

Economic Evolution on the Northern Plains of the United States: Indian Commons, Privatization, Deprivatization, and Hutterites

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Introduction

In Garrett Hardin's 1968 "Tragedy of the Commons," published in *Science*, Hardin argued that unmanaged commons lead to "ruin." "Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all."¹ Alternatives to an open-access commons include privatization, government-managed incentives (such as taxes and subsidies), and government land ownership through U.S. agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, United States Forest Service, and the National Park Service.

Political economists and economists almost always favor privatization.² Over the last century and a half in the Great Plains of the United States, a combination of privatization and multi-veined government subsidy has resoundingly failed to produce a thriving society. And it is only getting worse.

Here, we outline the history of European settlement on the Great Plains, from the 19th century to the present. We will focus on the history of the Plains as a commons, as well as environmental and social factors precluding successful European settlement there. We will address the demographic changes of the last two hundred years, and will finish with a successful case study illustrating the human ecology of niche filling.

Locating the Great Plains

The Great Plains lie west of the central lowlands and east of the Rocky Mountains. Elevation ranges between 2,000 feet in the eastern plains to 5,000 in the western plains. Large sections of 10 states compose the Great Plains: North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Nebraska, Kansas, Texas, Oklahoma. Minnesota and Iowa are sometimes included in this group. The Plains stretch up into Southern Canada and down into eastern Mexico as well. The vast majority of the Great Plains lies to the west of the 98th meridian, which coincides with the 20-inch isohyet; on average, the Plains receive less than 20 inches of rain per year. This semi-aridity, combined with the flat or rolling grassland, is the defining characteristic of the region. Furthermore, rainfall on the Plains is highly variable between wet and dry years. Drought and moisture seem to take turns by the decade.

¹ Hardin, Garrett. The Tragedy of the Commons. *Science*. (162)1968: 1243-1248. Also in *Managing the Commons*, by Garrett Hardin and John Baden. New York: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1977.

² See: *Managing the Commons*, by Garrett Hardin and John Baden. New York: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1977.

The Frontier and Its End

The Great Plains were essentially empty until Native Americans obtained the tools required to exploit their ecology. After Indians obtained horses, guns, and steel knives from the Whites, they occupied the Great Plains niche and experienced a brief cultural crescendo lasting about 160 years. With no fences and no permanent dwellings, various tribes shared (and fought over) a huge “buffalo commons.” Author Peter Farb writes, “They became inconceivably rich in material goods, far beyond their wildest dreams, and like a dream it all faded.”³ Homesteaders pushed into the Plains and brought disease⁴, Indian removal bills moved them and restricted them to small reservations, and Europeans nearly exterminated the American buffalo. Little is left of the Plains tribes today.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the combination of President Lincoln’s Homestead Act, powerful railroads, and the United States Department of Agriculture resulted in rapid population growth and privatization of the Great Plains of the United States. President Lincoln signed the Homestead Act into law in May 1862. Under this law, a U.S. citizen⁵ over 21 could claim a quarter-section of land (160 acres or approximately 65 hectares) provided he or she paid an \$18 filing fee, lived on the land for 5 years, and built a “12 X 14” building on it⁶. Homesteading took place in thirty states, and 10 percent of American land (270 million acres) was populated by homesteading.

If the Homestead Act was responsible for the availability of free land, the railroads were responsible for supplying people to the land. The Railroad Act was passed six months after the Homestead Act, and the Union Pacific Railroad Company completed a transcontinental railroad by 1869. The Northern Pacific, crossing the Northern Plains, wasn’t authorized until 1864, and wasn’t completed until 1883. The railroads received enormous land grants from the federal government; they sold land to settlers and businesses interested in locating close to the railroad, and they also sold bonds. But they couldn’t sell the land if they had no one to sell it to. One railroad executive noted, “You can lay track to the Garden of Eden, but what good is it if the only inhabitants are Adam and Eve?”⁷ Marketing brochures told of Yellowstone Park, promised alluring landscapes, and spread the myth of American cowboy glory. Jay Cooke, who ran the Northern Pacific’s early marketing campaign, promised a Plains climate akin to that of Virginia:

³ Farb, Peter. *Man’s Rise to Civilization*. E.P.Dutton, 1968. p. 112.

⁴ Ongoing debate argues both for and against deliberate infection of American Indian tribes with diseases such as smallpox. It is clear that smallpox decimated numerous tribes, but scholars argue about the intentions of the whites related to this widespread infection. Source: <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/~west/threads/disc-smallpox.html>. 3 May 2006.

⁵ Women could file claims for homesteads, as well as men. In fact, the first Homestead claimed in Montana was claimed by a woman, outside of today’s Helena. (http://montanakids.com/db_engine/presentations/presentation.asp?pid=329&sub=The+Act). “One community in Montana was named Ladyville because six single women had all filed claims for homesteads in the same area,” said Ken Robison, a historian at the Joel F. Overholser Historical Research Center in Fort Benton, Mont. Web accessed: <http://olc.spsd.sk.ca/De/saskatchewan100/womeanwonthewest.html>. 2 May 2006.

⁶ The “12X14” building requirement proved a powerful loophole to homesteaders, because there was no mention of measurement type. There was no requirement that people be able to live in the resulting construction. Therefore, a 12-inch X 14-inch dollhouse could validate a claim.

