deposit at the University of Pittsburgh Library. Mr. Russell Duino made a descriptive calendar of the papers as a master's thesis for Western Reserve University Library School in 1959 and titled his work "The Domain at Spiritual Springs." Cornell University Library has a microfilm copy. No study of Spear's work would be worthwhile without reference to these papers.
prepared the way for the greater marvels such as belief in communication with the dead — a belief that was an outgrowth from earlier forms of mysticism and from studies of the operation of forces unknown to science. The decade 1840-50 was a time in America of often undisciplined thinking, of religious epidemics, of the growth of American socialisms, and of crusades for free land, free marriage, and other manifestations of group activity.

It was on this stage that John Murray Spear enters the picture. Born in Boston in 1804, with a strong family Universalist background, he was baptized by John Murray, the founder of that faith, and was given his name. By the time he was twenty-four years old, he was a Universalist minister and had preached his first sermon but he lost his church when he adopted the cause of abolition and the tenets of William Lloyd Garrison and later was roughly handled by a mob while speaking at Portland.12

With a brother, Charles Spear, he next engaged in prison social work in Boston and that area, and was encouraged by such men as Wendell Phillips, Henry W. Longfellow, and Horace Mann.

In 1851 Spear’s attention was called to the investigation of spiritual manifestations and he became convinced of their genuineness. The next year he claimed to have received messages from a group of spirits called the Association of Beneficents who had selected him as their representative and this group included such famous men as Socrates, Seneca, Thomas Jefferson, and Emanuel Swedenborg, to name but a few. They gave Spear instructions as to what he was to do and how he was to accomplish his mission.13

The general purposes of the Association of Beneficents were these: to put an end to all commercial competition, to abolish all oppression, to abolish war, to unite the sexes that love might be universal, to educate man to control the elements, and to promote the study of the minor arts.

Shortly after this, in the valley of Kiantone Creek, the wife and daughter of John Chase, the local blacksmith, received information through trances that the land around them had been inhabited earlier by a people living under a perfect society and that most of their power

13 S. C. Hewitt, Messages from the Superior State; Communicated by John M. Spear (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1853); John M. Spear, Twelve Discourses on Government; Purporting to Have Been Delivered in Boston, Mass., December 1852 by Thomas Jefferson of the Spirit World (Hopedale, Mass.: Community Press, 1853).
came from a so-called magnetic spring. Chase soon unearthed what he thought was the spring and sent samples of this water to various spiritualists and among those who examined the Kiantone water was John Murray Spear.\textsuperscript{14}

Spear determined to his own satisfaction that the water from the two springs on the Chase farm had special magnetic and healing properties and through the guidance of his spiritual seers he decided to settle in that part of New York state. On April 14, 1852, a group of medical men and spiritualists who were interested, met at the spring to inspect it and to test the waters and remained there for two full days. While this group decided nothing definite, Spear remained fully convinced and moved from Lynn, Massachusetts, to nearby Randolph, New York.\textsuperscript{15} Doubtless he moved to Randolph because of his acquaintance with Thaddeus S. Sheldon, a prosperous Randolph businessman who had strongly embraced spiritualism.\textsuperscript{16}

He brought with him a perpetual motion machine that he and his cohorts had earlier constructed while at Lynn, and while it had been unsuccessful in New England, he hoped that the magnetic conditions in the vicinity of Randolph would be more inclined towards making the machine move. However, he never had a chance to find out for a group of irate citizens broke into the building and demolished his work.\textsuperscript{17}

With his followers, he now started the construction of a spiritualistic village at Spiritual Springs. The houses were ten in number and oval in shape measuring ten by fourteen feet and painted inside in a wide variety of colors. The plans were designed by unknown spirit bodies and many of the ideas Spear hoped to adopt at Spiritual Springs are explained in Spear's book entitled \textit{The Educator} which was published in 1857. Seven associations devoted to education, health,

\textsuperscript{14} "Spiritual Springs," \textit{Jamestown (N. Y.) Journal}, April 15, 1852.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Spiritual Telegraph}, 1, May-August 1853, 1-6.
\textsuperscript{16} Thaddeus S. Sheldon was born March 3, 1818, at Rupert, Vt., and came to Randolph, N. Y., at the age of eighteen. He became a large land owner, ran lumber rafts to New Orleans, had a general store, and was postmaster. He was heavily interested in the Erie Railroad and spent a year in New York City as a director of the company; his brother-in-law James Calhoun was an early Secretary of the Erie. Sheldon was President of the Board of Trustees of the Randolph Electric Medical College which opened in 1848. He died July 17, 1868, when only fifty.
\textsuperscript{17} Emma Hardinge, \textit{Modern American Spiritualism} (New York: Published by the author, 1870), 221-229.
agriculture, and other governmental units were to be the basis for the community effort.\(^{18}\)

