



Take Two

How the Dunites created a secret utopia among the Oceano Dunes

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Courtesy Bennett-Loomis Archives In Arroyo Grande.

Photo of Moy Mell by Virgil Hodges, early 1930s.

An entire squatter community once disappeared into the wilderness of the Oceano Dunes outside of Santa Maria — a colony of hermits, artists and poets called Dunites.

"The most amazing vibrations on earth could be found 18 miles south of San Luis Obispo

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We're a few miles south of Pismo Beach not far from the 101 freeway. I've been following environmentalist John Reid into the dunes for hours. We're a little lost, but that's the nature of the place.

An entire squatter community once disappeared into this wilderness — a colony of hermits, artists and poets called Dunites. They sat out the great depression here in a string of wooded coves, drawing in visitors like John Steinbeck, Upton Sinclair and even India's holy man, Meher Baba. The Dunite appeal — as, Reid sees it — was their freedom.

"To live the American dream the way it was intended to be lived, not the way it was manufactured to be," said Reid. "They were able to have their little plots of land, their gardens and their creative enterprises without any government interference."

Tucked behind commercial farmland and oil fields, the Oceano Dunes are still obscure. Most people I've talked to have never heard of them. Strange considering they're 18 miles long and look like an Egyptian desert sitting halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco.

You know those famous Ansel Adams dune photos? Well, that's them. Except now they're a big RV campground and off-roader's paradise.

Fenced off from the vehicles, the Dunites' archaeological remains sit side by side with those of the native Chumash who lived here for thousands of years before them. Big white heaps of their ancient discarded meals. Their shell mounds.

"You could tell which ones are Chumash and which ones are Dunite based upon the size of the clam shell," said Reid. "When the Chumash were here, there were a lot more sea otters, the predator of the Pismo clam. But when the Dunites were here, sea otters had gotten rare, the clams got larger, lived longer."

Full grown clams, a mediterranean climate, fresh water a few feet underground, and secluded coves. What more could a hermit ask for?

The last Dunite

Reid tromps into a snarl of vegetation where the last Dunite in the wild was ever seen, back in the late '70s. This is where Norm Hammond, a firefighter at the time, saw a plume of smoke he thought was coming from a wildfire. Searching for a way in, he spotted a



"You had to get on your hands and knees, and there were places where the limbs had been cut and hooked together like a gate. It opened up into a clearing. There was a fellow in there tending his fire, washing clothes," said Hammond. "There was several buildings. He had a little garden going and I saw him but he didn't see me so I stood there long enough to check out what was going on."

When that last Dunite died a few months later, the group's legacy might have largely vanished, but for Hammond. He had become transfixed. Since then, he's published a history of the Dunites and is still unearthing their artifacts.

At the Oceano Depot Museum, we stare at what looks like a hippie health guru who's time-travelled back into a 1930s photograph.

"This is George Blais. He was generally a nudist. He believed in drawing the power of the sun in the day, and the power of the stars at night into his naked flesh," said Hammond. "He's shown here with one of his paintings depicting the evils of eating meat and drinking milk."

Blais was a self styled evangelist among this band of renegade Sufis, Theosophists, yogis, and astrologers. When India's great spiritual teacher of the '30s, Meher Baba, visited them, he may have seen some of their art, like this sculpture that looks half robot painted in the pallet of a B-52s album cover.

"This is a religious figure, The Evolution of Consciousness. Those crossed legged things are supposed to symbolize duality. And then the square is truth and then the little ball on top is enlightenment," said Hammond.

Shifting sands

I'd always streaked past this Pismo Beach stretch of the 101. Written it off as culturally devoid. RV parks, dreary motels, outlet malls. Yet when I looked for an affordable way to vacation in nearby Avila Beach during peak season, I landed in a \$45 a night Airbnb tent on someone's lawn overlooking this.

"The sand dunes migrate over time so a couple of the cabins just got swallowed up by the dunes," said Reid.

