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Culture Shock

Tales from the 21st Century Intentional Community Movement

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Tales from the 21st Century Intentional Community Movement

by

Stephanie Marie Bathurst, B.A.

Report

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Abstract

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Tales from the 21st Century Intentional Community Movement

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Stephanie Marie Bathurst, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

SUPERVISOR: Dennis Darling

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In the wake of the Great Recession of 2008, the ‘new normal’ left many Americans deflated after losing their financial savings and general confidence in the political system. There is a growing movement saying the traditional path to the American Dream is no longer satisfying. From coast to coast families are moving from sleepy towns to so-called ‘intentional communities’ in search of alternatives. They are building new lives in spiritual enclaves, nudist havens, eco-wonderlands and other unorthodox societies while seeking like-minded souls and a better way of making a living. Although they don’t often reflect the traditional lifestyle of most citizens, they do represent the widespread frustration with the status quo. The United States has long been a safe haven for these nonconformists and continues to attract those seeking escape from the mainstream each year. Intentional communities throughout Texas and the U.S. are flourishing despite harsh economic times elsewhere. This report documents daily life in three intentional communities during 2011 and 2012, all focused on achieving their individual goals of environmental protection, building community bonds, and achieving spiritual enlightenment.

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Introduction

The American dream has changed, and so have the people who live it.

Facing environmental degradation, fading spirituality, diminishing community involvement, and the growing cost of basic goods needed to survive, many are struggling to even make it past the front door. Last year, 85 percent of college grads who once left their parents' home in search of achievement returned defeated, resulting in an entire generation branded as the boomerang kids.

You may wonder if there are any idealists left to fight the good fight at all, to defy the unprecedented odds placed against them. Remarkably there are. In fact there are masses of them, and they are bleeding with cultivated ambition. Inventing their own model of the American Dream, they are part of a movement saying the traditional frame dictating how to be an American is no longer satisfying.

In a move to narrate their own success stories, families across the nation are moving away from conventional neighborhoods to form new lives in so-called intentional communities. People are heading to spiritual enclaves, nudist clubs, eco-retreats and other unorthodox societies seeking like-minded souls and a better way of making a living.

An intentional community is any group of people living together with a common purpose, working cooperatively to create a lifestyle that reflects their shared values. History labels these romantic groups as everything from utopian to anti-government. The 1960's gave rise to places like Tolstoy Farm in Washington State. Founded by an anti-war activist, the hippie

haven was famous for wild sex parties and heavy drug use. Another commune in Tennessee known simply as The Farm was founded the following decade by an instructor at San Francisco State University. The community was dubbed “the archetypal hippie commune” and its population soared to 1,500 10 years after it was founded in 1971. The Rajneesh movement grew popular in Oregon during the 1970’s and 1980’s, with members known as the ‘orange people’ due to their monochromatic clothing. They blindly followed the spiritual teachings of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, an internationally renowned Indian guru. Those are some of the older, famous ones, but new communities continue to surface today.



A community member breastfeeds her daughter in her outdoor kitchen in Dexter, Oregon.

Deborah Altus, an Associate Professor of Human Services at Washburn University in Kansas, says many of these communities may be resurging from a quiet history established decades ago. She is the former president of the International Communal Studies Association, an academic think-tank for scholarly exchange regarding intentional community life. She has studied hundreds of intentional communities during the past 30 years.

“There is a myth that all the ‘hippie communes’ from the 1960’s and 1970’s crashed and burned, but that is far from the case,” says Altus. “There are a number of long-standing communities that still exist from this time period.”

Star Ranch is a communal hamlet that survived the hurdles of time. The community is the oldest nudist encampment in Texas with roughly 30 residents ranging from toddlers to members in their golden years.

“The people here are all a little weird, they want to be naturalists,” says Rod McClanahan, the operations manager of Star Ranch. “This is the way we come into the world, and this is how we want to go out. I think there is a big portion of the population that is envious.” He says his life changed the day he and his wife Pixie arrived at the nudist club.

“There was more of an acceptance here you know, makin’ you feel welcome,” he says. “On a scale of one to ten, when we moved out here my life went from a six to a ten.”

Today, newer intentional communities continue to surface around the U.S. and abroad. The Communities Directory — a user generated database of varied intentional communities around the globe— is published by the Fellowship for Intentional Community. The F.I.C.

is an online and print resource for those seeking information about alternative lifestyles. In February 2012, the directory had almost 800 registered groups in all of North America, up from 600 in 2005. That doesn't capture the full extent of the phenomenon though, as some may not want to be listed or may not identify as an intentional community.

"It is safe to say that certain types of intentional communities, like ecovillages, have increased in recent years," says Altus. "This is largely due to an increased interest in concern for the environment and preservation."



Justin Michaelson heads a new moon ceremony at Lost Valley Educational Center.

