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History of Fourierist Utopias, 1869-1892**

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Silkville: A Kansas Attempt in the History of Fourierist Utopias, 1869 - 1892

by Garrett R. Carpenter*

Silkville was a communitarian¹ society in Kansas founded by Ernest Valetton de Boissiere in 1869. The founder's hope was to organize his utopian experiment upon the social and economic ideas of Charles Fourier. Although the farm was economically successful, the attempt to develop a Fourierist phalanx in Kansas failed in 1892.

Brief accounts of Silkville appear in most studies of Kansas state history and in much of the literature concerning utopian and communitarian endeavors in the United States. Although several popularized stories of the experiment have been printed in books, magazines, and newspapers, there has been no comprehensive investigation of this community and its particular significance as an attempt to revive Fourierism in America.

Ernest Valetton de Boissiere

A study of the Silkville communal society is inadequate without a knowledge of the earlier life and colorful background of its founder, the French humanitarian, Ernest Valetton de Boissiere. Born June 9, 1810, at the Chateau de Certes in the baronial estate of his family southwest of Bordeaux, he was a descendant of one of France's old and aristocratic families. His education, which was similar to that of other noble and well-to-do youths of the country, was followed by a short but apparently successful career in the French army. It is not clear whether the growing burden of debt at the family estate or the death of his father brought de Boissiere back to his birthplace. However, after assuming direction of the family properties near Bordeaux, the young Frenchman displayed considerable ingenuity in the financial recovery that occurred. Part of the large estate con-



*The Reverend Mr. Carpenter is the minister of the College View Presbyterian Church, Lincoln, Nebraska. This study originated as a Master's Thesis at Kansas State Teachers College, Emporia, in 1951, under the direction of Dr. William H. Seiler.

1. The term has been revived in a recent study by Professor Arthur E. Bestor, Jr., *Backwoods Utopias: The Sectarian and Owenite Phases of Communitarian Socialism in America, 1663-1829* (Philadelphia, 1950).

sisted of several thousand acres of sea marsh, which at low tide was mostly at sea-level but at high tide was covered with water. De Boissiere had a sea-wall built that was seven miles long, with sluiceways at intervals. The currents attracted large numbers of fish inside the wall and a trap attachment prevented them from returning to the sea. In addition, five thousand acres of the barren land reclaimed through the building of the sea-wall were planted in pine trees, which ultimately brought him a large income from the tar and turpentine products. In fact, during the later years of his life most of his income was derived from his pine forest and fisheries. A clear indication of de Boissiere's initiative, imagination, and financial skill is obtained from this early success.²

By the middle of the nineteenth century, with personal success and prosperity at hand, de Boissiere's life took a different direction. Actively participating in political affairs, he allied himself with the radical wing of the Republican Party, associating closely with Victor Hugo, General Changarnier, and other leaders of the unsuccessful opposition to Louis Napoleon's strident ambitions. When Napoleon took forcible possession of all departments of the government in December, 1851, and began his program of executions and banishments, de Boissiere was advised that he must "go abroad for his health," although his property was not confiscated. It was because of this that he came to the United States early in 1852.

Traveling throughout the eastern part of the United States, with recent experiences in France fresh in his liberal mind, de Boissiere understandably devoted part of his time to a study of American government, comparing it with various European systems. On his journey he was also very much interested in the development of the different sections as well as the enterprise and public spirit of the people. Soon after his brief trip through the East he was attracted to New Orleans, probably because of its large French population.

In New Orleans de Boissiere's acumen in business opportunities expressed itself again and he made investments in property which included several merchant ships. For several years, and until just before the Civil War, his vessels operated regularly between New Orleans and several European countries. De Boissiere made frequent trips to France upon his own ships. One of these trips occurred just before the Civil War and he did not return to New Orleans until after the conflict.

Shortly after his return, a group of women trying to establish a home and school for orphaned Negro children called upon de Boissiere for help. After carefully investigating the project, sponsored by the Freed-

2. George A. Huron, "Ernest Valetton de Boissiere," *Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society*, VIII (1901-02), pp. 552-53; W. M. Raymond, "Silkville Commune," *Kansas University Seminary Notes* (Lawrence, 1893), p. 163.

men's Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, he astounded the ladies with a contribution of \$10,000. When they expressed their deep gratitude, the philanthropist is reported to have replied:

It is nothing. I want to do something for that part of the human family that is most needy. I have for some time been impressed that the most needy persons in New Orleans are the poor, homeless, parentless negro children that are outcasts upon its streets. I have inquired into the reputation of you ladies, as well as the character of the work you are doing, and I am satisfied that you are honest, capable women, and that in your hands what I can give will be worthily bestowed, and so you give me pleasure in allowing me this privilege of helping you.³

The women of the church group immediately publicized his contribution, hoping to encourage other generous gifts. The reaction was unexpected and quite the contrary to what had been hoped. Very soon a committee of irate citizens descended upon de Boissiere and informed him that he could not spend money in New Orleans for the Negroes. Continued pressure against him by this group caused de Boissiere to close his business affairs and leave New Orleans in 1868.

This incident illustrates de Boissiere's avid interest in the "human family," a humanitarian concept widely expressed by the reformers and idealists of the mid-nineteenth century. It is perhaps safe to say that his treatment in New Orleans, as well as the degradation of life in that post-Civil War city, influenced his decision to establish a rural cooperative community. Shortly after he left New Orleans de Boissiere joined with Charles Sears, Albert Brisbane, and E. P. Grant in reviving interest in the communitarian plan of social reform. They decided to put the ideas of Fourierist Socialism in practice with de Boissiere as the active agent.⁴

In 1856 de Boissiere had met Charles Sears, the former President of the Fourierist North American Phalanx which had been dissolved in 1854. At that time the French emigré had expressed his desire to devote a part of his income to the establishment of an educational, industrial, and cooperative institution. Despite the failure of the North American Phalanx and the decline of the movement in the United States, Sears apparently had high hopes for the eventual success of Fourierist principles. Sears and de Boissiere had visited occasionally and corresponded frequently.⁵ There is every reason to believe that much of their conversation was centered around the ideas and philosophy of Charles Fourier. Sears, Brisbane, and Grant, all prominent leaders of the earlier Fourierist movement, encouraged de Boissiere's proposed enterprise.

3. Huron, *op. cit.*, pp. 554-55.

4. (Oneida Community) *Circular*, new series, V, March 15, 1869, pp. 412-13, and cited in Arthur E. Bestor, Jr., "American Phalanxes: A Study of Fourierist Socialism in the United States" (New Haven, Yale University, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, 1938, 2 vols.), II, p. 160. The author gratefully acknowledges Professor Bestor's very generous allowance of the use of these materials in the preparation of his thesis and in this monograph. Dr. Bestor's published study of the communitarian movement in the United States is in progress. His first volume, *Backwoods Utopias*, has already been published.

5. Huron, *op. cit.*, p. 554.

Less certain, but possible, is the personal encouragement de Boissiere may have received from Horace Greeley and John Humphrey Noyes. Greeley had earlier played an important role in the Fourierist movement and Noyes had based his religious community at Oneida, New York, on some of these communitarian principles. While both of these men apparently had every reason to encourage de Boissiere in his desire to establish a Fourierist phalanx, the conclusion that they even knew the French humanitarian personally must await more conclusive evidence.⁶

Before considering these efforts to rejuvenate Fourierism through a Kansas experiment, a brief review of the Fourierist phase of communitarian socialism in America may be helpful in more accurately understanding the Silkville endeavor.

The Fourierist Phase of Communitarian Socialism in America, 1840-1854

With the rapid expansion of capitalism and industry in the early nineteenth century there arose those abuses and dislocations that to this day remain the concern of our civilization. In response to these widely publicized challenges many theorists evolved plans for the amelioration and improvement of society. Underlying this amazing fertility of reform projects in Europe and America were religious, intellectual, and social forces. One of the most significant intellectual forces was provided by the expanding Enlightenment with its emphasis on progress, humanitarianism, and the ultimate improvability of man. One of the most influential of these stimuli was the economic and social philosophy of Charles Fourier.

