

## THE LIBERATED WOMAN IN THE ONEIDA COMMUNITY: 1840-1872

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The Perfectionists of Oneida Community in upstate New York existed as a community experiment of much note and merit during the nineteenth century. Among the myriad experimental communities of this period, the Oneida Community was unique. It offered many worldly and modern approaches to the philosophy and actual implementation of quality education. The role of women of the Oneida Community is particularly interesting because the Perfectionist philosophy not only determined the way women should be educated, but carried this philosophy over to every aspect of a woman's lifestyle.<sup>1</sup>

The Oneida Community was amazingly liberal in its sexual attitudes, especially when one remembers that the nineteenth century was becoming blanketed with multiple layers of prudery and modesty. Add to this that special New England brand of theology that equated all flesh with sin, and it is no wonder that the Oneida Perfectionists were assumed to be decadent by a suspicious outside world. In this light, it is easy to understand why the writers of American educational history choose to bypass the Perfectionist experiments in education. A surface glance at the type of life Oneida stressed would lead the casual observer to decide that here, indeed, resided a variety of religious and sexual fanatics.

But, if improvement of the whole character of being was a preoccupation of the Perfectionists at Oneida, and these people felt that their systems of complex marriage, stirpiculture, child care and women's equality were important steps in this process, then these systems cannot be separated from what was their whole process of education.

John Humphrey Noyes, as the spiritual leader of the Perfectionists, felt sure that spiritual attainment was completely possible within one's own lifetime and the necessity of striving for

salvation after death was to deny oneself the true meaning of living. To attain a high level of spirituality, however, meant that the Perfectionists were to ever be on guard against what was termed "special love." Any exclusive feelings or relationships, even in the form of close comradeship on a one-to-one basis was not acceptable to the basic tenet of the Community for it threatened the fiber of togetherness on which the Community thrived. Extending this philosophy further was to include the state of marriage.

It was not alone that the Community religion rated "special love" between the sexes as sin, but any friendship that excluded others came in for censure, and those Perfectionists believed in uprooting tares as soon as they showed themselves.<sup>2</sup>

Thus developed the most novel feature (and most unacceptable to the outside world) of the Oneida group when it attempted to end forever the sexual jealousy and possessiveness of life by instituting a system of "plural" or "complex" marriage. Under this system every man was to be the husband of every woman. But this by no means resulted in wild sexual freedom. The Community directed that mating and any special sexual preference, such as falling in love, was regarded as a threat to the harmony of the whole family.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, to the outside world the Perfectionists became stigmatized in the popular mind as "Free Lovers." The Perfectionists felt that the abolishment of sexual exclusiveness was involved in the love relationship required between all believers of Christ's injunction — "The new commandment is that we love one another." Noyes and his followers took this in terms of the larger meaning of the New Testament that love be not by pairs, but *en masse*.

This system of complex marriage was regulated by the principle of "ascending fellowship,"

whereby those who had attained a higher state of spiritual perfection would be the first to acquire partners and would also be of good influence on those of less-perfected status. In this way older persons, more advanced in "fellowship," were likely to encounter sexual association with younger persons, and thus influence them with more mature character and sound sense.

The method of sexual encounter was simple: the man usually approached the woman of his choice, whereupon she was free to refuse or accept. A third party often would serve as an intermediary, both to avoid any embarrassment and act as a check on members' activities. The couple would retire to a room, either their own or a special "social room" set aside for sexual purposes. The amount of time they spent together was subtly checked so that they wouldn't spend too much time together and develop an exclusive relationship.

Although visitors to Oneida never reported anything but the most proper behavior and although there is no evidence of sexual orgies, incest, or homosexuality, Community members were undeniably keenly sensitive to the whole question of heterosexual sex.<sup>4</sup>

Considering such an open atmosphere of sexuality, love affairs would become inevitable. It was thus necessary to keep control of relationships and prevent exclusive love from threatening the communal ideal and the Community's unity.

