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Article Title: Henry Olerich and the Utopian Ideal

Full Citation: H Roger Grant, "Henry Olerich and the Utopian Ideal," *Nebraska History* 56 (1975): 248-258.

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1975HOlerich.pdf>

Date: 10/7/2015

Article Summary: Henry Olerich, who spent his later years in Omaha and who proposed building a utopian colony in eastern Nebraska, typifies the forgotten utopian writer of the late nineteenth century. His most famous book *A Cityless and Countryless World* was published in 1893. Henry Olerich differs from virtually every other utopian novelist in that he continued to express his plans for an improved world well into the 20th century.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Edward Bellamy, William Dean Howells, Charles Fourier, Albert Brisbane, Viola Olerich

Keywords: utopia; nationalization; American literary history; *A Cityless and Countryless World*; labor scrip; Big House; Labor Exchange; *Modern Paradise*; *The Story of the World a Thousand Years Hence*; *The New Life and Future Mating*; Chicago & North Western Railway; self-education; monopoly; Motive Power and Car Department / Union Pacific Railroad; Olerich All-Purpose Tractor; 2219 Larimore Avenue (Omaha); Omaha Philosophical Society; *Modern Paradise*; *Outline or Story of how Some of the Cultured People will Probably Live, Work and Organize in the Near Future*; supernaturalism

Photographs / Images: Henry Olerich, 1921; Olerich "All Purpose Tractor"; "Co-Operative Landed Estate" diagram



Henry Olerich in his Omaha apartment in 1921. . . . This Olerich "All-Purpose Tractor" had been tested by 1917. The machine, designed for cultivating corn, was never mass-produced.



HENRY OLERICH AND THE UTOPIAN IDEAL

By H. ROGER GRANT

During the closing years of the 19th century a rash of utopian novel appeared in the United States. While Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* and William Dean Howells' *A Traveler from Altruria* are well known, most novels are not.¹ They remain obscure because they lack the literary merit of the Bellamy and Howells works. Yet all the utopian books of the period are significant both to American literary history and to the study of American reform thought. Virtually the entire body of this literature reflects a wide variety of reform ideas and community-betterment schemes, ranging from the single-tax to the nationalization of industry and commerce.

The appearance of the utopian novel during the late nineteenth century is understandable. The decades of the 1880's and 1890's saw America rapidly become an industrialized and urbanized society. And with this dramatic change came serious agricultural reversals in the late eighties. Moreover, they were followed in 1893 by one of the nation's most severe industrial depressions. Scores of writers, sensitive to the plight of farmers and workers, revealed in utopian works their blueprints for a better life. The number of utopian novels published, however, declined dramatically with the return of prosperity following the Spanish-American War. After 1900 few appeared.²

One author, Henry Olerich, typifies the forgotten utopian writer of the late nineteenth century. His most famous book, *A Cityless and Countryless World*, was published in 1893.³ Like other utopian novels of the day, this work contains the author's pet reform schemes, ones that he believed would for-

ever end hard times. But there are additional similarities between Henry Olerich and other late nineteenth century utopian authors. Like Olerich, most writers lacked literary training and experience. The style of Olerich's novel is stilted and the plot poorly developed. Many authors, moreover, were forced to publish their studies themselves. In Olerich's case he formed the firm of Gilmore and Olerich for the sole purpose of publishing *A Cityless and Countryless World*. This book, along with the vast majority of utopian titles, sold poorly, probably less than 1,000 copies.

A Cityless and Countryless World is a 447-page work that purports to be the story of a Martian's visit to a Midwestern community. The traveler from outer space describes in rich detail how residents of the red planet built a paradise and suggests that earthlings, too, can easily enjoy the same life. The visitor explains how his planet's landscape is marked off into "communities" – rectangular tracts on which Martians erected what they called "big houses," each accommodating a "family" of a thousand people. Every community had its quota of factories, mines, and warehouses. Through the agency of "Community Business Houses," distribution of surplus products between various communities occurred without profit. For Olerich the key to ending society's problems was the redistribution of population, solving both urban and rural problems.

While the means of production and distribution were cooperatively owned, individualism thrived in Olerich's utopia. "Labor checks" best symbolized the Martians' personal independence. Scrip was the sole medium of exchange and represented the amount of work performed by each citizen. No one could buy what he had not earned. Those who worked at extra duties received additional labor checks and thus enjoyed greater buying power.

