Hutterite Communities

By Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, July-August 1969.

Summary: Describes her visit to a Hutterite community and gives a brief history of their existence. Bases their life on Acts 2:42, which depicts a form of distribution. Other beliefs of the community are adult baptism, self-help, property in common, rejection of the state, and pacifism. Sees the Hutterites and the Kibbutizims of Israel as successful examples of farming communes as advocated by Peter Maurin. (DDLW #179).

One chapter of Ammon Hennacy's autobiography **The Book of Ammon** is devoted to communities. He gives the impression that most of them do not appeal to him very much, perhaps because he is an individualist anarchist. Besides, although Ammon is a pacifist, he likes a good fight. He once laughingly told me that heaven would not be heaven to him without a strong combat. I assured him that if he spent his heaven doing good upon earth like St. Therese, the Little Flower, that would be struggle enough. Actually, it is really work itself that he loves. So he respects the Hutterites and their nonviolent struggle against worldliness and the State.

Always there have been the beginnings of communities in the United States, people looking for a utopia or trying to regain the lost Garden of Eden. A character in Dostoyevsky's **The Possessed** refers to his experiences in a community in the United States, and the hero of Dickens' **Martin Chuzzlewit** ventures westward to a community on the Mississippi, hoping to settle there, and is bitterly disappointed.

When Peter Maurin talked about farming communes during the depression, he was thinking of them not only as means of survival but as agronomic universities where scholars could become workers and workers scholars. Unemployed college professors could not only teach but learn to work with their hands. Unemployed workers could not only teach manual labor but learn to think and study. The pursuit of wisdom, understanding, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord were very much part of heaven here and now to Peter. The last five years of his life, when he could "no longer think," were a veritable purgatory to him.

We stress community at the Catholic Worker, not only because we need to think of survival in wartime and because the problems of poverty are still with us, but, also because by living in voluntary poverty we can support so many more people in community. "The more property becomes common–the more it becomes holy."

I had visited my first Hutterite community, in Montana, some years ago, along with the late Father James Kittelson, and we had spent the day there. I bought a spinning wheel from them, which is now at our Tivoli farm. My present journey began with three days of speaking engagements in St. Paul. Father Marion Casey, who has given us so many retreats, was recently transferred to the western

border of Minnesota, near some Hutterite colonies, and he agreed to visit them with me.

Father Casey's new parish is in Lake Benton–a delightful little town, and his rectory is large enough to accommodate several visitors. He cordially invites any **CW** readers to drop in and see him. Mary Humphrey, who years ago lived on a Catholic Worker farm in Minnesota with her husband and children, drove me from St. Cloud to Lake Benton.

The next day Father Casey and Father James Barry drove us over the state line and through the vast prairies and fields of South Dakota to visit two of the colonies of the Hutterites who had settled there in 1874. They are a people who have been persecuted for centuries and driven from one country to another, from Transylvania to the Ukraine. They first emigrated to Canada and the from there to the States, where they chose South Dakota because it reminded them of the Ukraine.

Anabaptist Origins

In his scholarly study **Hutterian Brethren** (Stanford University Press, 1967), John W. Bennett points out that "the Swiss sectarian groups that made up the nucleus of the Anabaptist movement [from which the Hutterites derive] founded their doctrines on the teaching of Erasmus." Their essential concepts are "adult baptism, self-help, and avoidance of worldly affairs." Their activities aimed at bringing about social change here and now. "Luther taught submission to the State and Calvin accepted capitalism as a positive good; the Anabaptists rejected both positions." They held all their property in common and gave as little as possible to the State. They are absolute pacifists and were severely persecuted during World War I, especially because they are a German-speaking people and refused induction. Three of their young men died from sufferings in solitary confinement and were shipped back home dressed in Army uniforms and their coffins draped with American flags. At present, twelve of them are doing their alternative service in a State Park in Black Hills, taking care of a herd of buffalo and doing tree work. One of their ministers is with them as counselor and guide.

Soon after the Swiss theologians formed the movement, Jacob Hutter became the leader of their commune in Moravia, which was founded in 1533. Three years later he was burned at the stake by the Catholics, who tried to force the conversion of the Anabaptists by torturing them and imprisoning them in monasteries. The history of religion is not a pretty one; on the other hand, when we contemplate the torture of prisoners in wartime, as in Algeria a few years ago and in Vietnam today, it does not seem that we have advanced very much in the love of God and our fellows.

