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“Virtual Communities”: The Anarchist Press at Home, Washington

By Holly Folk

The Mutual Home Colony Association was a freethinking (anarchist) community that operated from 1898-1919.¹ Located twelve miles across the bay from Tacoma, Washington, Home was reachable only by boat. Despite its remote location, the colony stayed connected to the greater world of Progressive Era radicalism through the publication of several newspapers. For some of these few if any issues survive. Extant print runs of two papers, however, illuminate both the daily life of the Home community and its ties to other expressions of cultural dissent.

A great many intentional communities have published community newspapers, which appear to serve multiple functions. Here I will use a “developmental approach” to explore the layered uses of print culture in the Home Colony. My discussion will primarily consider *Discontent: Mother of Progress*, which ran for almost four years between 1898 and 1902, and its successor, *The Demonstrator*, which was published between 1903 and 1908. Toward the end, I will discuss two other papers produced at the colony, *The Agitator*, which was published between 1910 and 1912, and its successor, *The Syndicalist*, which operated for less than a year in 1913, which bore the much stronger imprint of their writer and editor, the “Wobbly” activist Jay Fox.

The Mutual Home Colony Association had its origins in another short-lived Washington community, the Glennis Island Cooperative Industrial Company. Around 1895, three families from the rapidly failing community set out to establish a new colony on Puget Sound. After touring the area in a homemade boat, George Allen, Oliver A. Verity, and B. F. Odell chose a spot on Von Geldern Cove (a.k.a. Joe’s Bay, southwest of Gig Harbor), part of Carrs Inlet. In early 1896 the Verity, Allen, and Odell families moved onto a twenty-six-acre site the trio bought for \$182. The Mutual Home Colony Association was formally incorporated in 1898. The colony grew briskly, thanks to the donations of land by an affluent, free-thinking West

Virginia farmer, Martin V. Dadisman, who with his family settled at Home that fall. Within a year, Home counted fifty-four people. Dadisman's land donations would help to grow the colony to more than two hundred acres, with a comparable number of residents.

Mark Silk has described Pacific Northwest culture as "libertarian," and we see hints of that in the Home experiment. One joined the community by buying the rights to two acres of land from the Association, paying the assessed taxes on it, and purchasing a membership certificate for \$1. Membership certificates were good for life, and could be left to heirs. People built their own houses, usually on the waterfront. The way property was shared evokes comparisons to both modern "cohousing arrangements" and "community land trusts." Home residents didn't own their land in fee simple, but it could be mortgaged, and improvements like houses and barns could be sold. The community pooled resources to build a common library and lecture hall.

For a time, the Association ran a cooperative store, and some members farmed cooperatively. Many others worked for each other. Home Association members used a barter system of "work hours," with everyone agreeing to compensate each other at the set rate of 15¢ an hour. This bears a similarity to the "time dollar" local currency systems of some progressive towns.

Chuck LeWarne notes that in many ways Home was only "thinly" communal. Few rules governed personal conduct, though members were expected to practice "Tolerance" and pay their annually assessed taxes to "The Enemy" (ie, the state and county). The spirit of the Home endeavor – cooperative and not – is an expression of greater anarchist sentiment, which warrants some explication. Anarchism is a radically anti-authoritarian political ideology with many permutations. All versions, however, include the idea that the best society is one without a centralized government and where the individual possesses complete autonomy. One hundred years ago, one popular anarchist social vision was the establishment of a network of cooperative voluntary associations as the new basis of society. The belief that the rights of the individual were paramount, however, made the imposition of social control (through "commitment mechanisms") difficult to adopt conceptually, and even harder to implement.

My own observations about the Home "character" center on how the community harbored impulses seen across Progressive Era radicalism, what I elsewhere have described as "dissenting culture." The Home

colony attracted free thinkers, dietary and health reformers, spiritual innovators, and sex radicals. Among the visitors and residents were not only political radicals like Emma Goldman, Moses Harman, and Lois Waisbrooker, but also a diverse cast of cultural and religious reformers, including spiritualists, "Russellites" (Jehovah's Witnesses), Mormons, and members of Cyrus Teed's Florida-based Koreshan Unity. Far from being an oddity, the cultural eclecticism seen at Home appears to be replicated across much of the native-born (i.e., non-immigrant) anarchist movement. These anarchists wanted not only to reform social institutions, but to change cultural norms, family relations, and other matters usually seen as private. Many anarchists were "sex radicals," rejecting the institution of marriage, arguing for women's right to choose their relationships, and promoting birth control. They also sought changes in broad cultural arenas, espousing dietary and health reforms, and experimenting with new religions. The Home residents thus shared a passion for change, and were open to its expression in a diversity of ways. This vision informed the editorial perspective of the Home newspapers.

