

# The Roots of the 1960s Communal Revival

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One of the great flowerings of communitarianism in America came with the era of the hippies in the 1960s and early 1970s. The rural hippie communes were media attention-grabbers, full of photo opportunities, wild anecdotes, and the weirdest-looking people most Americans had even seen. Press coverage was massive from about 1969 through 1972, and a string of popular books soon emerged, most of them travelogues of the authors' visits to communes. A fair body of scholarship eventually developed as well.

One standard theme in all of that coverage and scholarship, however, was oddly misguided. In case after case, observers of the new communalism seeking to explain the origins of the communes concluded that they were products of the decay of urban hippie life in the Haight-Ashbury, the East Village and other enclaves. The hip urban centers, so the thesis ran, might have briefly been joyous centers of peace and love and expanded consciousness, but they soon devolved into cesspools of hard drugs, street crime and official repression of dissident lifestyles. The hippies at that point fled for the friendly precincts of the countryside, where they built communes as new places for working out the hip vision.

Examples of this explanation of the origins of hippie communalism abound in both popular and scholarly writings. Maren Lockwood Carden, for example, writing in 1976, says matter-of-factly that the hippies' "first communes were created within the urban areas in which they already lived," and that beginning in 1966 "and especially during 1967 and 1968, such community-oriented hippies left the city."<sup>1</sup> Helen Constanas and Kenneth Westhues purport to trace the history

of the counterculture “from its charismatic beginnings in the old urban bohemia to its current locale in rural communes,” concluding that “communes signify the routinization of hippiedom.”<sup>2</sup>

Actually the new communes began to appear before there was a clearly recognizable overall hippie culture, much less a decaying one; rather they represented a new outcropping of the much larger venerable American tradition of alternative culture, a part of which has involved communal living. Catalyzed by shifts in American culture in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the hip communes were not, in the beginning, products of hippiedom, but crucibles that played a major role in shaping and defining hip culture. In other words, the urban hippies did not create the first hip communes; it would be closer to the truth to say that the earliest communes helped create the hippies. While communes were indeed founded by hippies who fled the cities, they were johnnies-come-lately to the hip communal scene.

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When did the hippies first appear?

An argument that the new wave of rural communes predates the rise of the urban hippies depends on the proposition that hippies were not present as a recognizable movement in American cities until the second half of the 1960s. Of course no one can point to an exact moment at which the first hippie appeared at the corner of Haight and Ashbury streets. The hippies evolved from the beats of the 1950s and the bohemians of the decades before that, but it would be hard to see them as coalescing into anything that amounted to a distinct social movement before about 1966. The Diggers of San Francisco, the altruists who helped penurious hippies survive and whose abodes were sometimes more or less communal themselves, began to take clear shape in that year. Although LSD, whose use became a pivot of the hip experience, had been discovered by a few cultural pioneers (among them Timothy Leary and Ken Kesey) some years earlier, it did not become a symbol of and vehicle for rejecting the dominant culture until mid-decade, when Kesey staged a year of Acid Tests from November 1965 to October 1966.

The term “hippie,” which seems to have been coined in late 1965,<sup>3</sup> was quite obscure even into 1967; it does not appear in such pioneering books on the new dissident culture as J. L. Simmons and Barry Winograd’s *It’s Happening* and John Gruen’s *The New Bohemia* (both published in 1966).<sup>4</sup> By mid-1967, however, everyone knew who hippies were. The 1966-67 *Reader’s Guide* has no entry for “hippie”; the 1967-68 volume has more than a column of them.<sup>5</sup> In sum, it would seem fair to conclude that the cultural phenomenon of the hippies began to take on clear, distinguishing characteristics about 1966 and was widely familiar to the general public by the following year.

But communes that were hip already existed by then. Drop City, a full-blown prototype of hip communalism, was established in May, 1965; another community with a notably hip orientation, Tolstoy Farm, was two years older. Ken Kesey

and his Merry Pranksters took their famous bus trip in 1964 and thereafter settled down to a freewheeling communal existence in California and later Oregon.<sup>6</sup> Mel Lyman's Fort Hill community adopted communal living in 1966 in Boston, and had been moving toward that model since Lyman had first begun attracting followers in the Boston area about 1963. These communes had been developing new subcultural mores and were helping shape the emerging hip movement.

Moreover, other communes that were not "hip" but that in some cases influenced the hippies were also well established at the time. Religious communalism, a staple theme in American history, was a part of the context, with groups dedicated to such diverse centerpoints as Catholicism, various Eastern religions, and the Anabaptist tradition all thriving in the early 1960s. There were also secular communities devoted to radical politics, anarchism, sexual freedom, the sharing of labor, creation of arts and crafts, land development, ethnicity, and a dazzling array of visions of assorted seers and cranks. While American communitarianism has historically had stronger and weaker periods, it has been an ongoing theme in American life for more than three centuries, and it was very much there when a new generation of dissenters decided to give it a whirl.<sup>7</sup>

That is not to say that every new commune deliberately studies the historic communal tradition and tries to build on it. As recent scholarship has pointed out, most communal groups have some independent reason for existence and adopt communal living as a vehicle for the achievement of specific goals.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, communes have had a more substantial and consistent presence in the United States than many have realized. That ongoing presence has often been overlooked by American historians, who typically see a great surge of colony building in the first half of the nineteenth century, with such groups as the Shakers, the Oneida Community, the Fourierists, the Owenites and many others, but then a near-void until the hippies came along.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, several historians working just prior to the sixties communal revival pronounced communitarianism essentially dead as of about the time of the Civil War.<sup>10</sup>

