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Green Mountain Communes

The Making of a Peoples' Vermont

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Collective

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Vermont; a trajectory which, in part, was set in course by the Commune Movement a generation before.

The final chapter on Vermont's Commune Movement cannot be written until history reveals whether or not those heady days of the 60s and 70s were a cultural abrasion, or an immediate harbinger of things to come.

For Robert Houriet the future, and therefore the past, holds a bitter promise. "We were just ahead of the economy," says Robert. "We were trying to go back to 1930 at a time when the economy was going off the scale in terms of abundance. A false abundance, as it turns out... [The final victory of the cooperative movement] will have to be economically determined. People will do this because they have to, because they choose to do what is possible. And what becomes possible is [determined] when the price of oil becomes too high, when the price to the environment becomes too high not to do it that way. Not for idealistic reasons, but because they have to. The farmer [for example] will feel the pinch... -they can't achieve the mechanization, the storage, the distribution without doing it cooperatively. So cooperativism will become efficient. It will become necessary that people adopt cooperative methods."

But just as the Commune Movement has had its effects on Old Vermont, Old Vermont has had its effects on the counter-culture activists and institutions that have survived. Its long standing tradition of local democracy through Town Meeting has focused much of the continuing political angst of the left out of closed off communities, and into the directly democratic Town Halls, where their ideas have spread throughout the population. It should come as no surprise that hundreds of Vermont towns have passed resolutions against the war, for the impeachment of the President, against GMOs, and in support of universal healthcare. And where the old co-ops have drifted into more traditional business practices, the unions have been there to organize the workers [such as the United Electrical Workers at Montpelier's Hunger Mountain Co-op, and Burlington's City Market –both of which are large area employers]. In a very real sense the relationship between Old Vermont and the Vermont of the communes has become symbiotic; elements of each driving the state in both a more democratic and more socialistic direction.

This continuing trend to the left can even be observed in the declarations of the State's General Assembly and other bodies of Vermonters who have gathered in capital building in Montpelier. Pressured from below, in 2007 the State Senate passed a resolution calling for the impeachment of President Bush, and both the House and Senate passed a resolution calling for a military withdrawal from Iraq. In 2003, the day the U.S. invaded Iraq, hundreds of Vermonters met in the State House where they unanimously passed resolutions condemning the acts of the Federal Government as illegal and immoral. And again in 2006 more than 200 Vermonters held a meeting in the State House to discuss the possibility of secession from the United States (a cause now supported by 13% of the population). Former communards and 60s-70s radicals were undoubtedly present at both events. All these declarations, as symbolic as they may be, point to the leftward trajectory of politics in

Gonna leave the city, got to get away,

Gonna leave the city, got to get away.

All that hustling and fighting man,

you know I sure can't stay.

-Goin' Up To The Country, Canned Heat

*Something is happening here but you don't know
what it is.*

Do you, Mr. Jones?

-Ballot of a Thin Man, Bob Dylan

From 1965 through 1975 it is estimated that 100,000 young people migrated north to the Green Mountains; most simply passed through. Still, many thousands remained. These newcomers, mostly white, of mixed class background and primarily from the eastern cities, shared the commonality of being part of a loosely defined 60s counter-culture. This youth migration culminated in the founding of 50-100 communes by 1970. Their forms varied; some were organized around radical left politics, others around agriculture, many more lacked any defining focus beyond the vague parameters of the hippy counter-culture. What they all had in common, whether this was individually articulated or not, was a desire to transcend mainstream America. With this, social experimentation as opposed to adherence to traditional political-social-family structures became the counter-culture norm.

The first wave of communards hit the Green Mountains in the mid-60s. By 1967 a number of communes were established, especially in the southeast part of the state. Of these, a good deal of their members cut their teeth in the Civil Rights Movement, and the continuing resistance to the war in Vietnam.

Robert Houriet, an early communard and a current resident of the Northeast Kingdom, recalls, "The commune movement

began with the Civil Rights Movement. The Freedom Houses in the south became the incubators of the communes... People continued to live communally because they wanted to restore the broader community of the Civil Rights Movement.”

