The Extinct 'Grass Eaters' of Benton County: A Reconstructed History of the Harmonial Vegetarian Society.

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The Extinct "Grass Eaters" of Benton County:

A Reconstructed History of the Harmonial Vegetarian Society

By KIM ALLEN SCOTT and ROBERT MYERS*

A PRACTICE OF PALEONTOLOGISTS which is difficult for the layman to understand is the reconstruction of an entire prehistoric creature based on the discovery of a single tooth or bone. By comparing a fossilized sample from a previously unknown animal to a more complete skeleton of another, the paleontologist can logically present a reconstructed beast based on what appears to most of us as the flimsiest of data.[1]

The historian usually does not enjoy latitude comparable to that of the paleontologist in reconstructing the past. Tied to the rules of evidence, the scholar who seeks to tell the story of a distant event faces a critical audience demanding a careful evaluation of numerous reliable sources. This limitation is unfortunate because occasionally one discovers some "fossils" of important information on a subject that deserve presentation regardless of corroborating witnesses.

Recognizing the limitations of presenting a historical study based on fragments and a comparison model, this paper will trace the history and

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[1] Joseph T. Hannibal, "Building Beasts," *Earth Science,* 39 (Winter 1986): 20-21.

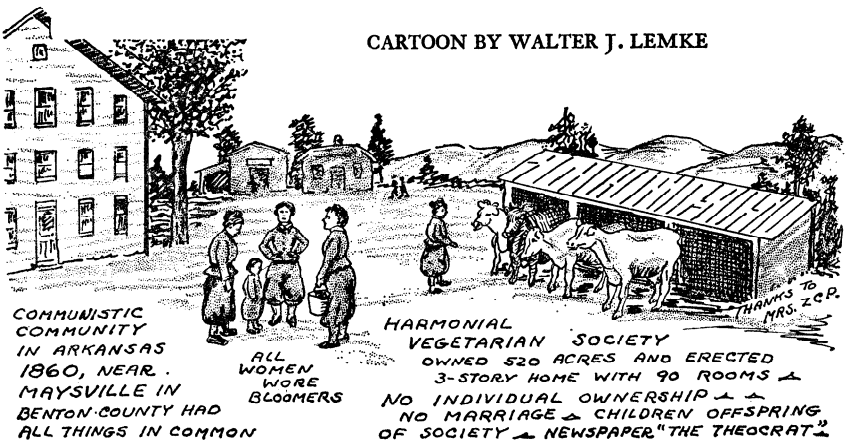
explain the death of Arkansas' only nineteenth-century socialist colony, the Harmonial Vegetarian Society of Benton County. To supplement our primary sources we will offer as a comparison model another American communal settlement whose membership and practices appear remarkably similar to those of the Harmonial Vegetarian Society. However, before we begin our reconstruction we must examine the histories produced by previous writers and the single account on which they have based their inquiries.

Some of the most valuable tools for the Arkansas local historian, and at the same time the most unreliable, are the county histories issued by the Goodspeed Publishing Company of Chicago between 1889 and 1891. The Goodspeed histories are valuable because they contain a wealth of information about early Arkansas settlers which is available from no other source. But that is precisely why they are such a danger to the historian: without any substantiating source, much of the Goodspeed sketches must be accepted on faith alone and, in the case of the Harmonial Vegetarian Society, there has been no shortage of true believers.

Briefly summarized, the anonymously-written Goodspeed account states that after its inception in 1860, the Harmonial Vegetarian Society flourished on a tract of 500 acres in western Benton County, Arkansas. The vegetarians held all property in common, renounced marriage by choosing mates by lot, and considered all of the members' children to be the offspring of the society as a whole. They lived together in a huge three-story building equipped with indoor plumbing supplied by a hydraulic ram. Within the main building the members operated a hospital and school, while other structures were erected on the property for a store, a blacksmith shop, a spring house, a grist mill, and a printing office where, for about a year, they published a newspaper called the *Theocrat.* Aside from advocating a completely vegetarian diet in their newspaper and offering medical services for pay within their hospital, the hardworking colonists had little to do with the outside world, even going so far as to dress in distinctive attire such as "bloomer" skirts for women and what observers called the "Quaker style" for men. After a lifespan of four years, the Harmonial Vegetarian Society disbanded, sold off its assets, and distributed the proceeds among its members. The

