

## A Tale of Two Communes

**Noel:** Ever since I was kid, I've been fascinated by communes and collectives. I grew up during the 1980s in a white picket neighborhood in the old north end of Colorado Springs. It was mostly full of professionals and their nuclear families. But there was a secret side of the neighborhood -- a community of lesbians, including my mom, many of whom had kids around my age. And some of them lived together in a commune. It was in a big old victorian house next to a butcher shop called "Babe's Meat Market." And it was started by a woman named Bonnie Poucel.

**Bonnie Poucel:** The vision was that we would live, collectively and that we would help each other with our kids, and we would take turns with the work, you know, and that we would contribute financially according to our abilities, you know, and according to what we were making and that- that was the vision.

**Noel:** My mom and I didn't live there, and she didn't live with her partner. She was afraid that I could get taken away from her if a nosy neighbor decided to call child welfare... But Bonnie and her kids Jean-Jacques and Genevieve lived there. And my friends Tom and Brooke lived there part-time with their mom. Part of me was glad we didn't live there. It was like a cross between a sorority house and a hippie grocery store. It was kind of embarrassing in that buttoned down neighborhood. But another part of me was jealous that my friends and their families could be so open and free about who they were. Here's Tom and Brooke remembering the commune in an interview I did with them back in 2015:

**Tom Carlson:** The commune was great and I wish it would've lasted longer. But I'm sure there were pressures and unknown fact- factors unknown to me that brought about its breakup. But I really enjoyed it, it was a couple years of living in a house with a bunch of women and a few other kids. I remember Julia paid my allowance and Julia had- was- was one of the women living there, and she had a better job, I think, than my mom, or something. [Laughter] So- So you know, it was just part of the deal, that you know, my chores- Julia would pay my allowance for doing my chores. You know, which was awesome, you know- what- you are- you know, it was a good deal, worked out well.

**Brooke Carlson:** and were things like naked yoga happening. Um- That was kinda strange for me.

[Music Plays]

**Jean-Jacques Poucel:** That- That sounds like a fiction to me.

**Noel:** Does it?

**Jean-Jacques Poucel:** Yeah.

**Bonnie Poucel:** It does to me too.

**Noel:** Interesting

**Jean-Jacques Poucel:** Yeah.

**Bonnie Poucel:** I never s- I never participated in that- in that, and uh-

**Noel:** Huh

**Bonnie Poucel:** I don't think- maybe, Peggy, I don't know

**Noel:** Even if there wasn't naked yoga, the commune was wildly different from the other homes I knew in Colorado Springs. Bonnie's son Jacques remembers how important that space was where he could feel free to be himself and be different.

**Jean-Jacques Poucel:** So you're actually protecting yourself as a form of cocooning and also intensifying your stance within the community.

**Noel:** But like so many communal living experiments from that era, many of which relied on cheap land or cheap rent, the lesbian commune next to Babe's Meat Market didn't last long.

**Bonnie Poucel:** And then you have conflicts, especially [stifling laughter] if you have a bunch of lesbians living together, you know, you get to write something. And then the people who come after may just think, oh, this is cool, but they don't really have this- they don't share the vision to create it.

**Noel:** Here's Brook again.

**Brooke Carlson:** The commune was an idea, it was ideal, and it was utopian, but then there were personalities and certain personalities were bigger than others and people. People had secrets and, you know people were, behaving differently and, jealousy and fear and, those different things also soon developed, and I remember in that tricky complicated victorian space, of the house, that those things seeped in and made it, complicated.

**Noel:** By the time I graduated from high school in 1990, the commune and the utopian spirit of that time all seemed to have vanished in a cloud of such complications. And in the years since I've been part of several collectives that have all collapsed under the weight of egos, misunderstandings, and resentments. I've often wondered if such collective efforts are too idealistic to survive for long in this world.

**Noel:** But then a few years ago I went to an art opening at the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Colorado Springs. It was for an exhibit celebrating one of the oldest continuously inhabited intentional communities in the United States. A little-known commune right here in southern Colorado called Libre that had just turned 50 years old.

**Dean Fleming GOCA:** I don't know how much introduction you've done, but this is 50 years, and this is where I feel really really good about it, because I have no idea about anything about 50 years! 1968, I thought if we get through this winter we'll be in really good shape!

**[Theme]**

**Tyler:** From History Colorado Studios, this is Lost Highways: Dispatches from the Shadows of the Rocky Mountains. I'm Tyler Hill.

**Noel:** And I'm Noel Black. On each episode, Tyler and I explore overlooked stories from our home state of Colorado and the American West.

**Tyler:** On this episode: How two experimental artist communes in southern Colorado sought freedom **and a new collective way of life** in the American West in the 1960s and 70s.

**Noel:** At a time when many Americans are **thinking hard about** how we can live together, **how we can build lasting communities that make space for our differences**, and what's sustainable long term, we'll look at how one of those communes survived **and lived their ideals** by striking a balance between freedom and order.

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**Noel I:** You may have heard the name Drop City, or seen pictures of the colorful geodesic domes in a pasture outside Trinidad, Colorado in the 1960s. They looked like giant golf balls or mushrooms with crazy quilts tossed over them.

**Tyler:** The name and the commune all started with some painted rocks dropped from the top of buildings. Here's Clark Richert, one of the founders of Drop City, describing an art project that he and his classmates Gene and Joanne Bernofsky created at the University of Kansas in 1963.

**Clark Richert:** I was an art major and we would go up onto the roof of the building, which was three stories high and we would start painting these rocks and then we started dropping the rocks down onto the street and we were amazed at the response between the the people who were seeing the the rocks dropping.

**Noel:** Like many art students in the 1960s, Richert and the Bernofskys were influenced by the major international art movements of the time that challenged notions of what it meant to be an artist.

**Clark Richert:** And we were very much informed by the idea of *Happenings*, which started in the summer 1949 and at Black Mountain College

**Tyler:** Happenings were a kind of performance art popularized by the artist Alan Kaprow. They were events meant to disrupt the ordinary in everyday life. Flash Mobs, for example, where people show up at a designated time to dance on a subway car, are a kind of modern-day version of a happening.

**Clark Richert:** So our dropped rocks, we called Drop Art or Droppings

**Noel:** Richert and the Bernofskys were also taken with the ideas of another highly influential teacher at Black Mountain College: the designer and futurist Buckminster Fuller, a champion of the geodesic dome.

**Clark Richert:** So in the summer of 1949, Buckminster Fuller built his first geodesic dome.

**Noel:** Shortly after graduating in 1963, Richert moved to Boulder to get a Masters Degree in Art at the University of Colorado. While he was there, he got to hear the scientist, thinker and humanist R. Buckminster Fuller speak.

**[Fuller lecture sound]**

**Interviewer:** What brought about the construction of The Geodesic Dome and its importance to you?

**R. Buckminster Fuller:** When I [Cough] told you that I hadn't committed myself to solving problems with artifacts and not by social reform. So religious rules...

**Noel:** Even if you've never heard of Fuller, you've probably seen geodesic domes, also known by their familiar name: Bucky Balls.