⁷ Czajka, Christopher W. *Conquering the West Without Firing a Single Shot: The Northern Pacific Railroad and Those Who Built It*. Montana PBS: Web Accessed. http://www.pbs.org/wnet/frontierhouse/frontierlife/essay11_2.html. 3 May 2006.

“temperate, invigorating, and mild.”⁸ Construction of the railroads led to short-term boomtowns, supporting crews of 4,000 laborers, and longer-term towns that connected outlying regions to the economy of the railroad.

The frontier expanded west. Defined as a population density of six people per square mile, the 1890 Census indicated that a “contiguous frontier line” no longer existed. In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner declared the end of the frontier in a speech at the Chicago convention of the American Historical Association during the Chicago World Fair. (The paper was titled “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.”) With the frontier’s end, the West would become more densely populated... except for the Great Plains.

Important Great Plains Thinkers

As the Plains’ human population grew, shrank, and evolved, a number of people had insightful predictions regarding the Great Plains. Some were responsible for the population of it, some predicted the dangers of this population, and others predicted and explained its depopulation.

Pike, Long, and Wilber

A pair of popular myths presides over the 19th century history of the Great Plains. The first is that of the “Great American Desert.” Zebulon Pike compared the Plains to the Sahara and called it the Great Sandy Desert, following an 1806 exploration of the area from the Missouri river to Santa Fe⁹. The idea gained strength following the 1819–21 travels of Stephen Long, a cartographer hired by the US government to explore and report back on the nature of the unknown region west of the Mississippi. On his maps, Long simply printed “Great American Desert” over the area today known as the Great Plains. Long wrote, “I do not hesitate in saying that the entire area is almost wholly unfit for cultivation. And of course it’s uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their existence.”¹⁰ The term is a myth not for its slight degree of exaggeration, but for its laconic, sweeping, all-inclusive judgment, and for the huge impact it had on keeping settlers out of the Great Plains.

The counterpart to the idea of the “Great American Desert” was the “Garden.” John C. Fremont first introduced the idea in 1843–44, when the Plains enjoyed unusually abundant rainfall. In the 1870s and 1880s, also a time of abundant rain, business and railroad supporters sought to overpower the idea of the Great American Desert, and one way to do that was to perpetuate the myth of “rain following the plow.” Its most influential supporter was Charles Dana Wilber, an amateur scientist and writer. He argued that the act of breaking, plowing and planting the land would lure rainfall sufficient for the crops to thrive. “In this miracle of progress, the plow was the unerring prophet, the procuring cause, not by any magic or enchantment, not by incantations or offerings, but instead by the sweat of his face toiling with his hands, man can persuade the heavens to yield their treasures of dew and rain upon the land he has chosen for his dwelling... The raindrop never fails to fall and answer to the imploring power or prayer

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Stegner, Wallace. “Living Dry.” *Marking the Sparrow’s Fall: Wallace Stegner’s American West*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998. p. 224.

¹⁰ Schultz, Stanley K., and William P. Tishler. “American History 102: Civil War to the Present.” http://us.history.wisc.edu/hist102/weblect/lec03/03_02.htm. Accessed 21 April 2006.

of labor.”¹¹ It was a myth that was pleasant to believe, so it thrived, aided by an unusually wet 1870s and 1880s.¹²

John Wesley Powell

John Wesley Powell heartily rejected the myth of the Garden. He warned that the region’s adverse mix of climate and topography would preclude repeating the successful homesteading experience in the Midwest¹³. He argued that agriculture would damage, and perhaps destroy, the semi-arid land. Powell, a one-armed Civil War veteran, visionary Western explorer, geographer, and geologist, predicted that water would quickly become a scarce Western resource and a limiting factor in social growth. Powell agreed that 160 acres was sufficient for farming where annual rainfall was consistently over 20 inches. In areas west of the 98th meridian, however, where average yearly rainfall fell below 20 inches, it would be virtually impossible to eek out a living on 160 acres¹⁴. Powell pointed out that an appropriate tradeoff of insufficient water would be to increase the acreage of landholding to support the same amount of life. In his 1878 government paper entitled *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region*, Powell laid out a strategy for Western development that would organize people according to watersheds rather than state lines. Powell’s vision was one of self-reliance, calling for farmers to pay for their irrigation water rather than relying on government subsidy, and not to “waste” a single drop.

Frank and Deborah Popper

In 1987, Frank and Deborah Popper of Rutgers University wrote a seminal piece called “The Great Plains: From Dust to Dust,” predicting the eventual depopulation of the Great Plains. “We believe that over the next generation the Plains will, as a result of the largest, longest-running agricultural and environmental miscalculation in American history, become almost totally depopulated.”¹⁵ They based this prediction from Plains population trends, Plains history, and environmental and agricultural trends.

The Poppers describe the Plains as “America’s steppes”: “They have the nation’s hottest summers and coldest winters, greatest temperature swings, worst hail and locusts and range fires, fiercest droughts and blizzards, and therefore its shortest growing season. The Plains are the land of the Big Sky and the Dust Bowl, one-room schoolhouses and settler homesteads, straight-line interstates and custom combines, prairie dogs and

¹¹ Schultz, Stanley K., and William P. Tishler. “American History 102: Civil War to the Present.” (From: Wilber, Charles Dana. *The Great Valleys and Prairies of Nebraska and the Northwest*. 1881.) http://us.history.wisc.edu/hist102/weblect/lec03/03_02.htm. Accessed 21 April 2006.

