we sit on the same bench
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by Francis Cape
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Communal Societies

This small book has two parts. The first tells a little about each of the communal societies that are represented by the benches in the exhibition. The second briefly outlines each of the communal societies, past or present, sited within a hundred-mile radius of Arcadia University. Each part is arranged roughly chronologically.

The high point for American communism, or communitarianism, is commonly regarded to be the first two thirds of the nineteenth century. Many communal societies from that time, along with some both earlier and later, share similar histories and characteristics.

Historically they left Europe to escape religious persecution, often as German Pietists denounced by the dominant Lutheran church, and consequently were attracted to the religious freedom offered by William Penn. Many were helped along their way by the Quakers in Philadelphia. Whilst a few had adopted communal life in Europe before emigrating, most chose it as a way to better handle the difficulties and challenges of their new world. In particular, the well being and indeed survival of the elderly, the infirm and the poor was given as a reason for their coming together. In the end, those groups that survived the first difficult years often flourished and did better than their individualist neighbors - often much to the latter’s chagrin. Indeed, in the mid-twentieth century the Hutterites in one Canadian province were legally barred from buying more land because their success in agriculture far outstripped the achievements of neighboring individual family farms.

Community of property in almost all societies meant that individual property was limited to a few personal items. Members were provided with everything they needed, from home and food to health care and education. They usually lived in communal houses, but with private rooms or suites. In return they worked at tasks often appointed by community leaders, and even if skilled in a particular trade would take up any appointed task as season or need demanded. Many did not see work as drudgery, but took pride in what they did, resulting in craft
legacies valued to this day.

The single largest common cause for the demise of communal societies has been the attraction of a younger generation to the pursuit of individual material wealth offered by the larger world. Celibate societies were particularly vulnerable as they were entirely dependent on new enrollment to keep up their numbers.

Contemporary societies, of which there are four represented by benches in the exhibition, are so far surviving and continuing successfully - Hutterites particularly so. Communes surviving from the 1960s, represented here by Twin Oaks, are to some extent keeping up their numbers with a revolving membership. Perhaps current disgust with money and politics will lead a new secular communal movement.
I

Communal Societies Represented by Benches in the Gathering

Ephrata Cloister
Shakers
Snow Hill Nunnery
Harmony Society
Separatists of Zoar
Society of True Inspiration in Amana
Hutterites
Church Communities International, Woodcrest
Twin Oaks
Camphill Village, Kimberton Hills
Ephrata Cloister

Date Founded: 1732

History

Johann Conrad Beissel was born in Germany, and joined the Pietists as a young man. The Pietists met in small groups that were not sanctioned by the church. The church found Beissel in conflict with the law and he was banished from his homeland. Arriving first in Germantown, Beissel moved to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where he joined the Conestoga Brethren Congregation and, in 1724, was appointed leader. His radical ideas of Saturday worship and promotion of celibacy soon caused a split within the congregation, and in 1728 Beissel withdrew his membership in the church. His charismatic personality continued to attract followers, but in 1732 he left the Conestoga and sought the hermit’s life along the banks of the Cocalico Creek in northern Lancaster County. Soon after his move to the Cocalico region, Beissel was followed by like-minded men and women who wished to follow his teachings; and what began as a hermitage soon grew into a thriving community.

Communal Life

The core group were a celibate sisterhood and brotherhood who lived in individual cells in separate dormitory houses. The cells were arranged around small communal rooms. Each dormitory house had its own kitchen. There were eight major structures, including the dormitories and meetinghouses, in addition to a number of smaller dwellings, workshops, and mills.

The celibates practiced self-discipline, along with a strict interpretation of the Bible. They slept on wooden benches that were 15 inches wide with wooden blocks for pillows. They had six hours sleep each night from nine to midnight and two to five in the morning, with a two hour break to watch for the coming of Christ. Members ate one small vegetarian meal each day, and only ate meat at “love feasts” when lamb stew was served. They wore plain white-hooded habits.

In addition to the celibates there was a married order of families called Householders who lived in the region, supporting the community. Members of the community typically engaged in farming, garden-
ing and carpentry, as well as making clothing from flax, and working in the sawmill and gristmill. Ephrata was celebrated for its hymns, which were composed by the community (mostly by Beissel himself) and sung *a cappella*. They developed their own musical notation. As a collective act of devotion and spiritual unity, these hymns were copied in *Frakturschiften*, a very elaborate German style of writing and decoration. They also became known for their complete printing center, which included a paper mill, printing office, and book-bindery.