**Tyler:** Epcot Center at Disney World in Florida has one, and Biodome 2 in the desert outside Tucson is a bucky ball as well. Or maybe you've seen one covering the radar technology when you come into land at the airport.

**R. Buckminster Fuller:** Might be able to take care of everyone. That did end up in the geodesic structures, which do do, vastly more and the way in the way of environment control in any other from the structure in the universe. In fact, isatsu important form that, you find the protein shell of all the viruses. With the DNA RNA control of life, are inside The Geodesic Spheres. Has a protein shell-

**Noel:** Fuller believed these domes could solve humanity's need for inexpensive shelter. They're incredibly light, efficient, relatively cheap and easy to build.

**Tyler:** Not long after hearing Fuller speak, Richert visited his friends the Bernofskys back in Lawrence, Kansas. The three of them had fantasized about starting a kind of communal living arrangement after graduation. They started looking for land where they could combine avant-garde art with Buckminster Fuller's practical philosophy and ideas.

**Noel:** In 1965, they started looking for land throughout the west.

**Tyler:** Land in Colorado and much of the southwest, especially rural land, was still incredibly cheap then.

**Clark Richert:** We first acquired the property based on the availability of it and the attraction also the property on our extremely limited budget. But shortly after we were living there, we started getting really very interested in the things that the creative things that were happening in the Southwest. And I think Drop City was one of the first things that happened that the world and art world started paying attention to.

**Noel:** And it was hard NOT to pay attention. The property they bought in 1965 for 450 dollars was just off Interstate 25 outside of Trinidad, Colorado.



**Tyler:** John Curl came to Drop City not long after Richert, the Bernofsky's, and a few others had just begun to build. Here he describes his first impression.

**John Curl:** I was coming out of nowhere and then all of a sudden there were these domes in the middle of nowhere, which I had already expected. I kind of knew about it, but it was it was you know, always really impressive.

[Construction Sounds]

BBC Reporter: The Domes, geodesic domes, are based on the same structural principle as the American Pavilion at Expo 67. Steel Cartops are not the only material they use. Beer Cans and second hand plywood make a very good structural sandwich.

[Hammering and Axe Sounds]

**Noel:** Not long after Curl arrived, they began covering the large geodesic structure known as the theater dome with a patchwork of colorful metal car tops from a local junkyard.

[Construction Sounds, moving sheets of metal around.]

**John Curl:** To get them out of the cars we used axes and we just climbed up and we just we just chopped them out of the- But at that time, for some reason, the junkyards let us do that.

**Tyler:** Once they had the car tops removed, says Curl, they used electric shearers to fit them to the triangle shapes that made up the structure on the domes and zomes. Zomes were modified domes that were easier to divide into separate rooms.

**Noel:** In photos and old film footage, Drop City looks like it was settled by farmers from Mars. Horses and goats roam between the Kaleidoscopic domes and improvised sculptures.

**Tyler:** Once you've seen the domes, it's easy to understand why Drop City drew almost immediate international media attention. But the attention wasn't just about the spectacle. It was about what Drop City stood for, as one of the earliest intentional communities of that era.

**Noel:** Here's one such report from the BBC.

**[Construction Sounds]**

**BBC Documentarian:** Building your own house of theater is not, for this young community just an exercise in *do it yourself* cheap housing for their wives and family. Or a back to nature movement. It's an attempt to give visual expression to their ideal of a free society. What is this Utopian Freedom they desire so much?

**John Curl:** Social changes are always connected to changes of consciousness, because you really can't have social change unless you- unless you change the way people are thinking about things. And so we with getting together with a group of people who were all into, try to find

new ways to relate to each other. That we had all pretty much rejected the world that we had been brought up in.

**Noel:** Many who showed up at Drop City, says Curl, were resisting the war in Vietnam.

**John Curl:** So that was the atmosphere that it was. And so you know, and so we would- it was like a refuge, and it was, you know, kind of getting together with like minded people for mutual aid, you know, to interact, to to relate to each other in in new kinds of ways, in new- it's like when oh- when opening a box, you don't really know what's in it.

**Tyler:** What Richert, The Bernofskys, and other early residents DID KNOW was that it WASN'T going to be the world their parents had created after World War II.

**Noel:** For many young people, Drop City and other communes like The Farm in Tennessee, New Buffalo in New Mexico, and The Hog Farm in California represented a new kind of COLLECTIVE freedom. The young founders rejected America's rigid social norms, and the superficial culture it had sold to itself in the name of material prosperity.

**John Curl:** After the- after World War II there was this just a rigidity, people kinda wanted to get back to some kind of normalcy. But they had their fantasy of what normal was, and it just wasn't- it just didn't work. You know, if you look and all these- the 1950s led to the 1960s, there were those- It all exploded in the 1960s, and so large numbers of people were looking for new ways of doing things and that's what Drop City was.

**Tyler:** And the southwest, with its cheap land and wide open vistas, was the perfect place to build this new vision of social and economic freedom.

**John Curl:** It was you know, we, socially in terms of our interaction, we shared everything, we pooled all our money. You know nobody had any individual money, we wore our clothing, we had like communal closets where people took clothing out of. You know we all ate together, you know most of the vehicles were group owned.

**Noel:** But with the attention, came tension. For some, the openness and collectivity was too much. Here's Clark Richert.

**Clark Richert:** I think what the major areas of conflict was, whether or not we wanted to be a self-contained, but kind of shelter from the larger society- community. Or did we want to make it big in the art world? So I probably was on the side of I wanted to make it big in the art world. Uh- about uh- several people did not want that at all. They didn't want a lot of people- a lot of visitors coming and- like one thing about Drop City is it's extremely open. Like if somebody came and visited and said they wanted to live there, then we'd say: Okay, live here. And there was no there was no work requirement either, so all they had to do is show up for dinner. Anyway, that was probably the major conflict then at Drop City. Is whether it was where there is to be an open community and or whether it's to be more self-contained and closed.

**Noel:** Some of the residents like Gene Bernofsky didn't want anyone who hadn't been invited. Others actively sought to promote the community as far and wide as possible. But the lack of

any stated policy about visitors, aside from a sign that said NO VISITORS AFTER 8 P.M., became a de facto open door policy.

**Tyler:** The poet Peter Douthit, better known as Peter Rabbit, was one of the early residents of Drop City who believed: the more the merrier.

**Clark Richert:** One thing about Drop City is we all had our dropper name, so my dropper name was Clard Swendsen and Gene Bernovsky's dropper name was Curly Benson and Richard Curl's dropper name was Larry Lard. So Peter felt he needed a dropper name, and since he kind of functioned as a self-appointed public relations person for Drop City, he adopted the initials P.R., which stood for Peter Rabbit.

**Tyler:** For the most part, he was perfect for the role. He was charismatic, dedicated, and a writer willing to stretch the truth for media attention.

**Clark Richert:** Like, here's a great exagger- it's a falsehood. You know, he said that we were driving around in search of car tops and we saw this brand new Cadillac and well, we looked at each other and said, "okay, let's go." So we jumped out the car, went over to the brand new Cadillac, and chopped the top off. So that is *not* a true story, but a lot of people think it's true.