The Home community did not have an "official" newspaper. The Home newspapers all were published by resident individuals, who were presumed to reflect their own views rather than an "official perspective" from the community. The first newspaper was *New Era*, which Oliver Verity launched on a hand-held press in June 1897. The *New Era* only survived for a few issues, in part because the U.S. Postal Service refused to mail copies of the paper. I was not able to examine this paper; LeWarne mentions his inability to find it either. We know the Home residents also produced at least two other papers with shorter runs. Lois Waisbrooker brought her long-running publication *Clothed with the Sun* to Washington, and a spiritualist named Olivia Frelove Shepherd is reported to have produced *Spirit Mothers*. As with *New Era*, these papers do not seem extant.

The first paper with a print run accessible to researchers was *Discontent: Mother of Progress*. *Discontent* originally was a weekly newspaper; it later shifted to biweekly publication. Charles Govan, who was a printer, and James F. Morton, who previously wrote for the San Francisco anarchist newspaper, *Free Society*, started the four-page, four-column broadsheet in 1898. Other members of the community wrote articles for the newspaper, and helped with its production, in tasks like folding it for mailing. *Discontent* soon was available for sale, in bookshops and through agents, from Boston to San Francisco, and even in Hawaii. We have rather little information about its

circulation, but a University of Washington researcher has suggested that *Discontent* rose to a circulation of 1200. Its successor, *Demonstrator*, appears to have had a circulation of about 800. These two papers share so many similarities that I will consider discuss their content together.

Materially, the papers are typical of small newspapers of their time. One should note their use of an “artisan” font for the masthead. Such fonts were a popular choice among private presses, partly because they represented a symbolic rejection of modern industrial aesthetics. Conventional spelling was often rejected, too, in favor of the “Reformed Spelling” popular among American Progressives. The newspapers were replete with other period devices: they printed jokes, and filled the space at the ends of columns with quotations from famous people. The front page often carried a poem, often drafted by Home resident Mattie A. Penhallow. Immediately following the poem was usually a column of the editor’s thoughts, sometimes entitled “The Problem Solved.” Other observations and thoughts from the editors ran in columns entitled “Cranks and Pranks,” and “Cranky Notions”—titles that suggest both the writers’ awareness of their standing in mainstream society, and their capacity for gentle self-humor.

The papers embedded the Home writers in several webs of discourse. Daily life in the colony was a regular feature in a column entitled “Association Notes,” where residents could learn of the activities in the Children’s School, and who had eggs, strawberries, or wood for sale. Chuck LeWarne notes, however, that *Discontent* reflected the writers’ desire to be more than the “house organ of the community.” In the first issue, the editors told their readers, “We shall aim to make of our columns an open forum of liberal views, but we specially invite Anarchist writers to contribute to the work of spreading the Anarchist propaganda into every quarter of the world. The only restrictions placed upon the appearance of contributions to our columns will be those governed by space and the

DISCONTENT

“MOTHER OF PROGRESS”

VOLUME I

LAKEEAY, WAHL, WEDNESDAY, MAY 11, 1888.

NO. 1.

Masthead of the first issue of the newspaper *Discontent*.

literary merit of the articles. They must be to the point and tolerably well-written."² That the writers were comfortable with the term "propaganda" is something I still am contemplating. What seems self-evident, though, is the writers' desire to spread news about the Home experiment as a social message. The papers carried basic membership information, as well as the articles of incorporation of the association. They invited readers to visit, and printed travel information and steamer schedules. The papers also published articles on other communes, such as the Amana Colonies in Iowa. A writer name Nellie M. Jerauld sent in a series of dispatches on her visits to several colonies in the Midwest. (Her descriptions of Hiawatha and other sites may be helpful to scholars researching these communities.)³ Interestingly, the Home residents were harshly critical of the "Ruskin Colony" (the Ruskin Commonwealth Association) in Tennessee. This was a recurrent topic, revealing the type of conflict and competition that could run through Progressive Era social experimentation.

