

“A Nest of Vipers in this Country”

Anti-Anarchist Propaganda and the McKinley Era Red Scare: A case study of Home Colony and Tacoma, Wa

Anonymous

The first red scare in the United States happened during the years leading up to Haymarket in 1886, through the McKinley assassination in 1901, and culminated in the anti-alien, anti-radical federal Immigration Act of 1903. During this period, anarchists and other radicals throughout the country were systematically demonized in popular thought as a threat to public order and stability. One major arena in which this was accomplished was through the press, both in newspapers and periodical literature.

In Western Washington, Home Colony, an anarchist intentional community near Tacoma, was the local focus of anti-anarchist hostilities. During the hysteria surrounding the McKinley assassination, Home was portrayed in the Tacoma news dailies as a threat to the morality and decency of the larger community. Although Home actually posed little threat to public order, the anarchists there were a perfect distraction from the very real problems facing early twentieth century America.

The late 1800's and early 1900's were a period of increased class tensions as monopoly capitalism seemingly triumphed and the gap between rich and poor widened.¹ Social reformers and revolutionary socialist movements offered competing visions of workers' control and governmental relief for the increasing economic and social ills, while anarchism propagated a non-statist solution; all criticized U.S. imperialism abroad and uncontrolled capitalism at home.

At the same time, nativism and Americanism were gaining ground within the working class; these ideologies had the benefit of not questioning the underlying power dynamics in America. Nativism and Americanism appealed to many in the Anglo-identified working class because they offered discontented workers easy scapegoats to blame for the “depression, class conflict, increasing social and geographic immobility, war or the threat of it, and other problems of industrial and urban growth”² in early twentieth century American society.

These ideologies of intolerance and persecution also appealed to the employing and governing classes, as responsibility for social problems was transferred from the real culprits to the marginalized sectors of society. In a pattern illustrative of the power of U.S. business interests,

¹ Louis Adamic, *Dynamite: A century of Class Violence in America, 1830–1930*. (London: Rebel Press, 1975), 18.

² William Preston, Jr. *Aliens and Dissenters: Federal Suppression of Radicals 1903–1933*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 3. See also, Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream*. (New York: Verso, 1986), 37–40.

many newspapers and periodicals, either directly funded by or sympathetic to the employing class, supported the “divide and conquer” approach to social change, actively creating propaganda against anarchists, socialists, and communists, while encouraging nativist vigilante actions and giving open forums to pro-capitalist writers and businessmen.

Nathaniel Hong, in his essay *Constructing the Anarchist Beast in American Periodical Literature, 1880–1903*, discusses how periodicals helped to create the anarchist as the “bogeyman to guard the borders of the political alliances, loyalties, and obedience of American citizens.”³ Hong identifies two ways in which the writers and editors of periodic literature dealt with the issues raised by anarchist criticisms of the ruling powers: to deliberately misrepresent the political ideas of anarchism, and to critique this misrepresentation within the framework of religious, scientific, and nativist reactions.⁴

The result of this propaganda nationally was to discredit progressive ideas for social change and to create internal enemies that “patriotic Americans” had to fight against. How closely did local regions follow this national model? In the case of the Pacific Northwest, the pattern played out in almost an identical way.

Home Colony was an intentional community founded in 1897 at Joe’s Bay, Washington, part of a larger movement in the Pacific Northwest to create utopian communities as examples of the possibilities for social change that mutual aid and cooperation offered.⁵ The by-laws of the Mutual Home Association merely set up a land buying corporation “to assist its members in obtaining and building homes for themselves and to aid in establishing better social and moral conditions.”⁶

In actuality, the community considered itself explicitly anarchist, and while Home attracted many different types of anarchists—anarcho-syndicalists, anarcho-communists, and individualists—the people who chose to stay were all dedicated to some form of communal participation and mutual aid. The goal of the colony was “not ... to introduce any set system, but to arrive at conditions under which progress in all directions will be rendered far more easy, and the exploitation of man by man will become impossible.”⁷ Colony members were to “test the theory that in a well-ordered society it is safe to allow each Individual full liberty of action, as long as he does not infringe his neighbor’s equal freedom.”⁸

The Mutual Home Association’s charter prevented the corporate body from “the starting of any industry,” but industries could be started “by the members interested and those willing to help them.”⁹ However, since most of the individual colonists lacked enough capital to start local businesses, many relied on getting Jobs in nearby Tacoma, and often families were dependent on remittances from members working in Alaska or Seattle. Initially, there was little conflict between the Home colonists and the larger populations among whom they worked.

