

THE 400-YEAR-OLD COMMUNE

by Jon Swan

"Without religion sharing doesn't work."

If, tomorrow, a group of men and women, many of them married and with children in tow, were to set out on foot from one town to another to found a "community of love," and if, on their way, they were to agree that henceforth they would work and live together and would share all things in common, the odds are that within a few years that group would be atomized back into stray individuals or bewildered couples.

In 1528, however, a group of Austrian, German, and Swiss men and women did so, and in 1972 their descendants—a number of whom I visited on their colonies in September of last year—continue to work and live together and to share all things in common. If this group of people—known as the Hutterites, after a sixteenth-century Austrian leader named Jakob Hutter—were given to celebrating temporal events, which they are not, two years from now they would be able to celebrate the centennial of the arrival of the first Hutterite settlers in New York on July 5, 1874, or, more aptly perhaps, the purchase of their first, still colony-worked farmland, in South Dakota on August 24 of that year. If they were impressed by statistics, which again they are not, these "apostolic communists" and pacifists might also celebrate the fact that while the 1880 census for South Dakota listed a mere 443 Hutterites living in four different colonies, now some 20,000 of them live on more than 200 colonies scattered throughout South Dakota, North Dakota, Minnesota, Montana, Washington, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. No nonmonastic, communal group has endured as long as the Hutterite sect. No other group of its kind is flourishing with comparable vigor in the New World today.

I had been interested in the Hutterites for nearly a quarter of a century. So when a death in the family

called me out to Sioux City, I decided to stay put in the Midwest for a while to investigate an alternative society that included both young and old, and that appeared to work.

On a mid-September Thursday, driving a borrowed car that seemed as big as a barn door to me, I crossed the bridge over the Big Sioux that leads into South Dakota and headed west toward Yankton. It was to Yankton that the immigrant Hutterites—who, after their founding, had been pushed eastward to Russia by persecution, and had then faced persecution there as well—had come to look for land in 1874, and it was in Yankton that I planned to ask around for advice on where to look for the world-shy Hutterites. I had seen maps that showed colonies as dots—many along the James River, which joins the Missouri just east of Yankton—but no map that put the name of a town next to a dot. The Yankton County courthouse seemed a likely place to check up on their whereabouts. I found the county sheriff and his deputy shooting the breeze across the top of an uncluttered desk. I told the sheriff—a lean, good-looking man named Jeff Scott—the sort of information I was after. He said that Bon Homme—the first Hutterite colony established in the United States—was only about twenty miles west and a good place to start; but, he went on, "for your own good maybe you'd better see Mike Wurz first; he's the manager of the Jamesville Colony, up north a few miles on the Jim River." And Sheriff Scott described how to get to both colonies.

I headed due north to look up Mike Wurz at Jamesville, doing 85 on an endless highway. Slowing down to turn off on a gravel road, I got lost, asked for directions, and finally, coming down over a low rise, saw a bridge, a river, and a colony. I parked my fat, white car near a long barn, in front of which stood a young man who was wearing a black hat, a plaid shirt, wide suspenders, black pants, and work shoes. I asked him if Mike Wurz was around. He looked me

over with the slow, quizzical half-smile I was to be met with again and again on the colonies; then, looking me in the eye, he said: "He's out in the field, getting the corn in. About two miles north. A big green truck. You can't miss it."

I didn't, either, except that it shot past me on its way to the colony as I shot past it on my way out to the field, so that by the time I had turned around and reached the colony the big green dump truck was already dumping its load of corn out through a tailgate door into the high-rimmed O of a tractor tire, from which the kernels were being noisily sucked up into a grain drier going full blast. Walking up to the man standing by the truck, I roared: "Are you Mike Wurz?" He said he was. Then I shouted: "You have a minute?" He said he didn't; he was getting in the corn. "The preacher here?" I yelled. No, Wurz said; the preacher was out in the fields. Then he asked me what I wanted and I got across to him that I wanted to talk about Hutterites, and he said I should go to Maxwell Colony. "They got an old minister over there," he said, "who knows more about it than anybody." The corn kept pouring out, the sucking noise went on, the drier boomed overhead; Mike Wurz looked at me and smiled; and I thanked him—for nothing, I thought—and headed back to my car, feeling walled out by noise and work.

