

The Topolobampo Colony in the Context of Porfirian Mexico

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IN THE HISTORY OF American communal societies, the name "Topolobampo" can claim a certain notoriety. It appears in all of the standard surveys of the panorama of American Utopian schemes that have been compiled by anthologists from Kent¹ onwards. It is the subject of journal articles² and books.³ The celebrity enjoyed by Topolobampo owes much to its exotic location—in Mexico. During roughly a decade, beginning in 1886, more than 1,200 men, women, and children⁴ ventured south to that sweet-sounding site hard by the Sea of Cortez in the state of Sinaloa.

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1. Alexander Kent, "Cooperative Communities in the United States," U.S. Department of Labor *Bulletin* 6 (July 1901), pp. 536-646.

2. "The Topolobampo Colony," *Harper's Weekly* 31, no. 1593 (July 1887), pp. 475-78; Leopold Katscher, "Owen's Topolobampo Colony, Mexico," *American Journal of Sociology* 12 (September 1906), pp. 145-75; Sanford Mosk, "A Railway to Utopia," *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 20 (December 1939), pp. 243-59; Moises Gonzalez Navarro, "Dos colonias socialistas en el porfiriato," *La palabra y el hombre: revista de la Universidad Veracruzana, Xalapa* (October-December 1957), pp. 5-8.

3. Jose C. Valades, *Topolobampo: la metropoli socialista de Occidente* (Mexico City: Fbndo de Cultura Economica, 1939); Thomas A. Robertson, *A Southwestern Utopia*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Ward Ritchie Press, 1947); Juan Antonio Lastras Ramirez, *Topolobampo: Albert Kimsey Owen, socialista en Mexico* (Los Mochis, Sinaloa: Talleres Graficos de Los Mochis, 1971); Ray P. Reynolds, *Cat's Paw Utopia* (El Cajon, California: by the author, 7159 Crowley Court, San Diego, CA 92119, 1972); Sergio Ortega Noriega, *El Eden subvertido: la colonización de Topolobampo, 1886-1896* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1978). The authoritative works are those by Reynolds and Ortega Noriega. The former was the first scholar to examine primary materials extensively. These are now to be found in Mr. Reynold's possession; at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California; and especially at California State University, Fresno in the Henry Madden Library, Special Collections Department, Credit Fonder of Sinaloa Collection (hereafter referred to by the abbreviation CSUF).

4. Reynolds, *Cat's Paw Utopia*, p. 149.

An American socialist colony in Mexico seems bizarre. The presence there, at that time, of an American enclave appears less outlandish, however, if regarded in the context of Mexican history during the long reign of Porfirio Diaz. First, like many other Latin American nations during this period, Mexico was attempting to foster colonization by foreigners, and as a foreign colony on Mexican soil Topolobampo was hardly unique. Second, neither was Topolobampo unique by virtue of being an American colony; in Mexico during the *Porfiriato* (taken to mean the period from 1877 to 1910) approximately twenty other American colonies were established.

American colonies in the context of Porfirian Mexico must be regarded ultimately as the result of fortuitous, and temporary, convergence of interests of idealistic American colonists and pragmatic Mexican politicians. The Americans sought refuge from religious persecution or from a seemingly oppressive economic system; the Mexicans welcomed capital and foreign expertise as instruments for development. Topolobampo loomed larger than any other colony, American or otherwise, in Mexico during the *Porfiriato* because its dream was the most grandiose.

1. "*Colonomania*"

The Topolobampo colony, sometimes referred to as the "Credit Foncier de Sinaloa" colony, was but one of some 60 colonies established in Mexico during the Diaz era. This figure includes colonies established by Mexicans, repatriated Mexicans, foreigners, or a combination thereof. Some colonies survived, at least to the extent that they evolved into municipalities. Others failed to get off the ground, and some never even broke ground but existed only as ink on paper.

In terms of philosophical underpinnings, colonies ranged from new-towns founded by speculators to communal societies based on religious or even socialist principles.⁵ There was a distinction between government-sponsored colonies and colonies established by colonization companies. Initially, the Diaz government was actively involved in sponsoring colonies, but by 1893 it had abandoned the field to private colonization companies. The systematic abuse of the colonization laws by land speculators caused the government to reassert control over colonization in the following decade.

Mexican or foreign, enduring or ephemeral, governmental or private-enterprise, what all of Mexico's colonization schemes shared was the

5. For an account of the socialist colony at Tlapizalco, established by and for Mexicans with the assistance of the government, see Gonzalez Navarro, "Dos colonias socialistas en el porfiriato." (The other socialist colony described in this article is Topolobampo.)

manifestation of colonization ideology widely held throughout Latin America in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. This was the time of what has been described by one writer as "*colonomania*," or "colony mania".⁶ During this period, many Mexican leaders and intellectuals rivalled those of other Latin American nations in their fervor to attract immigration. Why? In the famous words of the Argentine statesman Juan Bautista Alberdi, "*gobernar es poblar*"—to govern is to populate. And immigration and subsequent colonization of a sparsely-settled hinterland would lead inevitably to economic and social betterment, it was reasoned. As a Mexican publication prepared for Chicago's 1893 Columbian Exposition put it, "Immigrants are indispensable for our national development".⁷

Given the chronic problem of overpopulation in Mexico today, it is startling that during the Porfiriato there was discussion about the problem of underpopulation. Immigration meant more people, a blessing in and of itself. It was also expected that the newcomers would not cluster in the big cities but would bravely strike out for the underpopulated frontiers, carrying with them enlightenment, law-and-order, and economic development. Colonies in remote frontier regions would increase national security by discouraging the predatory ambitions of neighboring countries. Using their superior know-how, foreign colonists would put new land into cultivation and would create new manufacturing and civilizing institutions. Finally, it was candidly offered that the gene-pool of the nation would be upgraded through intermarriages. The recruitment of the immigrant⁸ perhaps reached its zenith at the end of the nineteenth century, but it was hardly a new idea. An earlier yet typical endorsement of colonization is cited below; what makes the quotation all the more remarkable is that it comes from a man who spent his life *battling* foreigners, namely, Simon Bolivar.