An unusual practice of the Community, probably based on economics, was the system of "male continence." Noyes, burdened by a sense of responsibility when his wife bore four stillborn children, was determined to spare his wife future anguish by putting the system of male continence into use for the entire Community. The founder of the Perfectionists strongly believed that coitus was at a man's command so that he could stop at any point before orgasm.

Surprisingly, the men of Oneida did learn to practice this self-control. If they didn't, they were subject to peer disapproval and rejection. The effect was to diminish the number of births in the first twenty years of the struggling Community until they were economically capable of providing plentifully for the children.

In practice the birth control system was effective, if not quite perfect. Between 1848 and 1869, forty-four children were born in the Community. Eight of these had been conceived

before their parents joined Oneida and at least five more conceptions had been sanctioned by the Community. Consequently, at most, thirty-one children were accidentally conceived over a period of twenty-one years.<sup>5</sup>

With the proof of fairly successful birth control and the practice of complex marriage well-launched, a new stage of development was instituted in the late 1860's.

After reading Darwin's *Origin of the Species* and Galton's discussion on the improvement of the human species, Noyes was determined to delve into an experiment in eugenics. For the Community's purposes, the term "stirpiculture" was used, its derivation coming from the Latin word "stirps," meaning stock, stem, or root. The Community accepted Noyes' newest venture without apparent difficulty.

The bold venture into scientific procreation, of which the Community made no secret whatever, was denounced by interested moralists as an attempt to introduce the "ethics of the barnyard" into a human group. But the experiment was widely discussed, even across the Atlantic. In an essay on "The Evolution of the Family" published in 1877, even Herbert Spencer referred to "Father" Noyes and stirpiculture.<sup>6</sup>

A stirpiculture committee was established and persons who were well-advanced in spiritual attainment were selected as prospective parents. Most participants selected their own mates but about one-fourth of all unions were actually suggested by the Committee.

When the children born of these unions were weaned, they left their mothers for the part of the Mansion House called the Children's House. After that they saw little of their parents because of the Community's concern that frequent visiting might lead to special love.<sup>7</sup>

The care and upbringing accorded these children of the stirpiculture experiments was never lacking in adult attention. Plenty of both men and women looked after them in the Children's House. At night, most of the children were allowed to sleep in rooms with adult members, but, to discourage any growth of special attachments, their sleeping quarters were periodically changed.

Care of the children was in accordance with the already established custom of the Community. During early infancy, they remained in the care of their mothers. When able to walk, the child was admitted to the day nursery department of

the Children's House; the mothers continuing the night care. . . . Much attention was given to diet, clothing, sanitation and profitable activity.<sup>8</sup>

How the eugenic experimentation and the unusual upbringing of the stirpiculture children affected them emotionally, physically and intellectually is uncertain to any positive degree. Few of the children left any description of their early experiences. Community accounts are not specific either, other than describing daily routines. Any evidences of mental or physical superiority may be attributed more to environmental conditions than any other factor. These stirpiculture children were brought up in a healthy, disease-free, country atmosphere with lots of good food, good air and human attention.

The Oneida Perfectionists, under Noyes' leadership, experimented widely in areas considered taboo to nineteenth-century America. Complex marriage, male continence and stirpiculture were bold, audacious experiments for their day but even these practices reflected the Perfectionist concern for self-improvement to benefit the entire Community. Education was directly affected by the outcome of these practices, for in the long run, education cannot be separated from community spirit, the need to economize in order to achieve maximum results, and a controlled birth rate to insure quality to all and not merely harsh survival for the many.

Yet, of all these attempts in the sexual, social and family realm, probably most impressive was the stand taken at Oneida by the Perfectionists regarding the role of their women as equal members in the life of the Community at a time when womanhood's struggle for equality was taken lightly by the vast majority of the American people.

As was previously noted, the sexual role of the women of Oneida was probably much more liberal for the women members than the men since the women were open to a variety of sexual contacts and were not expected to abide by such a practice as male continence. In contrast to prevailing attitudes of the times, the Perfectionists felt sex should be enjoyed by women as well as men and that sexual communion differed only in its superior intensity and beauty from other acts of love.<sup>9</sup>

With such an attitude concerning the sexual rights of women maintained by these Oneida communists, there naturally developed particular attitudes concerning the role of this

sexually-liberated woman in society and in the family.

