

Religious intentional communities in Texas  
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I want to take just a moment to introduce the best-known religious communities in Texas history, and then make a few comments about less familiar ones. Most of you are familiar first two, if not more, with the Branch Davidian siege and fire in 1993; images like this one are burned into the consciousness of many of us.

But on the likelihood that some of you, especially those from outside the United States, have only limited knowledge of the terrible Branch Davidian tragedy, its background, and its aftermath, I will give the briefest of summaries here.

Victor Houteff was a Bulgarian immigrant to the United States who after his arrival in 1919 became active in the Seventh-day Adventist Church but soon began to formulate elements of a new theology that estranged him from that church. In 1934 he formed his own splinter group, the Davidian Seventh-day Adventists, whose name referred to his belief that the Kingdom of David would soon be re-established in Palestine as a part of the larger Adventist millennial scenario. In the late 1930s he moved with his followers to Waco and established an intentional community known as Mt. Carmel. Later Mt. Carmel was moved outside Waco to its current location.

Houteff died in 1955 and his wife, Florence Houteff, became the group's leader. Soon she issued a prophecy that the Kingdom of God would be established on earth on April 22, 1959. When that prediction failed the group splintered. One of the successor groups was led by Ben Roden, who died in 1978 and was succeeded by his wife Lois Roden, whose most distinctive teaching was that the Holy Spirit was female.

In 1981 Vernon Howell joined the group, soon becoming close to Lois Roden, but also developing his own following. In 1990 he changed his name to David Koresh. That was a highly charged name; David, of course, was a name of high significance for the Davidians, and Koresh is the Hebrew name of Cyrus, the Persian general who is considered a serious contender for the role of the Messiah in the Hebrew scriptures.

The events of 1993 are certainly well known to most of you. The federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms mounted an armed raid on the Mt. Carmel home of the Branch Davidians on February 28, 1993, that resulted in deaths of both federal agents and Branch Davidians. Why the agency did not simply arrest or question Koresh, who was readily available in and around Waco, instead of mounting an armed attack has never been answered satisfactorily. In any event, the siege that ensued ended disastrously on April 19, 1993, when the FBI mounted a gas on the building, and somehow a fire ensued that killed as many as 86 men, women, and children.

Several groups of Branch Davidians and other Davidians survive in several American states, including, in addition to Texas, South Carolina and Missouri. For those of you who have not met

any of the surviving Branch Davidians, you will have that opportunity during this conference.

The other communal group that is fairly well known to most of you, but again may not be to some of our comrades, was the community of Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints that was raided on April 3, 2008, by Texas law enforcement officials. The roots of the FLDS go back to 19<sup>th</sup>-century Mormonism, in which polygamy was established as divinely commanded.

When the Mormon church officially began to abandon polygamy in 1890, several groups of dissidents, astounded that the church would try to repeal the will of God, organized themselves into splinter Mormon groups to keep polygamy alive. One group of them began settling in 1928 at Short Creek, Arizona, just at the Utah state line, and there established the Fundamentalist LDS church.

Although governmental authorities conducted raids of the community three times, attempting to eradicate the practice of polygamy, they failed rather spectacularly to accomplish their goal, and Short Creek, later named Colorado City, continued to grow.

In the early 2000s the president and prophet of the church, Warren Jeffs, began opening other FLDS communities in widely scattered locations, once of which, near Eldorado, Texas, was called the Yearning for Zion Ranch. There some 800 FLDS members settled on a 1600-acre tract of land, built a community, and even constructed a temple, an important and highly sacred building for the LDS churches.

Then, in 2008, a young woman falsely identifying herself as Sarah called the authorities and claimed that she had been raped and abused by a husband she had been forced to marry. Without any verification of her assertions, which turned out to be completely fictitious, the authorities went in and removed 439 children from their homes into protective custody.

<children boarding bus>

After nearly two months the Texas courts ruled that there was not enough evidence to justify the raid, and that the children had to be returned to their homes. But several FLDS men were charged with various crimes related to sexual assault and underage marriage. On the basis of laws permitting state seizure of land related to criminal activity, this year the state moved to take possession of the ranch, valued at \$33 million, which by then was largely deserted. As Stuart Wright has succinctly noted, the state of Texas has not moved to seize any of the Catholic Church property in parishes in which pedophile priests sexually assaulted young boys.

So here we are in Texas, home of the two of the largest raids on minority religions in American history. That gives a new meaning to the University of Texas school spirit song:

The eyes of Texas are upon you  
All the live long days

The eyes of Texas are upon you  
And you cannot get away

Do not think you can escape them  
From night till early in the morn  
The eyes of Texas are upon you  
Till Gabriel blows his horn

However, fortunately, the story of Texas religious communities is not all about raids and deaths. Another Mormon-related community had a more peaceful existence in the state for over a decade. In the aftermath of the death of Mormon founder Joseph Smith his movement splintered, with the largest faction going to Utah with under Brigham Young. One of several others was led by Lyman Wight, who led his 150 followers, some of whom practiced polygamy, to a place north of Austin that became known as Mormon Springs.

