

The *Ashram* of Graton Road:
Morning Star Ranch, a California Commune in the 1960's

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IN THE SUMMER OF 1967 I was living in Sonoma County, California, some sixty miles north of San Francisco. I had recently resigned from the ministry of the local Unitarian Fellowship, but remained Chairman of the county's chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, which I had founded the previous year. And in that capacity I paid a visit to Morning Star Ranch, the infamous hippie commune on Graton Road, near the town of Occidental.

All through the summer Morning Star had been big news in the county. The news items which graced almost every issue of the daily paper¹ were supplemented by a series of pieces by a respected feature writer, and these were well enough done for the reader to gain a fairly accurate and unbiased picture of what was going on there.

I thus knew that some 160 persons were living on 31.7 acres that summer. I also knew that the property belonged to Lou Gottlieb, musical genius, bass player and narrator of the immensely popular folk-song group, The Limelitters, and founder of Morning Star. I knew that Gottlieb had retired from show business and purchased Morning Star and that shortly thereafter, following some kind of revelation, he had opened up the land to any and all persons who wanted to come and live there with him.

And finally I knew that not everyone approved of this generosity. Many county residents, led by Dr. Gottlieb's Graton Road neighbors, began putting pressure on the county authorities to do something about the invasion of hippies, to send them back to wherever they had come from. That some of this opposition was pure discrimination was

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1. *Press Democrat*, Santa Rosa, California.

more than obvious, but there were reasonable voices along with the bigoted. I knew of one woman who went so far as to take food to the communards from time to time, yet, as a neighbor, she signed the petition demanding their removal. Her reason was simple. "It's a fire trap. They're so careless about fires." Others mentioned other kinds of carelessness: the dumping of trash anywhere, defecation close to or even within neighboring property, and of course the general insouciance about the wearing or nonwearing of clothes.

This last feature of Morning Star—the casual nudity—was perhaps its greatest attraction to the media and to the visitors. For Lou not only permitted visitors, he encouraged them. His belief was that if everyone could see how beautiful a place it was, in its natural and personal qualities, the opposition would fade away. So the visitors came in droves, especially on weekends—with the natural result that Morning Star on weekends became like Paris in the summer: the residents left the place in the same numbers as the visitors came in.

I. My First Visit

About the middle of that summer, 1967, some of us in the ACLU chapter began fearing for the continued existence of Morning Star as a commune. The opposition was growing, and the possibility that its demise might result as much from unlawful discrimination as from practical considerations persuaded us to contact Lou Gottlieb and offer him our assistance. With this in mind I visited the ranch in the company of Don Johnson, our Vice-Chairman and a Professor of History at Sonoma State College, to speak with the owner.

It never occurred to us to try to telephone first, since we assumed there would be no phone on the property—a false assumption, as it happened. We drove out, parked our car in the large, dusty parking lot, were panhandled by three or four unimpressive young men sitting there, and found ourselves handing out a quarter to each—a psychologically interesting reaction, since I for one never respond thus to beggars.

Someone directed us to the Gottlieb house, the sturdiest on the property and its geographical center. The sounds of a piano inside (the musician was preparing for his next career as a concert pianist) ceased as we knocked. The musician ushered us in, and we told him why we had come. And it was now that one of Lou Gottlieb's most striking features was made manifest: a confidence approaching childishness in its naivete. "Oh no, there's nothing to fear. I know the sheriff: he's a fine man, he understands us. Many thanks for being concerned, but this opposition will come to nothing."

And that was the end of that. Immediately the subject was switched to something far more interesting to our host, and for the next two hours I listened to, first, an exposition by Gottlieb, then a debate with Don Johnson. After describing his revelation—that since he did not own Morning Star (because nobody *owns* land, but is at most its custodian), he therefore could not deny access to any people who wanted to live there—Gottlieb spoke of his research, pointing to a respectable library he kept in the room, of works on communes past and present. And the conclusion he had reached from all his reading and thinking was—and on this he was most emphatic—that all communes of the past had failed *because they restricted access*. They all had some kind of screening, some way of saying No to those they did not fancy as residents. He would correct this error; thus his slogan: "Access denied to none."

