



America Is a Utopian Experiment—and Always Has Been

By Kyle Chayka • February 19, 2014 • 6:00 AM

In 1967, an affable 23-year-old with an easy grin named Arthur Kopecky, the son of activist parents, was working in New York City at the NPR affiliate WBAI radio station, which would later become known as a formative influence on the burgeoning counterculture movement. “I was getting a hint of this cultural phenomenon occurring mostly on the West Coast,” he explains in a phone call from his current home in Sebastopol, California. One day, in the middle of the city, he had his big epiphany.

“I was in Manhattan and watching people come out of the offices at 5 p.m. This incredible crowd of people seemed so tenuous. What happens if these jobs go away? This was unsustainable,” he says. “There was something that people could do together. The chore was going to be to make an example of living together.”

By 1969, Kopecky had moved west, dropped out of the University of California-Berkeley after two semesters, bought a Wonder Bread truck that he called the Mind Machine, and set out across the United States for Vermont with a few friends. He would prove that a new kind of life was possible, one closer to nature and more compatible with his ideals of communal living. And his experiment would succeed—for the most part.

From the accidental discovery of this entire landmass in the 15th century to the pioneering Puritans who fled their native country to pursue religious worship on their own terms, the Transcendentalists and their environmental spirituality, and New Age back-to-the-landers like Arthur Kopecky, America has always been driven by a particular brand of utopianism, the idea that at any time, in any context, it is always possible to start a new life and create an intentional society ruled by the beliefs of its participants.

During the 1840s, as many as 84 different utopian communities popped up across the country. It was one of the most volatile decades in American history.

IN 1681, A CENTURY after a failed first attempt to colonize what would become the United States in Roanoke, Virginia, William Penn established the colony of Pennsylvania before he even arrived on the new continent. A Quaker who called in a debt with King Charles II to get the land, Penn created his new colony as a “Holy Experiment” that would allow for the religious

freedom Quakers were not allowed in both England and the Puritan American colonies. “You shall be governed by laws of your own making and live a free, and if you will, a sober and industrious life,” he guaranteed his new citizens.

Penn’s enlightened government provided for fair treatment of Native Americans, a ban on military, work for all, and universal suffrage (for men, at least). Pennsylvania rapidly became one of the best-known colonies on the continent and its policies eventually inspired the U.S. Constitution—but all was not well in this nascent utopia.

Penn had “sloppy business practices” and “couldn’t be bothered by administrative details,” according to Jim Powell, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. His business manager Philip Ford embezzled from Penn’s estates and took advantage of his boss’ tendency to blindly sign any paper handed to him with a contract that gave ownership of Pennsylvania to Ford, who then charged Penn exorbitant rent. (The founder eventually regained control, but not before being thrown in debtors’ prison.)

AFTER ARRIVING IN VERMONT in 1969, Kopecky and his cohort landed at Rock Bottom, a farm belonging to one Woody Ransom. One hundred people roosted in Ransom’s house and on the land. “It was a little crowded,” Kopecky recalls. “I had a tent outside. In the winter, I would leave my shoes in the house so I could wade out under the cypress tree where it was dry. That was part of the movement, living close to nature, planting gardens rather than developing hotels.”

The group stayed for a year and a half, working the farmland until their host decided their time was up. “Woody said, ‘I thought you guys were going to move along at some point, and we said, ‘Oh yeah, that’s right,’” Kopecky says. They headed for Drain, Oregon, a town in the southeast of the state as dreary as its name implies, and colonized another farm, picking up some tractors along the way. They lasted six weeks before heading north to Eugene, and then on to Bellingham, Washington, and Minnesota, where some friends had bought property and the group could camp out.

None of Kopecky’s temporary homes turned out to be sustainable in the way he imagined when he left Manhattan. But they weren’t endpoints so much as gypsy stops on the way to someplace else. His group was “being helpful, being happy, being resourceful,” he says. The back-to-the-land movement let people “go from community to community and maybe find one where they fit in.”

