

two hundred years of american communes

Two Hundred Years of American Communes: A Journey Through Collective Living

two hundred years of american communes have woven a fascinating tapestry of idealism, social experimentation, and community building across the United States. From the early utopian settlements of the 19th century to the vibrant intentional communities flourishing today, these communes have reflected changing attitudes toward society, economy, and the environment. Exploring this rich history sheds light on how Americans have continuously sought alternatives to mainstream living, often driven by desires for equality, cooperation, and shared purpose.

The Origins of American Communes: 19th Century Utopian Experiments

The story of two hundred years of American communes begins in a time of great social upheaval and religious revivalism. The early 1800s were marked by rapid industrialization, westward expansion, and a growing discontent with existing social structures. These conditions gave birth to a wave of utopian communities, many inspired by religious or philosophical ideals.

The Shakers and Their Legacy

One of the most well-known early communes was the Shaker movement, formally known as the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing. Founded in the late 18th century and peaking in the 19th, Shakers established self-sufficient villages emphasizing celibacy, communal ownership, and gender equality. Their craftsmanship and innovative agricultural techniques left a lasting imprint, even as their numbers dwindled.

Brook Farm and Transcendentalist Roots

Another significant episode in the history of American communes was Brook Farm, a transcendentalist community founded in Massachusetts in 1841. Inspired by the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and other intellectuals, Brook Farm sought to blend manual labor with intellectual pursuits, promoting a balance of mind and body. Though it lasted only a few years, the experiment highlighted the desire to harmonize individual freedom with collective responsibility.

The Evolution Through the 20th Century: From Socialist Ideals to Counterculture

As two hundred years of American communes unfolded into the 20th century, the motivations and forms of communal living evolved. The rise of industrial capitalism and the hardships of the Great Depression fueled socialist and cooperative movements. Later, the cultural shifts of the 1960s and 70s brought a new wave of communes inspired by countercultural values.

The Role of Socialist and Cooperative Communities

During the early 1900s, communities like the Commonwealth Club and the Equality Colony in Washington State emerged, rooted in socialist principles. These groups aimed to create equitable economic systems based on shared labor and profits. While many struggled to survive due to external pressures and internal conflicts, they contributed to a broader dialogue about economic justice and community resilience.

Counterculture Communes of the 1960s and 70s

Perhaps the most widely recognized period of American communes came during the counterculture movement. Fueled by opposition to the Vietnam War, environmental concerns, and a desire to reject materialism, thousands of people established intentional communities. Examples include The Farm in Tennessee and Twin Oaks in Virginia. These communes experimented with alternative lifestyles, from collective child-rearing to sustainable agriculture and consensus-based governance.

Contemporary Communes: Sustainability and Intentional Living in the 21st Century

Today, two hundred years of American communes have culminated in a diverse landscape of intentional communities that address modern concerns like environmental sustainability, social inclusion, and mental well-being. These newer communes often blend technology with traditional communal values, adapting to contemporary challenges while maintaining a commitment to shared living.

Eco-Villages and Sustainable Communities

Many modern communes identify as eco-villages, emphasizing sustainable

building practices, renewable energy, and organic farming. Communities such as Dancing Rabbit in Missouri serve as models for reducing ecological footprints while fostering social connection. These groups often offer workshops and open their doors to visitors, promoting awareness of environmental issues through lived experience.

Technology and Governance in Modern Communes

Unlike earlier communes that relied heavily on face-to-face consensus, some present-day communities incorporate digital tools to facilitate communication and decision-making. Online forums, project management apps, and virtual meetings help maintain transparency and participation even with larger or more dispersed groups. This fusion of high-tech and high-touch approaches reflects the adaptability of communal ideals to contemporary life.

Lessons from Two Hundred Years of American Communes

Studying two hundred years of American communes offers valuable insights into human cooperation and the quest for meaningful community. While no commune has been perfect or permanent, their collective stories reveal recurring themes and challenges.

- **Shared Values Are Crucial:** Successful communes often begin with a strong, clearly articulated set of principles that guide behavior and decision-making.
- **Flexibility and Adaptation Matter:** The ability to evolve structures and practices in response to internal dynamics and external pressures can determine longevity.
- **Economic Sustainability Is Key:** Balancing idealism with practical economic models helps communes avoid collapse due to financial strain.
- **Community Dynamics Require Careful Attention:** Conflict resolution, communication, and inclusivity are ongoing processes that need nurturing.

Tips for Those Interested in Joining or Starting a Commune

If the idea of communal living resonates with you, here are some pointers drawn from two hundred years of American communes:

1. **Research Extensively:** Learn about different community models to find one that aligns with your values.
2. **Visit Communities:** Spending time in existing communes can provide firsthand experience of communal life.
3. **Clarify Expectations:** Open conversations about finances, roles, and governance prevent misunderstandings.
4. **Build Strong Communication Skills:** Effective dialogue and conflict resolution are vital in tight-knit groups.
5. **Be Prepared to Compromise:** Living communally involves balancing individual needs with collective goals.

