

# Why Doesn't Anyone Want to Live in This Perfect Place?

Womyn's lands, established in the 1960s as lesbian utopias, have failed to attract a new generation of members. Should they be saved?

**By Rina Raphael**

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HOWL in Huntington, Vt., was once a residential community for lesbians, born out of the womyn's land movement of the 1960s and '70s. Now it's more of a rural retreat. Libby March for The New York Times

The Huntington Open Women's Land is about a half-hour drive from Waterbury, Vt., the home of Ben & Jerry's ice cream. It's a secluded patch of 50 acres, laden with wildflowers, tall woolly bushes and deep ponds, nestled up against Camel's Hump, a hiker's paradise frequented by outdoorsy types in Teva sandals and wraparound hydration packs. It is, by most standards, a paradise. At least for now.

HOWL, as it's known, was once a residential community with on-site events; today it's more of a rural retreat. A shabby chic four-bedroom farmhouse hosts a rotating cast of guests from HOWL's 300-strong mailing list, who stay for days or weeks at a time, tending to the land or making art. Most are 50 and older.

The five members of HOWL's board are more senior — 60 and up. They have begun weighing the possibility that their perfect place may not be long for this world. There are no clear inheritors of the land, which was designated a place for women and women only by a private donor in 1986. Recruitment efforts have been unfruitful. There are bills to pay.

Such stories of pending obsolescence are common among the living leaders of the womyn's land movement, who began founding rural lesbian utopias in the 1960s. At the peak, in the late '70s and early '80s, there were an estimated 150 such intentional communities in the United States.

The lands are now at risk of dying out, partly because of their virtues: They exist in remote, off-the-grid areas.

"Thirty-five years ago, this was a place to escape the patriarchy — and it still can be," said Lani Ravin, 60, a land-use planner who oversees HOWL. "But honestly, in Burlington, the patriarchy has a lower volume."



A structure fallen into disuse. Libby March for The New York Times


## If You Tweet It, Will They Come?

Fifty years ago, just as gay liberation movements swept cities around the world, some lesbians began to leave them. The women decamped to rural areas where they could collectively purchase property and build communities from scratch.

They erected outhouses, laid pipelines and set up chicken coops. In the process, many found romance. Membership grew by word of mouth, and eventually a directory of womyn's lands was compiled and passed between communities, creating a social network of potential friends and partners.

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“It cannot be overstated how hard it was for lesbians to find each other before the networking and consciousness raising that came with the women’s movement,” Rose Norman writes in “Landykes of the South,” a collection of essays, fiction and poems about lesbian communities.

Many of the lands functioned as cooperatives, with residents dividing labor: tending to the farm, repairing buildings, overseeing finances, accompanying each other to medical appointments, which could be quite a haul from their pastoral homes. In the absence of the men, women often comfortably lounged around the premises in various states of undress.

HOWL in particular was envisioned “as a place where young women have role models of strong old women and the children learn naturally the good things about growing old as well as the not so good,” Alverta Perkins wrote in a newsletter in 1986. (That bulletin also included a list of “actualizing” workshops and talks, like “Pelvic Power” and “no voice weekend — a gathering of deaf and hearing women with no verbal communication.”)

The caretakers Robin Baldwin, 63, center, and Meg Mass, 47, laugh as Cindy Feltch, 64, of Jericho, Vt., raises her arms in victory after stacking much of the firewood. Libby March for The New York Times

The scenic property continues to serve as a sanctuary where feminists can meet and engage in new challenges. They lead workshops, build sheds, shoot arrows, chop down trees — “even just use a tool and not have it taken out of their hands,” said Ms. Ravin, who commands her presence at HOWL with a thin walking stick. Often, newcomers talk of discovering themselves amid the forested landscape.

“Through the process of interacting with land, they become empowered, become part of a community, and help create something larger than themselves,” Ms. Ravin said.

Shaina Levee, 35, a psychotherapist in Richmond, Vt., discovered HOWL through a Craigslist housing search in late 2017. For five months of subsidized rent, she made sure the pipes worked and water flowed, and that guests were welcomed properly. With the money she saved, she was able to open a mental health practice in Stowe.

Ms. Levee had attended women’s groups and conferences, but HOWL felt different: The setting, work ethic and familial “circle of aunts” brought her back the next year.

