

Oneida Community Gender Relations—in Context and over Time

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The Oneida Community (1848-1880) was one of the most radical social experiments ever seen in the United States.¹ A religious, utopian group numbering about 250 New Englanders transplanted to upstate New York, the Community advocated common ownership of property and the sharing of all work and love. These people practiced a “free love” system of marriage in which all adult men and women were regarded as heterosexual spouses to one another. They believed sex to be a divine gift, “the instrument for unselfish love and communion with God.”² The Oneida Community claimed to have emancipated women from involuntary pregnancy by eliminating male climax from the sex act. They said Community women were freed from the bondage of marriage and the tedium of household drudgery. The commune instituted a program of human breeding in order, they asserted, to elevate the condition of humankind.

Not surprisingly, the Oneida Community was controversial in its day, especially on the subjects of gender relations, sex, and the standing of women. Those topics continue to attract scholarly interest today.³ While this essay travels much the same ground, it reconsiders gender relations at Oneida in a different light.

I look first at doctrine, summarizing information drawn mostly from the writings of Oneida Community leader, John Humphrey Noyes (1811-1886). Since the Community was founded on his teachings, it makes sense to try to understand the commune as—to use Lawrence Foster’s happy phrase—the lengthened shadow of Noyes.⁴

That, however, has been done before.⁵ I propose to look beyond theory, beyond Noyes, and beyond his long shadow to examine how gender relations actually were lived in the Oneida Community. That surely requires study of what Oneida Community members thought they were doing. Such information is available from descriptions they penned of



Figure 1. An Oneida Community group against the backdrop of the second Mansion House, 1871.

(All figures courtesy of Oneida Community Mansion House)

themselves, especially in their publications and their weekly newspaper-magazine.⁶

That, also, has been done before. What I think is new is a more comprehensive approach taking into account context and time. Mine is an interpretive framework embracing not only Noyes' doctrine and Community members' views, but also the material setting of Community life—some basic economic and physical circumstances of their existence—and how their lives changed over the course of three decades. Two eras of work organization are distinguished here because each involved different relations of production and gender. In effect, there was an age of Bees, followed by a time of Hirelings.

The Oneida Community commenced with the monumental achievement of transforming the domestic environment, thereby lightening the burden of household labor regarded as feminine. At virtually the same time, the communards of Oneida redefined the ideal of gender relations around the practice of bees. Men and women would work together outside

doing horticulture—a happy pastoral pursuit derived, in part, from the social theory of Fourierism.

Beginning in 1862-1863, the Community committed to a mode of factory manufacture with employees, which propelled the commune into the mainstream of American industrialization. Oneida became the largest maker of metal animal traps in the United States and one of the country's most successful producers of silk thread for the sewing machine. Oneidans also became dependent on hired labor, not only in the factories but also in the orchards where female and male members of the commune formerly worked side by side. The institution of hired labor tended to sharpen gender division within the Community and to foster a materialistic outlook inimical to earlier gender ideals.

Theology and Theory of Gender and Sexual Relations

John Noyes, founder of the Oneida Community, was a charismatic Bible scholar who championed a non-denominational form of Protestantism called Perfectionism. Rejecting original sin and preordained outcomes, Perfectionists regarded salvation as a matter of individual choice and faith. In Noyesian Perfectionism, the true believer was supposed to become one with Christ. In accordance with the promise of redemption, such a person was freed from sin and, therefore, theologically perfect.⁷

Noyes shared the conviction of his age that the Millennium was nigh although his scheme was an unusually complicated one. He believed:

that the second advent of Christ took place at the period of the destruction of Jerusalem [A.D. 70]; that at that time there was a primary resurrection and judgment in the spiritual world; that the final kingdom of God then began in the heavens; that the manifestation of that kingdom in the visible world is now approaching; that its approach is ushering in the second and final resurrection and judgment; that a church on earth is now rising to meet the approaching kingdom in the heavens, and to become its duplicate and representative; that inspiration, or open communication with God and the heavens, involving perfect holiness, is the element of connection between the church on earth and the church in the heavens, and the power by which the kingdom of God is to be established and reign in the world.⁸



Figure 2. John Noyes stands in the right foreground of this Community portrait, 1863.