The triumph of Jacob Hutter is that his colonies still exist and are increasing. When the Brethren first came to Canada and the United States there were

less than four hundred of them; now they occupy at least twenty-eight colonies in South Dakota and many more in Montana and Canada. They are still unpopular, because they do not support the local merchants and stimulate business. Everything that they earn from their hard work is put into the formation of new colonies, branching out when they reach a hundred souls. They are accused of buying up all the available land, but large corporations own far more acreage. Where we visited about ten thousand acres was supporting what is in effect a village of over a hundred people. But to do away with private property is a mortal sin in our system. (Governor Ronald Reagan accused the students at Berkeley of trying to do away with private property and called out the National Guard to control the thousands of people who demonstrated to protect a People's Park which is on University property.)

"The Hutterites are all right but they're not so holy," said an old man, grinning, when we stopped to ask directions in a tiny hamlet. "They sneak into town, the young ones do, and look at television and smoke cigarettes. And they make liquor out there on them colonies."

Teenagers

It is true that the boys, who are good horsemen from an early age, sometimes ride into the nearest village to watch television and visit a hospitable neighbor. According to a pamphlet on the Hutterites by John Hostetler, published by Herald Press, in Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: "Teenagers are not expected to assume adult behavior and because they are immature they are expected to waiver in their loyalties and fall prey to carnal temptations. While they are allowed to be foolish they are not permitted to be moody, anti-social or to perform their work poorly or to show disrespect for authority."

We drove into a dusty hollow, a little valley in the midst of vast plains. We were immediately charmed by the one-story fieldstone houses, each of which is inhabited by two families. There were huge barns and a large community house which held the kitchen, bake house and dining quarters. It was lunch time and we were met by a bevy of young women who had been setting tables. Their bright flowered jumper-style dresses, reaching nearly to their ankles, did not at all hide the grace of their movements. All of them were smiling and the one who undertook to answer our question was laughing so much that she could scarcely reply. They reminded me of a chorus of peasant maidens in a Viennese opera.

We were immediately invited to join them in a large dining room, where men sit on one side and women on the other. (The children have a separate dining room.) Since we were visitors, we ate together on the women's side of the room. Our first impression was of the beauty and the strength of the young men and girls, who were of course very conscious of our presence. The Hutterites are unfailingly hospitable to visitors; I do not think they have very many.

After lunch we had a short tour of the barns and the building which serves as

nursery, kindergarten, school and chapel combined. We visited the minister and schoolmaster, David Dekker, who showed us a bookcase full of volumes of sermons, all written in a beautiful German script and illuminated like medieval manuscripts. These sermons come down from the Middle Ages and are read in the long service every Sunday between hymn and prayer. It is as though our priests read Sunday after Sunday from the writings of St. John of the Cross or St. Augustine or St. Clement.

Sunday Service

Later on in my journey I visited Rita Riley, who worked with us for several years at the Peter Maurin Farm in Staten Island and has been teaching for the past winter at the Hutterites' Birch Creek Colony in Montana, twenty-five miles south of Shelby. We attended the Sunday morning service together.

The service began promptly at nine thirty, with a song. The minister would intone the first line, and the congregation of men, women and children would take it up, singing with all their hearts in strong, almost metallic voices. As I listened, I remembered Thomas Mann's **Doctor Faustus** and his description of the singing of the Ephrata community in Pennsylvania.

After the hymn, which is lengthy and, I presume, doctrinal, there was the long sermon, also read on a high tone, sounding somewhat like a reflection of the psalm tones the Catholic hears in the singing of the psalms at Benedictine and Trappist monasteries, which becomes a haunting music in the heart.

Father Casey later wrote to me about his first visit to the Hutterites:

"The charm doesn't wear off. Gentle simple peasants, some of them so simple perhaps that they don't imagine that people outside their valley live differently from themselves. And for all their independence they are not insular or withdrawn. No monastery I have seen is more charitable, socially concerned. If I were sure that I would not embarrass them or disrupt in the smallest way their unself-conscious regime, such as frightening the babies or provoking inordinate giggling among their maidens, I would plan to go and live with them, like them, for a couple of days occasionally. I feel that I have much to receive from a pure man of God like David Dekker."

But I am sure that the Hutterites' firm belief that they must keep themselves unspotted from the world does not mean that they are ignorant of the ways of the world. They are self-supporting, a self-subsistent community, not tax-exempt but paying corporate taxes. They welcome visitors and conversation. Our friend Mary Widman, who has been engaged in interracial work in Chicago for many years, visited one of the colonies along with a group of her volunteers, and the Hutterite who transports the cattle to the stockyards in Chicago visited her community in return.

