



# HARD TIMES IN 90's RESULTED IN FOUNDING OF HIAWATHA COLONY

The following article about the Hiawatha Colony was written about five years ago by Robert H. Wright, of Munising, former Manistique newspaperman:

Every period of business depression has produced a crop of humanitarian-reformers who are ever ready to inaugurate some new sort of a social system whereby the human race will be enabled to win its victory over the eternal struggle for livelihood. The business depression of 1893 to 1896 was in all respects similar to the present period of hard times. Kansas sent its bewhiskered and sockless statesmen to congress and the Populist party grew in numbers, intent upon changing our system of government. With the return of prosperity and the "full dinner pail," the movement died down and the Populists were forgotten. During the period of depression many residents of the upper peninsula joined the Populist party.

"Uncle Abe" Byers  
When times were hard and work was scarce it was such men as "Uncle" Abe Byers, of Manistique,

who became a leading agitator for the Populists, and who, with cane in hand, and tracts carried in his knapsack traveled all over Schoolcraft county, day and night, taking subscriptions for Populist publications and preaching to the people wherever he could find a crowd of a few men or women to listen to him.

He was like John Brown in some respects. He was of a deeply religious nature and was firmly convinced that the prevailing system of government was all wrong and that it should be changed. So firm were his convictions in the righteousness of the cause of populism that he went as far as any man could to back up his opinions. He turned over his farm of 240 acres of land in the township of Hiawatha in Schoolcraft county to an association which became known as the Hiawatha village association, having enlisted the services of Walter Thomas Mills in the promotion and organization of this scheme of government.

Mills was a man of small stature, wearing mutton-chop whiskers, and the most remarkable thing about

his personality was the size of his head, indicative of great brain power. As an orator Mills was the equal of any. He had nominated John P. St. John for president on the prohibition ticket in a burst of oratory that was well known at the time. He had occupied the pulpits of many leading churches in the United States and Canada, and with the beginning of populism had joined the movement. When he came to Manistique in 1894 to found the Hiawatha colony at the request of "Uncle" Abe Byers he was naturally looked upon with suspicion by local interests, but those who were loudest to denounce him were often converted after hearing him talk at a public meeting and they became his followers and adherents.

### Planned Modern Utopia

In telling the writer of the organization of this colony "Uncle" Abe stated that, in early life, he like Joan of Arc, had heard a voice, which he believed was the voice of the Lord. He was then living in Van Buren county. The voice told him to organize a cooperative colony, a modern Utopia. He moved

his family to Schoolcraft county where he acquired his 240 acres of land, and then, when the Populist movement was at its peak, he saw the materialization of his vision, of his dream to benefit mankind and to set an example for the rest of the country. He came in contact with Walter Thomas Mills. Mills had written a book entitled "The Product Sharing Village," and this it was that attracted "Uncle" Abe. He turned over his land and all his farming implements and the colony was started in the spring of 1894.

Mills had an aunt living in New York who helped finance the plan. She and "Uncle" Abe were the "angels" of the colony, one giving his land, his home, his implements, the other her money. Thus the Mills family consisted of Walter Thomas, his brothers, and "Aunt" Judith.

### Many Types in Colony

Walter Thomas traveled throughout the country advertising the formation of the colony and soliciting membership therein. He succeeded in attracting people from all over the United States. Many of whom joined were visionaries

and dreamers and but few, if any had any experience in pioneer life, necessary in that locality, which was then little more than a wilderness. Many of these people were scared veterans in the battle of life, who had lost out and were seeking a harbor of refuge, wherein to end their days in peace and contentment. Their meager savings and all their possessions were turned over to the colony. "Uncle" Abe was happy and he went about spreading his gospel of good will and Populism.

At that particular time Coxe of Ohio had organized an "army" to march on Washington with a petition to demand government reforms. One "division" of his army was headed by "General" Randall, reformer, and Chicago newspaperman. As his "division" marched north for recruits Randall was attracted by the great experiment launched by Abe Byers and Walter Thomas Mills, and he decided to join the colony, which he did. A son, a musician, and a daughter, became members of the colony. The further north "General" Randall took his army, the more he realized the fruitlessness of the undertaking, for his soldiers deserted

him and were chased off the grass everywhere they went. Thus Randall abandoned the project of marching on to Washington and settled down in the colony.

