

# Before & After 1932: A Memoir

HENRY SCHIFF

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## *A Note on the Author*

*Born in Amana in 1900, Henry Schiff is perhaps the most knowledgeable of the so-called Amana "descendants" (a social category in present-day Amana). He is one of about two hundred descendants in their seventies and eighties whose memory of "the old way" is still clear, still present, and still laden heavily with the emotions of separation and change. Some express themselves as unequivocally happy about their "release" in 1932 from the constrictions of the old collective life. But even those who revel in the freedom they have enjoyed during the last fifty-two years, have agreed with Henry Schiff that some worthy ways were lost in the move to individualism.*

*Henry Schiff is still a church elder. And in his retirement from a position in industry he has given his considerable energies to the establishment of, and the very successful growth of, the Amana Heritage Society's Museum of Amana History.*

*Mr. Schiff's sense of commitment, tempered by a realistic understanding of the unavoidable intrusions of modern capitalist life, was evident to all who participated in the eleventh annual conference of the National Historic Communal Societies Association held in Amana in October, 1984. All were grateful for his contribution to the visitors' sense of place.*

OUR PROGRAM LISTS, I believe, no less than twelve participants offering dissertations about, or touching on, Amana. People named Andelson, Barthels, Clark, Nordhoff, Rettig, Shambaugh, and the authors of countless newspaper and magazine articles and television documentaries have all told and retold the Amana Story. During my fifteen-year stint at the Amana Heritage Society Museum I have told it a hundred thousand times. To busloads of senior citizens, to sixth graders on field trips, to media big-wigs. We are a sentimental people. It's been quite a while since C.B.S. taped their "Sixty Minutes" segment on Amana. But we have, even now, at our house a chair festooned with a sign proclaiming: "The Indentation on this Chair Cushion, Courtesy Harry Reasoner's Behind—You may TOUCH BUT NOT SIT."

But, enough of that. Once, doing a documentary, I voiced this: "If the eyes of the world are upon us, it is, because we invoke 'A Time Gone By.' Amana is haunted by the beginning rather than the past or future." And the beginning was in *Die Inspirierte Erweckung*—The Inspirationist Awakening—of the early seventeen hundreds. For us (our *Inspirations Historie* tells us) it was on a grey, murky November day, the sixteenth of November, 1714 when, in a brown sandstone house, the home of Eberhard Ludwig Gruber, in the tiny village of Himbach, in Hessen, [West] Germany, a handful of people joined together in a belief which, to this day, is the spiritual foundation of Amana—a belief in the simplicity of worship (reflected, even today, in the near austerity of our churches and in the humility and simple sincerity of our services). A belief that there are, even now, individuals endowed with a divinely inspired gift, or power, of interpreting God's intention and desire—"The Instruments/Tools of the Lord" (*Die Werkzeuge*), whose testimonies are, even now, read at each and every church service. These testimonies are the legacies they have left us.

I will not bore you with a time-consuming rehash of the saga that led from that little house in Himbach across the Atlantic to Eben-Ezer in upper New York and Canada. A Pilgrimage spurred by the Inspired Directive of Bruder Christian Metz: "Your way lies over deep waters . . . . Your path towards the setting sun, to a new home (*eine neue Heimat*), a new home, in a land free from persecution." A new home called Eben-Ezer: "Hereto, the Lord has helped us." Eben-Ezer, six villages: four on the American side of the Niagara River, two in Ontario. Eben-Ezer, where our communal system came into being; for a two-fold reason: of necessity, to pay for the land; and to defray the cost of migration. We pooled our resources and, once you have emptied your pockets into the common fund, it became the obligation of the Society to provide for you: food, shelter, medical needs, etc. Once sampled, this togetherness would blend so well with our spiritual togetherness that we not only retained it but enlarged on it. By 1854 we had simply outgrown Eben-Ezer. Glowing reports about the territory of Kansas had been drifting east. So, in quest of a new home, a committee of four trekked west to explore the territory. Failing to find what they were seeking, tired, disappointed, they returned to Eben-Ezer. Then in late 1854, mindful of the "Your path leads towards the setting sun" directive, a second committee trekked west. Legend has it that when Christian Metz, in conducting the "Farewell/God-Speed" services for this second committee, opened his bible at random, his eyes lit on verse 8, chapter 4, of Songs, where we read: "Go forth, from the heights, the hills, of AMANA." "Amana." "To remain faithful." "To be true." In German: "*Bleibe treu.*"

Legend further has it that when that scouting committee reached that ridge of bluffs on the far side of our river, saw the corresponding ridge of bluffs to the north, saw the valley between, they knew they had come home, remembered, recalled, that biblical injunction: "Go forth, from the heights, the hills of Amana." Thus Amana, *bleibe treu*, Remain faithful, came into being. Seven—actually eight—villages from Eben-Ezer we brought with us, our communal system, and we lived with it until 1932.