Reflecting on the Enduring Appeal of Communes in America

Looking back on two hundred years of American communes, it's clear that the desire for community and shared purpose remains a powerful force. Each wave of communal living reflects broader societal trends, from religious fervor to political idealism to ecological consciousness. Even as the forms and motivations change, the underlying quest—to create spaces where people can live cooperatively, sustainably, and authentically—continues to inspire.

Whether as historical experiments or thriving modern collectives, American communes remind us that alternative ways of living are not only possible but essential for imagining a more connected and compassionate society.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are American communes and how did they originate?

American communes are intentional communities where people live together sharing resources and responsibilities. They originated in the early 19th century as experiments in social, economic, and religious reform.

What was the significance of the Oneida Community in American communal history?

The Oneida Community, founded in 1848, was significant for its radical social practices like communal property and complex marriage. It influenced later communal experiments and demonstrated the challenges of sustaining utopian ideals.

How did the 1960s counterculture movement impact American communes?

The 1960s counterculture movement led to a resurgence of communes as people sought alternative lifestyles based on peace, love, and shared resources, often linked to anti-war and environmental activism.

What economic models have American communes used to sustain themselves?

American communes have used various economic models including shared labor, cooperative businesses, communal ownership of property, bartering systems, and sometimes integration with local economies to sustain themselves.

How have gender roles and equality been addressed in American communes?

Many American communes have actively challenged traditional gender roles by promoting equality, shared domestic responsibilities, and inclusive decision-making processes, though the degree of success varied among communities.

What challenges have American communes faced over the past two hundred years?

Common challenges include internal conflicts, financial sustainability, legal issues, leadership disputes, and external societal pressures that often led to the dissolution or transformation of communes.

Are there any American communes still active today, and what do they look like?

Yes, some American communes remain active today, often focusing on sustainable living, ecological practices, and cooperative economics. They tend to be smaller and more adaptable, incorporating modern technology and values.

Additional Resources

Two Hundred Years of American Communes: An Analytical Review

Two hundred years of American communes reflect a unique and evolving aspect of the United States' social and cultural landscape. From the early utopian experiments of the 19th century to contemporary intentional communities, communes have served as laboratories for alternative living, challenging conventional norms around property, governance, and social organization. This article delves into the historical trajectory, ideological underpinnings, and socio-economic impacts of American communes, offering a detailed exploration of their enduring presence and significance.

The Historical Context of American Communes

The genesis of American communes dates back to the early 19th century, a period marked by rapid industrialization, westward expansion, and social upheaval. These communal experiments were often motivated by religious, philosophical, or socio-political ideals. Rooted in the broader utopian movement, these early communities sought to create self-sustaining societies based on shared ownership, cooperative labor, and egalitarian principles.

One of the earliest and most notable examples is the Shakers, formally known as the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing. Established in the late 18th century, Shaker communities emphasized celibacy, communal property, and pacifism. Similarly, the Oneida Community, founded in 1848 in New York, experimented with complex marriage and communal child-rearing, reflecting radical departures from mainstream family structures.

These early communes were often isolated geographically, enabling members to live by their ideals away from mainstream society. However, many faced internal conflicts and external pressures, including economic challenges and legal disputes, leading to the dissolution or transformation of several communities.

Key Features of 19th-Century Communes

- **Shared Property:** Private ownership was typically abolished, with land and resources held collectively.
- **Collective Labor:** Members contributed labor to communal enterprises such as farming, manufacturing, or crafts.
- **Religious or Philosophical Foundations:** Many communes were founded on spiritual beliefs or social theories advocating equality and cooperation.

- **Governance Systems:** Decision-making was often democratic or consensus-based, although some adopted hierarchical structures.

The Evolution Through the 20th Century

The 20th century witnessed significant transformations in the concept and practice of American communes. The Great Depression, two world wars, and shifting cultural landscapes influenced communal living trends. Notably, the 1960s and 1970s counterculture movement sparked a resurgence of interest in communes, with an emphasis on ecological sustainability, anti-capitalism, and alternative lifestyles.

During this period, communes like the Farm in Tennessee and Twin Oaks in Virginia gained prominence. These communities integrated modern ideals such as environmentalism and social justice into their frameworks. Unlike many of their 19th-century predecessors, these communes often incorporated secular and non-hierarchical governance models, emphasizing consensus and individual autonomy within the collective.

Comparing 19th and 20th-Century Communes

Aspect	19th-Century Communes	20th-Century Communes
Foundational Motivation	Religious and utopian ideals	Countercultural, ecological, and political ideals
Governance	Often hierarchical or religiously led	Consensus-based and egalitarian
Economic Structure	Collective ownership, agrarian focus	Mixed economies including crafts, services, and education
Social Norms	Strict codes, often celibacy or complex marriage	Emphasis on personal freedom and communal responsibility

The Contemporary Landscape of American Communes

In the 21st century, American communes continue to evolve amidst new challenges and opportunities. Modern intentional communities often prioritize sustainability, technological integration, and social inclusivity. The rise of eco-villages, cohousing projects, and cooperative housing reflects a diversification of communal living models.