Soon a hotel of some thirty rooms was built nearby and Spear's followers spent the summers at Spiritual Springs, although because of the severity of the winters and the rather temporary nature of the buildings, most of the members spent the winter months at home.\(^{19}\)

Early in 1858 the Association was instructed to dig a tunnel into the side of the hill near the spring at an angle of forty-five degrees and at a certain depth they were to discover relics of a prehistoric race of human beings. The tunnel was dug at great effort with regular steps wide enough for two people to walk side by side, and reached a length of one hundred and fifty-one feet. No relics were found and the velvet-lined casket that had been prepared to hold them was never put to use. What was found was a spring of water that effectively halted further progress of the tunnel.\(^{20}\) The whole effort cost $20,000 and was chiefly financed by Thaddeus Sheldon.\(^{21}\)

On September 17-19, 1858, a large gathering called The National Convention, mainly spiritualist believers, gathered at Spiritual Springs for a meeting and among those present were some of the best known spiritualists in the United States at that time. The Convention, which was reported in detail by the *New York Daily Tribune*, consisted mainly of a great many speeches, and Mrs. Carrie Lewis of Cleveland acted as president.\(^{22}\)

A newspaper reporter from Jamestown, New York, wrote that most of the lectures he heard favored the abolition of marriage and of family relations as commonly known. Mr. S. C. Hewitt, a well-known spiritualistic writer, attempted to explain what was proposed to be done in the valley of Kiantone but he succeeded only in confusing the crowd. On Sunday, September 19, Mr. A. E. Newton of the *Boston Spiritual Age* made a speech on spiritualism and its aims to elevate the human race. Mrs. A. M. Britt presented an excellent address on good manners and completely repudiated any thought of spiritualism being


\(^{19}\) Oliver F. Chase, "The Kiantone Movement," *Centennial History of Chautauqua County* (Jamestown, N. Y.: Chautauqua History Co., 1904), II, 827-829.


\(^{22}\) Ibid.
connected with free love or immorality. The gathering, estimated at between four and five thousand people, did nothing to clarify Spear's aims but seemingly served only to confuse the general public.  

Spear himself must take part of the blame for the poor reputation of the settlement because during the later part of 1858, Miss Caroline Hinckley was living at Spiritual Springs with Spear. She was serving as his amanuensis, but more important, she found herself pregnant and members of the colony were unable or unwilling to say who was responsible. *The Spiritual Telegraph*, a Boston paper devoted to spirit believers, strongly intimated that Spear was the father and that conditions at Kiantone had reached a bad state indeed.  

One of Spear's strongest followers, J. M. Sterling of Cleveland, supported his leader and sent a letter to *The Spiritual Telegraph* under date of October 18, 1858, stating that everything was calm at Kiantone and that Spear was there solely as a communicator and Miss Hinckley as his scribe. The paper added to this letter by stating that Miss Hinckley, in refusing to name the father of her child, had made the situation one that deteriorated public relations as concerned the entire movement. In this connection it is interesting to note that by 1863 Spear had divorced his first wife and had married Caroline Hinckley.  

By the fall of 1859 an unusual series of communications had been received by Spear at Kiantone and he and his followers were directed to form an organization called the Sacred Order of Unionists in order to bring world peace through world union. As soon as the Order had been founded, its members were to make a pilgrimage by ship down the Ohio River to see what opportunities might be there for the success of interesting the people in world union.  

Aboard the river steamer *Cleopatra*, the members of the Sacred Order headed down the Allegheny River from Oil City, Pennsylvania, on December 2, 1859. There were at least eight persons on board and probably more. A week later they were at Pittsburgh where they looked over the industrial conditions and then headed down the wide Ohio. They visited both sides of the Ohio so that they might see slavery in action, and from veiled references in the *Sheldon Papers*, it is likely that they often aided escaping slaves.