¹² The ubiquitous strength of these Plains myths is not surprising, considering the limited communication of the late 19th century. In 2006, it is possible to validate or refute numerous myths by consulting any number of newspapers, blogs, academic papers, or websites, most of which are available through a simple Google search. In the 1870s, those heading west had railroad brochures and enticing myths: little more.

¹³ Geddes, Pete. “Our Best Hope Lies in Luring Human Capital.” *Bozeman Daily Chronicle*. April 3, 2002.

¹⁴ Wallace Stegner, the dean of western writers, captures the difference between east and west in his fictional book entitled *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*. Traveling west by train, Elsa (Stegner’s protagonist) notes that “they had come to some sort of dividing line.... Farms were more scattered, the buildings unpainted, and either ramshackle or staringly new.” (Source: Stegner, Wallace. *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*. New York: Penguin Group, 1938.)

¹⁵ Popper, Deborah Epstein, and Frank J. Popper. “The Great Plains: From Dust to Dust: A daring proposal for dealing with an inevitable disaster.” *Planning Magazine*. December 1987.

antelope and buffalo. The oceans-of-grass vistas of the Plains offer enormous horizons, billowy clouds, and somber-serene beauty.”¹⁶

Following the Homestead Act of 1862, the Plains became home to tumultuous growth trends: steep growth, followed by steep decline. Wallace Stegner, dean of western writers, noted in 1963, “As memory, as experience, those Plains are unforgettable; as history, they have the lurid explosiveness of a prairie fire, quickly dangerous, swiftly over.”¹⁷ Because the Plains were so hostile, and the resulting decline so devastating, each cycle could start anew with fresh enthusiasm and little reminder of their predecessors’ failures. The two main growth cycles stretched from 1862 until 1880, and from 1900 through the first world war. Drought, dust storms, financial panic, blizzards, and grasshopper plagues took out the first growth cycle; drought and locusts strained the Plains economy and culture in the early 1920s¹⁸. According to the Poppers, the Great Depression started on the Plains long before it hit Wall Street: “by 1925, Montana had suffered 214 bank failures, and the average value of all its farm and ranch land had dropped by half.”¹⁹ The Dust Bowl followed shortly, arriving in 1934 to an already severely depressed Plains region.

After the Dust Bowl, a weak prosperity returned to the Plains, aided by ever-larger combines, larger irrigation systems, and enormous farms that ate up the small failed ones. The energy boom of the 1970s also helped the Plains, quintupling oil and natural gas prices²⁰. This cycle, because the farms were larger, the ecological damage they could inflict by “sodbusting” was more pervasive, and harder to reverse. “The lessons of the 1930s were forgotten as agricultural commodity prices rose rapidly. Plains farmers and ranchers once again chopped down their windbreaks, planted from fencepost to fencepost, and sodbusted in the classic 1880s–1910s manner. This time, though, the scale was much larger, often tens of thousands of acres at a time.”²¹ The most recent depression began in the 1980s, enveloping the farm, ranch, energy and mineral economies²². Towns are emptying and aging. Schools are closing.

What is the “Buffalo Commons” envisioned by the Poppers? It is a shift in land use patterns that would require fewer people living there; most will go as economies worsen. It calls for a reversion of the grassland from a wheat monoculture to a diversified group of pre-European grass species. It calls for the buffalo to return, as an important link in the grassland ecosystem. In the Poppers’ words, it calls for deprivatization: “We are suggesting that the region be returned to its original pre-white state, that it be, in effect, deprivatized.”²³

Government Subsidy and Plains Deterioration

Throughout the Plains history of European (white) settlement, the federal government has subsidized many aspects of Plains life. The 1862 Homestead Act subsidized land acquisition. Starting in 1902, the Bureau of Reclamation paid for reservoir construction

¹⁶ Popper and Popper, 1987.

¹⁷ Stegner, Wallace. *Wolf Willow: a History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier*. New York, Penguin Books, 1955. p. 4.

¹⁸ Popper and Popper, 1987.

¹⁹ Popper and Popper, 1987.

²⁰ Popper and Popper, 1987.

²¹ Popper and Popper, 1987.

²² Popper and Popper, 1987.

²³ Popper and Popper, 1987.

and sold water far below the costs of impounding and delivering it. Crop subsidy programs began in the 1930s. After the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934, public grazing was subsidized as well. The Soil Conservation Act of 1935 paid farmers not to farm certain tracts of their land. These multi-faceted subsidies supported endeavors that never would have paid for themselves. Even with these subsidies, many homesteaders couldn't survive, due to boom and bust cycles, brutal winters, scorching summers, constant wind, rare trees, and fewer than 20 inches of annual rainfall. Looking back over the 124-year history of the Homestead Act, some basic numbers reflect the difficulty of life on the Plains. Of the 191,965 Homesteads claimed in Montana between 1900 and 1920, 60,000 were flat-out abandoned.²⁴ Thousands of others were transferred to neighbors and patched together to create larger land holdings. Only one out of five Montana homesteaders proved up and stayed on the land. Of over 2 million claims filed nationwide under the Act, only 783,000 ultimately earned title to the land.²⁵

By predicting unviable futures, the publication of "Buffalo Commons" infuriated inhabitants of the Great Plains. And yet, population data from the last twenty years consistently points to persistent and pervasive Great Plains depopulation. The 2000 U.S. Census showed that more than 50% of the counties in the Great Plains homed fewer people than they did in 1990.