However, Houriet [who authored *Getting Back Together*, a book on communes in 1969] contends that this first wave was not necessarily intending to organize Vermont - at least not at first. In fact he understands these first commune pioneers essentially as political refugees suffering from both urban police repression and political burnout.

“The first phase was an escape, but it was an escape which had a utopian element... The big bang came after the Chicago [Democratic National] Convention. The Chicago convention [and the ensuing riots] was the epigamic event where people realized the political movement was over –fractured beyond repair. You can go to the Weathermen or you can go to Vermont,” says Houriet.

Many of these early migrants, a good number of whom were formally members of or allied to the radical Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), sought to take refuge in these northern hills. It was a time for reflection, experimentation with psychedelic drugs, and an evaluation of their personal and social lives. But it was not long before two things occurred. First, after 68’ the trickle of counter-culture migrants turned into a flood. This mass second wave quickly led to the formation of dozens of new communes, especially in the north. Second, the older SDS/political elements realized that any attempt to circumvent personal and economic alienation was intimately tied to the external community. And with that, new efforts at political organizing were rekindled.

One commune, Red Clover, was at the forefront of these new efforts. Members, including John Douglas, Jane Kramer, Robert Kramer, and Roz Payne, began as a radical media collective in New York City called Newsreel. By 1969 this group, now transplanted to Putney, formed an organization called Free Vermont.

in 2006, was formed in the 70s as the electoral expression of the Commune Movement. Besides the Liberty Union, there is also the social-democratic oriented Vermont Progressive Party. The Progressives were formed by former Liberty Union member Bernie Sanders (now serving as the first socialist in the US Senate) and includes many activists and supporters from the commune days. Sanders won his first election in 1981, becoming the socialist mayor of Burlington. He formed the Progressive Coalition, the forerunner of the Progressive Party, shortly thereafter. His victory was a result not only of gaining the backing of key unions, but also of support work done by former communards. One such communard, Barbara Nolfy of the Franklin Commune, went on to serve in his administration as a member of a newly organized Burlington Woman’s Council. Furthermore, Progressive Party Chairman Anthony Pollina (who won 25% of the vote in the 2002 Lieutenant Governor’s race and is currently considering a run for Governor in 2008) was once an organizer with counter-culture allied NOFA. Presently the Progressives are the strongest third party in the nation, with six seats in the State Legislator (including the Chair of the House Agriculture Committee), the Mayorship of the largest city (Burlington, population: 39,000), several City Council positions, and countless Town Select Board seats as well as lesser elected posts.

And again, our present seems to be witnessing a generational revival of cooperativism. In 2006, on the heels of greatly falling wholesale milk prices, the Dairy Farmers of Vermont (co-founded by Anthony Pollina) opened a farmer owned milk processing plant in Hardwick. More generally, of the forty worker-owned businesses in the state (which employ 2000 people), 10% are organized as democratic co-ops. From the Red House construction company in Burlington, to the Brattleboro Tech Collective, to the popular Langdon Street Café and Black Sheep bookstore in Montpelier, worker and farmer co-ops are again on the rise.

bedded in all corners of Vermont making the state the most progressive in the country; the only state never visited by President G.W. Bush. In recent years Vermont (population 600,000) has led the nation in many important social issues. Universal healthcare is provided for all its children (and will continue to be regardless of the eventual outcome of the Federal SCHIP debate), funding for public education has essentially been socialized, gay couples retain the same civil rights as straight couples, and more than 70% of the people firmly oppose the war in Iraq (in 2003 three thousand marched on the rural state capital to oppose the war). Even Vermont's organized labor is greatly influenced by the Commune Movement.

