

THE HOME OF TRUTH

For the followers of Marie Ogden in the 1930s, the vortex of the universe was at Photograph Gap

Lloyd Pierson

Visitors to the Needles District of Canyonlands National Park may wonder what the three groups of rag-tag buildings are along the entrance road shortly after leaving the Moab to Monticello Highway. The rapidly deteriorating buildings give little indication of the dreams and high holy aspirations of their former inhabitants. It was on this desolate sagebrush plain that a religious colony (some called it a cult) was founded. Its not so modest name? "The Home of Truth."

Well, Truth theoretically has to exist somewhere and this forlorn spot in the great Colorado Plateau is probably as good a place as any for the elusive deity to reside.

The colony was founded by Mrs. Marie Ogden in 1933, a well educated widow from New Jersey, after she received a spiritual revelation. Mrs. Ogden's husband, an insurance executive, had died in 1929 at an early age, back in New Jersey. In her grief she turned to serious religious study and, guided by an inner light, began to seek "the truth" and an understanding of life and death.



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As she delved further into religion she began to preach and to convince others of the correctness of her beliefs. Her religious activities took her over most of the east preaching and lecturing and at least as far west as Boise, Idaho, where she reportedly had the revelation to establish a religious colony devoted to "the truth".

She apparently convinced a number of Boise citizens to accompany her but exactly how, when, and why she settled on this remote corner of Utah is not known. She tried first to make a land deal with Al Scorup who then owned Dugout Ranch on Indian Creek. He offered to sell her the ranch for half a million dollars but the group couldn't ante up that much. Scorup said the deal she counter offered included his joining her group and a guarantee of eternal life. He declined. The Indian Creek area would have provided irrigated land for farming which was one of the original foundations of the colony. However when Scorup turned her offer down she settled on the land occupied by the three groups of now dilapidated buildings. The land here was much less suited for growing things but they tried anyway for a while without much success.

At best the group probably never consisted of more than 100 people. The group was a communal one: all members gave up their worldly goods, abstaining from liquor and tobacco, eating a semi-vegetarian diet with only fish for meat. The sect believed in revelations and prophecies by Mrs. Ogden, who received The Word via her typewriter and from trips to the top of a nearby hill. Among the revelations were those of reincarnation, resurrection, a spartan life and a form of spiritualism involving vibrations, spiritual planes, soul language, conversations with the dead and other astro-esoteric ideas. As director Mrs. Ogden made the decisions and controlled the financial and spiritual matters of the colony.

Descriptions of some of the members indicate they were ill suited for life in a high desert country. They seem to have put more faith in God supplying their needs than in themselves. They did have water from a windmill-driven pump and a couple of concrete tanks that still remain on the property. But today there is no sign of their ultimately futile attempts at self-sufficient farming.

The colony was organized in three groups entitled, as one proceeds west from the state highway, the Outer Portal, Middle Portal and Inner Portal. It is the Inner Portal where Marie Ogden lived in what has been called Photograph Gap with a fantastic view of the canyons and mountains. The Inner Portal was also the real Home of Truth and on the very axis of the earth according to members of the sect.

The various buildings were all built by the members. Most of them are rough cut lumber, uninsulated, with no plastered walls and usually cardboard or newspaper to keep out the winter cold. Wood burning stoves provided warmth and the means to cook. Outdoor plumbing was the rule and no water seems to have been available in most of the houses--a pretty rugged existence even for the 1930s.

Some of the buildings were built as dormitories and meeting places. One large unfinished foundation must have been meant to be a temple of sorts. Marie Ogden's home in the gap, though unpainted clapboard, had a porch, a fairly decent interior with several bedrooms and a two car garage underneath the structure. Here and there are homes made of adobe brick or covered with shingles instead of the usual clapboard. In the 1970s transients used the buildings and, in one case, burned the house to the ground.

Mrs. Ogden and her group got along fairly well with their Monticello neighbors. She even bought and edited the San Juan Record, the only newspaper



in the county. Wallace Stegner, in his book "Mormon Country," says they got along because many of Mrs. Ogden's beliefs were similar to those of the dominant religious group in the area, the Mormons. As a result, they were more understanding than would normally be expected.

What finally got the Home of Truth into trouble was an attempt in 1935 to bring one of the recently deceased members of the colony back to life. Mrs. Ogden believed that if she could keep the corpse from deteriorating that sooner or later she could get the soul back into the body and restore life. The sheriff of San Juan County got into the act several months later and checked on the now naturally mummified body declaring that it was no health menace and since many people in San Juan County had old Indian mummies from the dry caves of the county he guessed Mrs. Ogden could have one too.

So Mrs. Ogden kept her mummy for at least another two years. It was an-

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nounced that the dead woman was about to return to life. This stirred the authorities to further action. As the furor got hot she gained nation-wide attention and the powers-that-be began to lean harder and harder on Mrs. Ogden. She solved her problem by getting rid of the body. Some say it was cremated shortly after the first contact with the law. At any rate the colony began to go down hill after this fiasco and most of the faithful drifted away.

A few members continued to live at the Home of Truth even after Mrs. Ogden's death. The final chapter was written in September 1977, when her possessions were auctioned off at Photograph Gap. The land and buildings are now in private hands. Passersby should mind their manners if only out of respect for Mrs. Ogden and her sect and their attempts to solve the mysteries of life and the hereafter. And who knows the mummy may still be about the place somewhere.

LLOYD PIERSON is retired from the National Park Service. he was Ed Abbey's boss in 1957. He still lives in Moab.



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