“There’s a healing component,” she said. Other visitors felt it, too.

“I didn’t realize the weight of society’s judgments that I had internalized until I didn’t have those anymore,” said Katherine Ayers, a 35-year-old Ph.D. student at Virginia Tech, who camped at HOWL in 2018. Over the course of the last year, she visited eight more lands. In her travels, she rarely came across another woman her age. Most everyone was 20 years older.

Campers set up for the night at HOWL. Since joining the booking site Hipcamp, the land has seen an uptick in visitors. Libby March for The New York Times

Ms. Ravin is determined to modernize HOWL to attract younger women. The board has begun reaching out to female-focused circles, like the Vermont Business Women's Business Association and the Greater Burlington Women's Forum, to boost its signal. More recently, HOWL joined Hipcamp, an online camping booking platform, which has led to an uptick in visitors.

Another member, Michele Grimm, 51, thinks the group should try harder to appeal to millennials on social media. "We need to take more photographs," she told Ms. Ravin. "For younger people, it's all about Instagram, Facebook. They want to see what's going on here and they want a window into it before they commit to coming out here."

Other lands have given up hope on passing the torch.

Alpine, a residential womyn's land in Mentone, Ala., encompasses more than 100 acres of lush, hilly landscape. A long, unmarked dirt road leads to 19 houses, trailers and cottages that make up a colony of women.

In the last two years, the population has dropped from 18 to 14. Many underwent knee surgeries or hip replacements, and some were forced to relocate for more intensive medical care.

Ms. Felch holds a small sculpture of a vulva in the memorial garden of former HOWL women. Libby March for The New York Times

A hammock on the land tucked away from the farmhouse. Libby March for The New York Times

As social media began to subsume the internet, Alapine purposely kept a low profile, for security reasons. But its members have come around to publicity, speaking to documentary crews and podcast hosts about the beauty of their home. They even contemplated starting their own podcast, but they simply don't have the money or resources.

"This is a business," said Barbara Lieu, 74, who manages the properties. "Some might say it's not, but it is."

In an effort to drum up interest, HOWL has held more theme weekends, like those focused on nature or the Sabbath, and promoted its property on Facebook. Alapine hosts college classes of lesbian, gay and queer students, many of whom bond with the residents about issues like being disowned by their parents or being bullied on campus. "Not much has changed," said Ellen Spangler, 85, of the conversations.

Still, Ms. Lieu said, "I don't have a fantasy that young lesbians will want to come here. They have enough freedoms in the world that we never had. And they're transitioning in all kinds of ways."

## The Safety of Separatism

The structural inequalities that gave rise to the womyn's land movement — gender-based economic discrimination and the lack of legal protections for gay people in America — aren't as acutely felt today.

Decades ago, these women came seeking a new life after leaving behind first marriages, families and neighborhoods where living openly was unsafe. Winni Adams, 75, a former government contractor, arrived at Alapine in 1999, long after she had divorced her husband in Virginia. She still recalls the contentious fight for custody she waged while hiding her sexuality. The day after she and her husband settled, she came out.

Ms. Felch dives into the river at Huntington Gorge, about a 20-minute drive from HOWL. Libby March for  
The New York Times

Robin Baldwin, 63, a caretaker for the property. Libby March for The New York Times

Middlebury Pratt, 59, of Williston, Vt., chews a piece of grass, touring HOWL land. Libby March for The New York Times

But the fear continued. She warned her children never to tell anyone she was a lesbian, lest they be taken away. Living as a woman was hard enough; she was once turned away when she tried to buy a car with cash. "I was told to go home and talk to your husband," she said.

"Young women today can't possibly comprehend what it was like for us," said Ms. Lieu, the Alapine manager. "You couldn't get a credit card in your own name. People wouldn't loan money to women, even if they had jobs and money to buy a house. We could be beaten by the police for wearing the wrong clothes, for wearing pants."

Several women interviewed experienced sexual harassment and assault in their home cities and towns. "We all have our own rape stories," Ms. Adams said.

Some residents, nearing or past retirement age, are less vocal about those violations now than they once were. "I don't want to fight anymore. I'm over going to marches and all that," Ms. Adams said. "My solution was to walk away from the patriarchy and not be in those situations, because you're just banging your head. Why keep doing that?"

Ms. Ravin, who previously worked in Israel establishing anti-harassment initiatives, believes there's much that HOWL can offer newcomers in the way of ideology.