In 1998 a Central Vermont anarchist group known as the #10 Collective [themselves members of the Love & Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation and largely influenced by the political teachings of Vermont 60s radical Murray Bookchin] played a lead role in forming the Vermont Workers' Center. One of the prime movers of this collective was a young man named Jason Winston. Jason, like thousands of other native born Vermonters, was the child of counter-culture parents. And today the Workers' Center, with a constituency above 20,000, functions as a grand coalition of most the major Vermont labor unions as well as individual workers. As such Vermont labor has been a leader in opposing the current war, and in the fight for the establishment of single payer universal healthcare. This fact can also be understood as another indirect influence of the leftism of the 60-70s. In a word, those communards that stayed, those that organized, those that eventually became neighbors and friends with thousands of native working class Vermonters, did in fact have an impact on public opinion.

Electoral Vermont, unlike most of the US, recognizes four major political parties. In addition to the Democrats and Republicans, there is also the very far left Liberty Union Party. This party, which received 5.7% of the vote for State Treasurer

The goal of Free Vermont was, simply put, to bring forth a popular revolution in the Green Mountains. To do so they worked to consolidate the newly arrived counter-cultural elements into the radical left. To a smaller extent, and with mixed results, they also sought to radicalize the native population. Free Vermont's political analysis also hinged on the belief that the urban centers of the United States were teetering on revolt, especially in the Black community. In the event of widespread urban insurrection, it was their contention that Vermont, and other rural areas, should be prepared to act in a supporting role. Towards this end they acquired firearms as a means of self-defense. But the acquiring of weapons was by no account considered a strategic end by Free Vermont. They realized that to foster a meaningful and socialist revolution and/or to provide the anticipated broader revolution support, it was first necessary to build up their own effective institutions which in turn would give the counter-culture left a non-capitalist (or at least a more participatory) means of subsistence and production. By enlarge these new institutions took the form of producer, consumer, and service orientated co-ops and collectives. By bringing people together within co-ops it was hoped that the ingrained cultural posits of individualism and authoritarianism could be, in part, replaced with a new cooperativism compatible with the basic principles of socialism.

As Free Vermont began to reach out to the communes, they soon launched a number of co-ops across the state. In Brattleboro they opened a free auto shop (Liberation Garage) and worker-owned and operated restaurant (the Common Ground). They began dozens of food purchasing co-ops. A free health clinic was formed in Burlington. A children's collective school called Red Paint was formed in southern Vermont. A Peoples' Bank was started whereby economically better off communes deposited money that could be accessed by communes of lesser means. They organized forums against the war, organized woman's groups, and around ecological issues. Free Ver-

mont also printed a leftist newspaper which was distributed by the thousands in the high schools and communes alike. In the north, where many communes focused on agricultural pursuits, farming co-ops were formed. Attempts were made to circumvent the highly capitalistic produce markets in Boston and New York by establishing a cooperative distribution center. The success of these endeavors varied, but for a few years, perhaps between 1969-1973, one could squint their eyes and almost see the outline of a true cultural revolution on the horizon. Free Vermont, though counting a hardcore activist base of no more 100, soon attracted ten times that many fellow travelers; a sizable force in a state that at that time had a total population of less than 400,000 people.

John Douglas, co-founder of Free Vermont and current Charlotte resident, recalls “[Our goal was] fucking revolution! Free Vermont was... the umbrella organization we had put together... We traveled around Vermont rooting out communes and collectives. We really were focused on bringing the state together politically around [opposition to] the war [in Vietnam], around the [Black] Panthers, [and] Civil Rights.”

Roz Payne, who later went on to form another Free Vermont commune in Burlington called Green Mountain Red states, “We were living together and we were trying to create a better world together... We were trying to make changes in our lives and the politics of the world as far as racism and imperialism and capitalism.”

But the story of Free Vermont is not the whole story. In Plainfield the Maple Hill Commune, which had dealings with Free Vermont but should not be considered part of its political core, also had their own impact on their surroundings.