Goodspeed account also adds that the vegetarians' buildings were used intermittently by the armies during the Civil War and that all were burned shortly before the end of hostilities.[2]

CARTOON BY WALTER J. LEMKE



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The Goodspeed version of the Harmonial Vegetarian Society stood unchallenged for over fifty years until E. L. Rudolph questioned the story in an article published in the *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*. Evidence he found in the Benton County deed records established 1861 as the year the Harmonial Vegetarian Society broke up rather than 1864 as the previous story had indicated.[3]

In spite of Rudolph's revision, at least four other accounts of the Harmonial Vegetarian Society have appeared in print since 1956 which again paraphrase, and sometimes even plagiarize, the Goodspeed article.[4] This repetition has been unnecessary, for the vegetarians left many

[2] *The History of Benton, Washington, Carroll, Madison, Crawford, Franklin, and Sebastian Counties, Arkansas* (Chicago: Goodspeed Publishing Co., 1889), 62-64; hereinafter cited as Goodspeed's Northwestern Arkansas.

[3] E. L. Rudolph, "Another Discordant Harmony," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 3 (Autumn 1944), 211-216.

[4] Clifford Fry, "Communist Colony in Benton County, Arkansas," *Benton County Pioneer*, 4 (May 1956): 4-5; Edsel Ford, "A Garden of Eden That Failed," Little Rock *Arkansas Democrat Magazine*, February 5, 1961, 6; Maurice Louix, *Historical Review of*

footprints outside of Goodspeed which have been available to researchers for decades. These sources, along with two letters acquired in 1982 by the Special Collections division of the University of Arkansas Libraries, are the scattered "bones" with which the history of the Harmonial Vegetarian Society can be reconstructed, with the Oneida Community of New York serving as our comparison "skeleton."

Long before northwest Arkansas became a haven for the Harmonial Vegetarian Society, another group of utopian idealists banded together at Putney, Vermont, under the leadership of John Humphrey Noyes. A Yale-educated preacher, Noyes had in 1834 developed a theory of "Christian Perfectionism," that combined the belief that the second coming of Christ had already occurred with the notion that man, through a profound "inner illumination," could achieve perfectibility on earth and establish the kingdom of heaven free from sin. He also preached the rejection of conventional marriage, arguing that "in the kingdom of heaven, the institution of marriage which assigns the exclusive possession of one woman to one man does not exist."[5] Eventually Noyes built on this premise to justify a system that he called "complex marriage," but that others have called "free love."

Noyes attracted a group of followers known as the Perfectionists after establishing a bible school at Putney. Initially the Perfectionists maintained separate households, but gradually they came to live together in homes owned by Noyes and his sisters. By 1846 the sect had formed a communal living association and established a constitution which detailed its intention to share all property in common and practice complex marriage. Not surprisingly, neighboring farmers and townfolk considered the group's unconventional ideas about matrimony unpalatable and, when Noyes added a form of faith healing to his activities, he found himself under court indictment for morality violations.[6]

The Perfectionists resettled in 1847 in Oneida County, New York, an

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Maysville; Pioneer Town of Benton County, Arkansas (Southwest City, Mo., 1972), 28-29; Robert S. Fogarty, *Dictionary of American Communal and Utopian History* (Westport, Conn., 1980), 200-201.

[5] John Humphrey Noyes, *History of American Socialisms* (Philadelphia, 1870), 624.

[6] Maren Lockwood Carden, *Oneida: Utopian Community to Modern Corporation* (Baltimore, 1969), 17-22.

isolated area where they hoped to establish their kingdom of heaven without outside interference. They lived together in a huge mansion equipped with a library, central meeting area, and private sleeping quarters. Children lived separately from adults, supervised by colonists assigned to the task, and were considered to be the offspring of the entire membership. In addition to their unusual marriage arrangements, the Oneida Community instituted a system of mutual criticism sessions which replaced conventional medical treatment for sick members who believed that faith alone would cure them.[7] Women ostensibly enjoyed equal status with men, adopting short haircuts and a style of "bloomer" skirt to ease their movements in performing non-traditional work roles.[8] While they theoretically rejected the outside world, the Oneida Perfectionists were careful to maintain cordial relationships with their neighbors in order to avoid another confrontation as well as to improve their economic situation. Peddling became an acceptable means of income for the group and the manufacture of goods for public consumption also fed the community's treasury. One of their most successful products in the 1850s proved to be animal traps,[9] and although they began a flirtation with the concept of a vegetarian diet in 1855, it does not appear to be a result of overwhelming sympathy for animal life.[10]

A year after the Oneida Community began its vegetarian experimentation someone placed an unusual solicitation in Charles W. Dana's guide for prospective western immigrants, *The Garden of the World; or, The Great West.* On the last page of the chapter devoted to "Kanzas," interested parties were requested by a group calling itself the "Vegetarian Settlement Company" to contact its New York City agent, George Walker, Esq. The advertisement also stated the company's objectives, which included:

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[7] Constance Noyes Robertson, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography, 1851-1876* (Syracuse, 1970), 150.

