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Philip D. Jordan

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The Iowa Pioneer Phalanx

History sometimes weaves strange patterns, bringing into harmony colored threads from many lands and times. A liberty-loving Frenchman, for example, fathered the thought which developed into a socialistic community upon the Iowa frontier. Flourishing for a time in the hope that all men might find happiness and economic security, the Iowa Pioneer Phalanx, situated on the Des Moines River about nine miles southwest of Oskaloosa, failed because the ambitions of its founders were destroyed by individual greed and lust for personal gain. The narrative begins in a handsome Parisian study and ends in an abandoned Iowa grist-mill.

On a spring morning in 1832 an American student, young, gay, and yet introspective, met for the first time François Marie Charles Fourier, about whom all intellectual Paris was talking. Albert Brisbane had heard of Fourier's social theories, and he was anxious to know this new philosopher who "combined exuberant imagination, boundless optimism, and senseless vanity with acute intelligence, a gift of penetrating observation, and great courage." Originally a humble

shop assistant and then a small merchant, Fourier early learned the discipline imposed by poverty upon the middle classes. Privilege, he already knew, flowed naturally from power. And capital always spelled both power and privilege.

Brisbane, before going to Fourier's office, had read the volumes which for a time were to alter Europe's intellectual pattern and were to serve as source books in the good life for many Americans. *Traité de l'Association Domestique Agricole au Attraction Industrielle* and *Le Nouveau Monde, Industriel et Sociétaire*, together with the *Fragments* and *The Passions of the Human Soul* were books read and thumbed, not only by the French nobility, but also by American reformers. And Fourier himself flamed in both the Old World and the New as a prophet and social messiah.

The man who greeted Brisbane that May morning and who became the household god of the Iowa Pioneer Phalanx was sixty years of age. "Fourier had a large gray eye," wrote the young student, "the pupil of which was so small that it seemed a mere pin-point. This gave great intensity to his look. The nose was rather aquiline, and the corners of the large mouth curved downward — the lion mouth. This, with a strong, firm chin, completed a fixed, abstract, settled expression of countenance. The head was remarkably round,

almost a sphere; the brow large, slightly retreating, formed a regular arch. The *ensemble* of the face expressed great intensity; and I may remark here that during the subsequent three years of my association with Fourier, I never saw him smile."

When Brisbane returned to the United States to share in the many curious social experiments of the fabulous forties, he introduced and sponsored the principles of Fourierism. The genial and gullible Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, himself conditioned by poverty, found in this new social and economic philosophy what he thought to be the panacea for national ills. Greeley, believing "society, as we find it, is organized rapacity," opened the columns of the *Tribune* in 1842 to Fourierism. Brisbane edited a daily column devoted to singing the praises of his French master. The result was startling.

Fourieristic societies, known as phalanxes, sprang up along the eastern coastal plain and almost immediately began to penetrate the States of the Old Northwest. The Alphadelphia Phalanx in Michigan, the Integral and Sangamon phalanxes of Illinois, and the Prairie Home Community of Ohio — these were among the more important western experiments in community living. Before the movement ran its course, about thirty-four settlements had been founded in ten States.

Over eight thousand persons, it was estimated, had subscribed to the philosophy. They had carved from the great public domain nearly forty-five thousand acres of land.

The Iowa experiment had its genesis in Watertown, New York. There the Fourier Association of Jefferson County made definite plans to emigrate to the Territory of Iowa in the spring of 1843. About three hundred persons, said *Niles' Register*, "will emigrate to the southern part of Iowa on the 7th of April next, the birthday of Fourier. They have recently commenced a paper at Watertown, called the 'Iowa Pioneer Phalanx.' They have sent an agent to Europe to induce people to join them."

