

# Experiment in Living

BY LAWRENCE

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Ruth Pleines and Rosemary Rychlik sort letters from one of 90 mail boxes clustered at colony entrance

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Free Acres folk, who dress as they please, gather on Common for monthly meeting. The platform is also used for community dances.

**B**Y applying a new twist to the old art of living, 86 New Jersey families are experiencing a unique adventure in communal life. They are residents of the "single tax" colony of Free Acres, nestled in quietude in the Watchung Mountains just inside the eastern border of Berkeley Heights.

Since its founding, residents of the colony have, as expressed in their constitution, "endeavored to create a community for the study and demonstration of problems of self-government, social progress and taxation where all shall be mutually helpful and free from all forms of monopoly of natural resources, in order to secure to all equality of opportunity and a full reward of efforts."

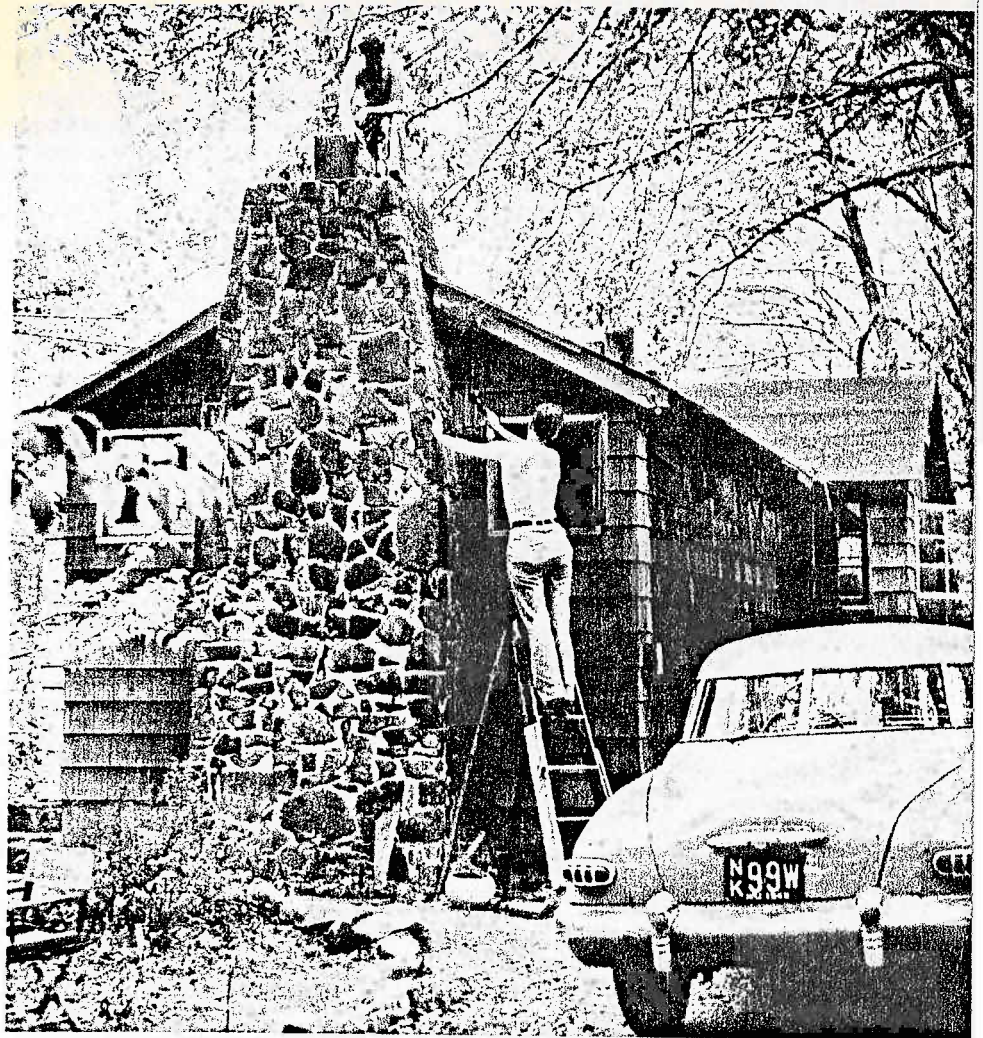
Free Acres was founded in 1910 by Bolton Hall, an ardent single taxer and one of the foremost disciples of Henry George, credited as being father of the movement. George's book, "Progress and Poverty," outlined a single tax plan on the theory presented by the social philosophers of debt-ridden, tax-bedeveled France as a solution to the shocking conditions which led to the French Revolution.

