

*A fleeting
moment in
history...
Modern Times
By
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EHLER'S HOTEL, BRENTWOOD-IN-THE-PINES, LONG ISLAND, N. Y.

Part I

In 1950 Brentwood celebrated the centennial of the founding of the strange colony of Modern Times. Now in this year of 1964, the community completes one hundred years under the pleasing name of Brentwood. The change of names came near the end of the Civil War on September 7, 1864.

In the difficult times which attended the war period the name of Modern Times had become something of a by-word on Long Island because of the eccentric appearance and behavior of the original settlers. Then the leaders of the village decided to adopt a new name. Henry Edger a famous resident, suggested Brentwood, the name of his home town in England and it was adopted. Brentwood, England is a lovely and historic place. Greetings were exchanged between the two communities at the time of the centennial celebration and one year later, the mother town sent our Brentwood a handsome illuminated scroll which is treasured and preserved at the local public library.

The "free love: colony of Modern Times was founded by Josiah Warren, reformer and anarchist, but a gentle and non-violent anarchist. An early follower of Robert Owen, he rejected the latter's political socialism, advocating instead an anarchy based on "the sovereignty of the individual." Of three utopian colonies which he founded, Modern Times was the most successful.

In his Long Island venture, Warren had the assistance of Stephen Pearl Andrews, the brainiest of the "free lovers" and described at the time as "the smartest man on the globe." He was a reformer, author, linguist, philosopher, and ardent abolitionist. He had a working knowledge of thirty-four languages, speaking six or more fluently, including Chinese. He devised a universal language and also was a proponent of the Pitman short hand system which he did much to introduce into the United States from England.

These two very remarkable gentlemen, late in the year of 1850, stepped off of a Long Island Railway train at Thompson's Station about three quarters of a mile west of the present Brentwood railway station. They walked down the railroad track to the site of the present village, then entirely uninhabited. They had been in a negotiation with Long Island real estate dealers. After inspecting the area, they arranged to purchase 750 acres. Ninety acres of this tract was set aside for the main settlement and was laid out in 49 blocks of about four acres each. In turn, the blocks were divided about four building sites each with a street frontage of 200 feet. In the center of each block, for the convenience of pedestrians, was an alley about twelve feet wide and running in a north and south direction. The tract was surveyed and the original map registered in Riverhead, the seat of Suffolk County, where it may still be seen.

Shortly before the arrival of the colonists, the land which they purchased and which now constitutes the heart of the village of Brentwood was sold by Dr. Edward Fenn Peck of Smithtown according to his statement for \$2.50 an acre "without the wood." The price paid by the promoters from New York City is not known but it is supposed to have been not much above the figure.

Warren had an advertisement printed in Greeley's New York "Tribune" in January, 1851, setting forth advantages of the ideal community. Soon settlers began to arrive to clear the land, build log cabins, plant gardens and the tall "cathedral pines" for which the village became famous. Fruit trees also were planted along the streets and highways to supply free food for hungry travelers.

To Warren's colony of Modern Times, when it was about three years old, came Henry Edger an English immigrant and reformer, mentally and spiritually adrift and seeking some new and more satisfactory way of life. He had resided in several of the existing reform settlements in the United States but had found them all unsatisfactory. What he had heard about Modern Times had induced him to gather and seek peace. Warren and his followers regarded Edger as an interloper and spy, but did not expel him.

Edger probably would have remained obscure and

unknown except for the lucky circumstance that he wrote a letter to August Comte, the great Positivist philosopher, in Paris whose great aim was “to reorganize society so that both individuals and nations could live and grow in harmony and comfort.”

The epistle from far away Long Island interested and delighted the brilliant French reformer for in it he discerned the author to be a man of parts who possibly could be counted upon to introduce Positivism into the United States. It chanced that just at that time he was seeking such a person . Comte’s sympathetic reply, in turn, thrilled and delighted Edger, and thereupon ensued a correspondence which became famous (and was published in Paris), resulting in the modest colony of Modern Times becoming known as the American center of Positivism. Edger almost stole the show from Warren.

