

The New Circular

Showcasing historic writings and photographs of the Oneida Community and its legacy.

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Issue 3

In this issue:

The Train Ride that Built Sherrill, Page 1

Excerpt from
"Basswood Philosophy:
An Appreciation of the
O. C. L.", Page 5



Dedicating Tableware No. 3:
**"The New Home of
Community Silver"**



The Train Ride that Built Sherrill

by Tony Wonderley



Pierrepont and Constance Noyes, 1905 (courtesy of Lang Hatcher)

THE SHORTEST SPEECH at the annual banquet of the Oneida Community, Ltd. in December 1912 was "Quo Vadimus" [Where are we going?] delivered by General Manager and President Pierrepont Noyes. After wading through the obligatory opening jokes, Noyes launched into a disquisition about corporate purpose and responsibility. "It takes money to make any institution go," he said. "I am not at all antagonistic to money as a means. It is a fine thing; but as an end I heartily despise it. This Society has, I believe, from the beginning of its history, and this year more than ever, aimed at finding a direct road to happiness" (*Quadrangle*, January 1913).

The "Society" he mentioned was a group of young men pictured as bees returning to the Mansion House hive on

the cover of that issue of the *Quadrangle* (see illustration). These individuals, most of them children of the Oneida Community, had been recruited to the company with the dream that they could revive Oneida Community ideals of brotherhood and accord. As explained in a 1909 manifesto called "Basswood Philosophy," PBN thought he and his peers could create a new kind of industrial organization run by a team of semi-socialistic partners. Their salaries would be kept relatively low and held within narrow limits. Among themselves, there would be a "reasonable equality" of wealth and power. Members of the Society were encouraged to maintain a similar standard of living in Kenwood, a place where there would be no rich and no poor (an excerpt from "Basswood Philosophy" follows this article).

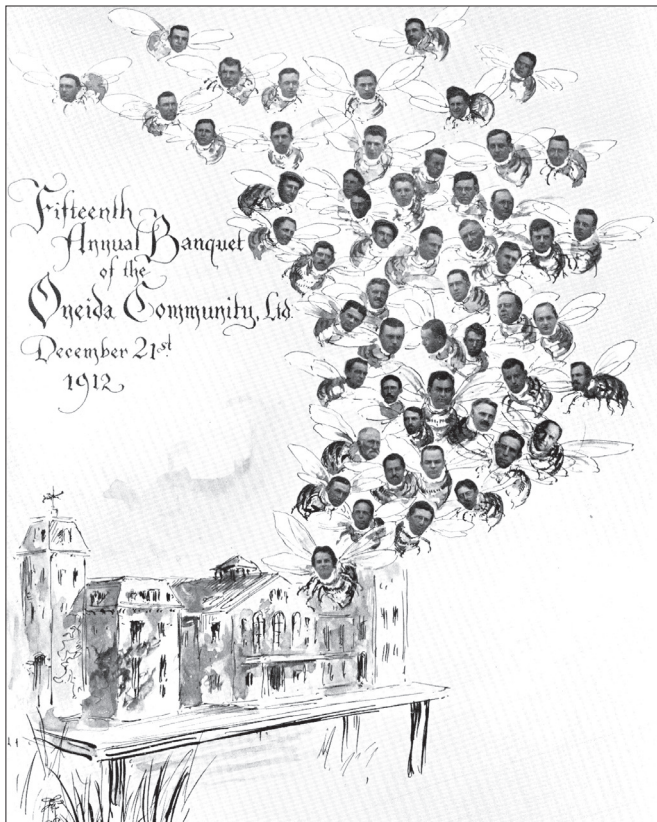
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The New Circular



The O.C.L.'s Quarter Finish building of 1912 (lower right) and, behind it, Tableware No. 3—the silverware factory of 1914

These people were the company's upper management and, by 1912, they had accomplished a great deal. They had created a new category of high-end silverware. They vigorously promoted what was then called "Community Silver" with innovative advertising and, at great risk, restructured the company around it. In 1910, silverware was considered successfully established as the company's leading specialty replacing traps.



