

10-1-2012

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### Recommended Citation

Miller, Timothy. "New Mexico's New Communal Settlers." *New Mexico Historical Review* 87, 1 (2012).  
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol87/iss1/4>

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## New Mexico's New Communal Settlers

*Timothy Miller*

Communes have dotted American life since the seventeenth century, but never before or since has there been the kind of outpouring of communal living that erupted in the 1960s. This era, which encompassed much of that decade plus part of the 1970s, was a time of questioning, creating, and envisioning whole new ways to live.

No one place or event marked the beginnings of the communal tide of the long 1960s. Gorda Mountain, a loosely organized commune in California, pointed the way toward the new communalism as early as 1962. It operated on an open-land principle, welcoming anyone who showed up and wanted to settle there. Tolstoy Farm, another open-land community, was founded the following year in Washington State, and continues today. A few miles northeast of Trinidad, Colorado, the commune Drop City demonstrated that a new communal era was truly at hand. Founded in 1965, Drop City was a settlement of anarchist artists whose colorful car-top structures told the world that something startlingly fresh was bursting up from the underground. Drop City's founders were nothing if not audacious—they wanted to establish a whole new civilization. With their ambition and exuberance, they inspired young communards, who eventually numbered in the hundreds of thousands, across the United States.<sup>1</sup>

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A major nexus of the emerging communalism grew up in New Mexico, just a few dozen miles south of Drop City, over the next several years. Somehow the rural romanticism propelled the early communes found fertile ground in the river valleys and mountains between the city of Albuquerque and the border with Colorado, and dozens of communes appeared on the landscape in short order.

The first communes in the area could be considered spinoffs from Drop City. Word of that pioneer commune quickly spread through the area. Steve Baer, a visionary architect who lives near Albuquerque, showed up to refine the Drop City-domes into “zomes”—dome-like structures, often built with salvaged materials, that could be erected in any number of shapes and sizes—and soon began helping others construct the brilliant and economical architectural forms. The first such community was Drop South founded near Placitas between Albuquerque and Santa Fe in 1966 or 1967.<sup>2</sup> Over the next year or so several others followed: Lower Farm, Sun Farm, and Towapa, among others. Some of them endured for many years, but others had shorter life spans, most notoriously the Lower Farm. Regarded by the other communards in the area as a low-life enclave, Lower Farm broke up following the deaths of two resident junkies and the subsequent disappearance of the community’s self-appointed leader, who, suspiciously, had just had a dispute with one of the victims.<sup>3</sup>

But other communes that would flourish on higher notes and live longer soon landed in New Mexico. It is difficult to say just what drew so many counterculturists to northern New Mexico, given the region’s sometimes harsh climate, its pockets of poverty, and its populace that was, on the whole, unwelcoming to young hippies. Perhaps the area’s natural beauty, along with the reputation of Taos and Santa Fe as somewhat bohemian centers of the arts, exerted a pull. One romantic attraction was the presence of Indian peoples, especially the Pueblos, with their ancient cultures; the new communitarians often regarded Native Americans as spiritually profound and environmentally benign—living in harmony with all of nature.

One of the first communes of the next wave was the Lama Foundation, which arrived in New Mexico in 1967. Lama had begun as USCO (meaning “the company of us”), a commune occupying a former church in Garnerville, New York. Artist Steven Durkee and his wife, Barbara Durkee, purchased the building in the mid-1960s and soon other artists from New York City joined them. The Durkees moved on, however, and soon settled on the land that would become Lama, located just north of Taos near the tiny hamlet of San Cristobal. Lama was and is a spiritual community not grounded exclusively in any one tradition but drawing on many religious faiths, including Sufism,

various schools of Buddhism, and Judaism. Many New Age spiritual teachers, “Sufi Sam” Lewis and Ram Dass among them, have been associated with Lama. The commune continues in more or less the spirit of its founding, although the Durkees departed many years ago.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, others were also envisioning communal life in New Mexico. In 1967, around the time Lama was started, the founders of New Buffalo arrived. One of them, Rick Klein (no relation to Irwin B. Klein) used his inheritance to purchase one hundred acres of land near Arroyo Hondo north of Taos but south of Lama. He and his associates immediately started building adobe structures. They named their commune New Buffalo because they wanted the commune to be to its people what the buffalo had been to the Plains Indians: a source of all sustenance. The main building, which has recently been rehabilitated and updated, featured a large oval gathering room, a kitchen, and several bedrooms. Other buildings for farming activities soon followed.