Immigration of the peoples of Europe and North America should be fostered, so that they may establish themselves here, bringing their arts and their sciences. These advantages, an independent government, free schools and marriages with Europeans and Anglo-Americans, would change the entire character of the people and make them enlightened and prosperous.⁹

6. German Carrera, "Sobre la colonomania," *Historia mexicana* 6 (April-June 1957), pp. 597-610.

7. Luis Pombo, *Mexico, 1876-1892*, trans. William T. Pritchard (Mexico City: Imprenta El Siglo XIX), p. 43.

8. It should be recalled that, during this period, states such as Minnesota and Wisconsin sent immigration agents and promotional material to (northern!) Europe in an effort to recruit settlers.

9. Quoted in Jose Gil Fbrtoul, *Historia constitucional de Venezuela* (Caracas, 1942), II, p. 84.

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The most successful nations, in the sense that the larger waves of immigration broke upon their shores, were Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay. (In this "derby," the United States, of course, was in a class by itself.) Yet many other Latin American governments were also trying to encourage immigration during this same period, with far less success. Mexico's legislation designed to lure immigrants was similar to laws passed in other Latin American nations, including Ecuador (1889), Peru (1893), Venezuela (1894), Costa Rica (1896), Paraguay (1903), Bolivia (1905), Honduras (1906), and Guatemala (1909).¹⁰ With the exception of the southern South American countries, in no case did the legislation have the desired effect of bringing in new settlers, let alone that of changing the national landscape and the national character.

The Mexican government directly or indirectly supported immigration and colonization in the century from its independence to its revolution, yet accomplishments fell far short of goals. Probably the greatest benefactors of the policy were neither the Mexican people nor the immigrants themselves, but land speculators, particularly in the northern states where the government possessed large amounts of unclaimed public land (*terreno baldio*) which it could offer to colonization companies. These companies received bonus land in proportion to the land designated for the proposed colony. All that a colonization company had to do was to "attempt" to settle colonists in order to legitimately claim the bonus land. This inducement was widely abused, and led to the backlash that was reflected in the revised colonization legislation of 1902 and 1909 which reasserted government control over colonization. In any case, the matter of colonization was soon to become irrelevant in the chaos of the Revolution.

For the period 1878-1910, one estimate claims that if all envisioned colonization projects had been carried out some 167,000 foreigners and 32,000 Mexicans would have settled in newly-founded colonies in Mexico.¹¹ Another estimate suggests that 200,000 colonists could have been settled in the period 1878-1892 alone if all contracts had been fulfilled.¹²

10. Nicolas Sanchez-Albornoz, *La poblacion de America Latina desde los tiempos precolombinos al ano 2000* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1973), p. 174. More specifically with regard to Mexican legislation, see Ignacio F. Gonzalez-Polo, "Ensayo de una bibliografia de la colonizacion en Mexico durante el siglo XIX," *Boletin del Institute de Investigaciones Bibliograficas* 4 (July-December 1970), p. 81 and Lucio Mendieta y Nunez, *El problema agrario en Mexico* (Mexico City, 1948).

11. Moises Gonzalez Navarro, *La colonizacion en Mexico, 1877-1910* (Mexico City: Talleres de Estampillas y Valores, 1960), p. 28.

12. Pombo, *Mexico, 1876-1892*, p. 39. In 1895 the figure of 200,000 would have represented nearly 2% of Mexico's total population.

In fact, for the period 1877-1917 a total of 156 colonization contracts were actually recorded, with 1883 as the peak year,¹³ and the number of colonists who actually settled remained small. By the end of 1887, there were approximately 6,500 colonists registered by the authorities in Mexico, in the proportion of 2:1, Mexicans to foreigners. By 1892, the number of colonists residing in Mexico had even declined somewhat, but the proportion had been reversed to 2:1, foreigners to Mexicans.¹⁴ By 1892, significantly, only 700 foreigners had taken out naturalization papers.¹⁵

The northern states of Mexico, particularly Chihuahua, received the most colonies. That was where the government could most easily procure unclaimed, title-less land (*terreno baldio*). The fact that the land was unoccupied also had something to do with its desirability. The land that was offered was likely to be semi-desert and far from population centers. Occupying such land did not make it easy, furthermore, to obtain credit from banks. This placed colonists in jeopardy of financial ruin in the event of a bad harvest. Added to these economic disincentives to colonization, foreigners contemplating emigration to Mexico worried about non-economic questions of religious toleration, civil liberties, and banditry.

During the long reign of Porfirio Diaz, some 60 colonies were established, 44 of them by private initiative and 16 by the government itself.¹⁶ Of these, 18 were composed primarily of Mexicans, five of repatriated Mexicans. Six were colonies of Italians, while there were two colonies each of Germans and Cubans. Other colonies had Guatemalans, French, Belgians, Spaniards, Russians, Japanese, Puerto Ricans, Boers, and North American Indians (the Nacimiento colony, with Kickapoo and Muskogee). It appears that approximately 20 colonies, Topolobampo among them, could be called American.

