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WOMEN WHO ARE
FULFILLING THEIR
DREAM TO BE MORE
THAN HOUSEWIVES

DISPLAY SHELVES

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THE RUSSIAN KOLKHOZ FOUNDED BY AMERICANS

By Alexander Tropkin
Photographs by Mikhail Kukhtarev

**They came to Soviet Russia from the United States
in the early twenties to build a farm commune.
This article is about their children and grandchildren.**

TO REACH TAMBOV REGION, you have to travel across half the European part of Russia. Its endless fields and birch and alder groves are wide open to the warm southern winds. Shallow streams snake through these primordial, fertile, black-soil lands, which have provided the country with grain from time immemorial.

Why do letters come so frequently from the United States to the Lenin Collective Farm in Tambov Region? Why the English John among the many typical Russian names: the Ivans, Nikolais and Vasilis? And why in family albums at this collective farm are there faded post cards with views of New York City?

How It Happened

The time was the beginning of the twenties, the early years after the Socialist Revolution in Russia. It was a difficult and contradictory period: the final battles of a devastating Civil War, famine and diseases that

killed thousands, lifeless factories and mills, fields trampled. But in spite of all this, the spirit of the peoples of Russia was not broken. They held to their belief in the ideals of the Revolution, in a new life.

Among the many Russian relief and cooperative societies that mushroomed in the United States and Canada at the time was the Society for Technical Aid to Soviet Russia. It was a very active organization with branches in dozens of North American cities and a membership of 10,000 by 1921.

The well-wishing and enterprising spirit of these Americans is illustrated by this letter, sent in 1921 by the committee of the society's first agricultural commune to the Supreme Economic Council of Soviet Russia:

Dear Comrades,

On behalf of its representatives, the first New York City Agricultural Commune of Technical Aid to Soviet Russia conveys greetings to the Russian working people.

We, grain growers with practical experience in American-style



farming, have organized a commune along communist lines for work in Soviet Russia.

Our gradually growing membership today numbers 50 people, with funds totaling 10,000 dollars for the common purchase of machinery. We have experts in growing vegetables, in running poultry farms and piggeries, and in raising potato and cereal crops. We also have our own carpenters, metal craftsmen, mechanics and blacksmiths.

We want to resettle in Russia and take up farming there as soon as possible. We, therefore, ask you for instructions as to where to buy machines and seeds—here or in Europe?

We shall await a cabled reply from you.

With comradely greetings,
The Committee

Pravda carried the following announcement in November 1920:

Two thousand workers have arrived in Moscow from America, another 1,000 are en route, while at least 10,000 more are ready to leave for Soviet Russia.

Lenin, head of the world's first socialist state, hailed the society's initiative, pointing out in a reply to its leaders that Soviet Russia was in great need of technical aid from the United States and Canada. He expressed his respect and admiration for the revolutionary drive and enthusiasm of the American agricultural commune, but he viewed matters soberly and warned the overseas friends of the food shortage and other hardships they would have to endure. He suggested that a group of people be sent first to inspect the place for the commune settlement.

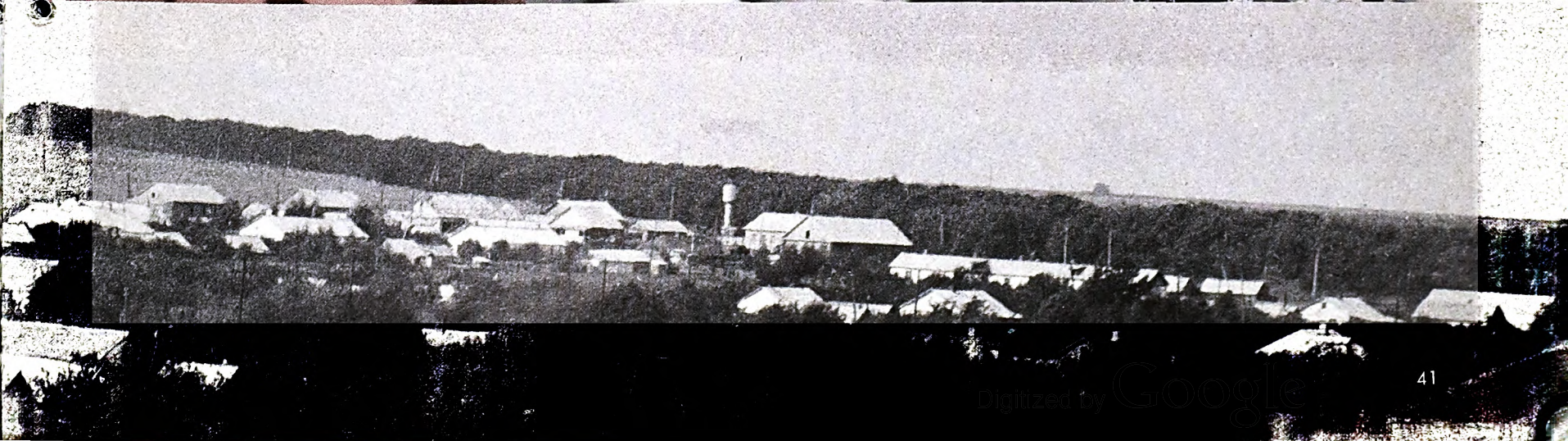
One of them was Karp Bogdanov, an American of Russian descent, who organized the commune in Tambov Region and became its first chairman.