Time, unfortunately, has erased many significant facts pertaining to the movement of the Watertown group from New York to the Iowa frontier. That men and women, bound by a written agreement to abide by Fourieristic principles, did come is certain. If they followed the logical route from Watertown to the Des Moines country they probably loaded children, supplies, and prized possessions upon an Ontario steamboat, and made the slow, but comparatively easy journey, through the Great Lakes to straggling Chicago. In this frontier town, "sitting upon the shores of the lake in wretched dishabille," the im-

migrants may have rested before beginning the long trek overland to the Mississippi. Then, too, it was necessary to outfit and lay in supplies for the prairie journey. Coffee, bacon, powder, and shot — these were frontier necessities. Sharp axes and awkward ploughs were included also, as were lengths of rope and extra leather for harness and shoes.

Sometime during the summer of 1843 the group moved out across the rich Illinois prairies. Crossing the Mississippi, perhaps at Burlington, the Iowa Pioneer Phalanx angled through the Des Moines River bottoms until it reached what was soon to become Mahaska County. About nine miles from Oskaloosa, near a bend in the river, the party found an ideal mill-site. Close by stood the small cabin of Dr. E. A. Boyer, himself a newcomer to that region. Although Dr. Boyer may have been interested in Fourier's social philosophy, he was not a member of the Watertown contingent.

Along the banks of the Des Moines the group, assisted by Dr. Boyer, made claim to about three hundred and twenty acres of fertile lands in Sections 27, 28, and 33 of what was later to be Scott Township. This country, except in high water, was ideal farming, grazing, and hunting land. Willows, cottonwoods, elms, sycamores, and the

black and burr oak afforded the socialists shade and logs for cabin and fireplace. Black walnut was abundant. Bee trees, as large as a hollow flour barrel, treasured honey-comb which bees had filched from prairie flowers.

"The fine bodies of timber on the river bluffs and bottom-land, and fringing the Des Moines," exclaimed a settler, "with the adjoining stretches of undulating prairies, were bedecked in spring-time with the richest and choicest wild flowers, in all their native beauty. The Des Moines River, with its sloping banks covered with grass down to its clear-as-crystal waters, flowing smoothly over its fine bed of gravel, full of numerous fish of various kinds, innumerable birds and water-fowls, including swans, pelicans, wild geese, black loons, and ducks of many different kinds, floating leisurely on the water, or resting on the numerous sandbars projecting out into the river. Deer, wild turkey, squirrels, pigeons, pheasants, and wolves were plentiful."

No sooner had the settlers squatted upon their half-section than they began to build substantial log cabins, to put in a late crop, and to hunt otters, wolves, raccoons, wildcats, mink, muskrats, and a few beavers. Dr. Boyer shot ninety-three wolves during the first winter the Fourierists were in Iowa.

With homes constructed, crops planted, and

winter supplies stored away, the Association, if it acted as did all other American phalanxes, drew up an elaborate system of pledges and rules for government. Each individual was assigned specific tasks and all adults, women included, were permitted a vote upon matters relating to the welfare of the enterprise. No provision was made for trying or punishing offenders; neither were there rules governing those individuals who preferred eating to working. The constitutions sometimes contained Fourier's definition of happiness, and usually made reference to the ploughshare (symbolizing production) and the pruning hook (symbolizing correction). These were the insignia of all American phalanxes. "Happiness", said Fourier, "consists in the possession of a vast number of desires combined with a full opportunity for satisfying them all."

John Pope's family, the Nortons, and George and John Rose, all immigrants subscribing to the French socialistic system, believed with Fourier that human motives are on the whole good, and if given free play will result in happiness. The second cardinal precept to which the members of the Iowa Pioneer Phalanx pledged themselves concerned commerce. "Commerce is morally and materially pernicious, and corrupts human disposition: it is the base soul of the civilization that is

approaching its term and that will be replaced by the associated and cooperative mode of economy and life." The redemption of mankind, therefore, would be accomplished by free associations of capitalists, workers, and talented officials. The product of labor was to be divided as follows: labor to receive five-twelfths; capital, four-twelfths; and talent, three-twelfths. "Free love, education of the children at the cost of the group, seven meals daily, opera and drama, joy of life — all this would be made possible by the phalanstery system, so that men might hope to attain an average age of 144 years and a height of seven feet." The Iowa phalanx certainly did not aspire to many of the specific goals listed above, but there is no doubt that the group believed that both economic security and social advantage would be derived from the association system.

