

COVER STORY

Brave New World (revisited)

A generation later, a daughter retraces her father's search for utopia, Virginia.
Style Weekly by Melissa Sinclair

Tuesday December 18, 2001

Often in my imagination, I've traveled the rough and rambling road to Twin Oaks. I have a vision in my mind of a hippie haven unchanged for 30 years, a vision distilled from creased photographs of my young father and his stories of a time when he rolled his own cigarettes, railed against capitalism and played bluegrass banjo.

My father arrived at Twin Oaks in 1970, when he was 21. My age exactly. Filled with the world-shaking optimism of his generation, he believed the commune could be a scientific model for a new, cooperative way of living. He left, frustrated and heartbroken, in 1976.

Now, my father says matter-of-factly, "I hate the place."

Now, I'm going there for the first time.

No signs point the way to Twin Oaks, a 465-acre tract in Louisa County, 50 miles northwest of Richmond. No billboard on I-64 warns that the rules may change if you take exit 148. But after getting lost a few times, I find myself at the community's gates.

A cloud of dust billows behind my car as it rumbles over the gravelly lane. I pass faded wooden outbuildings, placid cows, an apple orchard.

I remember my father telling me the orchard was once a hard-packed fallow field. There he struggled to plant winter rye, in a time when community members didn't know where they would get their next meal. Today, apples hang heavy on the branches. The cows are fat, the gardens generous.

I park my car in the midst of a fleet of old but sturdy cars and trucks. This is the communal means of transportation, for hauling things and running errands in town. The battered Volkswagen Beetle my father donated has long since rusted away.

In the distance, people reap summer's last offerings from the vegetable gardens. The rich smell of manure and drying leaves comes to me on the breeze. Swarms of migrating ladybugs flit by.

About five people are reclining on the sun-warmed courtyard lawn as a little boy crawls around. The boy, Jonah Raspberry Tupelo, is 1 year old, blue-eyed and bare-bottomed — I learn later that his parents, Promethea and Tom, have eschewed diapers for "elimination communication" training. They watch tolerantly as Jonah sits in the dirt and tries to figure out a twig.

Valerie (Twin Oakers use only first names) is the Saturday tour guide. She is a slender woman with long blonde hair who's been a member for nine years. She gestures for the visitors to come over to a leaf-strewn picnic table and asks us our reasons for coming here. Answers range from a young college graduate's "I've been reading a lot of Starhawk" (a New Age author) to a gray-braided woman's "I didn't want to sign another year's lease on my apartment."

Valerie begins to tell the story of the commune's founding. I've already heard it so many times, it's taken on a mythic light in my mind.

It was 1967 when eight people decided to found a cooperative community based on psychologist B.F. Skinner's fictional utopia, Walden Two. They leased a small plot of land about 35 miles

southeast of Charlottesville and began to scratch out a living.

The idea of a commune was nothing new. Across America, similar places were sprouting like mushrooms. But Twin Oaks was unique. Its founders believed the future depended on turning principles — egalitarianism, nonviolence, cooperation and income sharing — into laws. Specific rules for governance and labor were created to resist the “let it be” credo of the counterculture. Thus Twin Oaks endures today.

Practically, communal living means this: You work 43 hours per week doing what needs to be done. Weaving hammocks, cleaning bathrooms, gardening, answering phones, caring for children, cooking lunch. “It’s a deal, I think,” Valerie says. She calls the weekly schedule “structured yet flexible.” Members request the kind of work they’d like to do, and a committee works out the assignments.

Decisions are made by three planners and several executive boards, such as the Health Team, the Membership Team and the Child Board, which evaluates members’ requests to have children. All meet to divvy up the labor hours and money available each year.

Twin Oaks grows 40 to 60 percent of its food, Valerie explains, and provides everything residents need. Members live in eight houses scattered across the property. Television is anathema, although videos are shown four times a week. Each member receives a monthly stipend of \$60, which provides for luxuries like travel, movies and Ben & Jerry’s ice cream.

Someone asks what happens to members’ investments. Assets are frozen, Valerie explains, and any interest accrued goes to the communal good.

No one in my father’s day would have asked that question, I realize. In 1970, his investments totaled one mongrel dog, one dented 1964 Beetle, one guitar and some clothes. But by now he’s added a few stock shares, and so has Twin Oaks.

