

Utopia in Mesilla: The Shalam Colony

By Autumn Aguilar and Katie Roby

Inside a horseshoe bend along the Rio Grande in Mesilla, N.M., pushed by the passion of one extraordinary man, a commonwealth utopian society was born, around what it considered to be the world's most precious commodity: children. Welcome to the Land of Shalam.

On June 5, 1828, in a log cabin on a farm near Mohicanville, Ohio, John Ballou Newbrough was born. This future spiritual leader and author of world-wide renown began receiving spirit messages at a young age.

His sympathetic mother, Elisabeth Polsley, a spiritualist herself, sustained him on his long road to becoming a physician. By selling wool and eggs, his mother scraped together money to send John to high school in Cleveland.

Once there, John worked for his room and board in the home of dentist Dr. F. S. Slausen by helping to make dental plates and taking impressions for false teeth. It was during this time that he encountered the plight of the poor, including their lack of health care. After years of hardships, he graduated from Cincinnati Medical College and started his practice as a physician.

Lee Priestley, a Las Cruces historian, wrote in her book *Shalam: Utopia on the Rio Grande 1881-1907* that the constant contact with suffering and death led the soft-hearted man to become a dentist. He set up practices successively in Dayton, Cincinnati and New York City.

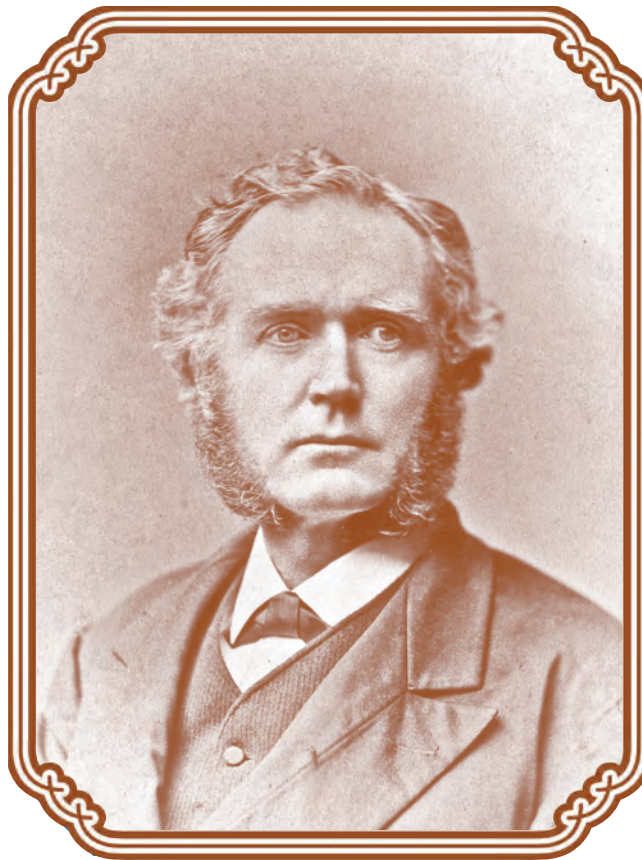
Remembering the poor and needing money to provide services for them, Dr. Newbrough left his practice and joined the California Gold Rush of 1849. He struck it rich and became business partners with another miner from Scotland, John Turnbull. The two men got lucky again off gold in Australia.

In 1857, John Turnbull's sister Rachel and Newbrough were married, setting up residence in New York City. They had three children, one dying in infancy. Little is recorded about the other two.

Newbrough never forgot the underprivileged, using his own funds to support mothers and children and to fund private charities. He was one of the first individuals to consider alcoholism a disease and established a farm where patients could be treated. Looking for an answer to society's evils, Newbrough immersed himself in self-purification. He became a strict vegetarian and carried out severe forms of chastity for both body and mind, which he epitomized by bathing and changing clothes twice daily.

Newbrough traveled extensively throughout Europe and Asia. He studied ancient religions and civilizations and received instruction from spiritualists. He returned to New York City with the intention of using his knowledge for social reform.