**Noel:** But Douthit *was*, also domineering, no stranger to drugs, and confrontational.

**Clark Richert:** Drop City was a fairly peaceful place, but there was one *intense* physical fight between Peter, and an old friend of his from way before Drop City. He also lived there- and they were really swinging at each other with two by fours.

**Tyler:** Needless to say, he rubbed some of the Droppers the wrong way.

**Noel:** Things came to a head in 1967 when Rabbit organized and promoted a small, proto-Woodstock festival with bands and people camping out all over the property.

**Clark Richert:** Peter Rabbit really wanted to be open, and he promoted the idea of the *Joy* Festival. So we had a big nationally advertised Joy Festival, and a lot of people came- it was noisy with a lot of music and a lot of drumbeating and dancing. And probably too much consumption of drugs and alcohol. But it was noisy and happy, but some people were repulsed by it, and *left* because of it.

**Noel:** Richert's co-founders Gene and Joanne Bernofsky DID LEAVE because of the Joy Festival. When contacted for this episode, they declined to be interviewed and stated only that they did not consider Drop City to be an ARTIST COMMUNE.

**Tyler:** What IS clear is that Drop City drifted further away from its original vision as the years went by. Richert himself left shortly after the Bernofskys when his girlfriend got pregnant and they needed to be closer to basic health and human services-- that weren't available in nearby Trinidad.

**Noel:** For the first few years, says Jon Curl, the commune had functioned by consensus, shared vision, and the bonds of friendship.

**Jon Curl:** Most of the time we just kind of talked about things until either we got tired of talking about them or- or it became clear there was some kind of way forward, some kind of consensus or some kind of compromise between the different viewpoints. But it takes a lot of time.

**Tyler:** And then, as the numbers grew, so did the difficulty of making decisions by consensus. As often happens in communities of all sizes, the most forceful personalities began to dominate despite the fact that there weren't supposed to be any bosses.

**Noel:** The founders had originally capped the number of residents at 30. But after Bernofsky and Richert left in 1967, Drop City's numbers quickly swelled beyond that. People crowded into the domes and zones scattered across the property.

**Tyler:** And the new members were more *hippies* than artists. They didn't share the founders' avant-garde vision. Anyone looking to hide out, do drugs, be sexually promiscuous, or freeload in any way, could just show up and drain the communal resources without necessarily giving back.

**Jon Curl:** At that time, there were a lot of people who were- who were kinda very funky people. Started out as kind of a family place, and then it became a kind of a homeless place where- where people who would, you know, for whatever reason from someplace- from Peoria, Illinois,

they were not making it there. And they just got a Drop City and- well they were marginal people, in their hometown and they were still marginal people in Drop City.

**Noel:** Then there was the so-called FREE love of the time, which didn't help matters at Drop City.

**Jon Curl:** Some of these people were fairly, loose, you know, I mean, they were in terms of relationships. The early people were- were, for the most part, kind of, I wouldn't say they were conventional, but they were just into couples, they were into they really were not into you know, into sleeping in a pile.

**Tyler:** A man living at Drop City got one of two women he was sleeping with pregnant. The other woman was inconsolable.

**Noel:** A warning: what follows is graphic, and sensitive listeners may want to skip ahead 40 seconds.

**Curl:** There was a gun there. Which had been left there by- I'm not sure who left it there, might- widecard- I think it was left there by this guy who was a deserter from the Marines and he was on the land from somewhere or other. But, this woman was feeling bad about the break up, and she stuck the rifle in her mouth and shot off the back of her head. And that was kind of the end of it. And then the- Drop City never recovered from that.



**[Funder]** To learn more about the stories you learn about on lost highways, check out History Colorado's Eight Museums around the state. Like the El Pueblo History Museum in Pueblo, which features a series of exhibits, events, and more, related to the borderlands of Southern Colorado. From a place of meeting between indigenous tribes to a physical border between nations. From the bounty between mountains and plains to everyday convergences of cultural and ethnic borders. This exhibit illuminates the site's specific geopolitical border history. As well as the regions historic and ongoing borders of: cultures, ethnicities, landscapes, industries, religions and identities.

**Tyler:** Right around the time that Drop City began to decline in the late 1960s, artists Linda and Dean Fleming were traveling around the southwest with a vision of their own commune.

**Noel:** When I met Dean Fleming in his geodesic dome in the Huerfano Valley for this interview, he was wearing bright red overalls smudged with a rainbow of paints. He has the same jocular almost mischievous continuance of a garden gnome and wore a silver, prince valiant haircut with bangs cut straight across. He's in his mid-80s now, but he was painting one of his canvasses in loosely stroked geometric shapes in primary colors with the zeal and ease of a child.

**Tyler:** When they first came to Colorado, Linda and Dean were both part of an artist's community centered around the Park Place Gallery in New York City.

**Noel:** Linda had been Dean's student at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. She was 12 years young but had the confidence and self-possession of an artist in the full swing of her career.

**Tyler:** There had been talk among members of the Park Place Gallery of buying a building in New York where artists could live and work in a shared space. But with protests against the war in Vietnam heating up in the streets of New York, Dean and Linda felt like they needed another alternative.

**Linda Fleming:** Mainly we were gonna find a place that could be a center for artists to come to that would be in the country. So there would be a rural and an urban outpost.

**Noel:** Dean had an idea of where to start. A few years earlier, two scraggly looking young artists had walked into the Park Place Gallery when it was just getting started.

**Dean Fleming:** Anyway it was the two guys that started Drop City, Clark Richert and Bernofsky and they were wandering around. This was like 65, and they showed me an out-of-focus Polaroid of their community of Drop City in Trinidad, you know, and they said next time you come by and come and see us. And I thought, wow, it's going to be a long day in hell. But anyway, it wasn't, it wasn't a long day.

**Tyler:** After an exhibition of Park Place artists in Denver in 1968, Dean stayed in Colorado and went to the mountains.

**Dean Fleming:** There were no houses, I went up in this- high up on this ridges and I was sitting there and I said: this is pretty intense, I, there's some kind of meaning that was going on besides just the view and- [Laughter] that- the Ponderosa were blowing in the wind, and I could hear them, and they were talking to me, and they said: *Stay here*. And I said: *Well, I can't do that because I'm an artist and- I gotta be in New York*. And they said: *You can be an artist here*.

**Noel:** Dean went back to New York to get Linda, and they drove out West in search of the perfect land for their vision.

**Tyler:** That was when they decided to drop in on Clark Richert and the Bernofskys to see how their artist community was faring 3 years into the experiment.

**Noel:** Both Dean and Linda were wowed by the hand-built technicolor domes and the anarchic creativity. But they sensed it wasn't what THEY were looking to create. There was something out of control, if not desperate about Drop City.