The Great Plains Today

In response to open niches, nonprofits are springing up throughout the Great Plains areas to create new economies consistent with ecological realities. Most focus on sustainability, whether it be community or landscape-oriented. Some focus on returning privatized land to a modified commons. For example, the American Prairie Foundation (APF), a nonprofit in Bozeman, MT, is committed to creating and managing "a prairie-based wildlife reserve that, when combined with public lands already devoted to wildlife, will protect a unique natural habitat, provide lasting economic benefits, and improve public access to and enjoyment of the prairie landscape."²⁶

The Great Plains Restoration Council is a non-profit "building the *Buffalo Commons* step-by-step by bringing indigenous prairies back and restoring healthy, sustainable communities to the Great Plains. From the Indian reservation to the prairie inner city to the High Plains outback and beyond, GPRC brings people together to establish creative, effective solutions that enhance and respect our natural environment, native wildlife, and the health and dignity of all people."²⁷ The Great Plains Institute serves "the citizens of the Great Plains across many borders as they wrestle with issues affecting the long-term viability of their communities, the productivity of their economic enterprises, the quality of their environment and the prudent management of their resources."²⁸ The Nature

²⁴ Libecap, Gary D. and Hansen, Zeynep Koccbiyik. "Rain Follows the Plow:" *The Climate Information Problem and Homestead Failure in the Upper Great Plains, 1890–1925*. University of Arizona, 2000. This information was "Calculated from the *Annual Reports of the Commissioner of the General Land Office for the Fiscal Years, 1900–1920*. The data are state levels, but most homesteading was in the east. Homestead failure figures from Howard (1959, 207-8) and Fulton (1977, 69)." (p. 50)

²⁵ Czajka, Christopher W. *Uncle Sam Is Rich Enough to Give Us All a Farm: Homesteaders, the Frontier, and Hopscoching Across America*. Montana PBS: Web Accessed. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/frontierhouse/frontierlife/essay1.html>. 3 May 2006.

²⁶ www.americanprairie.org/page.php?link_id=5. Accessed 20 April 2006.

²⁷ <http://www.gprc.org/about.html>. Accessed 20 April 2006.

²⁸ www.gpisd.net. Web accessed 10 May 2006.

Conservancy and the Sierra Club are buying up land and easements for conservation. The National Bison Association and Montana Bison Association help producers and promote the business. South Dakota is home to an InterTribal Bison Cooperative of 51 Indian tribes. There is federal conservation activity as well. In early 2001, the Bureau of Land Management created the Missouri River Breaks National Monument, placing more than 377,000 acres of land under federal protection.

Before the 1700s, there were an estimated 30–60 million buffalo; they were almost extinct by the 1890s. Bison numbers are currently up to at least 400,000 (in 2004), from approximately 150,000 in 1995²⁹. It certainly seems as though this disparate group of environmental entrepreneurs is developing a fledgling Buffalo Commons³⁰.

The Hutterites

Finally, there is a group of people that thrives in the Great Plains: the Hutterites. The Hutterites are a tight-knit group of communal pacifist agrarians. They are virtually invisible to the public eye; *The New Encyclopedia of the American West* (published in 1998) doesn't even mention them. Hutterites live in five U.S. States and three Canadian provinces on isolated colonies ranging from 70–130 people. In a region undergoing rapid depopulation, the Hutterites are multiplying rapidly. Throughout their 478-year history, Hutterites have suffered multiple bouts of intense persecution and population decline, as well as a few periods of peace, prosperity, and expansion. Following is a brief description of the Hutterites' history, religion, and culture. We end by addressing the Hutterite growth pattern and discussing their successful experience on the Great Plains.

Early History

The Hutterites are an Anabaptist sect of Christian communists operating on the basis of common property. To date, they are the only successful communist experiment, having survived for almost 500 years. They are also the largest communal group in the Western Hemisphere³¹, with over 40,000 members.

The Hutterites developed in Moravia³² in the early 1500s. Hutterites are pacifists, and much of their migration of the past 500 years has involved searching for governments that would extend them exemptions from military service. In the 1500s, their population grew to 20,000. In the 17th and 18th century, they suffered increasing religious persecution, and fled to Transylvania during the Thirty Years War (1618–48). In the mid 18th century, Hungarian officials tried to exterminate the Hutterites³³; by 1750, 19 Hutterites remained³⁴.

In 1770, the remaining Hutterites, accompanied by fifty Lutheran converts, fled to Russia³⁵ as part of a significant group of German migrants³⁶. Catherine the Great, who

²⁹ Vail, Jake. "As the Plains empty, minds change." *The Land Institute*. 11 March 2004. Web accessed: <http://www.landinstitute.org>. 3 May 2006.

³⁰ For more sources regarding demographic shifts on the Great Plains, please see the following: Garrett-Davis, Joshua. "The charm of a dying place." *High Country News*. Vol. 36, No. 5, 15 March 2004.

³¹ Wilson, Laura. *Hutterites of Montana*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000. p. 20

³² Moravia comprises the eastern third of today's Czech Republic.

³³ Bennett, John W. *Northern Plainsmen: Adaptive Strategy and Agrarian Life*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969. 249.

³⁴ Wilson, 12.

³⁵ Wilson, 12.

³⁶ Bennett, 250.

was looking for able craftsmen and farmers to help settle the Ukraine, welcomed them. One hundred years later, however, the Russians repealed their military exemption. After talking to American land agents about the favorable prospects on the frontier, the Hutterites decided to move to the U.S.