The hippies by and large disdained the study of history, so they were unaware that what they were doing had long before ceased to exist and in fact had become impossible. Nevertheless, their communes owed a debt to the American tradition of social radicalism and in some cases had distinct ties to communes of earlier times. One could argue that the hippie communal era, like earlier waves of communitarianism before it, represented one of the frequent outbreaks of the hubris that began with the Puritans, the belief that mortal humans could actually create perfect communities in which heaven would virtually be achieved on earth, and thus was but a new manifestation of a longstanding cultural motif.<sup>11</sup> Less grandly, it at least represented the kind of dissatisfaction with the institutions of mainstream culture that has frequently been manifested not only in the founding of communes but in other kinds of radicalism and bohemianism as well. In short, the communes were more closely related to the tradition of cultural dissent than they were to the breakdown of the hip urban centers.

Moreover, some hip communes did have distinct ancestry in earlier American communalism in that their founders and key members had been involved, directly or indirectly, with communitarianism before becoming hippies. Tolstoy Farm, for example, deliberately built on its founder's affinity for the community-oriented ideas of Tolstoy and Gandhi; the first residents of Drop City all had family ties to communal or collective traditions and deliberately built an art colony, thus becoming part of another pathway in communal history.<sup>12</sup>

The earlier part of the communal tradition, until 1860 or so, has been well recorded and will not be recapitulated here. And Robert Fogarty's recent excellent overview of the period from 1860 to 1914 demonstrates that communitarianism was quite active during that part of the period of supposed communal declension, so that period will be avoided here as well.<sup>13</sup> This minichronicle begins roughly where Fogarty quits, describing a few of the many communities that were active after 1914 and showing that the communal tradition was still alive and well when the hippies joined it.

### **Religious communities**

Christianity, Judaism and other religions provided important centers of communalism in the years preceding the hip era. The largest group of independent communitarians in North America, the Hutterites, grew enormously after their arrival in the United States in 1874, from a few hundred members to perhaps 40,000 in about 350 colonies today. Despite their isolation, the Hutterites have influenced many other communal groups—most notably the Bruderhof, a communal movement founded in 1920 in Germany in explicit imitation of the classic Hutterite model, but also such other groups as Koinonia Farm, an interracial community founded in Georgia in 1942. The Bruderhof, settling in the United States in the 1950s, has ever since continued to develop its own version of Hutterism, complete with Anabaptist theology, patriarchal leadership, and a completely communal economy.<sup>14</sup> Koinonia was founded by the Southern Baptist preacher Clarence Jordan as a place where blacks and whites could live together harmoniously, and Jordan became interested in exploring the beliefs and lifestyles of other communal groups. Soon he forged links with the Hutterites (and later with the Bruderhof); extended visits between Hutterites and Koinonians soon followed, and in fact Hutterite guests at Koinonia provided crucial support for the Georgia colony when it was severely endangered by KKK-inspired economic and physical threats.<sup>15</sup> Koinonia, in turn, helped link the older communal traditions with the hippies; many would-be hippie communards flocked to the Georgia farm, which received sympathetic coverage in many of the surveys of hippie communes.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, other Protestants also founded communes. One of many such groups operating in mid-century was Reba Place Fellowship of Evanston, Illinois, founded in 1957 by Mennonites as a socially radical evangelical Christian community.<sup>17</sup>

Catholic communitarianism historically has been centered in the religious orders, and as the larger culture shifted in midcentury the winds of change blew

through many of them. Changes accelerated under the influence of the reformist Second Vatican Council, which was convened in 1962. Among many new directions tested was an openness to the East; the Benedictine community in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, for example, became widely known for its prior's experiments in what he termed Zen Catholicism.<sup>18</sup> There was also important Catholic communitarianism outside the orders, the best-known such phenomenon being the Catholic Worker movement, which from the 1930s operated an extensive string of communal houses and farms in carrying out its mission of serving and enabling the poor.

Jews as well as Christians were active in creating new communities. The greatest wave of Jewish communitarianism came in the late-nineteenth century as impoverished immigrants from Eastern Europe were settled in rural colonies, but experiments continued thereafter. Closer to the hip era the Havurah movement, which began to take shape in the 1950s, spawned a number of communal living groups as young Jews sought warmer fellowship in what they perceived to be sterile synagogues. Moreover, the moving of Hasidic communities from Europe to America in the twentieth century provided intriguing models of close Jewish community, even though the urban Hasidic settlements were not economically communal.

Eastern religions were also well represented among the pre-hip communes. Indian religions opened monasteries in America as early as 1895.<sup>19</sup> Buddhist communities began appearing in the 1930s.<sup>20</sup> The International Society for Krishna Consciousness opened its American phase with the arrival of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami from India in 1965, and it quickly became largely communal, drawing much of its initial constituency from the hippies.<sup>21</sup> Other Eastern religions also developed communal presences about the same time.

