

sa, Calif., Wed., May 7, 1969

Lou Gottlieb Deeds Morning Star Ranch to a New Owner--to God

By DON ENGBAHL

Lou Gottlieb yesterday filed in the County Recorder's office a grant deed to his 30-acre Morning Star Ranch.

Giving it to God.

The legally embattled hippie leader and philosopher said he filed the document to set an example to "religious people all over the world" that the exclusive ownership of land is "the original sin . . . from which all bad stuff flows."

Transferring the title to the "rightful owner," said Dr. Gottlieb, is a "big load off my mind."

The move was symbolic of the tall, bearded musician's long-standing contention that no one should be denied access to any land.

Whether it will make any difference to Sonoma County's legal machinery, which has been enforcing an injunction—against Dr. Gottlieb—that says only he may live at the ranch west of Graton remains to be seen.

"It will depend," he said yesterday "on the degree of religious conviction of the people in this county."



LOU GOTTLIEB RECORDS GIFT OF MORNING STAR RANCH
Dr. Gottlieb (left) Watches As Recorder Snyder Stamps

can only suggest that neither that's not bad, to make a be- lie- go of his land." You nor Yaweh will have a liever in less than 16 minutes. Although he now main- tainable title."

Mr. Snyder, however, didn't see it in quite those religious terms; he later said he still thinks the deed is meaningless. Dr. Gottlieb says he'll continue to pay the taxes: "It's pre-

time in de-tension: Some Northern California Experiments in Open Land

Sarah A. Lewison

In October 1968, Lou Gottlieb, owner of 31 acres north of San Francisco went before his local Board of Supervisors to offer his property to the people of Sonoma County “as an experiment in living.” In his presentation, Gottlieb elaborated on the advantages of “Land Access To Which Is Denied No One.” He argued that free access to land would reduce the problem of human conflict, by eliminating “the territorial imperative,” and asked Supervisors to support a study to decide conditions of the county’s acceptance of the land. Continuing, Gottlieb described “a new town that would be designed by the people who live in it and marked by folk architecture.”¹ Failing to convince the County of the benefits of this bequest, in spring of the next year, Gottlieb transferred the property directly to God through a legitimate deed signed at the Sonoma County Recorder’s office.

This delirious episode in ideological philanthropy is documented in *Home Free Home*, Ramon Bayaron Sender’s online book about two 60s open land communes² - Morningstar and Wheeler’s Ranch³. Through interviews and anecdotes, former residents describe a period of time without social or economic rules or boundaries. Their experience at these “open-door” communes carried such impact that, over 30 years later, commune members maintain ties through a list-serve that provides a stream of conversation on present day concerns: politics, spirituality, healthcare and open land.⁴ Their accounts of self-organized rural life meet and exceed the stereotypes of Northern California hippie culture preserved by period photojournalism: long-hair, ‘free’ sex, hallucinogens, hedonism and hepatitis. Beyond the personal reflections that particularize the somewhat familiar narratives about the hippie movement, however, is an approach to the political that was, and continues to be invisible to a political and cultural movement fragmented by geography, political strategy, and perceptions of style.

Land Access To Which Is Denied No One⁵ can be viewed today as a critique of property that was overshadowed by the spectacular affect of national socio-political movements whose anti-authoritarian goals it shared. Gottlieb’s pursuit of a way to keep 31 acres open for an autonomous community of all species exposed a muddle of contradictions underlying American society and law. The legal conundrums he encountered enticed “straight” lawyers to prepare lengthy documents for the Court in defense of an individual’s Constitutional right to dedicate real property to an invisible Deity. Gottlieb’s own arguments aligned God’s ownership with the creation a new society inspired by ethics, security and love. Through the case of Morningstar, we can recognize political aspirations in a commune movement often coded as apolitical, withdrawn, or even infantile from the outside (certainly in comparison to the engagement of contemporary

