

a utopia
during
the progressive era
the helicon home colony
1906-1907

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From early October, 1906, until the middle of March, 1907, when it was completely destroyed by fire, a utopian community known as the Helicon Home Colony (and also called Helicon Hall) operated successfully on the fashionable east hill of Englewood, New Jersey. Prominent persons associated with the experiment in one capacity or another, like Upton Sinclair, John Dewey, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Jo Davidson, Sinclair Lewis, William James and others contributed to its reputation. Although largely ignored by historians of the period and barely remembered, except by a handful of local residents, Helicon Hall provided lively copy for the media. Stories about the colony regularly appeared in contemporary newspapers and magazines, shocking and titillating a readership just beginning to question the mores and values of the Victorian age.

The Victorian frame of mind, which dominated the American public consciousness during the late nineteenth century, offered a whole range of universal “truths” for the conduct of life and thought. Starting from assumptions regarding an unpleasant and unchanging “human nature,” the American Victorians held particularly dogmatic views about middle class behavior which attained the sanctity of absolute laws. Thought to be basic to every other institution was the family unit, whose stability supposedly determined the very health of society.¹ And essential to family

life remained the submissive role of women. As the weaker and more sensitive sex, females were trained from childhood to be full time wives and devoted mothers. Their assigned role consisted of obeying their husband and master by managing his household and by raising his children. A sheltered home environment would theoretically provide respite from the world's cares for the husband, as well as serving to protect the woman from the lurking evils of sexuality. It was feared that tampering with such a crucial institution as the family, or with woman's established role, as for instance by granting them the vote, could well weaken the sanctions of morality, thereby threatening the very stability of American society.²

Beginning around the turn of this century, a new class of intellectuals arose to challenge the national pieties associated with the traditional mentality. The Progressive era in the United States took various forms, some of them contradictory, but an important common ingredient was the development of a critical intelligence, one that rejected formalistic eternal truths. There emerged a deliberate attempt to undermine established social patterns for the purpose of creating new institutions and relationships, better suited to the realities of twentieth-century life.³ In essence, the community established in Englewood by a group of Progressive era intellectuals represented an innovative solution to problems connected with child care and homemaking. These intellectuals thereby called into question the fundamental position of women and the family, the very basis of respectable society in America. As a result, the Helicon Home Colony confronted the Victorian world at its center; and in this respect it represented the Progressive challenge in miniature.

Another important ingredient of the Progressive reform impulse pertained to improving the status of women. Although the feminist movement concentrated much of its energy on winning the vote, more radical elements also sought the liberation of women from domestic slavery. New labor-saving devices like washing machines, vacuum cleaners and electric irons were beginning to be introduced, especially in large enterprises like hotels and hospitals, but these did not see widespread use in other than affluent homes until the 1920s.⁴ Most housewives in the early twentieth century were thus still responsible for the extreme drudgery connected with cooking, cleaning and child care.

The running of a middle class household invariably necessitated the employment of servants, a practice which created almost as many difficulties as it purported to remedy. For domestic labor proved to be inefficient, unreliable and in short supply, giving birth to the troublesome "servant problem," discussion of which filled the pages of women's journals in the decade preceding the first world war.⁵ These problems connected with domestic workers turned out to be particularly overwhelming for radicals whose ambivalence about exploiting unskilled, lower class labor created political embarrassments that went beyond the usual kinds of difficulties encountered by their bourgeois counterparts. Helicon Hall can in part be viewed as a progressive solution to the mundane servant problem. At least

that is what Upton Sinclair, the man primarily responsible for organizing the experiment, frequently maintained.⁶

In the spring of 1906, while basking in the praise bestowed on him for his world-renowned muckraking novel *The Jungle*, Sinclair, a compulsive writer since his teens, looked forward to an endless stream of manuscripts flowing from his busy pen. Unfortunately for these ambitious plans, however, there stood a major obstacle in his path, in the form of a very disgruntled wife who for the previous three and one-half years had put up with an isolated existence on a Princeton, New Jersey farm, caring for a frequently ill young child. Although not overly considerate of his wife's needs, Sinclair realized that if he wished to continue with his projects he would somehow have to alleviate what had increasingly become a mutually shared domestic responsibility.⁷

As a left-wing reformer and socialist, Upton Sinclair's propensity was to consider remedies to his personal dilemmas in terms of society at large. And because of his contact with the feminist ideologue, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who had praised *The Jungle*,⁸ he began to consider schemes that would relieve him and his wife of their tedious burdens. Mrs. Gilman's central idea was that women would never be liberated until they gained economic independence; suffrage alone would be insufficient. Not only would women personally benefit through stimulating professional employment, but humanity itself would gain from the richer contribution made possible by this presently submerged half of the population. To demonstrate how women's productive functioning was desirable as well as practical, Gilman advocated the introduction of scientific management (which the Progressives believed to be the key to industrial and political progress) to the home as well as the factory. Trained experts would take over homemaking and child care, thus freeing women to serve society's greater needs.⁹