Some religious communes grew up independently of the major world traditions. Father Divine's Peace Mission Movement, for example, which focused on a leader who claimed to be God incarnate, grew rapidly during the Depression and was still alive, if dwindling, by the time the hippies arrived on the scene.<sup>22</sup> A few years later, in 1945, Lloyd Meeker and a group of his followers founded Sunrise Ranch near Loveland, Colorado, the first of what has become a network of a dozen communities in the United States, Canada and elsewhere. Emphasizing mind/body healing and other disciplines that today would be called New Age practices, these Emissary Communities received a flood of inquirers in the late 1960s when thousands of the young hip sought communities in which to settle.<sup>23</sup>

## **Secular communities**

While the longest-lived American communes have generally been religious in orientation, the nation has had no shortage of secular communities.<sup>24</sup> Society has always had those who have gathered in intentional communities as they advanced political causes, promoted social reform, created artwork, homesteaded new land, and pursued any number of common goals.

Many socialists frustrated at their inability to gain a major foothold in the national political arena have turned to commune-building as the only conceivable way to put socialism into practice in America. In the twentieth century one of the most prominent socialist communes was Llano del Rio, founded in California in 1914 by Job Harriman. Llano moved to Louisiana in 1918; there, as Newllano, the colony survived for two decades before succumbing to its ongoing financial crisis.<sup>25</sup> Similarly anarchists, in their resistance to structured governments, have often turned to cooperative communities as models for human interaction. The Ferrer Colony at Stelton, New Jersey, for example, operated an alternative school over a lifespan that covered roughly the period between the world wars.<sup>26</sup>

Still others have turned to communitarianism, in one form or another, to prove a social theory. In one prominent example, disciples of single-tax advocate Henry George, despairing of political success, decided to test their theories in collective settlements that would reallocate the tax bill for the settlement according to Georgist theory, in effect assessing land and not buildings. The most successful of the single-tax enclaves, Fairhope, in Alabama, still operates today.<sup>27</sup>

Quite a few of the mid-century communal settlements were devoted to a charismatic leader or some particular point of view. Alfred Lawson, a onetime baseball pitcher and self-proclaimed inventor of the airliner, founded a communal "university" in Des Moines in 1943 where his disciples steeped themselves in his wide-ranging theories and cultivated communal gardens.<sup>28</sup> In the 1930s and 1940s a novel group called Mankind United, one wing of which was communal, attracted thousands of Californians with its claim that it would soon establish an earthly paradise for its members.<sup>29</sup> The list goes on and on.

Artists' colonies, virtually by definition centers of bohemianism, constituted, collectively, a bridge between earlier communitarianism and the hippies. The earliest colonies were simply towns—including Provincetown, Massachusetts, Old Lyme, Connecticut, and Taos, New Mexico—where artists congregated. By the turn of the century, however, new colonies with communal features began to appear. The Roycrofters, founded by Elbert Hubbard at East Aurora, New York, in 1893, produced fine books (many of them consisting of Hubbard's writings), furniture and other craftworks for a nationwide clientele. Hubbard liked to speak of a common purse as well as shared living facilities, although some critics have found Roycroft's communitarianism less than perfect, and Hubbard rather more equal than his fellows.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, this colony, deliberately based on the artists' community founded by William Morris then operating in England, pointed the way to a new chapter in American communal history.<sup>31</sup> Byrdcliffe, founded through the largesse of the English millionaire Ralph Radcliffe Whitehead in 1903, was never very productive artistically, but it attracted a host of artists and bohemians whose enduring presence turned the obscure New York village of Woodstock into an important center of the arts.<sup>32</sup> 1903 also saw the founding of Rose Valley outside Philadelphia, where a diverse band of artists, architects and writers labored together for several years.<sup>33</sup> Other similar communities followed, and a decade or two later variations on the theme began to appear, especially with

the opening of the semicomunal Black Mountain College, an extraordinary center of the literary and visual arts, in North Carolina in 1933.<sup>34</sup> Here we have communities with some of the strongest links to the communes of the 1960s, the latter also having been populated to a large extent with would-be artists and writers. The art colonies prefigured the hippies in being centers of free expression; they also tended to accept relatively liberated sexuality (heterosex outside of marriage was not uncommon; neither was homosexuality). Hippies who had attended art schools often had art-colony veterans as teachers; the founders of Drop City, the prototypical hippie commune that had a strong artistic flair, were guided in significant part by their admiration for the bohemian art colonial tradition.

In sum, intentional communities were as alive and well as ever when the hippies began creating communes. The notion that the communal tradition essentially died out before the Civil War is clearly erroneous; there may well have been more North Americans living communally in 1940 than there were in 1840.

### Continuities and discontinuities

The point of all this is that the hippies, although some of them thought they were inventing communal living, in fact were merely writing a new chapter in a venerable tome. On the other hand, there *was* something new about the communes of the hippies. While it is hazardous to generalize too extensively about hip communal styles (the communes were a diverse lot, with a wide variety of purposes and attitudes), a few features tended to define the genre. For example, many communes, unlike most of their predecessors, subscribed to the concept of open membership. Openness was basic to the hip ethos; hippies tended to have a naive optimism about human nature, a belief that if one could simply be rescued from the nightmare of American culture and placed in a supportive setting, one would respond in kind and contribute to group harmony and achievement. So anyone willing to reject mainstream culture—to drop out, as the argot had it—was welcome.

A second hip innovation, in the communes as elsewhere in hip culture, was the use of drugs. Perhaps the hippies were not the first communal druggies; the Shakers, after all, had been major producers of opium. But by hippie times most mood-altering substances except alcohol were illegal, and illegality put a new patina on the use of those substances. The hippies were deeply convinced that certain drugs were valuable in a great many ways: They made you feel good, they provided glorious mystical visions, they increased your ability to live harmoniously with others and with nature. The fact that marijuana could often be grown in some obscure corner of a rural farmstead was a nice side benefit. Thus hippie communes were natural centers of drug production, use and advocacy, and as a result were frequently raided by the police.

