

## THE BEST OF THE SIXTIES REPRISED

John Wehrheim. *Taylor Camp*. Serindia Contemporary, 2015. *Bhutan, Hidden Lands of Happiness*. Serindia Publications, 2008.

*Peter Michelson*

At a time in life when I am dismayed by the number of former students, young men and women to my mind, who have died while I persist, I am blessed by the receipt of two ambitious photographic tomes from a onetime student reminding me that younger generations for the most part live, love and create with vigor and skill. In fact John Wehrheim's two works effectively synthesize the psychic pursuits and values of his generation. His documentation of "Taylor Camp," a hippy encampment on a peripheral Hawaiian island that existed from 1970 to 1977, evokes an existence of natural self reliance that does Henry David Thoreau proud and resonates with an ethos which defines and illuminates those times. The camp, named for its one benefactor Howard Taylor, the brother of the famous actress, has passed into memory and lore, the recording of which is passed on by interviews with the one time inhabitants of the camp.

At a reunion on the old campsite one camper's incisive recollection is a summa of the community's *raison d'être*, "We were all searching for something that wasn't quite what our families were offering, even though we had so much in America. We were still looking for something different and we were very lucky because we found it. Taylor Camp is a ripple in the water of our lives, still reverberating with what we found there. It was a wild serendipity experience and we're still here thirty five years later." Another prepared for her interview by taking off her clothes: "I can't do an interview about Taylor Camp with my clothes on. It wouldn't be honest." So, yes, drugs, sex and nudity were in fact a hippy hallmark of camp life.

But Wehrheim's rather elegant black and white photos depict a quotidian nudity amid the intriguing treehouse constructions in the forest and playtimes on the beach of the camp's Kauai island hideaway. Sex was manifest naturally in the number of children and babies pictured. While the photos of both people and landscape feature a dignified coherence, they also evoke the communal familiarity remembered by the campers, adults and kids alike. Wehrheim's own synthesis of that time foregrounds how campers set up a civic structure, with a food co-op, zoning and building codes, a public water system, garbage pickup, school bus stops, home made versions of the paraphernalia they left behind. And they had behavioral expectations

but unwritten and enforced by “common consent...and ‘vibes.’” And he’s careful to note that “Taylor Camp wasn’t a commune. It had no guru, no clearly defined leadership...no written ordinances. It wasn’t a democracy. It was much more than that: a community guided by a spirit that created order without rules.”

He’s also aware that, though the camp’s youth culture represented environmental, civil rights, peace movements, “and supposedly a great awakening in American consciousness,” its foundering was conspicuous as “counterculture art and idealism of the Sixties was packaged and marketed as a billion dollar industry.” Still, the vivacity of the camp in its time is the aura of this book. And the cover photograph of a bare breasted young woman with meditative eyes closed before the distinctive grains of a bare board interior tree house wall with a typical hippie poster tacked to it conveys the hope, innocence and, yes, spiritual beauty of Taylor Camp’s resonant era. It’s called “Diane, Krishna and the Gopis.” That’s the resonance of the John Wehrheim I knew as a student.

An older John Wehrheim is the author of *Bhutan, Hidden Lands of Happiness*. But he’s not so much older that he’s forgotten what he was looking for in the sixties. His art has matured, most noticeably in his photographs of the mountains, forests, mists, valleys and spectacular vistas of the Bhutan topography. Similarly, his photographs of the Bhutanese reveal his profound admiration of the people and the culture. In Bhutan, of course, there is a greater range, the young, the old, peasants, monks, urban and rural, though mostly the latter. His photos are more formal portraiture than in *Taylor Camp*, depicting a distinctly handsome people with extraordinary dignity. Even those who seem slightly amused at his intrusion—such as Chowan Bokum, an elderly man in bare feet resting on well worn floorboards, or Lhaden, a beautiful middle aged woman soaking in hot springs—have the grave poise of people accustomed to their own comeliness. The book and its elegant photography is a paean to the character of this ancient Buddhist culture as Wehrheim travels the north central third of the country talking with people and photographing them in their lives and environment.

Wehrheim has obviously found in Bhutan essentially what he and his fellow Taylor Campers sought in the sixties. While they were neither simple hedonists nor Buddhist acolytes, what they were after seems to have been something analogous to Aristotelian happiness. Happiness is a comprehensive good for Aristotle, complete in itself and a provider of the essential virtue for human being. That is, it is a philosophical condition to which all ethics aspire. Buddhism puts happiness on a similarly high plane, and vari-

ous dispositions of Buddhism are the soul of Bhutanese history and culture. Bhutan is a small country squeezed between Nepal, China and India. Now a constitutional monarchy [more at the insistence of its king than via the will of its people, about 740,000] it has been a monarchy since 1907 but really only an independent state since 1949. Over the centuries its Buddhist culture has survived many invasions but no real occupation. And despite the very recent invasion of television and the modern world Bhutanese Buddhism has kept happiness not only as an ideal good but has established a gross national happiness index to measure its availability. “Gross National Happiness,” its king announced famously in 1972, “is more important than Gross Domestic Product.”

Wehrheim, who still lives on a Hawaiian island, sees a future for Bhutan that is more than a little similar to the future he once hoped for Taylor Camp. “Because the country has come so late into the development process,” he says, “Bhutan is well positioned to learn from the mistakes of the world and to evolve from a medieval to a post-modern existence without sacrificing its traditional wisdom. To romanticize Bhutan as an otherworldly kingdom in the clouds would do the Bhutanese a great disservice, trivializing the very real challenges...that threaten their future. But only a cynic could overlook the practical gifts Bhutan has to offer—a focus on happiness and sustainability in a world swamped with over-consumption and environmental collapse.” That jab at the cynicism cultivated by the modern world affirms the vitality of the older John Wehrheim and his peers who keep their focus on a plausible vision of the future. It’s easy enough, however pertinent, to denounce our environmental promiscuousness. But to cite the cynicism behind the fiscal, corporate and administrative manipulation of it exposes causalities and generates more vigorous cognition. So these two books evoke a cyclic awareness, that such consciousness as the sixties proposed remains for this or some time soon to dispose.