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24 *Spiritual Telegraph*, November 20, 1858, 297.
25 Ibid.
26 *Sheldon Papers*. Items 27 and 28.
While berthed at Cincinnati, Spear was directed by his spirit guides to establish a new center in the Ohio Valley. In February 1860, a new site of ninety-three acres was acquired at Patriot, Indiana, and named Mount Alpheus, doubtless after Alpheus Cowles, a member of the Sacred Order. This place operated at least through 1862 as a fruit and wine producing farm.

By May, the Cleopatra and its band of spiritual missionaries, had gotten as far as New Orleans and by this time the treasury was exhausted, the success of their efforts had been few, and echoes of the coming Civil War were ringing throughout the land. What happened to the boat, and how the group got back north, remains a mystery, but by July 1, 1860, the expedition was considered terminated upon their return to Cincinnati.

This really ends the connection of Spear with The Domain and his supporters there. Unable to attract suitable followers in the United States, he journeyed to London and Paris where spiritualism was enjoying great popularity and continued working as a medium. John Orvis officially proclaimed the dissolution of the Sacred Order of Unionists on February 2, 1863.

In 1873 Spear wrote a brief autobiography titled Twenty Years on the Wing and after that date he disappears from the records.

On the Pennsylvania-New York state border today, where the dream city was to be erected, one can see the entrance to the tunnel dug by Spear's people, and a few summer cottages. Most of the residents know little or nothing of the unique background of the land on which they are living.

**The Harmonists or Economites**

The general history of the followers of George Rapp, the German vinedresser and weaver, who successfully brought more than five hundred of his people to the United States in 1804, and guided them well but dictatorially until his death in 1847, has been told by several writers. The years after his death up to the dissolution of the or-

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27 Ibid. Item 47. Cowles paid $12,000 for the land to George W. Mordecai.
29 Sheldon Papers. Item 130.
30 John M. Spear, Twenty Years on the Wing; Brief Narrative of My Travels and Labors as a Missionary sent forth and sustained by the Association of Beneficents in Spirit Land (Boston: W. White and Co., 1873).
ganization in 1905 have also been recounted and only a brief history of the earlier years of this group is deemed necessary here.\textsuperscript{12}

George Rapp, the founder, was born in Württemberg, Germany, in 1757 and he believed and taught socialistic community-living well spiced with deep religious worship. His followers, known as Separatists, were hounded by the German clergy who denounced them to the civil authorities and they were persecuted, fined, and often imprisoned. In 1803 Rapp sold his property in Germany and headed for America, searching for a location where he could establish his people.

Impressed with the land in the Connoquenessing Valley of Butler County, Pennsylvania, he purchased 5,000 acres there for $15,000. The next year his followers arrived and commenced building the town they called Harmony, hence their name, The Harmony Society. While George Rapp was the religious leader, his adopted son Frederick was in charge of administrative and financial dealings. Members of the Society pooled their wealth and possessions, renounced all personal ownership in favor of communal ownership, and prospered beyond all belief.

The rules of the Society consisted of ten written contracts made from 1805 through 1903. In 1807 the Society spelled its eventual death-knell when it adopted celibacy in a fervor of religious enthusiasm and in the belief that the millennium would come in 1836. It did not take place and while the Society adopted people, and hired workers for many years, the ranks gradually and steadily decreased.\textsuperscript{13}

In 1815 the Harmonists decided to move west, selling their town for $100,000, and relocated along the Wabash River a few miles south of Vincennes, Indiana. For a decade they worked and prospered in Indiana but suddenly malaria reduced their ranks, hostility and misunderstanding against them grew and multiplied, and much of their business slipped away. They decided to return to Pennsylvania and

\textsuperscript{12} W. G. Davis, "The Passing of the Rappists," \textit{Gunton's Magazine}, XXV, July 1903, 20-26; J. S. Duss, \textit{The Harmonists; A Personal History} (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Book Service, 1943); Brief but accurate historical summary of the Society can be found in: \textit{Old Economy} (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1947); Sylvester K. Stevens, \textit{Pennsylvania — Birthplace of a Nation} (New York: Random House, 1964), 132-133; What is probably the definitive history of the Society has been written by Dr. Karl J. Arndt of Clark University. The first volume is titled \textit{George Rapp's Harmony Society 1785-1847} and was published in November 1965, by the University of Pennsylvania Press. A second volume, \textit{George Rapp's Successors and Material Heirs 1847-1919}, is ready for publication.

