

DAY DREAMS, PIPE DREAMS AND THE RETURN TO SIMPLE LIVING

(Originally published October 1971)

Sometimes the crazy confusion of ideas banging around never sorts itself out with enough clarity to get anything down on paper. This month has been one of those times. In the past week we've started on at least five different topics and each time have hardly filled one page with scribbling before giving up in despair. In moods like this, the urge to chuck it all and escape is a strong one.

There is hardly an adult alive who at one time or another didn't dream of becoming a beachcomber, who, faced with the pressure of deadlines and futility of rat race activity, didn't long for the imagined paradise of a restful South Sea island. But this is the daydream of a sophisticated, scientific and industrially organized society. For more than 80% of the world's population, those who have no choice but to live the hard, simple and unadorned life, the dream is reversed, the longing is for clean clothing, running water, bathrooms and the modern conveniences we all accept unthinkingly.

The wish for escape and a return to the simple life is probably the only one we hold in common with that great army of rebellious youth. There is no denying that as Western Society becomes more and more sophisticated and urbanized, its multiplying complexities become a source of annoyance and frustration. How to escape is a problem most of us would like to solve. Few adults have the determination or courage even to attempt it. The young apparently have no qualms, and they are escaping without bothering about solutions.

In the case of the young, however, there is drift rather than determination. And it is primarily fear, instead of courage, that motivates them—fear of Vietnam, fear of atomization, fear of work, fear of failure and fear of responsibility. Like the ostrich with his head buried deep in sand, they ignore reality and practicality and seek security in the wishful thinking of a perpetually prolonged adolescence. Problems are for others to solve.

In all generations there have always been a few free spirits, unburdened by conscience, insensitive to responsibility and responding to a stubborn egocentricity, who have turned their backs on society and its conventions. These could be found in earlier, recent years inhabiting the Greenwich Villages or French Quarters of larger cities; they were the vagabonds and wanderers, the Bohemians and Left Bank expatriates. The chief difference between these earlier misfits and their synthetic, modern imitators was a determination to escape on their own with no expectation of support or approval of the society left behind.

The present mass movement of disenchanted young demands more of society. For one thing, it expects a blessing and often insists that society recognize the righteousness

and wisdom of its revolt. Eccentric and strong-willed loners are in the minority today; the new rebels cannot survive without the companionship and reassurance of numbers. While cooking over wood fires and eating natural foods, they require electric power to plug into with their musical instruments and stereo sound systems. Motorized transportation (preferably a Volkswagen minibus) gets them where they're going. Many count on credit cards, inherited funds and family generosity. They take for granted that society will somehow rescue them in emergency situations with welfare handouts, unemployment checks, food stamps, free medical care and legal aid.

Many of us, particularly those who experienced the wartime years, at least had part of our longing for vagabondage satisfied. We can remember how simple and gratifying it was to live in a war-torn countryside where society had no power to enforce its restrictions. Distance had removed effectively all past responsibility to a point of non existence; the future was too uncertain and far away to worry about, lived close to nature in heat, rain and snow; we slept in the open, in tents, abandoned houses, goat pens and rock crevices. We grew beards and washed and bathed when it was convenient; we bartered possessions and cooked our own food. Living was reduced to its bare essentials—seeking comfort and protection from the elements, satisfying hunger, performing simple tasks and surviving until tomorrow. A few complained then, most accepted it; but many look back on it now with some degree of wistful envy. We wish it could be that simple again. Of course, we forget that even then we were greatly dependent on a vast and complex military organization for food, clothing and some measure of security.

Still the dream of a return to the simple life persists. And we are fortunate to live in a country where society, however inefficient and irritating, eventually provides opportunities to realize the dream. The hundreds of retirement communities bear evidence that many have at least partially succeeded in uncomplicating their lives.

As we all do see, and as we have taught them, the young see clearly the imperfections of our competitive, materialistic society. There is nothing wrong with their wish to return to nature and the joys of simple living. But the young have become too accustomed to modern miracles—push button entertainment, jet speed travel, instant coffee, instant happiness. They want the simple life *now*. Their assumption that a mass transition from the irresponsible and carefree days of youth to the uncompetitive, retirement leisure of earned maturity can be accomplished in one sudden instant step is a marijuana pipe dream which could unhinge permanently the society which supports us all.