Although Henry Olerich considered *A Cityless and Countryless World* "novel and a product of original thinking," the "Big House" idea is reminiscent of the "phalanx" made famous by Frenchman Charles Fourier and his American disciple Albert Brisbane in the 1840's. Furthermore, "labor checks" were nothing more than labor scrip which the Labor Exchange, a quasi-utopian movement, had advocated since the mid-1870's.⁴

Henry Olerich differs from virtually every other utopian novelist in that he continued to express his plans for an improved world well into the 20th century. His later utopian works, all published in Omaha, included *Modern Paradise* (1915), *The Story of the World a Thousand Years Hence* (1923), and *The New Life and Future Mating* (1927). He did, however, abandon the novel format and presented his later ideas for a new way of life in essay form. Who then was Henry Olerich, one of the nation's most persistent and enduring utopian writers?

Henry Olerich was born on December 14, 1851, in the village of Hazel Green, Wisconsin, located in the heart of that state's lead-mining district. Three years before his birth his parents had immigrated to the United States from Germany. "They were poor, practically illiterate, devoutly religious, hard-working and very superstitious," remembered Olerich.⁵ After hardships and tragedies in Wisconsin, which included the death of Olerich's mother shortly after the birth of her twelfth child, the family moved to Carroll County in western Iowa.

From the 1870's until shortly after the turn of the century, Olerich had a varied occupational career. Initially he farmed. With his wife he also operated a hotel in Breda, Iowa, for a short period. At the same time he served as station agent and telegrapher for the Chicago & North Western Railway in Breda and did carpentry work. Then in 1875, at the age of twenty-four, he began his teaching career and "started my Self-education in earnest." Although Olerich had no formal education, he achieved recognition for his intellectual abilities. He earned a state "Life Diploma" in 1888 and by the end of the century had held various teaching and school administrative posts throughout the Hawkeye state. In 1894 he passed the bar and later practiced law briefly at Hawarden, Iowa, "but did not find the legal profession congenial."⁶

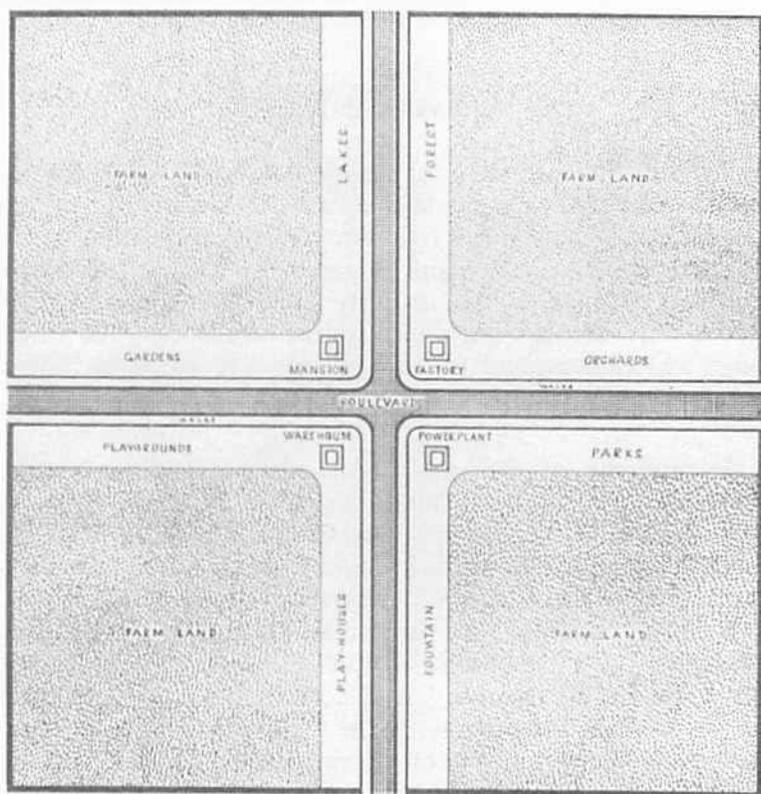
It was during Olerich's early period of "Self-education" that he developed and first expressed his reform views. Central to his beliefs was the idea that business monopolies — "trusts" — stymied individualism and, even worse, exploited workers, farmers, and consumers alike. He therefore advocated the "*Unified* GOVERNMENT OWNERSHIP AND OPERATION of railroads, telegraph and other monopolized and watered public

utilities for the general benefit of the Public instead of for private gain on the basis of charging 'all the traffic will bear.'"⁷ And Olerich came to support a plethora of reforms, including women's suffrage, the eight-hour day, spelling and dress revisions, direct democracy, and vegetarianism.⁸

