A Vision with a Business: Kerista Commune's Utopian Capitalism

ANNELISE VOUGHT

Introduction

Trading their hippie clothes for professional suits, a crew of commune sisters attended an Apple conference led by tech giant and former Apple CEO John Sculley in 1985.[1] Aside from the women registering the guests as they arrived, throngs of men representing Apple's different channel partners filled the auditorium. Once most everyone had been seated, the flock of confident commune sisters stormed the male-dominated space, making sure that they were seen and heard. In addition to living in the San Francisco-based utopian commune Kerista, these women either ran or worked at Abacus Inc., the commune's one-hundred-percent woman-owned company. As savvy entrepreneurs aware of Apple's rising popularity, the group's agenda for the day was to secure a dealer's license from Apple to sell Macintosh computers.

Bluejay Way (Way Konigsberg), one of Abacus's business-minded owners, led the charge. According to Geo Logical (Lynne Barnes), Bluejay Way "uncork[s] her champagne chutzpah … bobs through

---

Annelise Vought graduated from Hamilton College as a member of Phi Beta Kappa and Phi Alpha Theta societies in 2019. She currently works at an advertising firm in New York as a strategist for rare disease healthcare brands. In her spare time, she makes analogue films and writes creative non-fiction essays for a small independent newspaper. Despite not studying communes in an academic setting anymore, she continues to observe contemporary society through an anthropological lens.

[1] Lynne Barnes, *Falling into Flowers*, Fairfield, IA: Blue Light Press, 2017, 67. Based on a couple of sources, I made an educated guess that the conference took place in 1985. The Kerista members I have spoken with do not recall the specific date. Lynne Barnes indicates that the conference occurred a "few seasons beyond" a 1984 Apple ad.

waves of men, landing like a breathless Olympian, right in front and fully in charge of John Sculley's attention."[2] She pitched the company, explaining its advantage as a woman-owned business in a market dominated by men. Sculley then presented Bluejay Way with his card (or in Geo Logical's eyes the "gold medal"), prompting a conversation with Sculley's colleague and solidifying Abacus's Apple dealership as a value-added reseller. Geo Logical recalled: "[T]he waves close around him again; the rivers of reporters and businessmen reanimate … and our utopian community soon becomes the thirty-third-fastest-growing company in America. *A vision with a business* we said."[3] The company's rapid growth signifies its full participation in the capitalist technology market.

This entrepreneurial feature of the Kerista commune contradicts popular understandings of communes as communities of refuge from mainstream society and, by extension, capitalism. However, the utopian beliefs of Abacus's countercultural founders informed the company's business plan: job creation, technological experimentation, and social welfare over profit margins. Kerista members adapted to new market conditions in burgeoning Silicon Valley, becoming successful entrepreneurs dedicated to advancing social betterment as they grew their lucrative tech business. In this paper, I argue that instead of pitting capitalism against communalism, Kerista harnessed the former to promote the latter. Abacus-employed Keristans remained successful as long as they maintained the equilibrium between capitalist imperatives and their communal program. However, increasing workplace demands compromised that equilibrium, revealing the precariousness and complexity of leading a communal and entrepreneurial life.

Kerista's Infancy

Kerista went through many iterations before its San Francisco chapter "Kerista 12" (the focus of my work) started Abacus. In 1956, John Peltz Presmont—whose Kerista name was "Brother Jud"—experienced a vision that convinced him he was a prophet of the "next great world religion of Kerista" after spending a marijuana-filled six months locked in his apartment.[4] According to Dau the Pied Piper (Leonard Freitag), the self-proclaimed "second prophet founder of Kerista," Jud had served as an officer in the U.S. Air Force responsible for bombing the Japanese

---

[2] Lynne Barnes, *Falling into Flowers*, 67. I try to refer to all commune members by their Kerista name. If I cannot find a member's Kerista name, I refer to them by their legal name.
[3] Barnes, *Falling into Flowers*, 68.
[4] Leonard (Dau the Pied Piper) Freitag, *The History of the Communal Spiritual Movement/Judaism* (San Francisco: Kauliflower, 1984), 3-4.

during World War II.[5] His military background likely fueled his unabashed political views, especially his advocacy for the Vietnam war and vocal criticism of liberal radicals. Jud also owned a "capitalist" bar and restaurant at one point, worked as a "high pressure salesman," and championed "wife swapping" at New York swinger parties with a VIP guest list.[6] These business endeavors indicate that although Jud's communal pursuits were countercultural, he never outwardly opposed or opted out of the capitalist system. Dau even claims that Jud prostituted his wife and other commune women in the 1950s to keep the "commune" financially afloat. This action suggests capitalist exploitation, instead of mere market participation.

Historian Christopher Gair discusses the "ideological consensus" conservative Americans attribute to the 1950s, a time of "sexual innocence, cultural accord, and moral and economic stability."[7] Jud's behavior illuminates a couple ways in which Americans revolted against mainstream culture, as well as the lengths they would go to accomplish their goals. However, Jud's conservative view on war challenges the simplistic notion of what it meant to be "countercultural" in the fifties and sixties. His unique background laden with contradictions sets the backdrop for Kerista's utopian capitalist vision.

During the 1960s, the "utopian moment of the twentieth century," thousands of youth sought out "new utopian ways of living" to push back against traditional American family values.[8] Jud's main reason for creating Kerista, as he expressed at the time was: "I was ready for the next step in my life. Many of my basic needs were as yet unfulfilled ... I wanted heroic self-image, adventure, philosophical discourse, and community."[9] To thirty discontented young adults, Kerista appeared to be an oasis for those desires. Jud tried to create eleven separate communal experiments in the U.S. and abroad before the San Francisco chapter gained momentum in February of 1971.[10] As explained by Tru Reason

---

[5] Ibid, 5.

[6] Ibid, 4.

[7] Christopher Gair, "Introduction," *American Counterculture* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 18. .Gair discusses the idealistic nostalgia conservative Americans have towards the 1950s — a time they perceived as culturally, morally, and economically stable. He then proceeds to unpack the complexities of this vision to demonstrate how countercultural movements emerged.

[8] Marcia Martin and Pedro, Orrego, *SexTV*, "Utopia Love & Sex in a Perfect World," CHUM Television, 48:03, 2004, 11:15.

[9] Jud Presmont, "Kerista Commune Follow-up Questionnaire," March 24th, 1994, Kerista Papers, *Communal Societies Collection*, Hamilton College.

[10] Mitch Slomiak, interview by author, Menlo Park, CA, March 25, 2019.