Between 1871 and 1879, approximately 1200 Hutterites migrated to North America, arriving in the Dakota Territories of the US. Just over a third – between 400 and 450 – elected to maintain their communal lifestyle. The remainder opted out³⁷, and many assimilated into various Mennonite groups and are known today as Prairieleut (Prairie People). The communal Hutterites started three colonies in the Dakota Territories, which developed into three different sub-groups of Hutterites: Schmiedleut, Dariusleut, and Lehrerleut. Each group adopted the name of its first leader: Schmied means blacksmith, Darius was the name of the minister who led the Dariusleut, and Lehrer means teacher.

During World War I, neighbors depicted the Hutterites as pro-German and pro-Communist: enemies for sure. Some colonies lost cattle and sheep to theft³⁸. In May of 1918, the US government attempted to draft the Hutterites, and imprisoned four young Hutterites for their unwillingness to serve. Tortured³⁹, two of them died in late November, 1918. This incident triggered the departure of 16 of the 17 colonies to Canada in 1918⁴⁰. Although some returned to their former colonies in the US, three-quarters of today's Hutterites live in the Canadian provinces of Saskatchewan, Alberta, and Manitoba.

Today, Hutterites number 40,000⁴¹, spread among 470 colonies in Canada and the United States. In 1874, there were three Hutterite colonies in the United States; in 1964 there were 46; and in 2005 there were 126. (Please see Appendix A.)

Religion and Culture

While Hutterite colonies are often wealthy – especially in relation to neighboring farms struggling in the same economy – individuals own only the most personal private property. In some colonies, Hutterites receive a monthly allowance for toothbrushes,

³⁷ Interestingly, one reason that some may have dropped the communal lifestyle was the lack of large contiguous tracts of land available for colonies. The Homestead Act had already resulted in widespread parcelization of the Great Plains.

³⁸ Wilson, 12.

³⁹ Two sources describe the experience of the Hutterites. For refusing to serve, don military uniforms, and stand in formation, they were sentenced to 37 years in prison. They spent four months in Alcatraz. Still refusing to wear uniforms, they slept in their underwear in wet rock cells. At certain points, their hands were chained above their heads with their feet barely touching the floor, and they “were beaten by sticks.” At one point, they did not eat for six days, drinking a half glass of water every 24 hours. After Alcatraz, they were transferred to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Arriving at 11pm, they were “forced to run uphill to the prison gates, they were made to undress in the raw winter air and kept waiting, soaked in sweat, for their prison garb to be brought out. For two hours they shivered naked in the wind...they were chilled to the bone. Two of them collapsed a few hours later, when they were again brought outside into the wind; these two died.” (Source: The Bruderhof Community. “Persecution in the Land of the Free: Conscientious Objector is Tortured and Killed for Refusing to Fight in WWI.” 29 November 2005. Web accessed: <http://brightchristians.blogspot.com/>. 18 April 2006. Also see Wilson, 12.) Other sources note the imprisonment of four and death of two but we found no other details.

⁴⁰ Lazzerini, Rickie. *American Refuge: The Impact of European Religious Societies on Immigration and Settlement Patterns in America*. 2005. <http://www.kindredtrails.com/American-Refuge-1.html>. Accessed 15 August 2005.

⁴¹ Kraybill, Donald B., and Carl Desportes Bowman. *On the Backroad to Heaven: Old Order Hutterites, Mennonites, Amish, and Brethren*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. p. 22.

handkerchiefs, or perhaps binoculars⁴², but toys and pets⁴³ are discouraged because they may covet selfishness and competition between children.

Hutterite communalism began in 1528 when a small group of people began to share their possessions. This belief in communal living comes from the book of Acts 2:44–45: “And all that believed were together and had all things in common; and sold their possessions and goods and parted them to all men as every man had need.”

Anabaptist Christians, Hutterites are not baptized until around the age of 21. Baptism signals the threshold of adulthood as well as deliberate and voluntary acceptance of Hutterite life. Baptismal candidates swear to surrender all belongings to the colony; if they leave, they take nothing with them⁴⁴. This oath has been upheld in case law⁴⁵.

Conformity and loyal acceptance of Hutterite traditions are cultural pillars. The colony’s minister leads all religious services, which take up a minimum of 1.5 hours daily; if the minister is absent from the colony for some reason, services are cancelled⁴⁶. In Hutterite German, the minister reads one of a few hundred sermons that have been passed down through the generations. Hutterites use the old sermons, rather than ever creating new ones, because they believe “new interpretations of Scripture would only introduce error.”⁴⁷ Kraybill writes, “In the Hutterite view, religious faith is not something to be studied or examined; it is something to be accepted. Unlike forms of religious education that encourage independent thinking, Hutterite training involves indoctrination. Freethinkers would wreak havoc in these tightly ordered communities.”⁴⁸ This indoctrination is one of the ways the Hutterites can preserve their culture.

Children start school at the age of 3, and leave it at the age of 16 or the end of 8th grade, whichever comes first⁴⁹. Education is considered dangerous, and independent thinking is discouraged. Hutterites speak a German dialect (called Hutterisch), German (known as “High German”), and English. Religious education takes place in German, while math, writing, geography, and history are taught in English.