[8] Noyes, *American Socialisms,* 636. "When the partition between the sexes is taken away, and man ceases to make woman a propagative drudge, when love takes the place of shame, and fashion follows nature in dress and business, men and women will be able to mingle in all their employments, as boys and girls mingle in their sports: and then labor will be attractive."

[9] Another original product of the colony, Oneida tableware, is still being produced.

[10] Robertson, *Oneida Community,* 108, 157-158.

> the establishment, in the centre of the United States, of a permanent home for vegetarians . . . the concerted action of vegetarians so associated to be used for the establishment of a system of direct dealing, supplying the production of the soil of the best quality direct from the producers to the consumers, without the enormous profits of speculators and retailers coming between these respective parties.[11]

The mysterious settlement company also announced that it intended to "call public attention to the subject of a vegetarian diet" in a manner that could not be accomplished by a "mere theoretic movement."[12]

The Vegetarian Settlement Company's objectives seem similar to the Oneida Community's socialistic economy and it is entirely possible that some former Perfectionists were behind the solicitation. Regardless of who placed the advertisement, it does not appear that Kansas Territory, which had a low tolerance for experimental lifestyles, ever saw the establishment of their community. It is possible that the people who joined the Vegetarian Settlement Company found another location in northwest Arkansas with the "rich soil, salubrious climate, and pure water" they desired.

One of the organizers of the Vegetarian Settlement Company could have been Doctor James E. Spencer, a thirty-five year old Connecticut physician at the time the advertisement appeared in *The Great West.* Dr. Spencer may also have been a former member of Noyes's Perfectionist sect. Branches of the Oneida Community were established by 1852 in both Spencer's home state and in New Jersey, the birthplace of his wife.[13] Perhaps he became attracted to the Oneida group's beliefs but declined to join due to its rejection of conventional medical practice. All we can say with certainty is that in 1857 Spencer moved to Arkansas and purchased a large tract of land at a place he named "Harmony

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[11] [C. W. Dana] *The Garden of the World, or, The Great West; Its History, Its Wealth, Its Natural Advantages, and Its Future.* (Boston, 1856), 226.

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] Manuscript Census Returns, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Benton County, Arkansas, Schedule 1, Free Inhabitants, National Archives Microfilm Series No. 298; microfilm copy seen in the Audio-Visual Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville; hereinafter cited as Eighth Census, 1860.

Springs" in Benton County.[14] A sect of "Reform Christians" who emphasized a vegetarian lifestyle also settled on the doctor's property that year and he became their spokesman.

Almost everything we know about Dr. Spencer comes from his published statements in the Arkansas press. It is an unfortunate loss to Benton County history that no issues from its antebellum newspaper appear to have survived. Due to the common frontier editor's practice of clipping articles from exchange papers, we are at least able to consult the columns of the Fayetteville *Arkansian* to follow the first public controversy involving the group that was to become the Harmonial Vegetarian Society.

In April, 1859, the entire membership of the Reform Christian Church (also described as "vegetarians" in the *Arkansian*) was accused in the Benton County court of the crime of sabbath breaking. Represented by Fayetteville attorney William D. Reagan, the defendants explained that they considered "every day alike holy unto the Lord" but in order to conform to the local custom they set aside portions of the first and fifth days of the week for meditation and prayer. Even though Dr. Spencer and his followers claimed that what little work they did perform on Sunday was for charitable purposes, the jury remained skeptical and convicted them of the charge. The whole affair so disgusted the proprietors of the *Arkansian* that they published some of the proceedings of the trial within a condemnatory editorial entitled "Religious Intolerance."[15]

The crime of sabbath breaking and the vegetarians' defense seem remarkably similar to the experience of the Oneida Community. Noyes's Perfectionists did not observe any sabbath day either,[16] and in spite of careful consideration of their neighbors' feelings they faced in 1850 a New York court suit for morality charges just as they had at Putney four years earlier.[17] But the real parallel between New York and the Arkansas groups is best illustrated by statements made by Dr. Spencer himself.

