NINETEENTH CENTURY MANIFESTATIONS OF COMMUNITY IN THE WESTERN RESERVE

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Community in the early national period had several different meanings. It stood for a sense of belonging, of cultural heritage and connection to the past but at the same time it stood for new amalgams of older traditions, a sense of new beginnings and of whole new societies influenced by but not totally constrained by the past. The west symbolized this complexity for here easterners could create their own sense of community based on these conflicting and complementary meanings. The Western Reserve of Connecticut attracted adventurers who defined their quests within this framework; some tried to tame the barbarism of the frontier with eastern values, others, happy to leave the east behind, found the freedom enticing not threatening. Both types left the known for the unknown.

We will discuss three nineteenth century opportunities for community in the Western reserve before 1830 which highlight the potential and direction of the entire Reserve.

First, the Connecticut Land Company. The company had the greatest opportunity to put its imprint on the communities established on its lands but it had no communal vision for the Reserve. Unlike the New Englanders who founded Marietta in the Ohio Company lands, it did not plan a model community for other investors to replicate. In fact, it offered few financial enticements because it was a pragmatic conglomerate of individual land speculators (strange bedfellows who spent much of the previous several years fighting pitched political battles against each other and who symbolized the more significant compromises Reserve communities would reflect by 1830) who wanted to promote quick sale of their tracts at the highest prices. So when the company chose a time-honored lottery system to distribute its land it made certain each investor received similar portions of prime land and poor land; it did not allow investors to own all of their land in a single parcel or even in close proximity. Consequently, their holdings were spread throughout the Reserve (at first only that portion east of the Cuyahoga River) and they had to arrange for their tracts to be surveyed before they could be sold. Community would be slow to develop because the company provided no place to concentrate early settlement. True its surveyors laid out a capital but literally left it to fend for itself for twenty years. True incentives were offered to those who would develop mill sites but few benefitted from the policy.

So the Reserve began with no unified communal vision much like the rest of the west. Two options remained - either communities would evolve based primarily on who settled near each other or they would follow plans of owners or groups of settlers. This vacuum encouraged those who did possess an individual idea to experiment. In contrast to the Connecticut Land Company which would have benefitted from a communal vision but did not have one, the True Believers in Christ's Second Coming had a clear idea. The contrast could not be greater - a cloistered farm commune where no member owned any private property - and the Connecticut Land Company a group of investors whose purpose was profit. At their North Union settlement the group established a prosperous, tight-knit commune. The model evolved over several decades of other Shaker communities in the east. The one here was both typical of Shakers and radical compared to most communities. Its living and working arrangements, its decision making structure, and its integration of religious beliefs and daily routine were all distinct. Males and females were separated and
religious celebrations were part of the mandatory daily ritual, for instance. Other groups like Joseph Smith Junior's Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and the Tallmadge settlement of David Bacon also tried a tightly structured community to fend off the wilderness and its influences.

Most residents were not so conscious about the need for community, however. The typical process involved the uprooting of a small group of family and neighbors who supported each other as they moved to the Reserve. These people formed a more fluid but perhaps more long lasting bond as they bought land near each other. Many wrote back encouraging others to come. One early settler exclaimed that his "property had been doubled, [his] mind set at ease, & [his] circumstances every way bettered" in the Reserve. He was certain a man "restrained" by "the trammels of his native town & connections," will find in the Reserve that "his mind will expand, his native energies will put forth & he will become what God intended he should be."

This early rush of optimism was often tempered by the reality of the new land and its lack of communal familiarity. By the early 1820s the degree of sacrifice was more obvious. Advised one resident any migrant must "sacrifice the comforts of a Yankee society, good roads, meetings houses & books to men rougher than Indians in their moral parts, to mud, whiskey, & money."

After they cleared their land, planted first crops, they noticed with considerable surprise that they missed institutions and comforts of Connecticut. They even asked for missionaries and founded church societies. Some Episcopalians were happy congregational missionaries (their arch rivals in Connecticut) come for they "promote the best interest of mankind in these new settlements" reported one minister.

Part of this newfound appreciation was necessities by the amalgam of new and at times competing cultures New Englanders faced in the Reserve. In Euclid migrants arrived in nearly equal numbers from New England and from Pennsylvania and New Jersey. They brought distinct manners, customs and religious predilections. "each sort is now too strongly attached to its own particular way to think well of any other or yield any thing in compliance." thought one resident. It was likely there would be little "peace and unity ... until the diversity of national character, the difference of manners and custom and religious prepossessions shall have time to amalgamate and loose their distinctions to posterity." By 1830 the process was well underway. Some were even bragging that the Reserve truly was New Connecticut but in truth these communities were new. They were based on a broader spectrum of people. In Claridon township two decades of settlement brought two separate waves of settlers from New England. The first wave came before 1820 from two towns in Connecticut, settled in the western third of the township and formed the congregational church. The second came in the 1820s from Massachusetts and New York, settled in the eastern portion and did not join the congregationalist group. The two distinct waves formed two distinct networks which ran the township but rarely mingled socially.

Claridon and Euclid symbolize the transformation in community which had taken place in just three decades. Because the land was open to all, settlers from different states and sections within New England bought land near each other in the Reserve. In just a few short years easterners had become outmoded: "the dull unenterprising formality of their temper & the antiquity of their manners" was replaced in the Reserve by a new, vibrant sense of community which evolved from these roots but by including a greater spectrum of people had created a new, more vibrant and ultimately midwestern community.