Fourier has been called the apostle of harmony. God created the entire universe on a harmonious plan, he reasoned, hence there must be harmony among everything in existence.¹ The heart of Fourier's doctrine, therefore, was the belief in the all-pervading power of attraction: association was the principle of attraction among men, as gravitation was in the physical world.² Having endowed human beings with certain instincts and desires, God intended their free and untrammelled exercise in order that attraction and harmony might result.³

A complex analysis of human nature and the society of his day led Fourier to the conclusion that contemporary society was preventing the

6. John Humphrey Noyes in his *History of American Socialisms*, published in 1870, makes no mention of de Boissiere or the Kansas utopian endeavor which began the year before. While the *Oneida Community Circular* did include news of Silkville during the 1870's, the information, so far as can be determined, was reprinted from other newspapers and periodicals until 1876 when direct contact seems to have been first established by Charles Sears. While Noyes' interest in Fourierism is known, and it is interesting to discover the attempt to manufacture silk [Morris Hillquit, *History of Socialism in the United States* (New York, 1910), p. 43], the conclusion that Noyes personally inspired the Kansas Community's attempt cannot be accepted without more adequate evidence. The same is true in reference to Greeley. Although he did sponsor E. P. Grant's *Co-Operation; or, Sketch of the Conditions of Attractive Industry; and Outline of a Plan for the Organization of Labor* (New York, 1870), that in itself is not proof that he played a direct part in de Boissiere's effort to bring Fourierism to Kansas.

1. Morris Hillquit, *Socialism in Theory and Practice* (New York, 1912), p. 325.

2. Raymond Gtettell, *History of Political Thought* (New York, 1924), p. 378.

3. Hillquit, *Socialism in Theory and Practice*, p. 325.

free and natural expression of human "passions" and was the root evil. Fourier's view of human nature goes far to explain the direction of his remedies, since he thought that human desires, needs, and interests are determined at birth. He saw no reason to suppose that human nature changes from age to age, and he suggested that for man to act by impulse is to act rationally and rightly in the ultimate and absolute sense of those terms.⁴

Having exonerated the individual from responsibility, Fourier insisted repeatedly that the present organization of society was the real culprit. Although society was "unorganized, irrational, the prey of caprice, force and fraud" in its present chaotic condition, there was cause for hope. Some progress had been made. Fourier saw the perfect society as the final stage in the process of historical change whose principal epochs "after the fall from Eden are savagery, patriarchy, barbarism, civilization, guarantyism, simple association and finally composite association or harmony."⁵ Society was new in the stage of "civilization" and to hasten the process of historical change Fourier set about implementing his philosophy of human nature, society, and history with a grandiose plan of social organization.⁶

Recognizing that poverty and injustice had existed under all forms of government, Fourier concluded that governmental change would not meet the problem. Violent revolution would not suffice, nor could the solution be legislated from above. The remedy must be peaceful and constructive. Perfected association, he suggested, would alone end ruinous competition and waste, and lead to a productive relationship in the economic and social pursuits of men.⁷ Fourier was not alone in the realization that only on the local level could permanent reform take place. Others who had observed the degradation of the worker in the growing industrial system and had felt the disillusionment following the French Revolution reacted in similar ways. Some of the other utopian socialists of the time in France were Babeuf, Cabet, Saint-Simon, Blanc, and Proudhon.⁸

The communitarian plan of social reform received considerable attention from most of these utopian socialists in France. England had its outstanding exponent in Robert Owen, whose phenomenal success at New Lanark, Scotland, was followed by an American experiment at New Harmony, Indiana, in 1825. In addition, numerous religious groups

4. Edward S. Mason, "Fourier and Fourierism," *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1931), VI, pp. 402-03.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 402.

6. Fourier's three important books were: *Theory of the Four Movements and General Destinies* (1808); *The Theory of Universal Unity* (1822); and *The New Industrial and Social World* (1829).

7. Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias*, pp. 8-16.

8. Cf. Harry W. Laidler, *Social-Economic Movements* (New York, 1946), pp. 44-70.

utilized the communitarian concept in the United States and many of these had been in existence since the seventeenth century.⁹

Utilizing this communitarian concept, Fourier suggested that men and women should organize themselves into self-sufficient communities or phalanxes. The phalanx was the cornerstone of his social and economic structure. Each community would include capitalists, laborers, and those with talented creative imagination. Labor was to be made attractive, with monotonous employment and overwork prevented, and the unpleasant tasks to be most highly rewarded.¹⁰ A minimum income was guaranteed to all with the surplus to be divided according to a fixed ratio that would prevent labor exploitation and produce an equitable compromise among the three groups: five-twelfths to labor, four-twelfths to capital, and the remaining three-twelfths to talent.¹¹

Since Fourier particularly desired to render labor attractive and spontaneous, his provisions for it are of importance. The Plan proposed that the members of the phalanx should volutarily unite in "groups" for labor according to their individual tastes. Each "group" was responsible for a specific kind of work, such as the care of fruit trees. A subdivision of the "group" was called a "series" and would take care of a phase of the work, for example, the apple trees. Individuals were free to join any "group" or "series" that they wished, and to prevent the monotony of specialization were free to change from "group" to "group" at will. As a result of the new joy in labor, production was expected to multiply. Fourier's complex labor system was intended to eliminate excessive competition, yet utilize healthy rivalry between "groups" as an added incentive to production. Individual differences would be recognized through the freedom of job selection and change. Working with and for others, as well as for himself, the laborer would discover a new dignity and sense of creativity in his work.¹²

The waste involved in the competitive and separate household system of the day also appalled Fourier and he insisted that all of the inhabitants in each of the proposed utopian communities should live in a great central building—the phalanstery. There, community kitchens, common living quarters, and cooperative buying would lead to increased efficiency. In addition to these provisions the phalanx was intended to ensure care of the sick and aged. Great importance was attached to education, which was to be made attractive and efficient.¹³

Fourier was apparently anxious to win the support of the Christian church for his program. In his *New Industrial World* he traced the doctrine of association to the Gospels of the New Testament. However, it

9. Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias*.

10. Gettell, *op. cit.*, p. 378.

11. Laidler, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

might be suggested that many probably saw a paradox between Fourier's analysis of human nature and his acceptance at the same time of the doctrine of the Fall of Man.

Failing to perceive the full impact of the Industrial Revolution, Fourier saw in it primarily its evils and in response proposed a cooperative "agrarian-handcraft economy."¹⁴ His scheme for adjusting society and the environment to a static and perfect human nature included these elements: communal organization and life; a voluntary and predominantly agricultural labor and production system; and, finally, economic and social security. With this foundation, the evils of the present system would be eliminated in representative communities, which, with success, would spread throughout the world. In France, the home of Fourierism, very few attempts in the practical application of his philosophy were made and he was keenly disappointed.

The story in America was considerably different. Albert Brisbane presented Fourier's ideas to American readers through the publication of *Social Destiny of Man* in 1840. This reprint of important passages from the works of the French philosopher was accompanied by comments and illustrations relating to the American scene. Brisbane's book met with immediate success and initiated a movement that caused considerable notice for a decade.¹⁵

The first important convert to Fourierism in America was Horace Greeley, editor of the powerful *New York Tribune*. The *Tribune* carried a daily column explaining the new ideas to America, and Greeley, who was long regarded as the foremost editor of his time, also gave generously of his energy and means to advance the movement. His interpretation of the Fourierist principles reached thousands in his famous debate with Henry J. Raymond, then editor of the *Courier and Enquirer*, and later of the *New York Times*. The debate was printed in twenty-four issues of the *Tribune* between November, 1846, and May, 1847.¹⁶

Fourierism also attracted other brilliant and influential spokesmen who were able to translate the ideas of the French philosopher in a manner appealing to the American public. Parke Godwin, associate editor of the *New York Post*, and son-in-law of its editor, William Cullen Bryant, was attracted to the growing inner circle of Associationists. Godwin, in his *Democracy, Pacific and Constructive*, published in 1844, issued a strong indictment of the excesses of the capitalist system and urged that existing townships be gradually transformed into Fourierist communities.¹⁷

William Ellery Channing, the great Unitarian minister; Charles A. Dana, later the editor of the *New York Sun*; George Ripley, later editor of

14. Mason, *op. cit.*, p. 403.

15. Laidler, *op. cit.*, p. 100; Arthur E. Bestor, Jr., "Albert Brisbane—Propagandist for Socialism in the 1840's," *New York History*, XXVIII (April, 1947), pp. 128-58.

