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# **Equality Colony:**

## **A Brief History Showing Our Objects and Present Condition — Cooperative Colonies Are Not All Failures**

### **by H.W. Halladay**

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The Brotherhood of the Cooperative Commonwealth was initiated at the time of the Populist convention in St. Louis [July 24, 1896] by some of the socialists who went there as delegates of the Populist Party [People's Party].

The object of the association was to organize the workers into cooperative colonies and by pooling their capital, labor, and money, build homes for themselves instead of working for capitalists and building homes for the other fellow.

The organization was perfected in September 1896 by the election of a board of trustees consisting of Myron W. Reed, president; N.W. Lermond, secretary; Dr. C.F. Taylor, treasurer; Eugene V. Debs, organizer; Prof. Frank Parsons, dean; A.S. Edwards, editor; W.L. Smith, master workman; and W.W. White, distributor. The officers were to purchase land and machinery and hold it in trust for the association, carry on an active propaganda, and act for the association in all its dealings. Through the untiring efforts of the secretary, N.W. Lermond, the Brotherhood grew rapidly. Local unions were organized in nearly every state and territory. Pledges of money and machinery to help start colonies literally rolled in until over \$100,000 was pledged and Comrade Lermond started on a search for colony No. 1. After looking over several states he finally selected a location near the head of navigation of the White River, in Arkansas. Pending his report to the board of trustees, a convention of the American Railway Union was held in Chicago and he was requested to attend in the interests of the BCC. While there he made an agreement with the Debs faction of the ARU to join forces in colonizing a state with socialists and

Washington was selected as the best state in which to try the experiment, so the Arkansas proposition was dropped.

The first move toward starting a colony in Washington was sending G.E. Pelton to this state in September 1897 to select a site. After looking over a number of proposed locations, that on which Equality is now situated was chosen, and the watchword was "On to Washington." An option was taken on 280 acres of fine land and the final purchase was made in December following. This land was unimproved, being covered thickly with brush and standing and fallen timber and around 200 acres had to be drained. The price paid was \$10 per acre.

Equality Colony was organized November 1, 1897, at the home of Comrade Carey Lewis. The original members were 15 in number, two of whom are dead, two still members, and the rest scattered far and wide, working for the cause of socialism.

The first work undertaken by the colonists was building a dike on the 5 acre lot of Comrade Lewis to keep out the tidewater; next an apartment house was built at the same place for the accommodation of prospective colonists, who were coming in at the rate of half a dozen a day. The clearing of land and building of houses on the colony site was carried on with great enthusiasm and during the winter of 1897-98 not a day was lost; men waded through mud in rain before daylight and after dark to and from work. Machinists, tailors, engineers, carpenters, blacksmiths, school teachers, and preachers all used the saw, axe, and grubhoe to make a showing before spring, when the national board was to come from the east with a large printing outfit and thousands of dollars in cash to help develop Equality's natural resources and establish other colonies throughout the [Puget] Sound country.

Spring came and with it the national board, but, somehow, the cash failed to materialize; though a warn out printing outfit was shipped here and \$400 freight paid on it, but the press was never set up.

Soon after he arrived Comrade Lermond purchased a printing outfit in Seattle, paying \$1500, and the first copy of *Industrial Freedom* was issued May 7, 1898.

During the summer of '98 nearly 200 members joined Equality. Some were very practical, useful members, others were very idealistic, useless members; all were good people and their intentions were the best, but not having had experience in pioneering and always having

worked for capitalist masters who had unlimited capital to furnish all necessary machinery for production they hesitated to assume the responsibility that would naturally rest on them and so gave up the fight and went back to the "flesh pots of Egypt."

Small lots of cultivated land were rented at various places the first summer and planted to vegetables which helped to support the resident members during the winter of 1898-99 and the process of clearing land went on rapidly.

George Savage, of this country, brought his portable sawmill, set it up, and, with his family, stayed six months; at the expiration of that time he concluded that Equality life did not suit and left, and his labor and the use of the mill for the six months were donated to the colony.

Several hundred thousand feet of lumber were cut by this little mill and was used as fast as cut. Two large apartment buildings were erected the first summer, also a large barn and several smaller buildings. About 40 acres of land were slashed, considerable ditching done, and several acres of land put in condition for planting.

The national executive board of the BCC was at Edison, some two miles southwest of Equality, collecting and disbursing the monies of that organization and had ideas of establishing new colonies, regardless of the fact that the dues and donations were insufficient to sustain the colony already started. It became necessary for the members of Equality, to insure the continuance of its existence, to protest against the use of any of the funds towards starting new colonies until Equality was somewhere near self-supporting. This protest, after a number of intensely interesting meetings between the colony members and the national board, resulted in the complete autonomy of Equality and a division of the funds of the BCC.

When the government of Equality was thus taken from their hands the national board resigned, one by one and members of Equality were appointed to fill their places. On account of the misrepresentation of the colony to outside members of the BCC, the membership in our national organization dropped from 3500 to 250 or 300. The national headquarters were moved to Equality and occupy a large building built for the purpose.

A machinery fund was established about this time, contributions called for, and nearly \$2,000 resulted. With this was bought a sawmill with a capacity of 20,000 feet of lumber per day, a planer for finishing lumber, and a 35-horse power donkey engine.

During the year 1900 a large number of colonists became discouraged and left, leaving about 125 men, women, and children to carry on the work that had been begun by so many. From time to time machinery of different kinds has been purchased and built until at present we are prepared to furnish lumber rough or finished, shingles, cereal coffee, barrels, bread, graham flour, and many other things.

The sad part of our history has been left our so far and I will not dwell upon it, suffice to say that five of our good, able bodied men met death by accident; two in the mill, one by a falling tree, one by a fall from a porch on the apartment house, and one was thrown from a wagon; two children were burned to death. Besides there have been several deaths from natural causes. No epidemics of the kind that usually attack people when changing their climate have visited us.

The first two years of colony life were of continual hardship and privation, but this was cheerfully endured by most of us.

The year 1901 is a prosperous one for Equality; the crops are abundant and prices are good. Our shingles are all sold and orders for lumber are received faster than we can manufacture. About 100 acres of land are under cultivation, we have 50 head of cattle, 12 horses, several hogs, and chickens too numerous to mention.

In regard to our social life, we have entertainments and dancing, a fairly good library, and a comfortable reading room.

The government of Equality is democratic, and, although we have an executive council of "seven wise men," all questions of moment are decided by the general assembly (which meets every first and third Friday of each month), or, failing that, by referendum.

Our education facilities are limited and, although the school is a little ahead of the ordinary country school, we teach neither music nor the higher branches.

We have a fourth class post office with one of our member as postmaster and who is also storekeeper. We have a well stocked store in which everything is sold to members at cost.

One difficulty which hampered our progress for a long time was the need for a good road from Equality to the main county road. After much trouble with the county commissioners a road was finally surveyed and by dint of the expenditure of much cash and hard labor we now have an excellent outlet to the county road. Another thing which will facilitate our business is the construction of a branch of the Great Northern Railway through our land to Whatcom [Belling-

ham, WA], 15 miles away. Our nearest railroad point is now Belfast, six miles away, and it will be a great boon to us to save this six miles of travel over poor roads.

The possibility of the economic success of cooperative colonies has been successfully demonstrated here in Equality. Now comes the social problem, whose solution depends upon our intelligence in self-government.

*Edited by Tim Davenport*

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