I had been warned not to try getting into the colonies without proper academic introductions. I had decided to see how far an interested outsider could get on his own. I was beginning to wonder if I would get anywhere. Hoping my luck would change, I recrossed the bridge and headed for Maxwell Colony, which Wurz had indicated lay off "a few miles to the west."

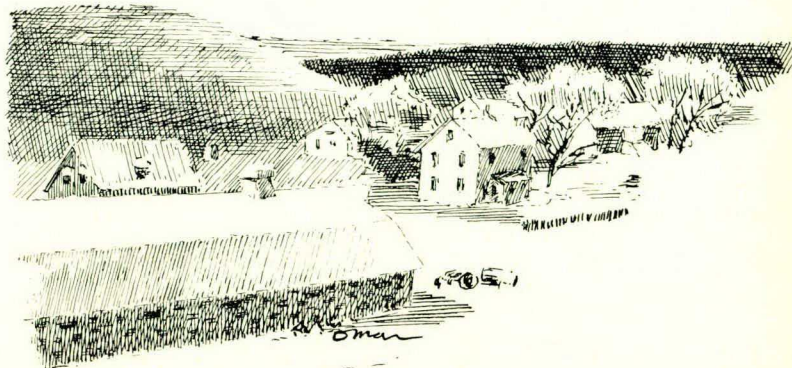
About twenty minutes later I came down another slope from the flat level of the Great Plains and found myself facing Maxwell Colony. Behind the large, two-story central house that was built of stone, I could see barns and the James River. Parallel to the big house was a long low building still under construction. Near it rose a white wooden church. On my right was a long, cinder-block work shed, a tractor parked in one doorway. A group of bearded older men and unbearded younger men in black jackets and pants and hats stood in a cluster by the door. As I walked up, the cluster sauntered off, leaving only one man in the doorway. I told him Mike Wurz had sent me over; he smiled. Then he asked just why I wanted to talk about Hutterites. After patiently hearing me out for a full five minutes, he thought for a moment, then said, "Come along."

We walked over to a small one-story building. Steps led down to a low door. The floor inside was packed dirt and the room was lit only by sunlight. By the door stood a young man attaching broom bottoms to wooden handles. In the shadows at the rear of the room an old man sat on a box. He was short,

plump, and wore a trim white beard, and his glasses glinted up at me as my guide—the colony's manager, Joseph Wipf—introduced me to him: Joseph Hofer, the colony's preacher. Reverend Hofer laughed when he heard that I was thinking of writing about the Hutterites. "Useless, useless," he said, with the glee of a man who could still be amused by meeting a fool. "More words won't do any good. Too many words already. You've got to live the life, and then you won't have time to write."

Reverend Hofer continued working as he spoke. Picking up stalks of broom corn, he shaped them into a sheaf, tied a string around the sheaf, then knocked the grain out by rubbing the ends against a whirling wheel-spike. The floor was littered with the cut-off ends of the blue-dyed stalks. I asked him what he thought was the reason why all other experiments in communal living in America had failed, while the Hutterites had lasted so long, and again this brought out in him a scornful glee. "They all fail, every one of them. The Shakers—*kaput!* Amana—*kaput!* Sure! And you want to know why? Because it's hard, too hard for most people to give up the self. They can't do it. They say they want to, but they can't. If you want to live the way God intended, you've got to give up a lot of things, and people want to hold on. Ja, it's a constant battle. Each grape must be crushed to give strength to the wine, each kernel crushed to make flour. People want to live together but they want to keep themselves. It won't work."