Structurally, as well as socially, the Iowa Pioneer Phalanx followed the prescribed pattern common to all American Fourierist societies. "The houses were built in a long row, all as one house, then partitioned off two rooms for each family. Back of them were the dining room, kitchen, wash room, milk house, etc. All kinds of farm work was carried on systematically. Every one had his or her work to do. Two women did the cooking, and took care of the milk. A man

with certain boys to help him took care of the cows and did the milking and churning. Another man with boys' help did all the gardening, brought the vegetables all cleaned to the kitchen ready for the cooks. Three women with young girls to help did the washing. Others did the ironing. One woman taught the school. . . . The cooks washed the kitchen utensils and cleaned up the kitchen. Two women did the spinning, for in those days we had the yarn spun and knit the stockings for large and small, young and old."

Such specialization of labor, however, was not sufficient to keep the community running. There were some commodities which the group could not produce. When staples ran low, therefore, settlers made the tedious journey to young Oskaloosa, nine miles away. Their heavy lynch-pin wagons, drawn by oxen, creaked along primitive roads. Although the Sauks and Foxes were peaceful enough, a long rifle frequently lay across the driver's knees. Its presence brought comfort, for the forest was not subdued at the time when Fourierists did their shopping in the frontier village of Oskaloosa.

Trading in town was a serious business for these social utopians — all were poor. Consequently, they purchased by barter when possible. Corn, smoked hams or bacon, a few hides, and

sometimes fresh fish were exchanged for tobacco, nails, whisky, and quinine. Fourteen pounds of salt cost forty-three cents. Jeans sold for \$1.12½ per yard and cassinette was marked \$1.37 per yard. A dozen buttons of the plainest type could hardly be secured for less than twelve and a half cents. Sturdy boots came to about five dollars. Even tallow candles were expensive. And a complete set of iron skillets, lids, and kettle was beyond the reach of these dreamers of social equality.

Yet the Iowa Pioneer Phalanx lived well and comfortably. When the United States government surveyors ran the first lines in Scott Township, they recorded with approbation the fine stands of timber and the fertile fields accessible to the Watertown immigrants. But there were few luxuries, and the experiment in community living gradually succumbed to the acquisitiveness of individual ambition. The common storehouse still held bundles of golden wheat and bins of yellow corn. Turnips, squashes, and pumpkins still lay buried deep beneath the frost line. And in the dusky, tightly-chinked smoke-houses still hung hams and hind quarters over slowly smouldering hickory fires. But the enthusiasm of the group was dying out. The ambitious, there as elsewhere, felt they were carrying the lazy upon their shoulders. Women wanted their own homes, not

merely a two-room cell in a long row of dormitories. Mutterings grew, were silenced, and then increased.

By the summer of 1844, news of this group's curious French philosophy was penetrating the Territory. By some, the Fourierists were thought criminals, like the famous "Brown Gang" at Bellevue. Others believed the group harmless fools. Many considered them atheists and in league with that scalawag Abner Kneeland. Preachers worried about their souls.

News of the phalanx finally reached the ears of members of the Andover Band, that group of eleven young men who came to Iowa in 1843 under commissions from the American Home Missionary Society. The Reverend William Salter was so impressed when he heard of the colony's existence that he took pains to enter the details in his notes. A friend of Salter's, the Reverend Benjamin Spaulding, visited the settlement and later included an account of his experiences in a report to his superiors.