16. Laidler, *op. cit.*, pp. 110-13.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

the *Tribune* and editor of the *American Encyclopaedia*; and John S. Dwight, poet and music lover, were a few of the other notables who joined with Brisbane, Greeley, and Godwin in the inner circle. During the early 1840's numerous periodicals were circulated, extensive lecture trips were arranged, and the new social philosophy became the subject of public discussion among increasing thousands.

Societies were formed to propagate the ideas in the East and Middle West, and on April 4, 1844, a national convention of these societies was held at Clinton Hall in New York City. The convention endorsed the phalanx as the one form of organization calculated to solve the problems of the day, but it warned against starting phalanxes with insufficient preparation or funds. A National Confederation of Associations was formed and the *Phalanx* was made the official publication of the movement. Albert Brisbane was appointed the Confederation's representative in seeking more information about Fourierist activities in Europe.¹⁸

There were a number of causes for the wide appeal of the Fourierist philosophy in America in the 1840's. The economic crises resulting from the Panic of 1837 and the general humanitarian agitation that surrounded the growing anti-slavery movement helped give impetus to the new teachings. There were certain ideas in the Fourierist philosophy that attracted American understanding. Fundamental to Fourierism was the belief in the essential goodness of man. The evils of the present society, it was insisted, were the result of thwarting human nature. This became an acceptable doctrine to many in a nation already "shaking itself free from the repressions of Calvinism." Fourierism also recognized the fluidity of class lines and proposed the elimination of class antagonisms rather than the necessity of class struggle, the concept of Karl Marx that was to make little penetration in America.¹⁹

Charles Fourier had regarded industrialism as a decided evil, and with a deep faith in the virtue of rural life he did not advocate urbanism in any way. Few mechanical devices which seemed to justify the high promise of industrial advocates had appeared by 1840, and, since America was still a predominantly rural nation, the Fourierist interpretation of the factory system as a threat to traditional ways of life was warmly received by many people. Condemning all displays of social superiority, the new philosophy, at the same time, avoided all infringements upon property rights. This attitude was sure to appeal more strongly to Americans than the rigid equality of communism. "Freedom, in other words, was dearer than equality."²⁰

Another blunder of great importance was avoided by the Fourierists in the presentation of their program to America. While the earlier com-

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 104-05; Noyes, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

19. Bestor, "American Phalanxes," I, pp. 9-10.

20. *Ibid.*, I, pp. 10-13.

munitarian, Robert Owen, had renounced in unequivocal terms all religion, including Christianity, this charge against Fourierism was refuted with considerable success by its spokesmen.²¹

Finally, characteristically receptive to idealism, the American people were sure to be affected by the new philosophy with its promise that the "elevation and refinement of the mass" would be effected by setting each person free in surroundings where there would be ". . . no tyranny or dictation--no control of the individual by the individual--no disciplining by monastic rules and regulations--no violation of individual will for the pretended good of the community--no subjection of man to arbitrary systems," but where "independence, education, intellectual development, moral training, enjoyment of the arts and sciences, and extended social intercourse, are only necessary to elevate the whole Human Race to the noble standard which God intended they should attain."²²

More than forty Fourierist community experiments were established in the United States between 1840 and 1850. Perhaps the best known was Brook Farm, founded in 1840, and which became the center of Fourierist activity in the United States. Brook Farm has been singularly well documented by scholars and it is sufficient for this study to note that it expired in the autumn of 1846. In many ways the most important of the Fourierist experiments was the North American Phalanx, developed near Red Bank, New Jersey, where a group of earnest and cultured people from New York and Albany made a concerted effort to institute the complete Fourierist program. Organized in 1843, it, like Brook Farm, seemed to enjoy considerable success until it, too, was disastrously wrecked by a crucial fire. Charles Sears, the Phalanx president, had the responsibility of closing the Red Bank experiment in 1854.

Other phalanxes were located in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, New York, Michigan, Iowa, Illinois, Texas, and Ohio. The history of these more than forty Fourierist communities during the 1840's is one monotonous record of failures, but in justice to Fourierism it must be admitted that very few of the projects were undertaken on the lines laid down by the French philosopher or his American disciple, Albert Brisbane. Failure for most of the communities can be properly attributed to economic factors. Although they had been warned against beginning without adequate financial means (Brisbane had suggested a capital of \$400,000), very little heed was paid to this advice by the enthusiasts. As a result, poor and heavily mortgaged land provided a disadvantageous beginning for most of the phalanxes.²³

21. *Loc. cit.*; Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias*, p. 55.

22. Albert Brisbane, *Association; or, a Concise Exposition of the Practical Part of Fourier's Social Science* (New York, 1843), pp. 28-29, cited in Bestor, "American Phalanxes," I, p. 157.

23. Hillquit, *History of Socialism*, pp. 96-97.

A serious defect in most of these experiments was the divergent interests of the people who composed them. Most participants came without agricultural or industrial backgrounds, accustomed to higher standards of living, and the lack of adequate preparation produced friction and disappointments. There was often religious dissension within the groups and antagonism from surrounding citizens. Other difficulties that beset most of the phalanxes included overcrowding and legal tangles. To the popular mind the failure of the phalanxes was the failure of Fourierism, and in vain did the American apostles protest that the doctrines had not had a fair trial.

In addition to the failure of the phalanxes there were other criticisms of the Fourierist theories that undoubtedly weakened the movement within as well as from without. Its power to reform the whole world and its promise to maintain individual property, family and marriage ties, and religious worship were doubted by many. In view of the general tendency on the part of the American public to regard all communal experiments as free love colonies, and in view of the unorthodox sexual views propounded in some of Fourier's writings, it is interesting to find that sexual irregularities were not an important source of friction in the phalanxes.²⁴ Despite criticism of irreligion in the phalanxes, it would appear that most of them encouraged and held religious services.²⁵

Other opponents of Fourierism accused the plan of Association as a scheme to form a landed aristocracy of capitalists who then could subject the working classes to a condition of serfdom on their feudal estates. From religious and philosophical circles came further criticism. From these sources it was pointed out that the Fourierist doctrine misrepresents the human predicament by attributing all the evils to civilization, none to human nature with its passions and appetites which, according to Fourier, were intended to become the supreme law for the direction of human conduct. There was an irreconcilable difference between Fourier's theory of human nature and the Christian ethic based on the idea of sin.²⁶ This paradox was never resolved by Fourier or any of his spokesmen.

The conjecture may be made that Charles Fourier attempted more than a compromise of labor and capital in the interests of justice, harmony, and efficiency. The deeper content of his philosophy suggests that it was an attempted compound of the ideas of the eighteenth century Rationalists and the early nineteenth century Romanticists.

The Early Years at Silkville, 1869-1873

Of the small group of reunited Fourierists, Brisbane, Grant, Sears, and de Boissiere, the last named was the most actively interested in set-

24. Bestor, "American Phalanxes," I, pp. 241-42.

25. Hillquit, *History of Socialism*, p. 139.

26. Bestor, "American Phalanxes," I, pp. 267-68.

ting up another utopian community. In 1867 he traveled throughout the Mississippi Valley in search of a suitable location and ultimately the decision was made to establish the community in Franklin County, Kansas.¹

There are a number of reasons which could have determined de Boissiere's decision to settle in Franklin County, Kansas. After his recent experience with the New Orleans Freedmen's Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church it may be no coincidence that the land was purchased from the Kansas Educational Association of that same church. The Methodists had earlier founded Baker University at Baldwin and were selling large tracts of land throughout the state.

Writing on January 11, 1868, one of the Educational Association's agents, William H. Schofield, said that negotiations were in process for the sale of 2,400 acres of land to wealthy parties from New York and Bordeaux, France. The buyers planned to cultivate 1,000 acres and with the thirty families they expected to bring to the farm they planned to combine manufacturing with agriculture. Silk products and some staple goods were to be manufactured. \$20,000 would be spent on improvements during the first year.²

Horace Greeley, an earlier advocate of Fourierism, may have influenced the decision to make the communal endeavor in Kansas through his then current popularization of the West. From their earlier experiences with the Fourierist communities, Brisbane, Grant, and Sears may also have suggested a location in the West for other reasons. The West would be removed from the rapidly expanding urban industrial system and would fulfill the agrarian requirements of Fourier. While the founders of Silkville were doubtless convinced that Fourier's communitarian ideas had not had a fair trial in the 1840's, there is the definite fact that success might be more easily achieved where earlier failures were not so widely known.

