

# RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## The Utopian Societies in Sonoma County

by Susan Teel - 2014

Notable utopian communities existed in Sonoma County during the last century and earlier.

**The Fountaingrove community** (1875-1892) was founded by Thomas Lake Harris, a minister and poet from upstate New York, and was located in the foothills of northern Santa Rosa. The Fountaingrove community encompassed over 1500 acres, many of which were covered with vineyards. Members turned over their worldly possessions and worked in the vineyards and winery, while Harris lived in a beautiful mansion on the property. (Does this sound familiar?) Harris was known for having unusual ideas about sex and was accused of adulterous behavior by a San Francisco Chronicle reporter. Although supported locally in Santa Rosa and by the members of the community, Harris left Fountaingrove in 1892 and deeded the property to his adopted son, Kanawe Nagasawa, one of the first Japanese to arrive in the United States. Nagasawa is best known for designing and building the Round Barn on the ranch, which stands to this day on the corner of Mendocino Avenue and Bicentennial Road.

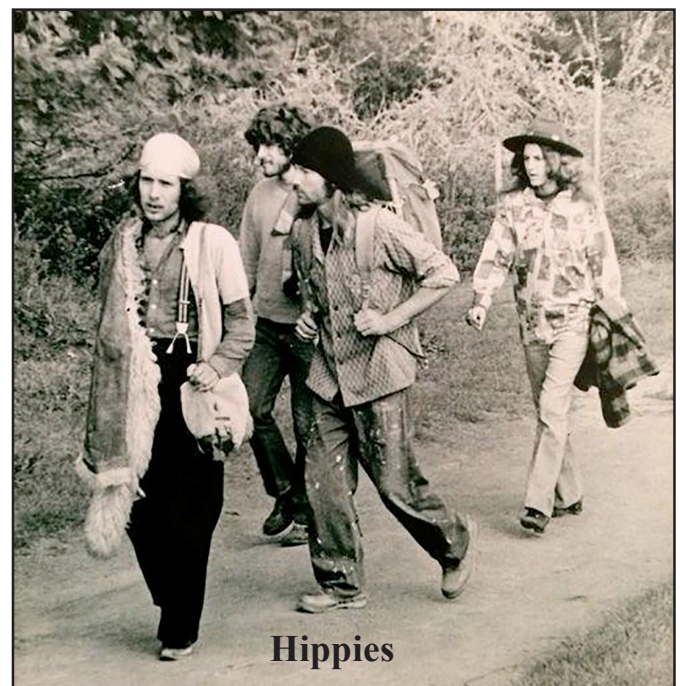


The Fountaingrove community



The Icaria-Speranza Commune

**The Icaria-Speranza Commune** (1881-1887) was founded by French immigrants who were forced to leave France for their political views. The immigrants were followers of Etienne Cabet, a journalist, lawyer, teacher and philosopher who wrote, "Voyage en Icarie". The Commune was an agrarian-based community that fostered a solidarity that was designed to promote peace and equality. It was located just south of Cloverdale on 885 acres where vineyards, fruit trees, wheat and flower gardens were planted. The Commune had financial difficulties and was unable to recruit new members. This doomed the venture. The abundant wheat harvests created a desire for profit which was counter to the communal economy and social structure. (Utopian society killed by capitalism.)



Hippies

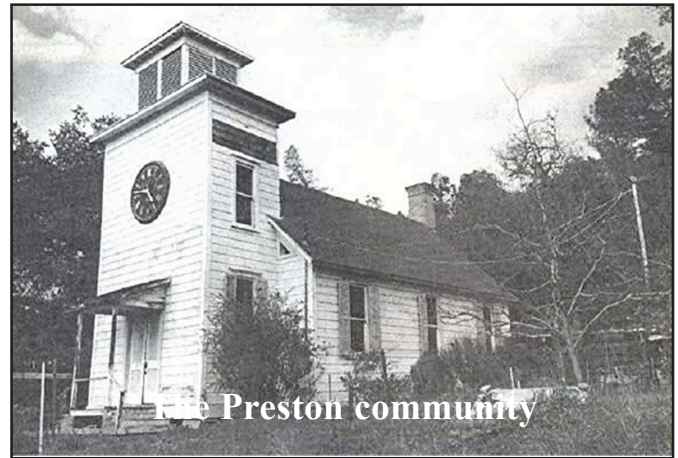
**Altruria** (October 1894-June 1895) was a short-lived utopian community that was founded by Unitarian Reverend Edward Biron Payne and 30 followers who

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were inspired by William Dean Howell's novel, "A Traveler from Altruria", and the Christian Socialist movement. In 1894 the community bought 185 acres a few miles up Mark West Road near Santa Rosa. Most settlers were working families with the majority being artisans. Although the community built seven houses, a plan to build a hotel on the property created serious financial hardships. The community was no longer viable and broke into three smaller groups lasting another year before disbanding.



**The Preston community** (1875-1909) was less a utopian society than a health-oriented colony. Preston was located north of Cloverdale on Oak Mountain. Life in Preston was centered on the Christian teachings and medical practices of faith healer Madame Emily Preston who was said to see through people with her "X-ray eye". Her medicines were mostly alcohol-based and she patented and then dispensed them through a thriving mail-order business. Emily and her husband Hartwell held religious services at their home and advocated a direct personal relationship with God. The new faith was called the Religion of Inspiration. Numerous attempts by licensed doctors to have her prosecuted for the illegal trade of drugs failed, but she was eventually stopped from dispensing her medicines by the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act. (Politics trumps religion?)



**Morning Star Ranch** existed from 1966 to 1969. It was founded by Lou Gottlieb, a member of the folk trio Limelites and subsequent hippie spokesman. It was known as the "digger farm", and there was an open invitation to people to come and live on the 32-acre spread on Graton Road. People built their own shelters, dug toilets, grew food and engaged in open drug use. Much of the food was used to supply the Free Food programs in San Francisco. Sonoma County authorities, citing health code violations, eventually came in and leveled the tents and cabins.



**Wheeler Ranch** was founded by landscape artist Bill Wheeler on 320 acres along Coleman Valley Road and was opened to everyone after county authorities began rousting the residents of Morning Star Ranch. Wheeler continued as the quintessential hippie commune until the bulldozers arrived in 1973. The book, "Living on the Earth", a best seller in the 1970s was written while the author, Alicia Bay Laurel, was living on the ranch.