The Beginning

It is hard today to say why the 57 volunteers, women and children included, who came with Bogdanov from far-off America, settled down



Left: This photo of Karp Bogdanov, first manager of the American commune, was taken in the thirties. Right: Maria Pelipenko, 86 and a pensioner, is one of the few founders of the American commune who are still alive. Her eight children work in various parts of the Soviet Union. Far left: The present farm chairman, Anatoli Povolyayev. Below: The commune today.



in that particular spot in Kirsanov Uyezd (district), Tambov Guberniya (province). On arrival they saw what had been an estate in ruins, fields more like wild steppe, and peasant huts—those still intact—standing isolated on this virgin land.

Regrettably, hardly any evidence remains of the commune's initial steps. Only one photograph of that time can be seen at the local museum depicting the collective farm's past and present. It shows a group of commune members: the women in long dresses, the children with lace collars, men in frock coats and derbies, smiles on all faces, as if there had been no long hours of backbreaking work when the old estate buildings were somehow made habitable and the barnyard and carpentry and machine shops were built. The commune then had only 14 horses and 46 cows.

However, in the first year of existence of Ira (the Americans named their commune after the local stream), a nursery and kindergarten were opened, and in the fall the older children were sitting at homemade school desks. Though not big, the first harvest was an occasion for rejoicing. Lenin wrote to the Society for Technical Aid to Soviet Russia:

In spite of the enormous difficulties, and particularly in view of the devastation caused by the Civil War, you have achieved successes that must be regarded as outstanding. Once again, on behalf of our Republic, I express to you our profound gratitude and ask you to bear in mind that the work you are doing to cultivate land with the aid of tractors is particularly timely and important for us.

Acting on Lenin's proposal, the All-Russia Central Executive Committee (government) passed a resolution in November 1922 to recognize a number of communes as models. Among them was the first Ira Agricultural Commune of Tambov Guberniya.

It was not long before the community where the Americans lived had a totally different look. The parties at the Ira canteen were highlighted by revolutionary songs and the fox trot and other dances of the time.

Tents gave way to two-story cottages. Streets and a park were laid

out and lined with sculptures by Giovanni Fanfaroni, a visionary and a jovial fellow; the commune's leading mason and architect. Incidentally, his stucco moldings in the canteen are still admired.

A group of fellow countrymen with doubts about the success of the Soviet form of government once came to Ira. Sherwood Eddy, the leader of these visiting U.S. writers and public figures, later commented that the commune was a pioneer and a striking example of what would happen "in Russia in the next decade." The Soviet Union, he added, "is the greatest experiment in the world in collectivized agriculture."

When George Bernard Shaw, the British playwright, visited the commune in 1931, he thought Russia was an amazing country. "I feel as though I am at least 20 years younger now!" he exclaimed at the end of the visit.

Who were these people who set off to seek happiness thousands of miles away?

Among the members of the Ira commune were people of a dozen nationalities—Russians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Jews, Czechs, Poles, Italians, Latvians, Estonians, Germans and Croatians. All these former miners, factory workers, farmers and farm hands donated their small savings to help Russia and were undeterred by hardships on the way and on their arrival.

The names of the commune founders are revered at the collective farm. Legends have collected around them for their indomitable courage.

Wind of Change

I met two veterans of the former commune when I first visited the Tambov Collective Farm a year ago. Evo Fanfaroni, 65, told me about himself, about his father, Giovanni the mason, and the commune. Evo's once dark hair was gray, but his brown eyes were as bright as ever.

"Those years in the commune were the happiest in my life," he smiled. "I had two older brothers, a younger one and a sister. My mother had died when I was four years old. Dad hadn't been able to take care of



all five of us, so he had placed three, including me, in a children's home, paying 30 dollars a month for each one.

"The whole family left for Soviet Russia. Thanks to the commune's progress, my father was able to take care of us and also give us a good education. I finished school. My sister graduated from Moscow University. An older brother graduated from the rural school, went to work as a tractor driver and later switched to driving a truck. My younger brother graduated from the Voronezh Agricultural College."

