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Tensions in Paradise: The Om Commune as an Alternative Cultural Experiment

“The kids at Holiday would give you the shirts off their backs [...] they would give things away until they didn’t have enough for themselves”¹ -Nick Atchinson

Colorful psychedelic swirls adorned the hand-painted sign reading “OM” off Highway 9, just north of Ben Lomond, California. Holly Harman and Carol Garisto, two young girls from the Om Commune, had painted over the sign’s original text marking the Holiday Inn Cabins. This transition from family resort to hippie commune signified the beginning of a cultural experiment. With visitors from Neal Cassady to Charles Manson, the Om Commune quickly gained a reputation outsizing the small town it was tucked away in.² The Holiday Inn Cabins, founded in the 1940s, sat upon six-acres of picturesque forest, right off the San Lorenzo River. In 1969, the plot of land was turned over to a group of young adults for \$500 a month.³ Nestled in the redwoods of Ben Lomond, this group founded the Om Commune.⁴ Most of the first residents of the commune had most recently lived in the nearby 7-unit Boxer Apartments and decided it would ultimately be easier financially, spiritually, and physically to live communally. Gene and Sue Carlson led this core group from the Boxer Apartments into the Holiday Cabins in April of 1967, and within three months the cabins had a residency of 40 people.⁵

¹ Atchison, Nick. “American history of hippies in Santa Cruz Holiday Commune.” 1971. Anthropology 121, University of California, Santa Cruz, Transcript for Class Paper, 5-6.

² Harman, Holly. “Hippies at Holiday Inn,” Youtube. November 2, 2023.
<https://youtu.be/IT-szoIBbrA?si=SZZLNWtR5oEUfd1k>.

³ Atchison, “American history of hippies in Santa Cruz Holiday Commune,” 1.

⁴ Throughout this essay, I would like to point out that I will be using the phrases “Om Commune,” “Holiday Inn,” “Holiday Commune,” and “Holidays” interchangeably. In recent writings the commune has been referred to as the “Om Commune,” however Holly Harman mentions in her oral history that it was not necessarily called that at the time. Regardless, these variations in name will be referring to the same community settlement in Ben Lomond.

⁵ Harman, “Hippies at Holiday Inn.”

The political unrest in the United States during the late 1960s birthed a generation seeking alternatives to the “American Dream” ideals their parents once fantasized. The civil rights movement and tragedies of the Vietnam War plagued the minds of many Americans during this period. Some young people found themselves on the literal battlefield at the time of the 1969 draft lottery while others felt the burden of a cultural battle back in the United States. This disorder marked the beginnings of the counterculture movement which rejected many traditional Western ideas. Scholars, like Sociology Professor William Smith, who study communes and hippie communities, tend to see these groups as a product of the counterculture movement; an attempt “to change the existing world through politics and even revolution.”⁶ Often, historical memory envisions hippies as an extremely radical and almost uncompromising group that aimed for total social and political transformation. While these ideals were crucial to many in the hippie movement, it is not historically accurate to assume that *all* hippies lived with such absolute ideals.

In his book, Professor Smith goes on to mention a subsection of the counterculture called “alternate culture” which “focused on creating a new world by example.”⁷ This division from counterculture provides a more moderate-seeming perspective on the hippie movement; one that would also characterize a portion of the commune movement. This idea of leading through “example” suggests a much less action-oriented approach than the revolutionary zeal of counter culturalists. While counterculture hippies may have been more obvious in their terms of protest, the alternate culture vision proposes that the mere existence of these communes- such as the Om Commune- was an inconspicuous version of protest against the larger American society. The ideals of the Om Commune, often mischaracterized by the local community and media alike, did not necessarily fit into the traditional perception of the American hippie of the 1970s.

⁶ Smith, William. *Families and Communes: An Examination of Nontraditional Lifestyles*. (Thousand Oaks, California; Sage Publications, 1999), 90.

⁷ Smith, *Families and Communes*, 90.

Gene Carlson, the informal leader of the commune, estimated one-fourth of the residents were San Lorenzo Valley born and raised with most of its residents being 18 to 24 years old.⁸ While there was a limit on the amount of people who could actually live in the Holiday Cabins, visitors were welcomed with open arms. A guest of the commune, Max Hartstein, proclaimed that “they accepted anyone in at their dinner table.”⁹ Acceptance appeared to be a major philosophical theme at the Om commune, unlike more exclusive communes from this period. While the residents of the Holiday Inn would feed and house almost anyone who needed it, there were still some ground rules that visitors were inclined to follow. For instance, the Om Commune hosted weekly meetings that everyone on the property was required to attend. Such meetings discussed logistical things like how to allocate work to general disagreements of how to allocate space for group activities.¹⁰ Beyond the attendance of weekly meetings, the mention of rules, or even general structure, is sparse across primary sources. Considering that many communes and hippie groups of the period were anti-institutional in nature, the lack of rules was likely an effort to decrease institutional influence or political agendas within the commune.