Their hard times were not caused by neighbors, but by nature. The springs dried up, forcing the community to move. Settling near Fredericksburg, the new community called Zodiac prospered for a time and built the first Mormon temple west of the Mississippi River, but the Pedernales River flooded and they moved again. After several other natural disasters Wight decided to leave Texas in 1858, but he died soon thereafter and the members divided their property and dissolved their organization.

There are dozens of other religious communities in the past and present of Texas. Quakers have been involved in at least three of them. The earliest, known as Marietta, was founded in 1878 when an Indiana Quaker named Paris Cox purchased 50,000 acres of land near Lubbock and sold smaller plots to fellow Quakers at cost. Gradually a community of a dozen or so families emerged, centered on a school, the Central Plains Academy. Some of the colonists had trouble coping with the weather and environmental conditions, however, and moved away. The colony, renamed Estacado, gradually lost its Quaker identity. In the 1890s several of the Quaker families moved to a new location near Galveston, where they founded another community Friendswood, that survived, gradually evolving into a suburb of Houston. More recently a community called Quakerland grew up around a Quaker meeting house near Kerrville in the 1980s and 1990s, but it couldn't overcome financial problems and the members gave the property to the First Unitarian Church of Austin, which turned it into a conference center.

One other community I will simply mention here is the Woman's Commonwealth, founded in 1879 by a group of Perfectionist women led by Martha McWhirter in Belton. Most of the 50 or so members left their husbands for the feminist commune, and they prospered mightily with various businesses, including the most popular hotel and restaurant in town, and got rich enough to leave Texas and buy a house in Washington, D.C., plus a farm in nearby Maryland, where they lived out their lives until the last member died in 1983. At 104 years, the Woman's Commonwealth was one of the longest-lived intentional communities in American history.

Finally, we move into the present. Those taking the tour on Saturday will visit a large community that is thriving today, the Brazos de Dios Community. Its outward face is Homestead Heritage, a traditional crafts village that is open to the public and has become a major regional tourist attraction. You can walk through various buildings and see various craft and food demonstrations, such as a grist mill or a woodworking shop where community members make fine furniture. The community was founded in New York City in the 1970s under the leadership of Blair Adams. It sees itself as Mennonite, although it did not have its origins in any of the standard Mennonite denominations. Looking for a rural place to settle, the community moved briefly to Colorado and then on to Waco in 1990. The community had grown to 43 families by 2005, with hundreds of nonresident church members living nearby. Like most intentional communities it has been the focus of controversy; most recently, in 2012 the community was accused of abusing its children by way of corporal punishment, but as far as I know nothing has come of such charges. Today the story is one of prosperity and stability.

If time permitted I would cover more of the dozens of Texas communities—Christ of the Hills, an unorthodox Eastern Orthodox monastery, the House of Yahweh, Adelphi, the Church of the Redeemer, and many more. But enough!

## Appendix: Texas communes, past and present

### I. Religious intentional communities

Adelphi  
Agape Inn  
Branch Davidians  
Brazos de Dios (Homestead Heritage)  
Burning Bush  
Catholic Worker  
Christ of the Hills  
Christian Faith and Life Community  
Church of the Redeemer  
Commonwealth of Israel  
Davidians  
Friendswood  
Good Shepherd Tabernacle  
Hope Community  
House of Israel  
House of Yahweh  
Last Days Ministries  
Open Door  
Order of Christian Workers

Poiema  
Quakerland  
Rainbow Hearth Sanctuary  
Refugio del Rio Grande  
St. Benedict's Farm  
Sasona Cooperative  
Woman's Commonwealth  
Yearning for Zion Ranch  
Zodiac

## II. Secular intentional communities

Arrakis  
Austin Ant Farm  
Avalon  
Bettina  
College House  
Dalworthington Gardens  
Danevang  
Desiderata  
Diga  
Double Dyke Ranch  
Echowood  
Eden House  
French House  
Greenbriar  
Halstead House  
Harmony Hill  
Helois Co-op  
House of Commons  
Icarian  
Kristenstadt  
Laurel House  
Magnolia  
Marietta  
Mariposa Group  
New Guild Co-op  
Opsis Co-op  
Peace Farm  
Pearl Street Co-op  
Rainbow Valley Agricultural Cooperative  
Reunion  
Rhizome Collective

Royal Co-op  
SBA Farms  
Seneca Falls Co-op  
Sunat Center  
Sunflower Cooperative  
Taos Co-op  
Tusculum  
Twenty-First Street House  
Tyler  
Whitehall Co-op  
Woodlake  
Yamato Colony  
Zendik Farm

This list has been extracted from Timothy Miller, *The Encyclopedia Guide to American Intentional Communities* (Clinton, New York: Richard W. Couper Press, 2013).