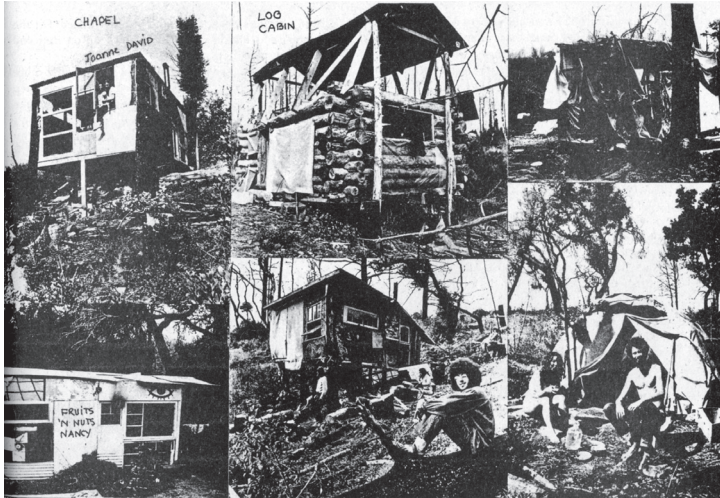


Fig. 4-2

Maoist and socialist organizations), but also from within— for Morningstar hippies were ideologically reluctant to separate out political threads from whole fabric, contributing to an impression this was a capitulation of politics to lifestyle. The unorthodox legal appeals pursued by Morningstar's former owner are relevant to contemporary conflicts in land and social justice, and bear antecedence in the politically charged religious radicalism of 17thc Protestants opposing the enclosure of the Commons. Gottlieb's needling of the legal system highlights the absence of recourse guided by ethics within our current legal system. Finally, the overall project of open land illuminates the economic relations between space and time, the urban and the rural, and provokes the question of how time: spare time, extra time, drop out time, might become politically charged.

Worke together, Eat bread together, declare this all abroad.

- Gerard Winstanley, from a vision (1649)⁶

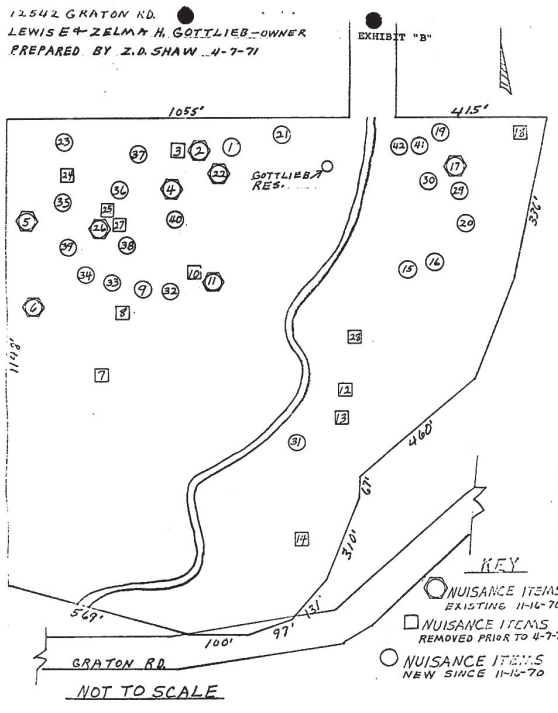


Fig. 4-3

Morning Star Diggers will swap work and organic vegetables for what have you. Diggers are determined to find a way of living that's human, person-to-person. Money makes life impersonal. It's our hope at Morning Star to establish a system of barter with our neighbors.

-A sign at a local Sonoma County store, circa 1967

...It seems from the psychological, theological and sociological point of view to name God as grantee will bring out the best in anyone who is - who feels a custody over this land. How really should we live on the earth when we are not concerned at least with this tiny, little pilot study with maximizing the net?

-Lou Gottlieb

It was cheap to live in San Francisco in the 60's, and even cheaper due to an extensive network of communes and informal associations for shar-



Bruce Baillie, Justin, a goddess, Lou, John standing; Mama Dog, Marjorie, Ramon, Katy the Dog, and Victoria seated. Late summer, 1966. (22)

Fig. 4-4

ing housing and food. Legend has it there were always crash pads where one could sleep and fuck and get stoned as well.⁷ People who left the city were not leaving because of the expense, like they might today, but for a retreat from the urban spectacle. Ramon Sender, a composer, author and co-founder of the San Francisco Tape Music Center, wanted to start an ashram.⁸ Through music circles, he met Lou Gottlieb, a bass player with the highly successful *Limelites* folk group. Gottlieb had bought the land as an investment, but influenced by his own recent experiences with meditation and LSD, he offered to let Sender move up, and soon followed along. When Gottlieb, Sender and their partners moved to the ranch, filmmaker Bruce Baillie, and Berkeley's Open Theater Gallery directors Ben and Rain Jacopetti joined along in an exodus from the city. These people were mature artists; musicians, filmmakers and teachers for whom the space of the country represented time to work on their own interests.