Gilman attempted to spell out exactly how individual families could avail themselves of scientific home management in various books and articles.¹⁰ What she had in mind was a kind of residential hotel with a centralized kitchen, private kitchenless flats and child care provided for all residents. But the actual specifications of her plan remained somewhat vague, however, since she never really detailed the means by which her theories about professionalization of housework might be achieved. Professor Dolores Hayden believes she favored a form of "benevolent capitalism," in which the entire enterprise would be placed upon a sound business footing.¹¹ But nowhere does Gilman reveal the business persons who would finance such a novel undertaking, nor does she identify the class of professional women who could afford it.

Because they agreed with her general critique of women's oppression and the need for economic and social equality between the sexes, socialists like Upton Sinclair came to believe that Mrs. Gilman had advocated cooperative home arrangements that would pave the way for women's liberation. Thus, when Sinclair first broached the idea of a home colony, he asked sympathetic persons to read Mrs. Gilman's books.¹² And once the

experiment got under way, the participants as well as most observers were convinced that she had been its main inspiration. One magazine article concluded that “Sinclair mainly realized the theory she [Gilman] advocated,” while a Boston reporter even took Mrs. Gilman to task for designing the child care arrangements at Helicon Hall (which he personally regarded as disastrous.)¹³

Yet despite this apparent connection between Gilman’s ideas and the practices at Helicon Hall, Charlotte Perkins Gilman strongly opposed cooperative household arrangements, and said as much in her major works. But these passages tended to be obscured by the overall critical thrust of her central message relating to women’s current exploitation. Consequently, given the obscurity of her practical formulations, and her own general sympathy with a socialist vision,¹⁴ it is understandable how socialists misinterpreted her ideas. Obviously peeved by the linkage of her name with the Englewood home colony, Mrs. Gilman took revenge in her autobiography published many years later. She wrote:

Cooperative housekeeping is inherently doomed to failure. From early experience and later knowledge I thoroughly learned this fact, and have always proclaimed it. Yet such is the perversity of the average mind that my advocacy of the professionalization of housework being done by the hour by specially trained persons, with the service of cooked meals to the home has always been objected to as “cooperative housekeeping.” Upton Sinclair’s ill-fated Helicon Hall experiment he attributed to my teachings, without the least justification.¹⁵

Charlotte Perkins Gilman notwithstanding, Helicon Hall’s founders wished to liberate women from household drudgery, which they believed could best be accomplished cooperatively using scientific management principles. In their almost naive faith in the possibilities of scientific management they shared the assumptions of other reformers during this period. For as Professor Samuel Haber observed, “the Progressive era gave rise to an efficiency craze.”¹⁶

The original impetus for Helicon Hall came from Upton Sinclair, who published an article in the June 14th issue of *The Independent* magazine outlining his plan for a cooperative home colony, and calling for responses from interested parties. Although Sinclair considered himself a socialist, he consciously directed his appeal to middle-class intellectuals and professionals who would be expected to pay a substantial fee for services received. And in case there might be some who would misinterpret cooperation to mean social equality, he stated specifically that coal miners, day laborers and the like need not apply.¹⁷ The non-socialist character of the community was therefore spelled out at the very beginning. This point must be emphasized, because in the succeeding months contemporary newspapers and journals frequently described the community as a socialistic venture.

Sinclair’s initial June appeal touched a responsive chord. Some four to five hundred persons demonstrated an interest in the scheme, and a series of well attended meetings were held in New York City throughout the

summer to iron out details. Reaching final decisions on specific matters necessitated the appointment of committees, with many matters being heatedly discussed, and finally settled by individual votes.¹⁸ In the end the basic outline suggested in Sinclair's original article was carried forward, with certain minor modifications.