St. Paul

The Hutterite way of life is based on the second chapter of the Book of Acts, beginning with the 42nd verse: "They met constantly [the three thousand who listened to the words of Peter after the descent of the Holy Spirit and were converted] to hear the apostles teach, and to share the common life, to break bread and pray... all those whose faith had drawn them together held everything in common; they would sell their property and possessions and make a general distribution as the need of each required. With one mind they kept up their daily attendance in the temple and, breaking bread from house to house, they shared their meals with unaffected joy, as they praised God and enjoyed the favor of the whole people."

I have read somewhere that the Christians, knowing that Jerusalem was to be destroyed, held all things in common and that as a result the poor of Jerusalem were so needy that St. Paul had to take up collections for them on his travels. But it is such teaching that has led to the foundation of many communities, Catholic and others. Certainly the Catholic ones have always profited by an increase of land and wealth so that persecution has come over and over again. The corporate wealth is then taken away, but later accumulates again.

Fortunately, the Papal States were wrested from the Church in the last century, but there is still the problem of investment of papal funds. It is always a cheering thought to me that if we have good will and are still unable to find remedies for the economic abuses of our time, in our family, our parish, and the mighty church as a whole, God will take matters in hand and do the job for us.

When I saw the Garibaldi mountains in British Columbia, and remembered the house in which he lived in exile in Staten Island, I said a prayer for his soul and blessed him for being the instrument of so mighty a work of God. May God use us!

Agricultural Communes

One reason I am devoting so much space to the story of the Hutterites is that it is so pertinent to our time. We are living in an era in which vast countries like Russia and China have solved the problem of agribusiness by abolishing private property altogether and setting up communes, which may be areas consisting of thirty villages, as in China, or collective farms, as in the Soviet Union and Cuba.

A priest I met recently remarked that in spite of Chiang Kai-Shek great progress has been made in cooperatives and land reform in Formosa. Forbidden as we are in this free country to travel to China or Cuba, we can still to some extent study the system of the Soviet Union. Harrison Salisbury's New York Times articles, now collected in book form, have much to tell us about the collective farms in Siberia and other parts of Russia.

On this pilgrimage within our own country, I am now on my way down the Long Valley in California to visit Cesar Chavez and the agricultural workers and report on what is happening in the enormous vineyards around Delano and in the lands further south. It seems an endless struggle, these strikes and boycotts, these sufferings of the poor of all nationalities, a struggle begun by the Filipinos and Mexicans who are the victims of this system of raising food. It is said that California could feed the world!

Word of this David and Goliath struggle has gone round the world and this "quiet battle" has in it for Christians the element of failure and success, that paradox of Christianity, that makes the world attend with fascinated interest. It is a nonviolent struggle, in which the techniques of a Gandhi and a Martin Luther King are being used on a most fundamental level: in man's struggle for bread, for land, for relief from brutalizing toil. The "ancient lowly" are still with us in these men, women and children who toil in the fields.

The Hutterite communities and the **kibbutzim** of Israel are two examples of successful farming communities in the world today. The Hutterite colonies are nonviolent and truly self-sustaining, built on poverty and hard labor and dedication. The **kibbutzim** have, after all, been funded by their compatriots throughout the world, and came into being as a refuge from hideous persecution. They are armed now, men and women alike, to defend what they have built up in the way of an earthly paradise.

The Hutterites began with four hundred immigrants who settled in Canada and spread to number a hundred and seventy colonies in 1965, with a total population of over fifteen thousand. They have large families and the increase continues. The **kibbutzim** comprise over eighty-five thousand people in more than two hundred and thirty villages and settlements.

Hutterite Children

I sat for some hours with the children in the Birch Creek Colony in the one-room schoolhouse which the eight grades share. Some schools have ten grades, but none of the children leave the colony to go to local high schools. A bookmobile comes around and the children read a great deal, but they grow up to be farmers, cowboys, mechanics, tailors, bookbinders and shoemakers, so both head and hands are well occupied.

Actually, the children go to three schools: the German school, the public schools, and the religious school. One of the Hutterite children, Dorothy K., tells the story of their day in a little theme she wrote for school on colony life:

"I like to live in colony life. I get up at six every morning. I say my prayers, then I sing some hymns, then we got to breakfast and after breakfast we have to wash dishes and I help my sister with the work every morning. We all take turns washing dishes in the kitchen and when we are seventeen we take our turn

at cooking. We take turns at everything: cooking, baking, milking, and washing dishes. I have to help butcher chicken and ducks. We butcher pigs only two times a year. We work in the garden in the summer hoeing all the vegetables and later we pick them and can them. We can a lot of fruit too. I like to can food. We have to pluck ducks and geese in the summer. Sometimes we have to do some work we don't like but we still try to be cheerful while doing it. There is no use grumbling when we have to do it anyway. We bake all our bread, cake, pies, buns and cookies. I go to church every Sunday and Sunday school in the afternoon, and we have a short service every day. We clean the school house every day when school is out and we have service there in the evening. We paint a lot of furniture in the summer. I have to help in the laundry too. When my little brothers and sisters tear their clothes I have to mend them. I knit socks and stockings too. I like it.

