

4-1-1944

The Land of Shalam: Utopia in New Mexico

Julia Keleher

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr>

Recommended Citation

Keleher, Julia. "The Land of Shalam: Utopia in New Mexico." *New Mexico Historical Review* 19, 2 (1944).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol19/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Historical Review by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu, lsloane@salud.unm.edu, sarahrk@unm.edu.

THE LAND OF SHALAM: UTOPIA IN NEW MEXICO

By JULIA KELEHER

ONE OF the most fantastic coöperative commonwealths in the long history of Utopian concepts of society materialized near Las Cruces, New Mexico, just before the turn of the twentieth century. The originator of the settlement, called the land of Shalam, was a John B. Newbrough, of Boston, the corporate name of the society was The First Church of Tae, and the articles of incorporation were filed with the secretary of the territory on December 30, 1885.

The settlement was conceived in fanaticism and built on an idealistic and humanitarian foundation. In its development, however, appeared the personal greed and individual selfishness which such societies usually encounter but fail to banish from their organization. Newbrough and his co-founder, Andrew M. Howland, came from a long line of socially conscious reformers. Most of their predecessors fabricated ideal commonwealths for the betterment of mankind out of dreams and wishful thinking, building word cities on mythical islands, on inaccessible mountains. Newbrough and Howland transmuted their dream city into New Mexico adobes on the banks of the Rio Grande.

Not very much is known about the originator of the project, Newbrough, prior to his New Mexico interlude, except that he had established a reputation in Boston as a hypnotist, and had also been identified with spiritualistic circles for some time. The picture left us by George Baker Anderson is no dry-point, however, for from him we learn that:

The doctor stood six feet four inches in height, weighing two hundred and seventy-five pounds, perfectly proportioned, extremely handsome, highly educated, dignified, cultured, refined and distingüè.¹

That the charming doctor was nobody's fool is quite obvious from the fact that on his exploratory trip through

1. George Baker Anderson, "The Land of Shalam," *Out West*, November, 1906, p. 414.

the West in search for a Utopian site, he realized the possibilities for developing an agrarian commonwealth on one of the few potential garden spots in New Mexico, the rich Mesilla Valley land. He took an option on nine hundred acres, and then returned to Boston to hook the financial backer of his project, a wealthy coffee importer named Andrew Howland.

Howland fits into the Utopian framework perfectly, a gentle, guileless visionary who might have read about Coleridge's fantastic plan for establishing an ideal commonwealth in America on the banks of the Susquehanna River. At any rate, he had some pronounced theories in regard to social reform, and what was most important, he had a fortune. He, too, was very much interested in spiritualism. This Boston background of the two men is very interesting because it ties up with another Boston social reformer, Edward Bellamy, whose study of a cooperative society, *Looking Backward*, was published in Boston in 1887. Bellamy's social theories had been attracting a great deal of attention, not only in the New England states but throughout the country, and it is not improbable that the two men were influenced by some of his ideas. Bellamy's Utopian state is laid in Boston in the year 2000, and the visualization of his ideal picture of society at that period is projected through the technical advice of a hypnotic trance. Some authorities on *The Land of Shalam* contend that Newbrough got Howland to convert his entire fortune, estimated at half a million dollars, into available cash for the New Mexico commonwealth by hypnotizing him.

Whether this contention is accepted or not, it is true that Howland fell with a thud which pains the modern reader. Newbrough sold him his plan for purchasing a tract of land somewhere in the West, free from the complexities of modern civilization, and the establishment of a city which should be the center of a commonwealth in which all should be equal. He apparently swallowed, too, Newbrough's fanatical illusions to the effect that although he had been divinely appointed by Jehovah to buy a tract of land for the ideal commonwealth, the Lord had told him that

Howland would supply the money necessary for the fulfillment from on High. One of the most revealing clues in regard to Howland's character and the humanitarian ideals which motivated him in the venture is the fact that the feature which interested him most in the projected set-up was the establishment of a home for foundling children.