In September, 1844, the phalanx consisted of about fifty persons, according to Spaulding. "A part of these only had come from Watertown, others having joined them since their arrival. They have in their possession a mill site, regarded by many as the finest which the Des Moines af-

fords. Here, at some future day, they hope to be able to erect a mill, which, from the increase of their numbers and wealth, shall eventually grow into a splendid manufacturing establishment. Their cabins are joined to each other in a continuous range, and seem like a little city in the wilderness. They have farm, stock, and other property in common, share their labors in common, board at a common table, and hope, in the economy of such an arrangement, to find wealth, and in the pleasures of social intercourse, to find happiness. They believe, in common with the founder of their system, that most of the evils which we suffer, social and moral, spring solely from the jarring of individual interests, and would at once disappear under a proper organization of society. They believe that he has discovered, and that they are carrying out, that principle of unity 'under which the interests of all will blend in the most delightful harmony, and that hatred must of course cease when its causes are cut off.' Their motto is 'Love thy neighbor as thyself.'

"We, of course, were deeply anxious to see the development of so holy a principle, and as they seemed equally ready to exhibit the merits of their system, we discussed it with the utmost freedom. We ventured to bring forward another principle as lying still deeper than the above: 'Thou shalt

love the Lord thy God with all thy heart.' The propriety of this requirement was readily admitted, but it was urged that God was a spirit, and could read at a glance all the thoughts and feelings of our hearts, and therefore any external form of worship was unnecessary; besides those who *profess* most often *feel* the least. On the other hand, it was urged, that God positively commands us to worship him, and that the *expression* of our love to him was as natural, and for some reasons as necessary, as that of our love to men; besides, those who *express* most love to *men*, often *feel* the least.

"We hazarded a few inquiries as to the practical operation of their system, and learned, not much to our surprise, that there *had* been, in a few instances, difficulties between *different families*, 'probably the result of short acquaintance,' and that 'the matter had all been talked over, and at last happily settled,' and that 'nothing of the kind would *probably* occur again.' I have since, however, met several individuals who were *then* prominent members of the association, having joined it at Watertown, but have left on account of some dissatisfaction with the practical workings of the system.

"No objection was offered to holding meetings for those who wished to attend, at night or on the

Sabbath, or any time when we might find it convenient. The use of a room was politely offered to us. We therefore made an appointment for the next Sabbath, and found a congregation of women and children, with a few men; others, *acting up* to their professions, were too busily employed doing good to themselves, and their fellow men, to waste any time in the unnecessary worship of God. Here we found a few professors of religion of different denominations. We left a few tracts, which were read with interest by some, and ridiculed by others. A Cumberland Presbyterian had preached once or twice. Besides this there had been no other preaching."

The dissatisfaction found by the Reverend Mr. Spaulding increased, rather than diminished. Individuals gradually left the phalanx to locate land of their own. The mill, small and insignificant compared with the dream structure, ground less grain. Patches of corn grew steadily smaller. The common dining room fed fewer socialistic mouths, and the general assembly fell into disuse.

This gradual decline of the Iowa Pioneer Phalanx was representative of the entire movement in the United States. Brisbane tired of Fourierism after a few years, and in 1847 Greeley, after a series of sharp debates with the editor of the *New York Courier and Express*, abruptly dropped

Fourieristic news from the columns of the *Tribune*. The many magazines and newspapers devoted entirely to Fourier's philosophy soon lost their circulation and died. Among the most notable of these read by members of the Iowa Pioneer Phalanx were *The Phalanx*, *The Harbinger*, *The Social Reformer*, *Pioneer Phalanx*, and *The Spirit of the Age*.

About May 10, 1845, the settlement on the Des Moines River dissolved its compact, satisfied that the system would not work "either to the satisfaction or advantage of the individuals concerned; or, to use the language of one who has been a member of the company, 'it would not do while men remained as selfish as they were now.' "

Weeds soon overran the garden patches and cabin walls crumpled before the blows of winter winds and snows. Within a few years only some graves and dilapidated buildings marked the spot of an idealistic social experiment. The Reverend Mr. Spaulding was perhaps uncharitable when he righteously wrote: "It is truly a matter of gratitude to God that so many mistaken schemes are falling to the ground, and that the true principles of the religion of Christ are becoming daily more known and regarded by the community at large."

PHILIP D. JORDAN