Environment: The People of the Lost Valley

The lush green environment nurturing Lost Valley Educational Center is wilder than that found in most intentional communities, and the woodsy “ecovillage” is designed with material found throughout parts of Oregon’s pristine landscape. Ecovillages are intentional communities focused on environmental concerns. The members collectively explore alternative ways of living in order to reduce natural resource use and also to meet essential human needs without compromising future generations.

Leaving the city of Eugene on a tranquil 30-minute bus ride eventually puts you in a world of snow-covered mountain peaks and evergreen forests. Here, in Dexter, Oregon, bird songs replace the growling bus engine as it scoots back toward the city. After the wide-eyed voyagers exit at a gravel-patch bus stop, the unpaved road ahead leads to what some nearby



The lush green landscape of Lost Valley Educational Center.



Lost Valley members help a neighboring alpaca farmer shave her herd in Dexter, Oregon.

citizens call the ‘hippie commune.’

“If more people in regular culture applied a lot of the practices we teach out here, the world would be a lot less toxic,” says Van Maxon-Anderson, a 30- year-old Army veteran who lives in a once-dilapidated cabin he and his wife Brianna fixed up in the summer of 2011.

The population of Lost Valley varies wildly with the seasons. In January less than 10 residents were braving the cold winter, huddling into a building called The Solplex in an effort to conserve energy and stay warm. By the end of June over 50 people occupied the 87-acre property, adding members every few days. Residents at Lost Valley have diverse backgrounds. Former entomologists mingle with dairy maids, and alpaca farmers moonlight

as bookkeepers.

“We had been talking about moving out to Oregon for years,” says Maxon-Anderson. “We’d say maybe we could even live at Lost Valley, it was like this dream.”

Maxon-Anderson, originally from Montana, speaks softly but with determination while squinting to shield the sunlight piercing the thin canvas that jackets the building he calls The Sacred Yurt. “So finally we sold all of our stuff and moved out here, the house sold three weeks before a flood, and we made \$100,” he says with a half-smile.



Van Maxon-Anderson relaxes in the Sacret Yurt at Lost Valley Educational Center.

His tall thin frame decorated with tattoos, the mellow Burning Man Festival enthusiast seems far removed from his recent past as a Jehovah's Witness. In Montana, he and his wife Brianna were ostracized by door-to-door religious crusaders after they questioned some long-standing religious beliefs. After losing everyone they cared about, the couple looked to Lost Valley Educational Center as a place that would be more welcoming. Now, they are thriving in their second year at the ecovillage.

"I am looking for friends and acquaintances that are looking to challenge themselves," says Maxon-Anderson. "I was hoping people would be radically honest and talk about what bothered them and deal with it at that moment. Here everyone is working on their own consciousness."

During a community building exercise one summer night, a trembling woman rose to bare



Brianna and Alex wait out the ecovillage's frequent rains in the outdoor kitchen.



Van Maxon-Anderson and his wife Brianna hike the wooded trails of Lost Valley.

her soul to the others assembled in the wooded wonderland. Dozens of her close friends and neighbors sat crossed-legged at her feet. She paced three excruciatingly slow circles around the yurt, taking gigantic drawn-out breaths. She fixed a piercing gaze on each observer. There was a thick silence. Finally she spoke: “I am smarter than you think I am. I know a lot. You should not judge me.” Suddenly the moderator whacked a loud bell and her allotted moment of bravery was over.

This is the method of “emotional release” the residents prefer at Lost Valley. Confessions never leave the circle and community decisions are based upon complete knowledge of member’s needs and desires. These community confessions allow residents to achieve the difficult balance of communal life and sustainability.

“I think the general public doesn’t have any idea about ecovillages,” says Maxon-Anderson. “The main culture has totally lost sight of where we live. There is no perspective. Paving,



Cabins at Lost Valley Educational Center mimic their wooded Oregon landscapes.

endless building and expansion are a reality, but you come out here and see the stars, touch the earth, smell things, it's a total contrast to the whole system."

At Lost Valley a dozen weather-beaten cabins and yurts house a rotating guest list of those attempting the green lifestyle for themselves, staying anywhere from a few hours to a few years. Over 100 residents have called the intentional community home since 2006.

"There have been some of the coolest people I have ever met in my life here," says Sam Bascom, a former professional skier. "It's a pretty remarkable place."

Bascom was the longest-residing member of the community until he converted an old Pepsi delivery van into a bedroom and hit the road in June. After six-years straight at Lost Valley,

the Grateful Dead admirer relocated to the side streets of nearby Portland with a plan to be a pioneer tie-die artist in the graphic design industry. The 53-year old bachelor was the “Natural Building Instructor” at Lost Valley Educational Center.

