

The Not-So Wild West: The Rise and Fall of Vegetarian Settlements in 19th century Kansas

Kelly Heiman

We've a Communal Home in the land of the west
Where the souls of our people are free.
Where Friendship and Love find a voice in each heart...
Will you come o our home, then, that's waiting for you.
—*Star of Hope*, R. T. Romaine¹

Social Reformer Horace Greeley once said, “Go West, young man, and grow up with the country.”² In the mid nineteenth century, the territory of Kansas was a hot spot for social reformers, including anti-slavery advocates, anti-Industrialists, socialists, communists, and religious zealots, even vegetarians, who saw Kansas as a sort of modern-day Eden. This deep interest in reform is a trademark of nineteenth century America; with the North and South entrenched in war over a matter of social and political theory, many social reformers saw the opportunity to establish a country based on radical new ideals that would stretch the old ideals of, “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” to their limits. Within this optimistic climate begins the story of the Kansas Vegetarian Emigration Society, a utopian society that preached liberty, morality, and above all, a deep relationship with nature that only the American West could provide. Spurred by the words of Horace Greeley, among other ideologues including Amos Bronson Alcott, Sylvester Graham and Henry David Thoreau, the Kansas Vegetarian Emigration Society was an experiment in nineteenth century social theory. Its ultimate failure is a marker in the development of vegetarianism, as well as a cautionary tale of optimism gone sour.

Vegetarianism in the nineteenth century was not only a dietary movement, but also a social one. Henry S. Clubb founded the Vegetarian Kansas Emigration Society in 1855. While this society appeared to be quite radical—based on the principles of vegetarianism, anti-slavery, communal and suburban living, and abstinence from alcohol—it quickly attracted a small following of rather average individuals, revealing the appeal that social change had at the time. About fifty families, mostly from cities throughout the East Coast, made the pilgrimage to their utopian Mecca: Neosho County, Kansas. In its early development, Clubb reported, “The members of the companies include nearly one hundred

¹ Fogarty, Robert S., *All Things New*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). 104.

² http://www.famousquotesandauthors.com/authors/horace_greeley_quotes.html

individuals, most of whom are heads of families...”³ Clubb hoped to attract moral individuals who sought freedom from the corruption of cities and would be willing to make this pledge:

I, -----, do voluntarily agree to abstain from all intoxicating liquors as beverages, from tobacco in every form, and from the flesh of animals; to promote social, moral, and political freedom; to maintain the observance of all good and righteous laws, and to otherwise conform to the rules adopted by a majority of the Vegetarian Settlement Company.⁴

With this pledge, the members of the Vegetarian Kansas Emigration Society became reformers actively participating in a movement which sought to improve not only the conditions of their own lives, but the lives of everyone and everything they come into contact with, through a compassionate mindset towards all life forms, and a fair amount of elbow grease. They became the select few who would live out the principles only talked about by great thinkers, to be temperate, hard working, sympathetic, accepting and noble. And what better place to start this movement than the territorial West, where the land was fertile and cheap, and these principles could be acted upon, perhaps even included in a state constitution.

The Neosho City vegetarian settlement is one of many tried and failed settlements within the long narrative of vegetarianism. America’s vegetarian story began with thinkers like dietary reformer Sylvester Graham, notably the inventor of the delicious Graham Cracker. Graham’s dietary philosophy sought to reform the woes of mankind, pinpointing our moral downfall on the establishment of industry, luxury and art. These things whetted man’s appetite for vice and a thirst for alcohol and blood. Graham states, “From [luxury] we derive our diseases, our deformities, our poverty and our slavery. Avarice, and the basest passions are generated and nourished wherever it exists; while crime and misery are its legitimate offspring.”⁵ Graham’s solution is a brotherhood of rational individuals—martyrs in their time—willing to give up all tokens of luxury, including meat, tobacco and alcohol, and serve as an example for all “victims of gluttony and intemperance.”⁶ According to Graham, this martyrdom was not without its benefits: practitioners would suffer fewer maladies at the hands of dirty meat and polluted air, feel more energized due to achieving appropriate levels of sleep and exercise, and achieve longevity due to an overall happier constitution. Graham, a prominent thinker of the time, published his thoughts on vegetarianism in 1835 in the book, *A Defense of the Graham System of Living: Or, Remarks on Diet and*

³ “Octagon and Vegetarian Society,” *The Kansas Herald of Freedom*, May 03, 1856, issue 13, column B.