Although a Democrat (a Bryan Democrat in 1896) and later a Socialist, Olerich did not attempt to implement his views either by seeking public office or by campaigning for candidates sympathetic to his views. Rather, he believed that the utopian novel and the essay were better vehicles for change. "Ideas of a progressive nature," he wrote in 1894, "will save the Republic from the selfish and exploitive elements."⁹

While never active in political reform causes, Henry Olerich engaged in an unusual experiment. In October, 1897, Olerich and his wife adopted an eight-month-old baby girl so that he could demonstrate how a child should be educated. "Baby Viola" quickly became a child prodigy and Olerich took her on tour throughout the Midwest between 1899 and 1901. Baby Viola's skills were many and varied. She could read fluently, use a typewriter, identify the portraits of more than one hundred famous persons, and name and locate the bones of the human body. But Viola was more than entertainment; she symbolized Olerich's "natural method" philosophy of education.¹⁰ As he told the *Chicago Times-Herald*, this theory rested on three principles: "To awaken a keen interest for educational work by the use of attractive apparatus — playthings for the child. To treat the child at all times with the greatest of kindness and equality. [And] all the education works of the child should be an interesting game of play — purely voluntary. No element of coercion or even undue solicitation should ever be resorted to."¹¹ Although Baby Viola became a celebrity, professional educators showed no signs of adopting Olerich's "natural method."

Over-all disgust with contemporary educational philosophies prompted Henry Olerich to leave the classroom in 1902. In that year he became a hand-drill press operator in the Motive Power and Car Department of the Union Pacific Railroad in Omaha, a position he held until his retirement in 1910.¹² Throughout his life he had been a carpenter and mechanic of considerable skill. His most notable creation, which he built during his retirement



"Co-operative Landed Estate" from Olerich's Modern Paradise: "This big farm is crossed in the center by firmly paved boulevards. The white strips on both sides of the boulevards are each 1,000 feet wide for garden, orchard, greenhouse, play-schools, nut-bearing forest, vine-clad trees."

years, was a farm tractor. "I personally designed, invented, built and patented the 'Olerich All-Purpose Tractor,' the first general Tractor conveniently adapted for cultivating corn."¹³ While he constructed only a prototype model, this invention reflected both his mechanical abilities and his long-standing desire to help society, in this case to mitigate the back-breaking work performed by corn-belt farmers. When not working in his garage workshop behind his home at 2219 Larimore Avenue, Henry Olerich spent much of his time reading and visiting with a small group of friends who shared his interests. He also actively supported the Omaha Philosophical Society where he annually presented a paper.¹⁴

Shortly before the publication of *Modern Paradise* in 1915, his first utopian piece since *A Cityless and Countryless World*,

Olerich sought to create a man-made heaven on earth. He proposed building a utopian colony on a 5,000 acre tract in eastern Nebraska. Here he planned to invite an initial population of 500 men and women to farm and also work in a variety of colony industries. Similar to the majority of secular colonies of the 1890's, this utopia's particular object would be "to furnish homes and employment for its residents." It would be "socialistic in theory and cooperative in practice and have no religious learnings."¹⁵

All residents of Olerich's utopia, called Modern Paradise, would live in a great and luxurious "mansion house" like the structure described in his 1893 novel. Olerich planned to use the available technology to provide colonists with every conceivable convenience. "Electricity will be harnessed to do the manual work of the household. So far as possible electricity will sweep the carpets, dust the furniture, wash the dishes, clean the windows, and do the chores." And according to one newspaper story, "He plans for a theater in the mansion, an art gallery, and a museum. There is also to be an 'automobile parlor.' The automobile is to be all but deified in this new Eden, as it is to be the power which will banish drudgery. There will also be sanitariums, nurseries, kindergartens, and conversation halls."¹⁶

Although details of the Olerich colony remain tantalizingly obscure, it is unlikely that this experiment ever progressed much beyond the planning stage. Several factors made Modern Paradise an impossible dream. First of all, Olerich's timing was wrong. By the second decade of the 20th century the nation enjoyed an unprecedented prosperity; few workers or farmers were likely to abandon their individual quest for riches to join an untried scheme, although thousands had done so during the nineties. Olerich's colony, furthermore, would be costly. He had no personal wealth and it was highly unlikely that he could have found a financial angel for the project. But he had hope: "It is a well known fact that millions upon millions of dollars have been donated for noble causes during the last decade, and we have every reason to believe that before long some one will enrich social science with a liberal donation."¹⁷ And finally, Olerich's personality, best described as crusty, would hardly endear him as a father figure to prospective communitarians.