“I would not want to live in a suburb that is all manicured. It used to drive me crazy having to mow the lawn as a kid, it seemed artificial,” he says. “I’ve had a lot of natural building experience, I built my own Earthship with recycled materials in New Mexico.”

Decades before his life at Lost Valley, Bascom hand-crafted his own eco-style home in New Mexico. He used earth-packed tires and empty beer cans for the foundation. The recycled material was transformed into a foundation remarkably capable of regulating temperatures. The “Earthship” had walls of angled glass windows and desert-colored imperfect siding,



Sam Bascom trains his replacement Natural Building Instructor



Sam Bascom watches his student splatter earthy goo across hornet-filled beer cans.

pushing the boundaries of home and art.

“When I built the bathtub I laid down and drew an outline around my body, next thing you know I had a custom-fit tub,” says Bascom. “I got to design every inch of that house.”

Dozens of students traveled thousands of miles each year to participate in Bascom’s permaculture courses at Lost Valley. Permaculture is a harmonious approach to the combination of landscape design and sustainable human culture. At the heart of the principle is the viewpoint that all systems providing food, energy, and shelter can organically return to the earth without human impact. Imagine an adobe house melting to mud in the rain, reincorporating itself into the earthy soil from which it was constructed.

The natural building style challenges the mainstream idea of incorporating serious



A natural building project in-process, constructed by Bascom and his permaculture design students.

environmental hazards into today's housing material. Asbestos was used in insulation until the 1980's in the U.S. -- and it continues its death march beyond U.S. borders today. Smoke detectors and compact fluorescent lamps emit radioactive particles as they decay, causing radiation poisoning. Driveways and parking lots across America are sealed with coal tar, a carcinogen that washes bits of chemicals into nearby streams and also gathers in household dust.

As the environmental movement attracts more American consumers, homebuilders are seeking sustainable knowledge similar to the permaculture design courses held at Lost Valley. At the Educational Center you can achieve a "certification" that allows the use of the word permaculture in a professional context like advertising.

As the natural building instructor, Bascom spent his last days at the community teaching a few students and a young replacement how to evenly spread earthen goo across hornet-filled beer cans. The empty brews were sandwiched in the walls of the cubicle-sized structure

nearly a year ago when Bascom's permaculture students started it as a design project. He left before the project was finished. A dozen students arrived in June to finish the job. Seeking sustainable wisdom, they camped in tents for five weeks and paid \$2,500 to attend daily permaculture courses taught by Lost Valley residents and experts from nearby University of Oregon. They each parted with a permaculture design certification from Lost Valley Educational Center.

"I am amazed of how much knowledge is here. The value is not placed on material things, it's more on the quality of life," says Melissa Johnson, a bashful 32-year-old from the state of Washington. She recently returned from a yearlong stay in Mexico studying organic gardening and sustainable agriculture. She has brilliant blue eyes and dark brown hair often braided down the center of her back. "The principles shown here are really valuable for the world to know, it's hard not to be conscious of what you're consuming because we compost or recycle everything, people are going to notice if you throw something out."



Johnson plants vegetables in the Creek Garden with a fellow student.

Styrofoam is outlawed and plastic packaging is almost non-existent on the property. Paper towels, food scraps, cardboard and egg shells go into labeled buckets to be incorporated into the nutrient-rich compost pile. A Styrofoam plate would not only raise eyebrows in the Lost Valley kitchen —the lifeblood of the community— but spark an intellectual debate on sustainable development.

“I think the most common theme in communalism today is protection of the environment in one way or another,” says Tim Miller, a professor at the University of Kansas with a special interest in intentional communities.

Altus agrees that environmental protection is a growing concern among intentional communities. “I would love to see them become more mainstream as they provide a means for sharing resources and living harmoniously in a world that desperately needs conservation and harmony, but I’m not convinced that they will,” she says.

When asked in a recent study which was more important – energy production or



The second kitchen, carnivorous residents are permitted to cook their hearty meals here.



Mariette, the oldest resident at Lost Valley, feeds the chickens and ducks each day .

environmental protection – 47 percent of Americans said energy production. We are currently in a political climate where these two issues are at odds, and the impending energy crisis is causing some Americans to turn their backs on Mother Nature. The good news is the number people voting in favor of environmental protection has gone up from last year. More than 12 million Americans have joined the fight to restore our planet, and some of these new environmentalists are testing the waters of communal living today.

“It’s a hard system but I am so much more conscious here,” says Johnson. She is visiting the ecovillage for six months to learn organic gardening. “Biodegradable is big, I didn’t really get that before, I think that a huge lesson someone would get if they came here.”