(Larry Hamelin), Even Eve (Eve Furchgott) joined Jud to establish what Tru Reason calls the "new tribe."[11]

Kerista emerged from the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco as a utopian community that boasted "income sharing, non-jealousy ... shared leadership" and polyfidelity.[12] Jud described their practice as "wholesome non-monogamy ... an alternative to the isolated two-adult household …" and claimed that they were "trying to build a super family."[13] Each member joined a "BFIC" (Best Friend Identity Cluster) or heterosexual family unit that functioned around a rotating sleep schedule. Ultimately, Kerista's core values of community, family, and sharing attracted members throughout the seventies and eighties. While these principles served as the bedrock of the commune and fostered close relationships, they did not cause Kerista to be isolated from the outside world. For this reason, Kerista does not quite fit the mold of scholars' definitions of late twentieth century communes.

The sixties era is the "greatest period of cultural change in recent history," according to Timothy Miller, a leading U.S. historian on communal studies.[14] He defines communes as a "group of like-minded persons who withdraw from the dominant culture and seek to create a micro-culture in which people live together and share resources while striving for common goals."[15] Kerista did not, however, withdraw from all aspects of dominant culture, as the growth of Abacus made them active participants in the capitalist economy. Communal studies scholar Rosabeth Kanter asserts: "[c]ommunes are one instance of collective behavior, an uninstitutionalized mobilization of people as a response to social strain in order to define and respond to the strain and reconstitute some element of society."[16] As stated in the television documentary *Utopia Love & Sex in a Perfect World*, Kerista developed "one of the most focused and complete Utopian blueprints" for people who "weren't happy being monogamous."[17] Miller posits that this philosophy resonated with a broader 1960s communal movement to "reject sexual exclusivity and

---

[11] Lawrence Hamelin, "And to No More Settle for Less Than Purity: Reflections on Kerista Commune," *Praxis: Politics in Action* 1, no. 1 (August 2013): 62.
[12] Martin and Orrego, *Utopia Love & Sex*, 13:24.
[13] Martin and Orrego, *Utopia Love & Sex*, 14:15.
[14] Timothy Miller, forward to *The Modern Utopian: Alternative Communities Then and Now*, edited by Richard Fairfield (Los Angeles: Process Media, 2010), 18. Miller underscores the historical significance of communes in the 1960s. His overview provides context to Fairfield's collection of articles documenting experiential communities in the 1970s.
[15] Miller, *The Modern*, 14.
[16] Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Communes: Creating and Managing the Collective Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 17.
[17] Martin and Orrego, *Utopia Love & Sex*, 12:01.

promote (or at least tolerate) multilateral and serial relationships."[18] However, sexual liberation was just one facet of Kerista's utopian vision. The means they chose to realize this vision required Kerista members to partake in the capitalist economy, an action some deem as antithetical to utopian goals. Thus, like Jud's complex background, Kerista's economic plan subverts conventional notions of countercultural communes.

Kerista also strays from scholarly categorizations of what makes communes successful. In his 2000 article, "The Success of American Communes," Clifford F. Thies argues that the more committed a commune's members are, the more likely it will survive.[19] Factors that positively affected commitment levels include: private property ownership, egalitarian distribution of wealth, celibacy, and religious piety, and anarchic governance.[20] Despite reaching Thies's twenty-year threshold for communal success, Keristans relinquished private property, practiced polyfidelity, shared religious beliefs but did not qualify as pious, and made decisions democratically. The only feature of Kerista that aided its longevity according to Thies's findings was its egalitarian distribution of wealth. This discrepancy further reinforces why Kerista does not conform to traditional understandings of American communes. Kerista more closely aligns with Thies's notion of a "planned community" or "club", as opposed to a "commune", because Kerista allowed some form of personal autonomy as well as specialization and trade in the greater outside world.[21] This alternative definition of Kerista suggests that the commune must be evaluated on different terms because of its defining economic structure.

The Complexity of Communal Economies

Joshua Davis's *From Head Shops to Whole Foods* provides the framework for this discussion.[22] Davis debunks the misconception that countercultural individuals rejected participating in the market. Activist entrepreneurs from various social movements in the late sixties and seventies pursued small business opportunities to advance political change. These groups viewed American business and consumer culture as perpetuating social illnesses, such as "inequality, conformity, materialism, hypo-

---

[18] Timothy Miller, *The 60s Communes: Hippies and Beyond* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 134.
[19] Clifford F. Thies, "The Success of American Communes," *Southern Economic Journal* 67, no. 1 (2000), 186.
[20] Ibid, 197.
[21] Ibid, 198.
[22] Joshua Clark Davis, *From Head Shops to Whole Foods: The Rise and Fall of Activist Entrepreneurs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

critical moralism, and alienation."[23] So, according to Davis, these political entrepreneurs opened up storefronts in order to conduct business ethically and prioritize the needs of their local community over profit. However, rather than challenging the predominant social order through small business, Kerista members leveraged entrepreneurial opportunities to pursue their utopian vision.

Davis's section on business in the women's movement illuminates how second wave feminists laid the groundwork for female entrepreneurs to start new businesses like Abacus. As stated in *Utopian Capitalism in the Haight: The Kerista Commune*, Abacus benefitted from policies that incentivized companies to contract with women-owned corporations.[24] The wave of feminist entrepreneurship in the sixties and seventies most likely fueled the creation of these policies. Davis adds: "[o]perating a business [also] gave the women a form of confidence and independence that would be unavailable to them as employees or homemakers."[25] Abacus-employed Kerista women reflected this courage and self-sufficiency as they grew the company. Although he focuses on politically active groups, Davis's overarching discussion of the link between capitalism and counterculture illuminates communal motivations to engage in capitalist enterprise. However, other scholars do address communal economics, shedding light on the complexities of developing profit-driven businesses. In *Utopian Capitalism in the Haight*, the authors discuss Kerista's income pooling, participation in the "external economy of competitive capitalism," and the "Hippie Work Ethic" that allowed members to quit their job and work for Abacus if they were stressed or unhappy.[26]

Kanter raises several important questions about how communal economies function: "[o]n what basis are goods and services distributed, and how is that process related to community values and individual rewards?"[27] Kanter outlines scenarios where communes generate just enough income to subsist, have a stable income, or attain financial success. She concludes that "at a certain point in the life of the community, it is not scarcity which threatens, but plenty ... as a community prospers, it becomes increasingly possible for differences of opinion to arise as to the relative distribution of resources toward collective, as against individual needs."[28] Her analysis sheds light on why the rapid growth of Abacus eventually toppled the

[23] Ibid, 3.
[24] Stacy Barwick, Michael Cummings, Lise Leibacher, and Lyman Tower Sargent. *Utopian Capitalism in the Haight: The Kerista Commune*. San Francisco: Publisher, 1987, 3.
[25] Davis, 142.
[26] Barwick et al., 3.
[27] Kanter, 271.
[28] Kanter, 273.

equilibrium between increasingly incompatible capitalist and communal demands. Similarly, sociologist Gilbert Zicklin elaborates on the fragility of constructing a communal economic order, "a process fraught with great danger to communal solidarity, since economic issues have the potential to raise basic questions concerning trust and fairness, self-seeking and exploitation."[29] Both Zicklin and Kanter suggest that profit-driven business can threaten broader communal values, illustrating the precariousness of Kerista's economic communalism as Abacus flourished.

