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An Interview with Spencer Klaw

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OUT OF THE FOLD.

"Oh, dreadful! They dwell in peace and harmony, and have no church scandals.
They must be wiped out."

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An Interview with Spencer Klaw

BY MARY BETH HINTON

Mr. Klaw's recently published book, Without Sin: The Life and Death of the Oneida Community,¹ has provoked varying, but generally enthusiastic, responses from coast to coast. A few reviewers took him to task for failing to see Oneida's leader, John Humphrey Noyes, as the wicked tyrant that he was. Conversely, one reviewer chided him for judging Mr. Noyes too harshly.

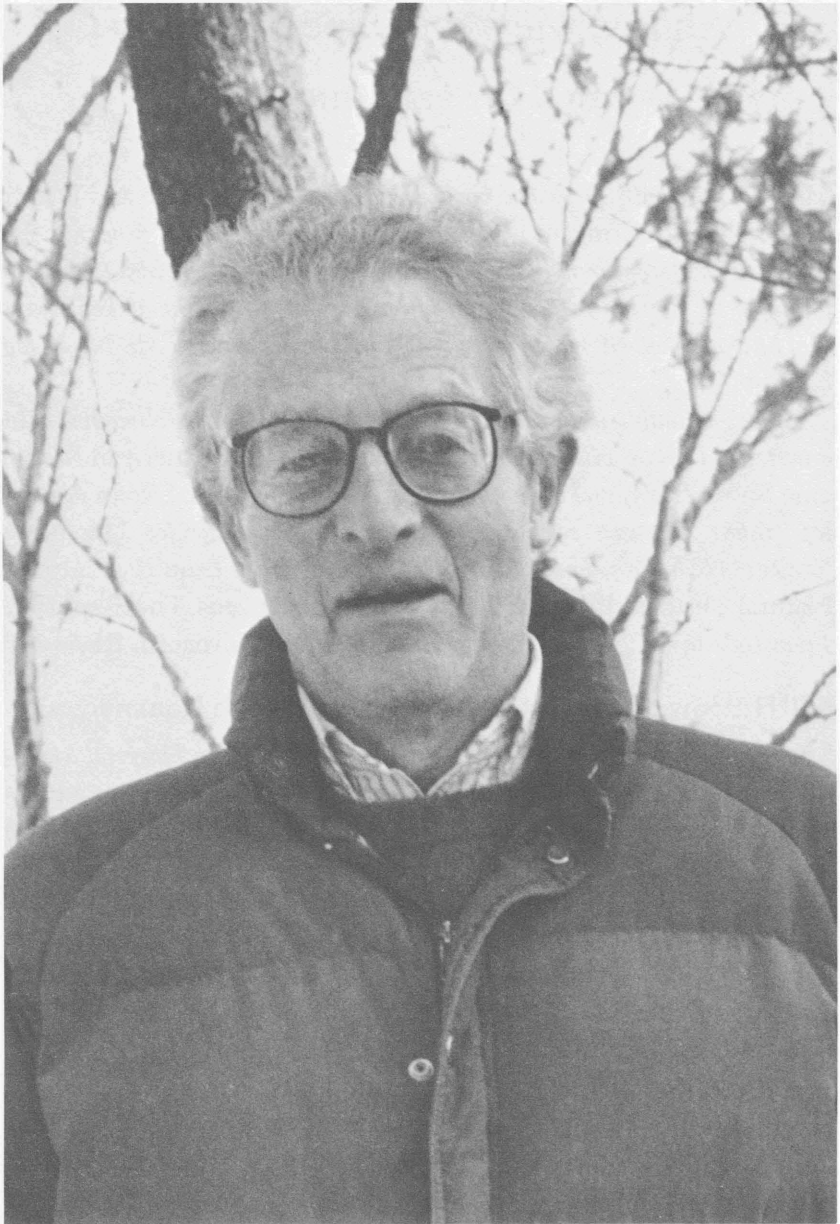
Since graduating from Harvard University in 1941, Mr. Klaw has been a writer and editor. His other books include The Great American Medicine Show (1975) and The New Brahmins: Scientific Life in America (1968). Between 1947 and 1952 he was a reporter for The New Yorker. He has contributed to American Heritage, Esquire, Fortune, Natural History, Playboy, Harper's Magazine, and The Reporter. From 1980 to 1989 he was editor of the Columbia Journalism Review.