To better understand how we can generally understand communes like the one at the Holiday I will provide a definition of communes from Sociologist Dr. Angela Aidala: “any group of five or more adults (with or without children) most of whom are unrelated by blood or marriage, who live together without compulsion, primarily for the sake of some ideological goal for which a collective household is deemed essential.”¹¹ She characterizes communes as having a shared “ideological goal”; a term that is vague enough to be all encompassing but requires at least some degree of structure in its foundation. With this definition, the ideological goal appears to be one of the most important aspects of a commune. Considering the historical context of these communes, one would only assume that most were

⁸ Harman, Holly. *Inside a Hippie Commune*. (Harman Publishing, 2013), 97.

⁹ Atchinson, “American history of hippies,” 4.

¹⁰ Atchinson, “American history of hippies,” 3.

¹¹ Aidala, Angela A., & Zablocki, Benjamin D. (1991) “Communes of the 1970s: Who joined and Why?” *Marriage and Family Review*, 89.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254372653_The_Communes_of_the_1970s (accessed November 25, 2023).

piloted by political motives. The term “ideological goal,” while having some political connotation, doesn’t necessarily *need* to be political and could be something simpler such as the goal of creating a deeper sense of community. In the chapter “Communes and Communitarianism,” anthropologist from University of Chicago, John Bennett, argues that the mission of the commune movement was motivated by search for the *gemeinschaft* and the individual’s identity within the larger community.¹² The term *gemeinschaft* was coined by Ferdinand Tonnies and translates to “community” from German.¹³ Bennett’s description provides us with insight into the motivations of the hippie commune movement that extended beyond the political sphere.

Likewise, this balance between community and one’s role within the community reflects the realities many young Americans faced in a country divided politically, one drafting unwilling young adults to fight for a cause they may not have believed in. The Baby Boomers of the Vietnam War had immense angst as they tried to understand themselves during such a period of grief and turmoil, asking reflective questions such as “Who am I?” and “What does it all mean?”¹⁴ With a future full of uncertainty, how to make sense of these dynamics was no easy question. While it was certain that thousands of young people hoped to entirely topple the American political system, this was not the goal of all who sought change. Instead of trying to completely transform the world from its current state as many counter culturalists hoped, alternate culturists look more closely at how to position oneself in the preexisting world and find community in a state of global chaos.

Moreover, Dr. Aidala’s study further confirms the importance in returning stability of the *gemeinschaft*, reporting through her research that the most common reason individuals joined communes was for what she calls “consensual community.” Aidala explains this as rooting from a desire for cultural

¹² Berger, Bennett. *The survival of a Counterculture: Ideological Work and Everyday Life among Rural Communards*. (Oxfordshire, England: Routledge, 2003), 64.

¹³ Smith, *Families and Communes*, 90.

¹⁴ Duncan, Russell. “The Summer of Love and Protest: Transatlantic Counterculture in the 1960s.” In *The Transatlantic Sixties: Europe and the United States in the Counterculture Decade*, edited by Grzegorz Kosc, Clara Juncker, Sharon Monteith, and Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson, 147. Transcript Verlag, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1wxt2b.9>.

coherence during a period of larger social upheaval.¹⁵ In a way, this response may seem somewhat contradictory to our current understanding of the hippie movement. Why would individuals fighting larger American systems desire “cultural coherence”? Russell Duncan’s characterization of the disoriented young American gives us a hint into why such coherence on at least some scale seemed so necessary. Need for coherence is ultimately what differentiates alternative culturalists from counter culturalists in their missions. Most of these commune residents, at least from the large sample Dr. Aidala collected in 1974, would appear to be in line with the alternative culture movement which emphasized exemplary change. Residents of the Holiday Cabins, and members of other communes studied by Aidala, exemplified the inclination for the return of *gemeinschaft*; something they believed the country needed most in this time. These residents found community in the Boxer Apartments and created the Om Commune, a place to share that sense of community and collective care. From Aidala’s work, we can see much stronger emotional motivation than a political one.

A statement by a member of the commune’s core group, Sue Carlsen, epitomizes the alternative culture view of the Om Commune: “we hope that this community will be an example for both the “Establishment” and what people usually term hippies.”¹⁶ From this statement, we can see that the Om Commune was not meant to politically change the “Establishment” but rather to be an example of how it should function collectively. It also suggests that alternative culturalists, such as those at the Om Commune, viewed themselves as distinctly different from the counter culturalists or as Carlsen refers to as “what people usually term hippies.” This distinction indicates that even at the time, mischaracterizations of the residents was common practice and were not well appreciated.