So the coffee fortune was turned into ready cash, and the two men started on the long journey in Newbrough's preconceived search for a site for the ideal settlement. At this point, in one of the most curious chapters in New Mexico's colorful history, Newbrough put on a pre-arranged burlesque show in an effort to further impress Howland. He convinced him apparently that:

Angels from on high had commanded him to travel towards the setting sun, and that when the divinely appointed place would appear they would both immediately and intuitively know it. The journey was uneventful until Socorro, New Mexico, was reached, at which point Newbrough told Howland that he was getting warm, and that he felt that they were nearing the place. At Las Cruces he was very warm, and a few miles beyond this settlement, he climaxed the show by allowing himself to be driven blindfolded through the vicinity; then at the psychological moment, at the very spot he had previously chosen, which is the present site of Doña Ana, he stopped, lifted his hands dramatically to heaven, and rendered thanks to Jehovah and all the angel ambassadors for their guidance.²

The commonwealth got off to a good start when it was agreed that the title to all the land should be invested in Howland. The structure of Shalam's government consisted of an Inner Council and an Outer Council known as The Tae. Each Council was to have a Chief elected by a ballot for a term of one year. The settlement drew up no constitu-

2. *Ibid.*, p. 419. Anderson's local geography was here at fault, for Doña Ana lies, north, not south, from Las Cruces; also the colony tract of about 900 acres was not "the present site of Doña Ana" but bottom land which lay to the west, between Doña Ana and the river. A more extended account, and in some ways more accurate, is "The Land of Shalam," an anonymous article which was incorporated in *History of New Mexico* (Pacific States Publishing Company, 1907), pp. 511-518.

tion or by-laws, but all of the applicants were required to enter into what was known as a Holy Covenant which reads thus:

I covenant unto thee Jehovah, that since all things are thine, I will not own or possess exclusively unto myself, anything, under the sun, which may be intrusted to me, which any person, or persons may covet, desire, or stand in need of.³

The members of the colony were guided by a long tract called *Oahspe* which Newbrough claimed that he wrote at the inspiration of Jehovah. The so-called "New Bible" was a hodgepodge of classical myths, plus the legends of India and China, larded with nonsense and weighted with rhetorical ravings. The following description concerning the creation of The Land of Shalam is an example of its style, and the approach of the author to subject matter:

Next south lay the kingdom of Himalawawoganapapa, rich in legends of the people who lived here before the flood; a kingdom of seventy cities and six great canals, coursing east and west, and north and south, from the Ghiee mountains in the east to the west mountain, . . . the place of the king of bears . . . In the high north lay the kingdom of Olegalla, the land of giants, the place of yellow rocks and high spouting waters . . . [After describing the main irrigation ditch, he continues:] There were seven other great canals, named after the kings who built them, and they extended across the plains in many directions, but chiefly east and west, [forming a great network through the valley of the Rio Grande.] Betwixt the great kings and their great capitals, were a thousand canals, crossing the country in every way, so that the seas of the north were connected with the seas of the south. In kanoos the people traveled and carried the productions of the land in every way.⁴

3. Ellis vs. Newbrough and Howland, 6 *N. M. Supreme Court Reports* (1896), p. 191.

4. Anderson, *op cit.*, 416-417. Anderson's alleged "quotation" is found to consist of four disconnected excerpts from the "First Book of God," chapter xxv, sections 18, 16, and 9. (See *Oahspe: A New Bible*, pp. 364-365). The clause placed in brackets, identifying the region with "the valley of the Rio Grande," is not in the original but apparently is a gloss added by Anderson.—Editor.

One of the most curious publications of the sect, in addition to *Oahspe*, was a pamphlet called *The Faithists Calendar*. In addition to information concerning Utopian plans, ideals and ambitions, *Faithists Calendar Kosmon 38* contains an involved Almanac calculated for the latitude of southern New Mexico. Calculations regarding the moon's phases are mathematically worked out, and parallel memoranda and selections from *Oahspe* are listed. Of particular interest to New Mexicans is the meteorological report giving the general average of temperature in Shalam, N. M., during eleven signs, or up to the 335 day inclusive of Kosmon 37. One must admit, after reading the following "remarks" that the Shalam weather man was on the job:

Owing to the high altitude and dry atmosphere of Shalam, the heat is not as oppressive at 110 degrees here as it is in New York or Boston at ninety degrees. The rainfall during the year was about ten inches.