New Buffalo’s population quickly outstripped the accommodations, and several tepees arose nearby. The commune also experienced high turnover; a large majority of the founding group, which had numbered around two dozen, left within a year. But word of the new commune, the very embodiment of the countercultural rural ideal, had spread far and wide. People kept coming to New Buffalo.

Life was never easy for communards at New Buffalo. The high desert of northern New Mexico and the remote location of the commune made basic life tasks difficult. Winters were long and harsh, and water for irrigation was scarce (annual rainfall can easily come up short of twelve inches). Essential supplies such as gasoline and groceries were many miles away. Basic chores were formidable. Gathering firewood, for instance, involved lengthy trips to accessible forest lands, and making adobe bricks and constructing buildings required large, ongoing investments of labor. No wonder many people tried New Buffalo for a week, a month, or a season and then moved on. Yet others stayed and kept the commune going. Although self-sufficiency was never absolutely achieved, the commune’s members did finally produce quite a bit of their own food, with, at various times, dairy goats, dairy cows, and chickens adding animal protein to their diet. In 1979 visitors reported eating an abundant meal made almost entirely of the land’s own produce. When money ran short, as it often did, members took on a variety of local seasonal jobs.

Thus life continued at New Buffalo for well over a decade, until the 1980s, when the population was reduced due to one family’s hostility towards almost everyone else. This unpleasant situation simmered for several years, but late in the decade, founder Rick Klein reclaimed the property and evicted the

problem residents. Rick and his wife, Terry, later opened a bed and breakfast in the now mythic building, an enterprise that lasted until the late 1990s, when they decided to sell. Luckily, the story did not end there. In 2003 Bob Fies purchased the central buildings and a few acres of land, began a major renovation, and sought new members to join a renewed community, albeit one less centralized than the original. New Buffalo lives on.<sup>5</sup>

A third commune showed up around the time Lama and New Buffalo were getting under way. In 1967 Five Star was founded as a Christian commune, but that orientation was short-lived. Located a few miles south of Taos, the Church of the Five Star Ranch, as it was originally known, quickly attracted visitors—often freeloaders—who soon overwhelmed the commune's older buildings. The founders moved to other lodgings nearby, and conditions at Five Star deteriorated. Transients began stealing the residents' personal possessions, including the simple woodstoves that heated several of the small buildings. With winter coming and no food or heat at Five Star, the property's owners evicted the deadbeats, who then proceeded to vandalize what was left. The serious communards, who had tried to make Five Star work, relocated to new digs at Mora and Pilar.<sup>6</sup>

Other communes followed the pioneering Lama, New Buffalo, and Five Star, whose presence made Taos a prime destination for the personal and communal journeys of many young counterculturists. The Hog Farm—which became famous partly for its operation of the “please force,” an unorthodox security force that used unobtrusive tactics to keep order at the Woodstock music festival in 1969—showed up in New Mexico around 1968 and established a small outpost that has continued since, although most of the Hog Farmers have long since moved on to California.<sup>7</sup> In 1969 several refugees from California's Morning Star Ranch, an open-land commune that had been bulldozed by the Sonoma County authorities, decamped to the top of a mesa owned by Michael Duncan, who subscribed to Morning Star's open-land principle. The new commune, often referred to as Morning Star East, was soon joined on the mesa by the Reality Construction Company, a tightly organized commune whose members saw themselves as preparing for the armed revolution that, they believed, was at hand and greeted visitors with guns. The situation deteriorated, and in 1972, Duncan, tired of hassles, evicted both communes from his premises.<sup>8</sup> The Reality Construction Company was physically recycled, however, when members of a new commune, Magic Tortoise, founded not far from Lama, carted away its adobe bricks for their own communal buildings.