A third innovation was a flamboyant outrageousness that thumbed its nose at the rest of society. Mainstream culture was dead; the hippies embodied a breathtakingly new civilization, or so they thought. In their clothes, architecture,

graphic designs, music and many other externals of life the self-described freaks saw themselves as utterly different from what had gone before, and advertised that difference as vigorously as possible.

Somewhat new, but less completely so, was the hippie belief in abolishing all restrictions on sexual behavior. The standard hip theory was one of total sexual freedom: multiple partners, multilateral relationships or no commitment at all, homosexuality—there were no boundaries. Of course some earlier communes had experimented with unusual sexual mores; the Oneida Community, for example, had a group marriage involving hundreds of members that lasted for more than 30 years, from roughly 1850 to 1880. The hippie contribution thus was to take an idea earlier promulgated by a few isolated radical communards and make a variant of it the standard for large numbers of communes throughout the country.

In other ways the hippies were much like many of their communal predecessors. Many of the hippie communes had a back-to-the-land flavor, a rural romanticism about raising crops from the good earth that had been very much a part of many earlier American communal ventures. Most of the hippies who had not been raised on farms found agriculture less rewarding and less productive than they had expected, just as many of their predecessors had. They also reflected the experience of their forebears in that they tended to attract members who were ill-suited to communal living. The communal ideal is one of strong, self-motivated altruists pooling their money and energy for the common good. The reality is that a reliable commune is seemingly a cradle-to-grave welfare system, and as such is attractive to persons lacking motivation and ability to contribute. The Shakers perennially had “Winter Shakers” who would show up in the fall and live the communal life during the cold months, only to leave in the spring when the workload increased and life became easier elsewhere. The hippies also had problems with freeloaders and misfits.

### **Toward the sixties**

No single chain of occurrences connected earlier American communitarianism to the hippies. Nevertheless, the communal form evolved, not necessarily consciously, over several decades toward the hip model. Any beginning point is bound to be arbitrary, but looking back about a quarter-century before hip days—a sociological generation—is useful. One can discern seeds of hip themes in one of the most important community-minded movements of the century, the Catholic Worker. Dorothy Day, its founder, was an early twentieth century Greenwich Village bohemian who was converted to Catholicism without losing her radicalism. Communal living was an important part of the movement from its inception in the 1930s. In cities the Workers established Houses of Hospitality, places where the poorest of the poor could get coffee, bread and a place to sleep. Eventually several communal farms were developed, providing refuges from the problems of the city and food for the urban houses. While the Catholic Workers were (and are) hardly hippies, their movement did provide new directions for



communalism. They were devoted to serving the destitute, something that was not a central precept of most of the more famous nineteenth-century communities. They lived lives of service around the clock and threw their doors open to all, sharing their physical space as well as their food and clothing with those they served. While they did not invent voluntary poverty, they lived it more truly than most communitarians have before or since. The center of their movement was religious, most Catholic Workers being as devoted to their religious path as hippies would be to their own diverse brands of mystical spirituality. And the Catholic Workers were full of political radicalism: they fed the poor, but they also worked to change the wealthy nation's political and social system that left many people hungry. It should not be surprising that some early pioneers of 1960s communalism were Catholic Worker veterans; their presence was especially strong in the early days of Tolstoy Farm, founded in 1963.

The founding of Community Service, Inc., by Arthur Morgan in 1940 also helped point new directions in communitarianism. Morgan, onetime President of Antioch College in Ohio and later chairman of the Tennessee Valley Authority, used CSI to help keep the communal flame burning at a time when Red-baiting and McCarthyism made life difficult for collective enterprises. In 1954 CSI established the Homer Morris Fund, a source of financing for communal businesses. When the hippies came along, the Morris Fund, although its resources were never large, helped their communes—at least some of the more stable ones—just as it had those of the previous generation. (Under a new name, Community Educational Service Council, Inc., the Fund continues to assist intentional communities today.)

Some of the member communities of CSI had features that anticipated the hip model and made them, in effect, links between the earlier communitarians and the hippies. One good example is the Glen Gardner Cooperative Community, also known as St. Francis Acres, founded in 1947 in New Jersey.<sup>35</sup> Its anarchist/pacifist members operated a radical publishing house (just as many hip communes would produce “underground” publications), farmed and operated a preschool. Glen Gardner's members declared themselves opposed to land ownership, and announced that the community's land belonged to God. The concept was not original; Peter Armstrong had deeded the 600 acres of his Celestia community to God in the 1860s.<sup>36</sup> But it was to crop up again in the hip communes when Lou Gottlieb, after protracted battles with the local authorities over occupancy and sanitation, signed over the 30 acres of his Morning Star commune in California to God.<sup>37</sup>

The most tangible link between Glen Gardner and the radicals of the 1960s was its leader, David Dellinger, who later became widely known for his pacifist activism and literary polemics, especially against the war in Vietnam. Dellinger eventually was one of the Chicago Seven who were tried for conspiracy for organizing demonstrations at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. He was only one of several sixties radicals who had earlier been involved in communal living; another was Staughton Lynd, who was a member

of the Macedonia Cooperative Community in Georgia for several years in the 1950s.<sup>38</sup>