Jim Higgins, a former Maple Hill resident and presently a writer for the Barre-Montpelier Times Argus, recalls “[In 1971] I went on to form the Plainfield Co-op with a lot of my old communards... One of our goals was to bring into our co-op network local born adults. It was an energetic ef-

farm were exasperated by a serious house fire, it was the men who were the first ones to leave the commune, and oftentimes Vermont too. On the other hand she notes that the women were more apt to try to work through the difficulties longer and ultimately, to at least remain in Vermont. Andrews speculates that the reason for this dynamic is because woman found their social relations and power within a communal structure to be more liberated than that which they previously experienced in mainstream America. The men on the other hand had a male dominated outside world to return to where they would at least be afforded the same limited rights and privileges that were too often elusive to women.

In the end the Commune Movement did not vanish into thin air, nor did all communards drop out of the social and political arena. The Vermont of today is inescapably a product of those times, just as it is also a product of other progressive migrations; be it radicals coming north during the Great Depression, the anarchist and socialist labor movement brought by Italian immigrants in 1900, or yeoman farmers/Green Mountain Boys who pioneered Vermont during the 1760-70s. The Commune Movement is just the latest of these defining eras of Vermont’s history, and its epitaphs and advancements are perhaps most apparent in their relative newness. The Bread & Puppet Theater (now considered a staple of Vermont culture), the dozens of food co-ops (perhaps the most per-capita in the world), a large free health clinic in Burlington (now employing over 60 people), a number of worker-run businesses (i.e. the Common Ground in Brattleboro), NOFA (and by extension Rural Vermont which began through NOFA), and countless farmers’ markets are all direct results of organizing done by Free Vermont and the communards of the 60s and 70s. However, its true legacy can perhaps best be seen through its indirect contributions.

Generational diffusion of the basic values of the 60-70s counter-culture has resulted in the left being more firmly em-

these pressures contributed to the eventual decline of the movement.

While many of the hippy communes collapsed due to lack of rational internal organization or focus [see Barry Laffan, *Communal Organization and Social Transition*, Peter Lang Publishing, New York, 1997] the decline of the more overtly political communes has more to do with political repression, disillusionment (as neither the local or urban insurrections came to pass), and again a new round of burn out. Just as they were compelled to evacuate the cities by the end of the 60s, the radical communards felt an increasing pressure, though be it maybe in a more personalized and defuse form, to abandon their communal lands in the face of a new backlash of political repression and interpersonal pressures. By 1976, following the end of the Vietnam War, less than half of the original 100 communes remained. By 1980 all but a few were gone. While many former communards remained in Vermont, and while a number of the institutions they founded continued, the general trend was overwhelmingly a turn away from models espousing collective living and working. Instead they increasingly turned to a private home life, or a traditional nuclear family arrangement. Cooperative farms were replaced with privately owned and operated organic farms. Radical agricultural organizations, such as the Northeast Organic Farmer Association (NOFA), drifted into a modest liberal reformism. Calls for insurrection were heard less, while calls for issue based reformism became louder. Where in 1970 the battle cry was for a complete new left social revolution, the mantra of the 80s was for a nuclear freeze. In short, as the Commune Movement broke down, and as its participants began to return to more individualistic-traditional living arrangements, their politics, though remaining left, grew more moderate.

During the declining phase of the Franklin Commune it is interesting to note the further observations of Lou Andrew. She contends that when the difficulties of operating the collective

fort to reach out with our ideas of cooperative business practices and wholesome food and subverting the system as it were through tremendously reduced prices... There was many co-op discussions about products we would offer that would bridge the gap, so we vigorously pursued non-food products from [wood]stoves to chainsaws, to ball jars, snowshoes, [and] skis; products that generally had interest to those around us who would not necessarily be interested in brown rice and soy beans. That helped a great deal simply breaking social barriers. They had to come into the co-op to buy it. ”

The experience of the Maple Hill Commune, who also took an active role in organizing demonstrations and teach-ins to end the conflict in Vietnam, is not dissimilar from experiences of dozens of other communes across the state. In short, the Commune Movement was a force, or at least a point of conversation, in many a small Vermont town.