The Home journalists cultivated relationships with readers, inviting them to correspond and contribute articles. On at least one occasion, the editors requested tips on interesting items to reprint, and I think it is likely that some of the eclectic mix of items reprinted in the papers came from reader submissions. In this sense, the readers acted as sort of a "clipping service"!

With political radicalism as the main editorial focus, the writers aspired especially to connect the community to other anarchists and reformers, nationally and internationally. Readers were kept updated on labor riots in Chicago, Spanish imperialism in Cuba, the political situation in Italy, and mining strikes in Colorado. The Home papers carried information on public lectures and anarchist "Meetings and Headquarters" in and around Puget Sound as well as further afield, and a column listed other "Radical Papers" available for subscription. The papers' engagement with the complex issue of anarchist violence is revealing. Few writers condemned violence outright, while the smaller number who actively defended bombings and assassinations felt such acts were prompted by the perpetrators' desperation.

The papers also ran articles on other progressive causes, such as alternative medicine, dietary reform, and spiritualism. Readers debated the best way to promote sex radicalism or oppose compulsory vaccination. They argued (sometimes forcefully) about the validity of "mental science." The eclectic mixture of dissenting cultural materials found on the pages of

the Home newspapers reflects the ideological diversity among the reader-contributors and at the colony. It is, I think, a direct function of the editors' request for "interesting contributions" from their readers. It also points to the widespread attempt within Progressive Era popular culture to construct a "unified theory" for the reform of society, one that would resolve not only political and economic injustices, but usher in new ways of living daily life, responding to the sacred, and assimilating the new scientific paradigms that were challenging the boundaries of human knowledge.

The Home ethic of "Tolerance" was reflected in the commitment, among the editors, that the free exchange of ideas was more important than simple social harmony. The papers invited views with which the editors did not agree, and frequently printed them. On some topics, dissenting culture was in broad agreement, while others suggest greater uncertainty. Vegetarianism was both promoted and rejected with especially vociferous debate, as was the worth of Christianity. It is intriguing to note that in some cases, a question or argument was debated on different pages of the same issue. It appears that Home writers with separate opinions (on spiritualism or mental science, for example), would simultaneously prepare copy spelling out their debates. It seems, though, that these rival opinionators simultaneously cooperated in the material production of the paper, spending time in close contact, negotiating both intimacy and conflict. Imagine the press room!

The content of *Discontent* and the *Demonstrator* challenges two facile (but wrong) assumptions: that communes are cut off from the world, and that anarchism was a nihilistic movement. The papers served as a "virtual community" where Progressive thinkers, from many cultural arenas and geographic locations, could exchange ideas. In this respect, they are illustrative of greater tendencies in Progressive Era dissenting culture, which thrived in the topical presses devoted to respected causes. For many radicals, their encounter with their chosen movements was almost entirely "on paper," through the activities of reading, writing, and publishing.

Then and now, the Home newspapers were a gateway to a remarkable cultural discourse. I feel I just have cracked the surface of what is in the papers, and I would encourage other people to take a look at them, too. One gets to know some of the people in the colony, to recognize their personal affiliations with Esperanto, Freethought, or health reform. As a religionist, I am intrigued by the defenses of Mormon would-be senator Reed Smoot, and unsettled by the editors' occasional lapses into anti-semitic warnings

about an international conspiracy of "Hebrew financiers."⁴

Across the good and bad, however, we discern a network of human connections maintained by colorful print discourse. To understand the "virtual community" fostered by the Home newspapers requires an appreciation of the human connections maintained by this rich discourse.⁵ Not only did the Home writers and correspondents engage each other's ideas, they used the papers to advocate for radicals who were arrested, sometimes even establishing legal defense funds in their behalf. There were, admittedly, instances where writers referred to one another as "ignoramuses" (or the like), but such insults were far outweighed by cross-fertilization and social support.

Looking at the Home papers, at the residents and their discursive community, I am most deeply affected by their optimism. Often, their writing slipped into "ultimate" terms, and they proclaimed their hope that the "gospel of anarchism" would be embraced by all humanity. I admit I am wading into a big historiographic debate, between academics who see the turn of the last century as one of great social adjustment, alternately optimistic and despondent. I find their optimism especially meaningful when it is put in context with the climate of financial and legal risk under which radical progressives operated. The Home writers seemed to maintain a belief in the intrinsic value of their work, even while they seldom made a profit, experienced legal and social harassment, and were the object of some censure in other Washington newspapers.