One factor is more certain. From the first, de Boissiere had hoped to establish the culture and manufacture of silk in his utopian community and this would fit in perfectly with the Fourierist concept of handcraft labor. Finding a climate in Kansas similar to that part of France where silk production was most prosperous, he was enthusiastic.³

Early in 1869 Brisbane, Grant, and de Boissiere completed the purchase of 3,500 acres of prairie land in the southwest corner of Franklin County.⁴ The undeveloped land was three miles south of Williamsburg, the nearest post office; about twelve miles nearly west of Princeton, the nearest railroad station, on the Leavenworth, Lawrence, and Galveston

1. Raymond, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

2. Letter from William H. Schofield to Daniel Fogle, now in possession of William Fogle of Williamsburg, Kansas.

3. Huron, *op. cit.*, p. 552.

4. Charles V. Riley, *Fourth Annual Report of the Noxious Beneficial and Other Insects, of the State of Missouri* (Jefferson City, 1872), p. 82.

Railroad; and about twenty miles southwest of the county seat at Ottawa.⁵ Charles Sears had not come to Kansas, and did not do so until 1875.

The narrative of the attempt to revive Fourierism through the experiment in Kansas began almost at once. De Boissiere, Grant, and Brisbane, who had subscribed \$29,000 to the new venture, drew up the Articles of Association of the Kansas Co-Operative Farm early in 1869. On March 15 the *Articles* were reviewed in the Oneida Community's *Circular*,⁶ a procedure identical to that taken with the founding of each of the earlier Fourierist communities. The publication of the *Articles* helped to notify all who might be interested in coming to the Kansas utopian community.

De Boissiere, now fifty-nine years of age, exhibited considerable stamina in the early months of hardship during the founding of the colony. His perseverance was put to an additional test in June when his partners, Brisbane and Grant, returned to the East.⁷ In a later letter, de Boissiere suggested that it was the hardships that had caused Brisbane and Grant to leave, but apparently no enmity was felt. He understood that cultured men could not be expected to come until conditions were more suitable at the farm.⁸ Grant corresponded with de Boissiere and published his *Co-Operation; or, Sketch of the Conditions of Attractive Industry* in 1870 under the auspices of Horace Greeley, an account which included a lengthy description of the Kansas Co-Operative Farm. In 1873 Grant joined de Boissiere in an attempt to attract residents to Silkville. Brisbane's enthusiasm had waned, however, and so far as can be learned he took no further active interest in the Kansas project.⁹

Continuing hardships and de Boissiere's patience are revealed in a letter to a friend, February 24, 1870:

Very well has my friend Santerre, one of the pioneers of Considerant in Texas [one of the numerous Fourierist attempts in the 1840's], said that laborers are needed for the work of establishing a farm, men habitual to hard work, to privations, to poor lodgings. Men of refinement can only join us when woman begins to bring a more varied nourishment, and when we have light and varied work, tolerable lodging, agreeable society and frequent postal communication. Scarcely before the spring of 1871 can we be ready to appeal to the socialists. However, I hope as soon as possible to attract hither my friend Charles Sears.¹⁰

In this long and illuminating letter de Boissiere said that he knew many men devoted to the associative idea and had great confidence in Sears'

5. *The Prairie Home Prospectus*, cited in Charles Nordhoff, *Communitistic Societies of the United States* (New York, 1875), p. 381. The Fourierist society in Kansas was first called the Kansas Co-Operative Farm. Later it was named Silkville and Prairie Home. The name of Silkville came to be most widely used.

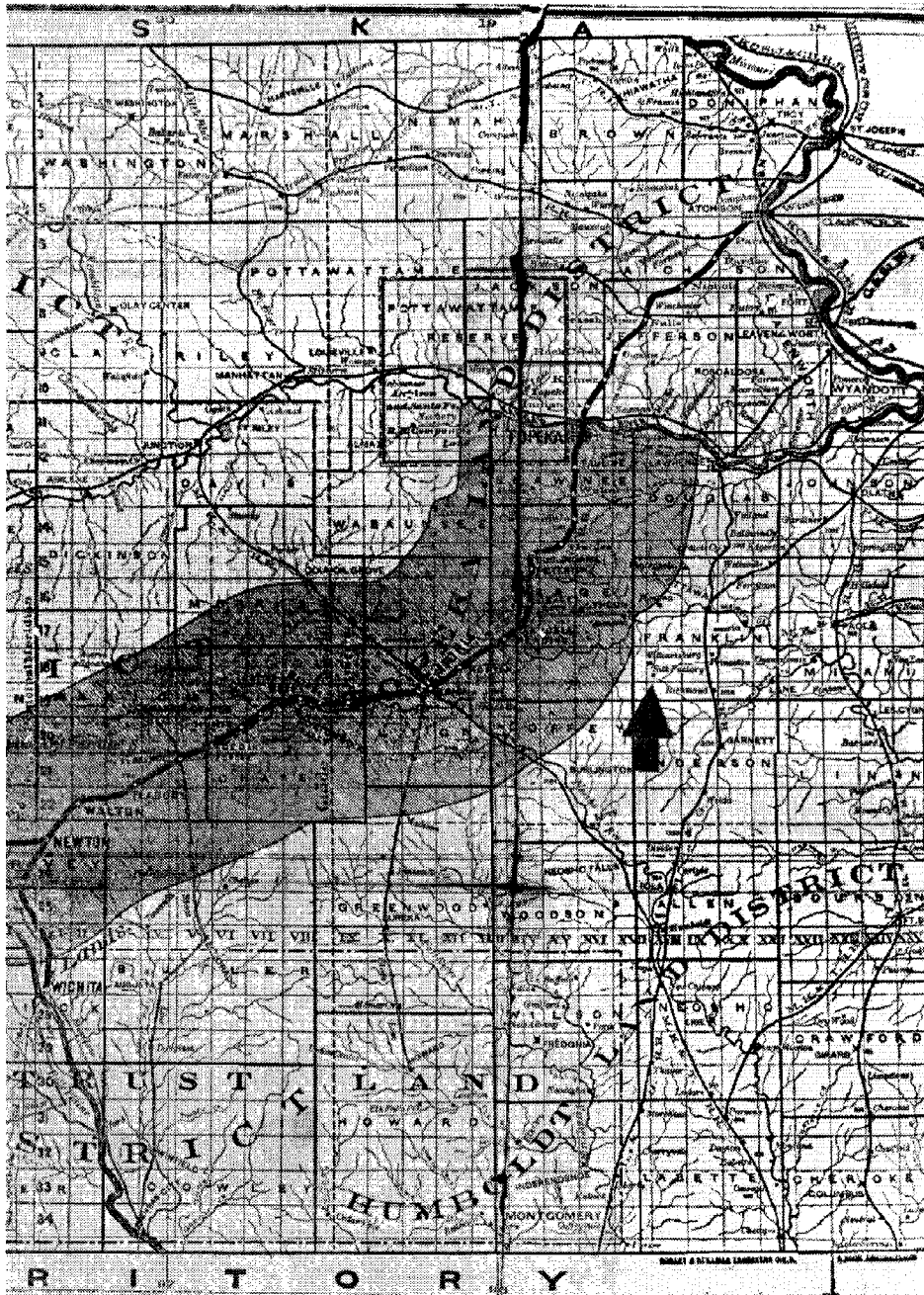
6. "Brisbane in Kansas," (Oneida Community) *Circular*, new series, V, March 15, 1869, pp. 412-13, cited in Bestor, "American Phalanxes," II, p. 161.

7. Letter from E. P. Grant, cited in (Oneida Community) *Circular*, new series, VI, July 5, 1869, p. 128, and cited in Bestor, "American Phalanxes," II, p. 161.