Once they leave school, Hutterites apprentice with an adult, and then assume more formal colony duties. These duties reflect status, age, and gender. One man will be the head of the colony and the preacher, another will be the German teacher as well as the head gardener, and further roles exist to run various aspects of the colony: assistant minister, business manager, farm manager, dairyman, electrician, chickenman, hogman, and carpenter. One woman – the head cook – is responsible for ordering all the food. (Hutterites spend lots of time at Costco, buying in bulk for reduced prices.⁵⁰) Other female roles include colony midwife, gardener, kindergarten teacher, in charge of children’s dining room, and dairy assistant. The remaining woman cycle through rotating jobs⁵¹.

The Hutterites are easily distinguishable by their traditional dress. The women wear long skirts, long-sleeved blouses, and head kerchiefs. The men wear dark pants and

⁴² Kraybill and Bowman, 25.

⁴³ Some colonies allow pets. See <http://sesd.sk.ca/grassroots/Riverview/page12.htm>. Accessed 8 May 2006.

⁴⁴ Kraybill and Bowman, 44.

⁴⁵ See, for example, *Hofer v. Bon Homme Hutterian Brethren*, Supreme Court of South Dakota, 109 N.W.2d 258, May 24, 1961.

⁴⁶ Kraybill and Bowman, 35.

⁴⁷ Kraybill and Bowman, 35.

⁴⁸ Kraybill and Bowman, 34-35.

⁴⁹ Wilson, 123.

⁵⁰ Anecdotal evidence. 2 May 2006.

⁵¹ Kraybill and Bowman, 39.

buttoned down shirts. These dress codes are respected throughout even the hottest summer months. However, the details may vary slightly between the three sub groups (for example: the Lehrerleut women wear spotted head kerchiefs and colorful flowered skirts and blouses; the Dariusleut women wear darker blues, browns and greens)⁵². This visible distinction helps maintain social isolation from the mainstream culture.

A Thriving Commons

The Hutterites fill two of Garrett Hardin's requisites for success in a commons. First, Hardin notes, "the commons, if justifiable at all, is justifiable only under conditions of low-population density."⁵³ Hutterites have consistently maintained low population densities on their colonies. As colonies, usually ranging from 70–130 people, near the upper limit they begin to look into acquiring new land for a new colony, or "daughter" colony. Once the land is purchased and basic buildings completed, the mother colony splits into two groups, one of which moves to the new land. This, in part, enables them to maintain their culture intact, because there is no need to add new jobs and functions to keep increasing populations busy. By keeping their colonies smaller than 130 people⁵⁴, the Hutterites prevent this social evolution. One Hutterite minister noted, "One good reason we split is to keep the workforce occupied. Our biggest trouble starts when we can't keep colony members busy. If there's no work, there's mischief."⁵⁵

Further facilitating the maintenance of a low population density, the Hutterite birth rate has dropped drastically in the last century. During the first half of the 20th century, Hutterite families averaged 10 completed children⁵⁶. In the 1990s, Orlando Goering found that Hutterite women over 45 had an average of six to eight children⁵⁷. And now, "the average family size among younger women...appears to be shrinking even further: to five or six children."⁵⁸ This decreasing family size coincides with increased technological advances resulting in fewer people necessary to provide a colony's necessary labor. Furthermore, more and more Hutterite women have their children in the hospital, where they encounter health care professionals who advocate smaller families rather than larger ones. Although birth control is strictly forbidden on the colony, intervention may be accepted for "health reasons" supported by a doctor or nurse.

Second, Hardin notes, "An unmanaged commons in a world of limited material wealth and unlimited desires inevitably ends in ruin."⁵⁹ The Hutterites effectively limit

⁵² Wilson, 28.

⁵³ Hardin, 1968.

⁵⁴ When John Baden was working on his doctoral dissertation, the maximum colony size was 160–180, and the absolute highest he had ever seen was 200. This shift from approximately 170 to 130 speaks to the technological revolution. A colony now requires fewer men to run the colony's enterprises at full capacity than it did in the 1960s. Noted one young Hutterite: "When you have about 130 people, the colony has to split because there is not enough work for everybody." Source: <http://sesd.sk.ca/grassroots/Riverview/page8.htm>. Accessed 4 May 2006.

⁵⁵ Wilson, 122.

⁵⁶ For comparison, consider that the country with the highest birthrate in 2005 was Niger, with 8.0 "lifetime births per woman," followed by Guinea-Bissau and Mali, each with 7.1 lifetime births per woman⁵⁶. Also consider that the replacement birth rate is 2.1 children per woman.

⁵⁷ Kraybill and Bowman, 49.

⁵⁸ Kraybill and Bowman, 49-50.

⁵⁹ Hardin, Garrett. "The Tragedy of the Commons." *The Concise Encyclopedia of Economics*. The Library of Economics and Liberty. 1999. Web accessed: <http://www.econlib.org/library/ENC/TragedyoftheCommons.html>. 4 May 2006.

their desires through group censure. Their voluntary austerity enables them to maintain their colonies as commons.

In discussing pollution and society, Hardin notes, “The rational man finds that his share of the cost of the wastes he discharges into the commons is less than the cost of purifying his wastes before releasing them. Since this is true for everyone, we are locked into a system of ‘fouling our own nest,’ so long as we behave only as independent, rational, free enterprisers.”⁶⁰ The Hutterites are neither independent nor free; they are not permitted self-interest. They are linked almost inextricably to one another by their religion, culture, and isolation.