**Dean Fleming:** And then when I finally got out here, I went to see 'em and here are the same guys, and they were trying to paint on the kitchen table with the kids running around on it and the dogs and cats, and food and, funky, really funky. And I was like- I said: *Why don't you just make a studio, you know?* And they come and live like that, but, you know, have to have a place to paint. And I remember Clark Richert said: *Oh no, we're all one*. And I thought: *That's not really true, we're not one, we're all different, and we're all really a lot of pigs and, you know-* [Laughter] *a lot of slovens and so forth*.

**Linda Fleming:** There were a lot of runaways. It was really- what should I say- it was very unpredictable who was going to show up and need to be taken care of. So it wasn't what many of the people who had started it, ever intended it to be.

**Tyler:** In many ways, there was TOO MUCH freedom at Drop City.

**Linda Fleming:** Nobody had any money, to buy a lot of food and feed a lot of people. So they were dumpster diving, they had, relationships with the supermarkets in town, when things would house expiration date, they would just save it for a drop city. So Drop City would get all this free food. But it was not the life that many of the original Droppers had in mind because they *were* artists.

**Noel:** What Dean and Linda saw at Drop City was what they DIDN'T want, and it made what they DID want even clearer.

**Linda Fleming:** Well, first of all, we were certain we were going to find a beautiful piece of land because Drop City was *not* beautiful.

**Tyler:** They liked the southwest. There was already a whole community of recently-formed communes spanning from Drop City near Trinidad, to New Buffalo in northern New Mexico. And the land, beautiful land, was cheap.

**Noel:** But most of the other communities were HIPPIE communes. They were focused on sharing all resources from housing to food and labor. Others were religious or spiritual communes centered on charismatic leaders or ideals.

**Tyler:** Dr. Tim Miller at the University of Kansas studies communes, or what he calls “intentional communities.” The United States, he says, has a long history of intentional communities with utopian ideals.

**Noel:** Not including Catholic convents and monasteries, or indigenous groups, Miller says that by his count there have been more than 3000 intentional communities since the earliest colonization of America.

**Dr. Tim Miller:** Well, it's a living situation in which people have come together, around some purpose, there's some point, it's not just random living together, but their- religious purpose or an environmental on some kind of philosophical point or something. A group of people come together, they share, to a fair extent, economically, share facilities and generally try in their various ways to do the work that they are gathered on the basis of.

**Tyler:** What often defines them ASIDE from their ideals or spiritual orientation, says Miller, is their opposition to mainstream American values.

**Dr. Tim Miller:** The first two notable English colonies both had communal features to them. Jamestown 1607, had notably communal features. And that was required, they had financial backers in England and the backers said: *No, you're gonna- live communally, you're gonna work*

*it out as a community.* And then when Plymouth Colony came along in 1620, same thing, they had outside backing. And they, the backers insisted that they organize on a totally communal basis, everything shared, including money. And that didn't last too long, that had a lot of problems, and that broke up, but that's how it started. So yeah, it goes back to the very beginning.

**Noel:** The oppositional nature of intentional communities in American history, says Miller, isn't limited to any one viewpoint on the political or religious spectrum. There are right wing communities like the Aryan Nation compound near Hayden Lake, Idaho.

**Tyler:** And then there are cult communes like Jim Jones's Peoples Temple and, ultimately, Jonestown where he and his entire community of followers committed suicide by drinking Kool-Aid laced with Cyanide. Then there was Bhagwan Rajneesh's commune in Antelope, Oregon, which was the subject of the recent documentary *Wild Wild Country*. And David Koresh's Branch Davidian compound in Waco Texas.

**Dr. Tim Miller:** A lot of people, like I say, they're there for a purpose generally, and as long as you keep that firmly in mind and are driven by it, I think it can endure quite a long while. But in a lot of cases that doesn't seem to work out. And there are various reasons why that is the case. I think maybe the most typical reason is simply financial. People don't really have it adequately capitalized, they don't have enough money to make it work. So that certainly undermines things. Sometimes with certain places it's just interpersonal relations. People don't get along with each other. Sometimes, I think people, I think when they're thrown in very close together discover they don't like to be that close to other people. So there various things can bring it to an end.

And the average commute lifespan in America is not terribly long for some, for aah- I'm sure it's under 10 years.

**[music in]**

**Noel:** Drop City lasted only 8 years by the time it finally fizzled out in the early 70s. And most of the original founders abandoned it not long after Dean and Linda Fleming visited in late 1967.

**Tyler:** The charismatic poet Peter Rabbit, the charismatic poet and self-appointed publicist, had worn out his welcome at Drop City by then. When he heard Dean and Linda were looking for land to start another artist commune somewhere nearby, he and his wife Judy quickly offered to join them.

**Linda Fleming:** I and Dean and Peter and Judy, actually, we were all really agreeing that we wanted something really, really epic and beautiful because Colorado is so beautiful.

**[music out - hard cut]**

**[Ambi Car Ride to Libre]**

**Electra Johnson:** That just got in our way.

**Noel:** What's up?

**Male Johnson:** So beautiful here.

**Electra Johnson:** Don't worry about it because were gonna go in a big bumpy dirt road um-

**Noel's Son:** Yeah

**Electra Johnson:** Couple bumpy dirt roads-

**Noel's Son:** Yeah

**Electra Johnson:** So-

**Noel:** So how far away are we?

**Electra Johnson:** Oh, were- It's right over the mountain. So basically were kind of um...

**Noel:** I'm in the car with my friend Electra and her family driving West off of Interstate 25 into an arid red desert landscape in Southern Colorado. It's forbidding and unremarkable for about 20 miles until you get to a ghost town called Badito.

**Electra Johnson:** ...or a dog fart, I'm not sure which.

**Male Johnson:** Kid-



**Noel's Son:** It's a dog fart.

**Male Johnson:** Yeah it's a kid-

**Noel's Son:** It's *not!* I didn-

**Electra Johnson:** A kid fart or a dog fart?

**Noel's Son:** Woo-

**Electra Johnson:** It's a stinker.

**[Laughter]**

**Electra Johnson:** House up here that's one of the oldest structures in Southern Colorado, That was a stage coach stop and before that it was- it's an old adobe house, that sort of melted into the earth.

**Noel:** Even the ghosts seem to have abandoned this memory of a place with nothing left to mark it but the wooden bones of a few buildings. I imagine things aren't much different than when Dean and Linda and Peter and Judy drove this road more than 50 years ago looking for the land that would become their artist commune.

**Noel:** Tucked away behind the Wet Mountains in the East, the valley looks like it got dug out in one long, curving ice cream scoop. The Huerfano River winds its way through the center in a ribbon of green to the northeast. Not too far beyond Badito you turn north on a dirt road up the backside of Greenhorn Mountain. The landscape here looks more like New Mexico high desert dotted with juniper scrub.

**Electra Johnson:** Yeah but this area right over here, on highway 69, was where all the mining camps where.

**Noel:** There are fences, a few homes, but it's mostly open. Then, just as the road starts to rise toward a sharp incline, you seem to fall down a rabbit hole. There in front of you sits a blue and yellow cottage straight out of a fairy tale. A steep gabled house with a porch supported by hand-fashioned buttresses, it has what looks like another little house boat with another porch stacked right on top of that. And all of it is tied together with a cattywampus wave of shingled roof. There's a steel hoop fence surrounded by white marble sculptures of fantastical female forms and homemade windchimes fashioned from all manner of baubles. Above, Tibetan prayer flags fly. And then there's a small junkyard full of old cars.