During that first year, 1966, someone brought apples from a tree on the land down to the San Francisco Diggers' Free Store that was in the Haight.



Fig. 4-5

The Diggers had broken off from the San Francisco Mime Troupe to produce direct actions that would engage the crowds of people who were starting to pour into San Francisco from all around the country. Among other things, the Diggers were giving away food and clothing to people, demonstrating an economy based on free exchange. They asked Gottlieb if they could garden at the ranch to grow food for the city, and began bringing other people up there.

Sonoma County, where the Ranch is located, is practically a bedroom community to San Francisco. Morningstar's proximity meant people didn't have to fully commit to going "back to the land." People could visit for a couple days to check it out, and weekends found several hundred munching on brown rice prepared by full-timers. With 31 acres to distribute their bodies, wastes and vocal chords, there was a relaxed attitude toward visitors, and the Diggers even made it a practice to "rescue" people who were having a hard time of it in the city by bringing them up to the



Fig. 4-6

ranch. Not everyone was prepared for the social and practical skills required to live in such a rustic setting; the point being that this was not what we would characterize today as a planned intentional community- it was anarchy.⁹ In *Home Free Home*, Sender describes a point when Gottlieb is asked to evict someone, and he discovers that he can't. He had a vision – part of a longer story about his own spiritual changes – that informed him he had no right to send anyone away, ever. As before, people stayed as long as they wanted, negotiated with each other or not, and debated or ignored issues like land capacity, where to crap, and how much to wash. These became subjects for confrontation by adjacent property owners who found hippies generally offensive, and hippies next door especially onerous. Complaints were soon registered with the authorities for specific grievances; everything from the smell of poorly buried feces to what was, for one neighbor, the unimaginably horrifying sight of 10 naked men standing on their heads.

By 1968, Gottlieb was served an injunction against habitation on the

land by the County. He was charged thousands in fines for improper sanitation, for maintaining an unlicensed 'organized camp,' and in the wake of the injunction, for trespassing on his own property. "I always thought this was a disorganized camp," quipped the comedian. For over two years, residents were repeatedly hauled to jail for sleeping on the land. On returning, they found their shelters had been bulldozed, bringing the question of the rights of a private landowner on his own land up for public inspection and debate. Families and women moved to nearby Wheeler's Ranch. Indomitable, Gottlieb continued to generate ideas that might save the commune; these included attempts to visit and seduce- "to love"- all the neighbors who signed petitions opposing the commune, and at last, his dedication of the land to God.

The earth is the mother of us all; and to pay rent will be one day understood as turning mother into a prostitute and hiring her services

... perhaps from the way that the public under the guidance of the new owner treats this land, we may have some real guidelines for how the rest of Mother Earth should be treated. If we continue to treat her the way we have been doing, we are rushing headlong for inevitable cataclysm. It is precisely for that reason that God has been named the grantee

-Lou Gottlieb, from court related documents

In a series of appearances at the Sonoma County Courthouse, Gottlieb and his lawyers argued for the validity of a deed to God, citing legal precedents that require only a valid deed and a named grantee. In his statements to the Court, Gottlieb repeatedly described the necessity of an "owner" whose interest in the property is not economic, and whose purview is eternal, e.g. outside of modern conceptions of time and progress. In one session, the Judge allows Gottlieb to pursue his arguments for God as grantee, while the prosecuting attorney impatiently insists they not prolong the proceedings any further, since the Deity on the deed, "clearly has not the ability to witness for himself." It makes good theater, and concludes with a challenge to the State's Constitutional and jurisdictional impropriety in making the assumption that "God is not a person." With humor and passion, Gottlieb exposes the absurdity of a state under God under which God has no claims.

Scholars and land activists who seek ethical parameters for land use decisions frequently view Gottlieb's use of a religious argument dismissively. In the context of the period, however, it made sense; a few years earlier, a defendant won the right of conscientious objection from military service based on religious beliefs, and a year later, a second Supreme Court ruling on CO status allowed the personal ethics of the applicant alone to trump belief in a Supreme Being.¹⁰ Even after losing the case, Gottlieb continued researching the ways religious belief would legally validate open land.