Almost 2,000,000 copies had been sold by 1905 and George's teachings caused a sensation as they reverberated around the economic world. It was George's contention that the land belongs to the people as an inalienable birthright, and that land rent should be taken by the people, instead of taxes, for all public expenses. He believed this ideal could be attained by a gradual abolition of taxes and substitution step by step of levies on the sum for which the land would rent.

**U**NDER the terms of Hall's deed of gift to the Free Acre Association, the land belongs to the colony and is leased to residents who renew their leases annually. Leaseholders pay a tax rent proportionate to the cost of making community improvements and providing services. If community costs rise, the tax is increased, even if a particular holding has not been improved. The man who owns a \$10,000 home pays the same amount on an



Residents are proud of library, located in old farmhouse. Here Mrs. Joseph Connors, daughter of late Thorne Smith, novelist, and Mrs. Betty Schechterman have books checked by Mrs. Hotson.



The Clay brothers make repairs on their cozy home. Many houses in the Free Acres colony are the handiwork of their owners.

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tween leaseholders and to maintain general supervision over all communal rights, property and affairs of the colony. They are commissioned to act according to the will of the majority.

Like any other community, Free Acres has its share of diversity of opinion regarding colony affairs. A recent dispute concerned the practicality of constructing a handball court. A referendum, the second one ever required to settle a local issue, resulted in approval of the project. Interest waned after the victory and the colony still lacks a handball court.

The building inspector and members of the health board perform the same duties as their municipal counterparts. Buildings must conform to colony specifications, which are in keeping with the municipality in which it lies. A small section of the settlement is in the Borough of Watchung, in Somerset County. Association rules permit only one building, not higher than 1½ stories, to a holding.

**B**Y its own choice the Association makes all improvements in the colony, even to the extent of constructing and maintaining almost two miles of macadamized roads. The only public utilities used by the colony are electric and telephone service. Water is purchased from the Commonwealth Water Co., but is piped from the settlement's limits through mains owned by the Association. The water bill is divided evenly among the 86 leaseholders.

Snow removal and garbage disposal are only two of the perennial problems facing leaseholders. The colony maintains its own hydrant system, but fire fighting and law enforcement are left to nearby departments.

The hub of community life, for young and old, is the 90 by 80 foot swimming pool constructed by residents. Expansion of the pool down through the years prompted Thorne Smith to quip: "At the rate the pool is growing, Free Acres is doomed to become a community of houseboats."

A quaint farm house, the colony's oldest structure, serves as a community center. A meeting room is located on the first floor and a library, containing more than 500 volumes, on the second. In fair weather Free Acre folk hold their meetings on an open air platform on a three-acre tract known as the common. The ringing of a large bell signals the beginning of all meetings.

**R**ESIDENTS regretfully note a decline in community spirit as compared with earlier days when primitive living prompted greater co-operation. They point with pride, however, to the group activities which still prevail. There is a weekly folk dancing class conducted by a college student and volunteers make the annual repairs to the tennis courts and baseball field.

Housewives board a chartered bus one afternoon a week and go on a shopping tour. It has recently broadened into a social get-together, too. Many Free Acres children attend the day camp operated in the colony during the Summer. Ninety mail boxes, clustered at the entrance in the form of a giant bee hive, often serve as a meeting place for the exchange of verbal tidbits.

As in all communal life, the colony has its share of social problems. They range from the more serious to the one presented by the man who had arthritis, and on advice of his physician, absorbed the sun's warm rays—attired in his underwear. He had not been strolling long when a neighbor raised vociferous objections. Obliging, he returned to his home and donned a tie. The silent squelch worked, and the complaints ceased.

**W**HEN most of the colony's young men went off to service, the supply of life guards dwindled so that women decided literally to come to the rescue. Even grandmothers spryly took their stations at the pool's edge and efficiently performed their duties as would-be rescuers. On their return the men got their jobs back for a brief time, but when they persistently centered their attentions on female bathers, the women were recalled—and even had their wages boosted to 65 cents an hour.

From its original status as a Summer colony, Free Acres has developed into a year-around home for two-thirds of its families. The economic contradictions which existed in the colony from its inception became intensified as the area built it.

Belief in the single tax theory, or any economic, political or religious conviction is not a requisite to establish residence at Free Acres, as any member of the Delaney, Berger, Van Straaten or Levendusky family will tell you. There are few ardent single taxers left, but leaseholders indorse enough of the plan to continue living happily by a skeleton of the original doctrine.