After Beissel’s death in 1768, membership declined and the monastic aspect was gradually abandoned. The last celibate member died in 1813. The group’s practices were maintained for a while longer at the Snow Hill Nun- nery in Franklin County, Pennsylvania. Today the cloister is preserved by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.
Shakers

Dates: 1774 to present in America

History

The community of the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing, or the Shakers, began in 1747, when a group broke from the Quakers. Members looked to women as leaders. Ann Lee soon assumed leadership and began to preach that marriage and sexual intercourse were sinful, and called on her followers to confess their sins, give up all their worldly goods, and embrace celibacy. The Shakers were not welcome in England because their services were so noisy and their beliefs were considered unusual. Ann Lee was imprisoned several times. Many Shakers believed, on her release from prison in 1770, that Christ had returned to earth in her form. By 1774 she and eight followers had emigrated to New York, eventually settling on land owned by one of the Shakers. Over the next century they built over twenty settlements and attracted more than 20,000 converts.

Communal Life

The Shakers are renowned for their simple lives and products, for their celibacy, and for their early practice of equality of the sexes. Mother Ann Lee taught: “Put your hands to work and your hearts to God.”

A Shaker village was divided into groups or “families”, with each family occupying a large house. Each family was designed to be self-supporting with its own farm and businesses. The leading group in each village was the Church Family; the village was governed by a team of two men and two women, elders and eldresses respectively. Men and women lived together as brothers and sisters. Houses were divided by gender with separate staircases and doors. They sat on opposite sides of the room during worship, at meals, and during “union meetings.” Work areas were similarly segregated.

Shakers lived in a form of religious communism. Written covenants were developed in 1790 - those who signed had to confess their sins, consecrate their property and labor to the society, and maintain celibacy. If they were married before they joined, their marriages essentially ended upon joining. Since Shakers did not practice procreation, children joined
through indenture, adoption, or conversion. When they turned 21, children were free to leave or stay with the community; many left, unwilling to remain celibate.

The Shaker religion valued men and women equally. It was a hierarchical church with men and women sharing authority on each level. They viewed God as both male and female. Worshiping in white unadorned meetinghouses, they marched, sang, danced, and sometimes turned, twitched, jerked, or shouted.

Their dedication to hard work and perfection has resulted in a unique style of architecture, furniture and handcraft styles. They believed that making something well was itself an act of prayer. “Do your work as though you had a thousand years to live and as if you were to die tomorrow.” Their industry and search for efficiency resulted in many inventions, including, for woodworkers, the circular saw. They also wrote their own music: songs and dances that were used in worship.

By 1925 most Shaker villages were no longer in existence. One reason for the decline was that the Shakers’ handmade goods could not compete economically with mass-produced products. Another was that people were attracted to the cities, away from the farms, and, of course, celibacy. Some sites are now museums. There is still one active community, Sabbathday Lake, Maine, which has three members (2009).
Snow Hill Nunnery

Dates: 1798-1895

History

Bearing letters from Ephrata Cloister to the Seventh Day Baptists congregations in York County PA, George Adam Martin and John Horn preached a revival that resulted in the establishment of a congregation at Antietam Creek. Continuing visits between the new congregation and Ephrata led to Peter Lehman organizing the congregation into a community somewhat after the manner of the Ephrata Brotherhood and Sisterhood.

Communal Life

Communal life at Snow Hill was similar to that at Ephrata Cloister, though not as harsh. The site is known colloquially as the Snow Hill Nunnery, although there was a Brotherhood as well as a Sisterhood.

The central section of the present brick house is the oldest and held the Saal, or chapel, on the second floor, with the dining room below it. To either side were added Brother and Sister Houses. As at Ephrata, these houses contained large community rooms with several “Kammern” or sleeping rooms opening into each of them. The dining room held two long tables on one side, covered with snow-white tablecloths. Plain benches placed on either side of the table served as seating.

All were required to labor on the premises - the men on the farm, in workshops or the mill, and the sisters at housework, in the dairy and in the garden. Each morning the Vorsteher assigned the duties of the day. Income was produced from agriculture, weaving linen and wool, black-smithing, cabinetry, and the making of barrels, brooms, and bricks.

Snow Hill was governed by five trustees, who were elected annually by the Cloister members and the lay congregation.
The last member, Obed Snowberger, died in November 1895. In 1900 a legal settlement left the lands and property to the Trustees of the lay congregation, the Seventh Day Baptist Congregation of Snow Hill, providing that the profits be applied (aside outlay for repair and such) to religious and charitable purposes concerning the church.

The buildings are now used as a residence for the pastor and his family, and the farmer’s family. Some parts are retained to accommodate visitors. Some changes have been made in the interior of the House for family accommodation. A Sabbath Service and School are maintained. Communion services are held four times a year. The spring communion, usually held the first Sabbath in June, is still spoken of as a “love feast”.

