

Discover Stories on the Land

In 1995 George McKinley and Doug Frank wrote *Stories on the Land: An Environmental History of the Applegate and Upper Illinois Valleys for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM)*. It has languished on the BLM website ever since. But in 2018 *Applegate Valley Community Newspaper, Inc.*, will be publishing this fascinating book to make it more widely available. Following is an excerpt; look for more excerpts in future issues of the *Applegater*.

The Applegate and Illinois valleys, at the beginning

The story of the origin of the Applegate and Illinois valleys begins 200 million years ago, when the continental land mass of which they now form a part was submerged beneath the Pacific Ocean, shifting west from the African continent. The accumulated debris at its forefront, transformed by heat, pressure, and time, eventually produced the Klamath Geologic Province of today. By about two million years ago, the basic topography of the region was similar to that of today.

The arrival of the early Holocene Epoch in southwest Oregon, about 10,000 years ago, brought a climate significantly cooler and moister than at present. During this time the conifer species of today expanded their range upslope from riparian bottoms. During the hotter, drier mid-Holocene, beginning 7,500 years ago, oak savannah/woodland communities probably spread across the area, taking residence in places they dominate still. The late Holocene, from approximately 4,500 years ago to the present, brought a return of cooler, moister weather to the region.

Is it a coincidence that the consensual date for the presence of resident humans in the Applegate and Illinois valleys approximates the onset of the Holocene epoch? Because the first humans almost certainly were in southwest Oregon by at least 9,000-8,000 years BP, we find a parallel between evolution of the ecosystems and that of humans in southwest Oregon. It is interesting to speculate upon the formative influences these partners in evolution may have had on each other in this earlier era.

Contemporary discussion has focused upon fire as a medium of interaction between the earliest humans and the young environment. One commentator, C.R. Clar, writing in 1959, before the recent paradigm shift in understanding prehistoric human-plant relationships in North America, suggests that the native inhabitants showed little interest in fire, calling the notion that these peoples consciously used fire as a tool “fantastic”: It would be difficult to find a reason why

the Indians should care one way or another if the forest burned. It is quite something else again to contend that the Indians used fire systematically to ‘improve the forest’... yet this fantastic idea has been and still is put forth time and again.

In his classic study, *Fire in America: A Cultural History of Wildland and Rural Fire* (1982), S. J. Pyne takes a stand at the other end of the spectrum, suggesting not only that natives had a profound interest in and understanding of fire, but that their use of fire virtually created the fire regimes and forest stands that existed throughout the Pacific Northwest prior to European settlement.

However, James Agee, in *Fire Ecology of Pacific Northwest Forests* (1993), reacts against such broad generalizations, saying that Pyne pushes to its “illogical extreme” the idea that native cultures utilized fire in so sophisticated a manner. In his view, “the role of human beings in the ignition and spread of forest fires is important, but this importance varies from place to place and from culture to culture.” Agee gives three examples: At least three common patterns of Native American burning were found in the Northwest: frequent burning in west side prairies and adjacent dry Douglas-fir forest, maintenance of small patches of open prairie for agriculture or hunting by coastal or mountainous tribes, and widespread burning by inland or ‘plateau’ tribes east of the Cascades.

In the Applegate and Illinois valleys specifically, evidence exists that natives burned their landscape for a variety of reasons: to control pests; to stimulate new plant growth for a number of uses; to provide browse, grasses, and berries for game; to reduce undergrowth as an aid for hunting; to more easily hunt insects; and to reduce wildfire hazard, particularly in residential areas.

Of greatest interest, however, is the role these fires played in environmental change in the region. It is less important to isolate anthropogenic fire from the evolution of plant communities than to note its participation in that evolution. Indeed, since anthropogenic fire has been so intimately involved in the environmental history of the region, Wayne Rolle, in a watershed analysis prepared for the US Forest Service, claims that “its role in the development and maintenance of pre-settlement plant communities cannot be segregated from that of fire from natural causes.”

Note: Excerpted by Diana Coogle from pages 5-14 of Stories on the Land: An Environmental History, by George McKinley and Doug Frank.

Applegate Valley history

Hippy communes revisited—Part 2

BY DIANA COOGLE



Molto Bene commune residents. Photo courtesy of Mike Kohn.