We shall first tell the story of Warren’s historic excursion into matrimonial reform and then Edger’s.

The earliest detailed report that the outside world had of the colony of Modern Times and the strange happenings here was made by the Rev. Moncure Daniel Conway, a young clergyman and social reformer, who in the next half-century was to become celebrated as a humanitarian and the author of some seventy books and pamphlets. Interested at first only in “free thought,” he finally turned his writing talents to “free love,” although he did not practice it. Conway’s article published in the “Fortnightly Review” stand as the classic early account of Warren’s experiment.



Part II

Summers on Long Island always are beautiful and fraught with flowers and sweet experiences on the sunny seashores or in the twilight of the inland pines. What did the handsome young preacher discover on that memorable weekend at Modern Times in the long-ago summer of 1857?

His most important discovery was a woman. She was a lovely and gracious lady in whose home he was entertained, all too briefly. Through the following years he wrote different descriptions of her, each revealing great enthusiasm, even the one which he penned after he had become an old bearded patriarch.

Through his hostess, Conway presented “free love” to the world in its most idealistic and tender aspects. In his first written account of the colony, the delightful creature’s name was not given as if it were too sacred to be bandied about on the lips of common mortals. In a second article he disclosed her name and then, almost half a century after the summer evening when he entered the fairy land in the moonlit pines, he again praises her in his “Autobiography: Memories and Experiences.”

About eight years ago”, Conway related in the “Fortnightly Review,” when residing in a city known in America as the Queen of the West, I received a letter making some inquiry, which was dated “Modern Times, N.Y. I carefully kept this letter which seemed to have come from some place in Bunyan’s dreamland. Having occasion afterwards to write to a friend in New York, I inquired if he knew anything of such a place. “It is,” he answered “a village on Long Island, founded and conducted upon the principal that each person shall mind his or her own business.” It is needless to say that after this the place seemed to me mystic and impossible.

Some months later, when there were strikes among the workmen of our neighborhood, I gave an address to them on the relations between capital and labor, at the conclusion of which a man with strange but prepossessing appearance, came up and said, “Sir, if you ever have the opportunity to visit the village of Modern Times, You will find that the evils of labor come out of the existence of money.” Where-

upon the man disappeared.

“I resolved to try to find Modern Times and started with the mere knowledge that it was on Long Island, not being sure whether a place where people attended to their own affairs and did without money was to be reached by railway or rainbow...I found it easy to be ferried over from New York to Long Island, there to be booked for Modern Times.”

After three hours of traveling, the train deposited Conway at Thompson’s Station, and he walked east to the rainbow hamlet.

“Presently I came to the verge of a village, and saw a cluster of houses standing pure and white under the clear light of the moon, which was just rising, each with a garden. The street before me was absolutely silent except for the voices of a boy and a girl who walked together talking in low and pleasant tones. I asked for the address of the person named to me in the letter already mentioned. The house was pointed out and I knocked at the door. I was soon introduced to its occupant, a lady, who was surrounded by one or two Modern-timers; and having stated that I wished to learn something about the village and its ways, was very cordially received.

“You will not find us,” she said, “a Goldenthal; we are rather poor, but if you are interested in our ideas, you may find us worthy of a visit.”

The story of the brilliant and beautiful Mary Chilton need not end a hundred years ago in the vanished colony of Modern Times, seen by the preacher Conway, so lovely in the moonlight with its quiet gardens and the sound of pleasant voices in the street. In 1949 a newspaper in New York City printed a letter from the scribe announcing that he was writing a centennial history of Brentwood and was seeking information about Modern Times. One of the replies received was from Putnam Foote Macdonald of Glen Gardner, New Jersey. Macdonald was the grand-son of that lovely and never-to-be forgotten Mary Chilton!

It was Saturday night, and Conway was in the home of Mary Chilton. Josiah Warren, the founder of the settlement, called Conway related:

“There entered presently a man to whom all showed profound

respect, and (who was introduced as the reformer, to embody whose ideas the village had been established.) He was a short, thickset man about fifty years of age with a bright restless blue eye, and somewhat restless, too, in his movements. His forehead was large descending to a good full brow; his lower face especially the mouth was not of equal strength but indicated a mild enthusiasm. He was fluent, eager, and entirely absorbed in his social ideas. It was pleasant to listen to him..."