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[14] Benton County Deed Book D, 315. This entry names Isaac D. and Susan K. Rice as the parties selling the land to James E. Spencer on December 24, 1857.

[15] Fayetteville *Arkansian*, April 30, 1859.

[16] Carden, *Oneida*, 45.

[17] *Ibid.*, 80.

Following its defense of the vegetarians, the *Arkansian* published a letter from Dr. Spencer thanking the editor and correcting a "few unintentional errors."[18] Spencer described his group as a community as well as a church and detailed the tenets of its faith. According to the doctor, the vegetarians believed that God was composed of immortal principles, and that the presence of these principles in the mind of man, with "their perceptive predominance . . . over the lower elements" of his nature, made him as an immortal being. Accordingly, the vegetarians rejected the concept of salvation by faith and insisted that their own efforts would result in eternal life. After Spencer's brief summary of the vegetarians' beliefs, he added that the judgment of the Benton County court had been stayed and that certain "other indictments" had been thrown from the court.[19]

Dr. Spencer's description of his followers' beliefs is very similar to the Perfectionist theology practiced by the Oneida Community. The rejection of salvation by faith, the emphasis on works, and the affirmation of man's status as an immortal due to his adherence to a certain lifestyle can all be found in the writings of John Humphrey Noyes.

What is missing to complete the comparison is any mention of the Arkansas sect's practice of communal marriage. It is logical to assume that if the Harmony Springs vegetarians had followed the lead of the Oneida Community in the area of matrimony, Benton County officials would have charged them with far more serious crimes than working on Sundays. Aside from Spencer's hint about "other indictments," the *Arkansian* is silent on the subject. In fact, no evidence on the vegetarians' practice of marriage can be found, which casts doubt on the claims of the Goodspeed article and subsequent writers who have gone so far as to claim that the group practiced "free love."[20] Perhaps the absence of testimony on the Arkansas group's marriage practice is due to the chron-

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[18] Fayetteville *Arkansian,* May 21, 1859.

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] Fogarty, *Dictionary,* 201. One might consider the hearsay testimony given in 1864 by William L. Gammage. A surgeon with the Confederate Army stationed near Harmony Springs in 1861, Gammage merely reported that he had heard that neighbors considered the moral character of the vegetarians to be suspect. See W. L. Gammage, *The Camp, The Bivouac, and the Battlefield* (Selma, Ala., 1864), 17.

ology of our sources. Noyes's Perfectionists developed their concept of "complex marriage" gradually after several years of experimentation. The vegetarians also could have arrived at the decision to abandon traditional marriage after several months of experimentation at Harmony Springs and long after their 1859 trial.

Through the public records, the columns of the *Arkansian,* and the reminiscences of contemporaries, an interesting portrait emerges of the unusual settlement at Harmony Springs. Like the Oneida Community, the overwhelming majority of the Harmony Springs vegetarians claimed New York and the surrounding states to be their birthplace. They also resembled the original Perfectionists in age: the average age of the thirty-eight vegetarians answering the 1860 census was 22.8 years. Occupationally the group included four teachers, two masons, a carpenter, a printer, and of course, a physician.[21] Their diet, which the vegetarians claimed would prolong life, emphasized unsifted whole wheat flour with no grease whatsoever. The vegetarians apparently were not abolitionists, and while they vigorously advocated their own lifestyle, they interacted easily with the outside world. Spencer vigorously defended slavery in his writings and another Harmony Springs resident calling himself "Astrea" did not hesitate to enter the political arena to defend presidential candidate Stephen A. Douglas when the opportunity arose.[22]

In June 1859, Dr. Spencer announced the opening of the Harmonial Healing Institute which would employ "a new and purely scientific recuperative principle, known as the Hydro-Electrical system of medical application."[23] Spencer claimed that the institute could receive up to twelve patients immediately, and that in a few weeks would be prepared to receive up to fifty. In order to house the expected number of patients willing to experience the doctor's crude form of shock treatments, the vegetarians had begun construction of a large mansion house, much the same as the Oneida Community had in 1847. The mansion at Harmony Springs must have been a huge edifice, capable of accommodating the sect's total membership along with the anticipated forty or fifty patients.