The debate was animated but friendly. When there seemed to be nothing more for either man to say, Lou rose and proposed a tour of the grounds. He noted that we were lucky, because just a few days before, at the most recent of the residents' infrequent meetings, he had called for volunteer tour guides, to make sure visitors received the best possible impression of the place. He went outside, and found for us a young woman who agreed to show us around.

Despite my suspicion of guided tours, I was impressed. In contrast with the panhandlers at the parking lot, everyone we now saw seemed clean and neat, and the grounds attractive. The highlight was the touted vegetable garden, well tended indeed, which not only took care of the residents' needs, but provided a surplus that was regularly shipped down to the Haight-Ashbury. Though this section of San Francisco is unknown to the present generation, it was a by-word for hippiedom in the late 1960's.

But my impatience with the restrictions of guided tours overflowed, and I finally slipped away to explore by myself. And now I was more than impressed, I was enchanted. So much so that I came back the next week. And the week after that—and regularly after that on a weekly basis, as long as the commune remained.

2. *The Three Categories of Members and Their Views*

I came because it was peaceful. The residents I grew to know radiated a serenity, a relaxation that I sorely needed in my life. That they accepted me, a noncommunist, surprised me, until I realized that they accepted everybody, at least everybody who intended them no harm. (Some did express surprise that I was a clergyman, from whom as a group they had encountered almost consistent opposition.) The prevalence of nudity seemed to enhance, or make easier, the general acceptance that pervaded the ranch.

Or rather, a part of it. For my friends there, those who provided the atmosphere of peace, made up only one of three distinguishable categories of resident. The others: the parking-lot parasites, whom I avoided entirely (easily enough, as I found a back entrance), and the majority.

I suppose the majority might also be called parasites, since not many of them did any work either. Less than a dozen, most if not all of them women, tended the vegetable garden; perhaps an equal number of men hauled the surplus off to San Francisco once a week. A few prepared the meals or cleaned up after them. The rest simply accepted the hospitality. And the main reason I did not meet most of this third category is that they were not often there. They would spend the day away, presumably in Occidental or some other part of the county.

In my first category were a few mothers, and they were kept busy with their young children. I met one full-time student, who commuted to Sonoma State College, some forty-five minutes away, every day. The rest spent most of their time in such peaceful occupations as meditating, or occasionally playing music on simple instruments. Or talking with me—but quietly, unostentatiously, and never with intent to convert me, or change any of my views, though my views were much at variance with theirs. The nearest any came to doing this was when one young man waxed eloquent on a theme frequently encountered there: the need to get away h was responsible for all the ills of the icworld. When I suggested that at least the city made possible art such as symphonic music, he retorted: "You heard me playing my flute. What more could you want than that?"

I thought of Morning Star as an *ashram*—a religious concept. It may not be apposite in all respects, but there was certainly much religion there, and it came in several guises. Many of the people, of course, tended toward Eastern religion, at least as filtered through Western minds. But there were also a substantial number of Christians, judging by the New Testament quotes to be found on many of the makeshift structures that served as dwellings.

Of the various types of commune suggested by scholars, the one that most nearly fits Morning Star was the anarchic or anarchistic. I cite several evidences:

1) The nonrule on admission. Lou Gottlieb did indeed deny access to none, right to the end, despite the knifing and the gunshot that disturbed the peace—presumably from the Hell's Angels representatives who took advantage of the policy.

2) The nearabsence of all rules for residents. Gottlieb himself said: "I have only one rule for Morning Star: no loud music." He came close to a second, perhaps, when he mused aloud: "I do think everyone ought to put on clothes for the evening meal."

3) There was nothing remotely resembling work schedules. The work that was accomplished was done voluntarily and without any coordination. Nobody was obliged to do *anything*.

4) Meetings were infrequent, occurring only when somebody (usually Gottlieb) had something he considered of momentous import, such as the appeal for tour guides, or (toward the end) the question of how to deal with the demands to evacuate.