The property to be purchased for settlement would be owned by a corporation consisting of stockholders, who were to raise the requisite capital. After making the essential repairs and alterations, the corporation would lease the property to a home colony for three years. The colony would be responsible for the mortgage as well as all the operating expenses. As a membership body, the colony was to elect by secret ballot a five person board of directors who would technically govern the operation. But day to day decisions would be made by a salaried manager appointed by the board. Women possessed equality with men in all respects, that is as long as they paid the initiation fee of \$25 required of all members. Women served on the board of directors and the chosen manager also proved to be a woman. Progressive era reforms such as the initiative, recall and referendum were to be applied where appropriate.¹⁹

A major reason for the two-tiered system of corporation and colony came from the wish to screen applicants for membership on the basis of "congeniality." While the standards for congeniality remained rather vague, certain applicants were, in fact, rejected.²⁰ The one specific restriction pertained to color: blacks were to be excluded from membership. The committee on organization, despite a handful of objections, stipulated "that the colony should be open to any white person of good moral charcter."²¹

In their obvious racist attitudes these participants remained consistent with the mainstream of the Progressive movement. Historians have long recognized that the quest for social justice during the first decades of the twentieth century largely ignored the question of civil rights for minorities. Believing blacks to be significantly inferior, even some of the most advanced thinkers looked to a future time for blacks to rise to the status of civilization achieved by whites.²² Thus Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the reluctant inspiration for the home colony, held generally racist views, believing that blacks would benefit from the regimentation provided by military discipline. And Upton Sinclair, in a book written at this very time, stated that one could not yet be sure whether this defeated race, i.e., the blacks, might ever win the struggle for improvement.²³

With the issue of membership requirements settled to the satisfaction of the future colonists, they next set out to raise the capital to support their scheme. Still flush with the royalties received from *The Jungle*, Sinclair put up most of the initial investment from his own resources, at first \$8,000 and later another \$7,800. In addition, subscriptions from individuals sympathetic to the experiment, and hopeful of some return, reached \$7,500. The rest came from the membership.²⁴ At the beginning of October, 1906, a former boys' school located in the affluent suburb of Englewood, New Jersey, was purchased. A few days later, members of the

colony with their children and possessions began moving in. By the following spring approximately sixty persons were living there.

Not all the details had been worked out beforehand. The principles of scientific homemaking became increasingly diffuse as the colony began operating. It was a large establishment, which in certain ways provided advantages in that labor-saving devices could be employed economically for cleaning and laundering. Also, bulk buying and mess hall style eating helped reduce costs. But none of the participants had any real training in running such a formidable enterprise. As a result, trial and error methods characterized the learning process. Fortunately, the chosen manager, Mrs. Anna G. Noyes, and her husband, Professor William Noyes of Columbia Teachers' College, a member of the board of directors, proved to be competent administrators. Professor Noyes' background in industrial arts did not exactly provide him with expert status, but Mrs. Noyes, a disciple of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, was in reality an intuitive and imaginative homemaker. These qualities had great value in a residence consisting mainly of intellectuals, many of whom preferred leaving the day to day details connected with home management to others.²⁵

The question of staff, a continual problem, emerged from the start, especially in connection with child care. It soon became clear that scientific child raising experts were unavailable in numbers sufficient to be hired by the community, if indeed they existed at all. Ultimately, some of the mothers (but none of the fathers) took turns supervising the colony's children, who were given maximum freedom and they seemed to have benefited from this approach. The mothers were reimbursed for their efforts by reducing their families' regular monthly fee.

In his original formulations, Upton Sinclair had strongly opposed the employment of a servant class in the cooperative experiment. This sentiment was shared by other members who, in similar fashion, were hoping to escape from the "servant problem." Instead, Sinclair advocated using college students (or college dropouts) presumably sympathetic to the colony, whose idealism would be converted into hard work. These university types would bring to bear a higher status even though providing menial labor; and since they would be treated as equals once their duties were performed, the problem of exploiting unskilled lower class laborers would be happily eliminated.²⁷

Among the college dropouts who came to work at Helicon Hall was the future winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, Sinclair Lewis. Accompanied by his Yale roommate, the poet Allan Updegraff, Lewis soon found himself overwhelmed by tasks like carrying around beds and mattresses and tending a furnace that insisted upon going out. Despite the fact that Lewis discovered congenial company (he became engaged to Edith Summers, Sinclair's secretary)²⁸ his inability to handle the work load contributed to an early disillusionment. After a month of releasing their frustrations by laughing at the guests and composing poems criticizing their supervisors, Lewis and Updegraff suddenly left, but not before writing a satirical and teasing article purporting to describe life at Helicon Hall for *The New York Sun*.²⁹

One aspect of the colony suitable for satire was the physical plant. Helicon Hall (the name was taken from Mount Helicon in Greece) had formerly served as a luxurious school for boys, founded by a schoolmaster who espoused "vague, neo-Nietzschean notions of gentility."³⁰ It occupied a scenic location of nine and one half acres only an hour's commute from New York. The building of three stories, with a glass-enclosed central court filled with tropical plants and an elaborate, flowing fountain, was described as beautiful by almost everyone who saw the structure. At one end of a great hall on the first floor stood a vast fireplace open on four sides, and, across from it, a large pipe organ. The school contained an indoor swimming pool, a bowling alley, a billiard room and a tennis court. There were also some thirty-five upstairs bedrooms, arranged around the plush central court. Newspapers made great fun of "such luxury in cooperation."³¹

