The Goyndah Commune

Gai

To the Bodhi Farm community,

Here is the text of my article for your examination and hopefully your approval. Please phone me as soon as you can to let me know of any changes you would like. My number is 66854428. FAX

Thanks and kind regards,
Simon

Intentional Communities ?

COMMUNES by Simon de Salis

Twenty-six years ago, a group of young people walked into a secluded valley in subtropical eastern Australia and asked an old farmer to sell them his thousand acres and sawmill.

The land was overgrazed and marginal, prone to mud slides in the wet season and bushfires in the dry. The idealistic eyes of the newcomers, however, saw a beautiful place where they could create their own wonderful world, living as one with each other and with Nature, away from the treadmill of bosses and bills.

They were fresh from the Aquarius Festival in nearby Nimbin, where they were among several thousand fellow babyboomers who aspired to usher in a new age of love, peace and freedom, and find a new, simpler, more natural way of living.

The farmer named his price of $100,000. They raised it by selling several hundred shares in the Co-ordination Co-operative Ltd., and Australia's first commune, Tuntable Falls, was born. A generation later, it is thriving and has been joined by scores more.

Their ideals have survived to this day, and their dreams of an alternative lifestyle have bloomed and flourished in places all over the nation. The heart and hub of the movement, however, remains rooted in the lovely verdant hills and valleys of northern New South Wales, around Nimbin, the original site of the festival.

Nestling forty kilometres inland of the continent's most easterly point, Nimbin in 1973 was a small, sleepy, fading dairy and timber town. The surrounding rain forests were denuded, the land overworked, and local industry had been in decline for decades.

Café Work

When some Sydney students asked the townsfolk to host an arts festival, they agreed, desperate for any economic boost.

But the influx of five thousand youngsters of wild appearance and uninhibited behaviour caused alarm and consternation among the conservative locals. It worsened when a large portion of the visitors decided to stay and settle in the area after the festival ended. The divisions between "hippies" and "straights" were extreme and often bitter, and although tempered and reduced by time, remain today.

"Remember, there are two very different cultures side by side here," says local identity Kevin Soward, 61, who has lived in Nimbin all his life. "I don't like drawing lines, but some do, on both sides."

Kevin has been a stalwart of many community organisations, and promotes harmony between old and new settlers, who he believes have learned from one another over the years. He counts many new settlers as friends, and says that the two groups can work well together, the local fire brigade a fine example.

Some of the ~~best~~ volunteer firemen come from Tuntable Falls, the ~~oldest and~~ largest commune in Australia, which now ~~owns~~ two thousand acres of the lush, leafy Tuntable Valley. It has three hundred residents, a hundred dwellings, a shop, postal and phone service, school complex, community hall, two fire trucks, and a two million gallon dam.

The lifestyle, however remains alternative _ and low cost. All land and buildings are communally owned, and community projects are funded by a modest compulsory annual cash fee, complemented by a work levy system.

"To start with, we were community-oriented by necessity as well as design," recalls Peg, one of the Tuntable founders, who now has grandchildren at the commune. "We had to rely on one another to survive."

The new settlers moved into anything on the property with a roof, including the pig styes, or lived in vans, humpies, or tents. Many were city kids clueless about the practicalities of their dream, which was soon tested by harsh reality.

Their first wet season was merciless. It caused mud slides, potholed roads that trashed their old bomb vehicles, and rusted and rotted their meagre possessions. They had no electricity or hot running water.

"Most of us were very poor, but we shared what we had and helped each other out," says Peg. "It was hard, but we learned a lot and it made us stronger."

Some couldn't endure it and left, but others arrived, and the community persevered. With few machines and much labour they built houses, regenerated the land, and grew food. They found and invented new ways to use and share natural power sources from the sun, the creeks, the wind ~~and their own gases~~ methane gas and pedalling.

They fought successfully to change ~~senseless~~ laws that disallowed multiple occupancy on single-title land, and narrow building design laws that made their own unconventional dwellings illegal.

Gradually, their collective spirit, energy, creativity and ingenuity transformed the valley and their lifestyle into something like their original dream. And they had children, who soon outnumbered them.

"My best memories are of sharing the joy of watching our children grow up together, and of working together to build them a home and community, " says mother-of-three Megan. "I'm so glad that they have this as their birthright, and it's given them such strong, loving hearts."

"There was a whole tribe of us marauding around the valley," says Rubin, 22, who was born at Tuntable. "We didn't have TV or heaps of possessions, but we had a lot of freedom and love and this great natural environment, with forests ~~and~~ with creeks and waterfalls. It was a great place to grow up."

"Everybody looked after everybody. My generation is really close, like family. We've run around together since we were babies, and have shared a lot."

Rubin has been the youth representative on the nine member, elected Co-op board. But all decisions are made communally, and have to be agreed by all members, who are ~~form~~ from a variety of walks

of life, some with jobs off the commune. They are governed by a comprehensive set of community rules and by-laws, which allow as much personal freedom as possible.

"We don't really follow a strict code," says Rubin, except to protect the environment. Everybody's free to do their own thing, and you respect their rights and privacy. If you don't get on with someone, you don't hang out with them. There's plenty of space here."

