

# ‘How the communes became a community’

56 years later, new doc  
profiles life on the  
Montague and Packer  
Corners communes

**By RICHIE DAVIS**  
For the Recorder

**I**t was 1968 when reporters and editors from Liberation News Service — who’d been on the front lines documenting the political battles to end the Vietnam War — pulled up stakes in New York City and put down roots on farms in Montague and nearby Guilford, Vermont.

Now, 56 years later, “Far Out: Life On & After the Commune,” a documentary about life on both communes, is getting a premiere screening at Brattleboro’s Latchis Theater from Sept. 6 to 12.

A special showing on Saturday, Sept. 7 at 7 p.m. will include a panel discussion with filmmakers Charles Light of Guilford and Daniel Keller of Wendell, along with former residents of the Montague Farm and Packer Corners communes.

The 85-minute film begins with the Aug. 11, 1968 “heist,” in which one of two conflicting LNS factions stole off — lock, stock and printing press — from the radical news service’s New York offices during a Fillmore East benefit showing of “Yellow Submarine.” They headed for the 60-acre Montague farm with a 17-room farmhouse, which they’d secretly bought on Chestnut Hill.

In the months after settling into their new communal life, the newcomers found themselves knee-deep in rural living chores they knew nothing about.

“My mother came to visit in the car. She thought I was completely off my rocker,” says Ray Mungo, who had settled at Packer Corners along with poet Verandah Porche. “This is what your grandmother fled when left that farm in Quebec in 1920 ... What the hell’s the matter with you?”

Once the rural winter set in, and the ink in their printing press had frozen in the barn, commune members turned their attention to trying to farm the land, with help from neighbors like Rob Ripley.

“There’s nothing that anchors a crowd faster than having a dairy

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cow that has to be milked twice a day every day, and watered," Lovejoy says. "And in the winter, water freezes. So there has to be a rhythm, and immediately, an agricultural rhythm takes hold."

The commune there became a pivotal outpost in the '60s generational push to get "back to the land."

After turning their attention to organic farming and working through the intricacies of raising families together, the Montague Farm confronted a utility plan in 1973 to build a twin nuclear power plant four miles away on the Montague Plains. Member Sam Lovejoy's toppling of a 500-foot weather tower on the planned site as an act of civil disobedience awakened a new sense of purpose among members, who went on to spearhead a national "No Nukes" movement and join forces to fight construction of a Seabrook nuclear plant.

Ultimately, plans for the Montague plant and one of the Seabrook reactors were canceled, and the group teamed up with Jackson Browne, Bonnie Raitt, Graham Nash and others to produce five nights of sold-out benefit concerts at Madison Square Garden and a 250,000-person rally in New York's Battery Park.

Despite brief periods of having central figures, first Marshall Bloom, who committed suicide 15 months after arriving, and then Lovejoy, Montague Farm differed from the much larger Brotherhood of the Spirit / Renaissance Community in Turners Falls and Gill, said Light.

"Bloom was a leader in the beginning, but he wasn't a cult leader. Sam moved into a leadership role during the nuclear thing. But this was a much more intellectual environment, much less cultish than the



STAFF PHOTO/PAUL FRANZ  
**"Far Out: Life On & After the Commune" director and co-producer Charles Light at the location of the Packer Corners commune just over the Leyden line in Guilford, Vermont.**

Brotherhood," he said.

Just as Renaissance, which swelled with hundreds of members, also had members living in Northfield and Warwick, the Montague and Packer Corners communes had sister communes in Wendell and at Johnson's Pasture in Guilford, as well as elsewhere.

## A long time coming

"Far Out," directed by Light and produced by Light and former Montague Farm resident Dan Keller, combines contemporary interviews with original archival footage to tell a story of radical journalists who left the city and politics to get back to the land and live communally. The film shows how they adjusted to life as organic farmers, and how they returned to politics.

In often humorous and intimate segments looking at how members explored their sexual freedom, drugs, relationships, feminism and

openness in raising children together, "Far Out" shows how these "hippies" were transformed by rural life and the people who lived here.

"We really didn't share an idea of why we were there," says commune member Cathy Rogers. "There was this assumption because of LNS, because of the times, and we were all kind of counterculture, whatever that meant, but we didn't say what we were for."

"The liberation we tried to force on the world became secondary to the liberation in our own lives," Mungo reflected at one point.

The film incorporates footage shot by Light and Keller as well as filmmakers Rawn Fulton of Bernardston, Robbie Leppzer of Wendell, Alan Dater of Westminster West, Vermont, and others. There are images of daily farm life, family interactions, communal rituals like May Day celebrations and elaborate outdoor theater productions in Guilford

of "The Tempest" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

"Far Out" has been more than 50 years in the making, from the time Robert Redford optioned creating a movie based on Ray Mungo's "Famous Long Ago — My Life and Times With Liberation New Service," according to Light. Redford rejected Mungo's proposed script and the option lapsed as Light co-founded Green Mountain Post Films with Keller in 1973 and tried to fashion their archival footage into a compelling documentary about the communes.

The documentary "Lovejoy's Nuclear War," "Voices of the Spirit" and other projects got in the way, and the commune documentary fell by the wayside, said the filmmaker, who first moved to Guilford from New York in 1968 after attending Mark Hopkins College in Brattleboro.

Raising money for the film and family obligations in New York also

slowed down work on getting to the film.

"We always thought we'd get back to it in middle age," Light said. Even a film about the commune's 1993 reunion got completed in the interim. "We kept putting this off for years. We turned around, and our middle age had come and gone."

Finally, a year and a half ago, "I said, 'I'll sit down and cut this thing before I die,'" said Light, who had to learn a new editing system to deal with the different formats the footage had been shot in over the years. That included interviews shot between 2006 and 2010 with former commune members.

"It took forever, but I'm so glad to have it done, because it's such a vital story. We knew it was a good story and it should be told through the actual people."

"It's a story of how the communes became a community," Light said. Their members included numerous writers, poets and artists, as well as those who went on to become civic leaders in the larger community, such as Lovejoy in Montague and Keller in Wendell.

In addition to the documentary, an exhibit at the Latchis Gallery will feature work by artists living on the Montague and Guilford communes, including Nina Keller, Susan Mareneck, Ruby Rice, Peter Gould, Stacy Morse, Harry Saxman, Mark Fenwick, David Yaghjian, Tom Hoffman, Susan Bonthron, Kim Murton, Joan Peters, Sheila Adams and Evelyn McClean. The Sept. 6 gallery opening will also feature music and poetry by Patty Carpenter and Verandah Porche.

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