A common stereotype held that in general cooperation served to destroy both the privacy and the individuality found in conventional homes. Without attempting to examine the validity of this assumption, it would appear that the opposite held true at the colony. There were no regulations except for a rule stipulating that everyone's quarters remained private; no one could enter another's room except by explicit invitation. This rule was essential to a residence consisting largely of writers, requiring seclusion for their work. Indeed, the most common sound during the day was the pounding of typewriters. The intellectuals who chose to join this cooperative society maintained the most diverse beliefs imaginable. There was almost every variety of socialist, as well as anarchists, single taxers, feminists, vegetarians, literary aesthetes and even spiritualists. As Michael Williams, later a leading liberal Catholic, observed: "Never since the episode of the Tower of Babel, I dare say, has there existed a place as saturated in language as Helicon Hall."³²

With complete intellectual freedom, sophisticated discourse abounded and became one of the most attractive elements of the colony. In the evening the members tended to gather around the four-sided fireplace for informal discussions. Even Sinclair Lewis, in his satirical article, wrote about being diverted from his menial tasks by the literary dialogues on Nietzsche, Zola, Turgenev, Ibsen, Shaw, etc. Occasionally formal lectures were delivered by a colonist or by visiting outsiders, and at times various writers in residence would read from their works in progress.³³

In addition to their general intellectual interests, the men and women of Helicon Hall shared certain political beliefs. All of them were committed to the woman's movement in the broadest sense. Almost all, according to Upton Sinclair, were socialists. They had their personal reasons for coming to Englewood, basically to rid themselves of time consuming household obligations and to provide a healthier environment in which to raise their children. Sharing these burdens with like-minded persons seemed a more enlightened approach than reliance on the usual self-contained, individualistic model of homemaking. Cooperation appealed to them because it was potentially more efficient and definitely more humane.

Many families came to Helicon Hall with the expressed purpose of freeing wives or single mothers from responsibilities, so that they could pursue their own careers. Moving to a cooperative establishment testified to a husband's willingness to allow both leisure and space for his wife's personal development. Motivations, of course, varied. There were those who participated because they hoped to find stimulating company and to take part in what promised to be an exciting and novel adventure. Many wanted to be associated with a noble experiment that might validate progressive tenets. They wished to prove to the world that cooperative living could work; that it was a practical alternative to the disabilities of atomistic living arrangements. As men and women of good hope these left-wing products of the Progressive era believed in progress, and viewed the home colony as a piece of that desirable future towards which humanity was headed.³⁴

Not all of the colonists favored the publicity generated by this experiment in cooperative living. The eminent philosopher, John Dewey, having arrived at Columbia University just a few years before, had been fully involved in the planning stages of the colony, and he came very close to moving in with his family. There is no surviving evidence to explain just why the Deweys changed their minds at the last moment. One can speculate, however, from the letters he wrote to his wife at this time, that he was becoming upset about the public statements made by various spokespeople for the colony. Also, the pragmatist in Dewey wondered whether the idealistic goals announced by some of the colony's founders would make it more difficult for them to handle matters of a practical nature.³⁵ Nevertheless, Dewey remained interested in the undertaking, visiting on several occasions and delivering lectures to the members on philosophical subjects.

A close friend and colleague of Dewey's, William Pepperell Montague, who lived at Helicon Hall with his two sons and his wife, also resented the publicity. But Montague, a rugged individualist with an attachment to socialism and human rights, was just embarking on a successful career in philosophy (which culminated in a Chair at Barnard) and he chose to ignore the public criticisms. More of a metaphysician than Dewey, Montague had a life-long belief in "cooperative anarchism," and this made him receptive to the free spirited intellectual atmosphere at Helicon Hall. His wife, Helen Robinson Montague, just then in the midst of her medical studies, preferred leaving her two sons with fellow colonists rather than with servants. She ultimately became a psychiatrist, devoting a good part of her career to helping delinquent, working class adolescents. Both Montagues remained devoted adherents of the experiment in cooperative living.³⁶