The coldest weather we had last winter, the temperature fell to 11 degrees Fahrenheit. On this occasion we had ice half an inch thick on standing water, but it melted away early in the afternoon. Although the above shows a comparatively mild temperature, the high winds made a few of the days in winter very disagreeable, especially as the people of Shalam lived in huts of poor construction. Although the high temperature exceeds but little that of New York and Philadelphia, yet we had many days in which temperature in the sun rose perhaps fifteen degrees higher than in either of the other places mentioned. The peculiarity accompanying this high temperature is that there are no sun strokes, or prostrations from heat as there are in northern latitudes. The dryness of the atmosphere prevents putrefaction in vegetables and animal refuse.⁵

Between 1885 and 1900 Shalam's welcome on the door-mat was broadcast through their tracts and *Calendar*. A cordial invitation was extended to Faithists all over the world to come and share their "blessed home" and make it

5. *The Faithists Calendar*, Kosmon 38, p. 17.

one of the "garden-spots of the world." Threading their very cordial invitations, however, were these admonitions:

Idle or indolent people would not be happy here. Neither is it an old-folks or a home for taking in invalids. Yet it is open for the strong, or the weak, young or old, rich or poor who can live the life of the commandments. We came not for ourselves alone, but to prepare a way for the raising of foundlings and orphans from infancy. How can Shalam, far away in New Mexico hope to work any good for the whole world? And this is what we say back: "Is the problem of life solved? Who knows how to live? What of the countless thousands in the great cities out of employment, out of food, sick and dying?" Oh, for a home on Jehovah's plan that the wise, the good, and learned may find a fact mightier than all the books in the world!⁶

Five years after its inception The Land of Shalam was apparently prospering as an agrarian one. Two hundred acres of the nine hundred original ones were under cultivation, and five hundred additional acres had been acquired through donations and contributions by applicants. Newbrough was an amazing combination of the fanatic and the realist. That he was "no idle dreamer of an idle lay" is attested to by the fact that in order to provide irrigation independently of ditches, he acquired two steam engines, one six horse-power, and one fifty horse-power, which raised from the Rio Grande about one million gallons of water an hour. The subsequent construction of the Elephant Butte Dam in Sierra County at a cost of seven million dollars, is ample proof that the Bostonian was a man of judgment, visualizing the possibilities of irrigation in a desert country.

Andrew Howland's dreams for orphans materialized. By 1891, a large and beautiful home for the orphans that they had been collecting at the rate of five a year, regardless of race or color, had been completed. It is interesting to note that "in front of a tree-lined lawn of the home is a

6. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

gushing fountain, flinging its silvery spray from massive stone columns."⁷

One cannot say whether the children liked the uniforms required, a sack-like garment containing holes for the free use of the arms, but they certainly must have enjoyed the bath-tubs which were provided "one for each child." Porcelain bath-tubs during this era in New Mexico history were not on the pioneer's priority list. In fact, it was the wash-tub doubling for the bath-tub in most sections of America.

The ones in charge of the orphans must be given credit for the announced intention of teaching them "politeness and gracefulness of behaviour." The Shalamites had a practical slant on education, and a modern approach to vocational guidance which may be seen from the following lament over the *status quo* of the prevailing educational methods:

To train boys and girls how to use their hands, is this not education? To learn to work at everything skillfully, this is the method of education in Shalam. How lamentably stupid is the method of education in this so-called civilized world! The young men and women graduates are as shiftless as babies!⁸

By this time several other large buildings had been erected for the care and comfort of the colonists. Among these, in addition to the Orphans' Home, was a large building for life members called a Fraternum, provided with a living-room, a library, and three adeptries or spiritrooms. (One of the red-letter days on their calendar was called "Holy Veil Day," formerly called "Rochester Knockings," or the beginning of Modern Spiritualism.)

