



Jane & Marguerite

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A tale of two women who *shared & shaped* New Harmony

“Young and Owen both added to the complexity and wonder of this town, still brimming with art, history, architecture, and a strong sense of place. If Indianapolis is the head of the body of Indiana, New Harmony is its *soul*.”

Starting in the 1940s, Jane Blaffer Owen and Marguerite Young broke unspoken societal rules for women and changed our cultural landscape with their unique work centered on utopia. 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 communal 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 alchemist 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 citizens many 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 during the Owen days included his sons: Robert Dale Owen, a congressman for Indiana who sponsored legislation to create the Smithsonian Institution, and Richard Owen, the Indiana state geologist, Indiana University professor, and the first president of Purdue University.

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 *Athenaeum* in the skyline, looking over the Wabash River. To the right is Phillip Johnson'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.

From the 1940s until her death in 2010, Owen—linked by marriage to the Robert Owen family—envisioned New Harmony's built environment as a mix of historic Hoosier and ultra-modern buildings. She brought world-renowned artists and architects and their work to town for its art-based utopian, “Third Experiment.”

During the nearly seven decades Owen lived in New Harmony, she commissioned several notable works of public art like Jaques Lipchitz's *The Descent of the Holy Spirit* and Stephen De Staebler's *Pietà*. She didn't stop there. She moved historic structures preserved and renovated them to their original state down to the paint colors. She infused the town with cultural programming by bringing in well-known writers, dancers, and performers. She shared refined, high quality works and artists, challenging the ideas of what a small town can be.

While a resident of New Harmony, off and on for less than a decade, Young likewise made an impact by sharing the town and its history with the world. Both hilariously critical and loving, Young paints a historic picture of the town in her 1945 work of experimental nonfiction, *Angel in the Forest*, in a way only a Hoosier could.

“Peculiarities multiplied, perhaps because New Harmony, which was the cradle of two utopias, is literally, if not figuratively, cut off from the outside world and introverted as a nude drunk with memories. It is as if this pocket country were a little planet, whirling far out alone in space. Almost every citizen is aware of New Harmony's strangeness.” — *Angel in the Forest*.

Cigarette dangling from her lips and standing arms crossed in a crumbling former bar on Tavern Street in 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, she also worked as an English teacher at Shortridge

High School in Indianapolis, mentoring a teenage Kurt Vonnegut. After writing *Angel in the Forest*, Young became a fixture in New York as a writing professor and author of two more books—also both about utopia, her life's obsession.

Young and Owen, both born in the early 1900s, weren't 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, séances, and speakers, including Tate Museum curator Cara Courage, *Imaginary Cities* author Darran Anderson, and Indianapolis sci-fi writer Maurice Broaddus. This exploration into utopia—and some about its opposite, dystopia—will focus on the lenses of storytelling and place. It will also feature a panel about these two badass women, Owen and Young. ☞

Big Car Collaborative, Indiana Humanities, New Harmony Gallery of Contemporary Art, University of Southern Indiana, Indiana State Museum, PATTERN Magazine, The New Harmony Project, Historic New Harmony, and others are teaming up to highlight the magic of New Harmony striving for utopia. Learn more about the symposium by visiting www.bigcar.org/utopia.