



New-age pioneers

Utopian vision emerges in Oregon hills

A pioneer dream common in the Sixties — living in harmony with the natural world and other humans — is coming to life 20 miles south of Eugene.

In the forests and meadows of a 1200-acre mountainside overlooking Dorena Lake, near Cottage Grove, members of the Cerro Gordo Cooperative nurture the solid beginnings of their utopian community.

They plan it to be an amalgam of space-age technology and medieval symbiosis, with energy-efficient, solar heated homes joined together by paths for people on foot, horseback or bicycle. Automobiles will be banned in the village center and limited on the rest of the property.

Cerro Gordoan Dale Van Metre, a former economics professor, describes the basic concept of the community as an effort to avoid the fragmentation of the American life-style. Residents will live, work and seek entertainment in the community, rather than compartmentalizing their lives.

"The automobile is the primary cause of fragmentation," Van Metre says. "We're operating on the theory that the way your town is structured influences the way people relate to each other. Our number one goal is to build a town in which a sense of community can thrive."

Cerro Gordo, named for the "fat hill" which towers on the site's western boundary, owes its birth to the time its founder spent working with the Hopi Indians in Arizona. Chris Canfield, a 30-year-old former electronics businessman, was impressed with what the Hopis call "pahana" — a sense of brotherhood and community closeness inherent to their approach to life.

Canfield founded the parent organization Town Forum in 1971, beginning the translation of his dream community into reality.

Building a paradise isn't easy — the project has a history of struggles with local resentment and county bureaucracy. "When we first came here," Van Metre says, "people in Cottage Grove were sure we were a bunch of lazy, rich

California hippies who were going to mess up the countryside."

And when the Co-op applied to Lane County officials to re-zone their land, they were received with less than open-armed welcome. "The county itself didn't have its land-use plan completed, and here we were coming in and wanting to build a whole new town," Van Metre explains.

Many of these problems are resolved now — residents have come to accept the Cerro Gordoans, and the county has okayed zoning for the first stage of building.

But there is some dissension within the community, Van Metre says — not major, but it exists. Two homes, built as a duplex and nearly completed, have drawn criticism from some Co-op members because they are too conventional, in spite of their solar heating, energy-efficient and land conserving construction. Both are three-story dwellings, rising

Story by KATHLEEN MONJE
Photos by DENNIS HICKOK

skyward rather than spreading out. The duplex halves were also criticized for being contracted rather than owner-built.

Van Metre says some Cerro Gordoans are "purists" in their approach to building the community, while others are less concerned with the completely hand-crafted ideal.

However, he says, a diversity in residents is encouraged as part of the Cerro Gordo concept. "We have retired people and very young people, people who are broke and people who are rich, people who want to work with their hands and people who work with their minds, people without high schools educations and others with doctorates."

They all have a common goal, in spite of their differences — building the place where they want to live. That goal has held them together for seven years.

After the years of planning, investing and preparing the site, the 30 families who make up

the Cerro Gordo Cooperative see their ideas bearing fruit.

The three-story duplex is nearly completed, another two-family dwelling is well into construction, and a large barn for recycling materials has been started.

Gravel roads and forest footpaths wind across the site. Surveying stakes mark the land for future construction — Lane County recently approved building permits for 120 houses.

More signs of progress — Cerro Gordo recently bought a bulldozer for community use. Healthy-looking organic gardening beds planted in the French intensive method are producing vegetables, and several hens are doing their best to start the first poultry-raising operation.

Some Co-op members already live at Cerro Gordo, camping out while they work on planning, surveying and construction. More live nearby in Cottage Grove. The 100 members of the Cerro Gordo Community Association live elsewhere across the United States; they are future residents and supporters of the project. Some will move there as progress and zoning permit.

Van Metre says studies indicate that the 1,200 acres can ultimately support 2,500 residents. When that number is reached, no more settlers will be accepted.

Only 200 acres will be used for housing, light industry and food production. The rest will be kept as close to its natural state as possible.

"Each resident will own the footprint of his or her house," Van Metre says. "And they will have the use of the entire site." The homes will be built in the village center, in clusters through the forest and on homestead sites.

The clusters and homesteads are planned as cooperatives, with sharing of transportation and food preparation. However, there will be some single-family dwellings. Community members who wish to have more privacy can build homes on the outskirts of the property.

No homes will be built in the three large meadows on Cerro Gordo. They are reserved for agriculture, Van Metre says, to keep the

community as self-sustaining as possible.