5) I observed only one common ritual: the evening communal meal, and a handholding, chanting circle preceding. Even this was discontinued during the summer and not reinstated until the eve of the expected big bust, in October. At this last meal together, which I was invited to attend, the remnant of Morning Star commune expressed solid feelings of satisfaction at reviving what had earlier been so important to them.

From the above, it is clear that there was a nucleus at Morning Star, some fifteen to thirty people who took communal living seriously. They were the ones who arrived first, in 1966, and stayed through the winter; they were the ones who spoke most confidently of their (often pantheistic) love of nature, of their solidarity as a group, of Morning Star as a holy place. They even stayed on in defiance of the law, when the authorities lowered the boom.

3. *The Boom Lowered*

It came rather suddenly. The county authorities condemned all the buildings on the ranch, save only its owner's, as being below health and building code standards; a few days later a Superior Court judge, ruling that Morning Star qualified as an organized camp, gave Gottlieb five days to close down all of it except his own cabin. Fifteen residents refused to leave; Lou was found in contempt of court and fined \$500, and threatened with further fines as long as the residents remained. The sheriff's deputies even made him make the arrests himself, which he likened to "something out of a Kafka novel. The courts sentence you to death for some obscure crime and then fine you \$500 a day until you cut your own throat." And the fifteen residents allowed themselves to be led off to jail rather than leave voluntarily—which to them would have been comparable to Servetus recanting to save himself from Calvin's stake.²

In response to the first of these actions I organized the Friends of Morning Star, in an attempt to save the commune. Our objective was

2. Ibid.

to bring the property into compliance with the health standards by hauling away trash, pulling down the condemned buildings, and generally making the place clean and presentable. A Sonoma State professor offered \$1,000 for use at my discretion; most of it went to pay the bail of a resident who found the reality of prison different from her expectations and freaked out. In the end the job proved far beyond our capabilities: Morning Star was unsalvageable.

Though Lou Gottlieb welcomed and appreciated the work of the Friends, his people did not. They looked on sullenly while we tore down the buildings (a job much more difficult than their rickety appearance suggested): these were their homes, they did not see their destruction as a friendly act. Mecca was being razed before their eyes.

4. Zion

So Mecca became Zion. The communards were released from jail and dispersed: some went back to New York or down to the City (San Francisco); some found a welcome at Bill Wheeler's ranch not twenty miles away, joining others from Morning Star who had already settled there; some even returned to Morning Star in violation of the law, and kept on returning, occasioning more court appearances and \$14,000 in fines for Gottlieb, and the eventual (1971) bulldozing of all the buildings except his cabin. But wherever they went, they took with them the dream of returning—legally—to the holy ranch.

Ramon Sender, who had been Morning Star's cofounder, theoretician, and best writer (he edited both *The Morning Star Scrapbook*³ and *Home Free!*⁴) settled down in a small property not fifteen miles away, purchased with a timely legacy. There he decided to do something about the vague yearnings of his people, and organized another "Friends of Morning Star," complete with newsletter—three issues appeared in 1976—promoting the Zionist hope. Since then there has been no sound from that direction; presumably Zion is quiescent.

3. *The Morning Star Scrapbook* (Occidental, Ca., Friends of Morning Star, 1973[?]) gives many details of the closing of the commune, and of much else in its history and posthistory from 1966 to 1973, mainly through newspaper clippings. Its value for research is unfortunately compromised by the lack of dates, and even incorrect chronological order, of many of the items.

4. *Home Free!* (unpublished manuscript, Occidental, Ca., 1978) recounts many anecdotes of life at Morning Star, conveying its flavor better than anything else I have seen. Ramon, son of the Spanish novelist Ramon J. Sender, had previously written *Being of the Sun* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), a freeform philosophy-cum-manual of communal life; his most recent publication is *Zero Weather: a Future Fantasy* (Bodega Bay, Ca.: Family Pub. Co., 1980). In these last two works the name on the title page is Ramon Sender Morningstar.