2. American Colonies in Mexico

No one has yet written a comprehensive history of American colonies in Mexico. For those colonies established during the Porfiriato, it is possible at best to put forth a tentative list by combining and cross-checking information from sources¹⁷ which rely on newspaper accounts and records of Mexican government ministries.

13. Gonzalez Navarro, *La colonización en Mexico*, p. 28.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

15. Pombo, *Mexico, 1876-1892*, p. 44.

16. Gonzalez Navarro, *La colonización en Mexico*, p. 35.

17. Gonzalez Navarro, *La colonización en Mexico*; Pombo, *Mexico, 1876-1892*, p. 35.; and Albert K. Owen, "Extracts from Newspapers." The last of these is a collection of 11*xl4* brown paper booklets containing pasted newspaper clippings. The clippings are usually undated and unattributed. None of the booklets are paginated. In some instances, booklets

Mormon colonies:

1. Chuichupa, Chihuahua
2. Porfirio Diaz, Chi.
3. Manuel Dublan, Chi.
4. Fernandez Leal, Chi.
5. Garcia, Chi.
6. Guadalupe, Chi.
7. Hidalgo, Chi.
8. Juarez, Chi.
9. Carlos Pacheco, Chi.
10. Morelos, Sonora
11. Oaxaca, Son.

Other colonies:

12. Topolobampo, Sinaloa
13. Metlatoyuca, Puebla
14. Tihuatlan (Harrisburg), Veracruz
15. Tlahualillo (Maipimi), Durango
16. Tapachula, Chiapas
17. Blalock Mexico Colony, Tamaulipas
18. Nacimiento, Coahuila
19. Ranchos Agricolas Coahuila, Coa.
20. Navolato, Sin.
21. Baja California colonies: Colonia Romero Rubio at San Quintin and Colonia Carlos Pacheco, latter including the towns of San Carlos, La Ensenada, and Punta Banda.

If the Mormon colonies clearly belong in the category of communal societies, whether any of the other colonies besides Topolobampo should be so classified is not clear. As will be shown in the case of Harrisburg, at least some of these colonies were motivated by a strong desire to escape from the perceived social and economic injustice of American life. Given the meager data available, though, it would be mere conjecture to claim that their ambition in seeking a new life under the banner of the eagle and the snake was to put communitarian philosophy into practice. We simply need to uncover more information about them.

Mormon colonists trekked to Mexico because of the mounting pressure against polygamy in the United States, which finally passed legislation against that practice in the 1880s.

are devoted to a theme, e.g. "Mexican Laws" or "Socialism," the title having been written on the cover in blue pencil in what is almost certainly Owen's own hand. It is not known whether Owen pasted the clippings himself or whether someone did this for him. In the broadest terms, the clippings come from newspapers in Mexico and the United States, mostly from the 1890s, and deal most commonly with such topics as Mexico, the international labor movement, colonization schemes, and "Utopias." These clipping booklets, about a dozen of which I examined, are in the possession of Ray Reynolds.

It should be recognized first of all that the move to Mexico had not been merely a private and personal affair. The Church authorities had advised polygamists to go [to Mexico] and had actively supported their emigration. High officials had been sent from Church headquarters in Salt Lake City to precede the colonists into Mexico and look for areas where colonies might be most successfully established. These men had been instructed to help the emigrants to organize colonization companies in order to purchase tracts of land and lay out townsites. The whole endeavor had the blessing of the Church.¹⁸

The Mormon colonies prospered. From 1887 to 1908, the number of Mormon colonies in northern Mexico increased from one to eleven, and the number of colonists from 630 to nearly 4,000.¹⁹ The colonies attracted favorable press in both American and Mexican newspapers.²⁰ The chaos of the Mexican Revolution in northern Mexico, however, was to drive out nearly all the Mormon colonists—another exodus in the history of the Church of the Latter-Day Saints. Some Mormon colonists held on and have remained in Chihuahua to this day, where they administer some large-scale agricultural cooperatives. The centennial of Mormon colonization in 1985 did not pass unfeted.²¹

As for the other colonies established by Americans in Mexico during the Porfiriato, with the notable example of Topolobampo very little is known. The colony at Metlatoyuca is indicative. Reports published in Mexican and American newspapers concerning the colony at Metlatoyuca are both sketchy and seemingly contradictory.²² It was stated in 1895 that 100 foreigners and 200 Mexicans were engaged there in the cultivation of various cash crops. Only one year later, in 1896, a different newspaper account gave the population as 5,000, while yet another report stated that by 1900 the colony's foreign population had been reduced to 30. In any case, the colony apparently had been counting on the construction of a rail link to a larger town, in vain.

The "Tihuatlan Land, Coffee, Vanilla, Sugar and Tropical Fruit Growing Association" was organized in 1896, some 40 miles southwest of Metlatoyuca. These colonists, Texans, planned to erect a settlement named Harrisburg, honoring their leader, Dr. John T. Harris. Of interest are the following comments by one of the colonists headed for Tihuatlan. They certainly echo the sentiments of Americans who set out for Topolobampo:

18. Karl E. Young, *Ordeal in Mexico: Tales of Danger and Hardship Collected from Mormon Colonists* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1968), p. 3.

19. Gonzalez Navarro, *La colonización en Mexico*, pp. 63ff.

20. Owen, "Extracts from Newspapers."

21. Lynn Smith, "The Mormon Enclave in Mexico," *The Los Angeles Times*, 18 August 1985, part 4, pp. 1ff.

22. Owen, "Extracts from Newspapers."

The question has been asked: Why do we wish to quit the United States?