Rubin like most Tuntable kids, went to primary school at the commune and high school in Nimbin. His background was no disadvantage. Tuntable was one of the first schools in the district to have a computer, and Rubin is about to start tutoring a computer class in Nimbin.

"Some people are into computers here, and some aren't," says Rubin, who plans to build his own home at Tuntable. "But they're a great way to communicate, and I can see us setting up a network in the future."

Not just Rubin's generation is computer literate. Thirteen-year-old Tara smilingly complains that she can rarely wrest her household's laptop from her mother, Megan, who e-mails friends everywhere and uses the internet to help her university studies.

"There have always been a lot of transients here, and so I've got plenty of people to keep in touch with," says Megan, "There's a big family network of Tuntable people all over the world, and that sense of family is more real to me than the family I grew up with.

"We wanted to create a model village, and to show the world it could be done. I think we've achieved that. Our home and community has spread from the confines of the valley, and taken our messages of community, creativity and ecology into the world. The global village is becoming a reality."

A few years after Tuntable was founded, a group of young Buddhists who had established a meditation retreat in the area decided to buy land and start a community.

"We had a common philosophy of voluntary simplicity," says Gai, one of the founders. "We wanted a lighter way of living, because we could see the way the world was running was not sustainable. We

followed the Gandhi creed of living simply so that others may simply live; enough for everybody's need, not greed."

Little of their peaceful, picturesque 150 acre farm was cleared, and as dedicated environmentalists, they had no desire to cut the beautiful forest, so the community remained limited to several buildings and three dozen people. They fought the same battles against the authorities as their neighbours at Tuntable, and successfully resisted demolition orders on their dwellings.

All land and buildings are communally owned. Decisions are made by consensus and work is shared. A small weekly fee covers basic food for all, the running and maintenance of the farm's machinery, and funding projects. Residents share a weekly meal together in the community centre, which has splendid forest and mountain views.

"Self interest has increased over the years," says Gai, "and we're less purist and holy than we were, but relative to wider society, we're still a nice outpost of collective thinking. We have successfully survived twenty two years here, and our ideals have been a rudder to steer us through inevitable change."

"I think the main change came with people becoming more working class," says Leah, a year 12 student with a penchant for gardening who was born and bred on the farm. "They got jobs, stopped being so poor, became more comfortable, and had more choices on how to live."

Those choices included their own cars, instead of sharing one or two, which gave more freedom of movement off the farm, and electrical appliances, powered by their own sources: a couple of turbines in their waterways, solar panels, and a diesel generator as a backup.

Leah thinks she will probably live in other places, but the farm will always be home, and she is happy to have grown up there. So is Li, 20, who is building his own place in the forest on the property.

Like the kids at Tuntable, they grew up very close to their peers, and in a community where entertainment was created, rather than consumed, with regular parties, pantomimes, cabarets, bands and parades.

"It was a magical place to grow up," says Li. "We were out in the bush, lantana bashing, and on our motorised go-karts, or playing music together. And we had ten mothers and ten fathers looking after us."

As on Tuntable, some have embraced computer technology, and some haven't. "A computer is a useful tool, but so is a mattock, and that's technology too, man," smiles Li.

That philosophy sums up the attitude of a group of Li's peers who have just founded their own ~~commune~~, Bunk Farm, in a lush, lovely valley dominated by the imposing, rain forested slopes of the Border Ranges National Park.

All from the Buddhist farm, except for one from Tuntable (Megan's son Jesse) and one from a non-commune background, Matt, ~~several youngsters~~ have bought shares in their own single-title property of 160 acres.

"We're still working on our rules, but we'll be basically continuing with the way we were raised, which was great," says Bodhi, 21, who was raised on the Buddhist farm. "This isn't something we're starting, it's something we're carrying on. It's our way of life."

But there will be some differences.

"I think the rules need to be flexible," says Cedar, 19, who grew up with Bodhi. "Our parents made their rules at the very start, then stuck by them rigidly all the way, even when the farm changed, and it caused some problems."

Also, they want to reverse the trend in many of the older communes, which evolved with less communal and more individual living.

"We want to live totally communally," says Bodhi. "We're aiming for complete self-sufficiency. We're not sure how big we'll get, but it's best to start small and allow for expansion."

Bunk Farm came with three houses, two of which they rent to help pay their bill and the third that they live in together.

"We don't need to build anything for a few years, which is great, because we can concentrate on planting out the land," says Matt, 23. "We're into permaculture, plenty of native bush tucker, and trees."

In their few months on Bunk Farm, they've started a nursery, vegetable gardens and orchards. They've planted hundreds of trees, and plan to put in thousands more.

Helping with the labour are "Woofers"- backpackers from the world-wide Willing Organic Farm Volunteers network, who work a few hours a day in return for food and lodging. The system gives the travelers an experience and the commune a hand, and helps keep the commune in touch with the wider world.

The Bunk Farmers are also up with computer technology, particularly with regards to music. Bodhi and Cedar are in a band with Ti and several other ~~commune brothers from the Buddhist farm~~ the "Red Eyed Frogs," which plays "sticky forest funk" and has just made its first CD.

Their computer at Bunk Farm serves as a recording studio, ~~a means~~ an aid in ~~of~~ designing their album covers, and they believe, eventually ~~as a way of~~ linking up with like-minded people all over the world.

"A huge global jam session," grins Bodhi. "That'll be something."