The Russian houses, built by the Economites for their Hutterite friends and workers, Limestone Township, Warren County, Pennsylvania. The two houses measured 32 by 96 feet. The houses were originally surrounded by a high board fence.
Built 1883-1884.
Remaining wall of one of the houses. This is all that is visible today except a rough outline of stone showing size of the houses.
this time they sold New Harmony, Indiana, to Robert Owen, the English industrialist who had great faith in cooperative living and wanted to try it on a large scale in America. He paid $150,000 for exactly what he needed for his experiment.

The Harmonists now secured 3,000 acres of land north of Pittsburgh and laid out a new and beautiful town which they named Economy (now Ambridge, Pennsylvania). All the members were situated here by 1825 and the buildings were in progress at that time. How well they built can be told today as seventeen of the original sixty-five buildings have been renovated and still stand as evidence of their skill and good taste.

Besides being expert farmers, at Economy the Society engaged in the weaving of cloth, made excellent wines, cutlery, and pottery, and were pioneers in the manufacture of silk in this country. Their stamp of quality, the Golden Rose, was well and widely known. They also owned their own steamboat known as the *Pittsburgh and Wheeling Packet* to haul their trade goods as well as passengers.

After the death of Frederick Rapp, two members were appointed to act as co-administrators; they were Jacob Henrici and R. L. Baker. Realizing that industrial competition was becoming more and more difficult to combat with hired labor, these men invested in outside interests such as manufacturing plants, banks, railroads, coal mines, and desirable land.

The Harmonists and Warren County first met when the Society purchased 2,000 acres of timberland across the Allegheny River from Tidioute, Pennsylvania, and erected a mill thereon. William Davidson of West Bridgewater, near Beaver, Pennsylvania, also had timber holdings in the same area and he was a frequent borrower of capital from the Society.

One of the new firms in which the Society invested was the Etna Glass Company and Davidson also owned an interest in it. When it failed, Davidson took over the company due to his belief that the Harmonists would assist him financially. This they did but Davidson failed too and he found the Harmony Society to be his largest creditor. At the sheriff’s sale of his possessions, the Society bid in the 4,000 acres of land he owned in Warren County, also his home and furnishings, these last two items being restored to Davidson’s son.

In a generous attempt to assist the Davidson family, the Society offered the family managership of its Warren County lands (now 6,000 acres in extent), but Davidson refused and Michael Merkle, a
relative of Rapp’s who came from Germany in 1853, became the manager. Merkle was never a member of the Society. ³⁴

And then suddenly Colonel E. L. Drake struck oil at Titusville on August 27, 1859, and one of the first places where the drillers tried their hand following Drake’s success was in the Tidioute area, only seventeen miles from the world’s first commercial well. As early as December 21, 1860, we find the Economites with a well on their land producing 600 barrels daily. Encouraged by this luck they drilled more wells and instead of giving them names, they lettered them as A, B, C, and so on.

Most of their wells were shallow, seldom over one hundred and fifty feet in depth, and the individual production ranged from five to eighty barrels per day. ³⁵ In 1869 the wells brought the Society more than $200,000. The buildings of the Economy Oil Company, the name selected for the Warren County operations of the Society, were clustered along the river just opposite Tidioute, where they built a large wharf and a large boarding house for their workers whose speech and manners were regulated by printed rules. ³⁶

One of the virtually unknown commitments of the Harmony Society was its association with the Hutterites. The leaders of the Society thought that except for the practice of celibacy, the Hutterites were fellow-believers and might well inherit their domain. During the summer of 1875 the Harmonists, upon request, made a loan of $3,000 to the Hutterite settlement at Bon Homme, Dakota Territory, and when it was determined the loan was not large enough to finish the mill the Hutterites were constructing, another $2,000 was loaned them.

In 1884 a tentative agreement was reached between the Harmonists and the Hutterites under which arrangement the Dakota Hutterites were all to move to lands near Tidioute; the Harmonists made a very fair proposition for the purchase of these Warren County lands. The offer was accepted by the Hutterites but was never carried through as they apparently had trouble selling their Dakota holdings. In April 1884, a group of thirty-two Hutterites arrived at Tidioute where they were quartered in two large especially constructed houses four miles across the river on lands of the Economy Oil Company. ³⁷

34 Merkle’s original passport is in the collection of the author.
36 John J. McLaurin, Sketches in Crude Oil (Franklin, Pa., the Author, 1902, Third Edition), 203.
houses immediately became known locally as "the Russian houses."