The first signs of outside interest in the Home colonists’ beliefs came in December, 1900. On December 22, United States marshals arrived at Home to arrest Charles L. Govan for violations of

³ Nathaniel Hong, “Constructing the Anarchist Beast in American Periodical Literature, 1880–1903” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 9, no. 1 (March 1992), 111.

⁴ Hong, 111.

⁵ Charles Pierce LeWarne. *Utopias on Puget Sound*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), 3.

⁶ See *Discontent: Mother of Progress*, March 6, 1901, p. 4, for a complete copy of the Articles of Incorporation of the Mutual Home Association.

⁷ *Discontent*, August 14, 1901, p. 1

⁸ *Discontent*, August 28, 1901, p. 1

⁹ *Discontent*, December 4, 1901. p.4

the Comstock Act, a law passed in 1873 that made the mailing of obscene literature a federal crime. The charge stemmed from an article printed in *Discontent: the Mother of Progress*, Home Colony's unofficial newspaper, discussing free love and the problems of state-recognized marriage for anarchists. Although the paper was usually just sent out to subscribers, one complementary issue was sent to an Atlanta preacher, who was "once a personal friend of Govan."¹⁰ The preacher promptly notified postal authorities of the "obscene literature" he had received through the mail, thereby bringing *Discontent* under the scrutiny of the federal authorities. Although Govan "Insisted that he was not guilty and that there was no obscenity in the published article,"¹¹ he was found guilty, charged \$100, and told not to publish this type of material again.

That first Comstock trial took place in Seattle, and there was little interest in the Tacoma newspapers over it. The first incident that the Tacoma press took notice of was Home's annual August picnic on Anderson Island, across the Bay from Home. The picnic was a community gathering, with 53 of the 86 colonists attending.¹² The *Tacoma Ledger* ran an anti-anarchist article, not specifically discussing the picnic, but, instead, the evils of anarchy in general. The sentiments in this editorial run very close to the language used in the national periodicals,¹³ including such inflammatory statements as "a price ought to be put on their heads; they should be exterminated as pests ... The avowed Anarchist is the enemy of all."¹⁴

The editors of *Discontent* understood the power that anti-anarchist propaganda could have, both against Home Colony and throughout the United States. As editor James F. Morton wrote in response, "If the *Ledger* really wants to see a reign of terror in this country, its advice to exterminate all who preach the gospel of liberty is admirably adapted to secure the ends desired."¹⁵ Morton's entire article is devoted to dispelling, in a clear, rational way, the propaganda that the *Ledger* put forth. Unfortunately, no one but the subscribers to *Discontent* would read Morton's response, although the arguments may have helped Home residents better understand the climate of hostility that articles such as the *Ledger's* contributed to, as well as helping those colonists who worked in Tacoma answer misinformed questions about anarchism.

Articles on the picnic continued to be featured in Tacoma newspapers. An article in the *Tacoma Evening News* discussed the "goings-on" as "sensational, to say the least." The "leaders" were of "vicious character," teaching "free love ... doctrines." The article also played on taxpayers' fears, claiming that two of the colonists "draw pensions from the United States government, and it is on this money that the colony is in a measure supported."¹⁶

Of all the charges levied in the *Tacoma Evening News*, however, the most important was the reminder that Home published *Discontent* and sent it out as second class material from the colony's post office. This section of the article brought up the December, 1900, Comstock charges, pointed out the hypocrisy of the anarchists in using a governmental service, and emphasized that the anarchists use these governmental services to further their own aims.¹⁷

¹⁰ *Discontent*, March 6, 1901, p. 1.