⁴ Colt, Miriam D., *Went to Kansas*, (Watertown: L. Ingalls & Co., 1862). 290.

⁵ Graham, Sylvester, *A Defense of the Graham System of Living: Or, Remarks on Diet and Regimen*, (New York: W. Applegate). 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

Regimen. While there is no evidence that Graham directly influenced Clubb, his arguments on vegetarianism directly reflect those same principles upon which Clubb based the Kansas Vegetarian Emigration Society some twenty years later.

Graham defended both the philosophical basis for vegetarianism, as well as a biological one. In his book, Graham offered a detailed, scientific, nineteenth century account of man's evolution, stating that everything about man's anatomy, from the shape of his teeth to the nature of his digestive system to his close biological resemblance to vegetarian mammals, such as apes and monkeys reveal mankind's evolutionary predisposition towards vegetarianism. His scientific hypotheses were verified by naturalist doctors of the time, and his introduction contains a signed note of approval, dated July 22, 1834 by the Portland Medical Association, stating, "If [Graham's] doctrines in respect to diet and general regimen should be universally adopted, the cause of temperance and morality would be essentially promoted and the physician's services rarely needed."⁷ Contemporaries of Graham, including transcendentalists like Amos Bronson Alcott and Henry David Thoreau cared less about his scientific theories and focused instead on his social doctrine.

A precursor to the Kansas Vegetarian Emigration Society was Fruitlands, a vegetarian utopia established in Harvard, Massachusetts by Amos Bronson Alcott some ten years before Henry S. Clubb began drafting the constitution for his settlement. Alcott, a philosopher, transcendentalist, and vegetarian undoubtedly inspired much of Clubb's rhetoric. Smaller than the Neosho settlement, Fruitlands was a small society of Alcott's closest family and friends, described as a "New Eden," and based on the similar utopian themes as stated by Graham and Clubb. This settlement, as the various vegetarian settlements to follow, lasted for one brief summer and resulted in extreme failure. The philosophers proved unprepared for the rough lifestyle, with an overly crowded house and little food to go around. To make matters worse, the members of Fruitlands denied the use of any modern amenities, including ploughs, and many complained of sore hands and backs.⁸ A harsh New England autumn was the last straw, and by November, the society disbanded. Louisa May Alcott, a young girl during the Fruitlands experiment, suggested that the world was not ready for the "newness" of utopian societies in her short story, "Transcendental Wild Oats." In it, she states, "To live for one's principles, at all costs, is a dangerous speculation; and the failure of an ideal, no matter how humane and noble, is harder for the world to forgive and forget than bank robbery..."⁹ Alcott argued that some social theory simply does not transfer from a hypothetical to a real-life setting, despite the atmosphere of freedom and hope that inspired radical new social theory, some theories were still too liberal to flourish in nineteenth century society.

⁷ *Ibid.*, iii.

⁸ Sears, Clara Endicott, *Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company). 71.

⁹ Alcott, Louisa May, "Transcendental Wild Oats," taken from *Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands*, compiled by Clara Endicott Sears. 169.

Fruitlands' failure devastated vegetarian social reformers, but Henry S. Clubb maintained the prevailing optimism of the nineteenth century. Clubb theorized that the missing key to the success of a vegetarian settlement was location; hence he established the Kansas Vegetarian Emigration Society. The logic in selecting Kansas seemed solid. Clubb selected a place suitable for farming, with good irrigation, fresh soil and an untapped wealth of natural resources including ample fresh water, timber, coal and limestone.¹⁰ Western emigration was a popular trend, and the society attracted enough members to feasibly establish a small township, with the possibility of growth in the future. Unlike the experiment at Fruitlands, however, located so near its members' homes and families, the failure of the Neosho settlement left its members—hailing primarily from the East Coast—caught in a wild land, far from home with little means to travel elsewhere and no means of correspondence beyond the pony express. One member expresses this isolation, stating, "These intelligent, but too confiding, families have come from the North, East, South, and West, to this *farther* West, to make pleasant homes; and now are determined to turn right about, start again on a journey—some know not where!"¹¹ The members who chose to risk their lives for dietary principles clearly assumed that the adjustment to a completely natural lifestyle would be a smooth one.