The "Society" as bees returning to the Mansion House hive

"We have found in our Society," Noyes (PBN) continued, "more than the money earned—in our daily association in the cultivation of affection for each other—in the opportunity for wholesome living and self-development; but beyond all this we are learning to use the real recipe for happiness, which as everyone knows (and the older they grow the more they know it) consists in doing something for someone besides ourselves. No one is really on the road to happiness, until he learns this practically."

Here, PBN referred to the company's efforts to better the conditions of its employees. He, himself, hoped to eliminate poverty among Oneida Community, Ltd. (OCL) workers by providing good wages. Others in his team were equally determined to share company prosperity. Among them were several former members of the Oneida Community who brought real continuity with the Perfectionist past to PBN's Society.

The next step, undertaken in the interests of efficiency, was to move silverware operations from Niagara Falls to Sherrill. The transfer commenced with construction of a Quarter Finish building in 1912. The operation would be completed with the opening of a new tableware factory in 1914.

One of the latter was William Hinds who knew that John Humphrey Noyes had once imagined building a workers' village near present Noyes Park, one in which employees owned their own homes. He also knew the elder Noyes had suggested the Oneida Community share its profits with its employees (Constance Noyes Robertson, *Oneida Community, The Breakup*, pp. 105-6). Hinds had been serving on the company's Board of Directors since the breakup of the Oneida Community in 1881. As president of the OCL from 1903 to his death in 1910, he was in a good position to realize some of the old socialistic intentions of the Oneida Community. In cooperation with the younger men, Hinds furthered measures for profit-sharing and building homes for workers. In 1905, for example, the OCL began to lay out streets on farmland immediately north of today's Hamilton Avenue, sold lots to its employees below market value, then gave them cash bonuses to build houses. By the time of the 1912 banquet, company officials had, in fact, improved the lives of their employees.

Nevertheless, the OCL had scarcely begun to bridge the chasm separating the interests of bosses and workers. "It is abroad in the land that no longer can the old problems of capital and labor be ignored. No longer can the working class be bullied or bribed to lie still." There would have to be a settlement emancipating workers from wage slavery, PBN stated flatly. Beyond making a living, each worker was entitled to accumulate property, to own his own home, and "to have leisure to enjoy that home and his family, and to develop himself."

"The thing which I see right ahead of this Society," PBN told the banqueters, "is the opening up of a field for this most successful method of pursuing happiness--a broader field for dividing our lives and efforts with others." The time had come for the OCL to move "beyond efficient money-getting" in "a spirit of practical unselfishness." "We shall all feel that our lives have been well lived if we can see that while making our own living and providing wholesome surroundings and activities for ourselves, we have been able to somewhat blaze the way toward general amelioration--that we have done our best in our own little place to help our employees toward the improvements I have described." More than ever, he concluded, we are engaged "in doing something that is worth while for other people."

PBN envisioned a new city fostered and nurtured by the company. The seed for that city would be planted in the coming summer when the company would bring the employees at Niagara Falls to Sherrill to see if they liked the place. If they wanted to move to Sherrill along with the silverware machinery, the company would gladly relocate them.

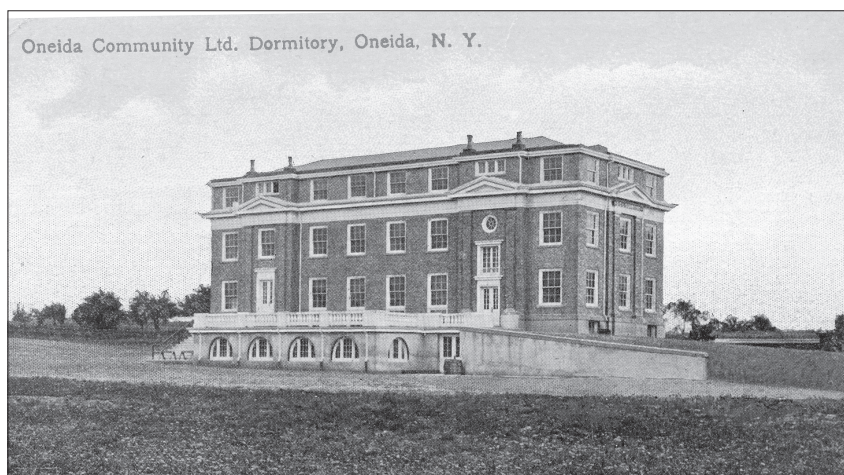
Three years of preparation had gone into the event. Sherrill, at that point, was a small town consisting mostly of the old Turkey Street village along Seneca Street and the Oneida Community's Willow Place factory complex, both north of today's Route 5. Now, in anticipation of arrivals from the Falls, the