He was eighty-three years old, he told me, yet he appeared in excellent health and his memory was clear. When had the colony moved up to Canada to avoid persecution both as pacifists and as a German-speaking people? "We left August 22, 1918." When had they returned? "June 1, 1936." And again Reverend Hofer laughed, telling me a long story about the rich man's son from Sioux City whose father had bought up the colony for him and who had been a flop as a farmer. For a time we talked together in German (my vain hope was that by speaking German I would seem less of an outsider); then, switching back to English, I asked him how the colony cared for its mentally ill. That was no problem, he said. His wife was senile; he and a daughter looked after her; if he himself got senile, others would look after him. "My daughter made this shirt," he said. It had hooks and eyes instead of buttons—Joseph



Wipf's had buttons—and was a yellow plaid. Then Reverend Hofer bounced up abruptly and asked me if I had ever seen a broom stitched together. I hadn't. He switched on an ancient stitcher, held the sheaf firmly in place, trod on a pedal, and a needle as long as a lance darted back and forth in front of his hands five or six times, and he held the broom bottom out for inspection. He was showing off. I was impressed.

Wipf led me back up into the sunlight and gave me a tour of the colony. He had nodded his head in agreement during the course of some of his preacher's longer sermonettes, I had noticed, and his eyes had respectfully glazed over from time to time. Fond of the old man, yet having obviously heard the message before, Wipf seemed more at home in the realm of barns and equipment and animals: 50,000 turkeys; 10,000 laying hens; 1700 pigs; 300 sows; 200 Hereford stock cattle; about 50 milk cows; 3600 acres of land. He said the colony had branched in 1964 and that there were now 90 people on the Jamesville Colony, and that although they were building a new dormitory, still, they would branch again. With more than 150 on a colony, the Hutterites feel, the sense of community starts to come unstuck.

In the new, 200-foot-long swine barn—which was equipped with automatic feeder and slat-cleaner systems, and which he and his work crew had built in about three months—I asked Joseph Wipf why, even if farmers didn't want to form colonies like the Hutterites', they couldn't at least cut down on costs by pooling their equipment. "They'd all want it first when the weather was right," he said, "and who would pay for repairs if it broke down when one man was using it? Without religion sharing doesn't work."

After Wipf had shown me through various barns, he invited me into the big stone house and we sat down at the kitchen table in his apartment, where his wife served us coffee and banana cream pie. She asked me if I would like to wash up before I ate, and as I looked down at my hands I saw they were blue from having handled the dyed broom corn. I made my way through a chatting group of boys and girls standing in the entryway and washed my hands with a bar of colony-made soap at a sink around the corner. Back at the table, I mentioned that I had three children; Wipf, who was only five years older than I, said he had eleven. His large, lively wife added that three grandchildren were in the room—one, by then, on her knee. Yet there was no hubbub.

On his way back to work, Wipf showed me the multipurpose building under construction: communal kitchen (complete with colony-built walk-in freezers, stainless steel tables and sinks), dining hall (colony-made tables, benches, and cabinets), kindergarten, and living quarters. Then he took me into the unadorned church and eventually to the workshop.

As I drove back to Sioux City late that afternoon, I reflected that when Joseph Hofer's wife died he would be spared the extreme solitude that my surviv-

ing Iowa aunt would feel when those of us who had flown in for her sister's funeral returned to our homes. The colony would support Hofer as he—both as a preacher and as a broom maker—helped support it. It also struck me that Reverend Hofer was the first preacher I had ever seen who worked with his hands.

The following day I paid a brief visit to Bon Homme Colony. The preacher was out in the fields; the colony manager was off somewhere; everybody seemed to be out of sight except for the boys by the metal workshop door who gave me this news. Then, suddenly, an outburst of children came whooping out of the small white schoolhouse: "Today is Halloween!" It wasn't, but a couple of the long-skirted little girls were wearing owl-eye, cardboard glasses. The children waved at me, said, "Hello, there. Who are you?" then vanished as quickly as they had appeared through the open schoolhouse door, which closed behind them. Off to the right, a group of teen-aged girls came out of a communal washhouse, carrying a steaming tub of washed laundry. I said hello. Giggling, they set down the tub and darted back into the washhouse.