While qualification requirements for the Kansas Vegetarian Emigration Society were morally stringent, they did not have restraints against class, race, or income, in keeping with its doctrine of acceptance and equality. The preparation for the expedition seemed sufficient; membership cost a mere \$10, all of which funded the company, which would provide seed grain, utensils, tents, building implements, etc.¹² President Henry S. Clubb offered the movement to any forward-thinking individual who believed in action over rhetoric. While this theory was admirable, it attracted many individuals who were perhaps better suited to read and contemplate social theory than forge into the unknown frontier. Stewart recalls:

One great difficulty with most of the members of the Company was their inability to adapt themselves to conditions unavoidable in frontier life; their expectations were too great as to the comforts and conveniences to be found under such conditions. They were mostly from the Far East; mechanics, professional men, and men from offices and stores in the cities, and altogether unable to adjust themselves to a frontier life.¹³

¹⁰ Stewart, Watson, *Personal Memoirs of Watson Stewart*, Kansas Collection Articles. Section 4.

¹¹ Colt, 46.

¹² Hickman, Russell, "The Vegetarian and Octagon Settlement Companies," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, November 1933, volume 2, No. 4. 380.

¹³ Stewart, section 4.

As Watson illustrates, despite the members' will to establish a natural lifestyle, their previous careers and lifestyles made it difficult to cope with their surroundings. This was true of Fruitlands, as well, suggesting that philosophers and ideologues overestimated their dependence on the luxuries of industry that they so strongly argued against.

One of the families who embarked to Neosho was the Colt family: William Colt, his wife Miriam, and their two children, whom Miriam lovingly refers to as Willie and Mema in her memoir, *Went to Kansas*. Before their emigration, Colt reflects the optimism of the time, excited by the aspects of community and opportunity. In an anti-urban voice similar to Sylvester Graham, she states: "The advantages to families of having their children educated away from the ordinary incentives to vice, vicious company, vicious habits, of eating and drinking and other contaminations of old cities...."¹⁴ However, upon arriving, Miriam Colt discovered that these principles were harder to act upon in real life, and the repercussions proved more devastating than a philosophical miscalculation like Alcott's at Fruitlands.

Miriam's account of their time in Neosho City, Kansas, is best summarized in her book's sub-title, *Being a Thrilling Account of an Ill-Fated Expedition to That Fairy Land and its Sad Results; Together With a Sketch of the Life of the Author and How the World Goes with Her*. Colt recounts the miserable conditions her family withstood in the four months they spent in Neosho City, Kansas beginning with the living conditions. The Colt family arrived to Kansas in a second caravan, two months after the frontier caravan embarked, which was sent with the intentions of building an octagonal-shaped settlement, including housing, a saw mill, and a gristmill. Upon arriving in Neosho, Miriam reported,

May 13th—Can anyone imagine our disappointment this morning, on learning from this and that member, that no mills have been built; that the directors, after receiving our money to build mills, have not fulfilled the trust reposed in them... Now *we all have come!* Have brought our fathers, our mothers, and our little ones, and find no shelter sufficient to shield them from the furious prairie winds, and the terrific storms of the climate.¹⁵

In the above passage, Colt addresses not only the incompetence of the settlement's members, but also the lack of preparation and action made by their fearless leader, Henry S. Clubb, the man who advocated, "...calling public attention to the subject of Vegetarian diet in a way no mere theoretic movement in the form of lectures or publications ever can be expected to accomplish."¹⁶ Shortly after arriving, members reported disappointment in Clubb's leadership. The participants mentioned no direct corruption within the Kansas Vegetarian

¹⁴ Ibid., 21.

¹⁵ Ibid., 45.

