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At age 25, Bryn Gweled, a co-operative community in lower Bucks County is still flourishing. A progress report from the sticks.

THE GOOD LIFE IN UTOPIAVILLE

THE OLD HOMESTEADER sat close enough to the fireplace to be warmed by its burning logs. He was in his forties and wore casual clothes as did his wife who looked like Vassar. A neighbor had dropped in to ruminate with the couple about life on the homestead, why they had come to the place, and what its future might be.

As the homesteader looked out the window at the land he'd helped clear he said as how, "This is the kind of place where I could invite five or six families in every weekend."

"Yes," retorted his wife with an air of resigned relief, "but you never do."

And with this unintentional confession of comfortable isolation the couple explained why their little community, at age 25, is a success. The place is called Bryn Gweled. No road signs mark its whereabouts. Few people know it exists. Only two miles above the Bucks-Philadelphia County line, and two miles west of Feasterville on Route 132, lies this T-shaped 240 acres of planned, controlled, co-operative community living. Its land is owned jointly and its problems are faced collectively by the 64 member-families of Bryn Gweled Homesteads, Inc. Its 61 homes are built on two-acre plots, backed by strips of hilly woodland and broken by fast flowing streams. About 80 acres of the tract are owned in common, and on them are recreational facilities—a community house converted from an old stone carriage house, tennis courts, soccer and baseball fields and a swimming pool—all built collaboratively by the "homesteaders." All but one of the houses are ranch modern—some constructed with unembellished cinder block, others in redwood. So radical were their design in the early 1940's



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REAL ESTATE

continued

and so unusual was the idea of communal living that for a while out-of-the way Bryn Gweled became a tourist attraction for Sunday drivers. Today, the houses don't seem so extraordinary—but the uncluttered preservation of the surrounding countryside distinguishes it from the suburban sprawl in the rest of Upper Southampton Township.

East of Eden. Unlike other American Utopias and private Edens that have come and gone, Bryn Gweled (which is Welsh for "hill of vision") was planned without the tight rules, cradle-to-grave panaceas and pretentious aspirations which have marked the typical attempt to set up a model community. Small settlements in Iowa, for example, fashioned after Sir Thomas More's 16th century ideas, sealed themselves hermetically from the outside world. Others in New York and Indiana depended on profits from farming or cottage industry, or the charisma of strong leaders. Most failed. Bryn Gweled, on the other hand, never lost its outside contacts. Its people are mostly middle class and well educated: Artisans like Joe Diano, businessmen like Thomas Paxson, professors like Tom Peters, engineers like Mel Hurwitz, journalists like the *Inquirer's* Louis Cohen. It also has architects, social workers, contractors, retired clergymen and educators like Bryn Gweled founder Herbert Bergstrom. The community, in short, is fairly affluent.

What Bryn Gweled's pioneers attempted to do was to develop an abode, says Thomas Paxson, "in which children could be brought up in a cultural, moral, cooperative atmosphere."

As originally conceived, Bryn Gweled was the creation of the 1930's depression mentality. A group of Cater and Bedford Street social workers, led by Herbert Bergstrom (who later became a UNRRA official) were in touch with Ralph Borsodi, a prophet of cooperative housing ventures, who ran the now extinct "School of Living," at Suffern, New York. The Philadelphians, weary of cramped space in the city, wanted a semi-rural atmosphere in which they could raise livestock, fruit, vegetables and children. "No one knew at that time," says Professor Peters, a 15-year resident of Bryn Gweled "how long the depression would last."

They combined with a group of social workers living in the Carl Mackley apartments in Frankford, an old co-op built by labor unions. The merged groups began the search for a suitable place to establish the com-

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munity in 1939. By December they signed the deed for the Franklin C. Reed estate in Upper Southampton, paying \$18,000 for the land. "At the time," said Tom Paxson, "they had trouble getting a mortgage." No one wanted to finance such a risky venture. Today, he notes, the problem is almost the reverse. Bryn Gweled's credit is so good a number of banks are willing to lend any amount on its name.

Dig we must. In early 1940, after several meetings, the 13 founding families drew up bylaws and articles of incorporation for the community. Land was surveyed, the Philadelphia Electric Company and Bell Telephone agreed to lay underground cables if the residents would dig the necessary ditches. And road paving was begun by the men of the families, which by May, 1941, numbered 21.

The early home construction was often a collaborative effort. Many of the settlers tried to cut costs by working as their own contractors, plumbers, electricians. One couple spent the summer of 1941 pounding dirt and cement into an amalgam for an adobe-like substance which would wall their house. In some instances, the architects in Bryn Gweled designed homes for themselves and neighbors. "Some of us had some pretty crazy ideas," reports one staunch resident. But the community's site and planning committee, one of twelve functioning committees, smoothed things out.

When war broke in December, 1941, construction was just about frozen. Only 13 families had completed homes by the spring of 1942.

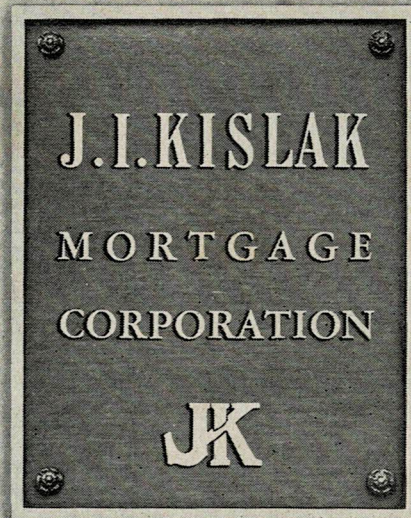
Since 1945 construction has moved at a pace of approximately four houses a year. As it now stands, there are only seven or eight home sites left in Bryn Gweled. But they will not be leased to just anyone.