One of the most significant accomplishments of these two commonwealth builders, from the viewpoint of those interested in the historical structure of Utopias, was the erection of a co-operative store with its various compartments separated by glass partitions. A department store in Mesilla Valley in this period must have been enough to

7. *Albuquerque Evening Citizen*, July 18, 1890, p. 2.

8. *Calendar*, p. 21.

make even the most lukewarm crackpots join up with the Faithists just for the opportunity of buying a package of Arbuckle's in such elegance. The ultra-modern approach to community life is one feature of The Land of Shalam which definitely ties up with Bellamy's model store in *Looking Backward*. The following description of the settlement gives one some idea of the plant:

The residence of Andrew Howland contains a fine library. Adjacent to his home are extensive barns, stables and corrals where fine Jersey and Guernsey stock is kept. The irrigation plant is probably the most extensive operated by a single owner in the territory. At Levitica, where the country store is located, are a row of comfortable cottages designed as homes for laborers and colonists. Nearby a well has been dug. A 60 horse-power boiler runs a pump, having a capacity of 1,000 gallons a minute by means of which the water is led directly into ditches or into a reservoir covering an acre of space. This season four full crops of alfalfa were cut. In large and thrifty vineyards hang luscious muscats.⁹

If the reader wishes a close-up of a few of the upper-bracket colonists, let him take a look through the telescope of time at Dr. Bowman, a man who made a considerable fortune later in California, but who at the historical present, clad only in a pair of white pajamas is busily engaged in irrigating the young peach trees. Or notice Dr. Tanner, the man sitting in the sun with his back against the adobe wall of the co-operative store. He is the one who proved his superiority over the flesh and the devil by fasting forty days and forty nights. Chatting with him is Mrs. Sweet, a newcomer from California. The lady may be trying to explain just why she left her husband, head of an esoteric cult. Probably the fact that he claimed that his body lived in the reincarnated soul of an ancient being who had wielded a sceptre long before the establishment of Christianity, bored her. Notice now the finely proportioned six-footer coming out of the store—it is none other than the emissary

9. *Evening Citizen*, July 18, 1890, p. 2.

of Jehovah on his daily tour of inspection of the commonwealth. Mrs. Sweet has also spied him, and immediately hurries over to join him, leaving the fasting prophet to give his undivided attention to the cockle-burrs clinging to his cotton pajamas.

The colonists were obviously led to believe that all of them were to enjoy equally a permanent place in the settlement, with no authority on the part of any member or members toward the exclusion of another, by such a statement as: "We are perhaps the only community in the world living peacefully and voluntarily together without a mortal leader."¹⁰ By 1900, however, Newbrough began to show signs of hurdling such bulwarks against authoritarian power, and his ambitious plans for installing himself as the eventual owner and ruler of a 1400-acre kingdom on the Rio Grande became apparent to such colonists as Bowman and Tanner who had put money into the common fund.

The one who precipitated crystalization of dissent, which had been growing for some time, however, was none other than Mrs. Sweet, whom Newbrough had married shortly after she had become a member of the colony. The lady had ambitious plans too, other than being the wife of an emissary from on High, and when it began to be noised around the settlement that she too had her eye on the fortune that Howland had invested in the project, the colonists most concerned demanded either their money back, or clear titles to a fair share of the rich Mesilla Valley land.

When neither money nor a share in the property seemed to be forthcoming, one of the colonists by the name of Jesse M. Ellis filed suit in the District Court of Doña Ana County against John B. Newbrough and Andrew M. Howland for \$10,000. The verdict of the jury in this trial awarded Ellis \$1500, whereupon Newbrough appealed the case and took the dream-city to the Supreme Court of the Territory of New Mexico. On August 19, 1891, an opinion was handed

10. *Calendar*, p. 20.

down by this court which reversed the decision of the District Court.

