

Charles Nordhoff's book *The Communistic Societies of the United States*, Harper & Brothers, New York, 1875, provided one of the earliest descriptions of the Aurora Colony and Bethel, its predecessor. Most later historical studies of Aurora refer to these accounts.

II-BETHEL

Bethel is, of course, the older community; I describe it here after Aurora, because my visit was made after I had seen the Oregon community; and also because here is shown to what Aurora tends. The two societies are still one, having their efforts in common; and I was told that if the people at Bethel could sell their property, they would all move to Oregon.

The Bethel Community now owns about four thousand acres of good land, exclusive of a tract of thirteen hundred acres as Nineveh, in the neighboring county of Adair, where six families of the community live, who are engaged chiefly in farming, having, however, also an old saw-mill and a tannery, and a shoemaker's and a blacksmith's shop. These families were removed thither twenty-five years ago, because it was thought the land there had a valuable water-power.

Bethel has now above two hundred members, and about twenty-five families. There are fifty children in the school, I was told.

They have a saw-mill and grist-mill, a tannery, a few looms, a general store, and a drug-store, and shops for carpenters, blacksmiths, coopers, tinners, tailors, shoemakers, and hatters, all on a small scale, but sufficient to supply not only themselves but the neighboring farmers. They had formerly a distillery, but that and a woolen factory were burned down a few years ago. They mean to rebuild the last.

All the people are Germans, and I found here many relatives of persons I had met at Aurora.

The town has much the same characteristic features as Aurora, except that it has not the exceptionally large and factory-like dwellings. It has one main street, poorly kept and in part even without a sidewalk; cattle and pigs were straying about it, too, and altogether it did not look very prosperous. But the brick dwellings which lined the street were substantially built, and the saw and grist mill which lies at the lower end is a well-constructed building of brick. Half-way up the main street was a drug-store, large enough I should have said to accommodate with purges and cathartics a town of twenty-five hundred inhabitants; and on a cross-street was another. Besides the chief store, I was surprised to see two other smaller shops; and still more surprised to be told that they belonged to and were kept by persons who had left the community, but who remained here in its midst. Of these I shall have something to say by and by.

At the head of the street stands the tavern or hotel, kept in the German or Pennsylvania Dutch way - with a bed in the large common room, and meals served in the kitchen. The German cooking was substantial and good. To the right of the hotel, at some distance, stands the church, placed in the middle of a young grove of trees planted much too thickly ever to prosper. The church has a floor of large red tiles; a narrow pulpit at one end; a place railed off at the other end, where the band plays on high festivals, and two doors for the entrance of the sexes, who sit on separate sides of the house. From the tower I had a view of the greater part of the community's territory, which lies finely, and is evidently a well-selected and valuable tract of land.

As in Aurora, they have preaching here every other Sunday, and no week-day meetings or assemblages of any kind. They told me, however, that they have a Sunday-school for the children, where they are instructed in the Bible.

The preacher and head of this society is a Mr. Giese, appointed by Dr. Keil; he keeps also the drug-store, where I was sorry to see liquor sold to laboring men and others, but in a very quiet way.

The Bethel Society has six trustees, chosen by the members, but holding office during good behavior. As in Aurora, no business report is made to the society. Giese is cashier and book-keeper, and the trustees examine his accounts once a year.

The real-estate in Bethel is held upon a very extraordinary tenure. It appears that - the settlement having begun in 1844 - by 1847 there were in the society some dissatisfied persons, who clamored for a partition of the property. Dr. Keil thereupon determined to divide it, and to each member or house-holder a certain part was made over as his own. Out of the gains of the community in the three years was reserved sufficient to support the aged and infirm, and I believe the mills were also kept as part of the common stock. Thereupon some dissatisfied persons sold their shares and went off. The remainder lived on in common, and without changing their relations. To each person a deed was given of his share; but those who remained in the society were told - so the matter was explained to me by two of the trustees - not to put their deed on record; and later a deed of the whole property of the community, including the individual holdings, was made

out in the name of the president, Mr. Giese. I did not see this document, but presume, of course, that it gave him a title only in trust for all.

"Why did you partition the property?" I asked, curiously; and was answered, "In order to let every one be absolutely free, and to see who were inclined to a selfish life, and who for the community or unselfish life." Moreover, I was assured that any one who wished might at any time put his deed on records, and its validity would be acknowledged.