MBH: How did you get interested in the Oneida Community?

SK: A good many years ago I wrote an article for *Harper's Magazine*² about a modern utopia builder, B. F. Skinner, who was a Harvard professor of psychology and the man who invented the Skinner Box (in which he raised his daughter). He had written a book called *Walden Two* about an imaginary utopian community. At the time I interviewed him, Skinner was planning to start a real-life utopian community more or less modeled on his *Walden Two* community. His specifications for the community got very detailed. He even had lists of what would be available in the refrigerator for midnight snacks. I asked him, "What about those nineteenth-century utopian communities?" He dismissed them because he said the founders hadn't known anything about behavioral, social engineering. I decided to check them out anyway for a sen-

1. New York: Allen Lane, the Penguin Press, 1993. In October 1994 the book will appear in paperback.

2. Spencer Klaw, "Harvard's Skinner, The Last of the Utopians", *Harper's Magazine* 226 (April 1963): 45-51.



Spencer Klaw.
(Photo: Peter Del Tredici.)

tence or two. I found out that most had indeed failed pretty quickly. But there was this one outstanding exception, which was the Oneida Community. It had lasted for thirty-odd years; a generation had grown up there. I just filed Oneida in my mind as something I might want to pursue sometime. Finally, years later, I did.

MBH: Many people who believe themselves to be spokespersons for God end up in psychiatric hospitals. Was John Humphrey Noyes a psychotic or a great spiritual leader?

SK: Well, I certainly can't for a minute think that he was a psychotic. If he were a psychotic, I would have to think that St. Paul was a psychotic or that Martin Luther was a psychotic. I think the belief that one has a special relationship to God is easy to write off as pure dementia. If somebody in the subway comes up to you and says, "I am Jesus. I died on the cross for you." I'm probably going to think that he is mentally ill. But in Noyes's context, in the religious environment in which he grew up, it was not unusual to believe in the imminence of the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. So I don't think he was psychotic. That doesn't mean that I happen to think he really did talk to God because I'm not sure there is a God. But he believed it, and he seemed to me to be thoroughly healthy mentally.

MBH: What about when, as a young man, he went through so much turmoil? Even his family thought he was deranged.

SK: At that time he was undergoing a supremely difficult experience of religious conversion, and certainly would seem to have been mentally unstable. But one would have to draw the same conclusion about some stage in the life of Martin Luther. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James describes prophets and their feelings—their agony and self-doubt and questioning of their own faith. Noyes was not unique at all in that respect. With his visions and his sense that the devil was grappling for his soul, he was not well balanced. But he sounded just like many other religious leaders, and when he emerged from that episode he seemed to be thoroughly in command of himself.

It's a difficult question. We don't think that a shaman or an In-

dian faith healer is deranged because he believes in things that we don't believe in. I don't think, for instance, that devout Catholics are mentally unbalanced because they believe that the Pope, through apostolic succession, is the vicar of Christ on earth. From my atheistic standpoint, that's an untrue belief, but I don't think that people who believe it are mentally sick. You have a point about the time when Noyes was wandering in the spiritual wilderness with the devil pursuing him. He was definitely at that time, if not entirely off his nut, at least sliding off it. But he recovered.

MBH: Some people say that the Oneida Community existed as a pretext for indulging sexual appetites. Another perspective is that Noyes was courageous in defying Victorian strictures. What is your own opinion?

SK: It would be much nearer to the second. I have no doubt that complex marriage served Noyes's own powerful sexual drives and rationalized his desire to have different sexual partners. The system that he built was interesting—I don't know that I'd use the word courageous, but it certainly was bold, innovative, a remarkable experiment. It showed that human beings can live together under many different sets of rules, other than, say, the ones that would have been prescribed by nineteenth-century Anglican missionaries. There are many different forms of sexual relations and taboos, and this was an experiment which, to a large degree, worked.

MBH: Often in our society sex is either cheapened or ignored. But the Oneida Community celebrated sex as a sacred and joyful part of life. Maybe Noyes's system deserves to be taken more seriously.