Lost Valley folk maintain common-sense sustainable efforts by dry-hanging clothes and flushing toilets with rainwater. They are vigilant users of compost, meaning all organic waste biodegrades or breaks down into the earth to create nutrient-rich soil. A healthy rotation

of bloody fish carcasses, dirt, and any other food scraps stink up the decaying compost pile lining one of the three organic gardens. Dozens of chickens, ducks and roosters roam the property claiming first pick of the best recycled produce like green vegetables and pasta before it's tossed in the rotting heap. This no-waste approach is the overriding principle of these environmental pioneers.

“I think one of the cool things about Lost Valley is the hands on skills,” says Johnson. “It’s a pretty good model for how the kitchen is run and how everything is composted. I will definitely take some of those practices back home with me.”

Leafy greens, like freshly harvested kale and rainbow chard, serve as dinner staples while other food is bought in bulk from Eugene wholesalers once a week. The goal is to minimize packaging and transportation costs; it’s sustainability in action. Organic seasonal fruits, vegetables, nuts, and dairy are always on the shopping list; the few carnivorous residents purchase and cook their own meat in a separate kitchen about 10 feet away.



Lost Valley residents prepare supper for the group using organic local ingredients.

From the dining hall's withered porch, a dinner bell echoes through the dense woods three times a day. Hungry environmentalists circle the buffet, joining hands to thank Mother Earth for her nourishment. Residents who participate in the optional meal plan called The Dining Circle have full access to the communal kitchen with three fresh meals a day, and they are expected to prepare two nutritious vegetarian buffets per week. The healthy diet is free in exchange for 35 hours labor doing things like gardening or office work. The shelter of a rustic cabin or campsite is included in the deal.

"The rent is really cheap, this is the best I've ever done financially," says Maxon-Anderson. The average rent is \$300 a month. "We used to go to the grocery store and spend hundreds on organic produce, we are saving so much here." The \$240 he receives monthly for his past military service is almost enough to pay the bills in the intentional community.



Residents join hands to thank Mother Earth for the meal they are about to enjoy.

Young families are thriving in ecovillages across the country, adopting an ‘it takes a village to raise a child’ approach to parenting. At Lost Valley, 10-month old Jack Phillips observes his jovial parents hard at work as he peeks through the mesh diamonds in his playpen a few feet away. The young couple takes breaks as often as needed to satisfy their handsome boy’s growing appetite for attention.

“It’s nice because I get to spend a whole lot more time with family than somebody who works a nine-to-five job,” says Jack’s mother Kamarie Thrall. “The most important thing to me is that we are able to raise our own children. Jack has never had to be in any kind of daycare and our next one will be raised the same.”

The unmarried couple is able to mold their work schedule around community and family



Nick Phillips plays with his son Jack behind their forested cabin at Lost Valley



Kamarie Thrall comforts her son Jack on their back porch at Lost Valley.

life, the opposite of what is seen in many U.S. households today. They arrived in June from a neighboring city and instantly fell in love with the lush ecovillage. It took a week and several packed car trips but by mid-month they were happy to call Lost Valley home.

“I am so grateful for the opportunity to live outside the norm of what is expected in our society,” says Thrall. “I do not want to raise Jack in an environment full of anxiety and unjustified irrational expectations, which was my experience as a child. The kids here are supported by multiple members of the community, the more love a kid gets from as many people as possible the better.”

Emerging from a painful past riddled with addiction and abuse, the frail beauty is glad to be living in a stable environment with her growing family. She and her boyfriend Nick are expecting another baby in late April, Kameron will be raised at the ecovillage with his brother.

“We are a group of diverse individuals who have grown up in a society that never made sense to us, or that we never quite fit into, and we have found this new way to live that can be ideal,” says Thrall. “There are lots of people here coming together and building a lifestyle of creation and spirituality and setting the precedent for how we will live in the future.”

The grandson of writer and countercultural icon Ken Kesey also lives at Lost Valley. The shoeless blonde adolescent proudly touts his authority to run wild on the land while catching slugs and salamanders. Despite being 9, Zion attends most “governmental meetings” held



Lost Valley residents attend a community meeting at their ecovillage in Dexter, Oregon.



Young Zion builds a fire for his fellow residents at Lost Valley Educational Center.

at Lost Valley.

A Stewardship Council solves the dilemma of communal governance, a common burden referenced throughout intentional communities. Lost Valley is a non-profit governed by both a board of directors keeping the community financially afloat, and the Stewardship Council comprised of longstanding residents. They call the system Sociocracy.

“In a sociocratically governed community everyone is equally valued and has a chance to have input somewhere within the organization, but not everyone has equal say on all issues,” explains Lost Valley director Melanie Rios.

When the weather is nice, community members relocate the bi-weekly meetings to a nearby overgrown meadow. The dark-haired community director Colin Doyle rests on a tree stump

rimming the populated fire pit. Under the colorful sunset, Doyle grips a black binder of notes while meticulously counting the seconds passing on his wristwatch. The laid-back 34-year old holds an M.A. in religion coupled with a B.A. in anthropology. He wades through three topics each meeting in order of importance, ranging from tobacco-use to background checks. They don't live in a world of Washington, D.C. politics, they make their own rules.