Now among the persons who left the society, six families were allowed to retain their property, and of these several at this day live in the midst of the village. One is a mechanic, who pursues his trade for wages; and two others keep small shops. This appeared to me a really extraordinary instance of liberality or carelessness; but no-one of the community seemed to think it strange. There are also one or two farmers, not members; with one of these, a young man, I rode into Shelbina. He told me that he had grown up in the society; that he had gone into the army, where he served during the war; and when he returned he had got tired of community life. He had also got some business notions into his head, and thought the community affairs were too loosely managed. The members, he thought, had not sufficient knowledge of business; in which I agreed with him. But his house stood at the end of the village, and the relations between him and his former associates were at least so far amicable that one of the trustees took me to him to engage my passage to the railroad station.

The society was strongest before Dr. Keil went to Oregon; he drew away, between 1854 and 1863, about four hundred of the six hundred and fifty persons who were gathered in Bethel in 1855; and among these were, it seems, a large number of young men who did not want to serve in the war, the society being non-residents, and slipped off to Oregon to avoid the draft. There are no accessions from outside, or at any rate so few as to count for nothing. But, on the other hand, they assured me that they keep most of their young people.

When one of the younger generation - for whom no property has been set apart - wishes to leave, a sum of money is given. While I was there a young girl was about to sever her connection with the society, and she received, besides her clothing, twenty-five dollars in money. If she had been older she would have received more, on the ground that she would have earned more by her labor, beyond the cost to the society of her care from childhood.

Some years ago they were subjected to a troublesome law-suit, brought by a seceding member to recover both wages and the property of his parents. Thereupon, for the first time, they drew up a Constitution, which all signed, and which binds them to claim no wages.

Clothing is served to all the members alike from a common store. As to food: as at Aurora, each family receives pigs enough for meat, and cows enough for milk and butter; and adjoining each house is a garden of from a quarter to half an acre, in which the women work to raise vegetables for the home supply - the men helping at odd hours. But it is plainly understood that each may, and indeed is expected, to raise a surplus of chickens, eggs, vegetables, fruits, etc., which is sold at the store for such luxuries as coffee, sugar, and articles of food brought from a distance. The calves are raised for the community. I found that one member was a silversmith and photographer; and all that he sold to his fellow-members of course they paid for with the surplus products of their small holdings. Flour and meal they take from the mill as they please, and no account is kept of it.

The trustees are also foremen, and lay out the work. The people rise with the sun and have three meals a day. Before every house, neatly piled up in the street, a noticed large supplies of fire-wood, sawed and split. They hire a few laborers to cut wood for them; it is then drawn into town and to each man's door by the community teams; and thereupon each family is expected to saw and split its own supplies. In fact, they make a general effort, and with singing and much merriment the wood-piles are properly prepared. This certainly is a convenience which the hackwood's farmers wife is often without; but the untidy look of a great wood-pile before each house vexed my eyes.

The older men complained to me that the emigration to Oregon of so many of their young people had crippled them; and, indeed, I saw many signs of neglect - buildings in want of repair, and a lack of tidiness. But still they appear to be making money; for they have recently rebuilt their grist-mill, and have also within a few years paid off a debt of between three and four thousand dollars.

The religious belief of the Bethel communists is, of course, the same with their Aurora brethren. They venerate Dr. Keil as the wisest of mankind, and abhor all ceremonies and sects. I was told that they celebrate the Lord's Supper at irregular intervals, and then by a regular supper, held either in the church or in a private house.

The people, like those of Aurora, are simple Germans of the lower class, and they live comfortably after their fashion. They have no library, and read few books except the Bible. They have never printed any thing. In many of the houses I

noticed two beds in one room, and that the principal sitting-room of the family. Dr. Giese, the president, has living with him most of the young men who are without family connections in the society. There are usually no carpets in the houses. But every thing is clean; the beds are neat; and it is only out of doors that litter is to be found.

The people have but little ingenuity; there is a lack of labor-saving devices; indeed, the only thing of the kind I saw was a wash-house, through which the hot water from the boiler of the mill is led; but the house itself was badly arranged and comfortless. The young people have a band of music, but no other amusement that I could hear of. Tobacco they use freely, and strong drink is allowed; but they have no drunkards.

As their future is secure, the people marry young, and this probably does much to bind them to the place. No restriction is placed upon marriage, except that if one marries out of the community, he must leave it.

The extraordinary feature of the Bethel and Aurora communities is the looseness of the bond which keeps the people together. They might break up at any time; but they have remained in community for thirty years. Their religious belief is extremely simple, and yet it seems to suffice to hold them. They have not had among them any good businessmen, yet they have managed to make a reasonably fair business success; for though, as I remarked concerning aurora, almost any farmer industrious and economical as they are would have been peculiarly better off after so many years, still this people, but for their determination to have their goods in common, would for the most part to-day have been day-laborers.

In weighing results, one should not forget the character of those who have achieved them; and considering what these people are, it cannot be denied that they have lived better in community than they would have lived by individual effort.