1st. Land has become too expensive to own. It sells for \$50 per acre in Hill County [Texas].

2nd. The moneyed few in the States are making every effort in their power to control the working masses as they please. The consequence is that we have strikes, and a general disorganized condition of labor and society.

3rd. Monopolies are controlling every branch of industry, thereby putting their own prices on every merchantable commodity.

4th. In removing to Mexico we are getting away from political discord, and contentions. We want quiet.

5th. We believe that we are coming to a better government. We have noted with interest for the past 16 years the influence of the present administration, and believe that President Diaz has not a peer as a statesman and ruler.

6th. We believe that our condition will be bettered by our move.²³

Tlahualillo, also called the Maipimi colony, was another attempt by a large group of Americans to relocate in Mexico during the Diaz era. It ended as a fiasco, making headlines in its day and attracting the subsequent attention of historians. Some 800 American blacks from the Deep South set out for a remote hacienda near Tlahualillo in the state of Durango, counting on receiving land and finding prosperity. They found neither, and their condition almost immediately became desperate. There was a shortage of food and disease broke out, leaving some of the colonists dead. Others fled into the countryside, somehow hoping to return to the United States on foot. An alarmed U.S. consul helped arrange evacuation of the colonists back to the border, where they remained in quarantine for some time. The stink surrounding this botched colonization scheme was bad enough to require the attention of President Grover Cleveland and Congress.²⁴

The shortage of historical investigation into American colonies in Mexico during the Porfiriato can be labelled as part of a general pattern of neglect of the history of American colonies in Latin America. Although they are mentioned in some of the tabulations of American communal societies, apparently little is known about such groups as the Panama Colony established in the Canal Zone (1915), the La Gloria Land and Steamship Company of Cuba (1904), and the Hornella Colony along the Seisola River in Costa Rica (1890s).²⁵ The Cosme Colony in Paraguay,

23. Ibid. I confess to know nothing of the eventual fate of this colonization scheme.

24. U.S. Congress, *House of Representatives, Failure of the Scheme for the Colonization of Negroes in Mexico*, Document No. 169, 54th Cong., 1st sess., 1896. There are numerous clippings about the Tlahualillo colony in Owen, "Extracts from Newspapers."

25. See, for example, Julia Elizabeth Williams, "An Analytical Tabulation of the North American Utopian Communities by Type, Longevity, and Location" (unpublished master's thesis, Department of Sociology, University of South Dakota, 1939) and Ernest Wooster, *Communities of the Past and Present* (Llano Co-operative Colony, 1924; reprint ed., New York:

the socialist Utopia founded by Australians, has been well chronicled, however.²⁶

One hopes that scholars of American communal societies will someday be provided with a more complete picture of these American colonies outside America.

3. *The Place of the Topolobampo Colony in American and Mexican History*

Even if Topolobampo was not the only American colony in Mexico, and even if it was not the only American communal society established outside the United States, it clearly was the most important. Its magnitude is such that it must be explained in terms of the broader panorama of American and Mexican history. A necessarily brief account of the colony's history is in order, along with pertinent observations about where Topolobampo fits in the catalogue of American communal societies and where it fits in the area of intersection of American and Mexican interests.

The founder of the Topolobampo colony was Albert Kimsey Owen (1847-1915). The son of a Pennsylvania Quaker who served as Union surgeon during the Civil War, Owen saw quite a bit of the world while still a young man. In addition to accompanying his father to battlefields and hospitals during the war, he visited the American Southwest and later made a grand tour through Europe and the Levant.

Having opted for training in civil engineering, Albert K. Owen worked first in surveying and town planning around Philadelphia before he moved into railroad surveying. The railroad fever of the era led him "Out West" to Colorado. There he met General William J. Palmer, one of the emerging railroad barons and the founder of Colorado Springs. Palmer invited Owen to join an expedition into Mexico for the purpose of surveying potential railroad routes.²⁷ There the young engineer heard talk of a bay on the Pacific coast that was huge but uninhabited. Hidden from the view of coasting vessels, it had been charted for the first time only three years earlier.²⁸ With a companion, Owen set out overland to find it.

AMS Press, 1974), p. 65. The troubles of the Hornella Colony, located some forty miles east of the port of Limon, are recounted in an unattributed clipping in Owen, "Extracts from Newspapers."

26. Stewart Grahame, pseud, of Graeme Williams, *Where Socialism Failed: An Actual Experiment* (New York: McBride, Nast and Co., 1912).

27. For Owen's efforts at Topolobampo assessed in the context of aggressive American entrepreneurial activity in Mexico, see David M. Pletcher, *Rails, Mines and Progress: Seven American Promoters in Mexico*, 2nd ed. (Fort Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1972).

28. William J. Truxton, "Report of Reconnaissance of the Harbor of Topolobampo," CSUF.

The moon-lit epiphany that Albert K. Owen experienced while standing above Topolobampo Bay and its pristine shoreline was to focus his life for the next quarter century. He recorded his nocturnal inspiration in his diary. The entry is crucial for what it reveals about the initial vision of this future utopia-builder:

When the moon came up I could not resist the temptation of satisfying my curiosity at once as to our surroundings. It was a beautiful picture, and to me one of great promise... I was satisfied. I felt that our visit to these little known and out of the way shores would not be fruitless. In 1845, just such a lone neglected waterside was the site on which stands San Francisco and still more deserted and in appearance worthless was the Chicago site five years earlier.

