



Change Language:

Yellow Deli People

Dorian Hargrove

Not only are roads unneeded, there is no need for cars or personal possessions. All the Twelve Tribes require for the journey is a community that shares - love, friendship, earthly possessions - everything in exchange for peace and salvation.

The Twelve Tribes is an "end times" Christian organization with communities worldwide; one of these is located in Vista. The group believes that humans must return to an ancient communal life, much like that lived by early Christians in first-century Judea, when the New Testament's Book of Acts was written, in order to achieve salvation and to be one with God.

Members of the Twelve Tribes dedicate their lives and their possessions to the group. They live together, work side-by-side, and eat and pray together.

North County resident Gary Zuber, a former member who has considered rejoining the group, spent four months with them in 2009. Zuber attended weekly dinners and helped at a daily farm stand.

"If you join," he says, "you give up all possessions. It's a big step, but everybody there has done the same thing. They are such a community, in the true sense of the word. It's like a real family. Everyone works for the benefit of the whole group."

In trying to recreate biblical life, Twelve Tribes conforms to a patriarchal society, where older males are considered elders capable of making decisions for the group. In addition to turning the clock back on gender roles, the group also rejects multiculturalism. Members abhor today's "I, me, my, mine" culture. They disagree with current Christian doctrine, which puts so much emphasis on personal salvation instead of focusing efforts on improving the entire nation, and on the search for the royal priesthood, as preached in the Bible. Nation-building, according to the Twelve Tribes, starts with them.

There are nearly a dozen chapters of the Twelve Tribes scattered throughout the U. S.; among them are groups in New York, Vermont, Tennessee, Colorado, and Florida.

In San Diego County, members are concentrated in the hills of Vista at a sprawling compound two miles from downtown. The "Community in Vista," as it is called, has a two-story house on a large plot of land. The house is covered in vines and blocked by trees. Blinds cover the windows, preventing any glimpse into the house. Single men and single women stay in yurts on the property. Families live together.

Members keep busy when away from the house. They pass out religious newsletters at farmers' markets or work long hours at one of three businesses: BOJ Construction, Morning Star Ranch, or two popular cafés, both called the Yellow Deli, in downtown Vista and in Valley Center.

The group follows three basic tenets: "leave, enter, become." Before becoming a member, applicants must quit their job and give up all possessions, including houses, cars, and any cash in the bank. After being stripped of earthly possessions, they enter into a sacred covenant, similar to marriage, dedicating their lives to the entire community. Only then can they become a new person. The men adopt a new name and modify their appearance to resemble the Messiah, Yashua, the Hebrew term for the Savior.

Once the three tenets have been effected, members work at one of the businesses, do chores at the house, or

watch and homeschool the children.

All work is Performed in exchange for food, shelter, and clothing, much as was done in the mid-'70s, when the group's leader, Eugene Spriggs - known as Yoneq by his followers - branched off from the Jesus Movement in Chattanooga, Tennessee, to start his own community.

After obtaining a psychology degree from the University of Chattanooga, and after three failed marriages, Spriggs, along with his future wife Martha and 50 other members of the Jesus People, moved into a house in Chattanooga in 1974. Shortly thereafter, they opened their first Yellow Deli. Within a few years, Spriggs and the others operated six cafés in the city.

Two years later, the Internal Revenue Service granted Spriggs and "T.H.E. Community Apostolic Order" 501(d) status. The designation, according to the IRS, is reserved for religious and apostolic organizations or corporations with a common treasury, "even if such associations or corporations engage in business for the common benefit of the members."

In 1979, Spriggs and his followers sold their properties in Chattanooga and moved to Island Pond, Vermont, marking the birth of the Twelve Tribes.

The founders embraced the notion that they were descendants, spiritually speaking, from the original Twelve Tribes of Israel. The original 12 tribes lived as one people, a homogenous culture under God.

Today's tribe is trying to relive those days, believing that it was a time when the land was the body of God, before possession by the Evil One, Satan. They have faith that restoration of a communal way of life will mark the beginning of the end - the beginning stages of the apocalypse - when Jesus, or Yashua, will return to reclaim the land from Satan.

In 40 years, the Twelve Tribes has grown. Today, the man known as Yoneq oversees ten communities, seven farms in the United States (and one in Germany, three in Canada, and one in Australia), and eight Yellow Delis. The growth of the Yellow Deli has caused some to accuse Yoneq of preying on the weak and then reaping what they sow.

In San Diego County, the tribe has been busy. In two years' time, they've opened two delis. They grow produce at Morning Star Ranch, which is sold at farmers' markets throughout Southern California, from Ocean Beach to Redlands, in San Bernardino County.

Turning the clock back 2000 years is no easy task. The tribe is embroiled in a four-year battle with the California Division of Labor Standards, after labor commissioners fined each of the three businesses for failing to pay minimum wage and for not providing workers' compensation. After a judge upheld the fines in March of last year, the group filed an appeal in superior court.