Some communities established on the eve of the hip era eventually drew fair numbers of followers from the hippies. A good example here is the Himalayan Academy, founded in 1962 in Virginia City, Nevada. Virginia City was an early countercultural outpost; Subramuniya, an Eastern master of Western origin, bought an old brewery building and set out to form a spiritual community that would combine the best of Hindu and Christian spirituality.<sup>39</sup> By the early 1970s the movement had grown so much that it began forming satellite centers. Meanwhile, other communities of various Eastern religionists sprang up, often in small communities so far from the mainstream of society that they were hardly noticed. How many students of communal history, for example, know of the Ahimsa Community of Parsons, Kansas (founded in 1965),<sup>40</sup> or of the Yashodhara Ashram of Kootenay Bay, British Columbia (1959)?<sup>41</sup>

Yet another movement with feet in both earlier and 1960s communitarianism was the School of Living. In 1934 social critic Ralph Borsodi founded the School as an organization that would help people learn the skills needed to move back to the land; two years later a School community was established at Suffern, New York, with, eventually, sixteen resident families. It closed during World War II, but the School of Living was taken over by Mildred Loomis who, with her husband John, re-established it in Ohio, whence it expanded.<sup>42</sup> By 1966 the School was holding its classes and seminars at its new Heathcote Center, Maryland, and there a residential community was established. Unlike some older communitarians, Loomis was sympathetic to the hippies, whom she saw as perhaps the best hope for the ongoing communitarian movement and for the revival of rural self-sufficiency, her life goal.<sup>43</sup> In the late 1960s Heathcote seems to have become very much like other hip communes; Elia Katz, in a generally pejorative account of a visit there about 1971, reported that the physical community consisted of a “cluster of shacks and trailers” as well as tents, and that quite a few members used marijuana (although not the major psychedelics), led fairly freewheeling sexual lives, and were concerned with healthy eating, subsistence farming and rejecting the values of mainstream America.<sup>44</sup>

### **The hip era dawns**

Just when and where did the first commune emerge that could properly be called “hip”? The form seems to have evolved in scattered locations between about 1962 and 1966 as a series of communes, each more hip than the last, began to crop up independently. The first, or one of the first, was Gorda Mountain, reportedly founded in 1962 near Big Sur, California. Its nature and role is difficult to assess, however, because information about it is so sparse. Libraries in the area have no information on it, and Big Sur history buffs, while they remember the community, tend to know few details. Richard Fairfield, who devoted two paragraphs to Gorda Mountain in his *Communes USA*, called it “the first open-land commune,” saying it began when Amelia Newell, who operated an art

gallery on the coast highway, decided to make her rural acreage open to anyone who would settle there. She apparently had few takers at first, but after the hip communal movement reached full steam there seem to have been more. Fairfield reports that 200 were there in the summer of 1967, and that clashes between the hippies and the authorities were intense, leading to a forced shutdown of the community in 1968.<sup>45</sup> Gorda's chief contribution to hip communalism was its open-door policy; it may have had other hip features—free sex, drug use—in its early years, but documentation is lacking.

Another proto-hip commune was Kerista, established by John Presmont, who took the name Brother Jud, in the early 1960s. The Keristans were uninhibited practicing existentialists, especially noted for their practice of wide-open free love, but also pioneers in smoking marijuana and proclaiming an unabashed pursuit of hedonism. Although they later found it necessary to put some limits on their exuberance, in their early years they stretched the limits of a not-yet-very-permissive society a long way. There were bouts with venereal diseases, and as early as 1964 Jud and eleven others were arrested for possession of marijuana. But the Keristans were among the earliest exponents of anything goes, the first of the Do It! people.<sup>46</sup> With its more or less open use of drugs and freewheeling sex, Kerista even more than Gorda portended what was coming with the hip communes.

Meanwhile, a different approach to community was unfolding in the far West. Tolstoy Farm, more like the rural hippie communes to come than any of its predecessors had been, was established in 1963 outside Davenport, Washington. Tolstoy in some ways resembled a less organized version of Glen Gardner, with a radical political orientation and aversion to private land ownership. But it also reflected what would become known as hippie ideals. Its members espoused peace and love and noncoercive behavior. Rejecting all regulations, they tolerated drugs, sex of all kinds, nudity, and just about any imaginable thought and behavior. Huw "Piper" Williams, the founder, in the early 1960s took part in peace marches, including some organized by the New England Committee for Nonviolent Action, which had a rural, somewhat communal farm in Connecticut from which its activities emanated. He decided to return home to Washington and start a similar farm there. Setting up shop on land owned by his mother and his grandparents, he invited friends from the peace movement, including some from the Catholic Worker, to join him and "attempt to live in a way that would not require violent acts, being in the military, courts, jail, or police."<sup>47</sup> Early on they adopted as the sole rule of the community the principle that no one could be forced to leave, so that "We would have to work out our differences in the right way." With no rules restricting sexual activity or drug use and with wide-open membership, Tolstoy Farm lurched closer to hip than anything that had gone before.