Another reformer who joined the colony was Gideon Noel, Emmet county homesteader, who sold his homestead and all his belongings and joined the colony together with his wife and daughter. His case, like that of some other members was pathetic. During the summer Noel's wife and daughter picked and preserved large quantities of berries, same as they had done in Emmet county, for their own use. Mills and his brothers hearing of this violation of the colony rules, drove down the single street of the colony on horseback, raided Noel's home and carried all the preserves to the colony and the Noels returned to Emmet county, broken in spirit and their faith lost in humanity. This was the experience of many members of the colony. Another family that found strange environment came from Louisiana.

### Started Printing Office

A colony store was started to supply the members with their daily wants and a printing office was installed in charge of a young

printer who came from Scotland. A small paper was issued weekly, edited by Mr. Mills.

Every member of the colony was to do some sort of work for which he or she was paid by due bill, or order, upon the colony store, less ten per cent, which was deducted for the colony funds. Women and children, picked and preserved wild berries, turned them over to the store, and were given credit, less ten per cent. Men who worked in logging camps turned in their wages. The products of the gardens were also turned over to the store. This all caused some friction in most of the homes. The marketing of the farm products also required another ten per cent, thus the colonists were taxed more for living than under the "vicious" system of government which they were opposing.

### Mills Handled Money

The only person who seemed to have handled money in this colony was Mr. Mills, whose expenses were paid for spreading the propaganda work of the new Utopia.

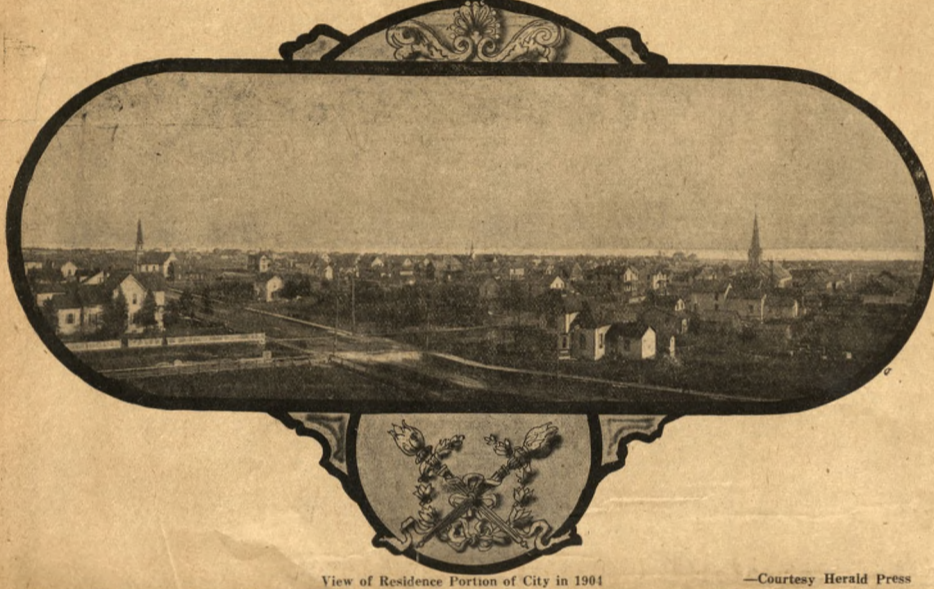
In the fall of 1894 Mr. Mills was a candidate for representative for the Delta district. He was defeated by a few votes. The colony then began to disband and for consolation, some of its members turned to spiritualism and for a time the members held frequent seances at the home of one of the lady members of the new cult, to communicate with the spirits of the departed and obtain news of other elysian fields beyond the ken of common mortals.

Thus ended the attempt of "Uncle" Abe to found a modern Utopia and benefit his fellow men and with its ending his vision faded.

Some time later we heard that Mr. Mills had gone to Australia. "Uncle" Abe has long since passed on, his aged widow living with her son, A. L. Byers, who redeemed the old homestead and now has a beautiful home. He married the daughter of Mr. Randall, who worked in the store and printing office, and this couple, with Mrs. A. S. Byers, the mother, are the only ones who found Utopia.

Some of the buildings still stand—a remembrance of the pet theories of Walter Thomas Mills and his confederates who stood by him from the inception of the Hiawatha colony.

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View of Residence Portion of City in 1904

—Courtesy Herald Press



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On the completion of your splendid P.W.A Improvements

We, who are part of this fine city, are mighty proud of our new streets, our boulevard lights and the many other modern additions.

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## WILMER PIERSON