For the most part, the residents of the Englewood colony were sedate, reflective people who valued the privacy as well as the stimulating company offered by the community as they pursued their various projects. The popular novelist, Alice MacGowan Cooke, her two young daughters and her sister Grace MacGowan, also a writer of fiction, would later help to

establish a famous literary colony in Carmel, California. One of the most influential colonists and a member of the board of directors of Helicon Hall was Edwin Bjorkman, a much published literary critic and sometime novelist. As editor of the Modern Drama Series, he is perhaps best known for his translations of Strindberg's plays. Bjorkman's socialism had its origins in reform Darwinism. He believed that society was evolving in the direction of greater "social cooperation and coordination,"³⁷ a tendency which presumably Helicon Hall helped to further. His then wife, Frances Maule, an active suffragist worker, was herself a prolific author and editor mainly of books and articles dealing with improving the status of women. As a socialist, her advocacy of the suffrage stressed the point that an increase in social welfare legislation would inevitably follow the granting of the vote to women.³⁸ Michael Williams, a left-wing journalist and novelist who would later be a founder and senior editor of *Commonweal* magazine (but up to now was something of a literary bohemian,) delivered over his two children to the child-care services at the colony so that he could continue on his novel and his wife could find work as a school teacher. His motivation combined both the practical and the adventurous aspects of the experiment.³⁹ Other persons in residence similarly had careers as writers, editors, artists, teachers and settlement house workers; one woman was a physician.

While Charlotte Perkins Gilman remained the intellectual patron saint at Helicon Hall, there were other thinkers whose ideas served to inspire the colonists. Among the esthetes, Bjorkman and Professor Montague, the French philosopher Henri Bergson, who saw reality as growth and intellect as an appendage to action, drew special praise.⁴⁰ But as was true of other Progressives, it was chiefly to British writers that the members looked for guidance. Michael Williams maintained that George Bernard Shaw was the most quoted author, especially in his presentation of the "new woman," an aspect of his writing which led Upton Sinclair to become his "disciple."⁴¹ Another Fabian Socialist whose optimism for the future and utopian formulations in a recent work, *A Modern Utopia*, "greatly moved many of the people at Helicon Hall was H. G. Wells. Particularly appealing to the colonists was Wells' concept of a governing elite called the Samurai, who propelled society forward in a progressive direction."⁴²

In addition to prominent members, guests would come to visit at regular intervals. Will Durant related how he met Upton Sinclair there, and was greatly impressed by his integrity and sincerity. John Coryell, an anarchist, who originated the Nick Carter detective stories, came and expressed great interest in the community. Jo Davidson, just starting out his great craft as a sculptor, got himself embroiled in a well publicized but minor incident at the home colony.⁴³ Perhaps the most distinguished visitor was William James, fresh from his famous lectures on Pragmatism at Columbia University.⁴⁴

Not all visitors were as welcomed as the great philosopher James. Newspaper and magazine reporters were always scouting around, sometimes in disguise, looking for amusement or items that would discredit the

experiment. This was the high tide of “yellow journalism” in America, and the colonists, with their unconventional behavior, became fair game for stories real, exaggerated or imagined. Even *The New York Times* stooped to the levels of “yellow journalism” with a headline in February, 1907, reading, “Helicon Hall has taken to bloomers.” An accompanying account described how the women wore this liberating garment, consisting of a short skirt and loose trousers, while walking around the main building.⁴⁵

The article in the *Times* represented its subtle way of implying that conjugal love was not always the rule at Helicon Hall, an implication given greater currency in the pages of its less restrained competitors. Radicalism has always been associated in the public mind with “free love”; thus, it was readily assumed that at Helicon Hall legal marriage had been discarded. Suggestions were made, largely by innuendo, that the home colony had been established in order to serve as a “love nest” for bohemian elements. Upton Sinclair eventually initiated a lawsuit and won a retraction from a Westchester newspaper, which had reported a non-existent police raid on Helicon Hall allegedly designed to halt “free love” practices.⁴⁶

In actual fact, a certain amount of sexual experimentation did take place, with English writers of a Fabian persuasion like H. G. Wells and Edward Carpenter providing the intellectual justification. Already in *A Modern Utopia*, Wells had advocated greater sexual freedom and he was at this very moment having political difficulties with the Webbs over this issue, culminating in his leaving the Fabian Society. But chiefly, it was the ideas of the cultural radical, Edward Carpenter, whose influential book, *Love's Coming of Age*, called for a more open style of marriage and an end to exclusionist relationships⁴⁷ which some of the colonists, including Upton Sinclair, put into practice. How many acted out “the new morality” shall never be known, mainly because the colonists preferred to keep this aspect of their life private, and as a result nothing on the subject appears in the published memoirs.⁴⁸ Greenwich Village bohemianism and *avant-garde* journals like *The Masses*, which similarly combined personal lifestyles with political radicalism, but did so in an overt, public fashion in order to shock genteel tradition, characterized a later stage of the Progressive era. Open advocacy and display of “free love” as a cultural rebellion was a few years down the road. Helicon Hall colonists may have taken some of the first steps towards encouraging new lifestyles, but despite the informal attire and the smoking in public by women, they were rather timid by comparison with what came later.