It is not to say that the hippies at Holidays did not have any history of political movement. For instance, after some of the Holiday’s residents were refused service at the Ben Lomond Grocery Store they hosted a sit-in in front of the store until they were allowed to purchase from the store again.¹⁷ Other

¹⁵ Aidala, “Communes of the 1970s,” 87

¹⁶ Harman, *Inside a Hippie Commune*, 96.

¹⁷ Harman, *Inside a Hippie Commune*, 150.

than this isolated instance, which likely stemmed from the general quarrels between Holiday residents and local business leaders, there are no sources that suggest residents of the Om Commune took significant political action. Even when the Peace and Freedom political party arranged a meeting to discuss conflict between the Holiday residents and valley locals, the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* did not report any aspects of the conversation that were political in nature.¹⁸ Rather, their lifestyle choices and mere existence became politicized by the media and then the larger public. In this process, the Om residents were misrepresented by the understanding of the traditional hippie. While aiming to provide the community a place to access food and shelter, the Om Commune began to come across to locals as a threat.

All of this brings into question: If the Holiday Cabins was created as a community space, why then did the community seem to have so much disdain for its residents? If you search for the Om Commune¹⁹ *Santa Cruz Sentinel* archives, almost every article will mention the tensions between the locals and the residents of the commune. The Sentinel recounts violent attacks on the commune by local vigilantes and the seemingly constant complaints of nude swimmers from the commune to local police authorities. Max Hartstein, a self-proclaimed “psychic alchemist” who stayed at the Om Commune, explained the most common type of people the commune got complaints from: “Weekenders complaining about people who lived and were expressing themselves and their right to live. The whole community of people who lived there that inhabited that area [...] at the Holiday Inn were local people.”²⁰ This description clearly creates a sense of tension within the Ben Lomond Community between the “weekenders” and permanent residents. While permanent residents were likely to have personal connections to the Om Commune – whether they had family members or friends who were residents – the weekenders were likely to be more socially disconnected from the community at large.

¹⁸ “Hippies and squares sit down to talk.” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*. 1968-03-10. *SCPL Local History*. <https://history.santacruzpl.org/omeka/items/show/92238>. Accessed 25 Nov. 2023.

¹⁹ Or search equivalent/related phrases to the commune.

²⁰ Atchinson, “American history of hippies,” 14.

With multiple sources confirming that many of the residents of the Om Commune were locals or children of locals, this can give us insight into why the commune so quickly gained attention from authorities. For instance, families who were wealthy enough to own real estate in Ben Lomond for vacation held at least some level of political or economic influence within the community, maybe more than their lower class counterparts. The community resources that the residents of the Om Commune believed they were providing were of no use to the wealthy class who likely saw such individuals as parasitical to their pastoral vacation spot. Keeping in mind the importance of tourism in Santa Cruz and its surrounding, this is just a hypothetical interpretation of its impact on the relationship between weekenders and Om Commune residents.²¹

Even families that lived more permanently in the Boulder Creek Area distrusted the Om Commune and its motives. The wife of a local business owner was quoted by the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* “I’m all for peace and freedom, but not going hand in hand with Communists” in response to the invitation for discussion with the Holiday residents.²² With the lingering effects of the Second Red Scare that took place two decades prior, the historical memory, especially for older Americans, gave the idea of communal living a troublesome connotation. Many also worried how the Om Commune’s existence may soil the reputation of their hometown. In an article in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, a member of the Ben Lomond Community was quoted on behalf of the locals; “we are disgusted with your publicity given this area- making it the beatnik area of your country.”²³ A place that had historically attracted vacationing upper middle class families would no longer seem appealing if it publicly accepted hippies. Fear for an influx of hippies into the region only fueled these disagreements. An article from the Blue Star edition of

²¹For more information about tourism access the following sources:

Limerick, Patricia Nelson. “Seeing and Being Seen: Tourism in the American West.”

Gendron, Richard, and G. William Domhoff. “The Rise and Decline of the Santa Cruz Growth Coalition & The Progressive Coalition in Power: 1981-1989.”

²² “Hippies and squares sit down to talk.” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*.

