

Droppers: America's First Hippie Commune, Drop City

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Communes have long been a feature of American life. For centuries, religious, cultural, and political groups have attempted to create their own societies to provide respite from the imperfections of the wider world. In the 1960s, however, communes took on a new life, as many young people chose to “turn on, tune in, drop out.” According to some estimates, up to 10,000 communes sprang up during the decade, housing approximately half a million people.

One of the first and most influential of the 1960s’ hippie communes was Drop City, a small settlement founded in 1965 outside Trinidad, Colorado. The main instigator behind the commune was Eugene Bernofsky, the son and grandson of radical communists, along with his wife and a few college friends. In his new book, *Droppers*, journalist and former wildland firefighter Mark Matthews documents the rise and fall of Drop City, from its idealistic beginnings to its disillusioned end. Along the way, Matthews provides valuable background on the history of communes in the United States and the countercultural context in which Drop City arose.

Bernofsky, who serves as Matthews’ main subject and source of information, was less interested in politics than he was in simply escaping from the confines of middle-class life. Consequently, Drop City had no philosophy other than to allow its members to live as they pleased. Since the commune had no source of income, Bernofsky and his friends lived off food stamps and occasional donations. Their iconic dome-shaped shelters were built out of scavenged materials such as car tops, and were inspired by maverick designer Buckminster Fuller’s geodesic domes.

As the hippie counterculture gained notoriety over the course of the 1960s, so did Drop City. In the spring of 1967 it hosted a “Joy Festival,” which drew visitors from all over the country. The commune’s increased public profile was a source of contention amongst its members, however, and just after the festival Bernofsky decided to leave. Over the next few years the rest of the founding members departed one by one, until Drop City was finally dissolved in 1973.

While Drop City never realized Bernofsky’s greatest hopes, Matthews stresses that it did achieve something valuable. “For two glorious years, the original droppers achieved many of their ambitions and realized many of their visions,” he writes. “They succeeded in tuning out the persistent static of war, racial conflict, poverty, mass murders, and social strife in order to maintain optimism and hope.” And while communes may be less popular today than they were in the 1960s, the story of Drop City is likely to interest anyone concerned with the far idealistic reaches of American life. Though it may have ultimately failed, Drop City was nothing if not a noble experiment.

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