“Financially, we tend to be conservative,” Valerie says. The community holds investments in socially responsible mutual funds, to set aside money for aging residents’ needs, and also lends money to like-minded organizations.

The money comes from making tofu (which is sold to Ellwood Thompson’s and some Richmond restaurants, among other customers), weaving hammocks and indexing books. Accommodations are comfortable, although Twin Oakers try to live lightly on the land.

To become a member, you must first spend three weeks as a visitor. After the trial stay, you tell your life story to the membership team, which decides whether to grant admission. Right now Twin Oaks is populated by 80 adults and 15 children. Jonah Raspberry is the youngest. The oldest is 78.

They’re searching for 12 more members, Valerie explains. To balance the aging population, Twin Oaks has put a hold on accepting people 55 years old and older. My father, 52, would barely be welcome now. But in the past two years, twentysomethings have flocked to Twin Oaks, and the average age of members has dropped for the first time since the commune’s inception. A new generation is arriving.

Watching people weave hammocks on wooden stands in the courtyard, the sun warming my back, I feel Twin Oaks’ magnetism. I could have been born here, I realize. Could have grown up like Jonah Raspberry, knowing nothing of malls and trends and TV. My father has despised such things all his life. Why, then, did he return to the material world in 1976?

We sit in chairs on opposite sides of the living room and look at each other, my father and I. The

question hangs in the air between us.

Twin Oaks is still a difficult subject for him to talk about, even 25 years later. "I'll always dream about returning," my father said once, "and I suffer heart palpitations whenever I get anywhere near the place."

Twin Oaks was 16 people and a few ramshackle buildings when my father arrived. It was wet clay in dreamers' hands, and ferocious optimism made up for lack of knowledge. "The thing was in such pathetic shape that my efforts would have an immediate effect," my father recalls. Every shed raised, every seedling sprouted, every hammock woven felt like building a new world.

The commune was just the first step in creating an entire alternative to the American economy, my father believed. But as Twin Oaks flourished, members increasingly looked inward instead of out. Talk turned from political activism to relationship-building and self-expression. "Screw it," my father said. "I'm dropping out." He sped away on the next bus.

A woman on the Saturday tour asks me why my dad decided to leave. I explain how his vision of radical social change diverged from what Twin Oaks became. How he traded the hammock-making idyll for political activism in Baltimore. Met my mom. And had me.

The woman peers at me and nods knowingly. "So you came out here as a healing thing?" I look at her eager, sympathetic face and don't know what to say.

In 2001, a metamorphosed Twin Oaks draws people seeking personal, not political, change. Sky Blue is one of the first residents I meet. The threads of our lives are the same length, 21 years. But while mine is marked off in conventional stitches through cities and suburbs, school and family vacations and odd jobs, his is twined tightly around alternative America.

Lanky and longhaired, with startlingly blue eyes, Sky is a true child of Twin Oaks. His parents met there the year after my father left, a time when — according to my father — the original vision had already faded. Sky grew up in another intentional community in California, and became a Twin Oaks member in December 1999. He'd left his sociology studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz, for a six-month ramble across the country. As winter descended and he was still on the road, Sky says he realized, "I just want to be somewhere." So he joined Twin Oaks for the three-week visitor period, and it felt like home.

At the time the population only numbered about 65, he says, and there were only two or three others near his age. But "they said if you come, more people will come." And younger members did start to show up — 2001 alone brought eight under age 25.

Sky's goals are precisely those my father rejected. Sky believes Twin Oakers need to focus on developing relationships and emotional health. "We don't have public forums for interpersonal processing," Sky tells me. "Inevitably, interpersonal dynamics play out in the political dialogue."

In other words: It ain't easy constantly living and working with the same 100 people. Interpersonal processing or no interpersonal processing, he doesn't plan to stay for long.

Neither do Mele, 20, and Sean, 27. They arrived at Twin Oaks looking for useful work, not utopia. "I'm in this lost generation of college students," Mele explains. She's seen too many students who want to spend their lives in academia, just because they feel useless outside of it.

"I studied art and activism," Mele says. It wasn't conducive to a career path. "You don't get hired to make graffiti on billboards," she says. Sean's also an artist, who was working as a bike courier in Chicago when they met.