Snow Hill Nunnery
Harmony Society

Dates: 1805-1905

History

When the group first moved to the United States from Wurttemberg, Germany, they purchased land in Western Pennsylvania and established the town of Harmony. The small community held houses, a church, a school, and workshops. Because the group had little money, their leader, Johann Georg Rapp, put it all into one common fund. On February 15, 1805 the Harmony Society was formally organized and all of their goods were placed in common. In 1814, seeking a better location, they sold the town in Harmony, Pennsylvania and moved to New Harmony, Indiana. The community moved once again in 1824, when they sold New Harmony, Indiana to Robert Owen and relocated to their final settlement of Economy, Pennsylvania.

Communal Life

The Harmonists developed a simple, pietistic lifestyle based on the early Christian Church. Upon joining, Harmonists turned over everything they owned to the Harmony Society. Everyone worked together for the good of the Society and received in turn what he or she needed to live simply and comfortably.

Homes were mostly two-story brick houses with neat gardens arranged on a grid of streets, along with a church, school, shops, mills and communal buildings. Four to six adults, generally family members, lived in each home. Since celibacy was advocated by most members and became the custom in the Society, it was suggested that married couples live together as brother and sister. Though sex was discouraged, although not banned outright, there were few births in later years and only a few marriages.

Each member had a particular job in a specific craft or trade. Most men performed manual labor and women worked in textiles and agriculture. As technology developed and business expanded, outsiders were hired as additional workers.

Although initially modeled on agricultural self-sufficiency, the settle-
ments became economically successful, producing many goods in their clothing factory, sawmill, tannery, vineyards and distillery. They also produced high quality silk for garments. Though plain clothing was typically worn, members donned fine silk garments on Sundays and special occasions.

As Millennialists, who believed that Jesus Christ would return to earth within their lifetimes and usher in a thousand-year kingdom of peace on earth, they embraced beauty and sought to establish harmony on this earth. They made a communal flower garden, deer park, and a maze, enjoyed music, and installed a museum with fine paintings, antiques and curios. They drank wine and whiskey, but refrained from tobacco.

Frederick Rapp, Johann Georg Rapp’s adopted son, helped his father lead the group, and managed its business and commerce. A board of elders was elected to enforce the society’s rules and regulations.

After the death of Johann Georg Rapp many members left. Nevertheless the Harmony Society prospered as a successful business community. However, declining membership resulting from both the practice of celibacy and an increasing reluctance to accept new members, along with the move from a religious to a business approach, caused the decline and finally the dissolution of the Society. The land and assets were sold by the remaining members in 1906. Today many of the buildings remain preserved by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.
Society of Separatists, Zoar

Dates: 1817-1898

History

Like the founding members of the Harmony Society, the Separatists of Zoar were Pietists from Wurtemberg, Germany. Their rebuttal of church authority resulted in their persecution; they were imprisoned and sometimes their children were taken.

In 1817 they fled from Germany with roughly 200 members to the United States. On their arrival they were housed by American Quakers in Philadelphia, and given money sent by English Quakers. With Quaker help their newly chosen leader Joseph Bimeler bought 5,600 acres in Ohio on a mortgage; the members moved there in November 1817. The village was named Zoar after an ancient Dead Sea town.

“But, having among them a certain number of old and feeble people, and many poor who found it difficult to save money to pay for their land, the leading men presently saw that the enterprise would fail unless it was established upon a different foundation”. In 1819 an agreement for a community of goods was signed.

Communal Life

In the early years the living was hard. Families crowded together in log cabins. However, in 1827 the Society contracted to build a section of the Ohio and Erie Canal that was to run through their property. With the women working alongside the men, they were able to pay off their mortgage, and thereafter the community prospered. Women’s labor continued to be invaluable to the society, as they made up the majority of the members.

The Society adopted celibacy in 1822, but reversed the ban in 1830. Children remained in the care of their parents until they were three years old, at which time they were placed in large houses, the girls in one, boys in another, under the care of persons appointed for that purpose.

Families lived several to a house in the larger homes. Each family managed its own affairs, cooked for itself, kept its own vegetable and flower gardens, and poultry. Tea, coffee, sugar, and other groceries were served out to all householders from a central magazine once a week.
Work was apportioned daily. In addition to agriculture they ran a number of industries, including a cabinet shop. The community was almost entirely self-sufficient and sold any surplus.

Toward the end of the century the members’ commitment to the society’s original goals began to deteriorate. The outside world influenced the community more and more, as strangers traveled to Zoar and stayed in the town’s hotel. In 1898, the remaining 222 members decided to dissolve the society, and divide the property among themselves.

The village of Zoar rests in a curve of the Tuscarawas river protected now by a high levee. Though Route 212 runs through its center, traffic is not heavy and the houses are quiet on the small grid of streets. I lingered on this bench in the high hallway of Number One House and wondered at the tall quiet rooms.