Many were attracted to Tolstoy—Robert Houriet says there were fifty the first summer—and the community focused mainly on living at a near-subsistence level.<sup>48</sup> With a cash flow of less than \$100 per month, Williams recalls, "We were

pretty poor, trying to grow our own food, build our own shelter, use old tools and equipment. It occupied us and challenged us.” After some shifts and land acquisition during the first two years, Tolstoy Farm ended up consisting of two separate parcels of land, one of 80 acres in a large canyon and another of 120 acres two miles to the south. An existing farmhouse, known as Hart House, became the communal center. A diverse crowd took up residence there, especially as hippie interest in communes boomed in 1966 and 1967. More than a few of the newcomers, whose numbers included runaways and mental patients, created problems for the longer-term residents. In the spring of 1968 Hart House burned to the ground as a result of a fire set by a teenage girl Williams describes as “kind of off balance.” Many of the earlier settlers had already built simple homes elsewhere on the two pieces of land and were reportedly not entirely sad to see the chaotic Hart House scene come to an end. After the fire the community consisted of private households, although cooperative features endured. Population estimates vary, but it appears that at its late-sixties peak the community had perhaps as many as 80 residents, including a healthy contingent of children in the cooperative alternative school, and several cooperative work projects. In 1970 a journalist wrote of a community of “serious, straightforward people who, with calculated bluntness, say they are dropouts, social misfits, unable or unwilling to cope with the world ‘outside.’”<sup>49</sup>

Life was never easy at Tolstoy Farm; many contemporary newspaper accounts of life there commented on the farm’s run-down physical plant. “Dotted with shacks and makeshift abodes, it is reminiscent of a Hooverville of the 1930s,” one reporter wrote.<sup>50</sup> But the residents had a sense that those who had learned to live without technological support systems would be the better off for it when, as many believed, the time would come when world crisis might remove such systems.

Eventually things took a downhill turn. “Things got wild and different,” Williams says. He left and later gathered another community, the Earth Cyclers, on land owned by his parents 25 miles from Tolstoy; at this writing it consists of nine persons living simply and carrying out organic farming and forestry projects. In 1990 Tolstoy reported a population of 27 adults and 22 children, the members living independently as families but still retaining some sense of community.<sup>51</sup> The old school building is now a communal library; the residents have potluck meals every Sunday and keep a cooperative milk cow. In the fall of 1990 residents were building a communal sweat lodge and, many of them having become interested in goddess religion, celebrating neopagan holidays together. In many ways little has changed in a quarter century.

While Tolstoy Farm was trying to map its communal route another influential variation on the communal theme began to take shape in California. Ken Kesey, one of the main pivots between beat and hip culture, and a circle of bohemian friends who became known as the Merry Pranksters soon became prominent promoters of taking LSD. Their 1964 bus trip became legend in countercultural history after its depiction in Tom Wolfe’s best-seller *The Electric*

*Kool-Aid Acid Test*.<sup>52</sup> After the trip the Pranksters lived in a loose, rather disorganized communal setup south of San Francisco and later, after 1967, on the Kesey farm in Oregon. Eventually Kesey tired of it all and in 1969 he shut it down. But for several years Kesey and the Pranksters had one of the liveliest communal scenes anywhere.

There was, in short, a good deal of communal activity going on by 1965. It drew from earlier communitarianism, utopianism and radical politics in many and basic ways; but it also pushed at the boundaries, looking for new options, trying to find new and better ways to live than mainstream America presented.

### **Meanwhile, back in America. . . .**

The ongoing communitarian tradition did not by itself cause the 1960s communal revival. Other forces were stirring, portending cultural upheavals to come. One thing that would have a great deal of influence on the hippies and their communes was the changing nature of the beat movement, the predecessor of hippiedom, where by the middle to late 1950s new themes were resonating.

One important harbinger of things to come was the emergence of the new psychedelic drugs, especially LSD. Drugs were nothing new to the beats; bohemians had been smoking marijuana for much of the twentieth century, and some of them, at least by the late 1950s, had dabbled in a fair number of other substances.<sup>53</sup> But LSD was something else. Its visions were fantastic, urgent, profound. By the cusp between beat and hip it was making rapid strides in popularity. Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters had much to do with that, of course; so did the Harvard Psychedelic Research Project of 1960-61, which got Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert fired for acts related to their experiments with LSD. The hippies soon made LSD the single most important symbol of what their movement was all about. Of course marijuana was not neglected; its low cost and less intense effects made it the subcultural drug of choice by mid-decade.

Meanwhile, things were not quiet on the cultural front. Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," published in 1956, was a new blast of poetic wind, a stunning challenge to the formal, academic style that dominated American poetry and that even the earlier beat poets had been unable to dislodge. At the same time, new and daring entertainment began to emerge. Lenny Bruce, to pick a prominent performer, devastated nightclub audiences with a new type of standup comedy, a savage assault on American icons with shocking swear words, heretofore never heard outside of private conversation.

New magazines were also pushing at the cultural boundaries. In 1958 Paul Krassner founded *The Realist*, a little newsprint journal that engaged in uninhibited social criticism and displayed freewheeling graphics. In the early 1960s Krassner was marketing, through his magazine, such artifacts as the "Mother Poster," which consisted of the words "Fuck Communism" done up in a stars-and-stripes motif. Another new periodical, this one begun in 1962, was *Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts*, put out in a mimeographed and stapled format by Ed Sanders, the proprietor of a radical bookstore in the East Village. (Sanders would

later gain prominence as leader of one of the farthest-out hip musical groups, the Fugs, and as a historian of the Charles Manson family.<sup>54</sup>) Much of the magazine's content consisted of experimental poetry and the works of leading beat literati, but Sanders also ran polemics (advocating the legalization of psychedelic drugs, he asked, "Why should a bunch of psychologists hog all the highs?") and sexually explicit graphics.