"We're bringing up young women today to feel completely, completely equal, and when they leave home they discover it's not quite like that," Ms. Ravin said. "They discover sexual harassment, they discover date rape, and they are completely shocked and outraged."

Moo. Libby March for The New York Times

Leah DeVun, an associate professor of history at Rutgers University focused on women's and gender studies, saw connections to be made between the rights these women pushed for and the continuing reckoning around abuses of male power.

"Drawing from feminist histories and experiences is so important for what people are trying to do now with respect to the #MeToo movement, women in the workplace and a hundred other things that are on the feminist radar right now," Dr. DeVun said. "And these people have been thinking about it and doing things about it for a long time."

In the last year, Alapine visitor traffic significantly decreased. The community now focuses mostly on attracting middle-aged women who may consider the remote Alabama location for a vacation home or retirement — but not millennials.

"Young women have never wanted to learn from old women," Ms. Adams said. "We are invisible to them. They've always been told that old women are worthless."

And it's not just about age. These communities were primarily founded by white women, and they continue to occupy them in the greatest numbers. According to Dr. Keridwen Luis, an anthropologist and the author of "Herlands," some feminists called the alternative living structures a "middle-class response" that low-income women of color simply didn't have access to.

"Women were really, really trying to get away from a capitalist-minded mentality," Dr. Luis said. "But it does come down to the fundamental problem of, how do you get the land in the first place? That kind of thing shapes the kind of end result of the community that you've got."

By secluding themselves into mostly rural areas, their employment options were limited. Many residents turned to modest jobs or local labor. They became, or remained, painters, craftsmen or food clerks. Some women couldn't commit to a working-class life.

Meg Mass, 47, is one of the two caretakers for the land. Libby March for The New York Times

Lani Ravin, 60, of Burlington, Vt. Ms. Ravin has been part of the HOWL collective since 2010 and currently serves as its treasurer. She regularly visits HOWL, spending time on the land about twice a month. Libby March for The New York Times



Photo albums recall busier times at HOWL. Libby March for The New York Times

Ms. Ayers said she would consider moving full time to a place like Alapine if she could afford it. Like many recent graduates, she has student loans to pay off and employment opportunities to consider. It was, she thought, likely easier in the '70s to farm and earn enough money to pay the yearly land taxes.

## The Time Share Expires

Since the invention of “womyn,” many people have come to prefer the term “queer” as a catchall for a number of L.G.B.T.Q. identities. Ms. Norman met several college students whose peers viewed the term “lesbian” as too “woman-identifying.”

Others take issue with policies that exclude bisexual and transgender women, or fear a group of older women won't be welcoming. “Younger demographics tend to assume that older generations are less forward-thinking,” Dr. Luis said.

Starting about a decade ago, HOWL began to welcome anyone who identifies as a woman. The move caused some longstanding members to bristle. Alapine, for its part, has no formal policy regarding trans women because it's not a commune. It was established in 1997, after a lesbian community founded 20 years earlier in St. Augustine, Fla., outgrew its beachside property and relocated to northeast Alabama. It is a subdivision of a corporation of properties developed by the founding women.

Mercedes Mack, 33, of Jericho, Vt., learned about HOWL at the farmers market and decided to visit. Libby March for The New York Times

Unlike HOWL or other land trusts, Alapine residents own unique properties on the premises. Each deed gives Alapine's management organization, Sheeba Mountain Properties, a right of first refusal for purchase. The idea was that there would be a waiting list of women to whom they could sell an open property. But there is no waiting list, and there are still 45 buildable lots.

Should a property owner wish to sell, she is welcome to accept an offer from any buyer, regardless of gender, which could upend the ideology of the place.

"You can't tell the person who owns the house next to you that they can't sell to a transgender person," Ms. Lieu said, though an informal contract among the residents does codify an agreement that each would find a lesbian buyer.

There have been rumors of new separatist communities springing up elsewhere. Dr. Luis heard of one run entirely by trans women in the South. The rumors place it on an alpaca farm. On Facebook, a rather secretive group hints at a female-led eco-village in Europe. There are also retreats and businesses built to meet a demand for women-only spaces.

But those reflect a new world, one in which feminism is marketable and where college-educated women make up more than half the American work force. Maybe it's time to stay?

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