When "Modern Paradise" did not materialize on the Nebraska

prairie, a disappointed Henry Olerich turned to what was within his grasp, a book — *Modern Paradise*. In this nearly 200-page treatise he provides what he calls an “Outline or Story of How Some of the Cultured People will Probably Live, Work and Organize in the Near Future.” Largely a restatement of his colony plans and reminiscent of *A Cityless and Countryless World* (Olerich argues again for the Mansion house and labor scrip), the book emphasizes society’s need to use the “New Technology” for community-betterment purposes. As an inventor Olerich was fascinated with the social potential of hydro-electricity, the use of the automobile and the internal combustion engine, and a variety of electrical inventions including the electric heater, dynamo, and electric cooking range.¹⁸

But why not allow American society to adopt the “New Technology” at its leisure? For Olerich it was a matter of the equitable distribution of national wealth. He believed that a major problem facing the United States was the gulf between rich and poor. “The enormously wealthy, the same as the very poor,” he wrote, “are . . . a danger to the community.” Therefore to close the gap, “new tools should be put to use uplifting all.”¹⁹

One recurring theme in *Modern Paradise* is the notion that residents must labor hard. “Every able-bodied person should feel proud of being a useful producer as well as a necessary consumer;” however, new labor-saving devices would help mitigate the drudgery of work. Olerich’s insistence on the work ethic clearly reflects his own career of toil and his deification of the self-made man.²⁰

Eight years after *Modern Paradise* appeared, Henry Olerich again penned a utopian work, *The Story of the World a Thousand Years Hence*. In it he forecasts how society will be organized in the thirtieth century. But the book contains no new ideas. “*The World a Thousand Years Hence* will be practically a *Cityless and Countryless World*,” says Olerich. “The people, instead of living in crowded, noisy, unhealthy and immoral cities and in lonely, isolated country homes, as we now do, will then live in social groups on large Landed Estates (*Modern Paradise*), where they are surrounded by beautiful flowers, pure air, fresh water, life-giving vegetables and a host of congenial Co-operators as equal partners.”²¹ Even many of the book’s illustrations had

appeared in previous Olerich publications. Moreover, the style is awkward and the content repetitive.

Olerich's final effort at describing the ideal society came in 1927 with the publication of the bizarre and quasi-autobiographical *The New Life and Future Mating*. Claiming that "this book is undoubtedly the most radical book ever written" and the "first literary production that accords to women and children a really fair deal in life,"²² Olerich again argues for a city-less-and-countryless-type world. But here the emphasis is on women's rights, publicly supported child-care centers, and the concept of "trial or 'companionate' mating." The latter is the idea that all marriages should be on a probationary basis. "They may last for a life-time or for less than a day, according to the desires of the mated parties." The advantages of this new human relationship were obvious to Olerich. "Separating will then be as easy and as respectable as coming together, and no evil consequences can then possibly result from such well-arranged freedom and independence." Moreover, "Every babe will be born in mutual love, so that few, if any, unwelcomed children will then come into the world." And "It would also daily avert millions of hard feelings and quarrels between parents and children."²³

Olerich's unconventional views of marriage likely stemmed from his personal experiences. His wife, Henrietta, never supported his reform and utopian views. As their daughter Viola remembers, "There was little sympathy between them. There was very little harmony in that household."²⁴

Henry Olerich ended his life in a dramatic fashion. Despondent over the suicide of his only son Henry, a banker in Butte, Nebraska,²⁵ and faced with failing health, he turned on a gas jet in his Omaha home on May 10, 1927.²⁶ "He expired," according to the *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, "with a copy of his latest book, 'The New Life and Future Mating' clutched in his hand."²⁷ In a letter to his daughter he explained the value of self-destruction: "Suicide is the rational way out of it, after we become helpless and burdensome by old age or disease. In my judgment under such conditions, suicide is the most honorable way of ending life." A long-time freethinker, Olerich closed with one last observation on life: "I am more and more con-

vinced every day that the belief in all supernaturalism is only another Santa Claus story for the adults."^{2 8}

