A tale of two women who shared & shaped New Harmony

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Starting in the 1840s, Jane Blaffer Owen and Marguerite Young broke unspoken societal rules for women and changed our cultural landscape with their unique work centered on utopias. Both focused on the southern Indiana town of New Harmony, where each lived parts of their lives. And neither took no for an answer.

The site of the Woodland Indian burial mounds and two continual utopian experiments in the 1800s, New Harmony wielded a legacy of lasting cultural and political influence—not just on Indiana, but on the nation. Built by German religious separatists led by pastor and alchymist George Rapp in 1814, this tidy town was the home of the hard-working (and celibate) Harmonist Society until they sold it in 1825 to Welsh industrialist and social reformer, Robert Owen.

The Harmonists moved back to Pennsylvania and Owen launched an experiment into a secular, rationalist utopia that allowed its citizen more choices and freedoms, including how much they wanted to work. It turned out most didn’t want to work at all! Two years later, the experiment failed but the community, under Rapp and Owen alike, made many important contributions to American society. Its prominent citizens, including how much they wanted to work. It turned out most didn’t want to work at all. Two years later, the experiment failed. But the community, under Rapp and Owen alike, made many important contributions to American society.

Owen days included his sons: Robert Dale Owen, a reformer, Robert Owen. Owen likewise made an impact by sharing his powerfully written words. She lived there with her political life’s obsession.

But after these men, it was two women who propelled the town forward, giving it new meaning and additional international attention. As you drive into New Harmony on Route 66, it looks like many other small, charming Indiana towns. Then, you notice Richard Meijer’s Roofless Church bowing into the horizon. These are just two of the buildings that Jane Owen added to the symphony of human experience that is New Harmony.

As you drive into New Harmony, Young posed for a portrait to accompany an article in Life Magazine on the release of her book in 1945. Young helped put New Harmony on the map with her powerfully written words. She lived there with her family while writing the novel, working in the crumbling tavern built by the Harmonists. A relative of Brigham Young and Owen’s life’s obsession.

Young and Owen, both born in the early 1900s, were not exactly fans of each other when they crossed paths in the 1940s. But both added to the complexity and wonder of this town, still brimming with art, history, architecture, and a strong sense of place. It remains a town that embodies the human condition. If Indianapolis is the head of the body of Indiana, New Harmony is its soul.

From Oct. 11–13, 2020, the Social Alchemy Symposium in New Harmony will feature performances, tours, silences, and speakers, including Jane Owen. Owen and Young, both born in the early 1900s, were not exactly fans of each other when they crossed paths in the 1940s. But both added to the complexity and wonder of this town, still brimming with art, history, architecture, and a strong sense of place. It remains a town that embodies the human condition. If Indianapolis is the head of the body of Indiana, New Harmony is its soul.

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