Kerista Publications as the Commune Voice and Critical Recruitment Tool

Optimism and experimentation defined the early days of Kerista, as demonstrated by their publications. Newspapers such as *Storefront Classroom* and *Utopian Eyes* marketed the commune and engaged potential members, underscoring one meaningful way in which Keristans interacted with the outside world. During a 2019 interview, Nu Luv (Mitch Slomiak) returned to the journals he had kept in the late seventies to reflect on why he joined Kerista in 1981.[30] During a trip out West in college, Nu Luv picked up a copy of *Storefront Classroom*. This "intelligently written" newspaper discussed sharing finances, collectively raising children, and polyfidelity, which "struck [me] as very edgy but very appealing at the same time."[31] He was drawn to the apparent commitment and seriousness the articles exuded; not only was the commune re-envisioning a new family structure, but its members were actively practicing it. One year, Nu Luv devoted his final school project to studying Utopian experiments. He revisited San Francisco to complete research on Kerista, but also used it as an opportunity to gauge whether or not the community would be a good fit for him. Like other prospective members, Nu Luv was captivated by the depth of conversations he had with Keristans upon initial encounter. Nu Luv stayed updated on Kerista as a subscriber to their publications, "devour[ing] them over the next couple weeks and months" and then "corresponding with Keristans after [his] Junior year" at University of Pennsylvania.[32] Nu Luv's continual engagement with Kerista material reflects the enduring intrigue and excitement their publications prompted.

Like Nu Luv, Mighty Mik (former member Renee Bertolette) received a copy of *Storefront Classroom*, sparking her curiosity and

[29] Gilbert Zicklin, *Countercultural Communes: A Sociological Perspective* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), 133.
[30] Mitch Slomiak, interview by author.
[31] Slomiak, interview by author.
[32] Ibid.

introducing her to the structure and philosophy of Kerista. During her search for a committed, long-term communal home, Mighty Mik moved to San Francisco and attended a Kerista women's group in the fall of 1977. In a 2019 interview, Mighty Mik recalls that the Keristans "were engaging and warm and really interested in me on a deep level ... there was a lot of conversation about profound things … [and] [not] a lot of small talk."[33] Also, according to Mighty Mik, "[t]he women were really strong. They were heterosexual but they seemed like sisters ... they were also cool, they were hip. It seemed like they were really on this frontier, which caught my imagination."[34] This sentiment highlights the sense of family Keristans demonstrated inside and outside the commune. Moreover, other prospective members shared the notion that Kerista was spearheading some sort of countercultural frontier. As Herbert Otto, a scholar who researched communes during the sixties and seventies, describes: "[t]he commune movement ... has opened up a new and wide range of alternative lifestyles ... it is a test tube for growth of a new type of social relatedness … [a] symbol of man's new freedom to develop deep and fulfilling human relationships."[35] Kerista, like the other communal groups that emerged with it, exemplifies Otto's argument.

Tip Tye (Shari Tresky), who joined in 1978, expressed similar feelings towards Kerista: "I totally believed it; I thought that we were on to something that was a better way of life ... if people could learn to live together cooperatively, it could be good for people financially to share resources."[36] After reading about their ideas for a while prior to joining, Tip Tye liked the Utopian plan Keristan literature posited: having an eco-village, sharing income, and practicing polyfidelity. Twenty-six-year-old Buf M'Up (David Zinn) explains that "the Kerista publication captured his fantasies," as he was already "interested in communal living experiments" and lived on a kibbutz in Israel for his college study abroad.[37] Thus, Keristan newspapers, magazines, and comic strips prompted Nu Luv, Mighty Mik, Tip Tye, Buf M'Up and most likely other members' initial intrigue with Kerista. The effectiveness of editorial writing in marketing the commune serves as a testament to the importance of print publications in disseminating information about Kerista.

Kerista publications endured, evolved, and multiplied throughout Kerista's twenty-one year lifespan, highlighting their effectiveness in

---

[33] Renee Bertolette, interview by author, March 31, 2019.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Herbert Otto, *The Communal Alternative*, quoted in Richard Fairfield, *The Modern Utopian* (San Francisco: Alternatives!, 1971), 29.
[36] Shari Tresky, interview by author, March 28, 2019.
[37] David Zinn, interview by author, San Francisco, CA, March 26th, 2019.

accomplishing communal and business goals. They enabled members to engage with the San Francisco community, articulated a breadth of Utopian ideas, marketed Abacus products and services, and made a profit selling advertisements for local businesses. As Even Eve describes in the Kerista comic strip *Far Out West*, the Storefront Classroom Collective's publications include[d] "utopian psychology lessons, communal living information, short stories, poetry, columns on ecology, alternative energy sources, nutrition, world citizenship news and lots of fantasies, plans & specifications for the creation of an actual utopian model community."[38] Membership dues for all material was five dollars per year for individuals in the U.S. and ten dollars for institutions or individuals outside the country. According to Buf M'Up, he was one of the few people who ever bought the magazine *Utopian Eyes*, as it was eventually given away for free.

During the 1980s, Abacus Inc. added *Node*, a computer publication that discussed how people should employ new technology to solve global issues. This paper promoted the business while also reinforcing communal values. In a chart labeled "Abacus, Inc. Sources of Income For the Month Ending August 31, 1985," "Advertising / Businesses Services" make up 33.9%, then in descending order, "Home Services," "Computer Sales," "Transportation," and more.[39] This chart affirms that publications became a viable source of income, not just an intellectual exercise or fun hobby. In addition to the pro-computer publications, club members or subscribers of the "Abacus Small Business Support Package" received discounts on Abacus services.[40] Thus, Keristans packaged memberships in a variety of ways,[41] an entrepreneurial tactic Keristans used to engage with and sell to a diverse audience. Overall, the evolution of their publications reflects the enduring creativity and innovation of both Abacus-employed and non-Abacus employed Keristans.