SK: Yes, I think so—and I don't think it was just an excuse to have sex. In fact, many people found it very difficult to adjust to the sexual life of the Community. They didn't want to take part in it as actively as Noyes did. For one thing, Noyes happened to be a man of very powerful sexual appetites. Well, a lot of people are, and a lot of people aren't. But the last thing you could say about Oneida was that it was in any way a licentious community. Everything at Oneida was infused with a sense of moral purpose and divine wor-

ship. Maybe Noyes's ideas were kooky, but then a lot of religious ideas are kooky by my standards. Noyes thought that sexual pleasure was not simply a device to lure people into propagation and thereby perpetuate the human race. The joy of sex was an end in itself; it was given to man for his pleasure by God. This is not quite the same as what we think of as hedonism. Noyes's sexual theories may have been self-serving, but they were embraced within a more or less rational ethical system.

MBH: What are the lessons about love and work that the Oneida Community can teach us?

SK: In writing the book, I didn't think about what lessons we could learn. I thought about entering into the life of the Community and describing it as faithfully as I could, to create a kind of portrait of the Community and its founder. But I think we can learn something from Oneida about love and work. *Leben und Arbeiten* are after all what Freud said man (he meant man and woman, I guess) was placed on earth to do. That's what John Humphrey Noyes said, too, only he added the worship of God.

At Oneida work was treated as part of the fabric of life. People worked together, changed jobs, shifted, and kept up a great variety in their lives. I don't know if we can duplicate that in our lives, or if we even want to duplicate it, but it did work in that many people at Oneida led happy and fulfilled lives. And to the extent that complex marriage caused pain and jealousy and breaking up of pairs of lovers, the young women having unselfishly to yield up a lover to another young woman—all of this was painful. But you have to ask yourself, how painful were the lives of women in the outside world in Victorian America, living on farms and in small towns in New York State? They, too, underwent terrible pains, many of which were absent at Oneida. When you stand back and try to take a larger view of it—I know this has been much debated in scholarly literature—the life at Oneida had a great many advantages and attractions for women compared with what was available to them outside.

MBH: How would you characterize the kind of people who joined the Oneida Community?

SK: They were what we would call, in modern terms, “straight”. They were very sober people, artisans, farmers, most of them quite deeply religious. After all, what attracted them to Oneida—many of them didn’t even know about complex marriage—was that Perfectionism, which they had read about in Noyes’s publications, offered an escape from the terrible prison of Calvinism. It meant that you weren’t at God’s whim perhaps consigned to eternal damnation, but that you could lead a good life and enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. So these were not fringe people at all. They were people of deep religious conviction.

And this is a mystery to me. I try to imagine the scene in the parlor or the kitchen of a farmhouse in western New York State, where a man and his wife and their two small children decide they’re going to sell the farm and load their stuff in a wagon and go to Oneida. It took an awful lot of courage. But people in nineteenth-century America did have the thought that you could pull up stakes and start anew. Think of all those people who migrated across the Great Plains and the Rockies looking for a new life.

One of the things that made Oneida successful was the fact that the people who went there were generally hard-headed, practical, and self-reliant. They make an interesting contrast with the people who went to Brook Farm. Those people were Boston intellectuals who, as somebody said, didn’t know one end of a cow from the other. But the people who went to Oneida were blacksmiths, farmers, surveyors, architects, hard-working and successful people who were looking for something else, some transcendent spiritual experience and life, which was offered to them by Perfectionism.

MBH: Someone I know commented that the Oneida Community members must have been losers, that is, weak people who needed to have somebody tell them what to do.

SK: I did not get that feeling about them. They certainly put their trust in their leader and believed in him. But their success in business indicates their ability to be independent and forceful and effective. Some of the women, such as Harriet Worden and Tirzah Miller, were extremely articulate, strong-minded women. For instance, when Harriet Worden was passed over as a candidate to be-

come editor of the new version of the Community's newspaper, she exploded.³ What she wrote about this publicly sounds very contemporary. But the fact that her situation allowed her to make such a protest illustrates the greater degree of independence and respect that women received in the Community.