Conway wrote of Warren's political and social theories and thus described the workings of free love:

"The arrangements of marriage were, of course, left entirely to the men and women themselves. They could be married formally or otherwise, live in the same or separate houses, and have their relation known or unknown to the rest of the village. The relation could be dissolved at pleasure without any formulas. Certain customs had grown out of the absence of marriage laws. Secrecy was very general, and it was not considered polite to inquire who might be the father of a new-born child, or who the husband or wife of any individual might be. Those who stood in the relation of husband or wife wore upon the finger a red thread; and so long as that badge was visible the person was understood to be married. If it disappeared the marriage was at an end."



Part III

The rival Positivist group in Modern Times performed their sacred rites in an oratorio attached to the residence of Henry Edger. The family at first lived in a small board shack. Shortly they purchased one of the first log cabins built in the village.

Details of a Positivist wedding ceremony of a local couple are on record. The groom was John Metcalf, one of Edger's followers, who shared the leader's fame as a correspondent of Compté. Metcalf wrote four letters to the master in France, receiving three in return. The seven missives were published in Paris along with the letters exchanged between Edger and Compté.

Details of the marriage of John Metcalf and Clara Christiana Osborne, according to Positivist rites, were solemnly recorded by Edger in his Journal. The betrothal ceremonies were performed, November 8, 1857, in the home of Richard Parker, a convert to Positivism, living in Hickory Street, Brooklyn. Then almost two years later on September 9, 1859 the wedding ceremonies were performed. Kneeling, Metcalf declared:

"I desire to be united with Clara, she being a virgin, in an eternal marriage according to the Positivist doctrine and I beg before the altar here raised to the worship of Humanity to have my engagement of eternal widowhood recorded by the Universal Church."

To which the bride, kneeling, responded: "I, Clara, being still a virgin, desire to be united with John in eternal marriage, and also beg to have my engagement of eternal widowhood recorded by the Universal Church."

Henry Edger, the officiant, then pronounced these sacred words: "In the name of Humanity, and by virtue of the authority delegated to me by August Compté, I pronounce you married."

"Accompanied by her son Henry, Mrs. Edger was admitted to the New York State Lunatic Asylum, now the Utica State Hospital, on November 18, 1866, two years after the name Modern Times had been changed to Brentwood. She was released from the institution, September 28, 1868 and returned to Brentwood where she died four years later

and was buried in the yard of the family residence.

Even before the death of his wife, Edger had experienced difficulty in keeping a rather unique pledge provided for the Positivist marriage regulations. In a devout period of his life, while Compte was alive, Edger, to demonstrate his deep adherence to the master's teachings, took a voluntary vow of chastity provided for married men by the Religion of Humanity. In a letter to Compte, the Long Islander admitted that he was having difficulty in keeping the vow. The great man in Paris replied that he also had experienced the same difficulty, and this was consoling to Edger.

Details of Edger's second marriage are meager, the name of the bride and the form of marriage employed not being made known in Brentwood.

From America Edger went to Paris where he shed tears at the grave of Compte and visited other sacred Positivist shrines, including the grave of the French Philosopher's perfect woman, Madame Clotilde de Vaux.

After touring several countries in Europe, Edger established a permanent home in Versailles, France. He seems to have patched up his broken Positivist vows since he appeared in Europe as a leader of the cult and gave many lectures on Compte and his teachings.

At Versailles, in April of 1888, at the age of 68 died "the former solicitor and attorney of London, Protestant, socialist, communist, and for some twenty-six years a resident of Modern Times (and Brentwood) and certainly one of the most faithful disciples that the founder of the Religion of Humanity ever had."

With Edger disappeared all traces of the Positivist movement in Brentwood. It vanished like a dream, like one of the small white, sun-lit clouds which drift out of the north and for a little while casts a shadowy outline upon the gardens and fields of Long Island and then passes on and is lost in the ocean-skies beyond Fire Island.