8. Letter quoted in "A Co-Operative Farm in Kansas," *Topeka Commonwealth*, June 1, 1870.

9. Hillquit, *History of Socialism*, p. 99.

10. *Topeka Commonwealth*, June 1, 1870.



EASTERN KANSAS—1873

From an Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad Land Map
(By courtesy of the Lyon County, Kansas, Museum. Dr. O. W. Mosher, Curator.)

judgment as to the proper time to invite them to Kansas. He would continue to labor diligently to lay the necessary foundations for the community. On the brighter side, de Boissiere mentioned that settlers were moving into the surrounding area, furnishing a more abundant labor supply, railways were expanding, and Ottawa stores were better stocked. As to the farm itself, de Boissiere said that he intended to add another 100 acres to the forty already under cultivation. Other planned improvements included a vegetable garden, the purchase of a large number of cows, and construction necessary for the growing number of livestock. Large workshops for the manufacture of silk fabrics would soon be erected and reeling machinery from France was expected any day.

De Boissiere's motives in the early months of the Kansas experiment were presented in a story by a newspaper correspondent in June, 1870, which included the reprinting of the letter referred to above. He reported that while dwelling in France M. de Boissiere had been moved at the sight of oppression and degradation endured by the weaker classes of society. As a result, he hoped to found in America a representative institution where workers would receive a just return for their work, where labor and capital could be reconciled, and where all could enjoy security from poverty without being enslaved by a "caste-iron system." Members of the proposed community would rent rooms in a large unitary building to be erected for its efficiency and social benefits. There the inhabitants would eat in a common dining room on the restaurant plan, but, for those who desired, liberty would be granted to live in private cottages on the domain.¹¹

These motives and community plans stated by de Boissiere in 1870 are almost identical with those of the earlier Fourierists, but it appears that he did not plan to insist that associates reside in the phalanstery. Another lesson from the earlier experiments was learned when de Boissiere said that it was essential that the farm should be firmly established before placing the communitarian ideas in practice.

In 1870 de Boissiere went to France where he persuaded two families to return to Silkville with him. Shortly after his return to Kansas four other families followed, and in the meantime several American families had come to Silkville.¹² During the first few years more than forty French immigrants came to the Kansas settlement. Most of these were experts in the production and manufacture of silk.

Silk manufacture at the farm had begun in 1869 with the production of silk ribbons. Three looms were employed with a capacity of 224 yards of ribbon per day. Broad goods were woven in 1870, the same year that preliminary steps were taken for producing the community's own silk.

11. *Loc. cit.*

12. Raymond, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

Seventy acres of Russian mulberry trees were planted and the first silk worms were imported from California.¹³

Obviously, there was considerable risk involved in the attempted production of silk in Kansas, although de Boissiere was convinced that the climate was satisfactory. There were encouraging prospects for the successful silk producer and manufacturer in the United States. The Civil War had stimulated the demand for silk products, and Congress was interested in the development of silk. Silk societies had been founded in several states, books on silk culture had been published, and new machinery for its manufacture had been invented.¹⁴

Silk products of the farm were early recognized for their superiority and with his success in attracting skilled labor from France de Boissiere believed that a permanent and profitable industry would soon be established.¹⁵

De Boissiere was quickly confronted with a new development, however, which disappointed him. Many of his French laborers began to leave the farm. As they learned the English language sufficiently to talk with the people of the neighborhood, they discovered that higher pay awaited them elsewhere. With the silk industry in its beginning stages, it was impossible for de Boissiere to compete with the wages paid farm laborers and mechanics in the surrounding country and towns.¹⁶ Many of the French girls who had been brought over to help in feeding the moths and reeling the silk left to marry farmers nearby.¹⁷ Although disappointed, de Boissiere's resourcefulness was not extinguished, and he augmented the group that remained with him by hiring outside workers. The community attempt continued.¹⁸

In November, 1871, Charles V. Riley, the noted Missouri State Entomologist, who later became the United States Government Entomologist, was interested enough to make a personal visit to Silkville. An account of his visit was printed the following year.¹⁹ He found de Boissiere sitting at an immense table with all the operatives, partaking in common of a plain but substantial meal. De Boissiere, said Riley, was a bachelor of some sixty years of age, a philanthropic and intelligent man

13. Huron, *op. cit.*, p. 557.

14. Margaret Whittmore, "An Ambitious Kansas Experiment Recalled by Relics of Silkville," *Kansas City Times*, August 21, 1941. The conclusion in this article that it was the growing national interest in silk culture that induced de Boissiere to establish his colony in Kansas is not borne out by the facts. Silk was one of the industries he wished to develop in line with the Fourrierist plan of diversified activity. Other industries were attempted along with it, as well as following its collapse. A detailed analysis of the attempt to produce and manufacture silk at Silkville is beyond the scope of this study and is mentioned only as it relates to the fundamental objectives of the communal endeavor.

15. For an interesting account of the many attempts to introduce silk culture to America: S. J. Barrows, "The Silk Industry in America," *Atlantic Monthly*, XLVI, 277 (November, 1880), pp. 614-24.

16. Huron, *op. cit.*, pp. 557-58.

17. Whittmore, *op. cit.*

18. Huron, *op. cit.*, p. 558.

19. Riley, *op. cit.*, pp. 82-83.

of plain habits and with such broad democratic views that he had come to prefer this country because of his disgust for Napoleon III.

In the course of their conversations de Boissiere told Riley that he saw no reason for the conflict between labor and capital. At Silkville he intended to form eventually "a co-operative society, with equitable distribution of profits, mutual guarantees, association of families, integral education and unity of interests." The full particulars of the plan could be found in a work on Co-operation by E. P. Grant. As soon as the organization was completed de Boissiere planned to donate to the association all of the capital he had invested up to that time, reserving for himself the right to as many votes as the capital represented.

Riley reported that a three-story frame building had been erected for living quarters. There were 3,500 acres of undulating prairie land of good elevation with a rich limestone subsoil, 360 acres of which were fenced and 150 acres under cultivation. Contracts had been let for fencing a 160-acre pasture with a stone wall, and, while the greater portion of the land was to be devoted to the raising of cattle, de Boissiere said that silk production and other activities were being developed. There were a few sheds for rearing the worm and a stone silk factory. The reeling of cocoons and the manufacture of velvet trimmings was expected to furnish occupation through the winter months. By November, 1871, they had planted 8,000 mulberry trees which had made fine growth. There were 2,500 more young mulberry trees in nursery and to be set out soon. A large orchard consisted of 2,000 peach trees and 900 other trees. There were 1,000 grape vines, and in the spring belts of Black locust, Black walnut, and Ailanthus were to be planted. Riley pointed out that it would take at least another two years to determine the possibility of profitably raising silk.

De Boissiere mentioned several other industries which had received little attention in that part of the country and some of which he expected to develop at Silkville. These industrial enterprises included broommaking, preservation of meat in tin cans, manufacture of sorghum syrup, castor oil, morocco leather, and non-poisonous matches which could not be ignited except on the box containing them. Riley found the looms in the silk factory idle and suggested that the state legislature would be wise to encourage de Boissiere. Although he was not certain that silk culture would prove successful, Riley concluded his report with an expression of confidence in the Kansas communal effort.

After two years of considerable progress, de Boissiere decided in 1873 to publish a prospectus describing the communitarian society and inviting socialists and others who might be interested to come to the Kansas enterprise. It is not certain whether E. P. Grant came to Kansas in 1873, but his name was included on the pamphlet as one of the pro-

jectors. *The Prairie Home Association and Corporation Based on Attractive Industry* was published in Canton, Ohio, sometime during the year. It was almost certainly written by de Boissiere.²⁰

The prospectus began with a description of Silkville and an invitation to all who were interested to join the associates at Prairie Home. Plans for the community were given in detail, including the fact that "a leading feature of the enterprise is to establish the 'Combined Household' of Fourier—that is, a single large residence for all the associates." The organization of labor, "the source of all wealth," would be

first, on the basis of *remuneration proportioned to production*, and second, in such manner as to make it both *efficient and attractive*.

Aids, including education and subsistence for all, would be provided when the community had "sufficiently advanced to render them practicable."