company laid out the greater part of Sherrill's streets radiating outward from Sherrill Road. In 1911, the company began to build houses along the new streets. Architect Theodore Skinner was commissioned in 1912 to design a dormitory building in which the workers could sleep when they came to inspect Sherrill.

In June 1913, the company chartered a special train to bring 351 male employees from Niagara Falls on a grand excursion to acquaint them with what could be their new home. "It was a gala affair," Constance Robertson wrote in her 1966 history of Sherrill (pp. 23-24). "The train left Niagara Falls at 5:30 a.m. and the guests reached Oneida at 11:00 o'clock, Kenwood at 11:30, where, so the program says, by 'games, music, cigars and vaudeville, etc., etc.,' the journey was enlivened. At one o'clock there was a Field Day with sports events at the Athletic Field at Kenwood Park. Supper was served 'under the big tent,' presumably at the



William Hinds



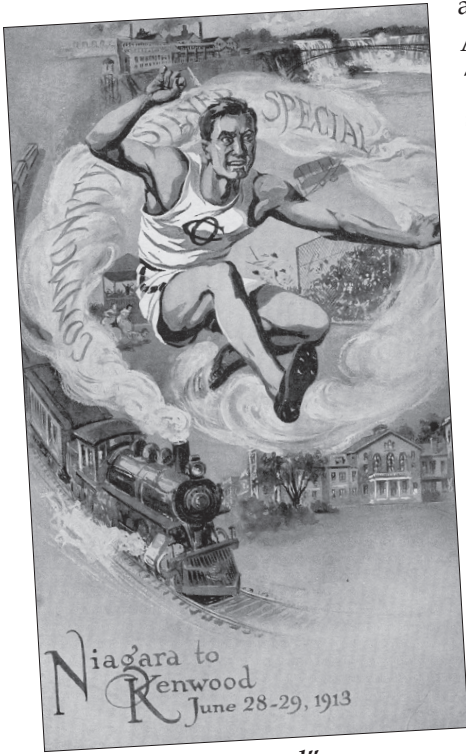
The Dormitory designed by Theodore Skinner

Park, after which there was a band concert... Next morning, after breakfast in the tent, there was an auto ride and a trip through the factories and Community buildings, ending with noon dinner at one o'clock."

The New Circular

"The train left at three, with supper and 'time-killing amusements' and reached Niagara Falls at eight thirty-five." Afterwards, Robertson added, "a handsome engraved plaque, signed by all the guests, tendered 'our most heartfelt thanks for the comforts, attention and entertainment giving one and all a vacation, the like of which they will never forget.' It must be believed that most of them, at least, liked what they saw in Sherrill and Kenwood and the next year decided to move with their families to this new home."

In fact, more than half the working force of Niagara Falls removed to Sherrill with their families. At the beginning of 1914, Sherrill's population was 89. In 1915, it was 1200. One year later, it was 3750 (Robertson, *Sherrill*, p. 33). Sherrill's meteoric rise in population resulted from the train ride. It was an excursion that brought a loyal and enthusiastic group of employees adding "immeasurably to the O.C.L., and I hope," PBN mused years later, "that none of them has ever regretted making the move" (*A Goodly Heritage*, p. 223).