¹¹ *Discontent*, March 6, 1901, p. 1.

¹² *Discontent*, August 14, 1901, p.4.

¹³ Hong, 116.

¹⁴ *Discontent*, August 14, 1901, p. 1.

¹⁵ *Discontent*, August 14, 1901, p. 1.

¹⁶ *Discontent*, August 28, 1901, p. 1.

¹⁷ *Discontent*, August 28, 1901, p. 1.

Home residents responded to this article both in *Discontent* and through letters to the *Tacoma Evening News*. Morton's letter to the *Evening News*, dated August 17, attempted to desensationalize the picnic by describing it as "simply a pleasant day's outing." Home is referred to as a "sociological experiment... [founded by] people of various shades of thought." Morton refuted the claim that anyone received government pensions, and assured the readers of the *Evening News* that Home "does not seek to induce anybody to join the colony."¹⁸

For the readers of *Discontent*, Morton states that he had, "'toned down' [his] reply 'considerably, for the express purpose of removing all possible excuse for its rejection.'"¹⁹ The note of apology to the anarchist reader indicates that members of Home were already put on the defensive by the attacks in the Tacoma papers, even before the presidential assassination.

President William McKinley was shot September 7, 1901, by Leon F. Czolgosz, an American of Polish descent who had been attending anarchist lectures in various cities in the East Coast and Chicago. The day of the assassination attempt (McKinley actually died a week later), newspapers across the country were out for anarchist blood²⁰. The *Tacoma Evening News* ran an anti-anarchist headline, "They Are Criminally Insane." The author of this article links anarchism to insanity, posing the question, "why do we allow anarchists like Johann Most and Emma Goldman to remain at large and to harangue the people, inciting weak and evilly [sic] disposed persons to violence?" He calls for a "line to be drawn against the dangerous doctrines of the anarchists." The article closes with a call for violent action. "No more toleration for the anarchists or their doctrines that lead to assassination! Put them down! Exterminate the disease!"²¹

The same edition of the *Tacoma Evening News* ran a page long article on assassinations of leading figures in Europe by anarchists who subscribed to the theory of 'propaganda by the deed,' one type of anarchist response to the growing inequalities in the industrial centers of Europe and the United States during the late 19th century. The practitioners of 'propaganda by the deed' attempted over 17 assassinations within a twenty year period.²²

The headlines are excellent examples of the duality between the "innocent" victims and the "detestable" anarchists in general that the papers were propagating. The Kaiserina Elizabeth of Austria was a "sweet and lovable woman ... struck down by an anarchist," the Spanish Prime Minister was "killed by an anarchist just after he had attended mass," Tzar Alexander II, killed by the bomb-throwing People's Will, was "the best emperor his people ever had."²³ The implication here is obvious: anarchists kill kind, good, religious, fair men and women. Lacking in these articles is any sense of the political situation in Europe which created the frustrations that drove people to violence.²⁴

The anarchists at Home Colony did not advocate 'propaganda by the deed' before or after the McKinley assassination. In August, 1901, James Morton had written an article that, while recognizing that "some Anarchists have applauded king-slaying and king-slayers, they expressed a private opinion, with which the Anarchist propaganda, as such, has nothing to do." Of any

¹⁸ *Discontent*, August 28, 1901, p. 1.

¹⁹ *Discontent*, August 28, 1901, p. 1.

²⁰ Hong, 125.

²¹ *Tacoma Evening News*, Sept. 7, 1901, p. 1.

²² Clifford Harper. *Anarchy: A Graphic Guide*. (London: Camden Press, 1986), 66.

²³ *Tacoma Evening News*, Sept. 7, 1901, p. 12.