Why, too, should then not one day be sited here... a cosmopolitan city? Why, too, should not these waters float the ships from every mercantile people with the valuable and the assorted cargos of the whole earth? There are a thousand and one reasons that such will be the case—there is not one to contradict.²⁹

The aspiration is secular, completely commercial in nature, and totally lacking in "utopian" content. Only later did Albert K. Owen begin to dream of a settlement of nobler principles. Before it became a project for the transformation of society, it was a project for the transformation of nature.

Topolobampo may be unique among American Utopian communities in that the site *preceded* the community, indeed the site *brought about* the community. That Owen did not initially plan to settle Topolobampo as a socialist colony is confirmed in a letter he wrote to a prominent Mexican government official. In that document Owen reflects back to an earlier time when he hoped that establishing a colony would serve as a demonstration to potential investors and capitalists of *the viability of the site*.³⁰ And even after the socialist colony at Topolobampo had collapsed in the mid-1890s, Owen continued to promote the site to capitalists as an investment opportunity:

In these days big money can be made with safety and certainty dealing with big and exclusive monopolies. Pacific City Site [at Topolobampo] is a natural monopoly that cannot be duplicated in North America; and, with very little money as it now stands, it can be handled with immense profits to the Company that organizes for that purpose. Considering what was done by the Elyton Land Company at Birmingham, Alabama and by the Mashonaland Company at Bulawayo, South Africa, there is no reason why those who handle the Pacific City Site should not also, within one year, make 100%, and, within six years, make an average of several hundred per cent a year on their investments.³¹

29. Folder "Topolobampo Bay discovery," CSUF.

30. Folder "Pacific City Colonization Company," Owen to Fernandez Leal, 22 January 1890, CSUF.

31. Folder "Topolobampo Bay and Pacific City site description," CSUF.

To Albert K. Owen—surveyor, planner, engineer, railroad man—no ambition could rival that of creating a new cosmopolis. Topolobampo offered him a project worthy of obsession. Its magnificent harbor, strategic location, and (presumed) blessings of climate and natural resources seemed to him to guarantee Topolobampo's importance for the future. He dreamed of building a trans-continental railroad that would be shorter than any other proposed route, with Topolobampo at the western terminus and Norfolk, Virginia at the eastern end. Thus, Europe and Asia would be linked via the United States and Mexico. Owen could not have foreseen such developments as the automobile or the airplane or the Panama Canal or telecommunications. It is understandable why he was mesmerized by what he perceived as the comparative advantage of Topolobampo and Mexico with respect to world trade and geopolitics. As he put it, "the Architect of the universe has placed Mexico between continents, between oceans, between zones."³²

In fact, Owen did come around to the idea of establishing a socialist colony at Topolobampo, and then threw himself wholeheartedly into the effort. (One might well ask whether Owen's frustration in trying to promote his city-port-rail plan to capitalists in the United States and abroad in the years 1872 to 1886 helped make him more receptive to a socialist alternative.) His interest in socialism can be traced back as far back as his involvement with the Greenback Party that flourished in the aftermath of the Civil War.³³ There is reason to believe that Edward and Marie Howland, who befriended Owen and who came to Topolobampo a few years after its founding, were very much responsible for further consciousness-raising. At any rate, the earlier experience of the radically committed Howlands at Godin's "Famillistere" in France seems to have found its way into Owen's design for his model city at Topolobampo.³⁴

"Integral co-operation," the economic and social philosophy on which the Topolobampo colony was to be erected, was elaborated by Albert K. Owen at length³⁵ and has been elucidated by other authors.³⁶

32. Albert K. Owen, *Integral Co-operation; with an Account of the Proposed Pacific Colony and the Credit Fonder of Sinaloa* (New York: John W. Lovell Company, 1885).

33. Owen was interested in both "utopian" and "scientific" socialism, to borrow the Marxian labels. For example, pasted side by side on a page in his "Extracts from Newspapers" are clippings about the Knights of Labor and Amana.

34. Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), pp. 105-6.

35. See, especially, *Integral Co-operation*.

36. Katscher, "Owen's Topolobampo Colony"; Reynolds, *Cat's Paw Utopia*; and Ortega Noriega, *£/ Eden subvertido* do the best job of untangling the strands of economics, moral philosophy, and historical reasoning that are woven together in Owen's prescription for "the good society."

Integral co-operation eschewed communism. It did not contemplate abolishing private property. At Topolobampo, it was planned that land and other resources would be common property, while land for houses was to be held by lease only. Improvements were to be considered private property. Home ownership, in fact, was deemed desirable. The best living arrangements, Owen believed, were family-based, though incorporating communal facilities for cooking, washing, etc.

Colonists were to be guaranteed a job as well as a dwelling. The life span of someone born in the colony was to follow a planned trajectory—schooling for the first 20 years, then 30 years of work (eight hours per day, six days per week), followed by retirement. Life and health insurance would be provided for all. At the beginning of the colony's life there would be both colonists and outside stockholders, but eventually only colonists would own stock, so that they would be their own employers.³⁷

In essence, the tenets of integral co-operation held that by rearranging certain features of economic life, by better equilibrating production and distribution, security for the community's members would be compatible with commercial interaction with the outside world. Public ownership would be the rule for all utilities, plus the likes of factories, restaurants, hotels, dairies, theaters, stores, and so forth. Money would circulate without interest. Integral co-operation was inimical to financiers and lawyers, but it did not reject the American ethos of "business." Integral co-operation supposed that the economic power made possible by large-scale incorporation, then being made manifest in American life, could be harnessed to serve a community instead of just a privileged few. Owen had faith in the business mentality. In 1887 he wrote:

If the questions of the day are to be solved, they will be solved by business persons. Others are not capable of looking into the causes or competent to mature a plan to perfect the details necessary to carry the same into execution.³⁸

It might be said, then, that Topolobampo's place in the history of American communal societies was that of a "cousin" to other late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century communities, such as the Union and Colorado Cooperative colonies, Kaweah, Ruskin, Fairhope, Llano del Rio, and the socialist colonies of Washington State. There was reciprocal influence between Topolobampo and these others, a characteristic phenomenon in the history of American communal societies.³⁹ In this

37. I am especially indebted to the succinct analysis provided in Reynolds, *Cat's Paw Utopia*, p. 26.

38. "Home Should Be the Palladium of Society," *Greeley County Graphic*, 22 December 1887, p. 27.