“These communities have a lot to teach us about sharing, living peaceably and harmoniously, reaching consensus, saving resources, making decisions in a just way, and promoting equality,” says Altus, referring to her extensive research.

Community: The Golden Age of Texas Nudism

Roughly 30 miles east of Austin, a hectic left turn off State Highway 183, and another at the retired train tracks, leads to a dusty road skirting the old town of McDade, Texas. Bluebonnet pastures and roaming livestock line the three-mile path to Star Ranch, the oldest nudist club in Texas, established in 1957.

“You know I do kind of feel like a rebel of society sometimes being out here,” says Rod McClanahan, the operations manager of Star Ranch. “Your whole life you are told one thing and then you come out here and it’s something totally different.”

The rambunctious 62-year-old says the kindness of Central Texans sets the ranch apart from others throughout the country — that and it’s a nudist club accommodating more



The McClanahan family celebrates with friends before the St. Patty’s Dance at Star Ranch.

than 30 permanent residents and hundreds of annual visitors.

Members savor award-winning pies in monthly potlucks and debut naked dance skills at communal sock-hops, sometimes sporting colorful body paint. An automated wooden gate separating Star Ranch from the outside world grants access to the dilapidated cabins and worn R.V.s. strewn along the sandy clay roads where residents prefer to move around via golf carts instead of SUVs.



Star Ranch member Wanda Hannah serves a bottom-shaped cake to a dining hall full of nudists.

On Saturday nights a group of card sharks boasting full-body tans surrounds a plastic table in the recreational room. After hassling each other for hours about the night's poker winnings, they retire to the 24-hour indoor hot tub and swimming pool, a favorite of nearly everyone at the club.

"It's like they know more about you when you don't have any clothing on, there are people out here I consider better friends than I've ever had in my life," says Rod's wife Pixie McClanahan. "They are just really good people, closer than family."

Most of the nudists lean toward retirement age but these baby-boomers behave more like teenagers than seniors. After retiring from their jobs at Caterpillar Inc. in Iowa, both Rod and Pixie now make minimum wage working in the office of Star Ranch.

"When we tell other nudists, they get so jealous that we get to work in a nudist club," says



Pixie McClanahan (right) and a fellow nudist watch as their husbands drill metal roofing.

Pixie. “I feel so lucky to be able to make a living in the nude.”

Rod and Pixie experienced the true value of this community firsthand when the historic Texas wildfires hit in September. At one point the blaze raced toward Star Ranch as the residents prepared to evacuate, but when winds diverted the flames the ranch transformed into a safe haven for several members with nearby homes like Rod and Pixie. Back then, fellow club members guided the couple through the most heartbreaking year of their lives.



Rod and Pixie keep a treasure chest of the few items salvaged from the Bastrop 2011 fire.

“Everything went to slow motion, the flames had to have been 150 feet in the air. The hot embers was comin’ down and it was burnin’ as it hit us, like rain,” says Rod. The soft spoken father of five had to smooth talk his way through the sheriff’s blockade to reach his Bastrop home, six miles east of Star Ranch. “It was going through my head— how am I gonna talk my way through this? Everybody was getting turned away.”

The former Des Moines police officer rolled down his car window to face the sheriff and said, “this is the only vehicle my wife and I own and she is in the house with no way out.”



McClanahan spends in his newly-built ‘man cave’ constructing a model battle ship.



McClanahan's grass has returned since the fire but the charred trees continue to struggle.

Rod was lying, Pixie was safe at nearby Star Ranch, but the state's worst wildfire in history was completely chaotic for Bastrop law enforcement. The duped sheriff took a big swallow and turned to face Rod. "You got 30 minutes," he said. A good friend from the ranch named D.A. volunteered as an intrepid partner in crime. In the race to get the couple's valuables, the crackling fires and eruptions engulfed them.

"I went to the porch and you could see a mushroom cloud, the neighbors' propane tank exploded and it sounded like an atomic bomb," Rod recalls. "Then D.A. says: 'Rod, please, we got to go.'" Rod and Pixie keep a treasure chest of the delicate porcelain plates and sculptures that miraculously endured the disaster. They are the only remnants the couple owns of life before the fire.

Meanwhile, on the cabin walls at the nudist camp hang two pictures of a 1965 Dodge Coronet sporting seamlessly airbrushed headlights. Rod and Pixie rebuilt the beauty from scratch in their previous life as drag racers. They keep a scrapbook of those years. One image displays a smiling woman in the passenger's seat with the caption *It's Better Than Sex!*

While still living in Iowa the McClanahan's made trips to Star Ranch for years but were not able to move to the property until they were in their 50s. In 2006 they bought a small cabin with a screen porch and an outdoor shower. Pixie was particularly nervous about the move from conservative Des Moines, so Rod agreed to buy an additional house in nearby Bastrop shortly after the move.