²⁴ Roderick Kedward. *The Anarchists: The Men Who Shocked an Era*. (New York: American Heritage Press, 1971), p. 5.

article in *Discontent* discussing “propaganda by the deed,” this was the most sympathetic to the idea of assassination as a means of political expression. Morton put political assassination into the context of a larger power struggle, where “the assassin of one man is at least less guilty than the oppressor of millions.”²⁵ While the article does not advocate assassination, Morton’s anarchist beliefs are evident in his assigning of varying levels of guilt for one’s actions based on the amount of personal power of the individual.

These same sympathies towards the oppressed and against the powerful continued after the assassination. In an article from November 13th, *Discontent* printed, “the anarchists are made scapegoats for official plunderers and assassins.” The article denies that Czolgosz had any support from the anarchist communities, but it invokes the Jeffersonian idea that “whenever any form of government becomes destructive ... it is the right of the people to abolish it.” To use assassination for this end, though is seen as “a pretense that originates with the official thugs who hope thus to dupe the people and conceal their own crimes.”²⁶

Neither Home Colony’s views against the use of violence for political change nor their emphatic statement that Czolgosz was not an anarchist found acknowledgment in the Tacoma press. In fact, it took Tacoma four days to remember that they even had “Damnable Anarchy in this County.”²⁷ The first article, September 11th, reiterates the obscene literature case, *Discontent*’s stand on free love, and the antigovernment position of Home. Once the *News* remembered Home, the colony became the focus of almost a month of anti-anarchist articles.

Interestingly, September 11th’s article makes sure to separate Home from the Burley Co-operative, another Puget Sound utopian colony, claiming that Burley was “not promulgating any socialistic or political doctrine.” Since Burley was set up by members of the Socialist Party,²⁸ and put out a socialist newspaper, *The Propagator*, it is hard to imagine that they had no political stand! This section of the article may be an attempt to marginalize anarchists from any other type of socialist political belief, subtly acknowledging that state-socialism was more compatible with the American way of life than anti-statism. It may also indicate that the editors of the Evening News knew nothing about Burley, or even about socialism. For example, the article claims that Burley “is not promulgating any socialistic or political doctrine, but is merely carrying on a general work of industrial co-operation on the lines of fraternity and assuring its members a home and employment.”²⁹ Certainly, a cooperative group which guarantees its members “home and employment” is practicing at least some of the most basic tenets of socialism.

The *Tacoma Evening News*’ stand against Home on September 11th foreshadowed the calls for vigilantism that it would make in the following days. Anti-anarchism was presented as a public duty, a responsibility that the papers owed to the readership:

“The Evening News feels that it owes the duty to the community which it endeavors to serve to expose the nest of vipers which flourishes in its immediate vicinity. If there is any law to deal with such a community of anarchists and free lovers as exists at Home, the *Evening News* calls upon the authorities to enforce it. If there is no law

²⁵ *Discontent*, August 14, 1901, p. 2.

²⁶ *Discontent*, Nov. 13, p.2

²⁷ *Tacoma Evening News*, Sept. II, 1901, p. 1.

²⁸ LeWarne, 129.

²⁹ *Tacoma Evening News*, Sept. 11, 1901, p. 2.

which will protect the state against the germs of disease which such an organization is certain to disseminate a law must be passed which will meet the case.”

The *Evening News*, September 12th headline declared “It Is Getting Warm for the Anarchists at Home.” According to the *News*, the residents consisted of “anarchists, free lovers, socialists, spiritualists, agnostics, atheists, infidels” who “denounce patriotism and revile the United States flag,” while “flying the red flag on Puget Sound.” This time, the newspaper claimed that six members had government pensions, and again brought up the obscene literature case.³⁰

The purpose of the previous day’s article is clearly articulated under September 12th’s subheading, “Public Thoroughly Aroused.” The author proudly states that “the people of Pierce county have been aroused almost to a pitch of desperation by the *Evening News*’ sensational expose of the group of anarchists and free lovers located only a few miles from Tacoma.” The article uses inflammatory wording about the activities at Home, calling it a “contaminating plague spot” and a “hotbed of treason,” and at the same time chastising the reader for allowing Home to grow “in their midst.” The article tries to shape public opinion into action by asserting that “the populace is rousing itself “On every side are heard mutterings that mean nothing short of final extermination for such a reeking hell hole as that at Home.”³¹ Through articles such as this, the terms of debate were set for the reader: either support some sort of action against Home, or be guilty of “damnable ... treason.”³²