The Supreme Court review of the case is a lengthy one, and as curious a document from the viewpoint of rhetoric, as the literature of the Faithists. The judges who reviewed the case were: J. D. O'Brien, William D. Lee, Edward P. Seeds and A. A. Freeman. Judge Freeman wrote the opinion in which the court frankly admitted that the case was a most extraordinary one and as far as they had been able to extend their researches, without precedent.¹¹ The following recitation of the Supreme Court is an example of the Court's frilled literary approach to law:

The most that can be gathered from the declaration is that the defendants had conceived some Utopian scheme for the amelioration of all ills, both temporal and spiritual, to which the human flesh and soul are heir; had located their new Arcadia near the shores of the Rio Grande in the County of Doña Ana, in the valley of the Mesilla; had christened this new-found Vale of Tempe "The Land of Shalam"; had sent forth their siren notes, which sweeter and more seductive than the music that led the intrepid Odysseus to the Isle of Calypso, reached the ears of the plaintiff at his far-off home in Georgia and induced him to "consecrate his life and labors and all his worldly effects," etc., to this new gospel of Oahspe. This much is gathered from the pleadings. The evidence in support of the plaintiff's demand is as startling as the declaration is unique.¹²

The reasons advanced by Ellis for joining the colony, his association with it for two years, and his complaints against the founders were carefully weighed by the Court. The facts were established that Ellis had made no sacrifice of property in order to become a member of Shalam, and that he could read, and had read the tracts and manifestos of the Faithists. What was more important, and the crux around which the decision of the judges was rendered, was the fact established by the court that Ellis had entered into

11. 6 N. M. Supreme Court Reports (1896), p. 182.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

what was called "The Holy Covenant," (the pronouncement required by the Faithists of applicants) and therefore: "Under the terms of this covenant, he cannot maintain his suit, for the defendants insist, and the proof is clear, that they 'covet or desire or stand in need of' the \$10,000 for which the plaintiff sues."¹³

The opinion of the court was to the effect that Ellis was a man of ordinary intelligence, and because he had entered into the venture with his eyes open, he was therefore not entitled to any share in the property. The decision thus handed down by this court disillusioned those sincerely caught up in a fog of religious fanaticism, or those who were interested in tracing a new pattern of social and economic life, so they stripped off their sack-like garments, put on their old clothes, and took themselves off to greener fields.

Newbrough made an effort to carry on in spite of crumbling foundations in his Utopian venture, and in spite of serious cracks in his apparent good neighbor policy, but after a few years of trying to attract new colonists he got discouraged, and made his exit from the melodrama by dying in El Paso.

The former Mrs. Sweet was no defeatist, however, and not to be outwitted by the turn of events had centered her attentions on Andrew Howland, and married him. No attempt was made by her to re-colonize, and Howland, always a follower, never a leader, saw the buildings which his money had made possible fall into ruin, and the people whom he had sincerely wanted to help, shadows of his dreams. The closing scene of Utopia in New Mexico is painted by a contemporary of the period thus:

Andrew M. Howland, the chief sufferer through the duplicity of Newbrough, and his wife still reside upon the property which was the scene of this unparalleled enterprise. All that remains of the fortune which he was persuaded to invest, is the land itself, and a few adobe buildings. He became widely known throughout the Mesilla

13. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

valley as a man of many eccentricities. At home he is usually to be found attired, summer or winter, in a thin suit of white pajamas enjoying a sun bath in the corrals of the institution. In spite of peculiarities of his personality, he and his wife are famed for their kindness of heart, and in referring to them, those familiar with the true history of the wretched fiasco of *The Land of Shalam*, should think twice before they give expression to aught but sentiments of pity.¹⁴

The reader may mentally dispose of Newbrough as he sees fit, but on the basis of his humanitarian concept of society, Andrew M. Howland does seem to deserve a place in the list of Utopian dreamers. He belongs, perhaps, in an humble way, with that famous company of men, numbering Plato, Thomas More, Francis Bacon, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Edward Bellamy, who in a Heavenly Utopia may be continuing to debate the merit of their commonwealths, their successes and their failures.

14. Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 424.