Linda Blazer, a researcher for NMSU archives and author of *Shalam Colony: A Utopian Experiment*, stated that it was upon Newbrough's return that he purchased a typewriter. After unsuccessful



Dr. John Ballou Newbrough chose the Mesilla Valley for his utopian community. (Photo courtesy of New Mexico State University Library, Archives and Special Collections)

attempts to use the strange contraption, he began to write under "spiritual control," with angels behind his chair, and he did so for 50 weeks. The resulting manuscript was published under the title of *Oahspe: The New Bible*.

With persuasive and eloquent public speeches, Newbrough was able to establish a group of followers, known as Faithists of the Seed of Abraham. The Faithists first gathered together in Woodside, N.J. in 1883. Newbrough was elected president. That same year members gathered in New York City in November. With 60 Faithists in attendance, the colonization society was organized.

Priestley stated that the purpose of the proposed colony was to raise children away from sin and to provide a place for members to lead "higher and purer lives." It was to be the "land of children" and a place of "peace and plenty." Timothy Miller wrote in *The Quest for Utopia in the Twentieth Century* that the Faithists had attempted two unsuccessful colonies, first in New Jersey and then in New York.

In October 1884, Newbrough and his friend and financial contributor, Andrew M. Howland, arrived in Las Cruces. Linda Harris, author of *Las Cruces: An Illustrated History*, wrote that legend states the pair were led blindfolded by spirit guides to a bend in the Rio Grande just north of town. They purchased a 1,490 acre tract for \$4,500 that was to become the Land of Shalam. Soon, 22 Faithists arrived. Among the new colonists were Newbrough's dental assistant, Frances Van de Water Sweet, and her and Newbrough's nine-month-old baby girl, Justine.

Priestley wrote that the colonists found the winter harsh; a few died of privation. With the arrival of spring and supplies coming from the east, new hope surged. Residents of the nearby village of Doña Ana introduced the colonists to local foods, such as beans, blue corn, hot red and green chiles and tortillas.

Newbrough hired 100 local laborers at an unheard of \$1 a day to build what eventually became a complex of 35 structures. The buildings included a

temple, an art studio, a children's home, barns and stables and what Newbrough called the fraternum. This was a long u-shaped building with 20 rooms on both sides and a courtyard in the middle, equipped with a steam laundry and flushing toilets.

Once the buildings were complete, receiving houses were set up in Chicago, Philadelphia, Kansas City and New Orleans to gather the orphan children Shalam was founded on. All babies were accepted regardless of race or health and brought to the desert Southwest.

Education began in infancy. By the time the children could walk, they received spiritual instruction. They could read at an early age, sing on key and were taught to be keenly aware of their five senses. Education was important, but so was play. Children rode ponies, went on picnics, learned to swim in the river and tended their own little

"miracle gardens."

Agriculture was very important to the pacifist vegetarians of Shalam. A water reservoir was built with wooden pipes for irrigation. Commercial crops included alfalfa and canaigre, a herb used for leather



The Shalam Colony built a fraternum, a u-shaped building that included modern features. (Photo courtesy of New Mexico State University Library, Archives and Special Collections)

Organized in much the same way as the Bible, the *Oahspe* declared that a new era had begun, in which the supreme deity, Jehovih, would come to all mankind. Also included was a plan for bringing about peace on earth through children raised without sin. They would become the future leaders that would usher in this new era.

continued on page 15

Shalam continued from page 8

tanning. Colonists cultivated grapes, apples, pears, apricots and peaches, as well as artichokes and asparagus, some of which was taken by thieving neighbors.

But the climate was no friend to the farmers. Heat warped irrigation pipes. Floods washed away new crops. Fires destroyed farm equipment. Soon, the huge farming enterprise was overrun with debt.

The colonists also had an extensive herd of dairy cattle to provide milk for the children. High-quality cattle that filled barns and corrals gradually decreased in number as neighboring families also made off with the colony's animals.