Noyes and his disciples were the earthly “duplicate and representative” of the kingdom of heaven. Through the practice of perfect holiness, they would be the medium for establishing God’s kingdom on earth. Perfect holiness, the means by which “the resurrection power is to be let in upon the world,”⁹ was the way of heaven, a place where private ownership of things and people was unknown. By practicing communal ownership (“Bible Communism”), the Oneida Association intended to replicate the heavenly state and thereby expedite heaven’s earthly reappearance.

The celestial lifestyle included sexual communism, a state of complete heterosexual availability. The earthly application of this was that no husband could claim to own his wife as private property. At Oneida, all adult men and women in their larger family would be spouses to one another in a group marriage they believed to be non-exclusive and non-possessive.

In what they called “complex marriage,” the presumption was that males would behave as chivalrous gentlemen to their lovers because, in the

divine nature of things, women were inferior to men. “To man is assigned the place of head of the woman,” Noyes’ sister, Charlotte Miller affirmed, “but woman is the glory of man, and neither is without the other ‘in the Lord.’” A woman’s true glory, according to another Community woman, was to love and be receptive to good men.¹⁰

We believe,” Miller also wrote, “that the great secret for securing enthusiasm in labor, and producing a free, healthy, social equilibrium, is contained in the proposition, ‘Loving companionship in labor, and especially the mingling of the sexes, makes labor attractive.’”¹¹ She was referring to the fact that the Oneida Community was conceived as a utopian association.

In early 1848, just prior to the founding of the Community, Noyes wrote out a plan for the coming community chiefly concerned with explaining free love and how the practice would hasten Christ’s return.¹² That work, *Bible Argument*, also contained a proposal to improve society by founding a communal-living situation based on complex marriage and, more generally, on mingling men and women together in every activity. The key to communal existence was the intrinsic pleasantness of male-female companionship which would render life enjoyable and work attractive.¹³

Applying the mingling of sexes to social reform, the Oneida Association would correct two fundamental miseries of human existence: the excessive labor of men and the reproductive toil (“propagative drudgery”) of women. Both would be ameliorated by reducing the number of unwanted children. That would be accomplished by practicing a form of birth control prohibiting men from reaching climax in sexual intercourse (“male continence”).

Utopian groups have always had to face the problem of regulating a couple’s intimacy.¹⁴ During the 1800s, the predominant policy was to forbid sex because there was no effective means of birth control. Male continence seemed to offer the Oneida Community another option.

All Community members were expected to enter into the holy ordinance of group matrimony or pantogamy in which celibacy and monogamy were discouraged and free love was virtually obligatory. Sex, Noyes said, was natural because God created human maleness and femaleness as fitted to each other. It was pleasurable because couples practicing male continence “may enjoy the highest bliss of sexual fellowship for any length of time, and from day to day, without satiety or exhaustion.” It was heterosexual

because “communication between male and female is more perfect than between persons of the same sex.”¹⁵

The theological justification for heterosexual bonding was that God is a bisexual duality in whose image men and women were created “and of whose nature the whole creation is a reflection.”¹⁶ The spirit of God passes between sexually conjoined, selfless partners who recreate and draw nearer to the Godhead in the sex act. For Perfectionists, the sexual organs were “the highest instruments of praise and worship.”¹⁷

With birth control, one could choose when and with whom to conceive, thereby exercising a kind of selection for offspring. “The race cannot be raised from ruin till propagation is made a matter of science,” Noyes affirmed in 1848. “The time will come when involuntary and random propagation will cease, and when scientific combination will be applied to human germination as freely and successfully as it is to that of other animals.”¹⁸ Eugenics, then, was policy on the books awaiting the proper circumstances to be carried out.

That time arrived in 1869 when the Oneida Community completed a new wing of Mansion House to receive the intended offspring. After the Community voted unanimously to initiate the reproductive program, some ninety young men and women volunteered themselves as soldiers in the cause of scientific propagation and living sacrifices to God, Noyes, and “true Communism.”¹⁹

Noyes and a group of senior advisors determined who would mate although, for a time, decision-making was vested in a stirpicultural committee composed of six men and six women. The standards for breeding selection were said to be “first the spiritual, second the intellectual, third the moral, and fourth the physical departments of human nature.”²⁰ Selection would also take into account the good of the parents as well as “the effect on the social relation of the parties and on the organism of society around them.”²¹

The basic procedure was that couples wishing to become parents would submit applications for reproduction to the governing agency. Most requests were approved, but “if an application were disapproved, the Committee would always interest itself in an attempt to find a combination agreeable to those concerned which it would approve.”²² “Couples who had babies by accident—or had them on purpose, but without authorization—were not disciplined for their offenses; the offspring of such unions were treated exactly like the approved stirpicults.”²³ During the decade of stirpiculture

(1869-1879), some fifty-eight children (called stirpicults) were born to forty-one mothers and forty fathers.