I walked down the barnyard lane past duck pens, goose pens, chicken pens, toward the groaning bin of a grain drier shuddering on top of its tall metal stilts. At the workshops a man emerged, the work crew of younger men clustered around him. He was talking in Hutterisch, the sixteenth-century Tyrolean dialect the Hutterites use among themselves; then he noticed me. His name was George Hofer, he told me, and he had a minute or two, but he and the boys were making a silage tipcart like the ones I had seen at Maxwell Colony, and they had to get on with the job. We talked for a while about why the Hutterites had endured, and, in nearly the same words as the Maxwell Colony preacher had used, he spoke of the need for a strong belief, a willingness to bend the self. The colony's population was up to just over 100, he said, and Bon Homme was getting ready to divide again—two families were already living up on the new site, getting things ready. I asked how a colony decided who was to go. Hofer replied that heads of families, and older people too, chose which preacher they wanted to be with—the main preacher or his assistant—and that an attempt was made to keep the groups balanced according to age and sex. The two preachers then drew lots—a piece of paper from a hat—to decide which group would leave. People at new colonies were often overworked, he added. They took with them their share of the machinery and livestock; but they had a lot of building to do.

As I walked back to the car, I heard women laughing and talking in loud voices. A fuel truck from a nearby town was about to pull out and colony women were shaking hands with the couple sitting up in the cab; the gabble sounded as free and easy as my talk with George Hofer had been courteously re-

strained. When a male Hutterite is faced with an inquisitive outsider, his eyes express a docility that has nothing in common with weakness, and a patience that contains a speck of suggestion that the sooner you leave the better. Frequently, too, he displays the good humor of a person accustomed to being misunderstood and not much minding. The gaze is frank and unflinching, and one should not expect the grin that cracks most modern American faces so quickly in half. Smiles take time in coming; and hearing outright laughter, as when the Bon Homme women said good-bye to their friends, remained, for me, a novel experience.

Later I stopped in Yankton to see a lawyer who, in 1970, had provided counsel for the Hutterites in one of their frequent legal binds. His name was Robert W. Hirsch, a compact, energetic Republican in his mid-forties who was the former majority leader of the South Dakota state legislature. He told me that his help to the Hutterites consisted in drafting an accommodation to a law that, unamended, would have endangered the existence of the on-colony school. There had been a hitch, however. In the original wording, the accommodation had obliged school boards petitioned by the Hutterites to organize an elementary school "for such children . . . and to employ a teacher therefor, provided a suitable . . . building is made available by such petitioners." In committee, though, a "shall" had been changed to "may," leaving such matters as who would pay the teacher's salary, school supplies, and so on up to the discretion of the board involved. In general, Mr. Hirsch said, the school boards had assumed these costs, "since, after all, the colonies pay their school taxes and the boards get state aid according to the number of children attending school in the district."

Before taking on this case, Mr. Hirsch said, he had read up on Hutterite history and had gotten to know a number of the colony people. "A good, hard-working bunch," he called them. I asked him if there was much anticolony feeling in the state. "The only thing people get uptight about," Hirsch replied, "is the way the Hutterites are supposedly eating up the land. But per family they own less than the average farmer." Later, another informant remarked: "Nobody says a word if a Texas or Kansas millionaire buys up fifty thousand acres of South Dakota so he can write off a farm operation as a tax loss, but if the Hutterites buy three thousand acres, people get all worked up."

In the light of what Mr. Hirsch went on to say, this resentment seemed somewhat ironic. During the Depression, he told me, both the state itself, which had gone into the credit loan business, and various other loan associations, had acquired "so much land they didn't know what to do with it all. With nobody farming and nobody buying, it wasn't any good to them." Agents had been sent to Canada to invite the Hutterites, who had been driven out of the state during World War I, to return. In 1935, to encourage

their return, the legislature had passed a communal corporation law that granted the colonies the same tax benefits as were granted to cooperatives. "In the 1950s, though," Mr. Hirsch said, "when the colonies started spreading out again, a law was passed to forbid the expansion of already incorporated colonies, though it did not prevent the formation of new ones—most of which are nowadays set up as trusteeships."