The Twelve Tribes has other problems. Residents in North County have called them a cult and accused them of indoctrinating forlorn youth, keeping them from reading certain material, from owning computers, and from forming individual identities. But others say the organization saves lives and allows members to open their hearts and embrace their faith.

All is on display at the two-story yellow building located at 315 East Broadway in downtown Vista.

The first sounds you hear when entering the Yellow Deli are gentle hymns streaming from wall-mounted speakers. The first items you see are bright yellow walls with large, colorful murals painted on them. One wall features people smiling. Another depicts fertile land with the words "Morning Star Ranch" written in large letters. Vines weave through a lattice above an outside patio. Patrons sit at darkly stained tables. A few feet from the entrance stands a middle-aged man with a beard, a ponytail, and a smile.

The dozen employees working the café all appear to be from a different time and place. The men, young and old, look like 1960s hippies: they have beards and their hair is tied back into ponytails. The women resemble the Amish. They're bare-faced. Their hair is long, tied back in ponytails. They wear homemade long-sleeved blouses with dresses that flow to their ankles. Most wear sandals with socks covering their feet. An exposed forearm is a rare sight.

Workers range from late teens and early- 20s to mid-60s. All move at a relatively slow pace, regardless of the bustling lunch crowd. Workers don't rely on tips to put food on their own tables. They don't rely on paychecks, either. The tribe provides all that for them.

In February 2008, a deputy labor commissioner conducted an inspection of BOJ Construction and found that the sole worker onsite did not receive wages, thus violating the state's minimum-wage requirement. Elders in the tribe refused to pay the fine.

In June 2010, labor commissioners inspected the Yellow Deli in Vista. The commissioner asked to see evidence of workers' compensation. Todd Thiessen, the host that day, said that there was no workers' compensation because there were no employees; everyone was a volunteer. The commissioner issued the Yellow Deli a \$10,000 citation, \$1000 for each of the ten workers present.

Two weeks later, commissioners inspected the Morning Star Ranch in Valley Center. There they found three workers present without evidence of workers' compensation. The tribe was fined an additional \$4000.

In the appeal, the tribe argues that state labor laws do not apply, that 501(d) status designates the group a "tax exempt religious community... allowed to operate business ventures."

The appeal reads: "[The] communities support themselves by operating businesses in various industries. The individual members do not receive any kind of remuneration, wages or the like for their work. No outsiders are employed in any operations in an employee capacity. There are no employees because everyone is a volunteer. Every member working for the Yellow Deli and Morning Star Ranch live, in their way, according [to] the early teachings of the Book of Acts - the way Christ did in the early days, all in a communal fashion."

The court case is currently open and, says a spokesperson for the state labor division, no additional inspections will occur until the appeal is heard.

The tribe has been through similar cases in other states. In 1994, a workers' compensation director in Vermont determined that, because of the 501(d) status, the group is exempt from workers' compensation law.

A letter from director Charles Bond, dated November 30, 1994, reads: "T.H.E. Community Apostolic Order provides for its members the protection called for in the statute and that it is, in the eyes of the State of Vermont and of the Internal Revenue Service, a partnership which does not constitute an employer of the members."

This exemption, however, is moot for some former members. They say that the tribe profits from those afraid to fend for themselves in the outside world.

Cheryl Lewczyk runs the website twelve tribes- ex.com. Lewczyk claims she was kicked out of the Twelve Tribes in Lakeview, New York, for being unable to work the 16-18 hour-days required by the group.

"I couldn't work as hard or as long as all the other slaves," says Lewczyk during a phone interview. "They put me to work in the kitchen right after joining. I did that for two and a half years, despite having herniated discs. My hurt back was never an issue for them, and I hardly ever received any medical treatment."

Asked why she endured the work for so long, despite the pain, Lewczyk says, "We had no other choice but to work, because they teach that the community is protected by God, and if you leave, then bad things will happen."

Elders in San Diego County's group won't admit to such conditions - in fact, they won't admit to anything.

In Vista, elder Wade Skinner, known by tribe members as Mevaser, stands at the host table upstairs, holding a small notebook and a pencil. In his 60s, Mevaser is short and thin. A white, wiry beard covers his gaunt face. A cap covers his long, stringy white hair.

When handed a card and asked to comment for this story, Mevaser gives a deep, penetrating glare, as if seeking signs of malice. He says he will talk to other members before he decides.