As the stirpiculture program was getting underway, Noyes happened to read Francis Galton's recently published *Hereditary Genius*, a work arguing that eminent men throughout history have been the result of "superior strains of blood."²⁴ The work convinced Noyes that good breeding chiefly depended on selecting a few progenitors with good blood, a concept that put Noyes in mind of himself. A growing conviction in the quality of his pedigree and the desirability of his genetic stock is documented in a journal kept by Tirzah Miller, Noyes' niece and lover. Noyes, in 1874, proposed having a child with her, a conversation Miller reported in this fashion: "I told him I should like that. He said he believed it to be his duty, and he had considerable curiosity to see what kind of a child we should produce. He said to combine with me would be intensifying the Noyes blood more than anything he could do. He was just waking up to a full sense of his duty, which was to pursue stirpiculture in the consanguineous line."²⁵

Noyes' definition of Perfectionism had become genetic, a state of high sanctification carried in the blood of his family. Shortly after, Noyes appointed his eldest son, Theodore, an agnostic unskilled in leadership, to head the Community. These measures effectively elevated Noyes and his family to a position of aristocracy within the Oneida Community while revealing the imperfection of his judgment.²⁶ "And then," Oneida Community member Jessie Kinsley recalled, "doubt grew in the minds of *many*, regarding Mr. Noyes's ability to long be a leader. Doubt grew of his impartiality toward his son. There were doubts of J.H.N.'s 'inspiration.' Later, in the hearts of some, came doubt of the goodness of his intentions and of his acts."²⁷

Divisions of opinion created an atmosphere—in Robert Fogarty's words—"over-charged with passion, with conflict, and with contentious politics" which contributed substantially to the breakup of the Community.²⁸

The Age of Bees

The Oneida Community was born in a public works project, the collective act of building a communal home. "We'll all have one home, and one family relation" run the lyrics of the hymn of the Oneida Community being sung by about this time. By 1853, "dwelling together in Association" was listed as an article of their religious creed.²⁹

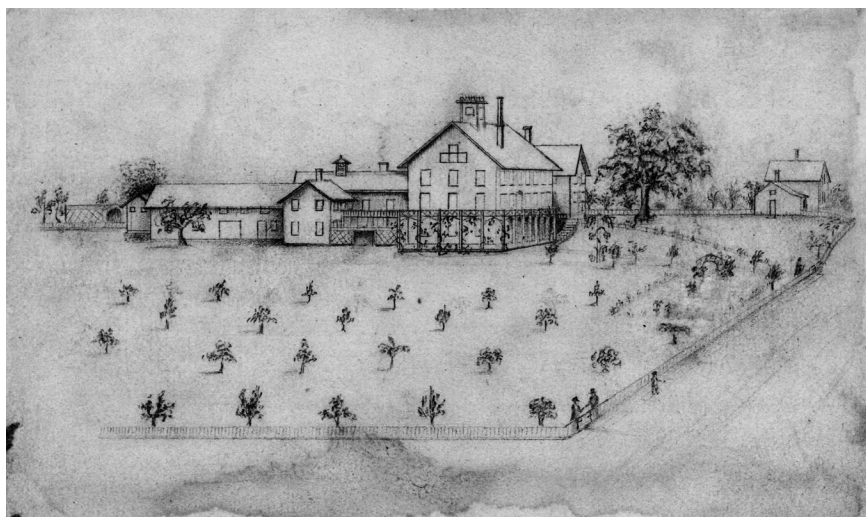


Figure 3. The first Mansion House is the three-story building in the center of this 1851 drawing by Charlotte Miller.

The “Mansion House,” as they called their family residence, may have been the country’s first communal dwelling built specifically to house men and women living in free association under the same roof. The compact living arrangement corrected what Noyes called the “isolated apartments” of the outside world which encouraged egotism and exclusiveness.³⁰ The building also spatially concentrated household work and childcare which, performed cooperatively, lightened the drudgery of what was regarded as feminine work. Though not remarked at the time, this arrangement revolutionized the social and spatial aspects of the domestic sphere.