39. See Otohiko Otugawa, "Intercommunal Relationships among Nineteenth-century Communal Societies in America," *Communal Societies* 3 (Fall 1983), p. 79.

connection, a previously unpublished letter to Owen from JJ. Martin, one of the leaders of the Kaweah colony, should be brought to light. Dated 29 January 1893, the letter includes the suggestion by Martin that:

... it might be well for us to either ally ourselves with Topolobampo or secure some territory adjacent to you. I have been thinking about this for some time; but I do not want it mentioned for the present, for the reason that if it became generally known that we intended to invest and settle in Mexico it might prove an obstruction in the matter of our getting an indemnity.⁴⁰

That the indefatigable Marie Howland moved on to Fairhope after the demise of the Topolobampo colony, or that there were some Topolobampo veterans in the ranks of the Llano del Rio colony,⁴¹ shows further that the connections between Topolobampo and other socialist Utopian colonies of the period were real.

Stretching beyond its affinities with contemporary American communal societies, Topolobampo must be considered similar to countless other American Utopian communities in that it was, ultimately, a failure.⁴² Like most American communal societies, particularly those with a secular motivation, the Topolobampo colony crashed into the chasm between expectations and reality. It was dogged by lack of money and by internal dissension, familiar problems to any student of the history of American communal societies.

When the first boat of colonists, a few hundred in number, arrived at Topolobampo in late 1886 (in defiance of Owen's warning that it was premature), no preparations had been made for them. Even simple requirements like drinking water were not readily at hand. The hardship endured by the first group of colonists included illness and death. A wave of disgruntled colonists returned to the United States, where they spread bitter reports in the press. The remaining colonists persisted, though,

40. This letter is in the possession of Ray Reynolds.

41. Ernest Wooster, *Communities of the Past and Present*, p. 61.

42. The definition of success or failure of communal societies bedevils me, although I recognize the effort of scholars of communal societies to clarify the notion, e.g. Dolores Hayden, *Seven American Utopias: The Architecture of Communitarian Socialism, 1790-1975* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976), p. 6; Mark Holloway, *Heavens on Earth: Utopian Communities in America, 1660-1860*, 2nd ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), pp. 221-23; Gairdner Moment and Otto F. Kraushaar, eds. *Utopias: The American Experience* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1980), p. 345. I have taken the stance that Topolobampo was a failure because it ended in dissension and poverty. That it lasted as long as it did under trying conditions or that it attracted as many people as it did perhaps should qualify it for inclusion in the "success" column. Was Brook Farm, with its influence on American intellectual life, a failure? What about the fact that Jonestown lasted twice as long as the average lifespan for all American Utopian schemes? I am partial to the analysis of Gairdner Moment, cited above, i.e. "if human diversity is anything like as great as it appears to be, it can be expected that a given Utopian community will be successful for some people, unsuccessful for others."

and counted themselves at approximately 100 at the end of 1888.⁴³ The high point of the colony's population was reached at the end of 1892 at 500.⁴⁴

Who were the Topolobampo colonists? An analysis of the people who bought stock in the colony reveals them to be primarily of working-class origins.⁴⁵ "Working-class" also seems like a fair description of the people who actually went to Topolobampo as colonists. By using records kept by both the colony itself and by Mexican authorities, the occupations of a sample of 422 colonists can be determined.⁴⁶ This sample, representing roughly a third of the total number of people who lived in the colony during its lifespan, suggests an occupational profile very similar to that of American society at the time, to judge from comparison with the occupational statistics contained in the 1890 census.⁴⁷

An important group of 150 new colonists arrived in December 1890. These people were Kansas farmers, suffering from hard times, who had been recruited by Christian B. Hoffman, a wealthy Kansas businessman who was also a socialist and friend of Owen. The Kansans by all accounts were less interested in building a socialist Utopia than were the earlier colonists. The Kansas contingent was also recruited with an eye toward construction work. Settlement by Topolobampo Bay, it had long been known, would require irrigation. The task ahead involved digging a canal from the Fuerte River to the land north of the bay. After the arrival of the Kansans, this work was begun. In July 1892, after more than two years of arduous digging and scraping, and with the indispensable labor of local *peones*, the "ditch" was dug. (It is still in use today, now known as Canal No. 5 or the S.I.C.A.E. canal.)

It was, alas, engineered inadequately at the beginning. The scarce water that flowed to the parched farmland was coveted. Dissension, lurking near the surface as in so many communal societies, became untenable. The colony split into factions, pro-Owen (the so-called "Saints") and pro-Hoffman (the "Kickers"). The latter wanted individual title to their land and freedom from the embroiled finances of Owen and the colony. The two factions narrowly avoided violence. The colony began to break up. Those who remained soon found themselves beholden to a new force, a young American entrepreneur who had arrived in the Fuerte Valley, Benjamin Johnston.