Life has been good to the Fanfaronis. Evo's son, for example, graduated from a conservatory and is a professional musician. As for Evo himself, he was always interested in pulling engines apart and putting them together again, in repairing tractors and combines. Half his life was spent in the machine shop, and he continued to show up there time and again after retiring on pension.

That was a year ago. When I visited the collective farm recently, I heard the sad news that Evo had been buried in the village cemetery next to his father. Another founding member of the commune who had passed away was Kornei Zadirako.

The local schoolteacher, Yevgenia Bokanova, is not from a commune family. She was young and shy when she came to teach in Ira in the thirties. The one-story wooden seven-grade schoolhouse where Yevgenia gave her first lesson is gone. It has been replaced by a brick building three stories high, with physics, chemistry, history and geography classrooms, a spacious gym and an equally spacious auditorium. The collective farmers' children now get a complete secondary (10-year) education plus training in cultivating field crops or operating machines.

The reason I wanted to meet and talk with Yevgenia Bokanova was that she had educated several generations of those children whose grandfathers had founded, and whose fathers had developed, the American commune. She remembers all her pupils and knows what happened to them after they finished school.

The graduating classes presented her with big group pictures of them-

selves, seated and standing fanwise. Some of the names were familiar from the commune history.

For instance, I saw the two daughters of John Lapsky, one of the surviving veterans of the original Ira. He, his wife Stella and his father Ivan had left Brooklyn for Russia many years ago. Ivan's granddaughter Olga is a chemical engineer in the Volga city of Kuibyshev. The other granddaughter, Nadezhda, has just graduated from the teachers college in Tambov and will start teaching mathematics.

The eight sons and daughters of another American commune veteran, 86-year-old Maria Pelipenko, left for other cities. They have families of their own. Vladimir is a mining engineer, Valentin a metallurgical engineer, Vera a lawyer, Olga a collective farm economist, Anna a bookkeeper, Alexander a scientist with a candidate's degree in economics, Vitali a metal craftsman, and Lev an instrument maker.

I could understand why Bokanova was ready to talk endlessly about each of her pupils. Among her "favorites," she singled out Alexander Kurganov, who graduated from school many years ago and has been working at the collective farm ever since.

Kurganov, Grandson of Kurganov

"He was as prickly as a hedgehog. He was forever plying me with questions," Bokanova recalled Sasha Kurganov with a smile.

His eyes looked "prickly" to me now too, as though hinting that he was too busy to let anyone interview him. Besides, the phone kept ringing all the time, with the people at the other end of the line wanting to speak to Kurganov—nobody else would do. He is the chief agronomist of the Lenin Collective Farm. That is why he is mostly seen in the dispatcher's office, where a selector system puts him in instant touch with the field teams, the tractor maintenance shops and the livestock complex.

Among the very few things Kurganov remembered about his grandfather Konstantin Kurganov, also a member of the American commune,

John and Stella Lapsky and their granddaughter Alla. They lived in Brooklyn, New York, as children. Then the family moved to Russia and the commune. Left: This photo was taken in New York in 1919. Three years later these people left for Russia to build a farm commune. Below: The farm now mostly raises cattle for milk and meat.



was his charcoal beard, constantly sprinkled with flour. He was the Ira miller, and the flour mill always reflected harvest results. That was why Kurganov's grandfather was expected to perform miracles, as though it depended on him whether the year would be a plentiful one or a hungry one. And apparently the miller never let his fellow villagers down. Even in poor harvest years, the commune made a profit from the sale of its grain.

Kurganov remembers his father endlessly moving from one city to another, from north to south and from east to west, and vice versa, wherever duties of a married professional military man called him. But after retiring, he spent the remainder of his life in his native Tambov. He built himself a log house and planted an apple orchard.

As a schoolboy, Kurganov followed behind the harvester picking up stray ears of grain and digging up sugar beet. It is from these places and from his father's orchard that the invisible path to his future led. Though he tried different trades and moved from city to city, like his father, Kurganov finally decided that working the land was the job for him, and he returned to Tambov Region. He studied at a fruit and vegetable cultivation institute in Michurinsk and started as an agronomist at the Lenin Collective Farm. He now commands the same respect his grandfather did in the days of the commune. He is in charge of more than 6,000 hectares of land (the commune's field looks like a vegetable patch by comparison), 60 tractors (only five in Ira's time), dozens of other farm machines, plus a 200-hectare orchard, a cannery, an apiary and many other things.

At a show presented in the evening by the local amateur talent company at the collective farm club, I was pleased to see chief agronomist Kurganov perform as one of the chorus soloists.

Bach and Haydn

I don't know that I deserved it, but a special show was put on for me

as a SOVIET LIFE correspondent by the children of the Lenin Collective Farm. They performed a Bach prelude, a Haydn dance tune, a waltz by Mirelli, and a Byelorussian folk dance.