After President William McKinley was assassinated in September 1901, newspapers across the U.S. attacked anarchists in print. The *Tacoma Daily Ledger* entered the fray, with calls to "Exterminate the Anarchist." Another local paper, the *Tacoma Evening News*, warned readers of the dangers in harboring an anarchists colony nearby, with an article, "Shall Anarchy and Free Love Live in Pierce County?" *Discontent* returned this volley with a battery of articles in defense of free speech, and despite the involvement of a local veterans' group (The Grand Army of the Republic), the Home newspaper survived.

They were less lucky the following spring, however, when Charles Govan, James Adams, and James Larkin were arrested for printing "sex radical" articles in the colony newspaper. One item targeted was the advertisements printed for Lois Waisbrooker's book, *My Century Plant*, which promoted "Dianism," a system of "refined sexuality" similar to male continence as practiced at Oneida.⁶

Here, I should explain that some anarchist newspapers promoted sex radicalism partly as a cause with its own worth (i.e., women's emancipation was critical to social reform), and partly as a means of championing free speech, an even dearer anarchist cause. Promoters of human sexuality and birth control courted federal prosecution under the Comstock Laws passed in 1873, which made it a crime to send "obscene material" through the U.S. mail. Three common targets for prosecution were religious ideas, human sexuality, and birth control; in at least one case, an individual's love letters from an illicit affair were cited. As a result numerous freethinkers, health reformers, and religious radicals were charged in the late nineteenth century, and those convicted often were sentenced to years of "hard labor."

In facing harassment for publishing controversial material, the Home journalists found common experience with other American radicals. Just as it had called for the release of other radicals arrested under the Comstock provisions, *Discontent* initiated a print war in behalf of its own editors, who were portrayed as defending the ultimate value of free speech. Probably irrespective of their efforts, the three journalists were acquitted, but the Postal Service retaliated by closing the community's post office in April 1902, which led to the closing of the paper. Undeterred by the challenge of now needing to mail the newspaper from Lakebay, two to three miles away, the Home writers reopened in 1903, under the new name, *Demonstrator*. After the San Francisco newspaper Free Society⁷ closed in November 1904, the *Demonstrator* won (by default) claim as the only major anarchist paper in the U.S. Around 1907, the *Demonstrator* merged with the *Emancipator*, an IWW paper. This coincided with some changes to the editorial staff; central figures like James F. Morton and Charles Govan had left the paper. Toward the end of its run, the *Demonstrator* went through several editors, ending with Laurence Cass, formerly of the *Emancipator*. At this point, the editorial focus of *Demonstrator* turned almost entirely to international anarchism and the labor movement, with a concomitant shift away from covering colony life. The *Demonstrator* folded around 1908, quite possibly due to instability in staffing.

Jay Fox, who had participated in the Haymarket Riot in Chicago, contemplated moving to Home as early as 1905. He started the *Agitator: A Bi-Monthly Advocate of the Modern School, Industrial Unionism and Individual* in 1910 after he relocated to Washington State, probably around 1910.⁸ Fox used a press that once belonged to Ezra H. Haywood, who in the 1880s had fought a memorable battle against the Comstock Laws for

publishing the birth control manifesto *Cupid's Yokes*. (This meant, however, that notwithstanding its pedigree, Fox's equipment was decades old!).

The *Agitator* was quite different from the earlier newspapers. Timothy Hong, in comparing Jay Fox to James F. Morton, has written that Fox "had a more developed appreciation for [the paper's] pragmatic contribution to developing dissident movements." In this view, the conceptual discipline seen in the *Agitator* was an advantage over the earlier Home papers, but I feel this interpretation is incomplete. To be sure, the *Agitator* was more focused on political and economic reform, but that was not the only difference.

The Home residents were demonstrably less involved in the creation of Fox's paper. For example, financial reports printed in the papers, usually quarterly, reveal that Fox was hiring printing companies in Tacoma to do much of the production work, especially setting the type, which was a major expense. And for the most part, other than a column for classified ads, the Home colony was not a featured topic in the *Agitator* or the *Syndicalist*, Fox's second newspaper, which he composed at Home, had printed in Tacoma (I believe), and was distributed out of the Syndicalists' offices in Chicago.