*"Niagara to Kenwood":
The Community Silver Special*



*Niagara Falls workers at Kenwood Park, June 28, 1913
(gift of Geoff Noyes)*



Niagara Falls workers at the Mansion House, June 29, 1913

Excerpt from "Basswood Philosophy: An Appreciation of the O. C. L."

by Pierrepont B. Noyes

PIERREPONT NOYES CONVEYED his thinking about the early twentieth century Kenwood Society (see previous article) in a piece published in five installments in *The Quadrangle* in 1909. He cast his ideas in the form of a fictional dialogue taking place under the shade of a basswood tree in the Mansion House's Quadrangle. The main speakers were "Dr. T," a character based on Theodore Noyes (1841-1903), and Squire S," a former member of the Oneida Community now visiting his old haunts.

In the course of their conversation, Dr. T and Squire S agree that "Mr. Noyes set before his followers the loftiest ideals of human relations and these ideals were realized to a greater extent...than was ever accomplished elsewhere." The religion and communism of the Oneida Community, however, are out of place in the 1900s. The younger generation recognizes that and is resurrecting only the most worthwhile features of the old Community: its egalitarian and fraternal feeling. What follows is the final segment of "Basswood Philosophy" (Part 5, *The Quadrangle*, June 1909, pp. 7-9).

Throughout the morning rain had threatened. "Flocks of Sheep" floating lazily across the valley at sunrise drew in their wake a blanket of gray clouds which quickly spread from hill to hill and growing ever darker bore upon its broad back the oppressive weight of the July sun. Under its grateful shade a little breeze creeping up from the south seemed a long suffering earth's sigh of relief.

Just before noon it began to rain. One of those quiet gentle rains, which sink silently into the grass and are only audible on the roofs or amongst the leaves of the trees.

There were only a few collected in the Quadrangle after dinner although our basswood, unless the storm be violent, acts as a huge umbrella, keeping

dry the area underneath for a long time. H-----came first and was soon joined by S----- and Chas. W----- and others perhaps a dozen in all. The Squire and Mr. F----- hurried across the short open space, stood for a moment brushing the drops from their clothing, while they continued a conversation evidently begun in the dining room. Mr. F----- was not present on the previous day. He is a man of seventy and a leading officer of the corporation.

Turning now from the Squire he addressed the younger men. "I was saying to Squire S----- that I believed our past success in maintaining the equality mentioned yesterday and the possibility of preserving it in the future depends upon keeping a reasonable equality in the standards of living more than upon any other one thing. This 'standard of living' is an awful tyrant. If not controlled it will force disastrous inequalities in spite of you. Our Society is too small and too closely associated to prosper if those with larger salaries set standards which others cannot afford to imitate. I want to say to these young men that all the rest will be in vain if this is not recognized in the unwritten law spoken of by Doctor T-----."

At this moment the Doctor appeared in a doorway at the end of the south wing. He had evidently been down to the club-room thinking the noon-day gathering would be adjourned indoors on account of the weather. He looked doubtfully up at the falling rain and smiled at the group under the tree, then, bareheaded, he hurried across the Quadrangle. As he settled himself comfortably in his accustomed seat general conversation ceased.

Now the Doctor, as you all know, is a modest not to say bashful man. On the day before he had



Theodore Noyes in Oneida Community days (gift of Lang Hatcher)

Cont'd. page 6

been drawn into a discussion which greatly interested him and had become absorbed so that expression was easy. He forgot his audience, or rather the idea of an audience did not present itself. He talked as though alone with his friend. Today he found a hushed audience. He was expected to speak and consequently he could not start. When several expressed their eagerness to hear him further he turned red and said with an embarrassed smile that he did not know as there was much more to tell.

H----- tried to draw the Doctor out. "Don't you think the personal attitude of the young men towards the business and towards each other is different from others and has a great deal to do with our success?"

Doctor T-----. Yes, I do.

H-----. I think Squire S----- would be interested to hear you define this difference. I know I would.