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[21] Eighth Census, 1860, Population Schedules, Benton County, 298.

[22] Little Rock *Arkansas True Democrat,* December 21, 1859; Fayetteville *Arkansian,* June 18, 1859, February 3, 1860.

[23] Fayetteville *Arkansian,* June 11, 1859.

Our best description of the vegetarians' home comes from a Confederate soldier, William Watson of the Third Louisiana Infantry. Writing in 1884, Watson recalled his 1861 experiences in northwest Arkansas, including a serious bout with malaria. He became delirious while at Camp Walker, near Maysville, Arkansas, and his comrades took him to the mansion at Harmony Springs which had been commandeered for a hospital by the Confederates. When he recovered several days later, Watson explored the house:

> It was an enormous building of wood, and seemed never to have been finished. . . . It was said to have been built by some peculiar sect of people, having some singular belief or ideas of their own. . . . It was now completely deserted by its founders, although there was evidence of its having been partly occupied not long previous. Large quantities of apples and dried peaches were lying carelessly on the floors of some of the lower rooms, but there was very little furniture of any kind except tables and seats, of which there were abundance. There were several large halls, furnished with seats, as if for teaching, lecturing, or places of worship.

Watson also said that only one wing of the building was used as a hospital and that it alone housed over 100 men.[24]

Although Watson was unsure about where the mansion was located in relation to Maysville, evidence gleaned from other soldiers who wrote letters to the *Van Buren Press* in the summer of 1861 pinpoint the location of Harmony Springs to be on the edge of a wide, flat expanse of grassland known as Beatie's Prairie, just over three air miles northeast of Maysville along present day State Route 72.[25] No separate descriptions of the springhouse, printing office, or gristmill have come to light, but we do know that enough building activity took place in the area during the summer of 1859 to justify the establishment of a post office at Har-

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[24] William Watson, *Life in the Confederate Army; Being the Observations of an Alien in the South During the American Civil War* (New York, 1888), 249-250.

[25] *Van Buren Press,* June 19, 1861; July 24, 1861. Present day topographical maps show a large stock pond near the center of the northern boundary of Section 13, Township 22 north, Range 33 west. In 1956 Clifford Fry identified this location as the only spring of any size on what was the Harmonial Vegetarian Society's land. See Fry, "Communist Colony," 5.

mony Springs.[26] The location of the vegetarians' grist mill, if it ever saw completion, would likely have been on a separate forty-acre tract also owned by Dr. Spencer along a tributary of Honey Creek, about four miles directly north northwest of Harmony Springs. Henry C. Dewey, the former vegetarian who bought this land, was described in the Goodspeed article as having operated a mill along Honey Creek after the Society's breakup.[27]

The Harmony Springs printing office may have been in a separate building or in a part of the mansion. Wherever the shop's location, copies of the vegetarians' monthly newspaper, the *Theocrat,* began rolling off the press in August 1859. Charles G. Foster served as printer for the sheet while Spencer and his wife, Martha, assumed the role of editors. Although the vegetarians claimed a circulation of 1,000 and Spencer once boasted the paper was "circulated quite extensively in the North," apparently no copies of the newspaper have survived.[28] We know from advertisements and exchange clippings that the *Theocrat* strove to explain the religious position of the sect and promised to "mind its own business, and work for the general interests of all who appreciate that Progress which is associated with Life, Truth, and Virtue."[29] Perhaps the *Theocrat* did fulfill its objective to reassure the vegetarians' neighbors that the group posed no threat to established order. As we shall see, at least one Maysville area resident, J. Frank Owen, became quite intimate with the vegetarians, and others who took note of the "grass eaters" seemed more interested in their peculiar diet than their politics.[30]

One such individual was William Quesenbury, a Fayetteville writer

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[26] Little Rock *Arkansas True Democrat,* July 27, 1859. In a brief letter to the editor, Spencer announced the opening of the post office and complained about mail going astray.

[27] Goodspeed's Northwestern Arkansas, 52. The grist mill probably was not operating by the summer of 1860 because it is not listed among the mills of Benton County in the census taken that summer. See U. S. Census Bureau, *Products of Industry, 1860,* Benton County, Arkansas, n.p. Manuscript copy seen in the Special Collections Division, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

[28] U. S. Census Bureau, *Social Statistics, 1860,* Benton County, Arkansas, n.p. Manuscript copy seen in the Special Collections Division, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville; Fayetteville *Arkansian,* February 3, 1860.