In January 1913, Fox moved the *Agitator* to Chicago, where it took the name the *Syndicalist*. Although it was the official newspaper for Syndicalists in America, this paper only ran through September of that year.

Many historians see the failure of anarchism to build alliances with other movements as a major cause in its decline, and there is an object lesson found in comparing the papers edited by Cass and Fox to the other Home periodicals. The final issues of the *Demonstrator*, along with the *Agitator* and the *Syndicalist*, exhibit much more conceptual discipline. Their narrower focus on the anarchist cause, however, appears to have come at the cost of important social support. Fox's periodicals appear to have had a much smaller circulation—possibly 300 copies an issue for the *Agitator*.

The Home colony is visibly absent in Fox's publication, as is much of the colorful discourse that filled the pages of the earlier papers, with one significant exception. In the spring of 1911, some Association members placed a complaint about other Home residents' nude swimming in the bay, and a small number of colonists were arrested (between four and six). Jay Fox defended the bathers in an article entitled, "The Nudes and the Prudes." This triggered Fox's arrest on the misdemeanor charge of advocating disrespect for the law and courts of justice. The *Agitator* began carrying requests for Fox's public defense fund, and ran a series of columns

on naturalism and public indecency, all under the heading, “The Nudes and the Prudes.” Fox was convicted and given a two-month jail sentence after the jury advocated leniency. Fox protested, and even tried to appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court. Meanwhile, The Free Speech League held demonstrations on Fox’s behalf across the country, which seems to have led the governor of Washington to pardon the Home journalist six weeks into his sentence. These events were chronicled in the *Agitator*, writing Fox into the meta-narrative of radical journalists’ martyrdom, which had been well chronicled in the earlier Home papers. It was also among the rare instances when the *Agitator* entered the charivari of dissenting culture, by reprinting other “naturalists” like Bernarr McFadden. For a moment, therefore, the *Agitator* activated the print community of its predecessors.

This “intrusion” of “extraneous” cultural material into the *Agitator* was, in all likelihood, a sign of Fox’s own desire to raise support for his case. But it raises the question of whether, had Fox (or the Syndicalists) been more receptive to the soft boundaries of cultural dissent, whether he might have found stronger footing for his project.

The Home Colony carried on after Fox’s departure, but commitment to the community eroded. In 1909, the bylaws of the Association had been changed to allow members to own their land outright. That the Mutual Home Colony Association continued until 1919, when it was dissolved under court order (dates here vary), marks it as one of the “successful” communities lasting over fifteen years, the yardstick set by Rosabeth Moss Kanter. In the waning years, however, anarchists nationwide castigated the Home colony, foretelling its dissolution. In the IWW paper *Solidarity*, J. C. Harrison called it a “dilapidated community,” beset by constant quarreling. No less a figure than Emma Goldman herself called Home the “Anarchist graveyard.”⁹

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Notes

1. For an exposition of "developmental theory," see Donald E. Pitzer's introduction to his edited collection, *America's Communal Utopias* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).
2. *Discontent: Mother of Progress*, May 11, 1898.
3. Jerauld also wrote a sentimental "free love" novel, *Chains*, which was serialized under the pseudonym "Juno." The novel prompted several readers to discuss the fate of one rather unlikeable character, who died at the end.
4. See *Discontent*, no. 10 (July 13, 1898); no. 26 (October 12, 1898).
5. One of the most interesting aspects of the Home papers is how they show an engagement with a recognizable cast of Progressive Era figures. Some, like Ezra Heywood and Moses Harman, are well known to historians. Other names that show up, like the spiritualist and geologist William F. Denton, or Oliver Sabin, an "independent Christian Scientist," are figures I know from other projects. Such figures have not been the object of much inquiry, yet it is interesting how their ideas—and human experiences—were widely circulated in the radical press.
6. Sarah A. Willburn. *Possessed Victorians: Extra Spheres in Nineteenth-century Mystical Writings* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2006), 73.
7. Portland/Chicago/New York.
8. Fox's own allegiances in the anarchist movement changed over time, so that papers first supported the IWW, but Fox later rejected the Wobblies and turned to Syndicalism.
9. Charles P. LeWarne, *Utopias on Puget Sound, 1885-1915* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), 175.