**[Music with Guitar]**

**Electra Johnson?:** This is where I grew up.

**[Sound of getting out of a car]**

**Noel:** Wow, I never knew there's the Spanish Peaks.

**Noel's Son:** Give the gourds! The gourds- gourds!

**Female Johnson:** The gourds!

**Noel:** And when you get out of the car and turn around, you can see why Linda and Dean chose this spot over 50 years ago. Incredibly beautiful is an understatement. Facing southeast, you can follow a long panorama of spectacular mountain views that stretch from the conjoined Spanish Peaks to the Sheep Mountain, Little Sheep Mountain and then Blanca Peak at the southern end of the Sangre de Cristos. From there, the sharky, jagged peaks of the Sangre Cristos run north. The whole valley seems to have been swallowed in the long jaws of the mountains. One of the poorest regions in our state, it's a kind of Land of the Lost. Despite the fact that I've lived in southern Colorado for most of my life, I've never been here before. And this view of The Huerfano Valley is, without question, one of the most beautiful places in Colorado that I've ever seen.

**Jim Fowler:** [Laughing] that was a long time ago.

**Noel:** Hi Jim

**Jim Fowler:** Hi

**Noel:** Nice to see you.

**Jim Fowler:** Likewise

**Noel:** So good, it looks like something right out of pippi longstocking.

**Electra Johnson?:** Yeah, well-

**Jim Fowler:** Actually some Germans a *long* time a go when it was even smaller, they said: *Es ist ein kleines Hexenhaus, it's a little witch's house.*

**[Laughter]**

**Tyler:** Dean and Linda knew this was where they wanted to start their artist commune. And they decided to name it Libre, which of course means -- Free.

**Dean Fleming:** So we started with that premise that it meant free, and that didn't mean that the people involved in it were free. It just meant that- that was a dream, and that was what we would work for, like a carrot on a stick, you know?

**Noel:** The land itself wasn't exactly free, but...

**Dean Fleming:** It was thirty-five bucks an acre, which is almost free, you know. It's really ridiculous, an acre is a lot, you know. And so there's three hundred and sixty acres here. So it was \$12,000.

**Tyler:** Just like Drop City, they set up Libre so that no one person would actually OWN the land. But that was really the only thing the two communes would have in common. Libre is now almost 53 years old, making it one of the longest lasting communes in the United States today.

**Tyler:** Electra's dad Jim built this cottage by himself, adding on over the years as his family grew or he needed more space. One of the hard and fast rules of Libre when it began was that anyone who wanted to live there had to build their own home.

**Noel:** And the home had to be out of view of any of the other homes on the 360 acre plot of land.

**Tyler:** These were just a few of the carefully-thought-out rules set down at the very inception of Libre designed to help the founders and anyone who came after avoid the pitfalls they saw at Drop City.

**Noel:** It was like a Constitution to help Libre be and remain a home for a small community of working artists. Linda Fleming goes so far as to say that it wasn't a commune at all.

**Linda Fleming:** We did not want to be communal, and what I mean by that is we didn't want to be obliged- to be responsible for each other's well-being. We would be friends, we would help each other, but we weren't gonna- take care of each other. We were gonna create space for ourselves. We would have individual spaces that were more than just a bedroom, but that was studio spaces, and really foregrounding that at the outset was a very important endeavor.

**Noel:** Even among those on the far left, says Linda Fleming, the prospect of setting out to simply make art and live life as an artist was radical at the time.

**Linda Fleming:** And I can't impress on- you know, how difficult, psychologically and philosophically, it was to convey to many people in the late 60s that this was a revolutionary thing to do, to make art, to have a studio. Everybody thought you had to fight to fight and bring down the government and the war in Vietnam was raging. And to say that you were going to make your own work. Which to me is one of the most radical things you can do. Everybody is always trying to hijack the agenda of what your life that's about. But to say: *no, my life is about this, I'm going to make my work.* So, we have- you know, we were able to create a place.

**Noel:** Drop City was a kind of art experiment unto itself, it was a radical test of freedom as an act of CREATIVELY LIVING DAILY LIFE outside the norms and expectations of society. Libre, on the other hand, took a more pragmatic view of itself as a radical place for MAKING art.

**Tyler:** To put it another way, Drop City was a kind of long term HAPPENING by Alan Kaprow's definition. Libre, in contrast, was merely an Art Colony where happenings might HAPPEN.

**Noel:** Just up the dirt road, and out of sight from Jim Fowler's fairy cottage, Dean Fleming's hand-built home in many ways epitomizes Libre's relationship to Drop City.

**Tyler:** Like many of the structures at Drop City, Dean's home is also made of geodesic domes.

**Noel:** Rather than a patchwork of colorful car tops or silver paint, however, Dean's domes are covered in sheets of light brown roofing material that blend into the landscape. But like the domes at Drop City, it was still cheap to build.

**Dean Fleming:** I want to tell you, this is a seven hundred dollar house, seven hundred bucks.

**Tyler:** It was aesthetically beautiful.

**Dean:** We still never made money, but we had beautiful houses.

**Noel:** And it was built to last.

**Dean Fleming:** So this house is now 52 years old, and that's how it's gonna- low-cost housing, man.

**Tyler:** Linda and Judy made all the precise measurements and cuts while he and Peter put it together. It was pragmatic, and the design could withstand the snow and stay warm in the long, harsh Colorado winters.

**Dean Fleming:** The dome is incredibly fine.

**Tyler:** Linda and Judy made all the precise measurements and cuts while he and Peter put it together. It was pragmatic, and the design could withstand the snow and stay warm in the long, harsh Colorado winters.

**Dean Fleming:** Many people said: *Oh this is a 20 foot ceiling an- all the heat's gonna go up there.* But it doesn't man, It circulates.

**Noel:** And unlike Drop City, it's not only hidden far from the main highways, it's camouflaged from casual gawkers or drop-ins.

**Tyler:** But on the inside it's a gigantic, bright white studio with skylights for making his primary-colored, geometric abstract paintings. It also has its own gallery AND separate living spaces heated by passive solar.

**Noel:** Again, the goal for both Dean and Linda, if not Peter Rabbit, was to live as full-time artists, NOT as communards. Building your own home and studio far from the main road was one rule meant to help keep out interlopers. But they needed something more to keep out long term guests who weren't there to make art.

**Linda Fleming:** You had to build your own house and you had to be self-contained. But that we would help each other as much as we could. And that was really important thing we learned from Drop City that we didn't want, to have to take care of runaways. There was no space for anybody who just showed up.

**Tyler:** But Dean and Linda knew that making it too difficult for new members wasn't going to work either. They were trying to make an artists's community at the foot of the mountains in rural Colorado.



**Noel:** There were also limited resources. For one thing, you could only have so many homes when one of the rules was that you had to be out of sight of your neighbors. For two, there was only so much water available from a creek and natural Spring in the canyon behind their property.