Today you are, in reality, looking at two Amanas. First: the church as it was at the very beginning, except for minor adjustments. Of necessity we adopted an English service to go along with our old, original German service. Secondly, the dress code. Today the plain, sober, somber "go to church garb" is mostly a memory. Today they will wear a dress right off the hanger, Saks Fifth Avenue. Today the ladies make one concession only. Only when going to church they will wear the traditional headcovering, the Little Cap, (*Die Versammlungs Kappe*) made of some sheer material, transparent, with some dainty lace edging. The church itself, the building, reflects the old Pietist belief of absolute simplicity in worship. The exterior, red brick made out of Amana clay and brown sandstone, quarried at the edge of our village. The interior: plain, bare wooden floor, with only a strip of carpeting running up the center aisle. Plain, bare wooden benches. A plain, green-cloth covered table serves as pulpit.

What was it like, Amana's communal system? How did it differ from New Harmony? From Zoar? From Bishop Hill? Always remember, *everything* revolved around the church. The very fact that you chose to be here meant that you were dedicated to the Amana faith, the Amana belief. The Amana Society would give a house, an apartment, rooms to live in. There was no furniture factory, like today. Each village had its cabinetmaker. And all he did was to provide furniture for his home village. So, your house became a home. There were communal kitchens, sixteen in this village, Amana, alone. Depending on which section of town you lived in, this would be your home kitchen. You would either eat at the kitchen dining room or carry your meals home in a basket. So if you wanted five meals a day—breakfast, lunch, dinner, and two very elaborate coffee breaks—you knew where to find them.

There was every imaginable shop; if it is shown in the dictionary or encyclopedia we had it. There were, for instance, such goodies as umbrella makers and lampshade makers. Any time a situation arose when we needed or wanted something, we found someone who could make it. There was a drawing account, or allowance, not in cash but in credit, established for you. This allowance would be identical for

everyone, regardless of status or capacity. This, in a physical sense, is what the Amana Society did for you.

In return, if you were physically able, you would attend each and every church service. That meant a prayer meeting every night, a Wednesday morning service, a Saturday morning service with Sundays, one, two, three. Again, if you were physically able, you would give the Amana Society eight hours of work each day. During harvest this could well be nine or ten hours.

Why then (some of us aghast at our brazen defiance of the Christian Metz injunction—"As truly as I live, says the Lord, it is at no time my will to dissolve the ties of community . . . either through artful devices, skill and diplomacy, or through the power and cunning of men"), why then, did we abandon this togetherness? Today you will meet and converse with people who experienced the "Great Change" of 1932. But few are left that lived the twilight years of the old Amana Society. And, let me emphasize that "the Twilight Years" were not 1929, 1930, 1931, 1932. Those were the transition years, when we were already dismantling our communal structure, seeking plans and formulas for its demolition. No, the twilight years were the years when the governing body, the *Grosse Bruderrath*, was trying so desperately to hold high the torch thrown them by Christian Metz and Barbara Landman. Then (was it fate? was it Divine Intervention?) at exactly high noon, on Saturday, August 12, 1923, fire, sparked by a dust explosion in the flour mills, completely and totally destroyed our flour and woolen mills. There was no insurance coverage.

Perhaps they are right, they that tell us that Amana *never* recovered from that near lethal blow; never recovered from the financial burden of rebuilding and remachining the fire-charred skeleton of our mills. Perhaps they are right, they that tell us that, on that day, the bells of old Amana tolled a requiem to our communal way of life.

Perhaps they are right, they that tell us that we were no longer strong enough, tough enough, to resist the magic embodied in those words, that began to creep into the vocabulary; words like *radio*, and *automobile*, and *college education*, and *vacations* at a place called Yellowstone Park.

What was it, I said once, long ago? "Amana, is a large corporation; Amana is a belief in a way of life; but above all, Amana is people." Today, we might add, Amana also is gift shops and wineries and eateries. But, above all, Amana, still, is people—people, who have not forgotten how to *bleibe treu*, to remain faithful.