"Where there is a cool nice evening all the girls go for a walk. We like to chat while we are walking. We often go for a ride with the wagon. It's lots of fun. We share and do everything together in the colony. I think Hutt's life is wonderful."

George W. writes briefly:

"I get up at 6 A.M. Then I wash and get dressed. I sing a hymn and pray. My breakfast is at 6:45. Cheese, butter, bread, syrup, pancakes, sausage, corn flakes, milk, coffee, eggs, bacon and hot oatmeal. Before breakfast I say a prayer and after. German school starts at seven and ends at 8:30. Then home to eat bread and eggs and coffee. At nine is English school. At four p.m. after school I go in the garden and help Paul put seeds into the ground and water them till five thirty. After washing my hands, face, and sometimes feet I go to church at six and till six thirty and then supper is at six forty five. Then I go home and learn my German lessons until eight thirty and go to bed at nine thirty."

Leonard K., grade four, wrote this stark account:

"One summer I went fishing down the road with the other boys. We were going with the horses down the road when we saw a rattle snake and she did want to go after us. She gave the horse a bite on the leg and she could not walk so we got off the buggy and went home. The rattle snake crept away while we were going home. When we come back the horse was laying on the ground and we pulled the buggy home to the barn."

Lawrence K., grade eight, wrote the following vivid account:

"I'm a pretty good cowboy, after all. One time I was to ride an outlaw horse who once almost killed a man. My boss said, watch out that he don't pile you. I said if he pitches some I reckon I'll stay on him. I was to ride him on the rodeo, his name was Infighter because he could fight like a wildcat. I stripped my saddle on him and checked my saddle for a rough rider. Coming out Chute No.3, roared the announcer, Larry Jean on Infighter. Then the gate was flung open. Infighter came out on a dead run, with me spurring him hard, waiting for what I knew was coming.

“Suddenly Infighter stopped dead, bucked fast, and followed it through with the strange, high, twisting kick. He could bit harder and buck faster than any other horse on the rodeo could. He twisted, sunfished, whirled and yanked the saddle from side to side, writhing like a cobra. Yet I was raking his shoulder and flanks. I stuck to the bronco like a cockle bur. I waved my hat wildly in the air. I was the champion bronco rider.”

Colony Life

Evidently the teacher suspected Lawrence of either making up or copying this fascinating account, although she knew that all the boys were good riders and “bronco busters.” She penalized him by making him write another theme, which is a sober account of work entitled “Colony Life.”

"I work hard all day, I never sit around and fool around. I work. I get up at five a.m. and go to bed at ten p.m. I work on the farm. I am working with 900 ducks and 600 geese. We feed them morning, afternoon and night. We give three bushels of ground oats to nine hundred ducks every time we feed them and four bushels of grain to the geese. We give the ducks lots of grass too. When we are done with our day’s work we go fishing. We ride wild horses and mustangs every week. Some guys call me a wild outlaw and don’t know why. They think I am packing 44-45 revolver. But I don’t. We can’t have cowboy boots, wrist watches, guns and nothing. I don’t know why but that’s the way we guys live.

“Hutterite life is really wonderful. You don’t need to buy your food or anything. You have to buy nothing.”

Reuben in grade seven wrote:

“Colony life is interesting in some ways. I like the job I have. I am helping with the pigs. One interesting day a pig jumped a high fence and I ran after him but the pig ran so fast that I had to give up. He ran down into the root cellar and smashed all the garden things. The people gave me the blame for that. When the pig came out of the root cellar he ran into a house. Ho, what a mess. The little boys were playing in the house and the pig muck them down. They were all crying. When the mother came home and saw what the pig did she moved to another house. When it was supper time I was so unhappy that I smash the plates. After supper I went fishing. The wagon broke down and the horse ran away. I never want another day like that.”

The girls’ essays were all about work and their enjoyment of it. There are twenty-nine children in Rita’s class. She is a good teacher and enjoys teaching. The morning I sat in on the classes the children chose to sing for me instead of having their recess. Singing plays a large part not only of their religion but of their recreation as well. Rebecca, who had a strong voice, led off. The others all took it up, singing first a hymn with many verses then a long ballad.