While the external complications were plenty, it was the internal strife that brought about the colony's demise.

During Shalam's conception in 1884, Newbrough was still married to his first wife, Rachel. He was granted a divorce on Oct. 6, 1886. Newbrough and Frances Sweet were married in 1887, causing dissension amongst the colonists, as well as rumors of free-love and easy character.

The well publicized trial of Ellis vs. Howland and Newbrough over ownership of the land and delay of agricultural plans also played a major role in the demise of the colony. Cutting remakes made by the presiding judge, Justice A. A. Freeman, caused derogatory publicity, and recruitment of potential colonists came to a halt.

Ultimate disaster befell the colony in 1891 when Newbrough died of influenza. Frances Newbrough and Andrew Howland attempted to revive the faded dream. In 1893 they were married to quiet sordid rumors. For almost a decade, they struggled to keep the colony going.

By 1900, Shalam was destitute. The school closed, children rebelled and colonists squabbled. They officially disbanded in 1901, with the remaining children sent to orphanages in Texas and Colorado.

Andrew Howland sold Shalam in 1907 for \$60,000. He and Frances settled in El Paso, selling vegetarian snacks.

The Newbroughs' daughter, Justine, changed her name to Jone Howland, and wrote for an El Paso newspaper.

Never reaching the hundreds predicted, the 50 children of Shalam grew up, most abandoning their Faithist training. Some found relatives, others wandered.

The Faithists of Shalam scattered throughout the West. Some started their own colonies, all to be short-lived. In 1942, Faithists led by Wing Anderson bought property in Utah and Colorado for orphanages and agriculture. Today, there are about 1,500 Faithists in the United States, and the *Oahspe* is still in print and available online, but very little of Shalam can be seen. Amidst cottonwood trees stands the studio, the sole surviving building, where Newbrough painted religious art while children colored at his feet.

The history of this short-lived utopian society, laced with fact and fiction, is attracting new attention. The Shalam Colony & Oahspe Museum in Las Cruces is located at 1910 Calle de Niños. T. Robin Riley, a former NMSU professor now teaching in Minnesota, has recently produced a documentary film on the colony and curated an exhibit in 2009 at the Farm and Ranch Museum in Las Cruces. Can Hollywood be far behind? 🍷

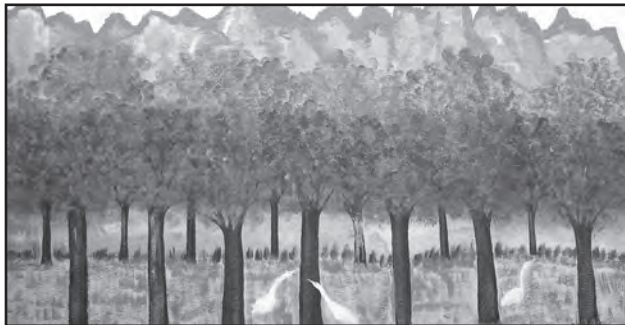
Stahmann continued from page 9

building, the slaughtering and freezing plants for the geese, a blacksmith shop, a machine shop, a store and a clinic with a nurse, producing the atmosphere of a little town.

Employees lived in company housing and in early days bought their food and other necessities in a commissary which became the Stahmann Country Store, the retail outlet for pecans and related products. Later a modern three-story processing plant replaced the other two plants, and mechanical shakers greatly reduced the number of employees. By 1989, the Stahmanns halted processing activities, but they worked with the New Mexico Department of Labor to retrain and find their former employees other jobs.

Deane also built an airstrip high atop a mesa on his property and acquired several aircraft, including B-26 bombers used in World War II and small jets, that he used for various activities, such as crow patrol (the birds love pecans), spraying of herbicides and fertilizer and freight and charter passenger service. At one time, he even provided commuter airline service in southern New Mexico.