The newcomers manufactured charcoal and some worked as lumbermen. But in a region where hard work, long hours, and little time off was the rule, their religious demands for many holidays, and their secluded living behind high board fences, did not fit in well and they did not become financially independent. In despair they gave up and returned to Dakota in the middle of 1886. The "Russian houses" stood for many years in the woods of Warren County but now have completely disappeared and nothing remains of them except a few stone foundations.18

During the period of the best oil production, the Harmonists had installed William Davidson, Jr., on its oil lands as lessee in order that he might recoup the family losses. In less than two and one-half years he had paid off $35,000 in old debts and had cleared $100,000. The Davidsons then tried to hold possession of the property rather than seek an extension of their lease from the Society. From this generated the long series of Warren County court battles that ran for years and was eventually settled in favor of the Economites.

While the Economy Oil Company operated in Warren County, no members of the Harmony Society actually lived in the county. Many visited the oil operations, and Harmony trustees were there very often attending to business. The Society saw to it that Christian goodness was practiced; the poor were aided, money was sent to immigrants, merchants in financial difficulties were helped, and the Methodist Church in Tidioute received $366 when it was seriously in need of funds. Eventually the oil production declined, the membership reached a new low, and the treasury was in a deplorable condition. Some of the factories operated at a loss, hired workers had drained too heavily on the funds, and the court suits were expensive. John Duss, last trustee of the Society, reduced hired help, sold much of the land, liquidated nearly half a million dollars of railroad stock, and induced the American Bridge Company to buy a mile of land at Economy owned by the Society.

Trustee Duss instructed William Merkle to dispose of all the Warren County holdings and by 1895 this had been accomplished. Ten years later the Society was dissolved with permission of the court and with the death of Mr. and Mrs. Duss, the Harmonites disappeared forever. They were a potent business force for many years in Warren County and served as an example all others could profit by.

Alcuin

Most recent of the religiously influenced communities to make a settlement in Warren County was Alcuin, more properly known as Alcuin Community. It was defined by its organizers as being "A craft agrarian community, in the spirit of Saint Benedict and after the pattern of the Danish folk school . . ." 39 It was conceived and started by a few ardent Roman Catholics from the New York City area during 1940.

The land consisted of 326 acres of farming land near the village of Lander, in Farmington Township, and was originally part of the Homer Preston farm. The place had been given to the Order of St. Benedictine Inc., St. John’s Abbey, of Collegeville, Minnesota, in 1939 by Gilbert Winkelman who had previously joined that Order.40

When the New York group, headed by Ray Scott of Chappaqua, New York, a former high school teacher, learned of this farm owned by St. John’s Abbey, an arrangement was made with the Order for the use of the land under prescribed conditions.41 The conditions, as finally worked out and as presented to prospects, were as follows:

1. Applications for membership are to be made through St. John’s Abbey, Collegeville, Minn.
2. Each accepted applicant shall, upon taking up residence in the community, be given his choice of any of the unallotted parcels of land designated for private use, no such parcel to exceed two acres.
3. Each such grantee who, within six months after receiving his allotment, shall have built a home according to an approved plan upon the land so allotted, shall thereupon be given free use of the land so allotted so long as his family or heirs shall occupy said home. This tenure shall be transferable only to another accepted applicant or to the community, but it may be terminated and replaced by title in fee under the terms in paragraphs 9 and 10 hereof.
4. Plans and specifications of all buildings are subject to the approval of the resident representative of St. John’s Abbey.
5. A proportionate share in common of the use of the common lands is guaranteed everyone holding tenure under terms of paragraph 10.
6. The nature and extent of use of the common land shall be determined by the resident representative, the community having the privilege of a consultive vote.
7. Taxes and assessments upon all the land in the community, and expenses incident to the proper use and care of the land shall be paid by the community.
8. When fifteen grantees shall have built homes on their respective parcels,

39 Quoted from the original prospectus of Alcuin Community, in author’s collection.
title in fee to all the land in the community shall be transferred to the community.

9. If by January 1, 1943, fifteen homes have not been erected under the foregoing plan, all rights shall revert to the owner of the land.

10. In which case those who have built shall receive individual deeds to their respective parcels provided all taxes on the property are paid in full.