The historic village of Zoar is under threat; the levee built 75 years ago by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is in need of major repairs. Options to repairing the levee include tearing down the village and letting the area flood. To learn more and help save this piece of history visit www.savehistoriczoar.org.
Society of True Inspiration in Amana

Dates: 1855-1932

History

The Amana Colonies trace their origins to a religious movement called the Community of True Inspiration that began in Germany in 1714. The movement was started by Eberhard L. Gruber and Johann F. Rock, who believed that God communicated directly through inspired individuals. Suffering persecution in Germany, Christian Metz led a committee to America in September 1842, in search of land for relocation. Pooling their resources the community purchased 5,000 acres near Buffalo, New York. Working co-operatively and sharing their property, the community, now numbering some 1,200 people, managed to carve out a relatively comfortable living. They called their community the Ebenezer Society and adopted a constitution formalizing their communal way of life. In 1854, when increasing prices of land in the area and a growing interest among some members in materialism threatened the spiritual focus of the community, the leaders decided to move the community westward, to Iowa, where there was available land.

Communal Life

The seven Amana villages lie along the fertile Iowa River Valley on 26,000 acres of Society land. Each village, with its two-story wood, brick and stone houses, looks perhaps like any German-American settlement, except that the wood houses are not painted. But the houses were communal: families occupied suites with bedrooms and sitting rooms, and ate together in communal kitchen houses.

Property and resources were shared. On joining, members gave their property to the Society, and in return received home, food, all necessities, and an allowance at the village store. Bertha Shambaugh relates that a talented Brother appealed for a larger allowance on the basis of his abilities. He was asked if the simple shepherd did not perform the task allotted to him faithfully and to the utmost of his ability. On answering yes, he was told to go and do likewise.
The community supported itself through farming and the production of wool and calico. In addition, the colonists made their own books, bricks, clocks, fabrics, furniture, and wines. Good craftsmanship was valued. They grew and prepared all their own food, and communal kitchens provided three daily meals, as well as mid-morning and mid-afternoon snacks.

Spiritual and temporal authority lay with an elected Board of Trustees. All adult men, widows and single women over 30 voted in the annual meeting. The Board of Trustees appointed elders to the village councils, which ran the affairs of each village.

The village council assigned work according to seasonal and business needs. Men might work in any of a number of trades; women worked in traditional roles. Children aged 5 to 14 attended school six days a week year-round without vacation. Older boys spent some hours each day trying out a trade. A few boys were sent to college for training as teachers, doctors and dentists.

In 1932 the members of the community voted to abandon the communal system and became a profit-sharing corporation. Many had come to see the communal way of life as a barrier to achieving individual goals. Rather than leaving or watching their children go, they changed. Today the Amana Society has nearly 900 members.
Hutterites

Dates: 1874 to present in North America

History

In 1528 a group of Anabaptists chose to live with all their goods in common. To avoid persecution they fled from Switzerland to Germany, to Austria, and then to Moravia. A year later, recognizing that the group was falling apart, Anabaptist minister Jacob Hutter helped them reorganize and recommit to communal living. It is from Jacob Hutter that the Hutterites take their name.

By 1600 the Hutterites had grown to 25,000 members in eight communities throughout Moravia. Once again they were persecuted for their beliefs; many were killed, others imprisoned and tortured. They fled to Russia in 1770 where they lived in peace for a century. But in 1870 the Russian government withdrew its support and the Hutterites fled to America. Between 1874 and 1877 about 800 Hutterites landed in North America; about half of them decided not to live communally and later became Mennonites. The rest of the group settled in South Dakota, in three different colonies named after their leaders: Schmiedeleut, Dariusleut, and Lehrerleut. Present-day colonies owe allegiance to branches descended from these original three.

Communal Life

Hutterite communes are rural and depend on agriculture, although now increasingly on manufacturing as well. They are virtually or actually self-sufficient, and practice a community of goods in which all property is owned by the colony. Housing is built and assigned to each family, but belongs to the colony; they make their own furniture and clothing. Meals are taken by the entire colony in a dining or fellowship room. Men and women are segregated during meals, but on some special occasions families eat together.

Each colony may consist of about 10 to 20 families, with a population of around 60 to 250. When the colony’s population grows near the upper limit and its leadership determines that branching off is economically and spiritually necessary, they locate and purchase land to build a “daughter” colony.

The Hutterites attempt to keep themselves from the outside world. They speak a distinct dialect of German and follow a specific tradition
in clothing, which can be vividly colored, especially on children. At first there was only one central phone in each colony; now there may be one phone per household with cell phones, computers and radios becoming common.

Children are educated to the minimum state requirements at a colony schoolhouse, although schools are often run by an outside hired educator. Religious and “German” education is taught by a colony member.

The colonies are male-managed with women in traditional roles, cooking, providing medical care and purchasing fabric for clothing. All management positions are elected, and many decisions are taken to a vote before being implemented. Each colony has three high-level leaders, tasked with managing legal, business and church matters respectively. Below these are “bosses” in charge of work areas. The voting process is based on a two-tiered structure, incorporating a council of seven men and a voting membership of all married men in the colony. Overarching colony governance consists of a Bishop’s Council drawn from all the branch colonies.