43. Reynolds, *Cat's Paw Utopia*, p. 149.

44. Ibid.

45. Ortega Noriega, *El Eden subvertido*, p. 101.

46. Ledgers of Credit Fonder stockholders and records of arrivals / departures at Topolobampo Bay, CSUF.

47. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *11th Census of the United States, 1890: Occupations*.

In the legal fracas that followed the demise of the colony, Johnston maneuvered successfully to gain control of the canal via a new concession from the Mexican government, thus putting him in a position to dictate terms to the colonists. Some paid Johnston's price for the life-giving water. Other Owen loyalists balked, convinced that they held secure title and devoted as yet to the anti-capitalist spirit of integral co-operation. They held out, in fact, longer than Owen himself, who by 1898 had admitted that the colony was a failure. By 1904, the last of the pro-Owen colonists had lost out in the Mexican courts. Johnston proceeded to develop the sugar industry of the Fuerte Valley in baronial fashion. The city of Los Mochis, today the center of one of Mexico's most productive agricultural regions, was suckled on that sugar industry.

Besides its failure as a socialist experiment, the Topolobampo colony was a failure as a "cosmopolis." That is to say, none of the grand projects envisioned by Owen—the city, the port, the railroad—were accomplished during the life of the colony.

Albert K. Owen put a great deal of thought into his plans for a city at Topolobampo. It was to have been vast—29 square miles of grid with radiating avenues, built in a prevailing architecture of low-rise buildings of Moorish design, supporting a population of 400,000. (With the possible exception of the Mormons, what other American Utopian dreamed on that scale?) He also had very specific ideas about such things as street widths, underground utilities, and the quartering of domestic animals. The future cosmopolis—which was variously named Carman City, Gonzalez City, and finally Pacific City—was to have all the appropriate amenities. Parks, libraries, lecture halls, hotels, a natural history museum, a zoo, and other hallmarks of civilization were pencilled in.

The reality of settlement at Topolobampo, though, was that the site of the grand city remained little more than a tent colony. The colonists ended up having to settle inland in the arable bottomlands of the Fuerte River Valley to the north of Topolobampo proper. The only surviving building from the colony is the brick customhouse at Topolobampo Bay. This customhouse stood by the stone pier, i.e. the sum total of "harbor facilities" built at Topolobampo during the life of the colony. As for the trans-continental railroad, it remained a phantom of the future as well. Only in 1961 was the track across the rugged Sierra Madre Occidental, linking Topolobampo with the U.S. / Mexican border, finally completed.

It must be recalled that Albert K. Owen was a friend of both Manuel Gonzalez (Mexico's president from 1881-85) and Porfirio Diaz, as well as a host of Mexican government officials. The governor of Sinaloa visited the colony more than once. At the highest levels in Mexico, then, the Topolobampo colony had support. This was not because it was a socialist Utopian experiment, but because it represented a massive project for

economic development in Mexico. It was in this grand vision of commerce, transportation, and civilization that Owen had captured the attention and consistently won the indulgence of the Diaz government. In the last analysis, Mexico did not care about the success of a socialist experiment conducted by a group of Americans; Mexico was interested in the development of the city, the port, and the railroad.

Although he consistently failed to deliver the hoped-for colonists or trackage, Owen consistently managed to renegotiate colonization and railroad concessions with the Mexican government—four for towns, six for rail, over the period from 1881 to 1889. Being a project of such grand scale, offering such tangible benefits of infrastructure, Topolobampo was the favored example of Mexican colonization. In 1892, President Diaz hailed Topolobampo as the most advanced colony in Mexico.⁴⁸ In 1893 the colony was singled out for praise by the Mexican minister in charge of colonization, Fernandez Leal, and by the propagandist Pombo, the latter writing that "of all these settlements [of colonists] one appears to progress more rapidly than any other, and that is the Topolobampo colony, on the Pacific coast of Sinaloa."⁴⁹ Even after the colony had broken apart, Diaz still had kind words for it, the only colony to be mentioned by name in his September 1896 address to the Mexican congress:

The foreign colonies in this republic, though few in number, are in a satisfactory condition, excepting that one in the port of Topolobampo, whose trouble arises from its own organization. It is hoped that it will be reorganized shortly and will regain the conditions it formerly had.⁵⁰

The enthusiasm of Diaz and others for the Topolobampo colony was by no means shared by all Mexicans, however. On the colonization question in general, there were significant pockets of dissent among politicians, clergy, intellectuals, and journalists. In their eyes, foreign colonization was irresponsible and unpatriotic. How, they wondered, could the government justify subsidizing the welfare of foreigners (and foreign socialists, even!) instead of Mexicans? Furthermore, the presence of foreigners, especially "*yanquis*" in Mexico's northern territory, still raised fears about territorial annexation.⁵¹

48. Gonzalez Navarro, *La colonization en Mexico*, p. 5.

49. Pombo, *Mexico, 1876-1892*, p. 41.

50. Diaz' speech appeared in translation in the Mexico City newspaper *The Two Republics*, 17 September 1896. The clipping is found in Owen, "Extracts from Newspapers."

51. Fears of American annexation of Mexican territory persisted long after the Mexican-American War. As late as 1890, Matias Romero, the Mexican foreign minister felt obliged to reassure his countrymen that they need not worry about being taken over by Americans. (See his *Estudio sobre la anexion de Mexico a los Estados Unidos*, published in Mexico City that year.) Before dismissing this fear as paranoia, it should be noted that only the year before, in 1889, a bill urging purchase of some of Mexico's northern territory was presented

The newspaper *El Tiempo*, for example, opposed the establishment of the Topolobampo colony, fearing that the port's proximity to the United States and its proposed role as a trans-continental railroad terminus would make it too tempting a prize for the northern neighbor. Although *El Tiempo* conceded that the colonists who arrived at Topolobampo in 1886 were well-behaved, in later issues the paper hoped for the colony's speedy collapse, so that Mexico itself could take advantage of the magnificent site.⁵² Here, again, we find the nub of the matter—Mexico was interested in Topolobampo as an economic development project, not as a laboratory for integral co-operation and communitarian socialism.