Operations during the coming year, it was said, would be preparatory only, with a few people as the nucleus for future development of these ideas. Each candidate would "be required to provide for his own support, and for that of such other persons as are admitted at his request as members of his family or other dependents." The means of support at the farm included fertile land available for cultivation and facilities for "the making of clothes, boots and shoes, and other articles of universal consumption." It was expected that the associates would "distribute themselves into organizations for industrial operations, and select or invent their own kinds and mode of cultivation and other practical processes, under regulations prescribed by themselves." Residents would be encouraged to choose their own work and their own social and industrial companions, to select, "concurrently with those with whom they are immediately associated, their own hours of labor, recreation, and repose; and, generally, in directing their activity in such manner and to such purposes as their taste or interest may induce them to prefer."

No effort was to be made to select persons of "similar views or beliefs, or to mould them afterward to any uniform pattern. That unanimity which is not expected in regard to practical operation, is much less expected in regard to those subjects transcending the sphere of human experience about which opinions are now so irreconcilably conflicting." Each resident was expected only to "respect the rights and interests of others as he desires his own to be respected by them."

One of the important objectives of the communal enterprise was to divest labor "of the repugnance inseparable from it as now prosecuted." Freedom of the associates to "select their preferred occupations and modes of proceedings" was suggested. This was expected to result in two

20. *The Prairie Home Prospectus* is reprinted with its title in Raymond, *op. cit.*, pp. 164-68, and is reprinted without a title in Nordhoff, *op. cit.*, pp. 376, 380-81.

important advantages, according to the prospectus. First, respective partisans would vie with each other to demonstrate the superiority of their chosen specialties. Second, the plan would "give full play to all varieties of taste and capacity, and secure a more perfect correspondence of functions with aptitudes than exists in the present system of labor."

De Boissiere intended that the colony should be "SELF-SUSTAINING," with associates supplying their own communal needs, including education and subsistence, upkeep and replacement of physical facilities, as well as a reasonable compensation to those who furnish the capital needed.

Persons interested in an extended explanation of the principles of the enterprise were requested to send fifty cents to the *Tribune*, New York, or to either of the subscribers, for a "treatise on 'Co-operation and Attractive Industry,' published under the auspices of the departed and lamented Horace Greeley."

Although expressed at times with less certainty than had been customary with the earlier Fourierists, the part of the prospectus just described was in essential accord with the earlier movement. The phalanstery; rejection of the contemporary degradation of wage labor for a plan of equitable remuneration; emphasis upon efficient and attractive handicraft industries; the self-sufficient agrarian community; the policy of granting associates the freedom of organizing themselves, choosing their own pursuits, and thereby giving full play to individual taste and capacity; the use of mild competition among groups; a just compensation for capital; the tolerance and consideration expected of one another in the life of the community; recognition of the necessity of a period of preparation which must precede the full application of the provisions for economic security; and, most importantly, the faith that these reforms on the community level would soon produce "a system of industry and of social life far in advance of any form of either now prevailing in the world,"—all of these utopian concepts bore the hallmark of the earlier Fourierist movement in the United States.

De Boissiere made some conservative additions to the earlier Fourierist program. In the prospectus he stated that

The apprehension that our experiment might be greatly embarrassed by admitting the totally desitute to participate in it, compels us to say that such can not at present be received . . .

For each person joining the community, a \$100 deposit was required, on which interest would be allowed at six per cent per year. This provision would serve the added function of giving the person a cash reserve in the event that he wished to leave the community.

Each person admitted as an associate or candidate would be required to provide furniture for his room and all other articles needed for his personal use, including hand tools with which he works.

Rent for rooms and payments for board must be submitted for "two months in advance for each person admitted to the domain, including each member of the applicant's family; and at the end of the first month; payment of these items for another month, so that they shall again be paid two months in advance, and so from month to month indefinitely."

We should esteem, as especially useful, a class of residents who, having an income, independent of their earnings, adequate to their frugal support at least, can devote themselves as freely as they please to attractive occupations which are not remunerative, it being such occupations probably that will furnish the first good examples of a true industrial organization. Next to be preferred are those having an independent income, which, though not adequate to their entire support, is sufficient to relieve them from any considerable anxiety concerning it; for they can, to a greater or less extent, yield to the impulses of attraction with comparative indifference to the pecuniary results of their industry.

De Boissiere, in addition, requested that the style of living at the farm be frugal and inexpensive, at least in the early stages, and also announced that no fund would be set apart for the gratuitous entertainment of visitors.

Although the above additions to the earlier Fourierist program were needed, perhaps, some of them were visionary and impractical. Nevertheless, these were the contributions of Ernest Valetton de Boissiere to the Fourierist plan of social reconstruction.

Another factor is worth mentioning. While the information was not contained in the prospectus, a stone building had been constructed for the purpose of religious meetings "so that ministers of the Gospel, passing through the country, could come and preach to the people."²¹ This was not a departure from the earlier Fourierist practices, for the North American Phalanx had also held religious services in its public building.²²

There are only two differences worth noting in a comparison of the *Prairie Home Prospectus* with the Constitution of the North American Phalanx. The first is the series of financial restrictions which have been mentioned, obviously for the purpose of protecting the investments that had been made and preventing incompetents or destitutes from coming to the farm. The other is a concluding note to the prospectus in which de Boissiere said:

It should be understood that the foregoing exposition of principles and policy, though the best that our present knowledge enables us to make, is provisional only, and liable to be modified from time to time as experience makes us wiser.

With this avoidance of dogmatism de Boissiere completed the prospectus which he sincerely hoped would attract a sturdy nucleus of people for his utopia in Kansas. He could look forward to the following spring and an important development in the construction of his community.

21. Huron, *op. cit.*, p. 557.

22. *Constitution of the North American Phalanx*, reprinted in Bestor, "American

Many striking personalities and groups played a part in the settlement of Kansas in the years following the Civil War, but few were as spectacular and attracted so much attention as de Boissiere and his proposed utopian community.²³

The Failure to Revive Fourierism in Kansas, 1874-1892

In the fall of 1873 a severe financial panic shook the nation and by winter many bankruptcies had occurred. Factories shut down and business suffered in a depression that was to last for nearly six years. Significantly, the country's financial depression slowed the heretofore rapid settlement of the area. An inadequate local demand for the industrial products of the Kansas utopia meant little work for new residents had they come. They did not come, and de Boissiere decided to postpone any further invitations to residents to join the Prairie Home community.

The French promoter was not defeated by this delay, however, and in the summer of 1874 the construction of the phalanstery was completed. The large building, thirty-six by ninety-five feet, was three stories high above the basement and contained sixty rooms.¹ Spacious parlors and dining rooms and living quarters for about 100 people were provided. The floors were insulated with straw to retain the warmth in winter and to eliminate noise.² Several fine stone barns and other buildings were completed at considerable expense.³ The fact that several of these buildings stand today, after eighty years, is evidence of their excellent construction.

De Boissiere had been disappointed with the silkworm eggs from California, and in 1873 eggs from Japan were imported. In 1874 the second growth of cocoons showed a marked improvement and the next year they were still better. The progress in silk culture was so encouraging that the French leader became more certain than ever that it could be made one of the farm's outstanding industries. So enthusiastic did he become that he exhibited the silk at fairs in Lawrence and Topeka.⁴

In 1875 de Boissiere was finally successful in bringing his good friend Charles Sears to Silkville. Sears was at once put in charge of the expanding silk industry, and his son, Charles T. Sears, took charge of the farm, orchards, and the stock-raising interests at the small community.⁵ Charles Sears soon established more intensive and direct contact with the Oneida Community and probably with other socialist and cooperative

Phalanxes," I, pp. 295-306; also cf. Hillquit, *History of Socialism*, p. 139.

23. Cf. N. B. Waldron, "Colonization in Kansas From 1861-1890" (Evanston, Northwestern University Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, 1923), pp. 72-75. A copy of this work is also available at the Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

1. Huron, *op. cit.*, p. 557.

2. Whitmore, *op. cit.*

3. Huron, *loc. cit.*

4. *Ibid.*, p. 556.

5. A. T. Andreas, *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago, 1883), p. 616.

Circular Letter

TO THOSE INTERESTED IN

SILK CULTURE
IN KANSAS.