Kerista's Initial Division of Labor and Financial Ethos

Kerista's fundamental economic structure highlights their egalitarian motivations. The basic premise of economic communalism, as Wise Sun (former Kerista member, legal name unknown) describes, is: "money comes in from many different sources and is pooled together. Then it is distributed to cover personal and business expenses of the commune members, and the remaining money is spent on philanthropic projects

[38] Even Eve, *Far Out West: The First Utopian Comic Strip* (San Francisco, CA: Performing Arts Social Society, Inc., 1976), 1: 36.
[39] Abacus Inc., "Sources of Income" *Node* (San Francisco, CA), 1, no. 2 (Autumn 1985), 6.
[40] Wise Sun, "The Historic Economic Evolution of a Hippie Tribe," *Kerista: Journal of Utopian Group Living* 3, no. 4: 62.
[41] Zinn, interview by author.

or held in reserve to be spent later on."[42] This system attracted members hoping to make a positive impact, like Buf M'Up, who stated: "I got involved, wanted to save the world, and thought this was a viable way to do it. You organize enough people [and] they all live communally or very efficiently meaning they aren't using more resources than they need."[43] To reduce waste, Keristans shared household appliances, bedrooms, and cars. Nu Luv shared Buf M'Up's sentiment, expressing the appeal of economic communalism: "here is a completely voluntary, simple form of socialism ... People are sharing their earnings with each other and everyone is living at the same standard of living ... what if this could be done around the world? What if this could be introduced to poor parts of the world where people pool resources?"[44]

These idealistic schemes shed light on why Keristans believed their model for living would benefit the collective if scaled up and replicated elsewhere. Kerista's economic future vision, according to Wise Sun, was "based on a simple economic principle: per capita, two can live more cheaply than one. Three or more can live more cheaply than two ... The bigger we get, the more we save. The more we save, the more creative goodwill projects we can fund. That's the heart of our movement."[45] Even though the commune never exceeded more than forty members, as Abacus emerged, it enabled more philanthropic projects, in addition to saving income.

In order to sustain themselves in the pre-Abacus days, members held a range of outside jobs, emphasizing their consistent involvement in the capitalist economy. A lot of members had just finished schooling and were too young to have full-fledged careers. Nu Luv pursued a role as a typist and official administrator doing clerical work for a business, then transitioned to a word processing job for the Federal Home Loan Bank of San Francisco.[46] Buf M'Up was a credentialed teacher on unemployment when he joined Kerista and then taught intermittently in San Francisco public schools for a number of years.[47] Laf Alott (former Kerista member David Gallo) worked as a governmental social security auditor the whole time he was in Kerista. Laf Alott later lent his van to Buf M'Up and Cap (former Kerista member, legal name unknown) to complete jobs for early Abacus. This effort to share reflects the ease with which the commune cooperated before building a thriving enterprise. Due to his outside employment, Kerista deemed Laf Alott a "hunter-gatherer." In contrast,

---

[42] Sun, 61.
[43] Zinn, interview by author.
[44] Slomiak, interview by author.
[45] Sun, 61.
[46] Slomiak, interview by author.
[47] Zinn, interview by author.

those who worked for Kerista-owned businesses were called "collective enterprisers," according to scholars Stacy Barwick, Michael Cummings, Lise Liebacher, and Lyman Sargent.[48]

The computer resale business had its roots in a more humble, manual labor-based home services operation. In 1977 Buf M'Up and Cap combined forces to create a janitorial service, marking the beginnings of Abacus. Buf M'Up reported working with Cap to devise a janitorial gig for themselves.[49] Buf M'Up had prior knowledge of the janitorial industry thanks to the time he spent working for his uncle, a janitorial contractor, during college. Cap, who developed handy skills working on a farm, had an aptitude for the kinds of tasks he and Buf M'Up would do: window cleaning, floor buffing, etc. Cap handed out business cards on the street, highlighting the grassroots marketing tactics of early Abacus. Before it became an official corporation, Abacus was "less formalized;"[50] clients made checks out to Buf M'Up.

After learning that he could make $5 an hour doing house cleaning and possibly janitorial work, Buf M'Up felt compelled to turn their services into a business in the hopes of ensuring a more consistent demand and profit. This transition illustrates Buf M'Up's capitalist impulse and eagerness to work within a business structure. "We took out a dictionary, we wanted something at the beginning of the alphabet for listings purposes, came to Abacus and said, 'yeah that sounds good.' We always had an affinity toward accounting … it was a requirement when I arrived that everybody learn the seven steps of the bookkeeping cycle," shares Buf M'Up.[51] Although Kerista later dropped this stipulation due to its difficulty, the principle behind it suggests that the commune advocated for its members to be financially responsible. Moreover, urging *all* members to learn the skill of accounting even if it would not be put to use reinforces the egalitarian nature of economic communalism. After it had been named "Abacus Home Services," the janitorial and house cleaning collective expanded to offer gardening services. Tip Tye and Ram (former Kerista member Chris Williams) were instrumental in establishing the gardening department. Keristans' willingness to diversify services and capitalize on new market needs underlines their entrepreneurial bent.

As the commune grew in mid-1977, Abacus Home Services became an official corporation, legitimizing their operation as an authorized business and incentivizing its employees to keep expanding its services. Using the skills gained from previously managing an employment office,

---

[48] Barwick et al., 3.
[49] Zinn, interview by author.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.

Lil O'Lee (former Kerista member Claire) researched how to form a corporation in California and transformed Abacus Home Services into Abacus, Inc. Other Kerista members were able to acquire valuable taxi medallions and become yellow cab owners. However, according to Buf M'Up, "the money they made did not accrue to them personally—it went into Abacus. So we said we had a transportation division.[52] The cab-driving division reflects the breadth and assortment of services Abacus offered in its early days. Moreover, positioning the few members who drove taxis as part of a "transportation division" demonstrates the enterprising efforts of Kerista members to market a versatile business.