In the 1960s, Deane's son, Deane Jr., worked for Barry Goldwater and announced he would leave the country if Lyndon Johnson became president. Johnson did—and so did Deane Jr. He convinced his father to buy 1,800 acres in New South Wales, Australia, to establish a branch of Stahmann Farms, and in 1965



This mural on the side of the Country Store depicts Stahmann Farms' young trees. (Photo by Heather Coons)

planted the first pecan trees at his farm named Las Piedras ("the rocks" or "the stones" in Spanish) at Gatton in Queensland. Soon after, he did the same at the much larger farm named Trawalla (Aboriginal for "flood waters") near Moree in New South Wales. In 1979, Deane Jr. sold 250,000 pounds of the nuts in the shell to China, opening an important market.

Deane Sr. died in 1970, and many changes occurred at the Mesilla Valley farm over the next few years. Cotton ceased to be planted, and the tree nursery was phased out. The chickens were sold and the facilities leased to a Mississippi firm with the agreement that the Stahmanns would still get the manure from the chickens. While Bill Stahmann was in charge of the American operations, Deane Jr. managed the Australian farms.

The Australian branch of Stahmann Farms funded research to find alternate ways to rid the trees of two main pests, the green vegetable bug and the Maroga or stem girdler, and introduced a native wasp and a South American parasite which all but eliminated these threats to the trees. Biological solutions are still an important part of Stahmann's operations both in Australia and New Mexico, the latter farm using ladybugs and lacewing flies, among other natural controls. The Australian farm employs a full time entomologist. In 2010, the first fully certified organic pecans are being produced at the farm near Gatton in Australia.

Stahmann trees provide a beautiful canopy of shade for travelers and tourists who take the slow rural road to Las Cruces from El Paso. Today, Stahmann's in the Mesilla Valley is still operated by the family and the 128,000 trees produce some 8,000,000 pounds of Western Schley and Bradley varieties of pecans per year. A large variety of candies, snacks and gift items are available at the Stahmann Country Store and also may be ordered online. One hundred years after the Stahmann family came to the Southwest for health reasons, the name still stands for quality pecans and innovative farming methods. 🌳

Robles continued from page 14

made, Robles is the Trustee for District 3 of El Paso Community College.

When Jessica Oracio asked Robles, "What do you foresee for the Latina community?" she responded quickly, "There is no limit nowadays. It's wide open when you have Justice Sotomayor in the Supreme Court, when you see Latina women in aerospace, the military, boards of major corporations. I am a strong proponent of educating the women because you educate the family."

The senior class of Bowie High School knew what they were doing when they selected Belen Robles "Most Likely to Succeed" all those many years ago! ☺

Toltec continued from page 16

June Davidson, an actor with the Upstairs Theater, stated in an *El Paso Times* article written by Pat Henry entitled "Spooked Actors Insist 'Stage Fright' is No Act," that stage lights would mysteriously change colors or explode and props would fall for no reason.

Bill Logan, another thespian with the Upstairs Theater, stated in that same article that he and two others saw the image of Pancho Villa across the street and heard the jangling of his spurs on the first floor.

I had to know if the building was really haunted. Playing a hunch, I went downtown and ended up having a conversation with the law office's receptionist, Natalie Castillo, mentioned at the beginning of this story.

Not only did Castillo admit to seeing things out of the corner of her eye and feeling as if someone else were in the room, she also recalled hearing from housekeeping staff that doors rattled for no reason. Castillo was adamant that the activity was in no way negative. "It's not bad. I just know something's there."

Just a little over 100 years ago, El Paso's social elite gathered together to form an alliance in an effort to build a better city for future generations. Because of their commitment, the borderland prospered. The Toltec Building was the home for these progressive-minded individuals, and its members left us with more than the buildings and improvements they made for our area, like Elephant Butte Dam, the electric and water companies, banks, schools and the university. They left us with a legacy: working together for the prosperity of the community.

Too many important people walked the halls of the Toltec Building, and too many important events took place inside its sacred walls for it not to have left an indelible mark. Whether it's haunted or not, the building's unique shape and history make it one of El Paso's major landmarks. 🏢