**Tyler:** So they needed to figure out how to have a governance structure that would allow just enough people with shared values in, but prevent random drop-ins from staying AND prevent charismatic individuals from taking over.

**Noel:** They decided on one of the most difficult forms of governance: unanimous democracy.

**Tyler:** That meant that ANY CHANGES whatsoever, inviting new members, kicking old members out, reallocating water, or selling the land, had to be agreed upon by EVERY SINGLE MEMBER of Libre.

**Linda Fleming:** There was really no leader, there were the original owners who bought the land together. But they were a group of people, and they acted as a group of people, not just one person in charge. And we've seen other communities where there would be a charismatic leader, and those seemed really deadly because pretty soon there are huge arguments and people are leaving and you put huge investment in something and then you have to abandon it, because people are so dictatorial.

**Dean Fleming:** So the idea was that, we would own the land together and it could never be disposed of or sold unless everybody agreed to do that. And it's come up a couple times in our history, that people said now the time to break it up into individual spots or whatever, and it was completely voted down right away by the other members. So I knew that it would be safe, with this condition. If it has to be 100 percent, it's not going to happen.

**[Music Fade In]**

**Noel:** These rules were, in effect, Libre's constitution. It was not FREEDOM ITSELF, but the conditions for freedom that Linda and Dean tried to establish.

**Tyler:** But even with these rules and the lessons of Drop City fresh in their minds, there were, of course, problems.

**[Music Fade Out]**

**[FUNDER BREAK]:** If you're enjoying this episode of lost highways, you may want to explore Trinidad's past and its place in the American West at the Trinidad History Museum. Featured exhibits such as Borderlands of Southern Colorado and the Santa Fe Trail Museum showcase, the Region's diverse cultural and ethnic Heritage. The property features the historic Blue Mansion and Baca House, to residences built in the late 19th century. As well as Heritage Gardens all on one block and Trinidad's acclaimed historic district. If you want to learn more about our I see I'm throughout the state. Go to history, Colorado.org.

**Noel:** One of the first problems Libre encountered as it added new members to its community was the lack of infrastructure and construction experience.

**Tyler:** Dean and Linda had built a dome, and Peter and Judy had built a Zome -- the modified form of Buckminster Fuller's dome that had two wings stemming out from the central dome. These were tried and true structures.

**Noel:** But the artists who came to build their own homes at Libre often had their own ideas, and were encouraged to be creative.

**Dean Fleming:** A lot of people made a lot of mistakes. Some people built in the woods and then things fell apart and then it leaked, or whatever. And so we've had a lot of experiments. But, we did end up building fifteen houses here, all different kinds. As you've seen already, they're all completely different.

**Noel:** Then there was the poverty. Writer and Musician David Perkins moved to Libre in 1970. He and his then-wife Roberta Price spent what little money they had building an octagonal home around a giant boulder high up on the steeper part of the property. Even if it was voluntary, says Perkins, it was poverty nonetheless.

**David Perkins:** What made it really difficult is that we were just so poor. It was just- we are rejecting the materialism, as we want to start everything fresh and anew.

**Noel:** But that poverty led to creativity, and, ultimately, it paid off.

**David Perkins:** Got out of some old building and pull all the nails, come back and straighten them and try to reuse them on your house. I think Roberta and I calculated that we had spent a total of six hundred dollars to build that house, an actual outlay. So, and here's a house for six hundred dollars, which I lived in for seven years, it is quite comfortable and wonderful.

**Tyler:** And at times there were gender issues to contend with as well. Men often did more of the physical labor of construction, while women would find themselves in the kitchen. But much of that was only while building in the early days, says Linda Fleming, who oversaw the construction of both Dean's dome a

**Linda Fleming:** I think one thing, that we did, that isn't in the bylaws, but was in the spirit of the place and now was that: women were not secondary, there was not a sexist culture, the women were designing and building and writing and making equally, and if not more so, than the men. And greg, a number of the women who lived at Libre have gone on to be really successful professionals in the world and much moreso than the men.

**Noel:** That egalitarianism carried over into relationships as well.

**Tyler:** The sexual mores at Libre were hardly libertine. And most of the couples were married. But the majority of them were just as likely to challenge the institution of marriage as anyone else in the counterculture at that time. Here's writer and photographer Roberta Price. She's the author of *Huerfano: A Memoir of Life in The Counterculture*, a book about her years at Libre.

**Roberta Price:** I guess when I was in my mid 20s and, you know, we all are attracted to a lot of different people, and if you're married to someone who's saying we should be free and you come across somebody you're really attracted to, it's like, well, why should I not pursue that?

**Noel:** And in a community as small as Libre, which regularly intermixed with the nearby Red Rockers and Ortiviz Farm communes for parties fueled by drugs and alcohol, it often created hard feelings.

**Tyler:** Here's David Perkins again, Roberta Price's husband at the time.

**David:** We just gave in to all our excesses, just, let it go in every direction. Drug use, alcohol abuse, the sexual freedom issues. So suddenly it's like a kid in a candy store where you've been sorta repressed your whole life and regimented. And suddenly it's like, OK, now it's Romper Room. Just do whatever you want, try not to break too many things, Ok. So we did that for a while. And obviously, you can't do that forever.

**Tyler:** As for the Flemings, when they founded Libre, Dean was 35, significantly older than Linda. He had no real interest in sleeping around, and tolerated Linda having other partners for a time.

**Dean Fleming:** Anyway, there was a huge amount of experimentation of- almost like kids playing house, you know. Kind of naive, really, and they tried all these things. And, basically the sexual revolution was hugely destructive. So it destroyed my family as a start. But it destroyed all of 'em- all without exception, everybody. Ah- What part of that is free, I don't know?

**Tyler:** Dean says he didn't want to inhibit anyone, including Linda. But he didn't want to participate either.

**Dean Fleming:** And so what I did, I would go up the mountain. I just take off for a few days and come back, and they'd kind of be over it. But, that was a hard thing, that was very hard.

**Tyler:** Linda notes that the rules that governed Libre were meant to assure they could be artists, not that they adhere to patriarchal social conventions.

**Linda Fleming:** I was determined, that it- we weren't going to have a bunch of guys telling us what to do. So we were going to have our own dreams and our own lives, and we did.

**Tyler:** Then, in May, 1971, a family tragedy tore Dean and Linda apart.

**[music]**

**Noel:** Dean Fleming says Libre was a paradise for the kids who grew up there. With the San Isabel National Forest just behind them, and a village full of artists to look after them, the children, in many ways, had even more freedom than the adults.

**Dean Fleming:** At the highlight of our time here, we had fifteen children here, and they ran as a group, and they would run, and they'd go way up the mountain and back down and around, and I knew they were watching each other.

**Tyler:** Electra Johnson, Jim Fowler's daughter, now a parent herself, remembers growing up at Libre in that tight-knit pack of children they called "The Wildlings." She still has a reverent awareness of how unusual it was.