Everyone who worked for Abacus, regardless of profession, made a minimum wage of two dollars and twenty-five cents an hour. In "Kerista: A Theology of Economics," an article published in the late eighties, Laf Alott asserts that: "All work is valued as equal because work transcends pure dollars and is seen as part of the total effort required to carry out the higher mission, which is the attainment of Heaven on Earth through non-violent, voluntary, partial redistribution of wealth. Thus, the relevant standard is equality of effort and not dollars produced."[53] This declaration reflects Kerista's policy of income sharing, egalitarian view of different kinds of labor, and the commune's greater goals. It also suggests that like activist entrepreneurs, Keristans believed that Abacus fostered "change by emphasizing cooperation over competition and solidarity over sales margins." This perspective reinforces broader communal approaches to market participation; while individuals working for Abacus held specific titles, wages did not perpetuate workplace hierarchy.

While the demand for Abacus's services and products throughout the early 1980s rose, the corporation's size was manageable enough that it did not compromise communal life. However, Laf Alott's outside job ultimately provided him superior retirement benefits to those of his fellow commune members working for Abacus. Buf M'Up explains: "As it turns out, if you work for Abacus for a long time, you wouldn't leave with any kind of stock … or a retirement plan; in terms of raw dollars and cents, being a hunter-gatherer ... was a way better deal. But we weren't projecting ever falling apart—we were involved for 'a current intention of lifetime involvement.'"[54] Buf M'Up's perspective on jobs held in and out of the commune suggests that despite the lack of guarantees Abacus offered its Kerista employees, he and his fellow members trusted in the

---

[52] Ibid.

[53] Laf Alott, "Kerista: A Theology of Economics," *Kerista: Journal of Utopian Group Living* 3, no. 3 (Winter 1987), 63.

[54] Zinn, interview by author.

communal vision and business enough to take the financial risk. This attitude exemplifies an audacious approach to business.

In the early days of Abacus, Abacus-employed Keristans worked relatively the same number of hours each week. Thus, one of the only ways to differentiate how Keristans contributed to the commune's economy in the late 1970s was the physical task he or she completed. The early version of Abacus lacked the hierarchy, structure, and intensity of the company as it evolved into a computer reseller business. According to the source *Utopian Capitalism in the Haight: The Kerista Commune*, Keristans followed a "Hippie Work Ethic, which says that, while everyone must work, work should be sufficiently satisfying that it does not cause an individual stress or unhappiness. If work [outside Abacus and the commune] does prove too stressful for particular individuals, they are free to quit the job and go to work for Abacus if they so choose."[55] This description implies that working for Abacus would mitigate professional dissatisfaction, or at least provide a better opportunity to be happy than an unfulfilling outside job. However, *Utopian Capitalism* was published in 1987, prior to Abacus's orderly liquidation and Kerista's decline. Thus, the "Hippie Work Ethic" encompassed an attitude that applied to Keristans prior to Abacus's decline.

The Cultivation of Enterpreneurship within Kerista

Abacus-employed Keristans were quick to enter the computer industry, highlighting their awareness of and interest in Silicon Valley's booming technology market. By the mid-1970s, San Francisco had become "the microelectronics center of the United States…[and] by 1980, Apple was the leading firm in the personal computer industry."[56] Thanks to the design and application programs of Apple II, Apple became wildly popular. Due to its rapid sales growth, Apple went public in 1980 and "reaped enormous capital gains."[57]

As reported by Mighty Mik, a woman introduced Kerista to Macintosh products in 1986 when she joined the commune and shared her Macintosh microcomputer.[58] The members were so captivated by the magic of this device, they wanted to purchase more. Along similar lines, Nu Luv explains that when Sun, who was graphically inclined, joined Kerista, he predicted Macintosh products would "revolutionize"

[55] Barwick et al., 3.

[56] Christophe Lécuyer, *Making Silicon Valley Innovation and the Growth of High Tech, 1930-1970*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2007, 253/303.

[57] Lécuyer, 303.

[58] Bertolette, interview by author.

their advertisements and publications.[59] After purchasing a couple of microcomputers, Keristans started using them to produce graphics and print literature and advertisements. Buf M'Up claims that this shift was more strategic than accidental: "[we] were interested in optimizing [the business] and being smarter than everyone else. If that meant mastering a new technology, we would do it."[60] This sentiment underscores the commune's entrepreneurial spirit that stimulated capitalist growth in the 1980s. Nu Luv—later nicknamed "The Computer Rabbi"—was particularly adept at using microcomputers. Even Eve, who became the resident artist, was known for her skill at using early graphics programs. Keristans stood on the technology frontier in Silicon Valley, both taking to the microcomputer and incorporating it into Abacus's business model.

Cooperation and Shared Ambition in Early-Stage Abacus

Abacus-employed Keristans then set up a training center, creating a space to directly engage with consumers and cultivate a reputation for quality service. In addition to letting people rent time on microcomputers, Abacus employees helped clients print and learn how to work the devices. After hours, the center became a "great environment for learning new technical skills," as Abacus-employed Keristans spent nights there "working on publications, teaching each other, and doing some accounting."[61] The cooperative nature of this endeavor supports Davis's theory of participatory economics: "The idea that citizens could regain power over their lives by making their daily experiences in capitalist society more humane, authentic, and even politically progressive or radical."[62] Although not politically radical, the storefront offered Keristans a chance to bond with one another and empowered them to help customers through concrete means. Mighty Mik discusses how they were always "brainstorming how to make money *and* what would be fun."[63] This emphasis on creating "fun" work opportunities for the collective underscores the harmony of Kerista's business operation and commune life at this point in time. The low business stakes of the store allowed for a cooperative, virtually stress-free environment. However, entrepreneurial Keristans recognized the market for selling microcomputers as opposed to just showing clients how to use them. So, they sought to expand Abacus past its storefront capabilities, upping the capitalist ante.

---

[59] Slomiak, interview by author.
[60] Zinn, interview by author.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Davis, 3.
[63] Bertolette, interview by author.

Abacus' move to cement an Apple dealership marked the transition from a small-scale communal business to a full-fledged, high-growth startup. Bluejay Way, known to be the most business savvy member and salesperson, pioneered the efforts to become an Apple computer dealer. She was assertive and courageous, according to Tip Tye, and came up with the idea of approaching John Sculley, Apple's former CEO, about one.[64] After negotiating a dealership contingent on becoming a value-added reseller, computer programmer Tru Reason (Larry Hamelin) spent weeks creating a contact management system until it satisfied Apple's requirements. Because the software was a new feature that could be programmed into microcomputers, it became Abacus's ticket to getting a value-added reseller agreement. This dealership catalyzed the growth of Abacus, allowing Kerista members to tap into the burgeoning technology market. Abacus-employed Keristans became the intermediaries between their clients and new technology, allowing Apple users to enjoy the full benefits of their new devices. While luck played a role, the rate of Abacus's transformation from a modest business into a multi-faceted startup demonstrates the industry and work ethic of its team.