Liberating women from the isolated household with its attendant drudgery was a dream of Fourierism or Associationism, in the the craze for communalism that swept the country in the early 1840s. The key principle of the movement was that humans acted according to inborn talents and traits called “passions.” If one assembled a group of people with the correct mix and number of passions, and had everyone live together in one big house or “phalanstery,” the result would automatically be utopia. Work would be enjoyable and everything would get done because people were doing what they were meant to do. According to the originator of the philosophy, Charles Fourier (1772-1837), things would run smoothly because “passional attraction”—meaning personal inclination and

occupational leaning — made work attractive.³¹

Fourier thought a civilization of “parcelled” homes was one consigning women to a state of degradation and dependence.³² American Fourierist Albert Brisbane described women living in separate households as absorbed in the “ceaseless round of petty domestic cares,” overcome by anxiety and monotony. In the present mode of isolated households, he moaned, men “see their wives obliged to drudge continually in miserable little kitchens and at a round of menial labor.”³³ The Mansion House achieved social reform in this area instantly and at the beginning of the commune’s career.

Building the Mansion House also was the first project in which men and women worked together. Out of that experience (and out of Noyes’ anticipation of that experience in *Bible Argument*), came first their distinctive women’s costume permitting feminine mobility — short dress and pantalettes — and, second, their preferred method of labor — “bees,” volunteer task groups that promoted happy mingling.

“This practice of doing work ‘by storm,’ or in what is more commonly called ‘a bee,’ in which the men, women and children engage, has been



Figure 4. Oneida Community members gather for bee, about 1863.

found very popular and effective,” the Community reported in early 1850. “It may be employed in a great variety of occupations, especially of outdoor business, and always contributes to enliven and animate the most uninteresting details of work.”³⁴ “For women,” Charlotte Miller elaborated, “the Bee is an unparalleled opportunity for exercise in the open air—and in companionship with men, too, which is of itself invigorating—and for men it takes off the ruggedness and drudgery of labor, by association with those whose presence naturally calls out the refinement and chivalry of their nature.”³⁵

By the early 1850s, the practice of men, women, and children working together outside became profoundly intertwined with the Community’s interest in what they called “horticulture.” Back in early 1848, Noyes had suggested that his association would subsist on tree fruit: “As society becomes vital and refined, drawing its best nourishment from love, the grosser kinds of food, and especially animal food, will go out of use. The fruits of *trees* will become the staple eatables. Gen. 2:16. The largest part of the labor of the world is now spent on the growth of annual plants and animals. Cattle occupy more of the soil at present than men. The cultivation of trees will be better sport than plowing, hoeing corn, digging potatoes, and waiting on cows and pigs.”³⁶

This sounds like Fourier, who loved pears and hated wheat. The communes he envisioned were rural, agricultural enterprises especially devoted to fruit-growing.³⁷ Noyes’ sentiments, however, probably derived from Albert Brisbane’s American writings on Fourierism, published in 1843 after running in the pages of the *New York Tribune*. This source indicated that an association—especially a small one, especially at the beginning—should favor fruits and vegetables over the heavy branches of agriculture. The examples recommended were apples and pears which the author sometimes called horticulture. “The association should raise large quantities of fruit for its cultivation is both attractive and profitable,” Brisbane concluded, “and adapted to the labor of men, women and children.”³⁸

At Oneida, the word “horticulture” meant tending fruit trees and bushes and vegetable gardens in contrast to “farming” which referred to the keeping of domesticated animals and the raising of grain crops. Horticulture was more desirable than farming and was to be the Community’s chief source of food.

The instincts and tastes of the Association, from the commencement of operations at Oneida, have led steadily to a revolution of the practices and notions, commonly associated with the idea of *farming*. Motives of *policy*, as well as good taste and the habits of community life, invite our efforts in the direction of making our domain a *garden*, rather than what is usually understood by the term *farm*.³⁹

Farming, as ordinarily practised, means, the raising yearly, of a crop of corn, potatoes, wheat, rye, or oats, and the like, with perhaps a few beets, turnips, and cabbages; and in some cases, and in a rather supererogatory way, of a greater or less quantity of fruit. Now, basing ourselves on Horticulture as our leading means of subsistence, we necessarily consider fruit and vegetable-raising as primary, and field-crops, as corn and potatoes, secondary and subordinate.⁴⁰