Undoubtedly the restraint which prevailed at the colony was designed to win favorable publicity from the media. As we have seen, this intention was doomed almost from the start, which explains why many of the colonists became increasingly disillusioned with the lack of objectivity in American journalism. Years later Upton Sinclair would try to even the score by writing a book attacking American newspapers. *The Brass Check*,

in which he included a chapter on the inaccurate press coverage of life at Helicon Hall, became one of his most influential works.⁴⁹

Much of the criticism in the mass media had to do with reports about the harm that was alleged to ensue from cooperative childrearing. Experts anticipated the very worst. Yet despite dire predictions, the Helicon Hall children appeared to have done rather well. There were approximately thirteen youngsters, sleeping in a communal dormitory and eating in their own special dining room, having access to their parents whenever necessary. They had separate play facilities, including their own theatre, and in general had the run of the entire place including the spacious private grounds. They seemed content with each other's company, a new experience for offspring of urban intellectuals, whose previous playing arrangements would not have come so spontaneously. Upton Sinclair later claimed that his six-year-old son was never happier.⁵⁰

In this semi-institutional setting, children were encouraged to be more self-reliant, dressing and feeding themselves. No longer were these progeny of middle-class intellectuals and professionals supervised by lower-class servants, whose traditional rules of discipline often conflicted (or at the least were inconsistent) with the approach of the parents. Moreover, now that most of the mothers were free to use their greater leisure time for personal fulfillment they harbored fewer resentments in the actual time spent with their children. Even those mothers who helped supervise child care gained immeasurably. They had stimulating company and were relieved of their duties during the evenings. Finally, they were remunerated for their services through reduced fees, giving them a sense of having contributed to the welfare of their own families and of the community as well. It is no wonder that the members of the colony, in particular the women, seemed very pleased with the arrangements for children and regarded this aspect of the experiment as its greatest success.⁵¹

The colony did not achieve such favorable results in all areas of home management. Its compromises and adjustments to reality have to be regarded as qualitatively successful, considering that the majority of members were, in fact, relieved of their household responsibilities. Nevertheless, the problem of servants would not fully disappear, mainly because the original idea of employing motivated students as a higher class of workers failed in its execution. The alternative was to hire experienced servants for decent wages, with the difference from regular employment consisting mainly in their being treated equally as colonists and having free access to all facilities once they completed their work. It was hoped that these generous practices would encourage workers to identify with the experiment and would motivate them to produce in a more zealous fashion. Yet despite the egalitarian atmosphere, not all the difficulties inherent in employing manual labor could be avoided. Thus, in the end all that was accomplished was the transfer of individual problems with servants onto a larger canvas, with the managers now having to handle a "staff problem." The conflict for radicals inherent to exploiting servants of a lower economic class failed to be resolved.

Management's concern with servants highlighted another misjudgment made by the colony's founders. The early hope that professionals would take over the running of the household, thereby relieving the members of such burdens, did not materialize. Because none of the people responsible for operating the community had any prior experience with such a sizeable undertaking, difficulties arose continually. This was particularly the case because a house full of individualistic intellectuals contained a variety of strong opinions on matters ranging from fundamental policies to whether eggs should be served every Sunday morning. Upton Sinclair, who had founded the colony mainly so that he could have more leisure for his writing, found himself constantly interrupted by the details of daily operations. In February he voluntarily stepped down from the board of directors, and without rancor a new board was elected. In office, Professor Noyes hereafter assumed greater responsibility for running the colony.⁵²

Despite the inevitable troubles, and some not anticipated, Helicon Hall continued to operate reasonably well. Disagreements between members tended to be easily resolved, and rules and regulations continued to be almost nonexistent.⁵³ If there had been serious snags, the daily newspapers, eager for copy, would have pounced on them. Moreover, none of the colonists became dissatisfied enough to leave. In fact, about twenty-five additional applicants for admission were on a waiting list, hoping that space would open up for them. But their chance never came, for after only five and one-half months of existence the experiment unexpectedly and abruptly terminated.

On March 16, 1907, at four in the morning, a fire of unknown origin swept through the Helicon Home Colony and completely destroyed the main building. One person, a carpenter's apprentice, died in the blaze, unable to flee allegedly because he was too drunk to heed the alarm. Everyone else escaped without serious injury.⁵⁴ In addition to the one unfortunate death, the members lost all their possessions, including valuable manuscripts representing months and even years of work.