[29] Fayetteville *Arkansian,* June 11, 1859.

[30] J. A. Fair, "Reminiscental," *Benton County Pioneer,* 31 (Fall 1986): 49.

who was offended by a piece that Dr. Spencer published in the March 1860 *Theocrat.* Spencer wrote a stinging condemnation of Fayetteville's only hotel, calling it "a pile of lumber with a hole in it" and declared that he had lost a night's sleep at the place due to attacks from insects.[31] Quesenbury answered Spencer in the *Arkansian* with a lengthy ridicule of the vegetarian's diet:

> Now, Doctor, we approach the bugs. You say you fought them all night. What sort of bugs were they? Chinches, usually, in this climate, don't bite till warm weather. . . . But granting that the "ravenous insects do dwell in and about the aforesaid hole," it was very natural that they should make a descent from their lairs. They thought midsummer come and berated themselves for lying dormant so long. They smelt radishes, onions, lettuce, squashes, and all the products of horticulture as soon as you entered the room. Wonder what they thought of the flavor of your blood when they bit upon you. Had it the onion taste — the tomato — the carrot; Did they think they were eating strawberries; did they think you a horseradish?

Quesenbury finished off his opponent by implying Dr. Spencer was deranged from eating raw sweet potatoes.[32]

Dr. Spencer's charismatic leadership had by the fall of 1860 convinced the vegetarians at Harmony Springs to formalize their living arrangements. A. D. Tenney, John Murphy, and Milton Vale formed a committee of trustees for the Harmonial Vegetarian Society, the legal name decided upon by the sect, and tendered $6,000 to Dr. Spencer for the acreage on Beatie's Prairie and the separate parcel near Honey Creek. This large sum in 1860 currency can be taken as indirect evidence that a substantial number of improvements existed on the properties. The deed named all the adult members of the vegetarians included in the 1860 census as members of the Society and claimed the land to be held in permanent trust for "the use and occupancy of said Society for agricultural, mechanical, mercantile, and manufacturing purposes."[33]

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[31] Fayetteville *Arkansian,* March 16, 1860.

[32] Fayetteville *Arkansian,* April 6, 1860.

[33] Benton County Deed Book E, 340-341.

Unfortunately for the vegetarians, the decision to legalize their living arrangements proved to be the beginning of their demise as a unified community. Historians of other nineteenth-century communal groups have analyzed the various reasons why most of the experiments failed. Some long-lived groups eventually dissolved because of the development of various factions which prevented them from presenting a united front against outside assaults on their lifestyles. This was certainly the case of the Oneida Community where a schism developed in the early 1880s between the followers of some recently accepted "free love" advocates and those who supported John Humphrey Noyes and his son, Theodore. Shorter-lived communes fell prey to different pressures. They frequently were formed in haste, with no suitable ideological preparation for members of diverse backgrounds. Ephemeral communes often fell victim to chance mishaps that had a fatal impact because the groups were not strong enough to cope with them.[34] In the case of the Harmonial Vegetarian Society, the ending calamity took the form of two knockout punches. The first blow was delivered by the founder himself.

Within a few weeks of receiving payment for the land from his followers, Dr. James E. Spencer suddenly left Arkansas leaving no forwarding address. We know the doctor left with a female companion, but it is not clear whether she was his wife or another member of the Society. Circumstantial evidence hints that Charles G. Foster played the role of cuckold in this melodrama, for the *Arkansian* identified him specifically as a character reference for the "absconded" couple.[35]

The demoralizing effect of Spencer's flight, together with the realization that the hospital business would be doomed without a resident physician, led to an exodus of at least seven other Society members in the fall of 1860. The Benton County deed records show that Angeline Dunn, a New York born widow, and her five children withdrew from the Harmonial Vegetarian Society on November 13. Two weeks afterward John Adams also relinquished his claim on the group's property.[36] An interesting coincidence accompanied the first departure. On the

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[34] Yaacov Oved, *200 Years of American Communes* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1988), 468.

[35] Fayetteville *Arkansian,* November 24, 1860.