The *Tacoma Evening News* of September 14th ran the strongest anti-anarchist article to date. The headline read, “The Red Peril: Its Remedy, Wipe Out the Local Anarchists. This is the Demand of the People.” The accompanying picture shows a simian creature being stabbed in the back (ironically enough) by the Sword of Law, wielded by the heavenly hand of God/America. This article incorporates all the classical propaganda tools used against the anarchists—religion (both God and the State), eugenics, misrepresentation of Home colony’s beliefs, “experts” to legitimate the “facts,” nativist reactions—to call for vigilantism against the colony. A statement from Benjamin Ide Wheeler, President of the University of California, is featured prominently. Wheeler states, “if the vigilant men will cope with anarchy they must kill these seeds of anarchy—and it is high time for them to be up and doing.” Three letters to the editor, all anti-anarchist, are printed on the front page, thereby supporting the claim that “the people endorse the *Evening News* in its expose of the ‘Home “gang.”³³

This same edition again endorses local vigilante action, devoting a large article to the Grand Old Army’s decision to form the Loyal League of America. The Loyal League’s stated purpose was to “stamp out anarchy in Washington state.”³⁴ The *Tacoma Evening News* ran pro-vigilante articles again on the 17th. In one of these articles, the paper enthusiastically reports that the Loyal League’s object is to “accomplish the utter annihilation of anarchists and anarchist teachings within the borders of North America.”³⁵

On September 21st, the *Tacoma Evening News* went back to reiterating the Comstock charges, running the headline, “Vicious copy of Discontent. Why is the paper allowed to go through the

³⁰ *Tacoma Evening News*, Sept. 12, 1901, p. 1.

³¹ *Tacoma Evening News*, Sept. 12, 1901, p. 1–2.

³² *Tacoma Evening News*, Sept. 12, 1901, p. 2.

³³ *Tacoma Evening News*, Sept. 14, 1901, p. 1.

³⁴ *Tacoma Evening News*, Sept. 14, 1901, p. 12.

³⁵ *Tacoma Evening News*, Sept. 17, 1901, p. 8.

malls?” The accompanying article brought up Govan’s December, 1900, arrest and implied that the first legal action had not been effective. The link between the propaganda printed in the paper and the interests of the federal government can be inferred by the timing of this article: three days later, on September 24th, three members of Discontent’s editorial board were arrested for violations of the Comstock Act.

Charles Govan, James E. Larkin, and James W. Adams were arrested by federal marshals and taken to a U.S. Grand Jury hearing in Spokane. The News report of the arrests discussed the “submissive attitudes” of the colonists to the marshals, putting the peaceful arrests into the context to the “average anarchist’s” desire “to pose as a martyr,” and claiming that the arrests would be “a short cut to notoriety” for the accused.³⁶

Although the article reports that the three colonists went with the marshals peaceably, the reader is warned in the second column that this was just an act for the press.

“Those who are intimately acquainted with the colonists declare this is their familiar way of pulling the wool over the public’s eyes. When disbelievers in anarchy outnumber them or officers of the law are present they sing low of peace and good will and non-resistance. When not under surveillance they are said to froth at the mouth and decry and defy the government in true anarchist style.”³⁷

In these few sentences, the Home colonists are easily dismissed as violent, dishonest and cowardly attention seekers who consciously martyr themselves for attention.

The people of Home colony did see their comrades’ case as attention getting, but only in terms of the larger struggle for the rights of free speech. The trial was “a test case” over “whether American citizens have a right to discuss social questions from different standpoints.”³⁸ The writers for Discontent used the paper to discuss the injustice of the Comstock Act, devoting two issues almost exclusively to the history of mail censorship in the United States and contemporary fights for free speech. “Discontent and the other victims of invasion are so many pawns on the chessboard, that must be removed, in order to render the kingrow unguarded, and to deal a speedy checkmate to the cause of free speech.”³⁹

An article by James Morton from November 13th puts the charges in the context of the assassination and governmental conspiracy against verbal dissension.