All such land-use decisions are made jointly by Cerro Gordoans — adults over 18 can vote on community planning and direction. "Everyone will help determine how the community will be run," Van Metre says.

Much of the work in this early stage of settling is being done by students and graduate interns at the summer-long Cerro Gordo Center for Creative Community, now in its second year, which Van Metre directs.

The Center is a temporary structure on the property, an open-air affair with tarpaulin shelter against the rain. It's a cheerful looking place, decorated with colorful designs on dish cabinets and signs. A wood-fired brick kiln, one of the summer projects, stands nearby.

The relationship between staff and students is as informal as the center, Van Metre says. "We all share the chores, in rotation; we try not to put a distance between the staff and the students."

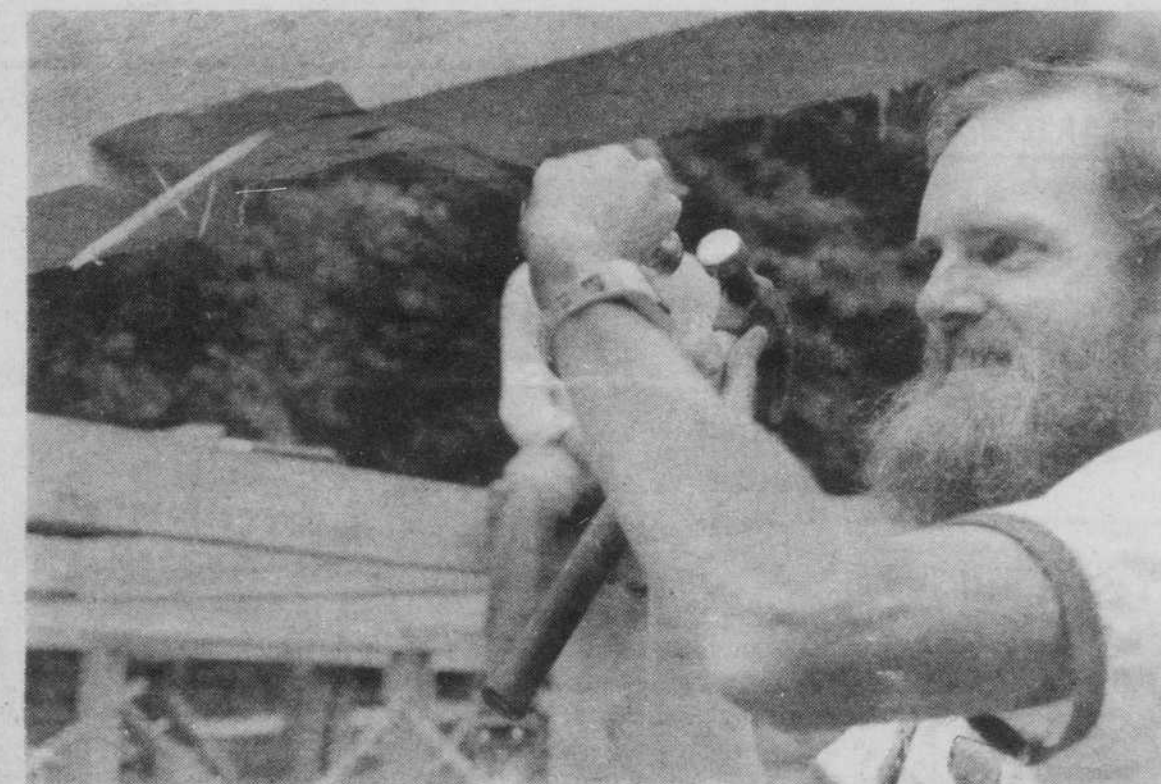
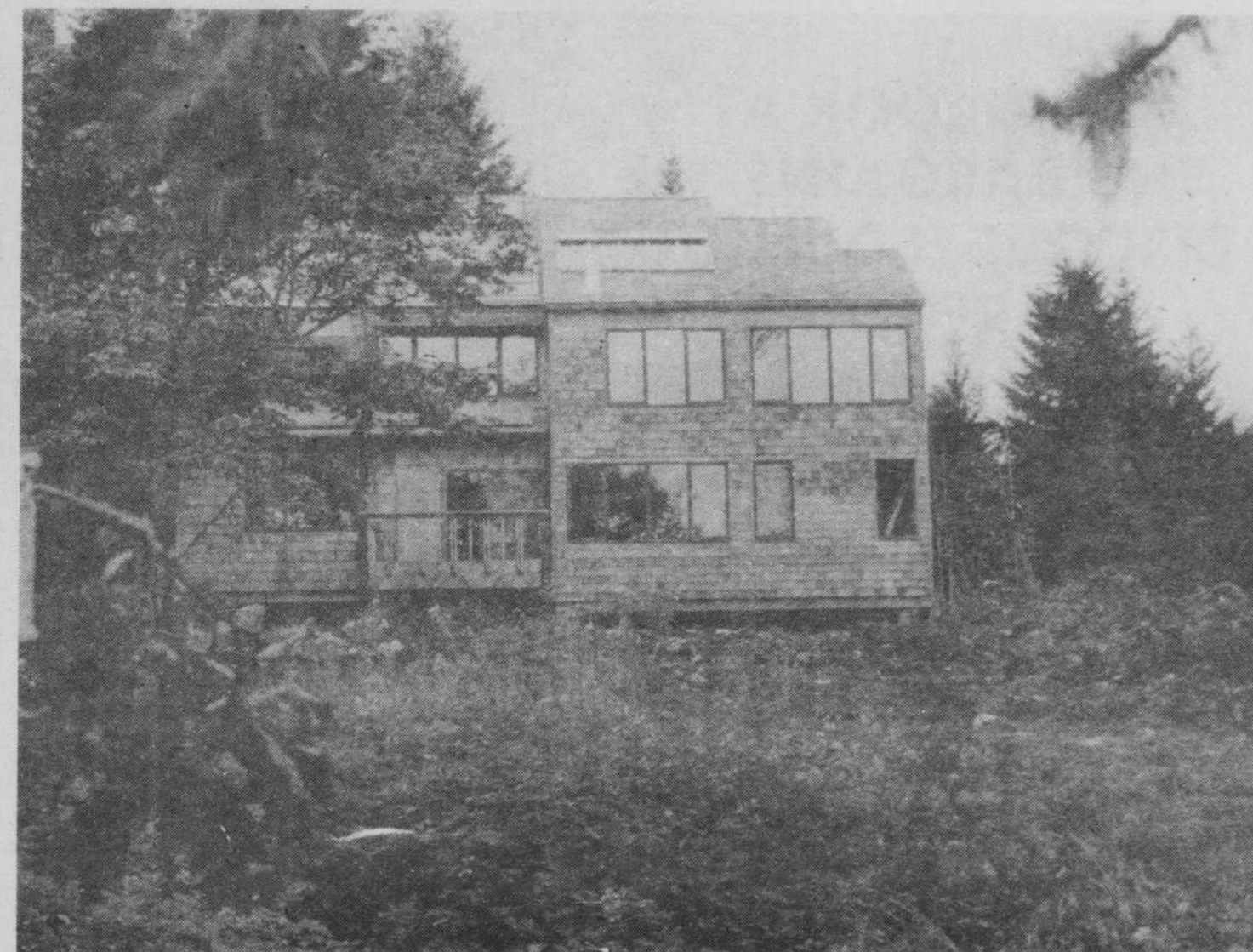
Sleeping facilities are all outdoors — tents or sleeping platforms in the trees, like Van Metre's own two-story structure among the oaks.