As a boy Hirsch had run the projector at the movie theater in Tripp, a small town in the next county north, where he had grown up. Every once in a while, he said, a couple of Hutterite kids would buy their way into the theater with a colony-made broom or a watermelon and sit in the back with their hats on, until the farm boss or maybe the preacher would come in and clear them out. "I suppose that sort of thing happens with every generation," Hirsch said, "but I wouldn't be surprised if some of those kids who broke colony rules then are preachers or managers now." Mr. Hirsch also gave me the names of two Hutterites I should talk to: Levi Tschetter at Poinsett Colony, some two hundred miles north; and David Decker at Tschetter Colony, near Freeman, only a half-hour drive north of Yankton. Levi, he said, was a teacher and the only Hutterite in South Dakota who was doing graduate work, at the South Dakota State University at Brookings; David Decker he referred to as the only other South Dakota Hutterite teacher, an assistant elder, the head of the Hutterian Brethren Association, and an authoritative spokesman.

I set out the next morning to look up David Decker at Tschetter and, on my way, to drop in on a neighboring colony, New Wolf Creek. My first stop, however, was at a farmhouse just outside of Freeman that, its owner proudly informed me, had been built in 1892. Mr. Gottlieb Lang had lived close to the Hutterites for most of this century. He had come over from Bessarabia in 1905 and had been farming his fields since 1907. About the Hutterites all he would say was that "they bothers nobody. We're used to them. They're a friendly people." His middle-aged daughter, Martha, was more voluble. As she poured me a cup of coffee in the kitchen, she said: "Don't praise 'em-up too high. They're all right, but they don't do much for the government." Then she spoke of "the young guys—they come over the hill to watch TV at my sister's, or anyhow they used to, three or four every evening. And they'll smoke, too, if they can get smokings on the sly. And every once in a while they run away for a summer or a year or two, but they come back." (Other neighbors emphasized how helpful the colony people are: "If



you're in a pinch, you may find a whole team of boys will show up to help out.")

After I had finished my coffee, Mr. Lang asked if I would like to see the "old house"—the sod house he had lived in for years. I said I would. We walked out the kitchen door and around to the back of the main house—and there it was: the slightly sloping sod walls were whitewashed, the wooden door framed with blue paint, the windows small. It was a beautifully simple six-room house that, Mr. Lang said, had been built in 1873 and which he had kept in good repair, "though nobody else seems to care much about it." I suspected that there weren't more than half a dozen like it left in the whole Midwest.

Old Wolf Creek Colony, a couple of miles from Mr. Lang's farm, had been established in 1879. It was the second Hutterite colony to be built in America. Abandoned during World War I, the site had been repurchased (from Mr. Lang) by a branch from Tschetter Colony in 1964 and renamed New Wolf Creek Colony. The houses and barns I saw as I drove down the dirt road were all new. The welcome I got was novel, too. "Howdy!" said a young man standing by the usual barn door. I asked him where the preacher was; he pointed to a one-story apartment building filled with the buzz of power saws. I walked the plank into the unfinished house and saw a bearded man smiling down at me from where he stood on top of a chair, a hammer in his hand, nails in his mouth. "Are you the preacher?" I asked. He said he wasn't, but that he would show me the way. The preacher was sawing a hole for a light fixture in the next room; his name was Paul Decker; and when I told him that I was on my way to see David Decker and to talk about the Hutterites, he suggested that I come by on Sunday evening and he would invite David down and the three of us could talk. He was busy now, but my carpenter-guide said he had a moment. He was a clockmaker named David Hofer.

As the power saw started up again, Mr. Hofer led me down the plank, across the stretch of green lawn that divided the two long rows of modern, two-family dwellings, and into his apartment. All around us, clocks ticked or sat perched on shelves silently waiting to be fixed. A jeweler in a nearby town sends Mr. Hofer

about sixty clocks a year for repairs and in the course of a year he repairs close to a hundred. "When I get one apart, she's got to run in the morning," he said. He admitted, however, that he sometimes had to work until two in the morning to get them to run, and that one century-old clock with wooden works had taken him longer than usual. He had had to make new parts. How had he learned his craft? Just picked it up, he said. His colony training had made him a jack-of-all-trades.