Technological advancements enable some communes to maintain connectivity with broader society while preserving their distinct lifestyles. Additionally, many contemporary communes engage actively in educational outreach, ecological restoration, and social activism, positioning themselves as models for sustainable and equitable living.

Modern Features and Challenges

- **Environmental Sustainability:** Emphasis on renewable energy, organic farming, and low-impact living.
- **Economic Viability:** Many communities develop small businesses, artisanal crafts, or eco-tourism to sustain themselves financially.
- **Social Diversity:** Efforts to include diverse populations and promote inclusivity regardless of race, gender, or background.
- **Legal and Zoning Issues:** Navigating property laws and municipal regulations remains a significant hurdle.

Pros and Cons of Living in American Communes

Living in a commune offers unique benefits and challenges that vary depending on the community's structure and goals.

1. Pros:

- *Strong Sense of Community:* Members often experience deep social bonds and mutual support.
- *Shared Resources:* Collective ownership can reduce individual financial burdens.
- *Alternative Governance:* Opportunities to participate in democratic decision-making.
- *Environmental Benefits:* Sustainable practices reduce ecological footprints.

2. Cons:

- *Limited Privacy:* Communal living can challenge personal space and

autonomy.

- *Conflict Resolution:* Consensus decision-making may slow processes or create tensions.
- *Economic Uncertainty:* Dependence on communal businesses can be risky.
- *Legal Complications:* Property and zoning laws can restrict communal expansion or viability.

Impact and Legacy of American Communes

The legacy of two hundred years of American communes extends beyond their immediate membership. These communities have influenced broader societal trends in sustainability, cooperative economics, and social innovation. For example, the cooperative movement, local food networks, and eco-conscious urban planning all draw inspiration from communal principles.

Moreover, communes serve as testing grounds for alternative social arrangements, offering insights into human cooperation, resource sharing, and conflict management. While many communes have dissolved over time, their ideas continue to permeate cultural dialogues about community, equity, and the environment.

The ongoing relevance of communes also invites critical reflection on their adaptability. As societal values and technologies change, so too do the forms and functions of communal living. This dynamic history underscores the resilience and complexity of American communes as a social experiment spanning two centuries.

Through this lens, two hundred years of American communes represent not only a historical phenomenon but a living dialogue about collective life, challenging assumptions about individualism and community in the American experience.

Two Hundred Years Of American Communes

two hundred years of american communes: *Two Hundred Years of American Communes*
Yaacov Oved, 2017-09-08 The United States is the only modern nation in which communes have continuously existed for the past two hundred years. This definitive history of communes in America examines the major factors that have supported the existence and growth of communes throughout

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branch of the Hutterites, the book includes the Conference Letters and Regulations, published for the first time in English translation, that provide invaluable insights into strategies for managing change.

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two hundred years of american communes: Globalization of Communes Yaacov Oved, 2017-09-08 After World War II, communes and cooperative communities became internationally oriented in their membership and networking began to develop. Unlike earlier such enterprises, these groups shared an openness to international relationships. This was evident both in the groups’ social composition, and in the extension of networks beyond their own country. Such globalization opened up the possibility of comparative analysis, which has become a trend in research since the 1950s. The dynamism and speed with which voluntary communities have spread throughout the world is impressive. In the 1950s there were only a few hundred such societies, but by the end of the last century there were thousands. These have taken a variety of forms. There are religious and secular communes, intentional communities, ecological communities, co-housing projects, various types of Christian communities, communities of Eastern religions, and spiritual communities inspired by New Age thought. Yaacov Oved shows that such societies maintain a community based

on cooperation and expand their influence through newspapers, television, and the Internet. Their chief characteristic is their openness to the outside world, and their search for a way to move beyond a world of individualism and competitiveness. To accomplish this, they embrace all the tools of the modern world. Oved observes that those who predicted the failure of communes and intentional communities failed to appreciate the extent to which people in today's society aspire to communal life. This book answers the doubters and does so with a sense of deep historical understanding.

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sustaining economic equality. By drawing on extensive historical data and the stories of his pioneering grandmother who founded a kibbutz, his uncle who remained in a kibbutz his entire adult life, and his mother who was raised in and left the kibbutz, Abramitzky brings to life the rise and fall of the kibbutz movement. The lessons that *The Mystery of the Kibbutz* draws from this unique social experiment extend far beyond the kibbutz gates, serving as a guide to societies that strive to foster economic and social equality.

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two hundred years of american communes: *Practical Directions for the Speedy and Economical Establishment of Communities, on the Principles of Mutual Co-operation, United Possessions and Equality of Exertions and of the Means of Enjoyments* William Thompson (Writer on Political Economy.), 1830

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