Horticulture, also called gardening, would take one to a higher spiritual plane and bring about a more advanced state of civilization.⁴¹

The savage eats flesh, because he has no fruit and but little grain. His food is chiefly the half-cooked fresh meat of animals just slain. The next stage brings in the art of preserving meats by means of salt, and a more general reliance on grains, but with fruit still inferior and scarce. Gradually, with the progress of refinement, more attention is paid to fruit-culture—improved kinds are introduced, and plenty is so far secured that most people can enjoy as a luxury the different varieties of summer fruits, during the few days that they are each in season. So far as this our present civilization has advanced.⁴²

Finally, horticulture was the original way of Eden. It would be, again, the way of the coming heavenly state on earth.⁴³

A prominent nurseryman, Henry Thacker, was recruited to the Community—along with his tree nursery in Owascoby early 1850.⁴⁴ Thacker initiated horticulture at Oneida so effectively that, in 1852, a Perfectionist boasted that Noyes' theory of horticulture (meaning the focus on tree fruits quoted above) "may have been thought a Utopian

speculation. But the Association, without much reference to theory, have naturally slid out of *farming* into *Horticulture*, as a means of subsistence.”⁴⁵

And, because women’s work was regarded as especially valuable in gardening, horticulture was fundamental to mingling the sexes outdoors.⁴⁶ “As horticulture supplants farming, and advancing civilization modifies man’s business in many respects, the association of the sexes in work, will of course be more agreeable as well as practicable.”⁴⁷ “Gardens and orchards are the chosen scenes for social festivity,” said another. “Women and children can mingle in the work. There is great chance for aggregation in the industry of Horticulture.”⁴⁸

Almost immediately the Perfectionists tried to make money from horticulture. They sold produce and nursery trees.⁴⁹ Inspired and instructed by the canning precedents of a Fourierist commune, the North American Phalanx, they turned to developing the technology of vegetal preservation in 1853.⁵⁰ The same year, the phrase, “Horticulture is the leading business for subsistence” began running on the first page of almost every issue of their newspaper as a statement of a key belief.⁵¹ It would continue to be featured in that capacity for the next eleven years.

In 1856, the Oneida Community test-marketed tomatoes preserved in cans and jars.⁵² What came to be called the Fruit Business began in earnest in 1858 with retail sale of foods hermetically sealed in glass jars.⁵³ The fruit business, initially, was the outcome of men and women mingling in horticultural pursuits.

The reality of men and women laboring together in a new way of life challenged traditional assumptions about gender. Realizing how much their lifestyle improved women’s lives, they were inspired to lighten domestic drudgery further with such labor-saving gadgetry as the sewing machine. “To relieve them [the women] somewhat from the exclusive and unhealthy occupation of sewing, the Association has recently furnished itself with one of Singer’s celebrated Sewing Machines, which is found admirably adapted to the economies of Community life.” A second machine purchased a few years later was described as “an iron arm into the house to help the women!”⁵⁴

Mingling raised the collective consciousness about gender equality. By 1850, Noyes was saying that a woman’s life in marriage was like a slave’s bondage in the South.⁵⁵ “I vow to the Lord before you women in the name of all the men,” he declared in 1853, “that we will do the fair thing by you. We will try to understand and appreciate you, and remove the torments

and encumbrances between you and the men. We will make room for you and you shall have all the chance you want. Before God here tonight, we give you free papers.”⁵⁶

Others said the same. At one Community meeting in 1857: “A conscientious brother wished to know whether woman had her full rights here...He wanted to know if any of our women felt themselves limited or oppressed, or in any way deprived of their natural rights. His inquiry was met with a hearty negative from the party addressed...They said they felt no oppression, but help every way from the men, and that they saw no distinction of privilege in the Community; women enjoy all the advantages for personal improvement and expansion that men do.”⁵⁷

However sympathetic men might be to women’s equality in the outside world, they never put their hands to “women’s work.”⁵⁸ In the Oneida Community, in contrast, men participated in such traditionally feminine tasks as cooking, waiting on tables, and performing housework including house-cleaning. To do laundry, probably the most onerous domestic chore, they assigned fifteen men to work with fifteen women washing, ironing, and folding the clothing. At one point, they discussed whether it wouldn’t be fair for the men to adopt new costumes the way women did—apparently an inconclusive discussion.⁵⁹

Perfectionists understood that their way of life flew in the face of gender segregation in the outside world which increasingly consigned men to the workplace and confined women in the household. They were sincere in their goal to correct the injustice of such relations. Yet, throughout the existence of the Community, traditional household work was mostly performed by women.

