

RR-faith

The Alternative Society

Perils Of Commune Living

Editor's Note: The commune is the distinctive life form, the badge of commitment that is the main support system of the Alternative Society. But communal living is not without peril, as examined in this dispatch, one in a series from the AP Special Assignment Team.

By KEN HARTNETT
SEATTLE, Wash. (AP) — Soaring Hawk, ex-pusher and proud superfreak, was getting ready to say goodbye to the Fecund Family and journey with his friend Prancing Bear up to the Yukon to watch the spring come in.

When Soaring Hawk (his real name was Arnie) pulled out of the commune on his motorcycle built for four people and three dogs and the American flag, the parting would be joyous.

But so was the commune. Its people were older—on the far side of 25. They were all on a spiritual trip—kundalini yoga. They were beyond drugs. They had financial resources. Within three years, when their farm and restaurant got established, they would, hopefully, be self-supporting.

Besides, said Arnie, the family was so close that "no matter where I am, I can tune in."

A thousand miles away near Santa Fe, N.M., Rick sat glassy-eyed in the sun, idly peeling an orange, his back propped against the adobe wall of the commune compound. He too was leaving. The parting would not be joyous.

Rick felt listless and demoralized. He could see the work that needed doing on the 100-acre spread. He could not stir himself to do it. Nor could he bring himself to eat at the communal table.

"God isn't there," he said.

Rick would move on but not back to the city, not back to his family. He was committed to the land. He was also committed to communal living. If one commune doesn't work for you, find another.

There are plenty to be found—some good or "together," some not-so-good and "untogether," some headed for survival, some toward ruin.

In the Alternative Society, the

Oregon and Washington State or to the lush dairylands of Wisconsin.

The commune movement, says Sociologist Bennett Berger, author of "Looking for America," has "exploded over the past year ... They are just everywhere."

"For us the future is in groups of people who establish more profoundly human relations with each other and their environment, those who return to the land and to communal forms living together ... those who scavenge the endless waste of a decaying society for the raw materials of a new culture," reads an anonymous message from a Northern California commune circulating through the hip community of Seattle.

Life in a commune is often emotionally exhausting. It can also be physically perilous.

Three cases of bubonic plague were reported in one commune-studded New Mexico county over the past two summers. All three victims survived. Hepatitis is a chronic problem, especially when there is a scarcity of water. Sanitary conditions are often primitive.

The hippie infusion into the country, an infusion often financed on inherited funds, reopens old wounds over land rights. In New Mexico, Chicano attacks on hippies who live in remote parts of the country are common.

"It's not easy to create an entirely new role and that's what they are doing," says a radical doctor in Seattle. "They were cowboys and now they've become Indians."

Urban communes are not as perilous but they can be just as trying.

John McGrane of Ecology-Action in Cambridge is a veteran of two communes. He now lives in an apartment.

"It's difficult enough to live in a one and one relationship. Our divorce rates suggest that and it's improbable that more than two people can live together and it's impossible that more than three people can live together unless they are very mature and very tolerant. I tend to be tolerant. But many people are



These are members of a city commune in Seattle. As so-

ciologist Bennett Berger says, the commune movement has "exploded over the past year

... They are just everywhere." (AP Wirephoto)

are not going to come down on business executive, lives communally outside Cambridge, Mass. She would never go back to her former way of life.

But in a commune in Albuquerque, Don Boyle is bothered by what he feels is a discharge of negative energy from a member of the household. Late at night, as the communards gather around the kitchen table, he makes a threat:

"I'm going to go up to my room and close the door and sit in my bed and send out such vibes that whoever's doing what they're doing is gonna get blown out the door."

Bad vibes can destroy a commune. So can psychological games.

"I'm trying to help you," says Kirby to a friend in an Albuquerque commune, "and you won't let me. You're hiding something from me and I'm the kind of guy that isn't going to let you. I'm going to keep after

housewife turned hip in Madison, Wis. "But collectively it can be done in a way that's probably much healthier for the children."

The woman, who has two children under five, says she tells them that they are far more fortunate than their playmates who have only one father. They have dozens—each of whom takes a transitory but real interest in the children.

Dr. Eva Wallen of the Bernalillo County health department in New Mexico is impressed with the care given communal children.

But like most structures in the Alternative Society, a purpose of the commune is for the long haul. "What we want to find is what to do with our old freaks," said Paul of Trout Fishing in America, a Cambridge free school.

Implied in building for the long haul are the age-old questions of how to regulate sexual customs and how to raise chil-

turn to the commune—to create the happy family they never had.

Dr. Wallen was surprised that communal venereal disease rates were no higher than they were—an indication, she said, that stable male-female relations were developing.

Sexual expression differs from commune to commune. Promiscuity seems most common in communes that attract the drug-oriented young still very much out for kicks. It is less common in the more stable communes, particularly those organized around a specific task or a political or spiritual goal.

In the Jesus house in Taos, for example, as many as nine young men and women sleep together in two beds; yet, the communards there insist that only the "married"—those Jesus brought together in a permanent union—enjoy one another sexually.