Communism gives woman, without a claim from her, the place which every true woman most desires, as the free and honored companion of man. Communism emancipates her from the slavery and corroding cares of a mere wife and mother; stimulates her to seek the improvement of mind and heart that will make her worthy of a higher place than ordinary society can give her. Freed from forced maternity, a true and holy desire for children grows in her heart. Here no woman's hand is red with the blood of innocents, as is whispered so often of many of her sisters in bondage. Gradually, as by natural growth, the Community women have risen to a position where, in labor, in mind, and in heart, they have all and more than all that is claimed by the women who are so loudly asserting their rights.<sup>10</sup>

The language is somewhat dramatic but, certainly, the implication this new role held for the women at Oneida was promising. The status of women within the family, it was hoped, would take on new dimension and meaning in contrast to the prevailing view of man's possessiveness over woman.

Mr. Noyes agreed with orthodox social scientists that the family was the keystone of the world's social system; that men's possession of women had been for centuries the strongest support of individualism and a powerful incentive to self-seeking. Engaged, as he was, in a campaign against self-seeking, he eliminated this kind of ownership with the rest.<sup>11</sup>

A mother was expected to entrust her child as early as possible to the care of the Community. Care was taken, of course, as to the time of year, the state of the child in regard to teething and other conditions. The child would usually leave the mother at eight o'clock in the morning, and would be returned to her care from the nursery at five o'clock in the afternoon and remain with her throughout the night. At about eighteen months of age, the child passed into the second department where he or she remained all day, with the parents given the opportunity to take the child at any time for walks or rides or a visit to their room. It was in this second department, however, that the mother gradually gave up all particular responsibility for the child's clothing, diet, and night-care. She was

then free to fill her place in the various industries of the household.<sup>12</sup>

As Harriet Worden, one of the children of Oneida, reminisced later in the *Circular* of January 30, 1871:

The separation from the main household proved very favorable to the comfort and good-breeding of the children, at the same time saving the older people from much noise and confusion. The women who served as "mothers" and attendants of the children found the business not a burden but a pleasure. At first the real mothers experienced considerable distress in giving up their little ones to the care of others, but a new sphere of existence opened to them, and they now found time for educational pursuits.<sup>13</sup>

Pierrepont Noyes, in his recollections of life at Oneida, gives an insight into the situation which brings a more human level to the problems often faced by mothers who were given all this extra time away from their children. It wasn't always easy for some to adjust to this freedom and they craved to dote at least a little on their children.

The afternoons with my mother meant a great deal to me, and it is no disparagement of my filial affection to add that freedom from departmental oversight as well as the petting and peppermints to be expected on such occasions enhanced their attractiveness. Certain it is that I often wept bitterly when the time came to return to the Children's House. I remember my mother's terror lest my crying be heard. She knew that Father Noyes frowned on any excess of parental affection as he did on all forms of "special love," and she feared that such demonstrations might deprive her of some of my regular visits.<sup>14</sup>

In order to strengthen the bonds of association between all members of the Community, childless persons were encouraged also to develop ties with various children and thus relieve some of their urges toward parental love despite their childlessness. This took the form of an "aunt" or "uncle" relationship and gave those persons without children a feeling of responsibility toward the children of the Community.

Equality for women in many imaginative aspects was fostered by the Perfectionists. The basic philosophy behind this belief was that every man, woman and child should be surrounded by the best circumstances in order to develop a heart, mind and body of spiritual attainments and that

no one despite his age, sex or race should be excluded from engaging in any occupation for which he or she was adapted by nature or culture.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, all questions of considerable importance brought before the Community for decision were voted upon in a general assembly by every person, male and female.