After the demise of the Topolobampo colony, the Mexican government was quite happy to receive the overtures of thoroughly non-utopian capitalists like the sugar king Benjamin Johnston and the railroad magnate Arthur Stilwell. It was Stilwell who took over Owen's railroad concession and formed the Topolobampo-to-Kansas-City line. When that in turn went into receivership, it was acquired by the Santa Fe line and then by Benjamin Johnston, only to be finally taken over by the Mexican government in 1940. Johnston's sugar enterprise was similarly acquired (read "nationalized") by the Mexican government around this time.

Topolobampo is firmly linked to Yankee imperialism in the mind of some Mexican historians. This is understandable, considering the more general phenomenon of American economic penetration of Mexico during the same period.⁵³ One historian of socialism in Mexico concludes his chapter on Owen and Topolobampo with the phrase: "At the bottom of this Utopia lay the imperialist dream."⁵⁴ Other Mexican historians smell imperialism in the fact that Owen was an old friend of certain politicians from the American South known for their "expansionist" policies toward Mexico and the Caribbean.

in the U.S. Congress. Indeed, proposals to acquire Mexican territory by purse or by arms had been entertained by American politicians and adventurers long after the last actual territorial acquisition, the Gadsden Purchase of 1853. See especially the remarkable provisions of the negotiated, but never ratified, McClane-Ocampo Treaty of 1859, which would have created Panama-Canal-Zone-like swaths of American dominion across Mexico, in William R. Manning, ed., *Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States, Interamerican Affairs, 1831-1860* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), IX, Documents 4374 (21 April 1859) and 4414 (14 December 1859).

52. Gonzalez Navarro, "Dos colonias socialistas en el porfiriato," pp. 5-6.

53. See Pletcher, *Rails, Mines and Progress*; Luis Nicolau D'Owler, "Las inversiones extranjeras," in Daniel Cosío Villegas, ed., *Historia moderna de México* (Mexico City: Editorial Hermes, 1965), III, pp. 973-1177; and Jules Davids, "American Political and Economic Penetration of Mexico, 1877-1920," (Dissertation, Georgetown University, 1947).

54. Gaston García Cantii, *El socialismo en México, siglo XIX* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1969), p. 262.

For my part, there is no evidence that Owen ever conceived of planting the American flag on Mexican soil. The more sophisticated debate engages the question of "economic" imperialism. If Owen is to be labelled an imperialist in the economic sense, then that description fits many other American entrepreneurs of the era who were plowing money into Mexican ventures. The "economic imperialism" of American ownership of land⁵⁵ and utilities in Mexico during the Porfiriato is similar to the "economic imperialism" of multi-national corporations in our day—considered by some as exploitation, by others as good business opportunity. Based on my reading of Mexican historians and on my conversations with Mexicans in the Fuerte Valley, I believe there is a tendency to automatically transfer to Albert K. Owen the more arguably "imperialistic" motivations of Benjamin Johnston.

Sergio Ortega Noriega, the Mexican authority on the history of the Topolobampo colony, offers the following summary of the difference in perception between American and Mexican historians.

Mexican historiography puts in relief the figure of Albert K. Owen and completely ignores the polemic about the honesty of the enterprise, as it was debated in the United States.

From the point of view of information, Mexican historiography depends almost completely on that of Americans; the bringing to light of new material is modest and concerns points of minor importance. The contribution of Mexican historiography is the double focus on the episode as the initiation of the development of the Fuerte Valley and as an imperialist enterprise; nevertheless, it must be noted that these two affirmations are presented as self-evident facts and not as the conclusion of a historical argument.⁵⁶

4. Whither Old Utopias? Topolobampo Today

The promise of grandeur that Albert K. Owen beheld over Topolobampo Bay on a September night in 1872 has been only partially fulfilled.

There is no cosmopolis on the north shore of the bay. Today Topolobampo is only a scruffy fishing village of a few thousand inhabitants. The elegant maps drawn up by Owen for his symmetrical city of avenues and boulevards bear no relation to the dusty streets that follow the contours of the shoreline and the hills.

The huge bay, bigger than that of San Diego, is not home to "ships from every mercantile people," but merely to a fleet of shrimpers and fishing boats. Dredging operations at the entrance to the bay are necessary to provide passage over the shifting sand bar that was also a worry

55. By 1910, one fourth of Mexico's landholdings were owned by foreigners (Gonzalez Navarro, *La colonization en Mexico*, p. 93).

56. Ortega Noriega, *El Eden subvertido*, pp. 227-228.

for the original colonists. Although Mazatlan is the largest port in Sinaloa, an occasional sea-going vessel docks at Topolobampo, and Pemex has built a facility for its oil tankers.

The railroad from Topolobampo across the Sierra Madre Occidental was finally completed in 1961, as mentioned above. Today, though, the spectacular "Copper Canyon" rail trip only goes as far as the station at Los Mochis. Grass grows high along the tracks at Topolobampo.

From the highest point in Topolobampo, where the church sits, one can survey the ramshackle town and the glistening bay, and fairly conclude, as did Albert Kimsey Owen did more than a century ago, that Topolobampo is a place whose greatest days lie ahead.