Most colonies depend on an inherently fragile ecosystem. Hutterites cannot engage in mining practices (such as stripping the land of its topsoil, causing erosion, or polluting water) because the colony is not designed to move⁶¹. Says Hutterite Paul Hofer, “When we move in somewhere, we stay.... We’re here to stay, not to move on.”⁶²

Hutterites on the Plains

Three Plains states are home to Hutterite colonies – Montana, South Dakota, and North Dakota. (Additionally, Minnesota has nine Hutterite colonies and Washington five.) The Hutterites have thrived on the Great Plains where other Europeans have not, and the obvious question is “why?”⁶³ The easy answer is that they enjoy many collective strengths and few individual weaknesses. As a group, the colony manages its income as a trust⁶⁴. Typically, Hutterite colonies are wealthy relative to the surrounding communities. Virtually all labor comes from colony members who receive no payment for their work, essentially reducing Hutterite expenses to purchasing and maintaining capital.

The colony provides for its members’ housing, food, medical bills, and basic upkeep, and some allocating a \$2–\$10 monthly allowance to its members for personal effects⁶⁵. Simultaneously, the colony frowns upon materialism, competition, worldliness, and education. It is a self-policing group, with little privacy for deviation from the Hutterian norm. On the colony, social isolation is extreme, and insulation from the outside world almost complete. Donald Kraybill, an expert on Anabaptism, describes the extent of Hutterian isolation. “Political and economic separation does not insure that members will remain insulated from the world.... The Hutterite strategy for separation is rather simple: establish colonies in isolated rural areas beyond the reach of urban vice. By controlling the use of vehicles and monitoring who enters and leaves the colony, the Hutterites are able to regulate interaction with outsiders. Members traveling outside a colony are often

⁶⁰ Hardin, 1968.

⁶¹ We know of one instance of a colony moving: from Montana to North Dakota in 2004. This move was caused by high land prices rather than environmental degradation. Source: personal communication, August 2005.

⁶² Wilson, 123.

⁶³ Also See: John Baden and Richard Stroup, “Choice, Faith, and Politics: The Political Economy of Hutterian Communes.” *Public Choice*. Volume XII. Spring 1972.

⁶⁴ Interestingly, this has resulted in a current lawsuit involving Hutterite women and Medicaid. Seven women from the King Colony have been denied Medicaid coverage because the Department of Health and Human Services claims that the women have access to the colony’s \$2.1 million colony assets: the women assert that as women, they have no vote in the colony, and therefore no access to the colony’s resources.

Source: *Billings Gazette*,

<http://www.billingsgazette.com/newdex.php?display=rednews/2005/12/08/build/state/75-welfare-case.inc>.

Web Accessed: 2 May 2006.

⁶⁵ Kraybill and Bowman, 25.

accompanied by another member, providing a mobile system of social control. The relative isolation of many colonies makes it difficult to walk to town or to interact privately with outsiders.”⁶⁶ Few Hutterites actually leave the colony permanently (traditionally about 2%). Of those who do (almost entirely young, unmarried men), most return. Lacking both high school degrees and resumes, it is hard to thrive off the colony.

The one exception to this isolation is trade between the colony and the outside world. Trade is the Hutterites’ lifeline to economic viability. Hutterites work on the colony, in contrast to many Mennonites who work for outside employers. Owning and working the colony as a group gives the Hutterites a huge advantage when dealing with the harsh agricultural economy. The colony enjoys non-wage labor, and hence avoids costs of wages, social security and workers comp. This substantially reduces its costs, and operates as a group rather than a nuclear family. This enables them to compete with today’s enormous corporate farms (ironically, this communist group is an enormous corporate farm). Hutterites produce 60% of Montana’s pork, 50% of its eggs, and 17% of its milk⁶⁷.

On Entrepreneurship

In 2003, the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship published a paper outlining the basic requirements for successful entrepreneurship and why it is less prevalent in rural America⁶⁸. It described entrepreneurs as people who are actively engaged in, committed to, and focused on creating a successful enterprise. The personality requirements for successful entrepreneurship are motivation, capacity, the ability to network, and a willingness to partner with others. The paper described that rural individuals are less likely to become entrepreneurs due to their independent nature and physical isolation; while motivation and business acumen may be high, networking and partnering skills are relatively rare due to problems of distance. Interestingly, this explanation may explain the success of the Hutterites. The Hutterites are not fiercely independent. The tight colony network, as well as the inter-colony network, provides for both the networking and the partnering with one another.

Wilson notes that although “Hutterites speak of themselves as ‘hog men’ or ‘chicken men’ or ‘Cow Bosses...’ in reality they are rural entrepreneurs who take advantage of any opportunity their land affords to generate income and prosperity. By producing hogs, chickens, cattle, milk, eggs, geese, ducks, turkeys, wheat, oats, barley, alfalfa, soybeans, feathers, honey, and vegetables, the Hutterites have economic flexibility.” The diversity facilitates economic survival in a varying climate, as well as facilitating more holistic, variable environmental practices.

Although Hutterites are intent on maintaining their culture intact, they embrace technological advancements in agriculture⁶⁹. One colony has a computer-controlled feeding system that mixes feed individually for each cow: it cost \$225,000. Another has a

⁶⁶ Kraybill and Bowman, 32.

⁶⁷ University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire. Alternative communities: Montana Eden, 40 Mile Colony, Montana. <http://www.uwec.edu/geography/Ivogeler/w188/articles/hutterites.htm>. Accessed 31 August 2005.

⁶⁸ Center for Rural Entrepreneurship. “Entrepreneurs and Entrepreneurship.” Monograph 1, June 2003. <http://www.ruraleship.org>.