Since the Hutterites moved to South Dakota, they have prospered and formed new communities. As of 2008, there were 460 colonies with around 45,000 members in the United States and Canada.
Church Communities International, 
Woodcrest

Dates: 1954 to present

History

Inspired by the German Youth Movement, Eberhard Arnold founded the Bruderhof in the 1920s. He led a group of young adults who strove to bring Christianity into their everyday lives. (A Jewish offshoot of the German Youth Movement later contributed to the establishment of kibbutzim in Israel.) In 1931 Arnold visited Canadian Hutterite communities and was ordained minister; upon his return to the Bruderhof adopted Hutterite customs. Conflict with the Nazis in Germany in the late 1930s led them to flee to England. At the outbreak of WWII, threatened with internment as German aliens by the British government, and unable to obtain refuge in North America, the Bruderhof migrated to Paraguay, the only country that would accept a pacifist community of mixed nationalities.

In 1954 responding to increased American interest, the Bruderhof set up their first U.S. community called the Woodcrest Bruderhof, in Rifton, New York. There are now branches in several states and nations. Strained relations both with the Hutterites and within Bruderhof membership itself, eventually led to separation from the Hutterites, as well as rifts within the larger community.

Communal Life

The entrance looked like a small company campus, which, in a sense, it is: the community operates a business designing and manufacturing rehabilitation equipment for the handicapped. We pulled into the small parking lot and two men came out to talk with us. They seemed guarded at first. I explained my project, and, confused by the change of name from Bruderhof to Church Communities International, asked them to tell me about their community. The older man gave a brief history. While explaining the administration of their community and how they have no hierarchy, suddenly his face lit up, and he turned to me and said: “we sit on the same bench”.
Ryan, the younger man, showed us benches they use for meetings in a room in the factory. He introduced us to his wife who, my wife later pointed out, wore traditional dress while the men wore contemporary clothing. He then walked with us up the short steep hill to the large circular meeting hall and community dining room with its great view over the tree tops. Ryan explained that anyone could speak at the meetings. The communal houses are gathered nearby.

Their website states “Bruderhof members take lifetime vows of obedience and poverty. Anyone who wishes to become a member gives away his or her property before joining, and contributes his or her talents to stand on an equal footing with all brothers and sisters.”

While each community, including Woodcrest, has a minister called the Servant of the Word, they are seen as servants of the community. Under the minister are witness brothers, stewards, and housemothers who are not chosen for life and can be replaced.

Community life is built around the family, though there are also many single members. Children are an important part of each community and participate in most communal gatherings. Young adults are encouraged to gain experience elsewhere before choosing whether or not to commit to the community. Elderly and disabled people are cared for within the community, joining communal activities and work as much as they are able.

Like many Christian communal societies they model their lives on the practices of the early church as described in the Acts of the Apostles. Our older guide told us they also hold the Sermon on the Mount central to their beliefs. Ryan promised to e-mail me; I hope he will yet.
Twin Oaks

Dates: 1967 to present

History

Twin Oaks was founded following a conference in Michigan in 1966 that was held to promote the idea of starting a community based on B. F. Skinner’s novel *Walden Two*. The novel describes a utopian community where members share work and income, have plenty of leisure time, and use behavioral modification training to lessen individual negative emotions and behavior. Twin Oaks began with eight members on a farm purchased by one member.

Communal Life

I came up the dirt drive past a large field of - was it beans? - to the home-built hammock workshop, and next to it, the small original farmhouse. Labeled piles of recycled materials stood about. Other workshops, homes and the dining hall scattered along the field’s edge and into the woods. The place was unkempt but purposive.

A woman working in the office in the farmhouse took me to find Purl, who had volunteered to show me around. He worked as a forestry manager, harvesting from their woodland to supply frames for the hammock works. Later I met a woman making a hammock, who also fielded general e-mail enquiries, including mine. Up at the dining hall, Purl joined a group preparing a harvest of strawberries while I measured the bench.

Twin Oaks is made up of around 85 adult members and 15 children. Their website states: “We do not have a central leader; we govern ourselves by a form of democracy with responsibility shared among various managers, planners, and committees. We are self-supporting economically, and partly self-sufficient. We are income-sharing. Each member works 42 hours a week in the community’s business and domestic areas. Each member receives housing, food, healthcare, and personal spending money from the community.”

The community has a structured but flexible labor system with labor credits. Each member must work an equal amount of time, and all work earns equal labor credits. Members opt for the work of their choice; most
work a few different jobs each week. Members can earn vacation time by working extra hours. The community earns income by making and selling hammocks and hammock chairs, making tofu and other soy products and indexing books. They produce most of their own food and generally eat in the common dining hall, although some houses have separate kitchens. They live in group houses, which they build themselves.