“We had always had the notion of heading south, for Arizona or New Mexico,” Kopecky says. It was there, in Michigan, he stumbled upon New Buffalo, the community that became his home for almost a decade.

CRISES OFTEN PRECIPITATE RADICAL breaks with mainstream society. In 1837, speculative lending in the Western U.S.—along with a decline in cotton prices and a popped land bubble—caused a financial panic. Forty percent—353—of the young country’s 850 banks shut down. The dollar deflated. “A lot of people were out of work,” says Sterling Delano, a scholar who studies the era. “People were thinking that what they were doing wasn’t worth very much.

Mills in Lowell, Massachusetts, attracted women who worked 12- to 16-hour days. There was this sense of dehumanization.”

The social ennui created conditions not unlike those in the 1960s. “It’s only a few decades since the founding of the nation with all that hope and promise,” Delano says. “A couple of decades later you have tens of thousands of people dropping out of mainstream society.”

During the 1840s, as many as 84 different utopian communities popped up across the country. It was one of the most volatile decades in American history, according to Sterling. “We were into everything: feminism, diet reform, utopian communities, educational reform,” he says. It was the era of Transcendentalism, belief in “the divinity of the self” springing from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s 1836 *Nature*: “As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions. A correspondent revolution in things will attend the influx of the spirit.”

Though Henry David Thoreau’s commune of one at Walden in 1845 (“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life,” he wrote) may have become the most famous American example of retreat from society, the utopia renaissance included much larger, more organized efforts to create new intentional communities.

While Emerson and Thoreau argued that “in order to bring about change in American society, you need first to reform yourself,” Delano says, others like George Ripley, a high-power minister and graduate of the Harvard Divinity School, and the teacher and writer Amos Bronson Alcott believed that “unless you re-organize the social institutions, the individual will never be able to fully develop all of those inherent gifts that each of us supposedly has”—the great American values of self-realization and the pursuit of happiness. Ripley and Alcott would go on to create two different societies, one influential, the other infamous, and both terribly ephemeral.

In 1841, Ripley left his post as an influential minister. He “walked away from it in order to build a castle in the sky,” Delano says. “He believed he could do it.” Ripley sold 10 shares in his new venture, Brook Farm, in West Roxbury, Massachusetts, for \$5,000, including one to the author Nathaniel Hawthorne. The farm developed slowly, but the majority of the community’s income came from its school, attended by an international group of paying students who wanted to learn from well-known Transcendentalists—but open to all in the community. “Regardless of socioeconomic background, if you came and worked you could get a good education,” Delano says. “The overwhelming majority went there because they knew they could have a better life.”

The project was forever on shaky financial footing, however. Courting the fad for the utopian socialist thought of French philosopher Charles Fourier in what was partly an attempt to get funding and attention, the community began the construction of a massive Phalanstery in 1844. Inspired by Fourier’s ideas, the \$7,000 building was designed as a self-contained ecosystem that would house 14 families along with single residents.

At the time, 120 people lived at Brook Farm, and the situation had begun to look bleak. Some complained about the newly strict conversion to Fourierist doctrine. A November 1845 outbreak of smallpox briefly quarantined the community and shuttered the school. In 1846, the uninsured

Phalanstery burned to the ground in a fire. One year later, six years after its founding, Brook Farm closed. As resident John Codman recounted, the community members drifted apart like “apple petals falling softly to the ground.”

“He wasn’t really willing to listen,” Delano says of Ripley. “He was very convinced that his vision was right, that they needed to do it his way.”

A UTOPIA BUILT ON the whims of a single person isn’t much of a utopia at all. In 1843, Amos Bronson Alcott decided to found Fruitlands, a community based on strict vegetarianism and ascetic living—no hot water, no artificial light, no animal labor. Alcott, who knew nothing about farming, bought a generations-old dairy farm in Harvard, Massachusetts, and promptly decided it would be more suitable for growing fruit, which it was not. Ruled over by its founder and lacking any real agricultural expertise, Fruitlands never attracted more than 16 people and didn’t last six months.