They've each been at Twin Oaks less than a year but have already learned its rhythms. When I approach to introduce myself, Mele's reading a book on film and Sean's knitting a multicolored cap. They are at ease, in no hurry. "I guess we should do some work sometime today," Sean says after we chat for a while. Both carry in their pockets the creased work schedules that outline exactly what they must do this week.

Together, they're in charge of making "veggie sausage," which fills the "tofu hut" with a smell of steamy spice. Mele also runs the photography studio and Sean is the head bike mechanic.

Simple tasks, it seems, but both appreciate the feeling that every day they're accomplishing something useful and tangible. And they like their work, despite the running commune joke: "How many Twin Oakers does it take to screw in a light bulb? It depends — is it labor-accreditable?"

We three wander past the old barn which holds the fix-it shop and garage (the head mechanic is a German woman, continuing a long Twin Oaks practice of upending traditional gender roles). Sean points at dozens of bikes sprawled in a heap outside. "These are all the bikes I should have been fixing while I was knitting," he says wryly. We laugh at the names painted in pastels on the girls' two-wheelers — Fashion Miss, Dream Girl — and I ask if anyone uses the rusting stationary bike standing among them. "Kids love it," Sean says. "They think it's the coolest thing since sliced bread."

Twin Oakers try to recycle everything, but they have little use for objects such as exercise machines and microwaves. "That's why we live here," Sean says, "because we want to get away from those things."

Sean and Mele aren't radicals like my father was. And in today's Twin Oaks, that doesn't matter. "If you're a quote-unquote freak in the outside world you can be fine here," Sean explains. "We have no definition of the word 'normal.' Normal is what it is."

Normal is dreadlocks or cropped hair, wearing purple velvet pants or nothing at all. "The person who dresses most fashionably is probably the transgendered member," Sky tells me. "She wears makeup." Normal is vegan, vegetarian, omnivore and eaters of groundhog stew (a popular menu item for a while, after a trapper was hired to dispatch the animals gnawing through the gardens).

Normal is gay or straight. Normal is romantic relationships between people 30 years apart in age. It's having one steady sexual partner or experimenting with several. Sky believes polyamory is natural for humans, although "sometimes it sucks," he says. "Sometimes it's so painful." He and two other Twin Oaks residents, 43-year-old Paxus and 38-year-old Hawina, became a trio of lovers so Hawina could have a baby. It's due in January.

Twin Oaks prides itself on following no unified beliefs or religion, no creed and no leader. The only mandate is be who you want to be, which my father considers an invitation to hedonism. But he says he still can't dismiss Twin Oaks as merely a freewheeling hippie enclave. There's a strong ideological current running under its 465 acres, undeniable yet hard to define.

"All ideas have a content — the things you spell out. But all ideas also have a flavor," my father says, and pauses. "Twin Oaks has a very strange flavor."

The commune began with Skinner's science, yet those who aimed to make his theory reality were a "crew of marginal personalities from the counterculture," my father says. They dispensed with the behaviorism, the laboratory atmosphere. But the rational side of Twin Oaks never disappeared, creating — in my father's words — "this weird amalgam of the scientific and the practical and the hippie-dippy la-la."

These elements mix in unexpected ways. In a workshop room in the residence called Tupelo, the

ceiling is made of dozens of water-filled jars. They glow green and blue and clear in the sunlight. It's an old theory of energy conservation, Valerie explains. The water's supposed to absorb heat during the day and radiate it into the room at night.

Wouldn't the heat actually rise? someone on the tour asks. Probably, Valerie acknowledges. It's just a theory. But the ocean-colored lighting is nice too.

I find the strange mix of spirit and science again in a conversation with Tom, a Twin Oaker in his 30s. We're sitting on the grass in the courtyard one cool evening while baby Jonah, his firstborn, plays nearby. After more than six years here, Tom looks like he could be a spokesman for the laissez-faire life, with his long hair and bare calloused feet.

But ask Tom how the hammock sales are doing, and he metamorphoses from laid-back dad to shrewd industry expert. Twin Oaks is the second-biggest hammock manufacturer in the United States, pulling in \$3.5 million in sales last year, he proudly states. As general manager of the hammock division, he's soon heading to a big furniture trade show in Chicago to line up some contracts. "We don suits and ties and hawk hammocks," Tom says. He talks about vertical integration and subcontracting labor. I never expected to hear those words here. But Twin Oaks' survival means keeping up with the times.