I agree that these people accepted Noyes's leadership, but you have to ask yourself, do you think that people who have joined Benedictine monasteries throughout history have all been losers? I don't think so. They chose a communal life and accepted authority. A great many people like authority. We don't think that people who spend careers in the military are losers; they may exercise authority, but they also have to accept authority to a degree that the independent farmer does not. We don't think that people like Grant or Lee or Eisenhower were weak and dependent people because they willingly joined an authoritarian organization.

MBH: What are some differences between those who joined and those who were born into the Community?

SK: Those born into the Community never had the experience of choosing to join and of rejecting the outside world; and for the ones who were teenagers toward the end of the Community, the outside world held great fascination. The young women wanted to wear jewelry and long dresses. They wanted matrimony. Like the second and third generations of many social experiments, they were not wedded to the Community.

We'd also have to say that by then the times were different. Many of the people who had joined the Community were Noyes's contemporaries, and they had experienced the great spiritual revivals that made New York what was called the "burned over district". During the early decades of the nineteenth century, these people had been shaken and seared by religious conversion and then had chosen a life that would satisfy them spiritually.

It is interesting to note that Pierrepont Noyes, who spent his early boyhood in the Community and who, when he grew up, rescued the Oneida silver company and made it a great company, was

3. Her "explosion" is quoted in Marlyn Klee-Hartzell's paper, page 74 of this issue.

a strong-minded, highly independent person who looked back at his youth as a kind of golden period. He said he felt that the elders in the Community had been transfigured by a sense that they were taking part in a high spiritual adventure that set them apart from the ordinary run of mankind.

I don't know that I would have liked living at Oneida. I think I would have found Noyes exasperating. Look at the way he took away poor Frank Wayland-Smith's violin because he was too good a violinist! Noyes had all the weaknesses of an autodidact. He seemed to lack a context for what he read, and he had kooky ideas—wild ideas. He said, about Jonathan Edwards's son (a noted "womanizer", as we would say today), "Well, he was a rake and a profligate, but he was really serving God because he was spreading the seed of his brilliant, spiritually advanced father". Noyes could explain anything! A nephew of Noyes said he couldn't stand the way Noyes treated him like a little boy. You had to decide that you'd accept Noyes for what he was. It's not simple at all. I read the diaries and letters and I saw the pain. Yet many people chose to stay, and out of the sense of community they gained something that was very strong and rewarding. For others the constrictions, intellectual and otherwise, of that life may not have been strong enough to make them leave, but perhaps they would not have done it over again. There was a wide range of feelings.

MBH: Do you see parallels between the death of the Oneida Community and the demise of the Soviet Union?

SK: No. One way to look at it is that, clearly *not* like Oneida, the ideal of communism was perverted by a malignant dictator, Stalin, who was responsible for the deaths of millions of people. Obviously, there was nothing like that at Oneida. People who didn't like the boss left, and they got some money when they left. The Oneida Community failed for all kinds of reasons. One was the increasing secularism. In the early years of the Community, the members believed that the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven was only months away. And you remember that Mary Cragin, with general approval, invited the members of the Primitive Church to

send emissaries to Oneida. You might say, “That’s an absurd belief”. But is it more absurd than the belief in transubstantiation? Do we really think that the bread and wine of the Eucharist are somehow transformed into the true presence of the Son of God? This surely, from some nasty atheistic perspective, isn’t any more absurd than the Oneidans’ beliefs. The context for their passionate belief in the imminence of some sort of great spiritual change—the millennial spirit—was dying out by the 1870s. Oneida was no longer sustained by the sort of religious passion that had swept the country in the 1840s.

MBH: Is there one document that you wish had existed when you were working on your book?

SK: I did not have access to the diaries of Tirzah Miller when I began the project in the 1970s. When I resumed work on it more than ten years later, I spent time at the Syracuse University Library reading those diaries and other documents I hadn’t seen earlier.

MBH: Is there a document that *never existed* that you wish had existed?

SK: Yes. I wish that I had had a detailed, explicit diary of the sexual life of one of the men at Oneida. Very little is known about this. I know more about the women than the men because they wrote many more letters to each other, not so much about sex as about love. There is one document that provides a man’s perspective, and it will be published later this year.⁴ It is the diary of a young man, Victor Hawley, who was in love with a young woman. They were denied permission to have a baby under the regime of stirpiculture. She went to Wallingford,⁵ where she was paired up with a father, and later came back to Oneida. This young guy nursed her through a very difficult pregnancy. The diary is explicit about his feelings for her, and even about sex. But there’s not much else on the subject.