Countercultural communes were often thought to be nests of free love, which was far from always true. One community that did espouse open

and unconventional sexuality was the Family, which settled into a rented adobe house near Taos in 1968. As many as fifty residents crowded into the small home, some of them working in countercultural businesses in Taos. The Family endured in Taos for about two years and then moved on, first to Detroit and then to Denver, where a few members remain together.<sup>9</sup>

Countercultural life in the Taos area was fostered in major part by benefactors, including Rick Klein and Michael Duncan, who provided land and sometimes money to several of the communes. Another benefactor who helped a number of communes was Charles “Chick” Lonsdale, who owned the house that the Family rented and supported some countercultural services, among them a grocery store and a free medical clinic. In 1969 he purchased fifty acres north of town that he made available to counterculturists who opened a commune called Lorien. That effort closed a year or so later after a dispute erupted into a gun battle that ended with arrests and sent some members to the hospital. Undeterred, Lonsdale tried again with a more structured community called LILA, for Lorien Institute for Life Arts. LILA lasted until 1972, when Lonsdale asked each of the ten residents, who had built simple houses there, to help him with the land payment due that year. When several of them declined, he closed LILA and sold the land in small parcels, a few of which were purchased by members of the erstwhile LILA.<sup>10</sup>

Another community, more spiritual than New Buffalo, the Family, or LILA, was started a few miles south of Taos in 1970. Sikh teacher Yogi Bhajan, who had arrived in the United States from India in 1969, began establishing teaching centers, many of them called Guru Ram Das Ashram. These centers eventually numbered in the hundreds. The community headquarters was soon established in Española, and it has survived despite Yogi Bhajan’s death in 2004.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond such substantial and relatively well-documented communities, quite a few countercultural outposts scattered (mainly) around the northern half of New Mexico contributed to the larger communal presence. One of many such outposts was El Rito, a small town that became a center of alternative culture. Its residents experimented with everything from environmentally benign technologies to LSD. Other communal scenes came and went in the area. At one point a commune at Long John’s Valley, for example, had members who farmed with horses and had parties that attracted new settlers from some distance.

Several of the Taos-area countercultural communes are long gone, but some continue. Lama and the Guru Ram Das Ashram are still pursuing their respective spiritual missions. New Buffalo may yet see a communal revival. Some survive in other ways, with a few former members going on to establish

communities elsewhere or to inspire a new generation of communitarians to build their own enclaves. The communal spirit has been alive and well in America for over three hundred years and shows no signs of disappearing.

### Notes

1. For a discussion of some of the early communes that paved the way for the communal explosion of the late 1960s, see Timothy Miller, "The Roots of the 1960s Communal Revival," *American Studies* 33 (fall 1992): 73–93; and Timothy Miller, "The New Communes Emerge: 1960–1965," chap. 2 in *The 60s Communes* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1999).
2. For a discussion of the creative architecture of Steve Baer, see Mark Matthews, *Drop-pers: America's First Hippie Commune, Drop City* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010).
3. Richard Fairfield, *Communes USA: A Personal Tour* (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin, 1972), pp. 164–85.
4. For more on the founding and development of Lama, see Ahad Cobb, *Early Lama Foundation* (San Cristobal, N.Mex.: Lama Foundation, 2008).
5. The two memoirs of communitarian Arthur Kopecky provide the most complete written history of New Buffalo. See Arthur Kopecky, *New Buffalo: Journals from a Taos Commune*, CounterCulture Series (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004); and Arthur Kopecky, *Leaving New Buffalo Commune*, foreword by Timothy Miller, CounterCulture Series (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006).
6. Five Star was well known and well discussed among New Mexico's new settlers, but little has been written about it. For one early account, see Sterling F. Wheeler, "New Mexico: No Mecca for Hippies," *Christian Century*, 1 July 1970, 829.
7. For snippets about the New Mexico phase of the Hog Farm, see Wavy Gravy, *The Hog Farm and Friends* (New York: Links, 1974). Wavy Gravy, previously known as Hugh Romney, took on his new moniker soon after the Woodstock festival.
8. Hugh Gardner, "Love and Hate on Duncan's Mesa: Morning Star East and the Reality Construction Company," chap. 7 in *The Children of Prosperity: Thirteen Modern American Communes* (New York: St. Martin's, 1978); and Robert Houriet, *Getting Back Together* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1971), 181–86.
9. For more on the Family, see Margaret Hollenbach, *Lost and Found: My Life in a Group Marriage Commune* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004).
10. Gardner, "From Hobbitland to Subdivision: LILA," chap. 6 in *The Children of Prosperity*.
11. Constance Waeber Elsberg, *Graceful Women: Gender and Identity in an American Sikh Community* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003).