Now sixty-seven years old and actively retired, David Hofer had been a carpenter for fifteen years, a blacksmith for twenty-two years, and finally a farm boss for three years. He had seven married children, sixty-three grandchildren, and one great-grandchild; George Hofer, whom I had met briefly at Bon Homme, was a cousin of his; the wife of Joseph Hofer, the minister I had met making brooms at Maxwell, was his aunt; the assistant minister here at New Wolf Creek, Joseph Decker, was his son-in-law. Curious to know how the Hutterite "way of death" differed from the typically American, I asked this former carpenter if he had made coffins. "Yes," he said, "out of plywood now, though we used to use pine. Very simple—a box, that's all."

For a time, then, we talked about the colony's economy. He said they had brought 25 milking cows down from Tschetter and now had 125; that they had about 12,000 chickens, and more geese and turkeys, and a couple of hundred hogs. Safeway, he said, was the main buyer of New Wolf Creek Colony eggs. The colony's present population was 110, and they were planning to divide in the next four or five years. "That house we're working on now," Mr. Hofer said, "it's being built so it can be moved right out on a trailer: thirty feet by sixty feet and built of wood instead of cinder block like the others."

Just then the dinner bell rang, and the clockmaker asked me to join him for lunch. People came streaming in from all parts of the colony—children under fifteen heading for one door, older children and adults for another. Between the two dining halls was the spotless kitchen. The women, wearing polka-dotted kerchiefs on their heads and long skirts, sat at long tables on one side of the adult dining room while the black-suited men were at the other end. The men removed their hats as one of them offered up a short prayer in the Tyrolean dialect. Then all fell to: warm buns, honey from colony hives, a soup made of cut-up string beans, potatoes, and cream; a stainless steel bowl full of large chunks of ham; another bowl full of pickled watermelon. For dessert, peaches and coffee. The meal was immense and delicious. The retired Mr. Hofer and I, as an outsider, ate slowly. Ten minutes after we had sat down, I noticed, almost all the other men had gotten up and gone out. There had been only a dim hum of conversation.

On Sunday I called Tschetter Colony to ask if David Decker was there. No, a man told me, he had left for Minneapolis to pick up linoleum on Monday for the new colony at Pembroke. "So he'll return to Pembroke instead of to Tschetter?" I asked. "Most likely he will," the man said. I thanked him, then looked at the map to plan Monday's itinerary: 137 miles practically straight north to Brookings, near which I hoped to find graduate student Levi Tschetter at Poinsett Colony; and, from there the next day, another 170 or so miles northwest to Pembroke.

It was mid-afternoon when, on Monday, I came on the by now familiar sight of a cluster of barns and



sheds and two long rows of one-story houses characteristic of a modern Hutterite colony. Poinsett, for a change, was not tucked out of sight down by a river; it was out in the open. A sign saying MELONS pointed down the dirt road to the colony. Stopping by a barn where I saw a man, I asked where Levi Tschetter, the teacher, was. I was told to look in the carpentry shed.

The teacher was sawing a piece of oak at a table saw. He was making a handle for a meat cleaver; he would be done in a minute. (Besides being the colony's public school teacher, Levi Tschetter was also in charge of the meat department and assisted in butchering.) When he had finished sawing, he invited me to sit down and talk at his apartment. We walked down a sidewalk to one side of the wide strip of lawn planted with fast-growing Chinese elm saplings. "This was all flax fields before," Levi said. Building had begun in 1967, he went on, and by the following year three houses had been built and most of the dining room. When the ten families (comprising seventy-two people) who had left New Elm Springs Colony first moved in, some of the families had had to double up until there were enough houses. Two barns had been built only last year. "It was a mud-hole when we arrived," Levi added. It looked spruce now.