Women were expected to work in various jobs within the Community and in the early days of building the commune, women were known to courageously engage in farming, logging, milling and clearing swamps as well as lathing and other work connected with the building of the first houses. To emphasize that there existed no distinction of classes or sex with respect to labor, even Mr. Noyes, the founder, took the lead as a mason in laying up chimneys and foundation-walls.<sup>16</sup>

Nor was household drudgery expected of the women at Oneida. Things were operated as simply and comfortably as possible. Cooked meals, for example, were served only twice a day. The older children were responsible for such duties as washing dishes and helping to clean out the barns before and after school. This allowed the mothers a chance to leave maternal responsibilities so they could advance to other parts of the Community economy and work in one of the lucrative departments. They were also free to participate in evening meetings, dances, concerts, picnics, and the many varied social activities of the Perfectionist Community.

Women were not overlooked in the realm of education at Oneida. In 1863 there was talk of a Community University in which girls would have all the advantages that boys enjoyed. For a start, they were taught to swim and were urged to cultivate "a taste for solid reading."<sup>17</sup>

In 1866, the *Circular* reported an August 6th meeting where it was agreed that girls should continually be encouraged to study everything that boys studied; they should be admitted to all the sciences and to the whole course of education considered useful to men. They went even further and suggested that if women were properly educated, the education of men would take care of itself. This was a good gauge of the Community's desire for cultivation and many women were busily reading Malthus, Plato, as well as other Greek literature and history.<sup>18</sup>

The costume worn by the women of Oneida was simple and designed with the added purpose of discouraging vanity. The short dresses and

pantalettes worn by the Community women were a scandal to orthodox women of the day and it is reported that Amelia Bloomer first decided to produce "bloomers" for the public in the "outside world" after she had visited Oneida. Eventually bloomers became quite fashionable for women in the feminist movement.

Through this maze of practices, sexual and social, employed at Oneida there is a strong link to the basic philosophical tenets of the Perfectionists under Noyes' leadership, which sought self-improvement and education as superior goals of attainment. Although the Perfectionists are considered a religious sect, their practicality and adaptability in finding and solving the problems which might hamper them is amazing. Community solidarity was a necessity, and complex marriage, male continence and experimental eugenics were not divined as ends in themselves but rather the means for arriving at a more perfect state of existence through improvement of the spirit, mind and body.

Women at Oneida were to discover a myriad of roles open to them which were not easily available in the outside world. They were encouraged to develop as Community individuals; their cultivation and education were to be shared with all members of the commune.

With all the advantages available to the children born of the stirpiculture experiment, along with the strong educational philosophy and practices of the Perfectionists instilled in them, the prospects of Oneida's future seemed positively guaranteed. Such was not the case, however; within thirty years the Community ceased to exist as a tight-knit utopian commune and instead dissolved into a commercial enterprise. The liberal educational policy of the Perfectionists was, in large part, responsible for nurturing a second generation that would reject the lifestyle of its parents.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Michael Stepanek. "The Oneida Community and Education," thesis, University of Hawaii, Department of Educational Foundations, 1972.

<sup>2</sup>Pierrepoint Noyes. *My Father's House: A Oneida Boyhood*, Farrar and Rinehart, Inc., New York, 1937, p. 49.

<sup>3</sup>William Alfred Hinds. *American Communities: Brief Sketches of Economy, Zoar, Bethel, Aurora, Amana, Ithaca, the Shakers, Oneida, Wallingford, and the Brotherhood of the New Life*, Office of the American Socialist, Oneida, New York, 1878; new edition, Corinth Books, Inc., New York, 1961, p. VII.

<sup>4</sup>Maren Lockwood Garden. *Oneida: Utopian Community to Modern Corporation*, Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1969, p. 56.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>6</sup>Robert Allerton Parker. *A Yankee Saint: John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1935, p. 259.

<sup>7</sup>Garden, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>8</sup>Parker, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

<sup>9</sup>Garden, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>10</sup>Hinds, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

<sup>11</sup>Noyes, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup>Hinds, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

<sup>13</sup>Constance Noyes Robertson. *Oneida Community, An Autobiography, 1851-1876*, Syracuse University Press, 1970, p. 14.

<sup>14</sup>Noyes, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>15</sup>Hinds, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>17</sup>Robertson, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 295.

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