²³ Wallack, John. “Hippies Find ‘Where It’s At.’” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*. July 16, 1967.
<https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=SCS19670716.1.6> (accessed November 25, 2023).

the *San Jose News* that reads “Ben Lomond, ‘Invaded’... Hippies in the Hills... Some Families Moving.”²⁴ Even though many sources confirm that a large portion of the Holiday residents were born and raised in Ben Lomond, the media perpetuated the idea that these hippies were “invading” their homes, only inflaming pre-existing prejudice. Ironically, in the Om Commune’s reclaiming of the *gemeinschaft*, locals feared their community would change in its operations, residents, or otherwise. In actuality, their desire to preserve their community was much more in agreement with the ideology of the residents of the Holiday Inn than they seemed to think.²⁵

One of the other largest staunch opponents of the Om Commune were local business owners who “worried about their impact on retail and tourist operations.”²⁶ It would be understandable for business owners to hold such an opinion since considering the commune’s emphasis on self-sufficiency and free resources. With no doubt Gene Carlson’s comment to Los Angeles’ Oracle Magazine about the commune’s priority of “rejection of the attainment of tangible merchandise as a goal” could not align with the goals of local business.²⁷ Essentially, if the hippies wouldn’t contribute to the local economy, they would not be valuable customers of local business. Because the residents of Holiday Inn presented an economic deficit to the town, they became a subject of local politics. This transition from an economic issue to a political one, exemplifies the politicization of groups like the Om Commune that were never inherently political. Ultimately, it was many of the business owners that fueled the distaste against the commune members for their own financial motives. A woman who attended a community meeting in 1968 between the Holiday residents and its neighbors reported that “a small element of merchants seeks to keep the situation stirred up” after business leaders refused attendance.²⁸ Her quote suggested that it

²⁴ Quote from San Jose News found in Harman, *Inside a Hippie Commune*, 150.

²⁵ It would come as no surprise that the ideology of the Om Commune was comparative to that of the surrounding community. After all, the commune was founded by well-known community members and attracted the teenage children of the locals. Because of such intermixing, the line between Om Commune members and local residents was blurred.

²⁶ Harman, *Inside a Hippie Commune*, 98.

²⁷ Harman, *Inside a Hippie Commune*, 97.

²⁸ “Hippies and squares sit down to talk.” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*. 1968-03-10. *SCPL Local History*. <https://history.santacruzpl.org/omeka/items/show/92238>. Accessed 25 Nov. 2023.

was common knowledge at the time that some business leaders used the conflict between communards and locals as a tool for their own political and economic incentives.

Interestingly, any instances of aggression reported in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* are instigated by the locals against the hippies and not vice versa. Even Carlson tried to mend the relationship between the locals and residents by inviting the general public to see the life of the commune first-hand and discuss ideologies. With the exception of a couple of journalists, nearly no one accepted the offer. *Santa Cruz Sentinel* staff John Wallack wrote how the Om Commune “rejected a role in society that requires their efforts in producing materialistic items. But they add that it is society that is rejecting them, not vice versa.”²⁹

To those outside the commune, the way commune members shared resources and shared space with anyone who needed appeared as a constant state of protest to a larger system. But in reality, the Om Commune was a space for safe experimentation. In its essence, the commune was free from strict guidelines to living which in turn allowed its residents to navigate their own role within the community. In the political turbulence of the late 60s and early 70s, feelings of cultural coherence and community were at an all time low. By using communal work to take away the burden of attending to physical needs, members could focus on their individual moral, social, and emotional nourishment. By reestablishing the *gemeinschaft*, or recreating the sense of community these young Americans craved, they could answer their questions of individuality. In the search for a consensual community, business owners and weekenders of Ben Lomond feared the communal-style living system would negatively affect the town's tourism and economy. Locals worried about their town's reputation and how it may change internally. The residents of Holiday did not found the Om Commune in an attempt to end capitalist systems or international conflict but to prepare people to find their own internal fulfillment in spite of these systems. Rather than remodeling entire political and economic systems, the Om Commune taught members

²⁹ Wallack, John. “Holiday Community strives for Spiritual Enlightenment.” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*. July 17, 1967. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=SCS19670717.1.2> (accessed November 25, 2023).

through example how to navigate these inherently immoral systems through sustainability, acceptance, and donation.

My research on the Om Commune provides larger implications about modern understandings of the hippie and commune movement of the 1960s and 70s. The public mind has a tendency to conceptualize hippie culture as lowbrow culture that revolved around sex, drugs, and profanity. Undeniably this was an aspect of some hippie groups, however, this acknowledgement does not mean that there was no value in these groups' ideas and historical legacy. It is important to understand why these misconceptions exist and to look at a broader historical perspective to more accurately understand the values of these groups. This is especially important for groups that do not rely on written documentation which is often the preferred source for historians. Furthermore, when modern history is not preserved, we cannot accurately pass on historical narratives to future generations. Acknowledging how the public mind can corrupt historical memory allows historians to reexamine their biases when conducting research. While the public viewed the Om Commune as another stereotypical lowbrow hippie community, the residents of the Holidays remind us that the views of the majority can't always be taken as historical fact.

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