The roughly 75 managers are each responsible for one area such as a business, residence, the vehicles, or gardens. Anyone can volunteer to be a manager, whereon they are approved by a council of managers of like areas. Three planners serve 18-month staggered terms, make long-term policy decisions, and control the community’s resources. New candidates are chosen by other planners and must then be voted in by at least 80 percent of the community.

The founders of Twin Oaks had wanted the children of the community to be raised by the community as a whole, rather than by their parents as a single unit. However, parents wanted more contact with and responsibility for their children, and now children are either home-schooled or go to the local public school.

Twin Oaks does not isolate itself, but allows newspapers, radio, and the Internet as well as visits to nearby towns and recreational travel. The community hosts an annual Women’s Gathering, open to all women and girls, and an annual Communities Gathering, open to the public. They also welcome visitors for tours on Saturdays.
Camphill Village, Kimberton Hills

Dates: 1972 to present

History

Karl Koenig, an Austrian physician who had left his home country after the Nazi invasion, formed the first Camphill community in Scotland in 1940. Before he fled to Scotland he had worked as a physician for a therapeutic institute in Switzerland and co-founded a school for people with disabilities. In Scotland he joined others in seeking to establish a spiritual community based on ideals of freedom and equality, who ultimately decided to focus their time and energy on caring for children with special needs. As the children grew up, the communities expanded into communities accommodating adults with developmental disabilities.

The underlying principles of König’s Camphill school were derived from concepts of education and social life outlined decades earlier by anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner. These are still the founding principles of all Camphill Village Communities.

The first Camphill community in the United States was started in 1961 on 615 acres in Columbia County, New York.

Communal Life

My brother worked as a shepherd on a Camphill Village in Scotland for a few years, and an ex-girlfriend is, as far as I know, living on one still. So it was with fond anticipation that I came up the long drive that meanders through pastures generously bordered by woods in the gently rolling hills. Across a field I saw a stand of beehives under reaching branches. At the top of the hill stood the older stone house. Each house, hall or workshop is carefully sited and designed according to specific anthroposophical principles. Inside they are clean and orderly. I entered the stone house by the wrong door. A villager came from her loom and led me to the office.

Villagers, those with special needs, and co-workers, those with ‘ordinary’ needs, live together in group houses. Some co-workers are long term residents. Others are volunteers who come for a year. Co-workers are not paid for their services but receive room, board, health insurance, and a small
monthly stipend, as they are considered members of the community.

The community website states: “community members, with and without disabilities, live and work together as expanded families in comfortable homes throughout the village, forming a supportive community based on shared responsibility and caring. This lifestyle helps to foster mutual help and understanding, as people live and work side by side, day by day, each learning from the other.”

Each house has a “house mother” and a “house father” and its own kitchen, dining and sitting rooms. All work together in one of the craft shops, gardens or on the farm. With my brother in Scotland I saw a lamb born for the first and only time in my life. Camphill Kimberton takes its stewardship of the land seriously.

Anthroposophy embraces a spiritual understanding of the human being, based on knowing rather than faith. Anthroposophy is the wellspring for Waldorf education, biodynamic agriculture, and curative work.

There is a wonderful calm and peaceful feeling about Camphill Kimberton. It was not so easy to leave at the end of the day.
Communal Societies
Local to this Site

Woman in the Wilderness, Wissahickon, PA
Ephrata Cloister, Ephrata, PA
Snow Hill Nunnery, Franklin County, PA
Moravians, Bethlehem, PA
Valley Forge Community, Valley Forge, PA
Social Reform Unity, Barrett, PA
North American Phalanx, Monmouth County, NJ
Promisewell Community, Monroe County, PA
Goose Pond Community, Barrett, PA
Raritan Bay Union, Eagleswood, Perth Amboy, NJ
Battle Axes, Chester County, PA
Rose Valley, Delaware Co., PA
Father Divine’s Peace Mission, Gladwyne, PA
Camphill Village, Kimberton Hills, PA
Eternal Cause Society, Philadelphia, PA
Society of the Woman in the Wilderness

Johannes Kelpius, a German Pietist immigrant to Pennsylvania, and his followers believed that the world would end in 1694. They crossed the Atlantic and, in 1694, settled in what was then wilderness in the valley of Wissahickon Creek.

They are said to have been the second commune in colonial America. They lived a celibate life in cells and caves, sometimes in solitary meditation. After Kelpius’ death, the Hermits or Mystics of Wissahickon continued to wait for the end of the world.

Kelpius was a musician and composer who left behind a legacy of hymns.