Realtors tried to develop the dunes into an Atlantic City of the West, but the shifting



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Eventually one small development did sprout up among the broader Dunite population. A utopian commune founded by the grandson of President Chester Arthur. A friend of FDR's with carte blanche at the White House, Gavin Arthur wandered out of city life on a literary quest. John Reid is writing a book about Arthur.

"Gavin first went into the dunes in 1926 having just come back from Ireland where he would buy weapons for the IRA with his allowance from his father," said Reid. "That wasn't going anywhere so he came back to the United States and happened upon the Oceano Dunes. Heard that there were hermits living out there and eventually he got to know them and a seed was germinated of establishing a utopia out there and a literary magazine."

Arthur found an empty cove, named it Moy Mell — that's Gaelic for "Land of Honey" — and built a handful of vacation-style cottages. He moved in an editorial staff that published what he hoped would become the New Yorker of the west. The Dune Forum.

Arthur urged Dunites and literati alike to sit around the fire, debate controversial issues and share new work. An unknown John Steinbeck read from what would become his first commercial success, Tortilla Flat.

Another face around the campfire, Upton Sinclair. The social justice writer frequented Moy Mell in the moments leading up to his run for governor of California. The group's fireside chats were turned into articles Arthur hoped would reach across class lines.

Among them, there was a young girl named Ella Thorp Ellis. From her bohemian seaside cottage in Santa Cruz, she explained what drove her father, Dunham Thorp, the managing editor of the Dune Forum, to leave his job as a press agent in Los Angeles.

"Dunham worked for Joan Crawford. She was bossy and Dunham didn't like being bossed around," said Ellis. "He didn't want Hollywood, he wanted a real intellectual community. So he got rid of Joan Crawford."

Between the time I'd met Ellis and found someone to guide me to her old neighborhood, she'd passed away. Like so many aspects of this story, I'd barely caught a glimpse of her before she was gone. I'd been hoping to get her a copy of this recording of her mother, Marion Thorp, interviewed by historian Norm Hammond in 1979:



HAMMOND: What did they do for heating at Moy Mell? Did they have wood there?

MARION: Yes, Gavin had a big fireplace. Oh it was fine. Saturday night Gavin would bring some wine and ale and beer and they'd have a party and a dance.

HAMMOND: A dance! Who did the cooking there?

MARION: Everybody took a turn. Gavin liked to cook fancy dishes. You know, like you'd get in a good restaurant.

End of an era

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Lately, the lure of the Dunite seems to be growing. A small group of devotees are working to preserve the spirit of their settlement. They're restoring Gavin Arthur's cabin. It's been moved to the Oceano Depot Museum where it was recently surrounded by a small ocean of sand.

So next time you're barreling through some stretch of California highway that seems a little beneath your travel standards, you might want to pull over, get out of the car, and press your ear to the ground. Some old Dunite like Ella Thorp Ellis might be summoning you from the vortex.

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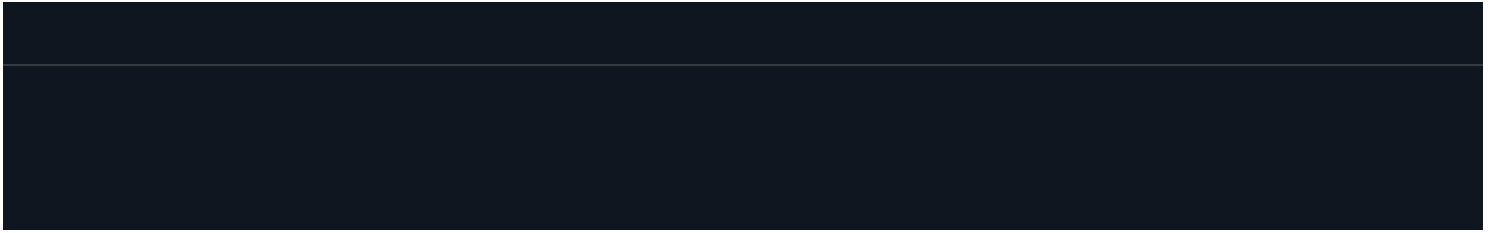
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