Modern Times had a life span of about one decade. For about five years prior to the Civil War and including the time of Conway's visit, the colony under Warren's leadership probably was the most ideal and utopian of any other community in the United States, if not the whole world.

Dishonesty, disorder and crime were non-existent; there were no policemen, no prisoners, no judges, no jail.

The “time store,” one of the central features of Warren’s economy, was working smoothly and supplying all of the food, household necessities, and clothing needed at cost, with exception of a few cents charged for the time required for a clerk to wait on a customer. The only money in circulation in the village that was printed by Warren in his print shop in the same building as the “time store.” This paper currency was not backed up by gold but by a certain number of hours of honest labor.

The honesty of the period is illustrated by the oft-repeated story of the lost watch. A Jewish peddler dropped his gold watch and chain on the street as he was passing through the village. A local resident found the watch and hung it on a nail on the bulletin board outside of Thespian Hall. There it remained for 10 days, until the peddler returned to the village, saw his watch and claimed it.

Thus for a few years the inhabitants of Modern Times enjoyed an almost perfect existence. Conway stated that the colony could be found “either by railway or by rainbow.” And someone remarked, “It was closer to the rainbow than to the railroad.”



Stephen Pearl Andrews



Josiah Warren

Part IV

Indeed, for a short period, it seemed that the perfect village of all time had been planted at the end of the rainbow on Long Island. Here at Modern Times it appeared that a hamlet of one hundred people on the south side of the railroad surrounded by a peaceful wilderness of scrub oak and jack pine and sealed off from the wicked world, had at last discovered the magic formula for living and had been able to found Plato's Republic and Moore's Utopia.

But, alas! "all this was too beautiful to last even as an inspiration." Internal and external forces combined to destroy the magic village. The economic panic of 1857 undermined the business enterprises of the community and the surrounding region, and the Civil War completed the destruction.

Attracted by sensational newspaper reports, hoodlums, cranks, and trouble-makers of various kinds began to invade Modern Times and disturb its utopian calm. Warren lamented:

"One man began to advocate plurality of wives, and published a paper to support his views; another believed clothing to be a superfluity, and not only attempted to practice his Adamic theories in person, but imposed his views upon his hapless children. A woman with an ungainly form displayed herself in public in man's attire, which gave rise to the newspaper comment: 'The women dress in men's clothing and look hideous'. Still another young woman had the diet mania so severely that, after living on beans without salt until reduced to a skeleton she died within a year."

Through all vicissitudes, Warren, unlike Edger his rival, consistently practiced what he preached. The man who selected a site on Long Island for the last and greatest effort to transform human society, was faithful to his theories until the end of life. He left Modern Times shortly before the name was changed to Brentwood in the troubled Civil War period, somewhat frustrated and adrift. His last years were spent aimlessly in and around Boston. In 1873, near the end of his career, he went to live with friends in Princeton, Mass. for a short time.

Warren had a lingering illness at the home of his old

Brentwood friend. E.H. Linton at 29 City Square, Charleston, one mile from the Boston City Hall. “he was cared for in his last illness by kindly hands. Miss Kate Metcalf one of the pioneers of Modern Times, nursed him until the end.” He died on April 14, 1874, at the age of 76 and was buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery. In accordance with his wish, no headstone marks the spot where he lies. George Washington Warren says of his father in a manuscript biography:

“Devoting himself to the advancement of civilization, he died in Boston in 1874, having gone through a checkered, and for many years a fine musician and member of the Boston Brigade Band, and all of the exciting life of a musician. I never knew him to use profane language or to touch liquor of any kind, or use tobacco in any form. He was strictly temperate in every respect.”

Josiah Warren’s noble dream of a better world having ended in Brentwood-in-the-Pines a decade before that time, this was the end of the dreamer himself—reformer, philosopher, printer, musician, inventor, devoted husband, kind father, honest citizen, “anarchist,” and the advocate of free love. This amazing array of talents, Warren centered upon one central objective—the improvement of the hard lot of his fellow man. In the last letter he wrote before his death he vowed: “A piece of land set apart for each person who desires it, I think, the first step in civilization.”