[36] Benton County Deed Book E, 500.

same day Angeline Dunn settled her claim, Benjamin Stites and his family drew on the Society's treasury to finance a trip to "Syracuse, wherever it may be."[37] Aside from demonstrating the bricklayer's limited knowledge of geography, this entry suggests that Stites did not completely relinquish his share in the community and may have just been escorting the widow Dunn back home to Syracuse, New York, a town less than 30 miles from the Oneida Community. Other discontented vegetarians left the community the following winter. On February 23, 1861, Milton and Mercy Vale, members named in the Society's original incorporation papers, decided to settle their account and leave the area.[38]

By May 2, 1861, the remaining vegetarians had authorized trustees A. D. Tenney and Henry C. Dewey to sell all of the Harmonial Vegetarian Society's lands. On that date Dewey himself purchased the mill site near Honey Creek and another vegetarian, John Murphy, bought the acreage around Harmony Springs.[39] However, these land transactions should not be taken as proof that all the vegetarians intended to leave the area or that they had abandoned their communal living experiment. After all, they had lived collectively for nearly two years on the property while James E. Spencer held sole title and the fact that only two members owned the land again by May 1861 does not mean the vegetarians had given up the experiment. It took a second punch of unfortunate circumstances to knock out the Harmonial Vegetarian Society, delivered when the Civil War arrived in northwest Arkansas.

During early May 1861, while the Society worked out its land titles, the Arkansas Secession Convention voted the state out of the federal union and prepared for war. Among the items of business decided at Little Rock that month was the appointment of general officers to lead the armies of the state. Nicholas Bartlett Pearce, a West Point graduate from Benton County, received a commission as brigadier general from the convention and prepared to execute his command.

Pearce had lived at Osage Mills, Benton County, since about 1858,

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[37] *Ibid.*

[38] *Ibid.*

[39] *Ibid.*, 498-499.

operating a gristmill and a post office with his father-in-law, Dr. John Smith. The two men must have been aware of the community at Harmony Springs; the vegetarians probably took their grain to Osage Mills while constructing their own facility near Honey Creek and Dr. Smith may have had professional reasons to monitor activities of the Harmonial Healing Institute. When Pearce arrived home in Benton County with the first contingent of Arkansas State Troops around mid-May, he chose Beatie's Prairie as the location of his training camp and established his headquarters on the grassland's highest point about halfway between Maysville and Harmony Springs.

Strategically speaking, Camp Walker (Pearce's chosen campsite) was both a good and bad location. From his headquarters he could see miles to the north, the anticipated route of enemy advance, and the gently rolling prairie made a natural parade ground for regimental-sized drill. However, the same lack of trees that eased military maneuvers also denied the soldiers easy access to firewood. Another serious deficiency proved to be water. Both shortcomings caused subordinates to speculate that General Pearce had chosen the location for personal gain. A board of inquiry held by Camp Walker officers on June 8, 1861, cleared the general of charges that his father-in-law sold the camp inferior flour from Osage Mills at inflated prices, but the placement of Pearce's headquarters took an additional hearing on the following day to adequately explain.[40] It is entirely possible that the general chose the location strictly for the advantages of the high ground with the knowledge that ample supplies of water and firewood could be easly procured just a mile and a half away at Harmony Springs.

Among the remaining vegetarians probably living at the mansion when the soldiers arrived was the family of A. D. and Rachel Tenney, from New York and Wisconsin, along with John Murphy and George Gardiner Bosworth, a young mason from Taunton, Massachusetts.[41] The decision by General Pearce to commandeer the vegetarians' home

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[40] *Van Buren Press,* June 26, 1861.

[41] The enlistment return of George Gardiner Bosworth gives his age and occupation as well as his birthplace. See Navy Enlistment Returns, Navy Records, Record Group 24, National Archives, Washington, D. C.

may have been eased by the fact that all the occupants were northerners and well-known to have harbored strange beliefs. We will never know exactly what influenced Pearce's decision because his personal papers were destroyed in a fire in 1870.[42] To reconstruct the events surrounding the confiscation of the Harmony Springs property we will have to build on two "fossils" of evidence contained in letters received by Maysville area resident J. Frank Owen.