While attempts to preserve open access to Morningstar (and subsequently Wheeler's, where many communards moved) failed in court, the



LOU GOTTLIEB, CENTER, WATCHES EVICTION SIGNS PREPARED
 Building Inspector Amaroli and Undersheriff Cozzolino at Work

Press Democrat Photo

Fig. 4-7

temporary creation of a space that was, in relative terms, “outside” of the land-as-commodity system made an effective incubator for ministering to a new consciousness. Morningstar residents discovered something about what it means for humans to live on land; of a deepening knowledge of place. Those who participate in the list serve continue to cultivate these kinds of ideas. Gottlieb, of course, was not nuts in suggesting that territorialism creates conflict.

All space is already occupied by the enemy, which has even reshaped its basic laws, its geometry, to its own purposes. Authentic urbanism will appear when the absence of this occupation is created in certain zones. What we call construction starts there. It can be clarified by the positive void concept developed by modern physics. Materializing freedom means beginning by appropriating a few patches of the surface of a domesticated planet.

-From Basic Program of the Bureau of Unitary
 Urbanism by Kotanyi and Vaneigem 1961

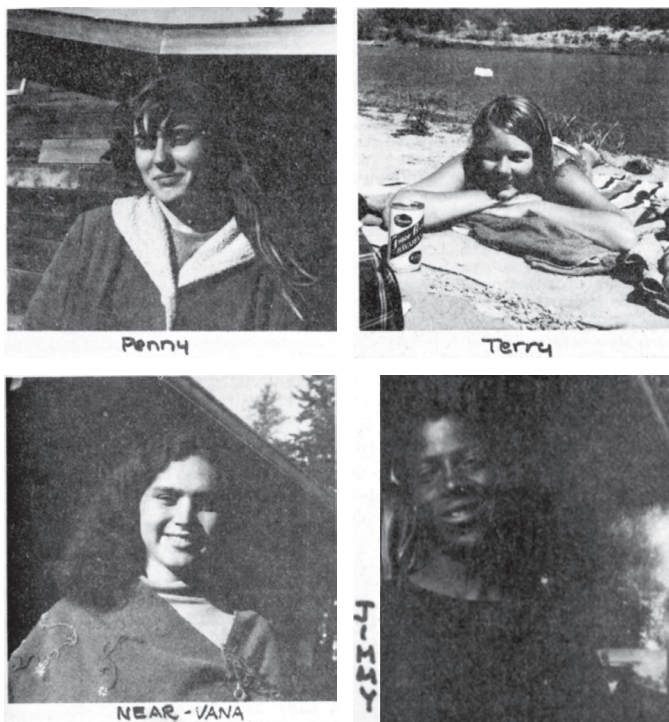


Fig. 4-8

Sender points out that there were different ideas about what they were doing. While he imagined it an ashram and persisted in creating meditation schedules and routines, he believed Gottlieb saw it as a big performance piece. Gottlieb's partner, who called it a "uni-nursery," was perhaps closest to the mark.

This was indeed a retreat that excluded no one. While the call of open land summoned individuals seeking dawn meditation, brown rice and sacramental use of LSD, it also beckoned urban drifters being harassed for what today would be called quality of life crimes. The parking lot was dominated by winos, and throughout the property wandered a miscellany of the unstable, asocial or simply clueless- abandoned in the predatory atmosphere on Haight Street. Open land functioned as a geographic pressure valve, a messianic compensation for the uneven development of the city. Ramon Sender writes, "We had dudes come up edgy and aggressive, and a few days later I'd see them smiling and relaxed. Living close



Fig. 4-9

to Nature is the best therapy one can receive, especially surrounded by loving and accepting brothers and sisters.”¹¹ Morningstar people regarded the problems of dysfunctional newcomers as symptomatic of larger social failings, and offered these individuals fraternity and the space needed to heal their mutilated psyches, a zone for recovery. In trying to locate the political legibility here in relation to a larger movement at the time—and to its historical treatment, I think these expressions of concern for an *other* outline a denigrated sort of political expression that sublimates individualism.

In analyzing how historians have recorded the 1968 general strike in France, Kirsten Ross notes that individual narratives tended to obscure the political cross identifications that linked workers and students. “May 68 had very little to do with [...] the students or youth who were its instigators. It had much more to do with the flight from social determinations, with displacement that took people outside of their location in society, with a disjunction that is between political subjectivity and social group.