VIEW OF SILKVILLE.

SILKVILLE, KANSAS, August 1st, 1877.

The number of persons giving attention to the culture of silk in Kansas is rapidly increasing. Silk culture will, in fact, soon be, to many, a valuable and profitable addition to general farming. The object of this circular letter is to answer many questions, explain many facts and correct many errors, in the desire to encourage new beginners and prevent the catastrophe of failure which must come to the most enthusiastic if they work ignorantly.

In my last circular I say, "no success can be obtained without two conditions, viz: Good sound eggs of the finest broods known, and the best varieties of Mulberry trees cultivated for their food."

enterprises. He wrote many letters and articles which publicized the Kansas experiment and indicated Sears' avid interest in cooperative ideas and the development of socialist theory.⁶ The addition of the father and son to the leadership of the Kansas utopia must have encouraged the French founder.

With Charles Sears and his son at the farm there must have been many interesting discussions. The size of the library at Silkville gives some indication of the interests of the group and perhaps the time spent in study. In the prospectus of 1873 de Boissiere had noted a library of 1,200 volumes in English, besides a large number of volumes in French and other languages. Favorite authors were Fourier, Cabet, and Laboulaye. Publications of the Icaria and Oneida communities were closely consulted.⁷

The small community began to attract more and more attention for its development of silk culture. At the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876 the displays from Silkville received favorable recognition. Cocoons from Prairie Home were considered "as good as the best cocoons from France, Italy, and Japan."⁸ Encouraged by this acclaim, de Boissiere returned to Kansas and with the help of others soon made Silkville the center of the silk culture movement in America.⁹ L. S. Crozier, a professional silk culturist, was brought to the community to help guide the intensified efforts.¹⁰ In the years that he was there Crozier issued a series of circular letters to those in the state interested in silk culture. From the Silkville headquarters he also published a book on silk culture and sold mulberry trees and silk worm eggs.¹¹ Sears and de Boissiere worked with Crozier with a great deal of enthusiasm for the next few years in a concerted effort to make silk production the mainstay of their utopian colony, as well as an important Kansas industry.¹²

Although the interest in silk undoubtedly stole the stage for a time, Fourierism and the communitarian ideal were not forgotten. Charles Sears continued to write articles which appeared in the Oneida Community periodical, and possibly elsewhere, and which clearly indicated

6. Charles Sears, "Co-operation in Kansas. Development of Silk Culture," (Oneida Community) *Circular*, new series, XIII, January 6, 1876, p. 3; also a letter from Sears cited in "The Tidal Wave of Socialism," (Oneida Community) *American Socialist*, I, May 25, 1876, pp. 68-69. Both articles are cited in Bestor, "American Phalanxes," II, p. 162.

7. Raymond, *op. cit.*, p. 167. Mr. Raymond also reports having seen many manuscript writings in de Boissiere's handwriting on a variety of topics. He suggested that these revealed "broad knowledge and a thorough method of study." The manuscripts have not been discovered and presumably were taken by de Boissiere on his final return to France or were destroyed.

8. Huron, *op. cit.*, p. 557.

9. Barrows, *op. cit.*, pp. 617, 620.

10. *First Biennial Report of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture* (Topeka, 1878), pp. 220-21.

11. L. S. Crozier, *Circular Letter, To Those Interested in Silk Culture in Kansas* (Topeka, 1877). The only extant circular is dated August 1, 1877, and is available at the Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

12. Barrows, *loc. cit.*

interest in the Fourierist philosophy.¹³ One of the articles appearing in 1877 described the Kansas experiment and may well have been another effort to attract associates.¹⁴

Despite a tendency on the part of the Kansas newspapers of the period to exaggerate it is obvious that by 1880 a considerable degree of prosperity had come to Silkville. Many complimentary accounts of the small community and its material abundance are recorded during the following years. One writer was particularly impressed with the "spacious buildings costing over \$100,000." He found that the fine cheese factory had a capacity of 1,200 pounds per day.¹⁵

Another visitor in 1881 warmly described the thriving orchards and the "acres of grapes then worked into wine." He found that the residents rented their rooms in the phalanstery and ate their meals in a common dining room. The price of the meals was \$1.40 a week. Commenting on de Boissiere, the correspondent found that he was jolly, a bachelor, and exceedingly good natured. Although the leader's annual income from France was \$25,000, he was able to live on much less at Silkville. The visitor further observed, "Surely here is a living example for cheap living, for he is no skeleton. In fact, at first glance, you would imagine he had been 'stall fed,' as he turns the beam at over 200."¹⁶

While the number of residents varied from year to year, it seems highly unlikely that there were ever more than fifty people in the community. Unfortunately, not much is known of the day to day life at Silkville during the two decades of its existence. Enough information is available, however, to disqualify many of the erroneous statements that have been made about the small community and its leader. Several writers have pictured de Boissiere as a domineering patriarch who developed an isolated and athiestic colony where free love was practiced and marriage was abolished.¹⁷

So far as can be determined, visitors were never prevented from going to Silkville, nor were the people in the surrounding neighborhood hostile to the communal project. It is true that transportation was slow

13. Charles Sears, "Are We Entering upon Guarantism [sic]?" (Oneida Community) *American Socialist*, II, November 7, 1877, pp. 361-62, cited in Bestor, "American Phalanxes," II, p. 163. In this article Sears was concerned with "guarantism," one of the stages of Fourier's philosophy of history.

14. Letter from Charles Sears describing Silkville, dated May 22, 1877, cited in (Oneida Community) *American Socialist*, II, November 29, 1877, p. 381, and cited in Bestor, "American Phalanxes," II, p. 163. In 1879 Sears published a small booklet containing his analysis of the earlier Fourierist endeavor at the North American Phalanx, of which he had been president, and which had collapsed in 1854. Charles Sears, *The North American Phalanx: An Historical and Descriptive Sketch* (Silkville [?], 1879), cited in Bestor, *op. cit.*, II, p. 164.

15. Leavenworth *Appeal and Tribune*, February 10, 1880.

16. Williamsburg *Weekly Gazette*, November 11, 1881.

17. Cf. Paul I. Wellman, "Only Mulberry Trees Outlive the Colony of Grand Dreams a Frenchman Set Up in Kansas," *Kansas City Star*, April 19, 1942; Ernest Dewey, "Silkville in Wheat Country," *Hutchinson News-Herald*, August 21, 1950; Charles A. Hawley, "History of Communistic Group in U. S. Bears Out Reassuring Words of Goethe," *Kansas City Times*, November 12, 1949; and William B. Bracke, *Wheat Country* (New York, 1950), pp. 62-65.

and the roads were poor, with the closest railroad station at Princeton, twelve miles away. Considering these factors, and the generally sparse settlement during this period, it is understandable that there was not the social intercourse that we can expect in our day.¹⁸ Actually, there were occasional guests at Silkville and notices of their pleasant visits appeared in the Williamsburg newspapers.

De Boissiere and Charles T. Sears participated in activities of the surrounding area. De Boissiere, a consistent advocate of reform, participated in the local political contests.¹⁹ Charles T. Sears was also active in local politics and in 1882 was secretary of the Williamsburg Greenback Party.²⁰ Another contact with the neighborhood was de Boissiere's position as Vice-President of the First National Bank of Ottawa for several years.²¹ For these and a number of other reasons to be indicated later, there seems to be no justification for the charge of neighborhood antagonism, and, as a matter of fact, the Williamsburg newspaper frequently expressed high regard for the French humanitarian and the work he was doing in Kansas.²²

A warm sidelight on the social life at the farm was recalled in 1929 by Thomas McDonald, who grew up on a farm near Silkville. He recalled that de Boissiere was a courtly old gentleman, a wonderful host who was fond of music and literature, as well as a capable and practical manager of the enterprise. He was known for honesty in his dealings and had the respect of the country side. While the accounts of the parties and dances at Silkville may be somewhat distorted, they indicate a far cry from social isolation. McDonald most vividly remembered the occasional parties, but also remembered the community life as well-balanced and normal.²³

Absolutely no evidence has been found to support the claim that marriage was abolished at the community or that unorthodox sexual relationships were condoned. Most communal endeavors in the United States had been branded as free love colonies and Silkville was not free from these general accusations. The marriage in 1882 of Charles T. Sears and Miss M. L. Lockhart, both of Silkville, would seem to prove that marriage had not been abolished.²⁴ With the lack of any significant evidence to the contrary, it is perhaps safe to say that family life was generally orthodox in the community.