Their perception of the problem was that women resisted leaving the domestic sphere and held themselves back by not being assertive. “We notice that the women are the last to acquire and the slowest to use their liberty in our meetings. They are exhorted to speech rather than to silence. Most of them bring their sewing, knitting, braiding and other womanly industries, some of the boys and men assisting them in braiding.”⁶⁰

Community writers complained that women were not embracing outdoor labor with sufficient enthusiasm because of the “tire-lady spirit,”

which would always be glad to creep in and install itself in the place of our principle that it is good for woman to associate with man in his work outdoors. We started here with the principle of mingling

the sexes in labor, and cultivating a robust race of women; but the law of habit and worldly fashion resist our purpose with great force and pertinacity. The love of dress is the natural rival of this principle. If we are dressed very nicely, we are disinclined to work out-doors, and on the other hand, if we forsake manly industry, the vanities of dress are likely to employ our hands.⁶¹

Women were disposed to love of dress, they thought, to appear well in the eyes of others. That required considerable sewing which, in turn, prevented them from asserting themselves in family meetings.⁶² Hence, their priority in mingling the sexes in daily labor was to get women out of the domestic sphere and into the male world, to make women more like female men as Noyes put it in *Bible Argument*.⁶³

The Age of Hirelings

The Community began in bees and mingling, which led to discussion about equality and improving the lot of women. But, over time, that emphasis shifted with the overall effect that men and women mingled in daily life less than previously. One reason for that may have been stirpiculture. Women, during the last decade of the commune, were expected to be mothers as well as companions. As mothers, they bore the burden of stirpiculture and probably withdrew, more than previously, from the daily round of work and sociability. There was however a material basis for the increasing gender divide which came out of the manufacture of metal animal traps.

In early 1849, Noyes moved to New York City where he would remain for the better part of six years. His digs in Brooklyn proved to be the first of several Perfectionist communities outside of Oneida that, collectively, were styled the “Associated Communities.” None was self-supporting and, with finances dwindling, the Associated Communities consolidated at Oneida in 1854-55 to focus on fiscal viability. “We must make business a part of our religion,” Noyes is supposed to have said.⁶⁴

The reinforced Oneida Community pinned its main financial hopes on manufacturing metal animal traps. Traps and trap-making entered the Community in the person of Sewell Newhouse, a blacksmith who had developed a hand-forged model of a trap very popular locally. The

Community's major innovation was to invent and build machinery mechanizing almost every step of the manufacturing process. The machine-making method started up in 1857 with spectacular results. That year, they made 26,000 traps—more than in the first five years combined (21,000). Thereafter, traps were the financial mainstay of the commune and the Community's *Newhouse* traps dominated the national market.⁶⁵

Trap money paid for a new up-to-date Mansion House, and for the transformation of its grounds into a pleasure park in 1862. The next year, trap money financed a building equipped with steam-driven washing machinery that dramatically alleviated laundry toil. Traps, Noyes said, were what built their home, improved their surroundings, and set the Oneida Community before the world as a successful business enterprise.⁶⁶



Figure 5. Community members strike a pose in front of the second Mansion House, about 1875.

As large sums were spent on these projects in the early 1860s, trap production was ramped up, accordingly, to 226,000 in 1863 and 275,000 in 1864. It was a frantic pace made possible by hiring, on a temporary basis, about fifty non-Community workers.

In 1863, the Perfectionists committed themselves to becoming permanent employers. “The Community have decided upon the very important move of hiring help to man our Trap Shop! Our Trap Business has increased so much that we are over-run with orders,” they explained, “and are unable with our own folks to fill them; so that it was a matter of necessity to hire help.”⁶⁷

In 1864, they built the largest trap manufacturing facility in the United States and staffed it with permanent employees working on an assembly line. While that allowed them to double their output, it also put them over \$30,000 into debt. Then, in 1866, they invested in a completely new factory industry, one requiring even more employees. This was the manufacture of “Machine Twist,” silk thread for the Singer Sewing Machine just then coming into widespread use. By the 1870s, there were about two hundred adult Perfectionists in charge of an equal number of hirelings engaged not only the industrial work, but other jobs as well. The new relations of production altered relations of gender. Greater dependence on outside labor sharpened gender division within the Community.