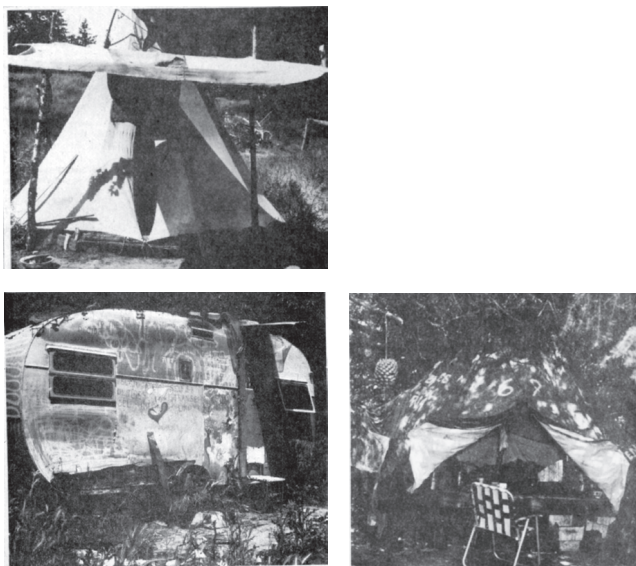


Fig. 4-10

There was an effacement of identity in favor of communal goals that is now missing from the record, what she calls “a shattering of social identity that allowed politics to take place.”¹²

Ross emphasizes how the French strike reflected a unity of response across a large part of the population.¹³ In the United States, anti-authoritarianism was expressed through multiple strikes, actions, postures, retreats, programs and occupations. Our social histories are too diverse, and our geography too immense to approach the coherence of over 9 million French people striking for a month. It is nevertheless tempting to seek analogues in the US experience. Ross’ observation of the movement’s fragmentation by the historicized individualization of experience does ring as familiar. What is the legacy of this same year of dissent in the United States? Much of what survived the 60s did so in forms that could be defanged or assimilated. The progressive programs sponsored by the Black Panther Party in dozens of African American communities were sabotaged by infiltration and subsequently appropriated by the government. The five-

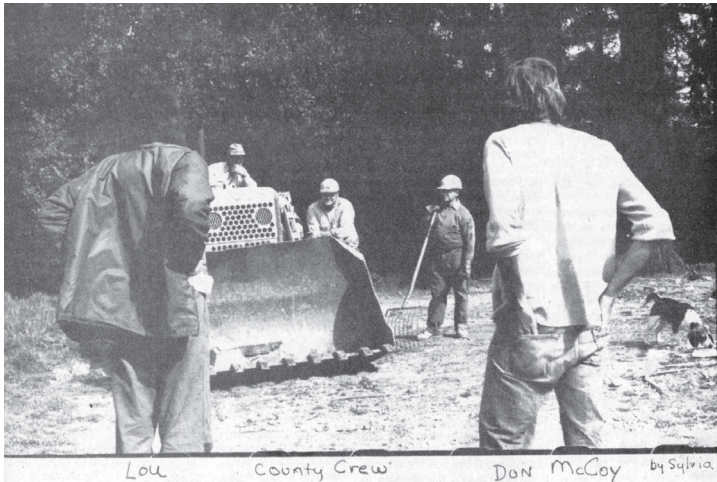


Fig. 4-11

month strike at San Francisco State College for broader educational access resulted in discreet academic reforms such as Black and Ethnic Studies that legitimized new areas of study *within* the academy. Some reforms brought needed changes, but others merely allowed for lifestyle shifts that ultimately functioned as handmaidens to a progressive modernism and, concomitantly, commodity forms. The ideas of voluntary primitivism expounded by hippies kind of went out of style once factories began producing tie-dye.

In the United States, we got liberated sexual norms and food stamps. Popular memories of a more unified left tend to become fragmented by social identities based in geography, class and color. The alliances between movements that did exist are often buried; for example, some Northern California open land communes did host and protect more militant activists¹⁴, and in the 70s, the work of hippie back-to-the-landers fostered the environmental movement.