The millionaire neighbors of Helicon Hall, notwithstanding their previous hostility, displayed generosity in taking in the bewildered survivors and clothing them as best they could. Such consideration was not repeated a few days later when a coroners' jury, made up of Englewood city fathers, including the mayor, publicly conducted an investigation into the cause of the fire and the loss of life.

Ostensibly summoned because a fatality had occurred, the jury, as most newspapers agreed, had been established to reveal the intimate details of life in the "socialist utopia" which had brought such unfavorable publicity to their city.⁵⁵ Upton Sinclair, who had arrived on crutches, was subjected to several hours of probing questions, ranging from unpaid grocery bills to his muckraking, with emphasis being placed on relations between the sexes. All that could be uncovered, however, was that male and female servants slept in adjoining rooms on the third floor with only curtains, rather than a door, separating them. This bit of scandal appeared

prominently in some of the metropolitan newspapers.⁵⁶ Thus, even at the very end of its existence, the home colony would not escape the innuendos about moral depravity perpetuated by yellow journalism.

After allegedly making a careful study of the evidence, the Englewood jurors censured the home colony “for not making adequate provision for the saving of life from fires in a building containing 62 souls.”⁵⁷ This condemnation was decreed despite the fact that, in its brief tenure, precautions never contemplated by the former boys’ school had been taken. These included the installation of a modern boiler, the attachment of ropes to be used as fire escapes from the upper floors, a new water hose purchased for the court area, and fire extinguishers placed on the first floor.⁵⁸ Given the rapid spread of the fire and the hour of its occurrence, it is miraculous that only one person died.

Among the abuse heaped on Sinclair by the coroner’s jury lay the implication that the fire had been deliberately set to collect insurance money. In reality, after receiving the proceeds from their fire claim and selling off the land, all stockholders were paid off with the exception of Sinclair himself, who lost several thousand dollars in the final transactions. He had been scrupulously fair in his dealings with investors, and even provided for those colonists whom the fire had left in desperate straits.⁵⁹

American magazines generally concluded that the fire at Helicon Hall proved their conviction that cooperative living was impractical. Upton Sinclair, irrepressible letter writer, did his utmost to answer the negative comments. His intention was to show that the experiment had been a total success. In actual fact, he and the other colonists truly believed this to be the case. Immediately after the fire many of them tried to work out another cooperative arrangement,⁶⁰ but they lacked the financial resources as well as the dynamic leadership originally provided by Sinclair. He himself did not lose any of his enthusiasm for cooperative living, going on to try out similar experiments in Arden, Delaware and Fairhope, Alabama. However, it seems he no longer wished to be the mainstay of such an undertaking, realizing that it took valuable time from his writing. Nonetheless, in summing up his thoughts on Helicon Hall, Sinclair expressed the sentiments of his former associates. His rhetoric is that of the Progressive era.

I have lived in the future. I have known those wilder freedoms and opportunities that the future will grant to all men and women.⁶¹

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notes

1. Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (New Haven, 1957), 14, 138, 341-343.
2. Aileen Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement* (New York, 1965), 15-25; Robert W. Smuts, *Women and Work in America* (New York, 1959), 113; Linda Gordon, *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Right, A Social History of Birth Control in America* (New York, 1976), 18-21.
3. Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence* (New York, 1959), 303-304; Morton White, *Social Thought in America* (Boston, 1947), *passim*; Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America* (New York, 1967), ix-xviii.
4. David M. Katzman, *Seven Days a Week, Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (New York, 1978), 127-129.