4. *The Annotated Diary of Victor Hawley*, edited by Robert Fogarty, is forthcoming from Syracuse University Press.

5. Wallingford was a branch of the Oneida Community.

MBH: The men with whom I've discussed male continence think it sounds like a bad idea.

SK: It is hard to imagine. The only thing you could say about it was that either the sex life was satisfying enough or orgasm was unimportant enough so that a great many men who came to the Community spent their lives there—when they could have left. I have not read widely in this subject, but I know that *coitus reservatus* has been practiced in other cultures. In some parts of India it was thought to be a spiritually superior form of sex. All I know is that it happened, and the fact that they had so few accidental pregnancies showed that it worked.

MBH: It is also surprising that there has been no mention of venereal disease at Oneida.

SK: The people who came there were typically small-town people who married young. The men were not the kind to have slept with prostitutes. I'm guessing that for most of the people their only sexual experience had been with their spouses.

MBH: How have Oneida Community descendants reacted to your book?

SK: Some of the descendants were unhappy about it. I have to remind myself that I wasn't writing the book for them, but for other people who might be entertained or edified by it. The descendants tend to regard the Community that I wrote about as a precursor of the silver company, and therefore to downplay its significance as a social experiment. Some of them felt I was exploiting the sexual aspects of Community life. I don't think I was guilty of that at all. Sex was one of the things that set Oneida apart. For example, Benedictine monasteries and Shaker communities also practiced total communism. But they did not have men and women living together and changing sexual partners, having lots of sex but no conventional matrimony—all of this existing within a moral framework that distinguished it from mere sexual anarchy and license. So I think that had to be emphasized.

Another thing I want to say is about complex marriage. Paradoxically, Oneida Community members felt closer to the Shakers

than to any other form of community. I think the reason was that, for both Oneidans and Shakers, the community was considered to be a large family. Monogamy at Oneida would have produced little knots of people whose loyalty was not to the larger community, but to their spouses or parents. Whether or not it was publicly articulated by Noyes, the Oneida Community could not have succeeded if it had had marriage as we know it. It would have foundered on conflicting loyalties. They called Noyes “father”. He couldn’t have been thought of that way if there had been many other fathers within that larger family.

I would also like to comment on the rejection of religious pomp, cant, and priestly ritual at Oneida. If you go into the Big Hall at the Oneida Community Mansion House—and remember this was a profoundly religious community—not one religious symbol or icon can be seen anywhere. Even prayer was entirely a private matter. I found all this rather appealing.

MBH: Would you like to say anything about the process of doing research on your book?

SK: I’ll tell you how I got to the sources and the difficulty I had. I came to Oneida to try to figure out what was available. There was a historical committee, and I had to be vetted by a number of people. I got some cooperation. However, I learned that a great many documents bearing on Oneida history, including letters and reports of meetings and mutual criticism sessions, had been destroyed. As I understand it, in the 1940s several Oneida Community Ltd. executives who were also Community descendants burned the archives for fear that the company’s image would be damaged if the public were to learn the truth about the Community. This disaster was mitigated by the fact that Noyes’s nephew, George Wallingford Noyes, in assembling the materials he needed to write a history (which was never completed) of the Oneida Community, had selected thousands of documents from the Community’s archives and copied them. These copies were in the possession of his daughter, Imogen Stone. She was dubious about my project, but agreed to let me use the copied documents after having a lawyer she knew look me over. Constance Noyes Robertson, a granddaughter of

John Humphrey Noyes, had written a history based in part on the materials assembled by George W. Noyes, but, as I discovered when I checked her work against her sources, she had bowdlerized them. She would quote letters and reports and would leave things out without any indication that she had done so.

There were other sources: one of Frank Wayland-Smith's descendants had his diary, and in the Mansion House were squirreled away hundreds of letters, reminiscences, and miscellaneous writings. I was appalled by the state of these documents, but they were there, and I used them. Fortunately, in the intervening years, an arrangement was made to give them to Syracuse University, where they have been properly catalogued and given the sort of tender loving care that they deserve.