¹⁶ Ibid., 289.

Emigration Society, however, Clubb had obviously squandered the company's initial investments, leaving them with few building and farming tools, and only two stoves to share among all fifty families. One member stated that, upon confrontation, "Mr. Clubb had no money to refund but let us have some corn starch, farina, a few dates, and a little pealed barley."¹⁷ As with Fruitlands, the members and leaders of the Kansas Vegetarian Emigration Society based their experiment on the supposition that a transition to an all-farming lifestyle would be easy, and were wholly unprepared. This fits into the larger spectrum of nineteenth century utopian philosophy, based on the assumption that the ideal would be easily attainable as long as one had the proper intentions. Nineteenth century utopian thinkers and their followers believed that if one's heart was in the right place, the rest would fall into place, but this was not the case in the vegetarian experiments they enacted.

The inexperienced members of the Neosho settlement were also unaccustomed to the climate and general wilderness of the West. Despite the fertile soil and clean water, Colt complained often of Kansas' erratic weather. Of one storm, she writes, "A most terrific thunder-storm came up last night; the thunder tumbled from the sky, crash upon crash, as though all was being rolled together like a scroll; the fiery chains of lightning streaked the heavens from zenith to horizon. The rain came in torrents, and the wind blew almost tornados."¹⁸ Rattlesnakes, tarantulas, and mosquitoes plagued the settlement, which Colt and other members considered a serious threat to their children.

While the thrill of belonging to a potential "Free State" appealed to the members of the Kansas Vegetarian Emigration Society, as avid anti-slavery advocates, Kansas maintained a political climate that was tense and often violent. Watson Stewart discusses in great length the political tension between the Missouri "Border Ruffians," especially the travel difficulties they posed. Allen County was a hot spot for activity, as one of the leading proslavery counties in "Bleeding Kansas." Watson reports one example of the dangers and loss the political struggle had on the Neosho settlement. He tells the story of a Mr. Buxton, sent by the community to acquire supplies, including a horse, bookshelf, food, and other necessities. Three weeks after his departure, Mr. Buxton returned, empty-handed. Buxton reported that his conflict happened on the return journey:

He had reached Westport, when a party of armed men stopped him on the principal street, and informed him that they wanted his horses... they told Mr. Buxton that he could go his way. He could do nothing else than make his way on foot. It took him about ten or twelve days to return; much of the way without roads other then Indian trails, and the country being but

¹⁷ Colt, 128.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

sparsely settled, so that some times he had difficulty in getting either food or shelter.¹⁹

Buxton got lucky, reckless Border Ruffians were known to kill or injure many during this time period. The Neosho settlement didn't fare as well. Watson reports, "We realized that we had, indeed, fallen upon troublous times. Our loss would be at least \$500.00, and one not easily borne by us in our circumstances."²⁰ The loss of those supplies was an extreme setback for the community, though some items were retrieved, including the wagon and some books. When Kansas Vegetarian Emigration Society members came across a pro-slavery man or woman, they were expected to be kind, but remain firm in their principles, however the Border Ruffians were intimidating, and arguing with them about politics was a dangerous business.

The most devastating element of the Neosho experiment was disease, due to the drafty, poorly constructed cabins in which members resided, overwork, stress, and diet. To the housing, Watson described his home, one of the more elaborate in Neosho,

...it had no floor; neither had we any table or bedsteads... we bored holes in one of the logs, got poles about four feet long, sharpened one end, which we drove into the holes, letting the other end rest upon a stake driven into the ground; and up these, we built, with poles, brush, and grass, a bottom on which we placed our mattresses and bedding forming a line of beds the entire length of the house. We used boxes in which we had brought our goods, for a table, and for chairs, we resorted to various devices.²¹

Flooding was common, as well as drafts which aggravated the member's illnesses.