The cheerful couple says they never experienced a true community like they have at Star Ranch. Rod and Pixie have various medical ailments and were unable to build a new home on their own after the fire. It's not uncommon to see Pixie with an icepack to her chest trying to stop the constant itch from her lupus, and Rod runs short of breath from his pulmonary cystic fibrosis. In a desperate search for relief they moved to their cabin home nestled in the nearby haven of Star Ranch.

"All my friends helped us, the ranch friends all came to the rescue. They just started showing up and cutting down trees. Within three months we were done," Rod says. He knew he would have some help, but he was surprised at how much.

"They brought us clothes, they donated and filled our kitchen with all the utensils, anything you would ever think would be in a kitchen, they brought for us. You try and hold back some of the emotions," he says. "There were a lot of emotional evenings here at the Ranch."



Truckers Greg and Rhonda planned to stay one day for their first visit, they loved it so much they left a week later.

They may be in a giving community, but, still, a code of secrecy allows a sense of mystery to exist at the club. They do not share last names or ask information about personal lives, although a background check and I.D. is kept on file after the first visit.

“Nudists don’t really ask each other what you do for a living, but if you want to talk about it it’s okay. They don’t like to use last names either because of where they work,” says Pixie.

The fear of getting fired or experiencing workplace harassment is a reality for residents at Star Ranch. In the past an aggravated club member told the Austin Independent School District about a fellow nudist – who happened to be an Austin teacher. Although he escaped termination, his reputation never recovered. “Let’s just say it made his professional life

difficult,” says Pixie.

Nudists often fear retribution from their families as well. Star Ranch members jokingly swap the white lies they tell their relatives. While still living in Iowa, Rod and Pixie told their adult children they were on vacation in Austin instead of coming clean about their nudist destination. Other members mention Bastrop State Park as their faux destination of choice.

“We put together a letter sayin’ where we was goin’ and apologized for lying, but said we no longer can keep this a secret. I mean we were really scared, we didn’t know how they would accept that, because they had no idea,” says Rod.

All five of his children were supportive of the nude lifestyle their parents were living, but some more than others. The first one to call was daughter Andrea; she said she would be taking a week off to come visit as soon as she could. “When we heard that we both just started cryin’ we were so happy,” says Rod.

After the reaction from his now-nudist daughter, one son said he would not be joining his sister. “Then the middle boy calls and says, ‘sorry Dad I’m just not ready to see mom’s boobies,’ ” he jokes.

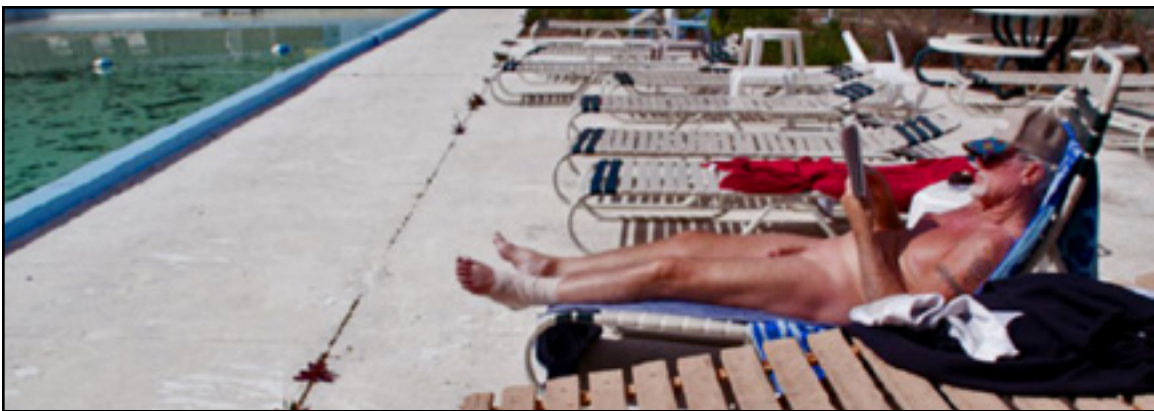
The children living at Star Ranch range from teens to toddlers and are well protected by the community; photography of the young ones is strictly forbidden. Two families have children enrolled in the nearby McDade school district, one of which has spanned five generations at the ranch.

Altus, the intentional community researcher, was given unique access to interview children at various intentional communities around the United States.

“Some of the children I interviewed said that they loved being part of a big pack of kids and appreciated the ability to go in and out of people’s houses with a sense of belonging and freedom,” she says . “It seems to me that learning to share and cooperate would be one of the big advantages of growing up in an intentional community.”