On the surface, however, the San Francisco scene was indulgent and

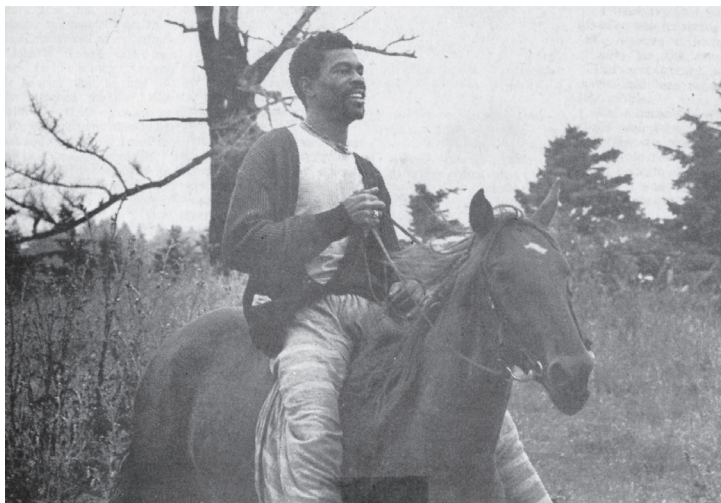


Fig. 4-12

frivolous, and there was a high concentration of drug use, sacramental and not. In 1967, the sensational image of masses of unkempt teens drew a lot of media coverage, and certainly obscured some detail. San Francisco's Summer of Love gets especially celebrated for its own colorful display, a rainbow of orgasmic freedom separated out from its arousal and detumescence. By dint of association- location and favored chemicals, Morningstar was part of this "scene".¹⁵ Morningstar people were eager to be part of this publicity; excited share their commitment to a lifestyles of voluntary primitivism, and seemingly trusting of the writers and photographers who mediated their lives for public exposure. They saw reduced consumption as an answer to the degrading forces of capital, and wanted to propagate the joy this awareness produced. The aesthetic sensuality of the hippies, and their practical integration of the political made it easy, however, for the media to ease these stories of social dissent into lifestyle sections. But even as the prissy journalists sniffed at the dirt, and Haight Street shops pushed tie-dye, LATWIDNO offered haven for refugees from the city,



Fig. 4-13

activists on the underground circuit, and any number of pilgrims.

Before injecting posteriors with massive doses of vitamin B-12, doctors should recommend a three-month stay in Alternate Society.

-Lou Gottlieb, quoted in court by the Sonoma Press Democrat, Oct. 5, 1968

One young man who read the article as an inmate of a New York mental hospital. He split for Morning star same day." Society's problems were coming to the Divine Mother to be healed, and no one was willing to stand in the way of whatever it was that was happening.

-From *Home Sweet Home* (Sender p. 10)

Mental health is a big topic on the Mostpost list-serve, and for a while, people were writing about how damaged they were when first arriving at the ranch, and about trauma suffered at the hands of their parents, fathers,

families, the state, the economic system. Some cornball puns were tossed around to describe Morningstar; It was a “uni-nursery,” or a “de-tension center.” These jocular referrals to places where humans experience growth, protection, healing and even discipline, provide one way of understanding why or how this movement was political but invisibly so. The work that occurs in these places is the labor of nursing, healing, and protection of the fragile, work that is unseen and economically under-compensated. This is the ‘immaterial’ labor Negri and Hardt describe in *Empire* as “labor-as-service.”¹⁶ These are also processes that occur over time, with results can’t be quantified. Is the labor of nursing and teaching less political- because it is less masculine, active or quantifiable than the labor of fighting police barricades or publishing? Without revisiting debates of how the personal is political, we might begin to look at political work across spectrums of velocity, and as matters of endurance and elasticity. How much time does it take to de-tension? Militant groups in late 60s US across the board were attacked and undermined egregiously by the FBI, with devastating impact on the overall left. In the next decade, we learn through narratives associated with women’s liberation, that members of these same groups suffered from the reproduction of the same internalized structures of power and authority they were supposedly fighting in the system at large. If people at Morningstar were confronting the internalization of authority, does the political legacy of these confrontations become lost after being processed through a calculus of labor that discredits invisible and feminized work? This is not exactly an apology for naval-gazing, but rather an acknowledgement of its usefulness.

Deeding land to God establishes laboratories for the definition, defense and demonstration of an alternate life-style consonant with human dignity for the time in the not-too-distant future when leisure will be compulsory due to the inevitable take-over of repetitive labor by our “happy slave” cybernated industry; laboratories for expanding the bliss tolerance of human beings.