5. *Epilogue*

Lou Gottlieb spent many sleepless nights trying to solve the problem of how to save Morning Star. He wanted to unload the property, yet be sure that it remained in sympathetic hands, open at least in principle to the public at large. He offered it to Sonoma County—on condition that the "religio-sociological experiment" of open access remained inviolate—but the county declined. Finally, one night in 1969, at about 3 A.M., solution struck him.

He phoned Rex Sater, his unpaid attorney (by way of the Friends), and awakened him. "Rex, I've got it! I know how we can save Morning Star!" "How?" asked a sleepy Rex. "By deeding the land to God." The next day Rex drew up the deed, Lou signed it, and Morning Star belonged to God.

But only for three and a half years. In November 1972 the State Supreme Court refused to reconsider the ruling of the lower courts that under California law, "the deity does not qualify as a grantee." The citation by the court of two sections of the California Civil Code implied that the disqualification resulted from God's nonstatus as a person. A more widely held belief was that God was incapable of supplying the county with taxes.

Appendix: A Chronology from The Morning Star Scrapbook

MAY 1966	Ramon Sender moves onto ranch with Katy Dog.
JUNE 1966	Lou Gottlieb, Victoria, Bruce Baillie, Mama Dog, Ben, Rain, and Leif Jacopetti arrive. Informal <i>ashram</i> . Discovery by Victoria of name of ranch on some old letters— <i>Morning Star</i>
SEPTEMBER 1966	Letters to Mother Mira at Aurobindo Ashram. Descent of Mother Force as Lou, Victoria, and Pam M. see a vision of the Eternal Mother by the barn.
NOVEMBER 1966	First seven young people from Haight-Ashbury.
JANUARY 1967	Don and Sandy, Leni and Phil arrive. First county narcotics officer visits.
APRIL 1967	First bust as ranch fills with Diggers. Ed, Cindy, Herb, John-John, Charlie, Peter, Briget, Superman, Deputy Dog, and many more arrive to start the garden.
MAY 1967	Pam and Larry Reed, Adam Siddartha, Willie B. and Bea, Andre and other dear hearts.
JUNE 1967	<i>Time</i> visits, and <i>Press Democrat</i> articles appear.

JULY 1967	<i>Time</i> : "Perhaps the most hopeful development." Health Department visits. Impossibles arrive. Neighbor Hochuli freaks. Dance in Sebastopol. Lou in court for Organized Camp.
AUGUST 1967	Organized Camp charges dropped. Petition circulates around neighbors. Hepetitis [<i>sic</i>] hits. Bill and Gay Wheeler visit.
SEPTEMBER 1967	Lou in court for <i>too much</i> Organized Camp. One year's probation deal worked out. Probation "redefined" next day as Judge, D.A., and Sheriff arrive to condemn structures and give ranchers twenty-four hours notice-
MID-SEPTEMBER 1967	Restraining Order. Meeting at Harmony Union School with neighbors. Temporary Injunction issued by judge.
OCTOBER 1967	The Last Supper. Lou in contempt of court, forced to arrest the Morning Star Fifteen. Men fast for ten days in jail. Charges dropped. Lou's fines begin to mount up.
DECEMBER 1967	Winter recess as friendly neighbors gather in the waifs.
JANUARY 1968	Twenty-one arrested, eleven found guilty as Lou becomes his own lawyer. Pam Reed arrested for assault.
MARCH 1968	Another one thousand dollar fine as Bill Wheeler opens his ranch to Morning Star Faith refugees.
MAY 1968	Permanent Injunction issued against the ranch. Families migrate to Wheeler's as warriors remain for rear-guard action.
JUNE 1968	Exodus to New Mexico and other points. Seeds scatter.
JULY 1968	Lou's fines now total thirteen thousand dollars.
AUGUST 1968	Lou's fines total fourteen thousand dollars. He offers Morning Star to Sonoma County.
SEPTEMBER 1968	Lou sentenced to fifteen days in jail along with Don "God bless ALL the people" McCoy. Lou and Near go to India after Near is busted for shitting in the woods. Lou meets Chiranjiva and arranges for him to come to America.
FEBRUARY 1969	John Butler is murdered in the Haight.
MAY 1969	Lou deeds Morning Star to God.

