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Jacob Beilhart's "Open House" at New Lisbon, Ohio, 1904.

Jacob Beilhart and the Spirit Fruit Society

Through the kindness of Robert J. Knowdell, nephew of the founder, the Ohio Historical Society Library recently acquired copies of a considerable amount of printed material relating to The Spirit Fruit Society. A little-known communal group, the society was founded by Jacob L. Beilhart in Lisbon, Ohio, shortly before the turn of the century and incorporated in 1900.

Son of a Columbiana County farmer and a harness maker by trade, young Jacob Beilhart (1867-1908) gradually evolved his own unique philosophy, renouncing his German Lutheran and Mennonite upbringing to join the Seventh Day Adventist Church while living in Kansas. After attending an Adventist College in California, he returned to Kansas, then drove by buggy in mid-winter 1300 miles to Battle Creek, Michigan, to study nursing at the Kellogg Sanitarium. Disenchanted with the Adventist Church, Beilhart and his wife Loruma practiced faith healing while he explored a variety of religions, selecting what he wanted from each one. At the sanitarium he became friends with a patient, C. W. Post, a suspender manufacturer who interested Beilhart in Christian Science. Both patient and nurse left Kellogg's sanitarium at the same time. Shortly thereafter they founded *La Vita Inn, Inc.*, and developed

Postum breakfast drink, a cereal coffee substitute similar to one served at "The San," which formed the basis for Post's multi-million-dollar breakfast cereal empire.

Beilhart eventually rejected Christian Science, as well as Theosophy and other religious experiments rife at the time. He returned to Lisbon, Ohio, and founded The Spirit Fruit Society, claiming that man's spirit had not yet reached its full potential, that it was only in the bud, and had not yet attained fruition, which entailed complete resignation of self in the love of others.

Beilhart's sincerity and magnetic personality attracted a number of Lisbonites, including Baltzer Young, a local hardware merchant, his wife Charlena, and step-daughter Virginia Moore, to his doctrine of passive nonresistance and universal love. A combination of hard work, a genuine communal spirit among the members, and financial help from well-to-do friends interested in the society augured success. The group kept to itself on the substantial Young farm (currently occupied by the Columbiana County fairgrounds) and published its own newspapers — *Spirit Fruit* and *Spirit's Voice*. Unwelcome publicity came, however, with the birth of Beilhart's niece Evelyn, the first child born

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Society



The Spirit Fruit Society in 1917, Santa Cruz, California. Robert J. Knowdell, Virginia Moore, Evelyn Galbreath, and Mary Beilhart are in the front row.



The Spirit Fruit Farm at Lisbon, Ohio, is now part of the Columbiana County fairgrounds.

in the society and known among the society members as "the love child." Newspapers inaccurately painted the group as a "free-love society," suggesting promiscuity and licentiousness. Matters worsened when a seventeen-year-old Chicago girl, "Blessed" Katharine Herbeson, joined the society. In what must rank as an early example of the "deprogrammization" technique currently in vogue, "Blessed's" millionaire father took a train to Lisbon and forced his daughter to leave the society, much against her wishes.

Before a crowd of over 400 curious onlookers, Beilhart held an open house on Sunday, June 26, 1904, to explain the society's creed; but such ideas as rejecting civil marriage because it made a slave of the woman proved too advanced for the village of Lisbon. Beilhart and his followers were forced to abandon the Spirit Fruit Farm and leave Ohio. They then moved to Ingleside, Illinois, a farming area northwest of Waukegan, where the group prospered, building a thirty-five-room home and generally eschewing publicity. Whatever the Illinois natives thought of the small sect's philosophy, they could not help but admire the industry and self-discipline of its members. There was little effort at proselytization, though Beilhart continued to publish his newspapers and explain his philosophy to interested listeners (among whom were numbered Clarence Darrow and Elbert Hubbard).

The society never numbered more than two dozen, which was possibly one reason it worked so well. Shortly before his death, Beilhart stated, with becoming modesty, "Those who have studied community life. . . have told me we have the only place they ever saw where the ideal of true brotherhood was

fully carried out in every way; that we are living what others have idealized and dreamed about. This may or may not be true."

Beilhart died November 2, 1908, aged forty-one, of appendicitis. According to his wishes, he lies buried in an unmarked grave overlooking Wooster Lake, near Ingleside.

The Spirit Fruit Society continued at Ingleside under the leadership of Virginia Moore until 1914, when the group moved to a ranch near Santa Cruz, California. Here it continued until Moore's death in 1930. Shattered by this second loss of a leader, the aging band quietly dispersed during the Great Depression. Robert Knowdell and his half-sister Evelyn are the only living members of the Spirit Fruit Society, which they left when they became of age.



Jacob Beilhart and nephew Robert J. Knowdell in Ingleside, Illinois, 1908, a few months before Beilhart's death.

Except for the more sensational aspects of Beilhart's life, which "made the papers," little has been preserved of the history of his essay in communal living. In the 1940s many issues of his newspapers were reprinted in California, and Mr. Knowdell has provided copies of these, along with Beilhart's brief autobiography, *Very Personal*, written only a few months before Jacob Beilhart's death. It is the remarkable story of an Ohio farm boy whom Elbert Hubbard — not given to recognizing unadulterated worth in another — perforce recognized as "a great man."

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