This is clearest in the case of the industrial enterprises. Perfectionist men supervised outside male employees in the trap shop and field. Perfectionist women supervised female employees in the silk works.⁶⁸

Then too, men and women did not work together outside as often as they had earlier because bees of the traditional sort essentially ended with dependence on hired labor. By about 1865, the day-to-day work of horticulture and farming was performed by employees.⁶⁹

Further, bees to process fruit ended, at least temporarily, in 1868 when the fruit business was discontinued. The problem was that horticulture and canning involved a double deadline—one for harvest, the other—in the absence of effective refrigeration—for preserving and processing the harvest. Unfortunately, the demand for labor to get all this done occurred at the same time of year workers were most needed in the trap-making business.⁷⁰ Competing with traps for workers, horticulture lost.

After the canning business was resumed in 1872, there were a number of emergency efforts in which Perfectionists and employees worked together in the Fruit House to can fruit before it spoiled.⁷¹ Although these activities



Figure 6. Oneida Community women, 1863.

resembled earlier bees, they were not occasions permitting Perfectionists to mingle outside.

Aside from the frantic canning events, later bees tended to be work groups composed solely of female participants. Women in the Oneida Community had the opportunity seldom found the outside world of living in close association with other women.⁷² As a communitarian venture, Oneida had always offered an unusual density of female interactions with the potential to become organized and to be able to accomplish major tasks. Late in time, that seems to have happened.

An example of a large-scale, task-specific activity of women is the great quilt project. “For the last month the feminine part of the O.C. has been busily engaged in a unitary plan,” it was announced in 1873. “They resolved themselves into an impromptu school of design”—for quilt-making.⁷³ About one hundred completed blocks were assembled into two quilts which, together were the product of a largely spontaneous group effort independent of the leadership, committees, and departments running most aspects of Community life. Almost every girl and woman in the Oneida Community took part in this cooperative endeavor for two months. Among other things, the quilt project documents a wide range of tasks being performed by Community women, including work of a non-domestic nature largely unavailable to women in the outside world.⁷⁴

The women also were organizing themselves to accomplish such

long-term tasks as silk-skeining—the preparation of threads used in hand-sewing as opposed to machine-sewing. Whereas the manufacture of “machine twist” was a factory operation performed by hirelings, the production of hand-sewing threads was done in the Mansion House by the Community women themselves. To skein silk, a person sat in front of a silk reel, a wooden stand with a crossbar about forty inches above the floor. Starting with large skeins of coarse silk, the skeiner skillfully sorted, bunched, pressed, and tied the material up into small hanks ready for sale. Hand-sewing threads were prominently advertised and sold in stores throughout the country.⁷⁵ This industry apparently was a significant feminine contribution to the Community’s economy.

Conclusion

“The amelioration of woman’s lot in our manner of life is too manifest not to be seen by all”⁷⁶ was a sentiment frequently expressed in the Oneida Community. It was true. The Oneida Community had transformed the domestic environment, at the outset, by revolutionizing the manner in which household labor, regarded as feminine, was performed. The Perfectionists then redefined the ideal of gender relations around the practice of bees in which men and women happily mingled in horticultural pursuits. Mingling paved the way for practical advances in female standing and for the development of gender relations astonishingly progressive by the standards of their day.

In later years, Oneida became the largest maker of metal animal traps in the U.S. and one of the country’s most successful producers of silk thread. The industrializing Perfectionists came to depend on hired labor, not only in the factories but also in the groves where female and male Perfectionists had once worked side by side.

The institution of hired labor fostered gender separation within the Community with the result that women worked less with men and more with other women. Dependence on hired labor also brought greater concern with profitable output and less concern with spirituality.⁷⁷

They were aware that the once-dominant principle that men and women should mingle in work was giving way to a greater emphasis on monetary profit. One who sensed this was gardener Lemuel Bradley who, in 1857, informed the Community:



Figure 7. Community woman skeining silk, about 1885.