Members are quick to remind guests that Star Ranch has a zero-tolerance policy, meaning that anyone acting inappropriately or making others uncomfortable is indefinitely removed from the premises. The ranch brochure reads “we are a warm and loving community with uncompromisingly high standards.”

“We call ourselves Sahnoans here,” says Wanda Hannah, an energetic silver-haired club member. “It means the healthy one. We take pride in providing a safe and fun environment for everyone, and we do enforce the rules.”



Star Ranch members enjoy the outdoor pool in the Texas heat.



Signs guide visitors throughout the many trails of Star Ranch.

In an effort to make all visitors feel welcome at the club, nudism is optional. You would be hard pressed to find a clothed nudist on the sunny days of spring and summer though. The club's slogan is "stand not between me and the sun."

After a long work day spent installing metal roofing at the ranch, Rod and Pixie take an afternoon stroll to enjoy the warmth on their bare skin. Pixie dots the back of her neck with an ice pack as Rod's eyes canvas for signs of his most persistent enemy, the menacing gopher redecorating the woodlands of Star Ranch. The fragrance of birthing buds and fresh dirt fills the air after a recent burst of spring showers.

"Star Ranch is a very rustic place, it's quiet and peaceful. It lets you get rid of worries and just be yourself. There is over 100 acres of wooded trails you can walk on and just be nude," says Pixie.

There is even a cougar that holidays on the property when not migrating to warmer Northern Mexico; members think she may have cubs with her this year. They are happy to share the

untamed land with nature's wildlife.

In an attempt to solicit more business, the nudist club hosts a unique opportunity for marathon runners to brown their bods at the 5K Bare Buns Run. This April of 2012 marked the 15th year of the family-friendly event. Another population spike at Star Ranch occurs during the Christmas light show, attracting more than a hundred visitors including conservative Texans from nearby McDade.

Still, keeping the place financially afloat remains a challenge: The nine rental cabins scattered around the property have historically provided steady income for the community, but recently the recession has wounded the fragile enterprise.

"It's affected us, we are down on the amount of people passing through on vacation," says Rod. "We've lost some members because they've lost their jobs, but we have such a good rapport with them that as soon as they get their jobs back they're gonna be back here, there is no doubt in my mind."



Some of the runners from the April 2012 Bare Buns Run at Star Ranch.

Last year an older couple leasing a cabin at the ranch lost their jobs. Lacking rent money, they were going to relinquish the annual membership, meaning they would spend much less time in the nudist community. Rod found a compromise that quickly improved the couple's financial woes. A rental cabin needed an upgrade, so they traded their dormitory-style refrigerator valued at \$180 for the \$455 membership fee. The elated couple soon recovered their jobs and wanted the cabin back.

“So, because of working with em’ we never lost members, and now we’ll have someone leasing a cabin again,” says Rod. “If it was at an apartment complex or something, you’d be on your own. Here in the community atmosphere and the fellowship, we do our darndest to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

They may be unusual but these nudists seem to be living the best years of their lives; escaping the problems plaguing most Americans today, this quiet community is thriving while embodying the nearby city’s slogan: “Keep Austin Weird.”



Star Ranch members collect nudist pins from over the years.

Spirituality: Krishna Consciousness and Health Food

Aside from seasonal deer hunters, Comanche is not likely to attract many visitors to the rural Texas town of 4,500. Located about three hours northwest of Austin, it is a retreat from the troubles of city life, especially for the men of the spiritual enclave called Govinda's Sanctuary.

"What we are doing here is our small way of being the change we wish to see," says Vakreshvara Das, a 25-year-old "environmentalist" from Louisville, Kentucky.

Das looks like a relaxed young hippie hoarding the secrets to the universe. He says he quit taking pharmaceuticals after high school and now relies on homeopathic remedies to cure all his ailments. His usual attire includes blue crocks, a cotton shirt, khaki shorts, and an earth-toned woven cap. He traversed the United States for six years seeking the right home



Pink robes hang-dry in the sunset at Govinda's Sanctuary, Comanche, Texas.



Vakreshvara Das, the head gardener waters some freshly planted nut trees.

to practice his spirituality and landed at Govinda's Sanctuary.

"We are trying diligently to live a more emotional, mental and most importantly spiritually healthy life. It embodies not only material sustainability but also spiritual peace, which for us is a major purpose of our endeavor," he says.

The 100-acre retreat has five devotees and occasional guests ranging in age from 25 to 65, including several visitors from Europe. All are men – and they are all Hare Krishnas, practicing bhakti yoga in which they dedicate their thoughts and actions towards pleasing the Supreme Lord Krishna. The community is a legally sanctioned church and is restricted

to members practicing “Krishna Consciousness.” There is a small pond adjacent to the main household where pink and white robes are sometimes pinned to a rusty clothesline.