Harnessing Kerista Values and Aesthetics as a Competitive Advantage for Abacus

Abacus employees positioned its female leadership as a business asset and not just a cultural perk, underlining one way the company used its progressive structure to facilitate capitalist growth. Along with a few other key factors, this characteristic catalyzed the rapid growth of the company, as Abacus's Chief Financial Officer Nu Luv explains, "When Abacus was first formed all the shares were put in the names of four women," which "never made any difference before other than making us feel better that we were real feminists somehow."[65] Its benefits remained conceptual until Abacus employees legitimized themselves as a one hundred percent woman-owned business and began to clinch deals. Despite embracing "conventional business practices" much more so than feminist enterprises in the seventies had, Abacus owners "benefited from the hard-earned gains of feminist activists in earlier years who had founded their own businesses."[66] Being one hundred percent women-owned proved instrumental in getting on vendor lists, as big companies like Pacific Bell gave procurement advantages to women- or minority-owned

[64] Tresky, interview by author.
[65] Slomiak, interview by author.
[66] Davis, 133/173.

companies.[67] So, once a reseller made the list, there was no hierarchy due to decentralized procurement, i.e. any employee at Pacific Bell could order fifty computers for his or her department from Abacus or another computer reseller company. Ultimately, Abacus-employed Keristans recognized the company's competitive edge, capitalized on it, and bolstered their client list. In order to maintain brand loyalty, Abacus then focused on enhancing its service division.

Abacus-employed Keristans fostered relationships with customers, reinforcing their credibility as excellent service providers in the industry. Specifically, customer experience and "genuine support customized to the specific needs of [its] clients" distinguished Abacus from its competitors."[68] Abacus employees, usually characterized as young, attractive, and vibrant, not only delivered microcomputers to their clients, but also spent two or three hours helping them get acquainted with their new device. Nu Luv argues that Abacus employees helped their clients get comfortable using their new Mac not because they thought that it would sell more computers but because they believed "it was the right thing to do."[69] This sentiment suggests that profit was a product of doing good business, not necessarily the sole incentive. Nu Luv further explains that having a "nice young hippie ... who is self-confident … [and] personable hanging out with you up and close" caused their "names to spread like wildfire" at large corporations such as Pacific Bell.[70] This personalized service secured clients before procurement was centralized, causing Abacus to grow rapidly.

The extent to which Kerista employees *intentionally* used their hippie identity to promote the Abacus brand, however, is a more complex matter. Mighty Mik asserts that while they did not hide their communal lifestyle, it was not a marketing ploy.[71] Tip Tye concedes that there was a "Public Relations aspect," as "we are young attractive hippies" and "a lot of people we hired were young musicians [or] hippie-ish types."[72] This statement suggests that the public image of Abacus-employed Keristans captivated both customers and potential employees. These "hippie-ish types presumably shared similar values to Keristans, such as cooperation over competition. In a 1991 *San Francisco Business Times* article, journalist Clifford Carlsen explains that, despite outsourcing labor, Abacus

---

[67] Slomiak, interview by author.

[68] Abacus Powerpoint, Kerista Archives, *Communal Societies Collection*, Hamilton College.

[69] Slomiak, interview by author.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Bertolette, interview by author.

[72] Tresky, interview by author.

still tried to "hire people who fit into the alternative corporate culture."[73] Their hippie appearance enhanced Abacus's popularity with clientele, ultimately distinguishing the business and aiding its success. This factor underscores the lingering commercial appeal of the larger countercultural movement in the 1980s and 1990s and how it helped communes like Kerista develop thriving capitalist businesses.

The language of Abacus publications and marketing collateral exemplifies Abacus's entrepreneurial strategy. On the tenth slide of their sales presentation, it states: "People say that besides knowing what we're doing, we're a lot of fun to work with. In today's harried world, that's worth a point or two."[74] Additionally, in a 1988 article titled "The Pure Sex of Personal Computing," The Computer Rabbi (Nu Luv) states: "Cutting edge technology is fun because it's fast, it's the latest, it's hip and happening, it's powerful, and it's better."[75] Although the title of the article and its content sound provocative, Nu Luv's language echoes the marketing campaigns of successful businesses and the rhetoric of their leaders at the time. Scholar Jim McGuigan's book *Cool Capitalism* examines "the coolly seductive qualities of ... technological innovations associated with mobile and privatised ways of living."[76] Consciously or not, Keristan publication writers participated in a broader marketing plan to position technology as exciting and stimulating to attract consumers. Their range of approaches and vast knowledge on the subject highlight the extent to which Keristans engaged with the world beyond the commune.

In his book *Conquest of Cool*, Thomas Frank poses the idea of "hip" consumerism born in the fifties and sixties, one that "recognize[s] the alienation, boredom, and disgust engendered by the demands of modern consumer society."[77] He also argues that while the 1960s Creative Revolution challenged tradition and mainstream culture, it was a market-driven movement at its core. As demonstrated by their emphasis on marketing not only themselves, but also their tech products, "fun" Keristans leveraged the appeal of "hipness" and subsequently hip consumerism to their benefit. The Abacus mission statement reads: "The company was started in 1973 by a group of idealistic friends. We had a common desire

---

[73] Clifford Carlsen, "A Vision with a Business: Abacus Inc. Melds Social Slant with Techie Smarts," *San Francisco Business Time*s, July 19, 1991.

[74] Abacus Powerpoint, Kerista Archives, Communal Societies Collection, Hamilton College.

[75] The Computer Rabbi [A.K.A., Mitch Slomiak and Nu Luv], "The Pure Sex of Personal Computing," *Node* (San Francisco, CA), 3, no. 3 (Spring 1988), 27.

[76] Jim McGuigan, *Cool Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2009), 86.

[77] Frank Thomas, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997, 231.

to create jobs."[78] While the word "idealistic" hints at Abacus's utopian underpinnings, it does not reveal the business's connection to the commune. However, "idealistic friends" lacks formality and conveys a sense of nonchalance. This colloquial tone further reinforces the age of corporate hip. Thus, instead of resisting capitalism, Keristans rode the wave of the technological revolution, using the tenets of hip consumer culture to grow their business.