11. Those receiving individual deeds shall have first consideration for the purchase of additional land for which they shall pay two-thirds of its tax valuation.42

The first group to arrive at the place was made up of Ray Scott, Robert Sukoski, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph MacDonald, and Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Curran. They arrived in February of 1940 and made their residence in the large fourteen-room farmhouse on the place. A tenant, Mr. Rod Carlson, his wife, his mother Hilda, and his grandmother Mrs. Gustafson, already lived in the house so it was suddenly filled to overflowing. As Carlson was an experienced farmer and the new arrivals were not, they asked him to continue living in the house and to help them get started.

Most evenings the group held a brief religious service in the house and the Carlsons and Mrs. Gustafson were always invited. They attended at times and Mrs. Gustafson, a Swedish Lutheran, would sing the hymns in Swedish as the others sang in English.

Upon arrival the group members talked with the community leaders in Lander, explaining what they had in mind, and they were cordially received.

The initial financing of the community came chiefly from Ray Scott who had a monthly income, though it was not large. At the most, the settlement had six families plus two single men as members. Some came and some went. Some disagreed with the program, others could not stand the difficult work, and all were inexperienced. One or more families lived in a small house across the road from the large farmhouse.

Carlson taught the men farming methods and the group raised its own meat and vegetables; excess dairy products were sold to a firm in nearby Niobe, New York. Strangely enough, no records were kept of the finances and the reason given was that the people were too busy trying to make the place go. One family started to construct a house on the farm but this was never finished.

Unfortunately, the development of Alcuin had hardly really started when World War II came along. Some of the men were drafted, others who had become discouraged left to take good paying jobs in

42 Ibid., Prospectus.
a booming industrial activity short of help; new recruits could not be obtained due to the conditions at the time and the farm deteriorated. From time to time, several religious objectors were at Alcuin; they objected not to being in the armed services but only against bearing arms and later they served in the Medical Corps.

One of the first arrivals, Robert Sukoski, entered the army early in 1944, lost an arm in combat, and upon being discharged returned to the farm and purchased it from St. John's Abbey. He operated it until 1953 when he sold it to Calvin Penly, a farmer from Ohio, who is still operating the place.

Looking back a quarter of a century, Mr. Sukoski recently reflected that while the war proved the beginning of the end for the Alcuin experiment, inexperience was certainly another important factor. The two acres allotted each family was insufficient and the brothers at St. John's, from centuries of such experience, had urgently suggested that fifty acres be allowed each family rather than merely two. But Mr. Scott had wanted to stress the communal aspect of Alcuin and felt that a small acreage per family might tend to bind the group closer together.43

The times and circumstances prevented Alcuin from having a fair trial but many utopias over the years have shared the same fate.

Summary

Smolnikar was a German mystic, a roving ambassador peddling his own beliefs which included the desire to establish peace through union throughout the world. He was an ardent millennium believer and apparently was never successful in setting up any community for any length of time. His experiment in Warren County was a short-lived failure.

John Murray Spear, a former Universalist pastor from New England, was guided by the spirits to form a community on the New York-Pennsylvania border and this he did. Operated by his Association of Beneficents, and later doing missionary work under the name of the Sacred Order of Unionists, he enlisted the aid of some well known and prosperous citizens who were spiritualists. His Kiantone community at Spiritual Springs gained fame as the site of a national convention in 1858 but was clouded as a refuge of free-love believers.

43 Lengthy interview with Mr. Robert Sukoski, Frewsburg, N. Y., February 9, 1964. As a member of the first group to arrive at Lander, and as owner of the farm following World War II, Mr. Sukoski is best versed in the history of Alcuin and gave freely of his information.
The Harmonists or Economites came to be in Warren County through ownership of timber lands and later of oil wells. Operating under the title of the Economy Oil Company, the organization was a paragon of virtue and the most financially successful of all utopian communities in the United States. By adopting celibacy in 1807 it spelled eventual extinction that came in 1895 in Warren County and in 1905 for the balance of the Society.

Alcuin was an attempt by a small group of Roman Catholics to organize a communal gathering in Farmington Township of the county in 1940. Sincere and hardworking as the members were, they were hampered by inexperience, lack of land per member, probably by a lack of funds, and doubtless by the onslaught of World War II which decimated the colony. The land finally was sold to a private farmer following the war.

Warren County waits patiently for some future group to come within its borders with high ideals and hopes for whatever type of community it desires to develop. Apparently our air, water, and land has an attraction for such.