18. Interview with Miss Clara Kaiser, Ottawa, Kansas, February 27, 1951.

19. Raymond, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

20. Williamsburg *Weekly Gazette*, March 10, 1882.

21. Interview with Miss Kaiser.

22. E.g., Williamsburg *Weekly Gazette*, July 16, 1880.

23. "Rise and Fall of the Silk Industry in Kansas," Kansas City *Star*, April 28, 1929. Mr. McDonald's earlier account of life at Silkville has been verified recently by Mrs. Anna Laura Bitts Fritts, Williamsburg, Kansas, in an interview, November 22, 1950. Mrs. Fritts grew up at Silkville where her mother was head cook for a number of years.

24. Williamsburg *Weekly Gazette*, December 22, 1882.

Little is known about religious life at Silkville. A church had been built in the early years and used for that purpose for some time. Later, however, an addition had been built to it and the building was used in the development of the silk industry.²⁵ With the small number of residents, it may be that religious services were discontinued. A few writers have suggested that de Boissiere was an athiest and that this was a significant cause for the failure of the community. Neither of these opinions is supported by definite evidence. De Boissiere did not participate actively in any orthodox church group and this may lead some to assume his athiesm.

Although religious services may have been discontinued at the farm, some of the leaders retained great interest in moral problems. One of the Williamsburg newspapers carried a series of articles written by a resident of Silkville and devoted to a variety of moral subjects. The writings carried a striking similarity to an earlier series of articles in a column devoted to Fourierism in the *New York Tribune* in 1842-43. The Silkville author is not identified, but the parallel with the earlier moral and intellectual interests of Fourierism is too obvious to avoid.²⁶

The economic activities of the abortive Fourierist attempt in Kansas have been mentioned. A comfortable living was assured the small group of residents through the development of stock-raising, orchards, and general agriculture. De Boissiere did attempt to introduce a system of cooperative labor with the silk industry and the cheese factory, but other than these two efforts, no further development of the Fourierist economic ideas is known. For the most part it was necessary for the Frenchman to hire his labor.²⁷ The inhabitants rented rooms in the phalanstery and paid for their meals in the common dining room.²⁸ When the meal was ready, the horn was blown, and each family took what was wanted and ate at an individual family table. One of de Boissiere's interesting projects was the use of zinc money for community exchange. This was secured from his office.²⁹

Although the cheese and butter factory was reported in 1880 to have a capacity of 1,200 pounds per day,³⁰ difficulties were encountered that made it an unsatisfactory project. De Boissiere's plan was to furnish families with as many cows as they would care for. The milk was to be delivered to the creamery and profits would be distributed proportionately. The plan was not popular because the people preferred cash on delivery, and, since the community was so sparsely settled, sufficient

25. Huron, *op. cit.*, p. 558.

26. This series appeared frequently with a Silkville dateline in the *Williamsburg Eagle*, 1886-87; a complete list of the articles published in the earlier column devoted to Fourierism in the *New York Tribune* appears in Bestor, "American Phalanxes," II, pp. 28-43.

27. Huron, *op. cit.*, p. 558.

28. *Williamsburg Weekly Gazette*, November 11, 1881.

29. Interview with Mrs. Fritts.

30. *Leavenworth Appeal and Tribune*, February 10, 1880.

supplies of milk could not be obtained. The experiment of procuring a large herd of cows for the farm and having them milked by the high-priced farm labor also turned out to be unprofitable.³¹

In 1882 de Boissiere also realized that the silk industry could not become the profitable enterprise for which he had so long worked.³² The climate of Kansas had seemed so ideally suited to silk culture and with great enthusiasm the French speculator had spent years in the attempt to make it a permanent and profitable industry. The protective policy of the United States, however, did not include raw silk imported from France, China, and Japan, and with the high-priced labor he was forced to employ, it became clear that competition with the foreign product was not possible. From that time on, the silk activities were greatly curtailed and only retained on an experimental basis for a few years in the hope that a new machine to facilitate the reeling process might be developed.³³

A satisfactory economic basis had been attained at Silkville, but the hopes of Ernest de Boissiere included more than this. As an analysis of the prospectus of 1873 shows, the Kansas utopian project had had the same objectives and plans as the earlier Fourierist experiments. Its decline was similar to the earlier movement. Without reliable and profitable industries at the farm it was impossible to provide the variety of occupations demanded by the Fourierist program. Without these stable industries it was impossible to attract enough associates interested in the communitarian way of life and the cooperative labor scheme that was a part of it. Many of those who did come soon tired of their jobs or were attracted elsewhere by cheap land or better pay.³⁴

Accompanying the frustration of his plans for a fully operating utopian community came the further saddening effect of the death of his close friend Charles Sears. When a reminder of his own age is added to these considerations, it is understandable that the French humanitarian's thoughts turned toward home. He returned to France in 1884 with keen disappointment over the failure of the communitarian program. Shortly after his return he sponsored an industrial school on his estate near Bordeaux which soon became a very successful institution.³⁵

The attempt to develop a Fourierist phalanx in Kansas had failed and its French leader had found financial and humanitarian interests in his own country to occupy his attention. The direction of the farm in

31. Huron, *op. cit.*, p. 558.

32. Mary M. Davidson, *The Bombyx Mori: A Manual of Silk Culture* (Junction City, Kansas, 1882), pp. 4-5.

33. Andreas, *op. cit.*, p. 615.

34. Jennie Small Owen, "Communal Plan Security Failed to Hold Silkville," *Topeka State Journal*, June 19, 1939.

35. Raymond, *op. cit.*, p. 168; Huron, *op. cit.*, p. 555.

Kansas was handled by Charles T. Sears and general agriculture and stockraising were continued profitably on the large tract of land.³⁶

The culture of silk, which had been continued as a small-scale, experimental project for several years, was abandoned completely in 1886.³⁷ The few French people who had remained since the early years then departed for work on surrounding farms and in nearby towns and cities.³⁸ Paradoxically enough, in that same year one of de Boissiere's earlier enterprises brought him acclaim in his native land. At the Paris Exposition of 1886 he exhibited drawings of his excellent fisheries and was awarded the highest honors. As a result, many other fisheries on the French coast were advantageously modeled after the one on the de Boissiere estate.³⁹

De Boissiere returned to the United States for the last time in 1892. He was eighty-two. Enthusiastic over the success of his school in France, he announced his desire to bequeath the property at Silkville to the state or to some institution for the establishment of an orphan's home and school. After studying several requests, de Boissiere presented the property valued then at \$125,000 to the Odd Fellows Lodge.⁴⁰ After a few years the Odd Fellows rejected the gift, and following a lengthy period in the courts the property eventually became a private farm.⁴¹ All of this was beyond the concern of Ernest Valetton de Boissiere. He had died at his home in France on January 12, 1894.

36. Williamsburg *Enterprise*, May 21, 1892.

37. J. Horner, "History of Silkville," *Topeka Capital*, August 19, 1886: The years of effort at Silkville helped in the establishment of a state financed silk station at Peabody in 1885. Its director for some time was J. Horner, an Emporia silk culturist who visited Charles T. Sears in 1886. The abandonment of the industry at Silkville had raised considerable doubt throughout the state about the wisdom of the Peabody venture. In this article, following his visit, Mr. Horner attempted to show that the collapse of the silk industry was the result of inexperienced labor and particularly of poor machinery. He explained that a co-operative community had been the prime objective, not the development of the silk industry. The Peabody station proved unprofitable, however, and after a few years the legislature discontinued appropriations for it. Sericulture never became a significant part of the Kansas economy. Cf. Cecil Hawes, "Kansas Notes," *Kansas City Star*, August 24, 1942.

38. Raymond, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

39. Huron, *op. cit.*, p. 553.

40. Williamsburg *Enterprise*, May 21, 1892.

41. "The Rise and Fall of the Silk Industry in Kansas," *Kansas City Star*, April 28, 1929.

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