Abacus publications discussed technology while promoting ideas about planned communities, underscoring how Abacus-employed Keristans made sense of themselves within the context of San Francisco's changing landscape. After the service division diversified, Abacus offered Macintosh "training, networking, consulting, programming, hardware and software sales" and more.[79] The advertisements placed in Kerista publications reflect the breadth of services and products and the range in guerilla marketing tactics Abacus employed. For example, in the newspaper *Rockhead*, a customized ad says: "Rockers, Musicians, Managers, MIDI-Heads, PR People, Agents, Composers, Bands, Songwriters, Roadies & Fans: Let the sound in your mind come to life with the easy-to-use hardware and software on a Macintosh workstation."[80] Moreover, Abacus's computer newspaper, *Node*, discussed the positive social impact microcomputers had on American culture. An article The Computer Rabbi (Nu Luv) wrote in 1989 argues that the advent of computers allowed for multi-adult households and eliminated the need for a sex-based division of labor, as anyone could work from home.[81] Later he refers to Kerista as a modern, computerized commune, signifying the integration of new technology into commune life, not just business life. Like other contributors, The Computer Rabbi advocated for the use of computers while subverting potential criticism by demonstrating why technology supported the Kerista utopian plan as opposed to diminishing it.

Promoting Abacus as an Experiential Service with Philanthropic Roots

Former Kerista member Tim Farrington's article in the Spring 1991 *Node* edition confronts the contradictions of big business and communes head on, illuminating the self-awareness of Abacus-employed Keristans about their conflicting identities. Farrington attempts to debunk the stereotype

[78] Abacus Powerpoint, Kerista Archives, Communal Societies Collection, Hamilton College.
[79] Storefront Classroom, "Mastery of the Macintosh," *Rockhead Newspaper*, (San Francisco, CA), Winter 1989, 7.
[80] Ibid, 18.
[81] The Computer Rabbi [A.K.A., Mitch Slomiak and Nu Luv] "The Computer Rabbi," 8.

of the "morally and aesthetically bankrupt" American businessperson by way of neoconservative Irving Kristol's political theory.[82] Kristol, like some of Farrington's other conservative sources, pushed back on liberal political agendas.[83] Thus, Farrington's choice to revere him suggests a few different things: by 1991, Abacus-employed Keristans' countercultural roots had faded, Farrington saw no discrepancy in praising a conservative thinker that might object to his communal lifestyle, or Farrington's imperative to defend moral business trumps any contradictions in his source material. These divergent implications highlight the complexities that pro-business Keristans had to wrestle with. Farrington also attributes the failures of European communes to their unrealistic withdrawal from the free market, underscoring his endorsement of capitalism. Farrington urges businessmen and women to realize their moral obligations and the "development of a corporate consciousness that includes greater social awareness and ecological concern."[84] His angle indicates that when approached correctly, capitalist endeavors afford communes the chance to make viable social change. Overall, Farrington's article is just one example of how the *Node*'s slant benefited Abacus in numerous ways. The newspaper marketed their products and services and brought in revenue via ad placement, while still appealing to more utopian, countercultural readers. Other marketing material, such as sales presentations, sheds light on how Abacus-employed Keristans positioned themselves in the public eye.

Instead of selling an object, Abacus employees marketed a holistic experience. Buying into the company's vision meant supporting female entrepreneurs, small local businesses, and philanthropic projects. In return, one received a unique, specialized *service* that large retail establishments did not offer. These perks paid off and created loyal customers, with "eighty-five percent of [their] business [coming via] recommendations and referrals."[85] The Abacus sales presentation highlights the breadth and diversity of Abacus clients and claims that "all these corporations are turning to Abacus for help BECAUSE of what [we] deliver."[86] To pinpoint what makes Abacus special, the presentation outlines the

---

[82] Tim Farrington, "Fruits of Labor: Free People in a Common Cause," *Node* (San Francisco, CA), 6, no. 1 (Spring 1991) 2. I am do not have Tim Farrington's Kerista name.
[83] Brian Duignan, "Irving Kristol: American Essayist, Editor, and Publisher," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 2019), https://www.britannica.com/biography/Irving-Kristol.
[84] Farrington, 19.
[85] Sheryl Oring, "Local Firms Score Big on Inc.'s Fastest-Growing List," (Inc Magazine), *San Francisco Business Times* 7 no. 10 (November 6, 1992), 3.
[86] Abacus Powerpoint, Kerista Archives, *Communal Societies Collection*, Hamilton College.

"causes" they support, including "programs fostering grassroots Third World economic development, and helping people overcome the loneliness and stress of social fragmentation."[87] The next slide covers the Bay Area Small Business Alliance launched by Abacus to provide small businesses with reduced rates. The presentation also includes a slide about Abacus's potential philanthropic projects of "establishing a prototype electronic (computerized) classroom in Eastern Jamaica or providing free graphics to Vietnam Veterans organization's "Moral Enhancement Through Education' campaign."[88] Thus, promoting global wellness was inexorably linked to Abacus's business plan, not just an added bonus. This facet of the business likely helped Kerista members justify their perpetuation of consumer culture while carrying out communal values of equality, sharing, and personal responsibility. Upholding the philanthropic vision, however, became increasingly difficult as the demands of running the business grew.

Booming Business and Waning Communal Collectiveness

As Abacus gained momentum, Abacus-employed Keristans took on more and more responsibility, compromising the time they spent in the commune fostering relationships with members not associated with Abacus. Abacus-employed Keristans challenged themselves to step into managerial positions they had little to no experience in. This shared sense of empowerment helped fuel their drive to see what new directions they could take the business in. Initially part of the house cleaning sector, Mighty Mik pioneered the robust training center division and eventually expanded it to three different locations. While Mighty Mik was pouring her energy into getting these centers off the ground, chief financial officer Nu Luv was tackling the accounting and finances of the company. However, because accounting software was new to the market and Abacus was growing so rapidly, Nu Luv was perpetually swamped and behind on financial reports. He also received little help from others, as "everyone was putting their head down just trying to survive in their own area … [so] [no one] had any time to think about the numbers … or was really that grounded in them."[89]

Despite working sixty to eighty-hour weeks, all Abacus-employed Keristans regardless of position had the same below market salary. This consistent feature highlights an attempt to preserve communal equality despite workplace hierarchy. As a self-identified hippie aspiring to

[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Slomiak, interview by author.

be an environmental scientist with no background in business, young Tip Tye became the chief executive officer of Abacus.[90] Through meetings, trainings, and other outlets, Tip Tye and her colleagues were increasingly exposed to the outside world. While she started to develop a new form of confidence and a business-oriented skill set, Tip Tye explains that she did "not have the energy or time for commune activity so much anymore."[91] As corporate demands monopolized more of Abacus-employed Keristans' lives, their communal obligations were subsequently subordinated. This byproduct, in turn, affected intra-office relationships between Keristans holding different positions of power.

