**Excesses Blamed for Demise of the Commune Movement**

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**WEST BRATTLEBORO, Vt., Aug. 1—** A gaggle of aging hippies gathered here over the weekend to assess what went right -- and wrong -- with the commune movement that brought them ''back to the land'' of southern Vermont 30 years ago. They concluded that theirs was a radical social experiment that died by its own hand, impaled on its excesses.

The occasion for their self-criticism was a conference sponsored by the University of Vermont at the West Village Meeting House, a stone's throw from Guilford, the mecca of the commune movement that began in the late 1960's with the influx of disaffected urban and suburban youths, seeking self-sufficiency, unfettered freedom and an alternative to the nuclear family. The conference attracted about 50 people, many of whom had joined the movement at the time.

In its brief heyday, the movement in southeastern Vermont included a loose network of communes clustered around the towns of Guilford and Putney, encompassing the Red Clover Collective, the Johnson's Pastures Commune, Packer Corners and the Montague Farm. A few of the communes, where people lived together as an extended family, still exist, although in modified form.

The glue for the conference was the posthumous publication of the book ''Communal Organization and Social Transition'' (Peter Lang, 1997) by the sociologist Barry Laffan that documents the life and times of the counterculture over 30 months at the end of the 1960's. The book is one of the first ethnographies to deal with that brief period of American culture.

The quest for a utopia soon turned into a self-destructive orgy of excess, many participants concluded, culminating symbolically in the fire that razed the big house at the Johnson's Pastures Commune, by far the largest of the communes. The blaze, on April 16, 1970, killed four people.

Chuck Light, a witness and member of the commune at the time, recalled during a panel discussion that the fire at the commune known as J. P. was precipitated when, after a night of drinking and drugs, someone tipped over a candle.

''I was living in a hovel in the back of a truck at the time,'' Mr. Light said. ''We heard screaming and came running; people were leaping out of second-story windows. The old wooden house went up in minutes.''

That blaze, he concluded, ''became a central symbol of the movement, symbolic of the personal fires and conflicts that were going on around us and among us.''

The communes inspired several spinoffs, including the Free Farm in Putney, intended as a place where anyone could grow their food.

But ''it was more about making political statements than about farming,'' said Robert Houriet, who moved to more structured communes in northern Vermont and is now an organic farmer in Hardwick. ''The Free Farm was in plain view of a building where the local Democrats met, and they got offended by all the weeds and the bare-breasted women. Eventually, there was an ugly confrontation between hippies and an armed vigilante group, led by the local sheriff.''

Even within the movement itself, however, the patterns of the broader society still held, said Howard Lieberman, a commune member who became a corporate headhunter. Mr. Lieberman, who now lives in Minnesota, said that he and Mr. Laffan ''spent years trying to puzzle through the class distinctions.''

''The Red Clover Collective was the educated, affluent kids,'' Mr. Lieberman said. ''The people at the Free Farm were middle-class kids, emulating the Red Clover hippies, and the J. P. was the Ellis Island of the commune movement, drawing people with nowhere to go and nothing else to do.''

In fact, Johnson's Pastures and its membership policies, or lack thereof, became the epitome of the movement in its extreme. The former landowner, Michael Carpenter, a silent, bearded man who attended the weekend sessions, set an open-door policy, refusing to turn away anyone.

The result, said Mr. Light, was that ''during the summer of 1969, somewhere between 800 and 1,000 people passed through the J. P. Lots of them would come in buses. The place became a slum. The class differences were very relevant; the first communards had shared values and education, but it quickly sank to the lowest common denominator -- the criminal element. What happened at the J. P. was a colossal failure.''

Others disagreed with that assessment. Verandah Porche, a poet and a past and current member of the smaller Packer Corners commune, said she ''admired the spirit and generosity of the Carpenters, and I wouldn't diss it as naivete.''

''Somebody had to try it,'' Ms. Porche said. ''I had the luxury of sending along the people I didn't want at our house down the road to his house.''

What she remembered from those early years was a utopian life on an old farm ''with a blooming peach orchard'' and mortgage payments of $227.10 a month. Her memories were of a life of generosity and connection, both among the communards and with the local farm families. ''Their kids didn't want to hear the old stories about making cheese and sap beer,'' said Ms. Porche, ''but we did. We ate that stuff up. We were in a listening mode.''

Marty Jezer, a co-founder of Packer Corners, blamed the failure of the movement on the profound conflict within the counterculture. ''We had a big cider press operation at Packer Corners,'' Mr. Jezer recalled, ''and I remember being up on top of the press one day, feeding in apples to make cider. A bunch of hippies had come by to help, but instead they were dancing around the press, throwing apples at each other. It wasn't much help. We had an impractical but noble vision that was constantly undermined by people who came just to play.''

In all, Mr. Houriet concluded, the important lesson of the commune movement was that ''open-ended, anarchistic communities didn't work because of problems with leadership, with land ownership, the role of drugs and booze, plus internal conflicts among the members. There was a lot of trauma involved, and not just from chemicals. The movement opened a Pandora's box of the liberated self, and the trauma proceeded from the inability of people to deal with themselves.''

If Johnson's Pastures went up in flames, he said, ''many communes dissolved with a whimper as people just drifted away.''

The later, more successful communes, he said, were a result of lessons learned in the early movement: ''that there has to be some leadership and decision-making, some control of membership, that you can't sell drugs to people in town, go skinny-dipping in the town pond and offend your neighbors.''

Then, all these years later, Mr. Houriet's eyes filled with tears and his voice choked up. ''There was a brief, shining moment when we knew it could work,'' he said, scanning the panel of his fellow communards. ''We knew it could work, but we blew it.''

Photo: Residents of the Johnson's Pastures Commune in December 1970, eight months after four people there died in a fire. The blaze, one former member said, was symbolic of the commune movement's problems. (Joyce Dopkeen/The New York Times)