The living room of Levi's apartment was large and simply furnished—most of the furniture, he said, was colony-made—and its walls were adorned only by a clock, a calendar, and a big Swift's Feeds thermometer whose pointer stood at 70. A hefty man with a short-trimmed beard, Levi told me he was the father of seven children and the grandfather of two. I took him to be about forty-five; he said he was fifty-four. This struck me as a ripe old age for a master's candidate; I asked him how, with all his colony and family responsibilities, he had gotten as far as he had. He had started by taking high-school correspondence courses, Levi told me, back at the mother colony, but when he had applied at nearby Dakota Wesleyan all his credits had been disallowed, so he had been obliged to take a ten-hour entrance exam, which he passed. At Dakota Wesleyan, where he had gotten his B.A., as now at the state university, he could attend classes only during the summer session when the colony's public school was closed for vacation. So he still had a long way to go. Had both colonies encouraged him to study? I asked. Yes, and he and members of other colonies had strongly encouraged young men to pick up their education where they had left off at the eighth grade. About ten men had tried for a time, but their colony workload, combined with the lack of stimulation that other students provide, had forced them one by one to give up.

I asked Levi what he thought of the colonies' own educational program, which consists of kindergarten for all children up to five and, for children up to fifteen, of the German school which meets for three-quarters of an hour before public school classes start and for another half an hour after it closes, and on



Saturday morning. "We don't teach them anything bad," Levi replied, "but the system could stand some improving. Too little attention is given to the selection of the kindergarten teachers, for instance. Usually they're older women, with an assistant or two, depending on the size of the class. The German teacher, too, has a very important job, since he not only teaches the language but religion, yet as educators . . . We could all be better at that."

I asked Levi why the German school was considered essential. "Because we want the children to retain what we think of as our mother language," Levi said. "And because it was the language our founders wrote in." Was it not also a factor that, by setting the children apart from others, helped keep the colonies together? "Yes, and our dialect, too—they are both cohesive factors. They make us feel a bit different."

Levi doesn't get paid for teaching public school at Poinsett Colony. This school, he explained, was in one of the five South Dakota districts that refused to contribute to the support of a colony school. So he received no pay at all? "That's right," Levi replied. How much, I asked, would he receive as a near M.A. "About eight thousand dollars, I guess." And why did the colonies object to having their children bused into town? "It just doesn't leave any time for religious education—for German school—and we consider that an essential part of our life. One colony near here tried it for a time. It didn't work." Still, Levi took pains to point out, the Hutterites did not want to have private, parochial schools. They welcomed state supervision and they welcomed outside teachers and their children studied the state curriculum; all the Hutterites wanted was for their children to be educated on the colonies.

The dinner bell rang. Levi asked me if I would care to join him for supper, adding that his wife was head cook. I said I would be delighted. As we entered the dining room, he pointed out the cabinets; his eldest son, Alvin, had made them. Then, after a prayer, we sat down to a filling supper of duck livers, french fries, mixed vegetables, bread and honey, honeydew melons, and coffee.

After supper I mentioned that I was going to spend the night at Brookings and Levi asked me if I would make a copy of a map for him at the state university library—a map showing where the Hutterite colonies were located in the United States and Canada. The thought that not only outsiders but born Hutterites, too, might wonder just where their colonies were amused me; I said I would be glad to. We were back

in Levi's living room then; his youngest son, Tommy, was alternately reading a book and listening to us talk. Earlier, Levi had mentioned that Tommy had two foxes. Would he show them to me? Tommy was eager to. We would have to go in my car, though, and use the headlights now that it was dark. I asked Levi if he had trapped them, and he said, yes, that was one of his jobs; the colony had to protect its turkeys.

I drove Tommy over toward a barn. The headlights picked up a pen, and as they fixed on the two, small, pacing cubs I wondered if the boy felt as much delight as I did in seeing those fiercely independent, untamable eyes that glowed as they turned to glare at us. But then I didn't raise turkeys. Nor did I belong, in any meaningful sense, to any community.