Five interns from as far away as Florida and New York have spent the summer earning graduate credit in fields ranging from landscape architecture to waste-water management, under the supervision of professionals on the center staff.

Undergraduates can study such subjects as energy technology, photography, ceramics, construction, organic gardening and mapping and surveying. They receive credit for their work through Lane Community College and the accredited Campus-Free College.

Tuition is \$650 for the eight-week summer workshop. The fee includes materials, food and shelter. Some financial aid is available.

Both Cerro Gordo and the Center welcome visitors, but ask some prior notice so arrangements can be made for guides to and around the property site. The Cooperative has offices in Cottage Grove, at 26 N. Sixth Street. Appointments can be made by calling 942-7235.



Members of the first Cerro Gordo homestead group (left and lower right photos) work on the foundation and floor of their hand-hewn barn. The six-by-six inch support beams were all cut with chain-saws. The barn is designed for the storage of recyclable materials from lumber to furniture. The recycling center will provide part of the homesteaders' livelihood, along with farming. The group's first home will be a similar structure, they say. This three-story duplex (upper right photo) is the community's first finished dwelling. Both halves are designed to be energy-efficient, with solar heating and thick insulation. Homeowners will actually own only the footprint, or foundation ground, of their houses, but they will share and use the entire 1,200 acres belonging to the settlement. Another duplex, which will be a large log cabin built with pre-labeled "Lincoln logs," is well into construction. Some housing clusters will share meals in community kitchens and dining rooms.