Three days later, in an email, Mevaser writes: "We talked about your interest in doing the story on us. As you indicated, you are planning on doing a story regardless of our wishes or participation. As I told you, we have not had favorable press from the San Diego Reader, so there is a little bit of a bad taste there for us. Regardless, we have never sought publicity, but always welcomed outsiders who are sincerely interested in our faith to get to know us. We do not think we have anything to add to what we have already said in the past to reporters - and have often been quoted out of context. So we do not see any value in inviting more into our homes. So we hope you can be led by your conscience and your heart to write a balanced piece, but we will not be participating with interviews or opening our homes and gatherings for this purpose at this time."

When I asked to view the Internal Revenue Service form 1065, which should be available for public inspection, Mevaser responded via email. "This is not something we have on file here in California. We file our taxes with all of the other communities in the United States as one legal entity." He then provided an address for a post office box in Hiddenite, North Carolina, and gave the name of the treasurer, Caleb Long.

Labor issues aren't the only problem for the Twelve Tribes in San Diego County. Some North County residents are offended by the group's radical newsletters and by racism expressed on the twelvetribe.com website.

Many refer to the group as a cult.

The associated stigma is evident at the Yellow Deli in Valley Center on a mid-August day. An older man in baggy jeans and a worn T-shirt, with a salt and- pepper beard and ponytail, brings food to an outside table, where three women and a young boy sit.

After the man leaves, the boy, prompted by his mother, bows his head and says grace. Moments later, two cyclists - one an older man in a bright fluorescent- yellow jersey, the other a middle aged woman in matching gear - pedal past the deli.

"You know that place is run by a cult," shouts the man to his fellow cyclist.

She murmurs something inaudible. The man repeats himself.

"That yellow café is run by a cult." The group is also accused of racist attitudes toward other cultures.

An essay on twelvetribe.com states: "Let's Face it. It is just not reasonable to expect people to live contentedly alongside of others who are culturally and racially different. This is unnatural, and sometimes forces people to go against what they instinctively know in their conscience."

"Trent," a 34-yearold who wishes to remain anonymous, urges people to refrain from dining at the Yellow Deli and from buying other products from the Twelve Tribes.

"It bothers me to see these companies, this deli and ranch, make so much money off of people who are clueless about their beliefs," Trent said during a meeting at a local coffee shop.

"They take money from people from all cultures, but they don't believe cultures should mix. It's total hypocrisy, false advertisement."

Trent accuses the group of preying on young people struggling with drugs or depression. He slides two newsletters across the table.

"Forever 27" is one title. On the cover are pictures of dead rock stars Kurt Cobain, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, and Jimi Hendrix. The stories attempt to connect heavy-metal music to a selfish way of life, and, as was the case with the Nirvana front man, it to suicide.

The second newsletter, aimed at hopeless youth, has a photo of the Clash's breakout album London Calling on the bottom of the front page. At the top is a photo of a top-hated punk, the emblem for the popular skapunk band Operation Ivy.

One of the articles says: "It's either that we get our friends together and smoke ourselves into a little stupor and cynically joke about anything containing even a notion of sincerity. Or we buy into the system and sit in misery through four or five years of college, hoping one day at the end of it, that somehow we'll be happy, and if not happy, at least secure." The article claims that salvation can only be reached when communal life is restored.

Despite being labeled a cult and called racists, some former members have only positive things to say about the tribe.

"A lot of people want to call them a cult. Well, I think they are, but they are a good cult," says former member Gary Zuber. "I've only had positive experiences with them and do not feel like they are doing anything but good for one another...nobody gets paid but everyone's needs are met."

Neither did Zuber see any racism during his time with the group. "They try to live biblically. I took a homeless guy, a black guy, off the street, and took him there, and he is still a member of the community. I just saw him the other day."

Rebecca Moore, PhD, professor of religious studies at San Diego State University, also believes the tribe has been treated unfairly. She says they are not much different than most fundamental religious groups.

"The Twelve Tribes are an apocalyptic Christian group. Most, if not all, of their beliefs are well within traditional Christian doctrine. They expect Jesus to return imminently. The difference between them and other evangelical Christians is that they take their belief to the next level. 'Live tomorrow's life today' is the way they approach life. They are living the life that they believe will have people ready when Jesus returns, so that they can be part of the anointed, or chosen, people. They take Their interpretation of the New Testament to a different level. They have to live it out, quite literally.

"This is America, and we have the principle of religious freedom. There are many fundamentalist Christians, or

Muslims, or Mormons that share belief in a patriarchal society. Unfortunately, at least in my personal opinion, that is not unusual. We can say, "This is not my cup of tea, but people can and will believe what they want."

"I respect the people in the Twelve Tribes because they made a commitment to their Lord and Savior that requires them to give up what the rest of the world thinks valuable. That's not a choice I would make. On the other hand, when you look at parts of the Bible, and Jesus says, "Give all you can to help the poor," or "Give up everything to follow me". There are all sorts of passages that people don't want to take literally. I feel that the members of the Twelve Tribes have done just that, and they see it as a good choice." "

.Dorian Hargr

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