Graham's evolutionary speculations did not negate the fact that Neosho's inhabitants, by nineteenth century ideals, lacked the nutrients to stave off even minor illnesses, much less increase longevity or develop a "happier constitution." The Vegetarian Settlement Company had strict regulations on what one could and could not eat. To appeal to a larger audience before embarking on their journey to Neosho Valley, Henry S. Clubb and his associate Charles H. DeWolfe planned to establish a sister company, known as the Octagon Settlement Company, which held its members to the same qualifications of membership as the Kansas Vegetarian Emigration Company, minus the vegetarian aspect.²² The members of the vegetarian settlement—bound by oath to strictly avoid meat—mostly ate

¹⁹ Stewart, section 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, section 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, section 4.

²² Hickman, 381.

fruit and corn, peas, beans, and cucumbers, watermelons and the cantaloupe-like fruit known as muskmelons.²³ While today, these foods have highly important nutritional value, within the context of nineteenth century ideas on health, a lack of meat meant a lack of physical strength, plain and simple.

The memoirs of John Milton Hadley address this dietary problem; Hadley intended to meet the Colt's on his trip, but fell ill shortly before the trip, and ate meat to regain his strength. His illness led him to reassess the benefits of vegetarianism, stating, "I found it wasn't best for me to risk my life any longer in the declining path of vegetarianism not from an insignificant whisper of danger... but from the imperative voice of admonition given under the seal of an experience [of illness] of some two of three years..."²⁴ Hadley established a rational assessment of vegetarianism, acknowledging that it is an admirable lifestyle, which promotes larger social ideals such as temperance, compassion and morality. There is, however an appropriate time and place for vegetarianism, and the radicals who willingly gave up their health to follow its principles, may not have been the noble martyrs hailed by social ideologues, but "unpractical enthusiasts,"²⁵ overwhelmed by the nineteenth century's aura of optimism.

The entire Colt family found themselves bedridden at some time during their four months in Neosho, suffering mostly from symptoms of malaria that included chills, overwhelming thirst, fevers and exhaustion. Within the first month of settlement, many older members fell ill, including Miriam's Colt's father and mother. Even the men in their prime suffered from bouts of dysentery, suggesting that the water in the Neosho river may not have been as clean as the settlement's leaders previously attested. Colt complained of constant headaches due to the stress of being her family's sole caregiver. No individual, despite age, gender or constitution was safe; Watson Stewart recalls the unexpected death of two members:

Two brothers... in full vigor of manhood, were living alone in a tent, about a mile east of our place, and were for some time ailing, but I had no thought that they were dangerously sick; when, through a neighbor, I learned that one of them was dead and the other very low; both were dead within two days. While many had been sick with chills and fever, no one of our company had, hitherto, died. They had died without medical attention, and with but scant help from anyone.²⁶

The Kansas Vegetarian Emigration Society brought no medical specialists along; in fact, Stewart reports that there was no doctor within fifty miles. The Colt family departed, intact, from the Neosho settlement in September of

²³ Colt, 126.

²⁴ Gambone, 13.

²⁵ Sears, xvii.

²⁶ Stewart, section 4.

1865, but by the end of the year, Miriam's husband and three year old son died from dysentery. This was a blow to Colt, who wrote, "Language is too feeble to describe the deep anguish that was smothered deep down in my heart; so deep that my whole being was paralyzed with a Mountain's weight of bitterness."²⁷ What began as a social experiment focused on compassion, nature, and optimism resulted in the destruction of at least one family. October 1865 was a dark time for vegetarian reform.

Sylvester Graham said, "The groans and tears of the old world too plainly speak the irrevocable doom of the new,"²⁸ The members of the Kansas Vegetarian Emigration Society who settled in Neosho River Valley in 1865 may beg to differ. The Neosho City experiment embodied all the elements of failure that one settlement could contain: a hardheaded leader, scatter-brained planning—including the acceptance of members ill-suited to a harsh lifestyle on the Great Plains and the selection of a land entirely too wild and politically tumultuous to suit a communal settlement—and an unhealthy lifestyle, rooted in stress and exhaustion. The stories of its members should reside within the long narrative of vegetarianism as a cautionary tale, not against its principles as a whole, but against its specific developments within the nineteenth century. Optimism, opportunity and action should never be discouraged, and the ideas that nineteenth century vegetarian social reformers proposed were noble, but mishandled.

²⁷ Colt, 181.

²⁸ Graham, 9.