Since Bryn Gweled is a relatively close-knit development (though the old-timers claim growth has cut the sociability and zeal of homesteading), the members reserve the right to pick and choose their neighbors.

And discrimination is a moving force in Bryn Gweled. But not the kind of discrimination Americans have come to associate with restricted communities. There are no racial or religious barriers here. Though Quaker at the outset, Bryn Gweled is today an American microcosm. About 15% of its families are Friends, but of the remainder Jews, Catholics, Protestants of other denominations (including some retired ministers) and Unitarians are represented. Six of its

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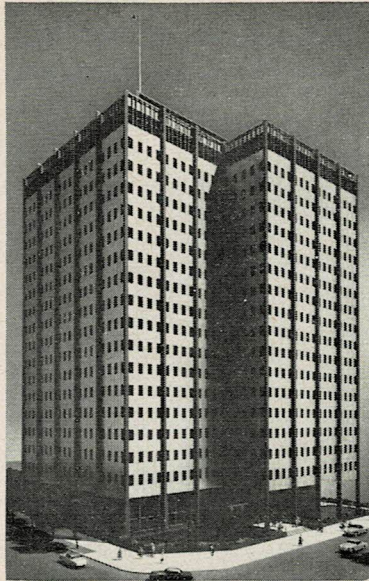
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REAL ESTATE

continued

61 families are Negro; one Oriental.

Inspection. What the founders of Bryn Gweled tried to establish was a community of like spirits — compatible people who would work to keep the place alive and in good repair. To hold the reins of approval Bryn Gweled has established a procedure for induction and acceptance in the community. Potential homeowners are sponsored by members of the corporation. They are asked to attend work parties of the community — to meet its residents, to watch how its 12 committees function in road repair (done by the householders), swimming pool maintenance and other assignments. Prospective members are also expected to attend social events in the co-op, and in the course of time — six months to two years — the new family is expected to meet each of the older families. At this juncture the members pass on eligibility of the candidate. If one-fifth of Bryn Gweled votes "no," the candidate is blackballed. If he passes the acceptability test he's invited to join the corporation. Membership fee is \$100. The future homebuilder is also expected to purchase \$1600 worth of stock in the corporation, capitalized at \$100,000. The original sale price of the tract, to Bryn Gweled Homesteads was \$18,000. Today with its homes and improvements, it's worth an estimated \$1 million—\$250,000 in land value alone.

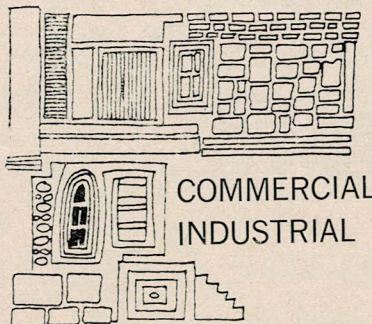
Though the corporation owns all the land in the community, each homebuilder receives a 99-year lease on his property. An annual surcharge of from \$145 to \$200, depending on the value of the site, is paid by each family in Bryn Gweled. The funds are used for the care and maintenance of the community. Though it's part of the township of Upper Southampton and its residents pay full taxes on their houses and the property they rent, the cooperative finances the paving of the community's few private roads and pays for their upkeep—as well as for the conditioning of the pools, the tennis courts and the other facilities. The annual budget runs around \$8000, some \$3000 of which goes into road repairs. This year Bryn Gweled faced a \$5000 question—whether to repair the pool built with their own labor in 1954. It voted for the repairs.

What was once planned as a low-cost, semi-self-sustaining community has turned into something slightly more expensive and somewhat exclusive. Tom Peters himself admits life in Bryn Gweled costs more than he thought it might. He has consolation,

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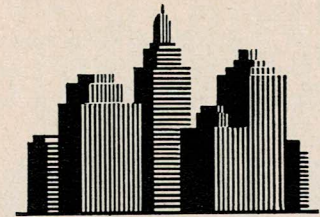
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however. "It's the good life," he states, pointing to the kinds of facilities the settlement offers.

Goodbye to pigs. And there's enough non-conformity so that everyone isn't stampeded into constant participation in all the activities. A little dolefully, though, Peters notes that the community is not as close socially as it was when there were only 20 to 25 families living there. Women had sewing bees then. And an annual covered-dish supper was attended by every resident. Now it's been discontinued. The few agronomists in the group have given up the former large-scale berry raising. There is little live stock left. The pig pen is gone, though it's doubtful anyone really yearns for it.

Work parties and business meetings have become the chief rallying point for residents. But even at these, participation varies. "About one-third of our people are reliable workers," says Tom Paxson, "one third are relatively reliable, and the rest are not too reliable." There is one consolation in the gold bricking, however. "If a guy doesn't dig a ditch, maybe his wife leads a class on nature study." While the women of Bryn Gweled may not exert themselves in the physical conditioning of the settlement, they're a strong-minded crew who participate in a number of cultural and educational efforts. Mrs. Bergstrom, for instance, is a private school principal. Mrs. Paxson is interested in "Young Audiences"—a program which brings live music to school children.

Though they constitute a small portion of Upper Southampton's 7000 people, Bryn Gweled's 61 families exert strong influence on the surrounding township, particularly in zoning, education and the library. A nursery school started in Bryn Gweled has been opened to the community at large, and in general, the expertise of many of its professional men has been called for in township planning. About the biggest problem the community faces is one of geriatrics. Many of the original settlers are now older, retired couples, with children married or away at college. They may want to move. But, aside from this, Bryn Gweled has proved a durable community. It is an uncluttered, pastoral stretch in an area where developments are uprooting the countryside. In a county where suburban sprawl is particularly nasty, Bryn Gweled has remained a pleasant and well-preserved neighborhood. And it intends to stay that way. ■ ■



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