“The nature of this path is one of deep respect and humility toward other living beings,” says Das. “We offer much respect to each other and try to communicate with affection and consciousness. We engage in group spiritual activities every morning and evening and take most meals together.”

Das dreams of returning to his hometown to start a Bhakti Yoga Center like Govinda’s Sanctuary. “I hope to benefit the consciousness of Louisville and help raise the vibration to a divine level, and hopefully I will someday achieve real love and devotion to Radha and Krishna,” he says.



The Hare Krishnas wake at dawn to honor the Gods.



The men chant and pray to the gods for hours each day.

The devotees rise at dawn to wake the gods by offering religious chant and food. The home's largest room is dedicated to Hindu gods, colorful drums and holy texts face the tired men as they rest cross-legged upon floor pillows. A rhythmic chant fills the room for an hour as they sing and play drums, always focused on the bombarding shrine filling the front of the room.

Next, the residents gather in the living area where a single member reads holy scripts to the group, similar to Bible study in Christianity. They listen intently as the rising sun paints their white robes with golden silhouettes from the windows panes lining the room. A small sacred tree graces the center of the room; after the reading they pace circles around the potted tree while reciting more chants. Upon completing three hours of worship, they share a healthy meal of oats and fruit. The devotees always offer a plate to the Gods before they begin eating.



The Hare Krishnas encircle a holy tree at dawn to honor the Gods.

“The largest motivation for joining intentional communities is probably religious,” says Tim Miller, the religious studies professor from the University of Kansas with a special interest in intentional communities. “Some people want to enact a vision of high religious conviction, others band together against a hostile outside world.”

Starting in the mid-sixties, the great outpouring of new religious and spiritual movements in the United States led to the formation of thousands of spiritual intentional communities, says Miller.

“Spirituality is our number one priority,” says resident Stefan Kneuppel, founder of Gopal’s Health Foods. “The goal is to awake our relationship with God— the Supreme Conscious Being. We practice the science of loving devotion to achieve our desired goal.”



The finished product after a day of milking sacred Hindu cows.



An exhausted devotee milks his dairy cow.

Gopal's Health Foods is an organic snack food company located on the property. The raw energy bars and dairy products, shipped around the country, allow Govinda's Sanctuary to be financially sustainable with annual revenue of \$180,000. After being established in 2002, Gopal's Health Foods has become a leader in the "raw food" industry.

Knueppel also founded Govinda's Bliss Bars in San Diego, a multi-million dollar company that produces raw healthy snack bars. He started Gopal's Health Foods in California and relocated to central Texas in 2006 to build a small food manufacturing plant out in the Texas heartland filled with wildflowers and cow pastures.

Govinda's Sanctuary is also the smallest dairy farm in Texas, with a single female cow. Gopal is a Hindu word that means "friend of the cows." Residents believe they are sacred creatures

and have incorporated them into their sustainable living practices. Raw milk and kefir are frequent delicacies here; kefir is a nutrient packed raw dairy product with a texture similar to cottage cheese.

“I traveled across the country for years searching for the right community,” says Das. He is now the head gardener in his second year at the spiritual enclave. “Right now our project is getting off the ground and is still small, but it’s an exciting time to see it as we are freshly developing our systems and working through many kinks. We just planted a new orchard and are building medicinal herb gardens and vegetable patches.”

Their daily routines may appear unfamiliar to many people, but they are not so different from you and me. They have simply forged a less familiar path to their unique American Dream, working within a small community to be the change they have always wanted to see in the world.



A visiting Dutch Devotee hang-dries his laundry on a beautiful spring day.

Conclusion

“I think intentional communities will always provide important outlets for people seeking certain ways of living – whether it be a place to live out one’s life according to Jesus’ teachings or to reduce one’s ecological footprint,” says Deborah Altus.

It seems likely that intentional communities will linger alongside mainstream culture in the future, whispering promises of earthly alternatives and community bonds to anyone willing to listen. These communities have been part of our human culture since “community” began, offering an exit for the non-conformist seeking control of their own destiny. Some people seek out foundations like churches and book clubs in order to satisfy the innate human desire for community stimulation – while intentional community folks just build their own utopian worlds.

From ecovillages to nudist clubs, members are enjoying peaceful lives far removed from the burdens of the economy and American politics. As they have in the past and will in the future, they offer a chance for humans to deny the accomplishments of modern man and return to the simple life. They give people the power to reclaim governance over their own existence and rebuild a customized version of what was once referred to as the American Dream.

“We don’t go to church since we moved to Star Ranch,” says nudist Rod McClanahan. “There is a closeness that we never experienced in a regular neighborhood here, this is where we let our hair down and leave the burdens. This is our church.”

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