There was, in short, an evolution from beat to hip that took place over a decade or so, from the mid-fifties until the mid-sixties. Beyond that, the changing nature of mainstream society and of popular culture also sowed seeds of hip. The new post-World War II prosperity put cash into the hands of the nonproductive young, and that certainly changed their way of thinking about the relationship of work and wealth. Higher education mushroomed; now a great portion of a generation could be isolated from its elders, ghettoized, and given a chance to try new experiments in living.<sup>55</sup> New contraceptives and treatments of sexually transmitted diseases made for relatively hassle-free casual sex. A new music with Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley was, compared to its immediate predecessors, primitive and sexual.

The political world was changing as well, on campus and off. The civil rights movement brought to the fore a new politics of moral passion. John Kennedy and some of his programs, notably the Peace Corps, furthered the idealism of the young. The founding of Students for a Democratic Society in 1962 and the sudden emergence of the Free Speech Movement at the University of California at Berkeley in 1964 inaugurated a new radicalism on campuses. Lyndon Johnson's escalation of the war in Vietnam in early 1965 engendered increasingly tumultuous protests.

The ongoing presence of utopian and visionary literature in America also promoted the communal vision. In 1948 B. F. Skinner published *Walden Two*, which became a perennial best seller and eventually directly inspired several intentional communities, including Twin Oaks in Virginia and East Wind in Missouri.<sup>56</sup> Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* became a hip literary favorite, and in due course communes devoted to its ideas emerged, including Sunrise Hill in western Massachusetts.<sup>57</sup> The communal vision certainly received a boost from the dozens of utopian fantasy novels appearing annually.

All of these rather diverse currents combined into a powerful stream. The rise of the hippie alternative, like that of the New Left, was the embodiment of a culture of rejection. Establishment culture seemed cold, empty, closed-minded, unable to change and to tolerate new insights. The countercultural vision as it emerged in the mid-sixties, naive as it may have been, was a seductive one: Don't work, get stoned and be mystical and happy, have sex at will, listen to lots of music, think great thoughts, live in warm communities with other mellow people.

### **Bringing it all together: Drop City**

In May of 1965 these strands of communal exploration and cultural paradigm shift came together in the settlement that turned the corner, that can plausibly be

called the first full-blown hippie commune: Drop City, located near Trinidad, Colorado. Drop City brought together most of the themes of its predecessor communities—anarchy, pacifism, sexual freedom, drugs, open membership, art—and wrapped them in an exuberance and an architecture that trumpeted the coming of a new communal era.

Drop City's founders were influenced by a number of communal and collective traditions. One was of Mennonite stock and thus familiar with the close-knit, world-rejecting search for community conducted by the Anabaptists. Two were from leftist families in New York, raised with the collective ideals of Marxism all about them. All three were artists and familiar with the concept of bohemian artists' collectives. The fourth person to settle at Drop City, and the one who lived there the longest of anyone, was raised by parents who had lived in the Jewish colonies of southern New Jersey.

The immediate impetus for Drop City, however, was art. Clark Richert met Gene and Jo Ann Bernofsky in 1961 in Lawrence, Kansas, where Richert and Jo Ann were studying painting and Gene was pursuing his own artistry, especially film. A year or two later Richert and Gene began creating what they called Drop Art, which began when they painted rocks and dropped them from a loft window onto the sidewalk along the town's main drag, watching the reactions of passersby. From there the genre became more elaborate.

By 1965 Richert and the Bernofskys found themselves trying to escape the system altogether by pursuing a communal alternative. They wanted to find land, build houses, and live rent free while doing art. Richert and Gene Bernofsky found six acres of scrubby goat pasture outside Trinidad and bought it for \$450 on May 3, 1965. There was never a question about the name; Drop City would be the communal settlement of the Drop artists. (Accounts in years to come would say that the commune's name stemmed from the fact that its members were dropouts, or from their affection for dropping acid; they were simply wrong.<sup>58</sup>)

The three Droppers moved in immediately. Shortly before the land purchase Richert had attended a lecture by Buckminster Fuller in Boulder and come away with visions of geodesic domes. With only the vaguest ideas of what they were doing they began to build. Without money—Drop City was always broke—they had to scrounge building materials; they planted old telephone poles for foundation piles and collected mill ends, pieces of 2x4 too short to sell, from a lumber mill scrap pile. Amazingly, two domes were soon erected, and a big third one was begun.

Before the third dome's outer covering was started in the spring of 1966, Steve Baer, an established dome-builder from Albuquerque, had begun to visit the Droppers. Baer startled junkyard owners by walking in and offering them a nickel or a dime apiece for car tops; then he and the Droppers would take big double-bladed axes and chop the tops from the cars. Attached to the facets of the domes, they produced a hamlet of crazy quilts.