-Lou Gottlieb from “*Morningstar Scrapbook*”

As a critique of property, Morningstar was neither academic nor militant as much as a circumstantial adjustment to geographical economics abetted by hallucinogens and other boundary-dissolving practices: meditation, yoga, dietary adventurism, and Digger idealism. This critique of property was stumbled into like an apparition of Mary on a tortilla, like falling into the earth itself. My provocations have to do with the gendering of labor but also with time, through the act of dropping out, which I see as an elective refusal to be subjected to the velocity of capital, and of progress. Gottlieb, by removing the barriers from his land, offered the opportunity of this refusal to others, and noted how it produced a different experience of time, “I urge anyone who owns land and wishes never to again to experience one instant of boredom, who wishes to live in a continuing state of elation, to deny no one access to that land and watch what happens.”



Fig. 4-14

Is dropping out a form of inaction, or one that labors toward another, ulterior end? “In terms of legacy and in terms of looking for or recovering useful information from the late ‘60s, I think we find ourselves at the same place, where the crucial elements to recover are control of space and of time. To make space available to people, so that they have time continues to be among the most radical acts, even at this moment. Spending time in de-tension, after all, is a productive space for political work.

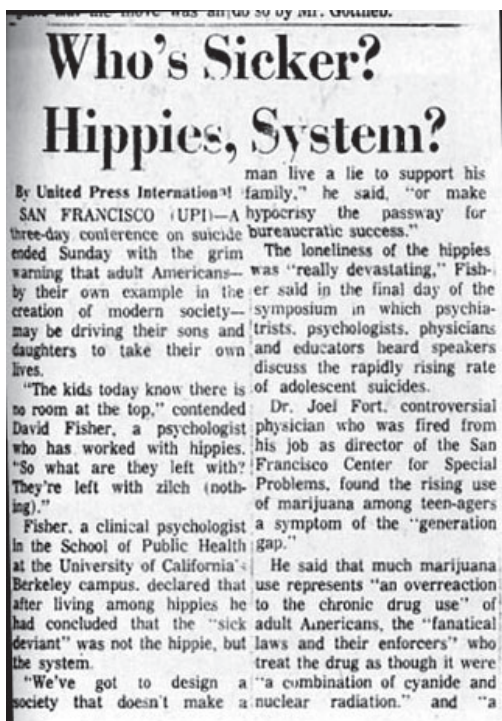


Fig. 4-15

Notes

1. Sonoma Press Democrat ca early 1968
2. Sender's book Home Free Home can be read at http://www.diggers.org/home_free.htm
3. This was a 320-acre property owned by Bill Wheeler which opened its doors in 1968, following the injunction against habitation at Morningstar. Wheelers continued to be the home of ex-Morningstar residents and others until it was also challenged by the county. The residents at Wheeler's Ranch also tried a religious defense in maintaining open land, claiming first amendment rights to establish a religion based upon open access to the land. For reasons of length, this essay concentrates on Morningstar.
4. Mostposts Newsletter and list serve: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/mostposts/>
5. Gottlieb's phrase, usually shortened to the acronym, LATWIDNO
6. Winstanley elaborates his vision in The True Levellers Standard ADVANCED : OR, The State of Community opened, and Presented to the Sons of Men. <<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/%7Erbear/digger.html>>
7. The sense of this moment is documented in the beginning of Bill Weber and David Weissman's 2002 film, The Cockettes,
8. SFTMC was founded by Mort Subotnick and Ramon Sender in 1962 and is central to the history of taped and electronic music. Other well-known composers involved there include Terry Riley and Pauline Oliveros.
9. Tim Miller, "Total freedom of conscience: what happens when there are no rules at all?," a paper given at the Center for Studies on New Religions 2002 International Conference in Provo UT. At: http://www.cesnur.org/2002/saltlake_prg.htm
10. Seeger v. United States (03/08/65) and Welsh v. United States. (Argued: January 20, 1970 --- Decided: June 15, 1970)
11. "Morningstar Ranch served as a free treatment center for LSD-overdosed people that the Digger bus delivered without charge from the Haight-Ashbury, as well as society's serious alcohol abuse cases." Ramon Sender, from a San Francisco Chronicle Sunday Book Review, March 3, 2003 of TC Boyle's Drop City.
12. Kirsten Ross, May 1968 and its Afterlives, University of Chicago Press, Chicago (2002)

13. Strikers won higher minimum wages, reduced hours and the right to organize.

14. FBI files on Black Bear Ranch, another Digger commune established in Siskiyou county at <http://www.blackbearranch.org/Pages/FBI.html>

15. Reflections on this relationship dominated recent list-serve postings, as San Francisco geared up for a 30th anniversary celebration and former communards discussed whether they would attend.

16. Hardt and Negri, Empire, p. 290