Doctor T-----. I heard you, H-----, the other day explaining, better than I can, the relation of the younger men to their business. Give him your comparison with the "amateur spirit" in sports.

Squire A----- also is an extremely modest man and with all his enthusiasm prefers the part of learner to that of teacher. His reverence for the Doctor made him especially diffident on this occasion. The latter however urged his request and promised when H----- had finished to continue his own account.

H-----. All I said was that it seemed to me our men play the game of business in the spirit of "amateurs," while in general it is like a sport in the hands of "professionals." The amateur plays baseball or football for love of the game and for loyalty to his fellows and the college, or other organization to which he belongs. The professional plays largely for the money there is in it. This difference in motives produces a vast difference in the character both of the game and the men. The vices of the commercial world about which so much is written--its selfishness, its oppression of the weak, its brutality, its unfairness, its corruption--these are the vices of "professionalism."

Doctor T-----. That hits the nail on the head. Neither preaching nor laws ever make a game clean and honest--it's in the spirit of the players. Loyalty and affection amongst comrades breeds honor towards opponents.

Squire S-----. All that sounds very altruistic and very desirable but is it practicable? I have in mind the emphasis you placed yesterday on the survivability. An organization on the lines just suggested would appear to me a tender plant, hardly able to hold its own in the sordid competition it must meet.

Doctor T-----. The answer to that is a statement of facts. During the past twelve years the Oneida Community, Ltd. has paid, in cash dividends to its stockholders, an amount equal to its total capital stock and over and above this, has from earnings doubled that capital stock and the net value of its property.

H-----. And why should it be otherwise? Where, among the best paid "professionals" will you find such energy and enthusiasm and co-operation, such determination to win--qualities of vital importance for business success--as exists in every college crew or football eleven?

Squire S-----. True, very true!

H-----. You know "team work" is immensely more important than individual merit. A team of mediocre players who have learned to work intelligently and harmoniously together, can whip an aggregation of "stars" who cannot do this. Our system develops team work. Among our fellows the spirit of brotherhood and loyalty to each other has proved equal to every strain put upon it for more than a dozen years.

This turn in the discussion seemed to arouse general enthusiasm so that several who had not before spoken interrupted, to re-inforce H-----'s statement. Two or three were speaking at once. Finally, as usually happens in our debates the one with the loudest voice or the most enthusiasm obtained the floor.

B-----. The book of our unwritten law is largely taken up with these personal relations. That is the portion most clearly understood and most consistently obeyed.

H-----. There is certainly no part we value more.

B-----. You will find in that unwritten book (if I may strain the Doctor's metaphor a little further) in large type, paragraphs which read about as follows:

Thou shalt not take offense at thy brother's words or actions no matter how great the provocation.

Thou shalt not permit business differences to create in thee personal soreness.

Thou shalt not be jealous of thy brother, nor envious.

Strive to place thy loyalty to thy fellows above the reach of selfish interest or passion.

Thou shalt not join cliques either to advance thyself or injure another.

Thou shalt not resent criticism.

Seek the causes for thy failures in thine own deficiencies rather than imagining unfriendliness in others.

H-----. Let me add one more. Be humble as well as brotherly, for social equality is for us as necessary as official inequality.

Squire S----- could not repress an amused smile. That surely is an odd way of stating conditions; or perhaps you intend it only as a statement of ideals--your aims.

Doctor T-----. No, Squire! B----- has described real conditions. If, for instance, you could attend one of their "agents' meetings" and hear the violent argument, the heated retorts and even personalities of their strenuous debates and then could see the same young men as their session breaks up, talking, laughing, joking together; perhaps the very two you felt must certainly leave the meeting bitter enemies, now walking affectionately, arm on shoulder towards the golf links, you would recognize the existence of some such code. But beyond this, beyond particular instances, the most eloquent tribute both to the reality and the character of our unwritten code is the record--fifteen years of unbroken harmony.



PBN at an outing for O.C.L. agents, 1916

Oneida Community
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Hinds Avenue, 1914