IN HIS INFLUENTIAL 1948 book *Walden Two* the American psychologist B.F. Skinner sketches out a utopian community based on Thoreau’s embrace of nature, but on a much larger scale. A town of 1,000 members resides in a clutch of farmhouses and buildings made of rammed earth. Each person has a specific, separate-yet-equal role in running the community, a spare-yet-not-uncomfortable system for living.

“The only reason we have a vast federal department is that millions of people find themselves trapped in overgrown, unworkable living spaces,” Skinner wrote in his introduction to a reprint of the book. “But something is wrong when it is the system that must be saved rather than the way of life that the system is supposed to serve.” Hence the need to, yet again, start anew.

The parable of *Walden Two* inspired several real-life communes in its own right, including Twin Oaks Community in Virginia, which is still active today at a population of around 100. Yet by the end of the book, even *Walden Two* takes on a slightly sinister cast as its founder, T.E. Frazier, plays God in his tiny universe. “I look upon my work and, behold, it is good,” he tells the book’s wary protagonist while he surveys the town from a hilltop nicknamed the Throne.

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IN 1971, ARTHUR KOPECKY and his group were camping out near Black Rock Hot Springs in New Mexico when they met a woman living at the nearby New Buffalo commune who invited them up to dinner. “There was this place,” Kopecky says. “Just what we wanted to create.”

At that point, New Buffalo had been around for four years. Founded on a 150-acre farm owned by the poet Rick Klein, there was a 5,000-square-foot main building made of adobe and some loose agriculture operations. But “symbolically, the last of the original people had left,” Kopecky says. “We were second generation.”

With the 30 to 40 people who stayed at New Buffalo for the summers, Kopecky built out the agricultural systems, planted perennial crops, and eventually developed a functioning dairy, which sold products to surrounding towns and generated a fair amount of income for the community. But the revenue caused greater divisions in the already fractured residents.

Iris Keltz, a resident in 1970, recalled of the time, “The people I’d met the previous year who still lived at New Buffalo were either lost to drugs, or searching for a stable relationship, or a calling.” “Some people left and they weren’t replaced,” Kopecky says. “It was this vacuum where it was easier for some pretty rough people to move in and take over.” The money coming in provided an incentive to exclude Kopecky, who was managing the farming and dairy and bringing order to the commune. “If it’s everybody is against you and everybody’s equal then we can kick you out, and that’s what happened,” he says.

Amidst personal conflicts and power struggles, Kopecky ended up isolated. When he was out in the field one day, a resident they called Army Joe started taking shots at him with a gun. “I wasn’t in for war, so that was it,” he says. He left New Buffalo after eight years to work on dairy farms, eventually settling in California.

THERE ARE A NUMBER of intentional communities around where Kopecky now lives in Sebastopol. In the small, new societies he sees today, there’s an emphasis on sustainability and the original tenets of back-to-the-land. “The movement has matured; it has a much better chance of lasting,” he says.

Does he feel bad about what happened at New Buffalo? “I did always know that it could possibly fail or explode,” he says. “It certainly wasn’t a happy feeling. I’ve got a certain toughness that I was able to pick up and go on when I knew it wouldn’t do me any good to stay in the neighborhood and talk about what might have been.”

In George Packer’s *The Unwinding*, the journalist grandly lays out what he sees as the central narrative of our times in this country, a great unspooling that started around 1960 of “the coil that held Americans together in its secure and sometimes stifling grip.” Yet he freely admits just pages later that “there have been unwindings every generation or two.” The truth is that America is always in the midst of coming apart and putting itself back together. Our current milieu of Tea Parties and crypto-anarchist leakers and autocratic billionaires is just another swirling cauldron of competing struggles to build something different, the same impetus that drove Penn and Ripley and Alcott and Skinner and Kopecky as well as all the people they worked and lived with.

How Kopecky sums up a life spent looking for the right community, the situation in which a new structure could bloom, might well apply to the country as a whole: “This is an experiment, it’s a cause, it’s a purpose.”