The Droppers had the kind of visionary optimism that would soon characterize the entire hippie movement. Jo Ann Bernofsky says, "We knew that we



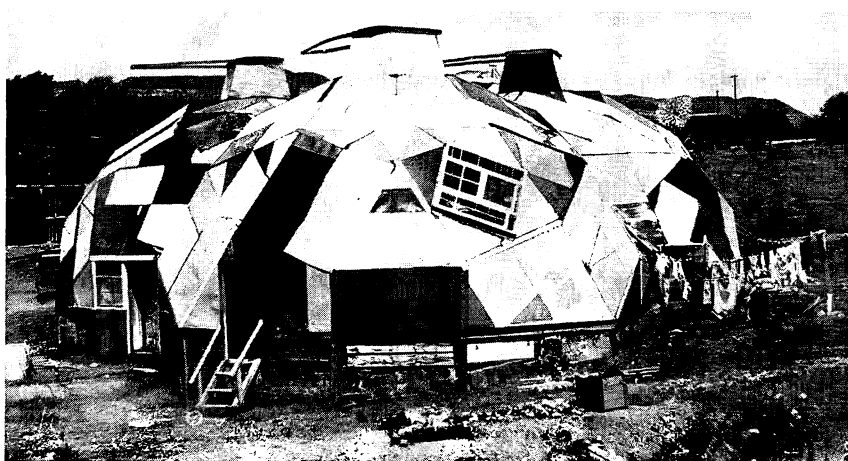
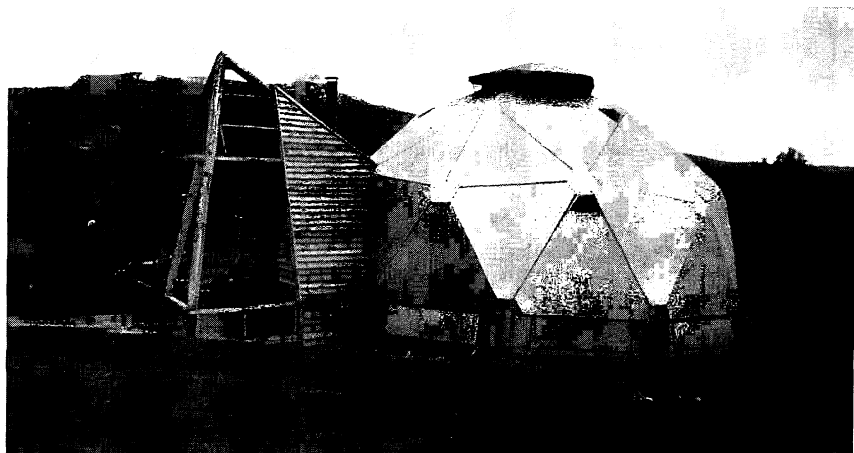
**Above and facing page: Photos of Drop City courtesy of Gene and Jo Ann Bernofsky.**

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wanted to do something outrageous and we knew we wanted to do it with other people, because it was more exciting to be with a group than to be just one or two or three people. . . . It was full of vitality, and it was extremely exciting and wonderful. You had the sense that anything was possible.” They also had the beat-hippie disdain for money, material comfort, and work. As Gene Bernofsky puts it,

It’s important to be employed; work is important, but we felt that to be gainfully employed was a sucking of the soul and that a part of one of the purposes of the new civilization was to





be employed, but not to be gainfully employed, so that each individual would be their own master and we idealistically believed that if we were true to that principle, that if we did nongainful work that the cosmic forces would take note of this and would supply us with the necessities of survival.

Living on a few donations, and, briefly, food stamps, the Droppers pursued their art vigorously. Slides taken during the first year show dozens of paintings, sculptures, pieces of decorated furniture, and assemblages, as well as the monumental artworks, the domes themselves. One innovative piece was *The Being Bag*, a hand-made black-and-white comic book cooperatively written and illustrated; it would be a strong contender for the title of first underground comic book. Gene Bernofsky also shot a great deal of film at Drop City. Literature was produced at the commune as well; the most prominent writer was Peter Douthit,

who arrived a year after the founding. Under his Dropper name Peter Rabbit he published a book entitled *Drop City*, a mix of factual history, fiction and prose poetry, which, despite its limitations as a historical document, remains the most substantial work to date on the community.<sup>59</sup>

There was much that was good about Drop City. Richert remembers it as the best part of his life. The Bernofskys talk of it with considerable pride. But eventually the edges began to fray, and Drop City began a long slide toward oblivion, finally closing in 1973. Before that, however, it helped inspire a whole new generation of communitarians, thanks to visits by thousands of hippies who dropped in, illustrated feature stories in both underground and mainstream publications, and the occasional presence of countercultural celebrities, Timothy Leary and perhaps Bob Dylan among them. Drop City had raised the flag of the city in the wilderness and became a defiant center of rejection of the culture of Babylon.

### The End of the Beginning

It is at this point that most accounts of 1960s communes start. In the spring of 1966 musician Lou Gottlieb opened his Morning Star Ranch in Sonoma County, California, to all comers, and quickly got into a long-running conflict with local authorities over matters of overcrowding and sanitation on the 30-acre spread. Here again was an important link to the American communal past: Gottlieb's co-founder of Morning Star, Ramón Sender, had lived in the Bruderhof



Children born at the Farm, Tennessee. Photo by Albert Bates © 1990 The Second Foundation. Reprinted by Permission.

and knew something of American communal history. By the following year hippie communes were springing up all over the country. Most were short-lived, but some endure even yet—the Farm, for example, in Tennessee, New Buffalo in New Mexico, and the pioneer Tolstoy Farm. A new and different chapter in the history of American communitarianism was under way.

## Notes

The author gratefully acknowledges support from the General Research Fund at the University of Kansas.

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15. Dallas Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence: The Story of Clarence Jordan and the Koinonia Farm Experiment* (New York, 1971), 93-104, 167-70.
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