“There is ... more than prudery in this invasion of human rights. It is too significantly timed to occur at the exact moment when public passion, fanned by malignant slanders of an unscrupulous daily press, was most bitterly excited against Anarchists in general, and the Home colonists in particular ... this is not in any sense an honest persecution. It is part of the general imperialist program for the complete suppression of free speech in this country.”⁴⁰

The writers for Discontent understood the direct connection between the charges Govan, Larkin, and Adams faced and the sensationalist news stories surrounding the McKinley assassination, telling their readers “the attack is the outcome of the assassination of Mr. McKinley,” and “the Anarchists are made scapegoats for official plunders and assassins.” A letter to the editor concludes that “the assassination of McKinley furnished the opportunity, in accordance with

³⁶ *Tacoma Evening News*, Sept. 25, 1901, p. 1.

³⁷ *Tacoma Evening News*, Sept. 25, 1901, p. 1.

³⁸ *Discontent*, November 13, 1901, p. 1.

³⁹ *Discontent*, December 4, 1901, p. 1, see also November 27.

⁴⁰ *Discontent*, November 13, 1901, p. 1.

the determination to exterminate the Anarchists, to hunt a plausible pretext for suppressing *Discontent*.”⁴¹

By 1902, the hysteria surrounding the assassination had died down, both nationally and locally. Govan, Adams, and Larkin’s trial took place on March 11, 1902. The prosecutor’s case was too weak to stand up in court, and the judge acquitted the writers on the basis of their First Amendment rights. There was little notice in the Tacoma papers of the acquittal,⁴² although at Home Colony, there were celebrations and optimism for the future of free speech in America. “This case will go down in history as a victory for free speech unparalleled, in kind and magnitude, since the enactment of the Comstock law,” wrote Morton in *Discontent*.⁴³

Unfortunately for the colonists, their victory was fleeting. Members of Home would be charged with violations of the Comstock Act at various times through World War One, and Home’s post office charter would be taken away in April, 1902, only a month after the acquittals, because members of Home had, “abused the privileges of the post office establishment and department” by sending obscene literature through the mail.⁴⁴ The fact that the colonists had been declared innocent of criminal violations of the Comstock Act in court had no effect on the Postmaster General’s decision.

Home-Tacoma relations during the McKinley red scare closely paralleled those on a national level. The Tacoma papers used the “anarchist beast” as a construct that a polarized population, in the midst of a depression and experiencing both rapid social change and political challenges to the status quo, could rally against. This construct helped to bind one vision of society together through the scapegoating and demonizing of another.

The strength of Tacoma’s newspapers’ condemnations encouraged the growth of extralegal groups dedicated to ridding the society of the created menace. While ultimately these groups did not pose much of a physical threat to Home as a whole, they helped create a climate of fear in which the colonists self censored the articulation of their beliefs to the wider public. The Tacoma newspapers set the parameters of debate, leaving the colonists in a reactive, defensive position rather than one of open dialogue and freedom of expression.

In reality, Home Colony presented very little threat to Tacoma, let alone the power structure of the United States. It consolidated a small group of disaffected people together into a little community that was far removed, both physically and philosophically, from mainstream America. Without the attention that the Tacoma newspapers devoted to Home, far fewer people would have had any kind of knowledge about it at all. The propaganda against Home, therefore, can not be looked at as stemming from some sort of real threat that the colonists posed to the morals and ideologies of the citizens of Tacoma. It should be seen, instead, as part of a larger drive to create a scapegoat for the real problems of income and power distribution and quality of life that the American public was confronted with in the early twentieth century.

⁴¹ *Discontent* , November 13, 1901, p. 1, 4.

⁴² *Tacoma Evening News* , March 11, 1902.

⁴³ *Discontent* , March 19, 1902, p. 1

⁴⁴ LeWarne , 185.

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