Frank Owen was a Benton County unionist and his loyalty to the northern cause paid off after the war when he won a seat in the Arkansas General Assembly. He may actually have joined the Harmonial Vegetarian Society, or he could have been merely a friendly neighbor. All we can say with certainty is that he knew two of the vegetarians well enough to receive a letter from each of them. In 1862 he received a letter from George Gardiner Bosworth, a seaman serving on the *U.S.S. Mound City* docked at Helena, Arkansas. The letter is twelve pages long, covering topics as diverse as combat experiences, an allegorical defense of war, and a description of ague symptoms. The letter also deals directly with the incident at Harmony Springs:

> Rachael's letter dated 17 and 18 of Aug. came to hand this morning. I was glad to hear of their being allowed to take their property with them, which is more than I expected from the tenor of circumstances, and but for the kind feelings of Mr. Adair it would have been as was anticipated by me — but none of us can tell the future — if it had appeared probable to me that permission would be given them to take their stock and teams with them I should have been the last to skedaddle, but knowing the lives of the female portions of the family were as safe as could be expected — and that was safe enough — and also being better acquainted with Powel and his neighbors than any of the rest of you, I knew that arrest of my person was liable at any time, and wishing to be a participator in the active events about to transpire instead of a prisoner is the reason of my leaving as was done by me. . . .[43]

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[42] Nicholas Bartlett Pearce to Kie Oldham, March 28, 1892, Oldham Collection, Arkansas History Commission, Little Rock. Microfilm copy available in the Audio-Visual Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

It is difficult to connect Bosworth with the Harmonial Vegetarian Society from his letter alone. But the sailor's association with the vegetarians, along with his hints of both assistance and persecution from the Society's neighbors, are seen clearly when his letter is considered with the one Owen received from a second Society member four years later.

Rachel S. Tenney, who was one of the original members named in the Harmonial Vegetarian Society's 1860 charter, wrote to Frank Owen on November 21, 1866 from Lawrence, Kansas:

> My good Angel says "write" and cheerfully I obey. I might offer a thousand apologies for neglecting you so long, but don't know as they would materially benefit you, so waive all apologies and proceed to business. . . . Now Frank, I want to whisper a word *confidentially* in you ear. I want your assistance. The point is this. If Brigadier Gen. Pierce [*sic*] is worth property, I have an idea of trying to recover something for false imprisonment. A few thousand would be of immense benefit to me now, and it would be only just for him to make some compensation for the severe trials and hardships I endured. I should need your Uncle[44] and John L. Adair for witnesses. Now Frank please help me. Find out where Pierce [*sic*] is and whether he is worth anything or not. Do not let anyone get wind of my idea or he might hear of it and put his property out of his hands. Find out also whether Captain Gratiot[45] of Hempstead Co. lived through the war and if he is worth anything. He was in charge under Pierce [*sic*] at the time of my arrest. . . . Remember me kindly to your uncle and say that we will all remember his kindness to us in our hour of trial. Possibly he never knew how I was at last released. In my last extremity I

[43] George Gardiner Bosworth, letter dated September 4, 5, and 6, 1861, Joseph Robinson Rutherford Papers, Special Collections Division, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville; hereinafter cited as Rutherford Papers. There is no addressee on this letter, but subsequent references indicate J. Frank Owen as the recipient.

[44] Joseph Robinson Rutherford was Owen's uncle.

[45] John R. Gratiot, an attorney from Washington, Arkansas, commanded in the spring of 1861 a company of men, the Hempstead Rifles. Within a few weeks after his arrival at Camp Walker, Gratiot won promotion to Colonel of the Third Regiment of Arkansas State Forces.

> bethought me that I had taken the daughters degree in masonry. I had forgotten it entirely. When I made the fact known to Mr. Adair, I was soon released.[46]

It is possible to reconstruct the demise of the Harmonial Vegetarian Society on the basis of these two letters. The arrival of Captain Gratiot's contingent, the heated accusations of hostile neighbors, the arrest of the utopians, and their final release due to the efforts of a few friendly civilians are all mentioned. Without corroborating evidence, however, these events must be considered only as possibilities and, unless other testimony comes to light, details of the Society's death will remain unknown.

In the final analysis, these last fragments from the Society's skeleton leave unanswered a larger question regarding the vegetarians. If the war had not interfered, would the Harmonial Vegetarian Society have been able to build itself into a stronger community along the lines of the Perfectionists at Oneida and survive? Maybe it is enough to point out that Arkansas did not see any other socialist commune for the remainder of the nineteenth century. When the vegetarians left the state in 1861 they carried their dream of utopia with them.

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[46] R[achel] S. Tenney to Frank Owen, November 21, 1866, Rutherford Papers. There is no entry in the Benton County court records indicating that Rachel Tenney ever carried out her threat to sue Pearce or Gratiot.