Battle Axes of Free Love Valley

In 1810 an itinerant preacher, Theophilus Ransom Gates, settled in Philadelphia. By 1837 he had laid plans for the foundation of the Battle Axes, developed from a passage in the Book of Jeremiah. He moved to Chester County with Hannah Williamson in 1840.

The Battle Axes were to “break into pieces” Sunday blue laws, organized religion, clergymen, marriage, and other institutions. In place of marriage Gates preached a more spontaneous and flexible arrangement between men and women.

There were most likely no more than 35 Battle Axers. The group had no written codes of conduct and developed no formal liturgy. No records exist of set times or locations for meetings, though it is known that group nudity was performed. The display of nudity was intended to emulate the pure state of Adam and Eve, and played an important role in Battle Axes services. This was illegal and outraged their neighbors, soon causing a run-in with the local constabulary.

After Gates died Hannah Williamson took over, but proved too brash and left the group in the 1850s. By the end of the decade the Battle Axe movement was over.
Moravian Community, Bethlehem

The Moravians settled in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania in 1741. They lived in communal groups called choirs structured by age, gender and marital status. Children joined a nursery at 18 months, and their first choir at 4 years. Members of the choir slept in dormitories, and ate, worked and worshipped together. This strengthened the bond to the community as a whole, as opposed to the individual family. There were two groups of choirs, the missionary and the home, with the former released from domestic duties. Members were not paid, but received food, shelter and all temporal needs. They believed in hard work, diligence, punctuality, frugality, and simplicity.

The continuing success and growth of the community led to change. In 1762 the communal system was abandoned for a more family-oriented settlement. Close bonds of community were maintained and many aspects of the original organization remained; the major change was the move from a communal to a cash economy.
Owenites

Local Communities

Valley Forge Community, Valley Forge, PA. Established 1826
Promisewell Community, Monroe County, PA. Established 1843
Goose Pond Community, Barrett, PA. Established 1843

History

Robert Owen, a textile mill owner in Scotland, was a philanthropist who worked for the betterment of his workers. Despite the acclaim he received, particularly regarding the education of children, he remained unsatisfied and developed a utopian socialist philosophy, determining to try a community experiment.

He purchased New Harmony, Indiana from the Harmony Society when they relocated to Economy, PA, and in 1825 established his community experiment there. His followers were referred to as Owenites. Their hope was to create a new way of living that combined material prosperity with education, health, and morality for everyone. Owen remained their titular leader but was mostly absent. The experiment at New Harmony failed after about two years following many difficulties and reorganizations in leadership and government.

The community at Valley Forge was established in the spring of 1826, but dispersed after a few months. The others were similarly short-lived.

Communal Life

Owen believed that environment shapes a person’s character. A clean environment with educational opportunities leads to happy, productive workers. His communities would provide housing and work for 500-1500 people. These large communal houses, similar to Fourier’s phalansteries, would have hot and cold running water. Residents would have access to a library, kitchens, dining halls, baths, laundries, stores, schools, a museum, a gym, music rooms, and lecture halls. Outside the main part of the village would be mills, factories, and farmland.
Children were removed from their families at an early age, so as to provide them with the best education as soon as possible. They lived in a separate building and were rarely allowed to see their parents. They learned through doing, and from maps, skeletons, and outdoor observations.

The community engaged in a variety of industries from soap-making to shoemaking, and a range of trades from carpentry to tailoring. The main source of income for the community, however, remained Owen’s personal wealth. And while they tried a number of forms of leadership, they were obliged to ask Owen to step in and take over when the community fell into disarray.

Although an atheist himself, Owen allowed freedom of worship in his communities.

The failure of Owenite communities can be attributed to their open admission policy. Unlike other communities, there were no requirements, checks, or probationary period. The participants were, in the words of Owen’s son “a heterogeneous collection of radicals... honest latitudinarians, and lazy theorists, with a sprinkling of unprincipled sharpers thrown in.”

Josiah Warren, himself a participant at New Harmony, went on to help develop American individualist anarchism, and to establish the communities of Utopia, and Modern Times.
Fourierists

Local Communities

Social Reform Unity, Barrett, PA. Established 1842
North American Phalanx, Monmouth County, NJ. Established 1843
Raritan Bay Union, Eagleswood, Perth Amboy, NJ. Established 1853

Principles

Fourierists followed the ideas of French philosopher, Charles Fourier, who despised capitalism’s failures and wanted to form a society based on cooperation, peace, and class harmony. Beginning in 1808, he developed his system of phalanxes. A phalanx, according to Fourier, should hold 1,620 people living in a building called a phalanstery, surrounding a courtyard, with workshops nearby. Fourier calculated 1,620 because he theorized that all humans are made up of 12 basic passions in different amounts, resulting in 810 personality types. Each phalanx would contain two of each type, male and female. Fourier declared that concern and cooperation were the secrets of social success, and believed that they would occur in his phalanxes. He characterized poverty as the principal cause of disorder in society, as opposed to inequality, and proposed to eradicate poverty with high wages, as well as a decent minimum wage for those who were not able to work.