Love, and old-fashioned exclusivity, are very much alive in the Alternative Society. But so is the belief that people are not to be possessed but exist as free individuals with free bodies and free minds.

"In the old sex idea," said a 19-year-old in an Atlanta political commune, "the taboos made sex an abusive thing rather than a flowing thing. With us, sex is a flowing thing that happens naturally."

Not that hypocrisy doesn't remain.

One reason for the demise of the Seattle Liberation Front was the outrage of revolutionary women at what they considered their sexual exploitation. One of the male leaders was accused of seducing a 16-year-old girl, giving her VD, then leaving her.

The crushing blow to the SLF was the Sky River Rock Festival at which three women were gang raped.

In the Alternative Society as in the straight society, sex is often a way to escape boredom. And boredom can descend on a rural commune at least as easily as it can on a Manhattan apartment house.

Jim returned to Seattle last winter after almost a year in the country.

"As if the place makes a real

...more real than long hair, beards or hippie clothes, and far more chancy.

It is the main support system—economically and psychologically, for those who have decided to try to build their own way of life apart from the America that spawned them. The commune is their second family where they seek to grow up anew.

Like much in the Alternative Society, the communal idea is something that has been tried before. American history is studded with utopian and usually ill-fated attempts, such as Brook Farm and New Harmony, to recreate a lost sense of community aloof from the distinctions and competition of the outside world.

But, never before have communal experiments been launched on such a scale. This reporter, in extensive travels throughout the country for the past three years, has yet to visit a major city without its share of communes, where people are struggling to rid themselves of egos formed in childhood and needs shaped in a world they are trying to leave behind.

Now inside these urban communes, the dream is to get to the country—to Vermont, to Marin County outside San Francisco, to Northern California, to

in a commune one tends to polarize along the lines of the cleans and the sloppies and isn't very easy to handle. You have to remember that a lot of people in the youth culture have really deluded themselves into believing they are really beautiful people when in reality many of them are mirror images of their parents. But there's this myth that anyone with long hair or who shouts 'off the pig' is a beautiful person. This is the assumption people make.

"So when real conflicts develop, it is utterly impossible to arbitrate the hostilities. They are transformed into political dialogues. They become very abstract kinds of conflicts that are very seldom brought to personal levels and an explosion of one kind or another becomes inevitable."

The Fecund Family in Seattle expects conflicts and so far—in its year of existence—has been able to handle them.

"You know it is not going to be easy," said Joy, a 27-year-old sculptress from Milwaukee. "But you also know the people around you dig you and know that everyone around wants to help everyone else. When something goes wrong, we pick it up quickly and have it out in the open. You can do it because you know people are with you and

lem. The impulse is to follow an open door policy. The practice is to be selective. Politically oriented communes must guard against government agents. The culturally oriented must be on the lookout for "ripoff artists," freaks who steal to support a drug habit. Houses that ban drugs must be on the lookout for visitors who carry them. And all communes are wary of newcomers who would bring conflicting or "bad vibes" into the house.

Frenchy, 19, in Berkeley after running away from a New Jersey heroin charge, would like to find a commune. But for Frenchy, one of the hundreds of ill-educated, drug-ridden youths loosely lumped as "street people," finding one won't be easy.

He might be able to find a place in a "Jesus House"—A religious commune. But he would have to first accept Jesus. He tried that in Los Angeles. It didn't work. "For seven and a half hours they preached the Bible into my head," Frenchy said. "They called me a pagan because I didn't read the Bible. I told them I was a Catholic."

If Frenchy were political, he might be able to land a spot in a political house. But he doesn't believe in the revolution. "Some people can dig it. I don't. The only thing it gets is a split head."

If Frenchy had a special skill, knew carpentering or plumbing, he might be able to convince people that he could contribute at least money to a communal effort. But all Frenchy has are "street smarts." His employment prospects are bleak.

So he must panhandle to eke out a bare existence. Meanwhile, he helps form a lower class that is faced with the same kind of poverty problem that plagues the larger society's lower classes. Crime results. The fabled radical enclaves such as Miffland in Madison, Wis., and Berkeley take on a seedy look. Paranoia mounts. The older residents decide to flee the city—not to suburbia—but to a new commune in the country.

Money is a constant problem in virtually all communes, and money is one reason why communes are popular. If two people can live as cheaply as one, ten can live as cheaply as five. Few could handle a rent of even \$75 a month by themselves. With three or four friends, they can and do.

Usually, this means that someone in the house must hold down a straight job—a task that sometimes is rotated in the interest of fairness. What comes in, whether in the form of cash or food stamps, is pooled.

Claudette, 29, the ex-wife of a



A country commune inhabitant known as Sun carries his son, Shanti, out of a makeshift sauna bath at the Sheep Ridge ranch commune at Occi-

dental, Calif. Saunas are held every Sunday. Communes are a distinctive life form in the Alternative Society. (AP Wire-photo)

approach is to experiment. "I couldn't imagine raising children with just one other person," says a former suburban

tion: most communalists seem to come from homes without warmth or loving parental care. That may be one reason they

doesn't, he said. "To move to from. For the country you become a better person, right? Wrong. A flood of educated streaks came down on the place. isn't easy.

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