Experimental Americans, by George L. Hicks

reviewed by Christopher H. Evans in the December 4, 2002 issue

In the 19th century, Alexis de Tocqueville praised the American ability to balance individual and community identities. This book by the late George Hicks, who taught anthropology at Brown University, presents an engaging analysis of this cultural paradox by examining 20th-century utopian communities.

Hicks challenges the argument that the 19th century was the heyday of American utopianism, asserting that communities like Celo emerged out of the desire of many 20th-century Americans to experiment with communal living, especially during the 1930s. Hicks connects Celo's utopian orientation to Arthur Morgan, an influential American educator and social theorist.

Influenced by the 19th-century utopian novelist Edward Bellamy and the 20th-century social philosopher John Dewey, Morgan believed that the best way to preserve American democracy was to build economically self-sufficient communities. He envisioned communities led by well-educated idealists who believed that the best way to build a better world was "on a small scale." These communities would produce individuals "who had learned how to make a living without compromising their convictions, who had learned to love nature, and who had an appetite for mental and spiritual growth." As head of the Tennessee Valley Authority, Morgan was an influential man. His influence led to the establishment of many experimental communities in the rural South, Celo among them.

Hicks reconstructs Celo's history from the late 1930s until the late 1970s. Celo's growth in the 1940s reflected its desire to differentiate itself in values and lifestyle choices from the larger society. Its first residents were young idealists, including several conscientious objectors to World War II, who embraced many of Morgan's theories regarding community living. But the community's initial experiments in economic self-sufficiency were soon abandoned in favor of a distinctive communal orientation toward self-government, lifestyle and politics (highlighted by a

commitment to nonviolence).

These practices created an impermeable barrier between Celo and its neighbors. Most local residents viewed Celo members as social pariahs or political radicals. Celo underwent years of internal conflict over the nature of its mission and lost many members to other experimental communities. An infusion of anti-war and environmental activists into the region in the late '60s lessened the tensions between Celo and its neighbors. By the late '70s, Celo had abandoned social experimentation to become a land trust community in which distinctions between members and nonmembers were largely ignored. Inexplicably, Hicks says nothing of Celo's history since the late 1970s.

Though the book is sometimes technical, it will appeal to those interested in American history and in what motivates people to join, and leave, religious communities. As with many other utopian communities, Celo members shared a deep-seated alienation from the larger culture. To them, 20th-century America society was sterile and impersonal, and they wanted to escape from it. However, unlike overtly religious utopian experiments, like the House of David sect of the early 20th century and the Hutterite-influenced Society of Brothers (which drew away many Celo members in the late 1950s), Celo lacked a clearly defined communal ideology.

While members rejected what they believed was the artificiality of 20th-century American culture, they freely embraced selected elements of that culture. Although members adhered to specific practices that promoted economic justice and self-sufficiency, they sent their children to public schools and supplemented the community's economic initiatives (including a co-op, health center and, eventually, a school) by seeking employment in schools and businesses in the surrounding region. Hicks relates utopian experiments like Celo to larger American cultural patterns. Far from negating the individual, such communities aim "to enhance the freedom of choice of the individual, to institute a more perfect equality, and to set before the world a model of improved society and culture."

Hicks argues that American utopian experimentation often supports lifestyle choices not readily sanctioned by the larger culture. However, he makes a somewhat artificial distinction between "religious" and "secular" utopian communities. Although Celo didn't adhere to any specific religious ideology or prescribed set of beliefs, during its most highly experimental stages it embraced Quaker traditions related to

self-government, worship, burial practices and, especially, nonviolence. This contributed to the outside world's perception that Celo's beliefs departed radically from those of the rest of the world. Although Hicks alludes to Morgan's religious beliefs, they are not discussed in detail. But Hicks's comparisons between Celo and more religiously based communities, like Koinonia, which spawned Habitat for Humanity, suggest the need to clarify the impact of religion upon so-called secular utopias.

Experimental Americans makes readers ponder the relationship between individual and community identity in American religion. The book makes clear that the American quest for a better community is inseparable from the anxieties and dreams of the individual.