that he was sorry to find a little disposition yet among some to disparage the garden, as less profitable than the old-fashioned system of agriculture. He did not like to hear remarks of this nature...Supposing the labor in the garden is not so remunerative in dollars and cents as the great operation of the farmer, (which may yet be questioned,) still the garden is a part of our interest that we appreciate highly for independent reasons; and if we are going simply for money-making, we might as well abandon the garden and farm both, and betake ourselves to the trap-shop or silk-peddling; for in either of these businesses, we could make money faster than we can on the land of our domain, cultivate it how we please.⁷⁸

In 1863, when agreement was reached to hire employees, no mention was made of the issues Bradley had raised. An obvious alternative, of course, was to produce fewer traps. But that was not acknowledged and, in fact, the Community always seemed to be in denial on the subject of hired labor. They said that being capitalist supervisors was only a temporary measure, one they did not endorse.⁷⁹

When fruit-canning started up again after four years, it was no longer valued for its spiritual benefits in bringing men and women together. On the contrary, it was a carefully planned-out commercial enterprise funded to the tune of \$9,000—by far the biggest expense in the 1872 budget.⁸⁰ That money was allocated for developing a fruit-processing facility staffed by hired help (“Arcade”) and for building a state-of-the art fruit-preserving facility (“Keep”). The Keep was a massive “Fisher’s Patent Refrigerator,” the construction of which was overseen by Mr. J. Hyde Fisher himself—brought all the way from Chicago to get that done.⁸¹ This fruit business was now about dollars and cents.

Meanwhile, Perfectionists were penning nostalgic accounts of Community life in pre-hireling times. “Those were the days,” one of them wrote in 1873, “when much of our irksome work was performed by ‘bees,’ which were well attended by men, women and children...Ah! those were happy days.” “I have heard old members say regretfully,” Pierrepont Noyes echoed, “‘those were our happiest years.’”⁸²

There was a real sense of sadness—perhaps of lost opportunity—in moving away from those early days in Eden. That, at least, would help to explain Noyes’ strange denunciation of his own flock when they had just

installed Mammon as the guiding principle of the fruit business: “If we have primarily in view to make money, we shall get no enthusiasm from heaven. That is the snare that besets the Community at Oneida. They are great business men there, and are engaged in big enterprises; but there is a great danger of ... taking up the idea of the world, which is that the object of business is *money*.”⁸³

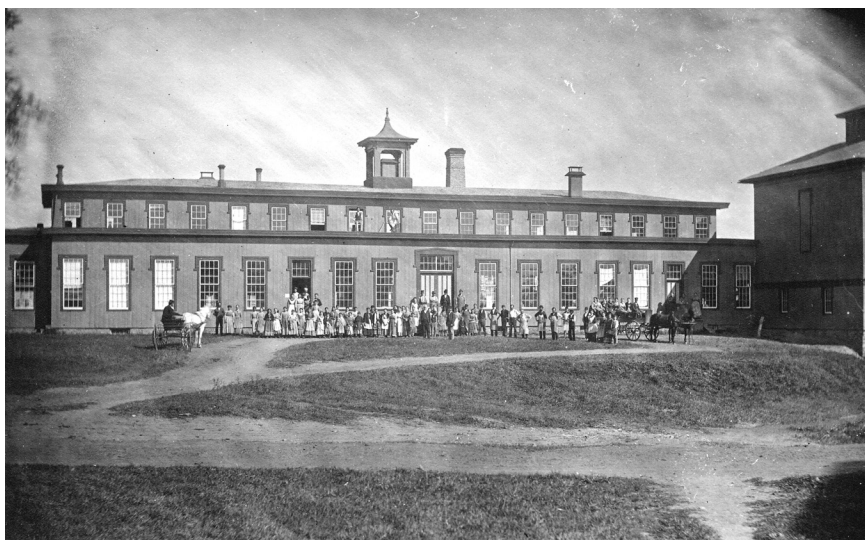


Figure 8. Employees in front of the Oneida Community’s fruit-processing and fruit-preserving facilities, about 1875.

Notes

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8. Oneida Community, *First Annual Report of the Oneida Association: Exhibiting Its History, Principles, and Transactions to Jan. 1, 1849* (Oneida Reserve, N.Y.: Oneida Association, 1849), 11-12.
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10. *Circular*, February 12, 1853; Robert S. Fogarty, ed., *Desire and Duty at Oneida: Tirzah Miller's Intimate Memoir* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2000), 5,
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 41. *Circular*, November 3, 1859, and February 25, 1853.
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 83. *Oneida Circular*, December 13, 1875.