The only member who remains from Twin Oaks' fledgling years is a man named McCune. He agrees to talk with me, and we sit outside in the fading sunlight of an autumn afternoon. He's a quiet man, with a shock of gray hair, ripped jeans and a small earring in his right ear. I scrutinize his face, trying to see the young radical who built a commune with my red-haired father.

McCune arrived in 1972, thinking "school's a drag and society's a mess and this place looks pretty cool." The weekly luxury allowance was 25 cents then, he tells me, and members had to take paying jobs in Richmond just to keep the commune alive. "We were so poor," he says — but he stuck it out, through Twin Oak's changing fortunes, through its rising and falling political tides. Every now and then, he admits, "I wish I could just hop in a car and go on a good long trip." But that temptation passes quickly. For McCune, the joy of communal life is the work, every completed task he can examine and then say: "Yup. The community needed that, and now it's done."

In his time he's managed forests, installed efficient wood stoves and solar heating in communal buildings, and developed Twin Oaks' Web site. McCune considers it a life well spent. He is content, and never bored, he says, as there's always plenty to learn. The heart of Twin Oaks is not its social mores or political statements, McCune says, but simply people "teaching each other like crazy."

As the flagship for a new socialist movement in the United States, Twin Oaks has run aground. It is no longer a scientific experiment or a political hotbed. Some members have even forgotten the location of the original twin oak trees.

But Twin Oaks may have become a new kind of university.

It's a place to learn real skills from one's elders, Sean says — a process most of his generation skipped. "I want to learn how to weld and garden and knit," he says. "In six months, I could go away and feel like I took away so much knowledge."

Mele concurs. When she came to Twin Oaks after college, she says, "I was blocking myself from adapting here because I wanted to do intellectual work." Now she understands the potential of that "roll-up-your-sleeves work," as my father calls it.

My father learned that lesson 31 years ago, just after arriving at Twin Oaks. A pipe under the

single bathroom froze and burst, and no one was inclined to do anything besides hang an "out of order" sign and wait. My father had never fixed anything in his life. But he picked up a hacksaw and a propane torch, wriggled under the floor, and taught himself Plumbing 101. Flat on his back in the frozen mud, he discovered the simple exhilaration of working with his hands.

Thus his legacy endures at Twin Oaks. He wasn't a communal founding father, nor did he devote his life to making the community endure. The stubborn fields he planted were long ago plowed under for orchards. No one who lives in the house called Harmony knows he helped raise its wooden walls. But the people "teaching each other like crazy" began with my dad and other dreamers, just rolling up their sleeves.

My father, now a machinist and an author, still regards Twin Oaks with ambivalence. The commune's newsletter continues to arrive in his mailbox, yet he scoffs at its detailed chronicles of developments in tofu making. His self-published novel, "The Four-Hour Day," outlines a radical utopian vision quite unlike Twin Oaks'. Still, the book begins with stories of that time — the fixing of the pipe, the planting of the rye.

The commune's 35th anniversary celebration is this summer, in mid-June. Valerie and other Twin Oakers ask me repeatedly if my father will be coming. I don't know, I say. He grumbles when I bring it up.

But, my father confesses, he doesn't really hate Twin Oaks. Its philosophies drive him crazy sometimes, and he wonders where the old fiery optimism has flown. But he still considers returning, to try to reshape the dream.

I think he will find himself drawn there for the reunion, wary but curious. And I plan to go with him.

On an autumn evening, I bid goodbye to Sean, Mele and the other young members I've met. It's unlikely they will stay at Twin Oaks long. The wider world offers too much. But for now, they have found rare knowledge and a quiet peace.

Leaving Twin Oaks, I walk with Mele through the darkened woods. The air is crisp and cool; the only sound is the crunch of leaves beneath our feet.

I ask, Is there anything you miss? Movies, bars, going out, television?

Not really, she replies. All those were just distractions.

"Here, I don't have anything to avoid," Mele says. She looks up at the star-scattered sky. "Hey, ya got a great show up here."

I say goodbye, slide into my car, turn on the radio.

Then I turn it off, and rumble down the gravel road toward home.

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