An Unsustainable Business Plan and Decaying Social Order

Because the corporate structure of Abacus was not necessarily compatible with the lateral, egalitarian structure of the commune, capitalist imperatives began to negatively impact communal dynamics. As a participatory democracy, Keristans made decisions cooperatively. However, the traits necessary to thrive in the commune did not necessarily translate to the characteristics crucial to survive in the business world. Mighty Mik describes the confusion and difficulty of managing commune friends as their boss and what sort of expectations she had to uphold.[92] Tip Tye explains this tension as a "conflict of interest;" on the one hand, "Kerista had [its] values about equality … and we had to treat everyone equally," on the other, "we are in the real world having to make business decisions and it [just] does not work that way."[93] This disparity underscores how capitalist imperatives forced Abacus-employed Keristans to breach their communal social contract in order to protect business interests.

Nu Luv alludes to the complexity of navigating relationships: "If there were interpersonal or emotional issues [between members of the commune] we would essentially take it outside and talk about it back home … If it was more of a performance issue, we would talk about it in the workplace."[94] This artificial compartmentalization, however, did little to mitigate the discrepancy between friend-to-friend or lover-to-lover communal relationships and boss-to-subordinate workplace relationships. To further complicate dynamics, Nu Luv states that he would be sitting around a table at an executive meeting with the CEO, the Head of Sales, the Head of Training, all of whom were his lovers.[95] Despite the hundred or so outside employees, the Abacus-employed Keristans experienced an unavoidable overlap of work life and personal life. In some ways, this phenomenon strengthened communal bonds, as

[90] Tresky, interview by author. (Shari stepped into this role between ages 26-28.)
[91] Ibid.
[92] Bertolette, interview by author.
[93] Tresky, interview by author.
[94] Slomiak, interview by author.
[95] Ibid.

Abacus-employed Keristans shared a sense of "excitement and camaraderie" according to Mighty Mik.[96] Their foundation of trust and support equipped them with the tools to create a cooperative work environment. In other ways, the conflation of work and personal relationships compromised communal goals.

Communal tensions came to a head when Abacus's business model was no longer sustainable, signifying the collapse of the capitalist-commune equilibrium. Abacus's microcomputer sales margins began to shrink because they could not compete on price with big box stores and online vendors. As CFO Nu Luv explains: "We were on increasingly shaky ground with our bank, we had to service all this debt, and our interest was really high … impair[ing] the business."[97] In an attempt to salvage the business, the executive team laid off employees. According to Nu Luv, not everyone was consulted on the decision to lay off commune members, however, putting even more strain on communal relationships. The ramifications of this economic reality affected not only those who lost their jobs, but also those who felt that their exclusion from the decision process breached communal trust.

The next obstacle was navigating Abacus's two year-long orderly liquidation process so that none of the owners faced legal or financial trouble.[98] The company incorporating Abacus paid Tip Tye a small sum of money for cementing the lengthy transaction. Tip Tye believed she deserved to keep this fee, sparking "anger and resentment" from other Keristans who thought it should be divided up evenly.[99] This disagreement highlights the fragility of economic communalism when members work jobs that require different levels of skill, commitment, and participation in the market. Tip Tye's perspective also emphasized the individual over the collective, indicating a broader departure from original communal goals. Thus, the demands of the business undermined Kerista's mission while intensifying the already complex dynamics between members.

Ultimately, Abacus-employed Keristans' capitalist imperative evolved from growing the business to saving it from complete decline. Towards the tail end of this shift, Kerista dissolved after substantial communal fall out, especially with the leader Jud.[100] As Geo Logical expresses: "Our vision with a business collapses—economic and emotional bankruptcy. The business that ate the vision, we say."[101] This fate reflects the pervasiveness of capitalism, the enduring economic system not even an ambitious, entrepreneurial commune can beat.

---

[96] Bertolette, interview by author.

[97] Slomiak, interview by author.

[98] Tresky, interview by author.

[99] Ibid.

[100] Zinn, interview by author. Abacus was just one of many factors precipitated the dissolution of Kerista. However, I do not address these reasons because they are beyond the scope of this project.

[101] Barnes, *Falling into Flowers*, 67.

Kerista was not the first planned community that wrestled with the competing demands of communalism and private enterprise. In 1841, John Humphrey Noyes established the Oneida community, a utopian project based on his perfectionist religious beliefs.[102] In addition sharing their communal structure, the Oneida community and Kerista both practiced similar forms of group marriage, collective criticism, and economic communalism. The Oneida community capitalized on a market niche, developing a robust fur-trap business in the 1850s. The business's trajectory mirrored that of Kerista, as they initially "communalized" the manufacturing work, increased output of products, innovated new marketing techniques, and then outsourced their labor when the community members could no longer meet the growing demand.[103] As the company began to prosper and dominate the mainstream market, the Oneida community gained its reputation as an industrial powerhouse. However, like Abacus-employed Keristans, Oneida members had to reconcile their communal values with their capitalist obligations as wage-earning businessmen and women. Because "being employers bothered them," they "formulated liberal personnel policies" and kept executive salaries low to avoid a discrepancy between Oneida employees.[104] The community also expounded a message similar to that of Kerista about business's duty to serve a greater good. Eventually Oneida's business outlived the community, taking on new ownership.

The striking parallels between these communal enterprises that date a century apart suggest that communal living inspires creativity and entrepreneurialism in its participants. The supportive, team-oriented environment of communes allow for innovative ideas to come to fruition. However, the unwavering pressure of capitalist success divorces the individual from the collective, jeopardizing communal harmony. For Kerista, economic plenty not only threatened its utopian vision, but the subsequent scarcity, among other factors, fractured the community to an irreparable end. This present case suggests that utopia and capitalism may aspire to co-exist, but ultimately remain incompatible.

---

[102] Cummings, "America's Communal Utopias," 198.

[103] Anthony Wonderley, "The Most Utopian Industry: Making Oneida's Animal Traps, 1852-1925," *New York History* 91, no. 3 (2010): 179. The Oneida Community eventually expanded to manufacture other products like tableware, cutlery, and military equipment.

[104] Wonderley, 185.

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.