Internally, a good number if not most communes sought to break the subtle and not so subtle chains of sexism. More often than not (and as a rule on Free Vermont Communes), decisions were made democratically, by all the members, housework was expected from males, while tasks such a splitting winter wood was also done by women. Childcare was collectivized and was performed by both sexes. Political meetings would include woman's caucuses. The Liberation Garage in Brattleboro held free auto repair classes, organized by Jane Kramer, especially aimed at teaching women how to fix their cars and trucks. In Burlington the Green Mountain Red collective was pivotal in opening a free woman's health clinic (which today is merged with the local Planned Parenthood). The Red Clover Collective organized a touring performance which taught and celebrated woman's history.

In many ways, Vermont communes, or at least the more politically active communes, did not suffer the same fractures that much of the broader U.S. left did when feminism came into its own in the early 70s. This was a result of the genesis of the Free

Vermont Movement. Free Vermont was essentially founded by the Red Clover Collective, which itself was an outgrowth of the older Newsreel Collective. And here, the Newsreel Collective already recognized the problems of internal sexism and found ways of correcting these tendencies.

Roz Payne, who was considered one of the political heavies of the movement, contends, "Free Vermont was a political activity that we had undertaken to organize and politicize all the [Vermont] communes. And we're the ones that...came out of a Newsreel Collective that talked about woman's issues starting in 67, 68, and 69 when we were making films in New York and we had those discussions. 'Why were only the women holding the microphones...and why are all the men holding the cameras?' Then John Douglas got cameras for [women] to use... These were issues that we brought up earlier. So we already had those issues [dealt with]... I never felt oppressed in my commune around the women or the men."

However, their efforts did not result in perfection. Female communard, Lou Andrews, recalls her days on the rural Franklin Commune (which was a core Free Vermont commune) as a time where she felt more liberated than previously in mainstream society, but one where men still had a disproportionate influence upon the general direction of the commune. In her opinion this influence was a subconscious force; one that was not guaranteed by formal process, but one that existed none the less.

As far as the division of labor goes, Lou, who now lives in Burlington, assesses her commune as a mixed bag, but one that clearly falls more in the direction of sex equality than does the traditional nuclear model. "It was always a struggle to get men to do the dishes... [But] we all gardened. Men and women canned the food. Men and women drove the horses. And men and women did the sugaring, although it was men who primarily were what we called 'the firemen' who in the sugar house fed the wood into the evaporator. And that was kind of a little

macho deal going on. Cause they got to where cowboy chaps (ha ha ha)."

Roz, current resident of Richmond VT, also recalls that not all communes were free of the traditional divisions of labor based on sex. "You'd find some of the more rural communes the women were in the kitchen, and the men were outdoors doing stuff. So [Free Vermont] would talk about that, and we would have women's meetings, a communal women's grouping that would break off to discuss the things that were happening with various people."

While Free Vermont sought to build equitable relations on the communes and a radical base of operations in the Green Mountains, it did not lose sight of its second purpose. As the local counter-culture became better organized, aid was offered to the urban revolutionary movement. In some instances children of Black Panthers from the eastern cities were sent north to attend the Red Paint collective school. Political aid was offered too. One former communard (who will remain unnamed) contends that the first dynamite procured by the Weather Underground Organization [an armed leftist group who carried out 27 bombings between 1969-1977 including those on the US Capital Building and the Pentagon] came from a granite quarry in Barre. John Douglas, for his part, states that Free Vermont helped establish safe houses for Weathermen and Black Panthers who went underground. They also facilitated clandestine border crossings into Quebec. But these activities were not committed without a price. Free Vermont communes were raided by the police and FBI. Government informants were known to be operating in many quarters. Douglas tells of a gathering he attended at the Franklin Commune (in far northern Vermont) where a group of federal agents posing as bikers offered to provide them with hand grenades and dynamite. Douglas declined. This surveillance and harassment ultimately lead to a pervasive atmosphere of paranoia and tension. In turn