5. *Ibid.*, 223-224.
6. "It is the 'servant problem' which will drive people into cooperative homes; it was that problem which brought our 'home colonists' together." Upton Sinclair, "A New Helicon Hall," *The Independent* (September 9, 1909), 580-582.
7. Upton Sinclair, *The Autobiography of Upton Sinclair* (New York, 1961), 94-95. See also Meta Sinclair Stone, *Thyrsis and Corydon*, v, Stone MSS, Lilly Library, Indiana University (no pagination).
8. Leon Harris, *Upton Sinclair, American Rebel* (New York, 1975), 82.
9. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics* (Boston, 1898), *passim*.
10. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Home, Its Work and Influence* (New York, 1903), *passim*; "Beauty of a Block," *The Independent* (July 14, 1904), 67-72.
11. Dolores Hayden, *The Great Domestic Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1981), 183-196.
12. Upton Sinclair, "A Home Colony," *The Independent* (June 14, 1906), 1401-1408.
13. *Englewood Press*, November 3, 1906; L. H. Harris, "Upton Sinclair and Helicon Hall," *The Independent* (March 28, 1907), 711-713; *Boston Transcript*, January 30, 1907.
14. Mary A. Hill, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman, The Making of a Radical Feminist* (Philadelphia, 1980), 295.
15. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, An Autobiography* (New York, 1935), 26.
16. Samuel Haber, *Efficiency and Uplift, Scientific Management in the Progressive Era* (Chicago, 1964), ix.
17. Sinclair, "A Home Colony," 1407.
18. *New York Times*, July 18, 1906; August 10, 1906.
19. Sinclair, *Autobiography*, 127-129; Upton Sinclair, "The Home Colony: Six Months After," *The Independent* (February 7, 1907), 306-313.
20. Upton Sinclair, *The Brass Check* (Pasadena, 1919), 69.
21. *New York Times*, August 19, 1906.
22. George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind* (New York, 1971), Chapter 10; Dewey W. Grantham, Jr., "The Progressive Movement and the Negro," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 1955, 477.
23. Hill, 173; Upton Sinclair, *The Industrial Republic* (New York, 1907), 60.
24. Sinclair MSS, Lilly Library, Indiana University, March 22, 1907.
25. *Englewood Press*, November 3, 1906. See also Anna G. Noyes' articles in *The Independent*, May 16, 1907 and August 29, 1907.
26. Sinclair, "Six Months After," 310.
27. *New York Tribune*, July 18, 1906.
28. Edith Summers' (Kelley) engagement to Lewis was broken and she married his friend Updegraff, whom she later divorced. Eventually she too became a novelist, publishing *Weeds* in 1923.
29. "Two Yale Men in Utopia," *New York Sun*, December 16, 1906. See also Harry E. Maule and Melville H. Caine, *A Sinclair Lewis Reader* (New York, 1953), 61.
30. Michael Williams, *The Book of High Romance* (New York, 1918), 141.
31. *New York Times*, October 7, 1906.
32. Williams, 142; Sinclair, *Autobiography*, 132.
33. *New York Sun*, December 16, 1906; Sinclair, *The Brass Check*, 66-67.
34. Sinclair, *The Industrial Republic*, 280-283; Williams, 66-67.
35. See John Dewey's letters to his wife from August through October, 1906 in John Dewey Papers, Southern Illinois University; Sinclair, *The Brass Check*, 66-67.
36. The entire issue of *The Journal of Philosophy*, October 14, 1954, is devoted to honoring William Pepperell Montague. See also *New York Times*, October 29, 1964, and Sinclair, *Autobiography*, 131.
37. Edwin Bjorkman, *Voices of Tomorrow* (New York, 1913), 101, 297.
38. Frances Maule, *Woman Suffrage* (New York, 1915), 37; *Woman's Who's Who of America*, 1914-15.
39. Williams, 139.
40. Edwin Bjorkman, *Is There Anything New Under the Sun* (New York, 1911), 149-151; *Journal of Philosophy* (October 14, 1954), 612-613.
41. Williams, 145-146; Sinclair, *Autobiography*, 57. See also Arthur Mann, "British Social Thought and American Reformers of the Progressive Era," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (March, 1956), 672-692.
42. H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, (London, 1904); Williams, 152-153; Sinclair, *Autobiography*, 146.
43. Will and Ariel Durant, *Interpretations of Life* (New York, 1970), 47; Sinclair, *Autobiography*, 131-132; Jo Davidson, *Between Sitzings* (New York, 1951), 28-32.
44. The William James Papers, February 6, 1907, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
45. *New York Times*, February 14, 1907.
46. Sinclair, *The Brass Check*, 65, 71.
47. Edward Carpenter, *Love's Coming of Age* (Chicago, 1904); Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie, *H. G. Wells, A Biography* (New York, 1973), 206-209.

48. The only available first-hand information is from Meta Sinclair's unpublished autobiography. See Stone MSS, *Thyrsis and Corydon*, v.
49. Sinclair, *The Brass Check*.
50. Sinclair, "A New Helicon Hall," 582.
51. Sinclair, *Autobiography*, 129-130.
52. *Ibid.*; *New York Sun*, March 17, 1907; *New York American*, March 20, 1907.
53. *Boston Transcript*, January 30, 1907.
54. Sinclair, *Autobiography*, 134.
55. *New York Herald*, March 22, 1907.
56. *New York Sun*, March 22, 1907.
57. *Englewood Press*, March 23, 1907.
58. *New York Herald*, March 18, 1907; *The American Magazine* (July, 1907), 329; Sinclair, *The Brass Check*, 68.
59. Sinclair, *Autobiography*, 136; Sinclair MSS, letters of March 22, July 19 and August 3, 1907.
60. *New York Post*, March 19, 1907; *New York Times*, March 19, 1907.
61. Sinclair, *The Brass Check*, 67. One is reminded of Lincoln Steffens' famous statement upon returning from the Soviet Union.