

two hundred years of american communes

Two hundred years of American communes have spanned a rich tapestry of social experimentation, idealism, and community living. From the early 19th century to the present day, various groups have sought to create alternative lifestyles that often challenge mainstream American values. These communes have taken on diverse forms, reflecting different political ideologies, religious beliefs, and social goals. This article will explore the history, evolution, and impact of American communes over the past two centuries.

Historical Context

The concept of communal living in America can be traced back to the early settlers, but it gained significant momentum during the 19th century. The Industrial Revolution and the urbanization of American society prompted many individuals to seek refuge from the social upheaval of the time. The desire for community, equality, and a simplified way of life led to the establishment of various communes.

The 19th Century: Utopian Communities

The 19th century was a fertile period for utopian experiments in America. Influenced by European socialist movements and religious revivalism, several groups sought to create ideal societies based on shared values. Notable examples include:

1. **The Shakers:** Founded in the 1770s, the Shakers were known for their celibate lifestyle, communal living, and simple worship practices. They established numerous communities across the Northeast and Midwest, emphasizing craftsmanship and sustainable agriculture.
2. **Oneida Community:** Established in 1848 in New York, the Oneida Community was founded by John Humphrey Noyes. It practiced complex marriage, where all members were considered married to one another, and engaged in communal child-rearing and labor.
3. **Brook Farm:** Founded in 1841 in Massachusetts, Brook Farm was a transcendentalist experiment that aimed to combine intellectual and manual labor. It attracted many prominent figures, including Nathaniel Hawthorne and Margaret Fuller, but ultimately failed due to financial difficulties.
4. **Amana Colonies:** Established by German immigrants in Iowa in the mid-19th century, the Amana Colonies practiced a form of communal living based on religious beliefs, with a focus on agriculture and craftsmanship.

These communities were often short-lived, but they set the stage for future communal movements by highlighting the tensions between individualism and collectivism in American society.

The 20th Century: New Waves of Communal Living

As the 20th century unfolded, the spirit of communal living experienced a resurgence, particularly during the counterculture movement of the 1960s. This period was marked by a rejection of traditional societal norms, as young people sought alternative lifestyles that emphasized peace, love, and communal support.

Counterculture Communes

The 1960s and 1970s saw the establishment of numerous communes across the United States. Some of the most notable include:

1. **The Farm:** Founded in 1971 in Tennessee by Stephen Gaskin and his followers, The Farm became a prominent example of a spiritual commune. It focused on sustainable living, organic farming, and a commitment to peace and social justice.
2. **Twin Oaks Community:** Established in Virginia in 1967, Twin Oaks is a long-standing intentional community that operates on a labor exchange system. Members share resources and responsibilities, working together to create a self-sufficient lifestyle.
3. **Drop City:** One of the first countercultural communes, Drop City was founded in Colorado in 1965 by artists and idealists. It became a hub for artistic experimentation and was known for its innovative geodesic dome structures.
4. **Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage:** Founded in 1997 in Missouri, Dancing Rabbit is a modern ecovillage that emphasizes sustainability and environmental stewardship. Members live in a cooperative manner, focusing on renewable energy and organic farming.

These communes were not only places of residence but also centers for cultural and social change, often advocating for civil rights, environmentalism, and alternative lifestyles.

Modern Communes and Intentional Communities

As the 21st century progresses, the definition of communes has broadened to include various forms of intentional communities. These modern communes often emphasize sustainability, social equity, and shared values, reflecting contemporary concerns about the environment and social justice.

Types of Modern Communes

1. **Ecovillages:** These communities focus on sustainable living practices, ecological design, and community engagement. Examples include EcoVillage at Ithaca, New York, which promotes sustainable agriculture and cooperative living.
2. **Co-housing:** Co-housing communities consist of private homes clustered around shared spaces,

encouraging social interaction and collaboration. These neighborhoods often prioritize sustainability and inclusivity.

3. **Spiritual Communities:** Many modern communes are founded on spiritual or philosophical principles. Examples include the Zen Mountain Monastery in New York and the Bhakti Yoga community in New York City.

4. **Artistic Communities:** Some communes, like The Mud Factory in New Mexico, focus on fostering artistic expression and collaboration among artists, writers, and musicians.

Challenges Faced by Communes

Despite their idealism, communes have faced numerous challenges throughout their history. Some of the most common issues include:

1. **Financial Sustainability:** Many communes struggle to maintain financial stability, often relying on member contributions, fundraising, or income-generating projects. The challenge of balancing communal living with economic realities can lead to conflicts and eventual dissolution.
2. **Interpersonal Conflicts:** Living in close quarters can exacerbate personal differences, leading to conflicts among members. Effective communication, conflict resolution, and shared decision-making are essential for maintaining harmony.
3. **Cultural Isolation:** Some communes may become insular, limiting their connections with the outside world. This can hinder growth, diversity, and the ability to adapt to changing social and economic conditions.
4. **Legal and Zoning Issues:** Many communes face legal challenges regarding land use and zoning regulations. Navigating these bureaucratic hurdles can be time-consuming and costly.

The Impact of Communes on American Society

American communes have played a significant role in shaping social movements and alternative lifestyles. Their contributions include:

1. **Social Change:** Communes have often been at the forefront of social justice movements, advocating for civil rights, gender equality, and environmental sustainability.
2. **Cultural Innovation:** The artistic and cultural expressions emerging from communes have influenced mainstream culture, contributing to movements like the environmental movement and the counterculture of the 1960s.
3. **Sustainable Practices:** Many modern communes have pioneered sustainable living practices, influencing broader societal shifts toward environmental consciousness and ecological responsibility.
4. **Community Resilience:** Communes have demonstrated the importance of community support and

cooperation, providing models for resilience in the face of social and economic challenges.

Conclusion

Over the past two hundred years, American communes have evolved from utopian experiments to diverse intentional communities that reflect contemporary values and concerns. While they face challenges in sustainability and interpersonal dynamics, their impact on social change, cultural innovation, and sustainable practices is undeniable. As society continues to grapple with issues of inequality, environmental degradation, and community disconnection, the lessons learned from the history of American communes may offer valuable insights into creating a more just and connected world. The spirit of communal living endures, reminding us of the power of collective action and shared values in the pursuit of a better future.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are some key characteristics of American communes that have emerged over the past 200 years?

American communes often emphasize collective living, shared resources, and communal decision-making. They may also focus on sustainability, alternative economies, and social justice.

What historical events influenced the rise of communes in America during the 19th century?

The rise of transcendentalism, the Second Great Awakening, and the search for utopian societies influenced the establishment of early American communes, such as the Oneida Community and Brook Farm.

How did the counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s impact the formation of communes in the United States?

The counterculture movement led to a resurgence of interest in communal living, as many sought alternatives to mainstream society, resulting in the creation of numerous communes focused on peace, love, and shared values.

What role have communes played in environmental activism in the past two centuries?

Communes have often been at the forefront of environmental activism, promoting sustainable practices, organic farming, and ecological awareness, as seen in communities like the Farm in Tennessee.

Can you name some contemporary American communes and their missions?

Contemporary communes include the EcoVillage in Ithaca, NY, which focuses on sustainability and community resilience, and Twin Oaks Community in Virginia, which emphasizes income-sharing and cooperative living.

What challenges do modern American communes face today?

Modern communes face challenges such as legal restrictions, economic sustainability, integration into broader society, and maintaining a cohesive community identity among diverse members.

How have American communes adapted to technological advancements over the last two centuries?

American communes have adapted by incorporating technology to enhance communication, manage resources, and promote their values, while also navigating the balance between communal living and individual privacy.

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