⁶⁹ Agricultural technology may be accepted more often and more quickly than cultural technology (such as dishwashers). Because men make the decisions in Hutterite colonies, when they see a technology to make their work easier, they take it. Women, on the other hand, have no formal voice in decisions, and so a dishwasher is seen as a cultural compromise.

\$200,000 tractor and seeder enabling one individual to seed over 400 acres a day. Some have installed thermostats in their hog barns before they've installed them in their own homes⁷⁰. These last two examples illustrate the clear distinction between the financial and the cultural aspects of Hutterite life. Kraybill and Bowman say it well: "The Hutterites compartmentalize change by building a cultural wall between religious and economic life. While they reject virtually any change in the realm of religious ritual, they freely embrace technological change and innovation in economic affairs. Rational thought is banned in religion, but the fruits of science and logic are welcomed in agricultural production."⁷¹

When I was living with the Hutterites in the late 1960s, some remembered when tractors first entered the colonies. Some preachers publicly questioned whether tractors were in accord with the Hutterian lifestyle. According to my friends, this question did not generate any important theological strife; it simply made their lives more productive, and was hence fully consistent with theology.

All of Montana's Hutterite colonies subsist on agriculture. In much of South Dakota, in contrast, Hutterite colonies have turned to manufacturing to supplement their income. South Dakota Hutterites sell hog feeders, rafters, windows, and plastic fans⁷². Other Hutterite-made goods include barn ventilation systems, coal boilers, plastic farm equipment, metal building siding, soda bottles, outdoor heaters, thermal heating units, and structural insulation panels⁷³. Some colonies have even launched websites to sell their goods.

One colony – the Martinsdale Colony of Montana – is home to Montana's largest wind farm⁷⁴. At most, it can produce 750 kilowatts of electricity, which can power approximately 350 homes. Martinsdale's first wind turbine, built in 2003, has saved the colony more than \$6,000 in the two years following construction. The colony leases land to the wind companies, and earns income by maintaining and repairing the eleven Martinsdale turbines as well as other company turbines in surrounding areas⁷⁵. The background of this story has a fascinating twist: the wind turbines on the colony are not new. Most are 20-year-old Danish turbines, and they cost approximately 15% of what a new turbine would cost. The wind company knew that eastern Montana was a great place for wind, and Martinsdale Colony already had a Montana Power substation on its land, so it had excellent access to the power grid. (It's currently adding several new windmills.) These multiple layers of entrepreneurship are a real boon to the colony.

⁷⁰ Kraybill and Bowman, 38.

⁷¹ Kraybill and Bowman, 38.

⁷² Wilson, 101.

⁷³ Please see <http://www.hutterites.org/manufacturing.htm> for a number of Hutterite websites.

⁷⁴ The Martinsdale wind farm will soon be eclipsed by the Judith Gap wind farm, but for now it is the largest.

⁷⁵ Halstead-Acharya, Linda. "Wind harvest: Hutterite colony boasts state's biggest wind farm – but not for long." *Billings Gazette*. 10 July 2005. Web accessed 30 August 2005.

Conclusion

In Montana, the counties that are depopulating most rapidly have never been home to Hutterite colonies, and they aren't becoming so now. (See Appendices B and C.) The only Hutterite colony in far eastern Montana moved four years ago to North Dakota because of lower land prices⁷⁶. The fact that there are no Hutterite colonies at all in the easternmost part of Montana attests to the validity of the Poppers' "Buffalo Commons" predictions, as well as Powell's water predictions.

In the 2001 Great Plains Population Symposium, University of Montana researchers showed that the primary social forces driving people from the Plains were "a lack of infrastructure and services, a lack of things to do, and adverse social conditions rather than employment-based reasons."⁷⁷ In contrast, it is extremely rare for a Hutterite to permanently leave his/her colony⁷⁸. In response to this Montana study, the Hutterites create their own self-enclosed infrastructure, and their days are full. The low rate of attrition indicates that they find their social conditions more attractive than perceived opportunities outside of the colony.

Hutterites present a fascinating case study of a commons in a market context. As individuals, they own virtually no private property; as a group, the colony owns the land, the buildings, and the business that trades with the outside world. Hutterites receive no pay from the colony for their work. They have successfully insulated their culture from materialism. They are willing to live in voluntary austerity and cultural isolation. The result is effectively a corporation whose only labor cost is that of feeding, clothing, and housing its members. In the agricultural world of the Great Plains, where the prices of commodities are ever lower, the Hutterites' availability of cheap labor contributes to their survival and growth. While a new buffalo commons may well develop to replace much of the current and past Great Plains economy, it is not likely to replace the Hutterites. They have proved sufficiently adaptable and resilient to thrive in the difficult ecosystem of the Great Plains.

Here is an important point: There is no one perfect set of institutions for all settings. When dealing with the problem of the commons, as we discussed at the outset, economists almost universally prescribe privatization. We've shown why and how Hutterites probe this rule. The Hutterites' use of alternative institutional arrangements, in combination with the failed privatization of the Great Plains of the United States, show that the economists' default is inappropriate for this region, and that communal organization proves superior.

⁷⁶ Personal communication. August, 2006.

⁷⁷ http://gppop.dsu.nodak.edu/i_exec_summary.htm. Accessed 20 April 2006.

⁷⁸ Notably, those colonies that have gone into manufacturing have twice the rate of attrition of the purely agricultural colonies.