**Electra Johnson:** The Wildlings, yeah. In our childhood we spent a massive amount of time on the land, and the land is very much a living thing. The cliffs, the animals, the trees, the pinion forests and the scrub oaks and the different sort of areas, the creek beds and the open spaces where there is a real sanctuary in the land.

**Tyler:** Dean and Linda's son Luz has similar memories:

**Luz Fleming:** The mountain was ours, and we were guaranteed never to see anybody else that we didn't know. And for that reason, we were given ultimate freedom, and we could just run around the trails or between each other's houses at a very young age. We were all very strong by running up and down the mountain and also had a real fierce sense of independence.

**Tyler:** While the older children certainly looked out for the younger kids as they often roamed the land unsupervised, they weren't adults, and in May 1971, the first major tragedy at Libre happened.

**Noel:** It was a warm Spring day and some of the children including Dean and Linda's 3 year old daughter Lia had been playing at a nearby pond.

**Tyler:** According to Roberta Price in her memoir, one of the boys came running up to Dean and Linda's dome and said, "Lia's playing in the pond, but she's not moving."

**Dean Fleming:** We lost our little daughter who's- was just born when we were building this place. But she was playing with the kids and fell in a little spring and choked and died, and we weren't there. But there other people were there, but they there was nothing but kids running all over the place. They weren't there at that exact moment.

**Noel:** For the entire Libre community, this was one of the first lessons in the limits of their freedom within the confines of their commune.

**Dean Fleming:** So when they all wanted to go to this certain place, we didn't say, no, you can't make sure somebody is watching but It was too much. I mean, they were young, you know, four years old, three years old.

**Tyler:** After Lia's death, Linda went back to New York and took their young son Luz with her. Dean left Libre and went to Central and South America. During that time, he says, he bottomed out.

**Dean Fleming:** I didn't have any money, I didn't have any hope. I didn't want anything. I, didn't really want to die, but I did a lot of terribly challenging things, stupid things that uh- Like I didn't care whether I lived or died.

**Noel:** At one point, Dean says, he swam into a group of sharks off the coast of Mexico.



**Tyler:** Another time, he found himself alone and drunk on Christmas in the streets of a town in Nicaragua where a man pulled a gun on him.

**Dean:** I said, you know, I don't care, shoot, man, I don't care. I just lost my daughter, I don't care about nothing, man, just shoot, who gives a damn. I don't know what he thought, but he put the gun away and went away. And so, other-

**Noel:** Dean returned a year later and moved back into the dome with Linda. But between the grief, their age difference, and Linda's desire to be in New York more, they decided to file for divorce.

**Linda Fleming:** So we went to the courthouse in Walsenburg, to get devorce papers, and we talked to the judge, or whoever it is, nobody plugged them out, and we talked to the judge and he said: Well, what about property? We said: *Well, there's not really any property. Well, what about custody? But we don't have an issue just share custody and- you want a schedule for that. We said no, no problem. And he said, [Laughter] why are you getting a divorce? You get a lot better than most married people I know.* It's really funny.

**Noel:** Eventually, in 1978, Linda returned to Libre and built another home and studio just down the hill from Dean. It's a long, passive solar box with tall, south-facing windows, and Dean helped her build it.

**[music]**

**Noel:** There were myriad triumphs and joys at Libre. Births; celebrations; the making of art, plays and music. They figured how to gracefully add new members, share and distribute their limited water resources, and live bountifully with almost no money.

**Tyler:** Hippie luminaries like Ken Kesey, Allen Ginsburg, and Ram Dass visited during the early years.

**Noel:** And of course there were other breakups, departures, and tragedies along the way.

**Tyler:** And then in 1979, Libre faced perhaps its most existential threat.

**Noel:** Peter Rabbit had been growing marijuana on the property for years and giving it away to friends. But at some point, he started selling it.

**Dean Fleming:** And then he took the money and bought some mescaline and then sold that and bought some acid. And when I saw him, he said: *"Boy, the idea that money makes money? I'm telling you, it's true."* *"Yeah man, I'm. I'm rich."* Right. And so he started separating himself from the community one by one.

**Tyler:** Peter's manic personality and taste for drugs, alcohol, and guns had contributed in no small part to the unraveling of Drop City. Now it was starting to draw attention at Libre and in the surrounding community.

**Noel:** Then one day it got a lot worse.

**Dean Fleming:** He came racing in here, his house is over there- he came racing in here, and he was going way too fast for our little road and our kids and the animals and everything. And I thought: *Oh, shi-[BLEEP], that doesn't look good.* And then the next morning I get busted in, there were all these CBI guys all over the place.

**Noel:** The CBI is the Colorado Bureau of Investigation.

**Dean Fleming:** And it was funny in a way because, you know- had observed this place from the air. So they figured the dome was the manufacturing lab for crack or whatever. I don't know what they thought, honestly, but they did think it was definitely a drug hub of some kind [Laughter] and they came crashing in, and there's nothing but paint. Looked exactly the way it looks now.

**Tyler:** Peter took off up Greenhorn Mountain and the CBI, unsure of who anyone was, arrested Jim Fowler and another community member instead.

**Noel:** Days later, Peter showed up at a meeting at Dean's dome.

**Dean Fleming:** So, we had a meeting about it, and we said something's happening, your getting weird and what are you doing, and tell us because we voted against it, what did, you know. And he said: I don't haft to tell you anything, and he got up and left the meeting.

**Tyler:** But by the time Peter returned the next day, it was too late.

**Noel:** They held another meeting and everyone agreed that Dean had to let Peter know, that it was time to straighten up or beat it.

**Dean Fleming:** And he said, all of you owe me money, give me my money. I need it, and I flew through the air, I swear to God, this is another one of those magic, I was on the other side of the room and all his furniture, couches. I somehow flew all the way over there and [Laughing] bopped him on the nose, so he turned around and left.

**Tyler:** Everyone thought Peter was gone for good after that, until a utilities truck showed up one day to turn his service back on.

**Noel:** Not long after that, the entire community came together and unanimously voted to make sure Peter could never come back.

**[Music Fades In]**

**Tyler:** So they tore down his zone.

**[Music Fades Out]**

**Dean Fleming:** So anyway, we took the house down. It was exceedingly painful. Wha- It was not like losing a child, but it was the most hideous thing, the community that happened here from the beginning.

**[Music Fades In]**

**Music:** That's right, that's just how you do it. What if I get busted, they threw me in jail, would you come down and see me? Would you go my bail? Would you rescue me? Would you set me free? If you want me to...

**[Music Fades Out]**

**Noel:** Even as many other communes in the southwest folded, sold out, or just faded away, Libre has persevered.

**Tyler:** Dr. Tim Miller of the University of Kansas says there are multiple reasons it lasted so long. One is simply: LUCK.

**Noel:** Two is having a common purpose.

**Tyler:** For many intentional communities, that common purpose is religious.

**Noel:** The Shakers, for example, though their community is almost gone, have managed to survive for more than 250 years.

**Tyler:** Then there's cheap land and cheap building materials.

**Noel:** But Drop City had most of these factors in its favor with the possible exception of luck.

What made Libre, different, says Dr. Miller, is the mandate of individual responsibility on which it was founded.