Holing up in a Brookings motel that night, I clicked on the ubiquitous TV set and was promptly rewarded by the sight of the Alamo blowing up. I wondered if, a score of years hence, Tommy Tschetter's sons and daughters would be permitted to watch TV in a less simple living room than his parents', whether, that is, the Hutterites' proliferation would result in their being gradually assimilated. How long could they keep up the German school and retain their Tyrolean dialect—those two essential layers in the wall that so far had helped to keep the Hutterites as distinct from "the world" as their geographical isolation? Yet even this was diminishing. Levi had told me that the reason all the old colonies were tucked out of sight was that they had required rivers to power their mills; with that need gone, the new colonies could be built anywhere, and now they were generally right up on top of the Great Plains—open to view. Also, I had noticed that whereas the old colony dwellings had been built to hold at least four families, the new ones were built to hold two. Was the one-family dwelling the next step? How thick was the line that divided privacy from private ownership?

The next morning at Estelline, a small town close to Poinsett Colony, I called ahead to Pembroke Colony to ask if David Decker had returned from Minneapolis. The man on the phone said he was David Decker and that he could see me. I should look for three blue silos, he said.

Shooting west through Doland (WELCOME TO DOLAND, HOME OF HUBERT H. HUMPHREY) and flushing whole families of pheasants as I headed north later on, I frequently thought of Joseph Hofer's remarks on how hard colony life was, what a struggle it involved. Was there any joy in this life? I wondered. An irrelevant matter, no doubt, in the eyes of these almost medieval-minded people who had yet learned to live with twentieth-century machines, a people who believed their way of life was *the* true way, the road to salvation.

It was late afternoon when I caught sight of three blue silos. I turned off onto a dirt road and pulled into Pembroke Colony.

David Decker, a lean, rather short man, conducted me on a brisk tour of the colony. He is the father of fourteen children, the grandfather of six. A good part of his family stood around us as we talked after supper on the glassed-in back porch of his farmhouse. Two of his sons held babies in their arms. Sunflower seed hulls pattered on the floor as we talked. I asked David—the Hutterites called me by my first name and expected me to do likewise—what his duties were as head of the Hutterian Brethren Association. He said his title was a bit more modest: treasurer of the Hutterian Brethren Fund—a small sum that took care of the costs involved in arranging for a rotating group of colony preachers to be with the boys doing their alternate service in Custer State Park.

Later, David began to talk about a girl, an outsider, who for a time had lived at the colony. She had heard about the Hutterites somehow out in California and, after taking a bus to Salt Lake City, had hitchhiked the rest of the way. "That was just six weeks before we branched," David said. "We were all very busy at Tschetter, but she had come a long way and we all liked her and somehow she seemed to fit in the family. We told her to get in touch with her parents right away and tell them where she was, and the sheriff came out later to see if she had any drugs, but she didn't, and she stayed with us for the six weeks there, and then when we moved she moved up here with us and stayed for two more weeks. Then her father told her to come home. We've written back and forth to both her and her father."

I was curious about what pleasures an outsider, not a believer, would find in the Hutterite life. Ida Decker had been the California girl's best friend. She read the letter she had received that morning:

I sure do miss this time of year in the colony—all the watermelon tossing and sunflower seeds and how the mornings were when we would get up early and I miss the prayers and the way the canning cellar smells and listening to jokes in the evening and hanging laundry at Pembroke with you when it is windy and cold—oh, all those things I love with all my heart.

Goosechaser

On my flight back to New York, I realized that though I had gone out to the Midwest to attend a funeral I had not visited a single Hutterite cemetery. The only book on the Hutterites I had taken with me was an annotated bibliography of literature on these people. The first entry under "Funeral and Burial Customs" read:

322. Clark, Bertha W. "The Hutterian Communities" (Part I). *Journal of Political Economy*. Vol. 32 (June 1924), pp. 361, 366.

"In some obscure corner of a field, roughly fenced off, you will see God's Garden, where without any monuments or names or eulogies the Brethren are laid to rest as unostentatiously as they have lived." □

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