The hippy communes in the Applegate Valley, like other communes of the 1970s, were founded with inspiration from Woodstock and in response to the Vietnam War and the riots of the time. In the face of those events, says Mike Kohn, co-founder of Molto Bene, “it felt good to try to live an ideal.”

One ideal, of course, was “peace and love.” East Side House was known as the “good-vibe commune.” Co-founder John Hugo says, “It was all ‘come up, kick back, relax.’ No one would judge you. There was no drunkenness, no fighting—it was all peace and love.”

But life is never all peace and love (except maybe at East Side House). Even the spiritual orientation of Trillium Farm, where each household hosted a spiritual day a week without advocating any particular religious path, did not eliminate friction caused by “the difference in people’s ability to manifest their dreams and do what they said they would do,” as co-founder Chant Thomas says.

Another problem, Mike says, was simply the difficulty of holding land in common.

For Bryan Newpher, at Laser Farm, the most difficult thing was “the emotional part of it, stuff that happened between people.”

Neither Molto Bene nor Laser Farm had much of a structure for dealing with conflict, but, Mike says, “Blowups were rare. If you sat on a thing for a while, you realized the other person had legitimacy for whatever the thing was.” Something similar worked at Laser Farm. “There was always somebody to turn to, to talk to,” Bryan says, then added, “Life is not an easy one, whether you’re on a commune or living in standard-type relationships.”

One of the greatest benefits of living in community was for the children. Mike, whose two daughters were born and grew up at Molto Bene, says, “There were lots of adults who treated them like human beings, interacted with them constantly, didn’t put them down in front of a television.” Childcare was shared by all the parents.

Children at Trillium attended Trillium’s own school, where I used to teach, but Molto Bene children went to Applegate School. Lori Hava, co-founder of Molto Bene, said about her relationship with other parents in the school, “Some of the ladies in the Applegate School were quite cool to me,” adding “but the teachers and staff were very nice.” Mike’s election to the school board—long hair and scraggly beard notwithstanding—proves the larger community’s tolerance and acceptance of the commune.

Applegate businesses were another lasting benefit. Even East Side House, with all its laid-back attitude, helped start (along with folks from Trillium and others) Co-operative Forest Workers, a tree-planting company. “We took care of our families by working in the woods,” John says. Indeed, he is still in that business. Laser Farm started two seed companies, Peace Seeds and Seeds of Change. Lori bought and ran what was known as the “hippy store” in Ruch. With his knowledge of wood-burning stoves gained in his years at Molto Bene, Mike started a chimney-sweep and stove sales business. Other commune members have built good businesses with their crafts.

Both Mike, from Molto Bene, and Bryan, from Laser Farm, cite “tolerance” as the most lasting influence of communal living. Bryan says, “Welcoming people into your life: I carry that with me and I live that today. Our house is full of people every weekend—a dozen or more, sharing the preparation of food, eating together, the camaraderie. It’s very much a communal living experience.”

But if it was all so good, why did the communes disappear?

“It’s difficult for humans to share fully all their resources,” Lori says. “There is a nuclear focus in raising children. People don’t want to make that effort of communal living.”

Chant says, “Community has to have people who are out for the greater good, not people who are out for themselves.”

Mike points to the lack of engagement, socially, in the outside world.

Essentially, though, as Tolstoy said in *Anna Karenina*, “Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Eventually, people just found other ways to live.

Nonetheless, nostalgia runs deep. “If there was a major snowstorm or freeze,” John says, “those were the nights we gunned up the sauna, then walked down to the river across a few feet of ice and jumped in.”

“We were together for a long time and are still friends,” Mike says, “so something worked right.”

Chant has just sold Trillium to another intentional community who will continue Trillium’s legacy of cleaning up the land and forest activism.

“The decision to disband Laser Farm came in the wintertime,” Bryan says. “My wife decided to leave and move from the farm. There was only a small group of people left. I was pretty much worn out. We sold the land for twice what we paid for it. I gave all the money to my wife and wandered off to the world.”

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Four communes in the Applegate

- Laser Farm (1969 - 1974) on Thompson Creek Road
- East Side House (1973 - 1979) on the Applegate River
- Molto Bene (1974 - 1990, or thereabouts) on Slagle Creek
- Trillium Farm (1976 - present; now called “Friends of Trillium”) on the Little Applegate

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