Suicide ended the career of a remarkable eccentric. While society never accepted his dreams of population redistribution, labor checks, and trial marriages, several reforms that he supported became public policy (for example, women's suffrage, eight-hour days, and direct democracy), the result of 20th century reform efforts. Yet his works are significant, not for their literary value, but because they provide useful indices to attitudes of "advanced" reformers and thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Unfortunately for Henry Olerich, few read his works and today he is largely a forgotten man. Nevertheless, in 1971 Arno Press reprinted his *Cityless and Countryless World*, one sign perhaps, of reawakened interest in the utopian ideal.

NOTES

The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of a Faculty Research Committee grant from the University of Akron for financing his research on Henry Olerich.

1. Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (Boston, 1888) and William Dean Howells, *A Traveler from Altruria: A Romance* (New York, 1894). The Howells' work initially appeared in *The Cosmopolitan* magazine between November, 1892, and October, 1893.

2. For overviews of the American utopian novel see Allyn Forbes, "The Literary Quest for Utopia, 1880-1900," *Social Forces*, VI (December, 1927), 179-189; Robert L. Shurter, "The Utopian Novel in America, 1865-1900," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, XXXIV (April, 1935), 137-144; J. F. Normans, "Social Utopias in American Literature," *International Review for Social History*, III (1938), 287-300; and Robert L. Shurter, *The Utopian Novel in America, 1865-1900* (New York, 1972).

3. Henry Olerich, *A Cityless and Countryless World: An Outline of Practical Co-Operative Individualism* (Holstein, Iowa, 1893).

4. Albert Brisbane, *Social Destiny of Man* (Philadelphia, 1840) provides a statement of the "phalanx" idea, while G. B. DeBernardi, *Trials and Triumph of Labor* (Marshall, Mo., 1890) offers an analysis of the labor exchange plan.

5. "Autobiography of Professor Henry Olerich" (Omaha, 1921), 2. This typescript is in the possession of Viola R. Storms, Moline, Illinois, and is hereafter cited as Olerich Autobiography.

6. *Ibid.*, 5-9; Viola R. Storms, Oral History, December 20, 1973, 22. A copy is in the State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, and is hereafter cited as Storms, Oral History.

7. *Carroll (Iowa) Times*, clipping, ca. June, 1894, in possession of author.
8. See Henry Olerich, *Various Essays* (Carroll, Iowa, 1888); Storms, Oral History, 9.
9. *Ibid.*, 1; *Carroll Times*, clipping, ca. June, 1894.
10. Henry Olerich, *Viola Olerich, the Famous Baby Scholar* (Chicago, 1901); H. Roger Grant, "Viola Olerich, 'The Famous Baby Scholar': An Experiment in Education." *The Palimpsest*, LVI (May-June, 1975), 88-95.
11. *Chicago Times-Herald*, March 22, 1899.
12. Olerich Autobiography, 15; Letter to author from Viola R. Storms, November 20, 1973; Letter to Francine C. Cary, Toledo, Ohio, from Barry B. Combs, Union Pacific Railroad, Omaha, Nebraska, October 17, 1973.
13. Olerich Autobiography, 15.
14. Storms, Oral History, 7; Olerich served as president of the Omaha Philosophical Society in 1920.
15. Unidentified newspaper clipping, ca. 1913, in possession of Viola R. Storms; "It is Time to Organize the Modern Paradise Colony," (Omaha, ca. 1913), eighteen-page pamphlet in the New York Public Library.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Unidentified newspaper clipping, ca. 1913.
18. Henry Olerich, *Modern Paradise, an Outline or Story of How Some of the Cultured People will Probably Live, Work and Organize in the Near Future* (Omaha, 1915).
19. *Ibid.*, 31.
20. *Ibid.*, 24-25.
21. Henry Olerich, *The Story of the World a Thousand Years Hence* (Omaha, 1923), 18.
22. Henry Olerich, *The New Life and Future Mating* (Omaha, 1927), 10, 55.
23. *Ibid.*, 45-46.
24. Storms, Oral History, 4.
25. *Butte (Nebraska) Gazette*, July 30, 1925.
26. Certificate of Death, Nebraska Department of Public Welfare, Division of Vital Statistics, May 10, 1927.
27. *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, May 11, 1927.
28. *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, May 11, 1927.