Communal Life

Phalansteries were to be four-level apartment complexes (none of which were ever completed) with the richest living at the top and the poorest at ground level. Wealth was determined by the job done and the contribution of the worker. Jobs were assigned based on the interests and desires of the individual, and unpleasant work was awarded higher pay.

Fourierist communities supported women’s rights. Women spoke as individuals, not as half of a couple, and it was held that traditional marriage could hurt women’s rights. The more typical nineteenth century sexual mores were rejected - casual sex was allowed, and homosexuality was defended as a personal preference.
In America

Fourier’s followers in America purchased land in Monmouth County, New Jersey in 1843 and established the North American Phalanx, which at its height, had about 120 members. They succeeded in building one wing of a phalanstery. The original members screened applicants and admitted only one-third. The community prospered because its proximity to New York City allowed for the sale of the goods they made. This phalanx lasted longer than others in part because, having bought less land initially, it began with less debt. However, disagreements did arise, as some members wanted the group to become more religious. The North American Phalanx closed in 1855 after the flour mill burned down and its insurance company went bankrupt. The final members voted not to rebuild.

Raritan Bay Union was started by members from the North American Phalanx in 1853. A progressive school was established and ran until 1861.

Other Fourierist communities in the United States in later years included Brook Farm, Massachusetts.
Father Divine’s Peace Mission

Father Divine opened his first commune in Harlem in 1914 in a middle class apartment building. His movement blossomed over the ensuing decades and opened more communes, adopting the name the International Peace Mission in 1931-32. The mission ran cut-rate hotels, restaurants and clothing stores through the Depression. In the 1940s a succession of scandals and arrests led to Father Divine’s move to Philadelphia. In 1953 he was given the estate at Gladwyne, where he died in 1965.

There are presently 50 members, and membership remains open. Governed by a leader and leadership group, the community is completely income-sharing. The community shares almost all meals; alcohol and tobacco use is prohibited.

Eternal Cause Society

A small commune in urban Philadelphia, this society makes extensive spiritual claims on the Intentional Communities website: www.IC.org. The members were evicted from their building in June 2008, and the building declared unfit for occupation. With support from the neighborhood, and following an inspection by an independent structural engineer, the building was unsealed and the residents allowed to return. Two years later, the commune - also known affectionately as “Gilbert’s Shoes” after the building they live in - continues at the same site.
Rose Valley

An architect and leading figure in the American Arts and Crafts movement, William Price and his wife, Emma, were free-thinking Quakers whose home became a meeting place for the discussion of art, economics and social justice. In 1901 they bought land and started an Arts and Crafts community. While Price’s vision may have been modeled on the socialist utopia described by William Morris in News from Nowhere, Rose Valley was not in fact communitarian, and is included here only because the Arts and Crafts Movement’s social idealism was important for the generation of this project.

The Rose Valley Association rented out space to craftsmen and provided them with housing, generally designed by Price. Their products were sold from his office in Philadelphia. By 1910 craft production had faded and the Arts and Crafts project ceased to exist. Rose Valley exists today as an independent borough with many of the original buildings intact and in private ownership.
Appendix

The Benches

There are twenty benches in the gathering. Sixteen are from the ten communal societies described in the first part of this book. Three are from our local Pennsylvania German woodworking tradition. They are included here to represent those local communes for which we do not have specific information regarding the benches they may have used. The last, the English Medieval bench, represents a pre-Capitalist social model that was admired by the utopian socialist William Morris, who fathered the connection of craft with the social idealism that is continued here.
1. Ephrata Cloister
Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Ephrata Cloister

2. Ephrata Cloister
Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Ephrata Cloister

3. Shaker, Mt. Lebanon

4. Shaker, Hancock

5. Shaker, Hancock
6. Snow Hill Nunnery

7. Snow Hill Nunnery

8. Harmony Society (feast hall bench)
   Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Old Economy Village

9. Society of Separatists at Zoar
   Courtesy of Zoar Community Association and Ohio Historical Commission

10. Society of True Inspiration in Amana
    Courtesy of the Amana Heritage Society
11. Society of True Inspiration in Amana (communal kitchen)
   Courtesy of the Amana Heritage Society

12. Hutterites

13. Church Communities International, Woodcrest
   Courtesy of Church Communities International, Woodcrest

14. Twin Oaks
   Courtesy of Twin Oaks

15. Camphill Village Kimberton Hills (Kepler)
    Courtesy of Camphill Village, Kimberton Hills
16. Camphill Village Kimberton Hills (Rose Hall)
Courtesy of Camphill Village, Kimberton Hills

17. Pennsylvania German

18. Pennsylvania German

19. Pennsylvania German

20. English Medieval