**Dr. Tim Miller:** They did have a real sense of individual freedom, as long as you're not damaging things. You're free to build your own house in the way you want to and to live your life pretty much the way you want to. But you've gotta be responsible for yourself, there was not a communal economy. The communal element was the land itself. But Libre I think the name itself, embodies what their goal, their ideal was, free. We are going to be free people and live in our own free way, and they did.

**Noel:** And now, at the foot of the Greenhorn Mountain, far from the spotlight that Drop City had sought and sometimes suffered, the members struggle with the very real possibility that Libre outliving them.

**Noel:** When I visit Libre with Electra for the first time in the Spring of 2019, we walk to the home of Bill and Muriel, two newer members, where everyone is gathering to debate a momentous vote.

**[Sound of walking over gravel]**

**Noel:** Electra thinks I might be able to record the historic meeting.

**Electra Johnson:** [Whispering and Laughing] Turn in the punch bowl reactions,

**Noel:** but things can get contentious.

**Noel:** So not gonna happen?

**Electra Johnson:** No, I don't think so.

**Noel:** Don't worry.

**Electra Johnson:** We can out- interview them up- tomorrow.

**[Laughing]**

**Electra Johnson:** Later I'm sorry.

**Noel:** When the meeting is over hours later-

**Noel:** Ok

**Electra Johnson:** Is that Ok?

**Noel:** I mean it's-

**Noel:** The members of Libre have made two difficult, but promising decisions for its future: First, they will they allow decisions to be made by an 80% majority rather than by unanimous vote to

avoid deadlock. Second, they will also allow ALL the adult children who grew up there to automatically become members. This will allow them, in effect, to inherit their parents' homes.

**Tyler:** These changes upend two of the foundational rules for membership at Libre: that each member has to build their own home, and that every decision must be made by unanimous vote.

**Noel:** It's hard to say what the long-term effects of these changes might be on the health and longevity of the Libre community, but the decisions were made in the spirit that Dean Fleming has always believed was at the core of their values.

**Dean Fleming:** That my feeling it's about the compromise is the name of Libre. That is the real, real significant thing that we, must listen to each other and help each other, and if you got- if there's a distance in understanding, you make an effort to iron that out so we can live harmoniously here. Anyway, in retrospect, after 52 years here, I truly, truly love it. It's everything that I ever dreamt about, that I ever could imagine. It's better than that by a long shot.

**[Music]**

**Noel:** For Bonnie Poucel, my mom, and her partner Joyce, who are also in their 70s now, their communal and collective ideals have not entirely faded. In the early 1990s, Bonnie was instrumental in starting Casa Verde, a co-housing development in the center of Colorado Springs. My mom and Joyce live there now, too.



**Tyler:** Co-housing, which started in Denmark in the late-1960s, is set up a lot like Libre with one major exception: everyone owns their own home.

**Noel:** Built on a city block just north of downtown Colorado Springs, Casa Verde has 43 units and almost 80 residents. It's largely inward-facing with winding sidewalks and yards where children can play. At its center there's a large community garden and a large common house where, before Covid-19, weekly meals were prepared and shared. Aside from the unusual arrangement of homes, it looks a lot like a fairly typical, largely white and suburban American neighborhood.

**Bonnie Poucel:** It's a little bit more of a bourgeois thing, you know, I mean, a little more middle class. Each person has their little, house. You know, it's not like you're all living on top of each other, which can cause some problems. And so I definitely wanted to be part of another collective communal experience.

**Tyler:** Like Libre, there are many issues to work out, and LOTS of compromises that have to be made. But for the most part, the mostly white, upper-middle class home owners at Casa Verde co-housing buy into it to be part of the community.

**Noel:** That said, it's far from "free" in any conventional sense. Just like at Drop City and Libre, there are struggles, deaths, disagreement over things as seemingly insignificant as minor bookkeeping errors and who can visit.

**Joyce Cheney:** Almost everybody here, moved here with the intention of being supportive and friendly with their neighbors, not with the intention that we're all going to be best friends, but we're gonna be a neighborhood, and it's practical and comforting.

**Noel:** For my mom's part, she says co-housing can feel claustrophobic at times. Like any small community, people are often up in each other's business. Though we never actually lived in a commune when I was a kid. She says, it carries on the collective spirit that supported our community in the 1970s and early 80s.

**Mom:** I think most of us had a really clear, awareness that we, couldn't accomplish very much by ourselves. And the only way we were really ever going to get anything rolling was if we would combine our skills. Because the way that, households and the way our culture treated women prior to that was, most women lived separate from one another and had their nuclear family kind of thing going on.

**Tyler:** For Dr. Timothy Miller, there are many things to be learned from co-housing, Drop City, Libre, and almost all intentional communities.

**Dr. Tim Miller:** I think the best of their ideas could be adopted by mainstream culture, we'd all be a lot better off. On the other hand, there are probably are some things we wouldn't do so well adopting. But, I think they stand simply as monuments to American creativity, American ingenuity. These are people who, wanted to show that there's a different way to do it, and they did it quite effectively.

**Noel:** Intentional communities can reveal both the aspirations and limitations not just of their members, but of human communities and perhaps the most valuable lesson we can learn from Shakers to Drop City, Libre, and co-housing is that freedom is as much about the rules we choose to live by as it is about those we cast off.

**[music]**

**Tyler:** Lost Highways is a production of History Colorado and History Colorado Studios. It is made possible by a generous grant from the Sturm Family Foundation, with particular thanks to Emily Sturm and Stephen Sturm. And by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities: Exploring the human endeavor.

**Noel:** Again, if you enjoyed this podcast and want to support it, PLEASE become a member of History Colorado. You can get 20% off your membership at [historycolorado.org/podcastdiscount](https://historycolorado.org/podcastdiscount). Plus you get all kinds of great benefits like free admission to our 8 museums around the state, where you can learn more about the stories we tell on Lost Highways, AND a subscription to the award-winning Colorado Magazine.

**Tyler:** And even if you don't become a member, you can still get \$2 off admission to any of our museums just by mentioning the podcast.

**Noel:** Special thanks to Susan Schulten, our History advisor on this episode, and to Chief Creative Officer Jason Hanson, our editor.

**Tyler:** And to Amanda Lane of History Colorado, and to Noah Allyn and Charlie Dreyer, our interns, who recently transcribed all our episodes.

**Noel:** If you'd like to see the transcripts, either as a matter of accessibility, or because you'd like to use Lost Highways in your classroom, you can find them at [historycolorado.org/lost-highways](http://historycolorado.org/lost-highways).

**Tyler:** The music for this episode was by Earth Control Pill, by the Triple A band courtesy of David Perkins and Jim Fowler, and by Jim Fowler. Our theme is by Conor Bourgal.

**Noel:** Many thanks to our editorial team:

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Thomas Andrews

Jonathan Futa

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Susan Schulten

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**Noel:** Finally, thanks to the entire staff at History Colorado. I'm Noel Black

**Tyler:** And I'm Tyler Hill. Thanks for listening.