The musicians fumbled a note here or there, but that was excusable: The oldest on the stage was Natasha Koch, the 12-year-old great-granddaughter of an Ira founder. Excusable to everyone but Galina Nerokina, the principal as well as a teacher of the local music school.

General subjects are taught in the regular grade school. What Nerokina's establishment offers is a seven-year program of special training in music. The first group graduated last year, and five members passed the entrance exams to a higher music school with flying colors. When they finish, they will be music teachers, chorus leaders and organizers of amateur talent companies.

I talked to Nerokina. She made a point of this interesting change in present-day collective-farm life. Not so long ago a piano in someone's home was considered an unnecessary luxury, while the two at the local club were thought to be more than enough. The psychological barrier was broken down after some of the local music school students won prizes in district and regional competitions for pianists.

There was a time when young people in the area crowded the open-air dance pavilion at the collective farm's central grounds to stamp and shuffle their feet to march tunes, fox trots and waltzes played by the commune's popular brass band, whereas today the walls of the collective farm club shake under the impact of superamplified rhythms plucked by electric guitars and pounded out by the drums of the Griffins rock group.

Naive plays by local talent on the commune's stage have long been replaced by Russian and world classics—Alexander Ostrovsky, Anton Chekhov, George Bernard Shaw. The collective farm's theater company, led by Nina Sovkova, is presently rehearsing *The House of Bernarda Alba* by the Spanish poet and dramatist Federico García Lorca, and the next venture will probably be an adaptation of a Hemingway novel.



The Chairman

The most conspicuous figure at the Lenin Collective Farm (that is what its members decided to rename the Ira commune) is Anatoli Povolyayev, its chairman. All the threads of economic, administrative and social management stretch to him.

I would rank Povolyayev among the younger generation of inheritors of the American commune, inheritors in the broad sense of the word, since Anatoli's forebears were not Americans. He is 38 but has been the chairman for nine years. He had been the farm's chief agronomist and, before that, a student at the Timiryazev Agricultural College in Moscow, a serviceman and a truck driver. Povolyayev was born in Tula Region, Central Russia, but after graduating from college, he moved to the Lenin Collective Farm, where his fiancée lived and worked.

"I have never stopped admiring the founders of the commune," said Anatoli. "It's really amazing how accurate they were in defining the long-term prospects for our farm's most profitable sectors. In fact, we're carrying on with what they started. Another astonishing point was how much they got done using technical equipment far inferior to what we have today. I can imagine how the commune's first chairman, Karp Bogdanov, would rejoice over the changes if he were alive today.

"You remember, of course, that the nursery, kindergarten and canteen were opened in the commune's time. The idea behind this was simple but wise, to save time for workers and especially for the women, who were able to increase their knowledge and raise their cultural standards.

"They saw the fulfillment of their ideal in this blend of material and spiritual values. But while the children's and the catering facilities have long since become commonplace, the housewives were skeptical about the public service center set up not too long ago. But I found out myself the other day that this, too, was changing. The center is handling far more orders for dresses, suits and coats to be made, cleaned and mended, which means more free time for community residents.

"I suppose our commune founders didn't believe that women would be able to drive tractors. Fourteen of our women are doing it today, and I'm satisfied with them. They're just as good drivers as the men.

"We need trained people of all kinds—electricians, mechanics, teachers, cultural workers. We vote with both hands for our young people to go to the cities and study there. Last year, for instance, we gave stipends to 15 boys and girls and sent them off to study in technical schools and higher educational institutions. If they pass their exams, they'll get an extra stipend of 50 or 60 rubles from the collective farm. These young people feel this interest and concern and come back to jobs here when they graduate. There are incentives we offer: the prospect of doing work their hearts are set on, good living accommodations with modern conveniences, settling down to a married life, and enjoying sports, films, shows, concerts, dancing and other forms of recreation and entertainment after work. We have all of this just like the cities.

"We stake our future on these specialists and put them in charge of teams, livestock and dairy sections and other collective farm divisions.

"On the farm's prospects in general, we see them clearly for at least the next 10 to 15 years. Like every other farm, we have five-year plans for production and social development in which everything is worked out in concrete detail.

"My most cherished dream is to see all our homes submerged in a sea of roses, tulips and peonies. Yes, I love flowers. I can visualize pleasant cottages, fluorescent lighting and flower beds bordering paved lanes. I don't want to give you the wrong impression; we already have a lot of greenery and the air is wonderful, but flowers indicate a different degree of culture, a different mode of life, so to speak.

"By all this, I mean that city life will offer nothing that we won't be able to provide in 10 years' time. On the other hand, we'll enjoy the everlasting advantages of nature, pure air and all those other things that urbanites have always envied."

Agronomist Alexander Kurganov is the grandson of a founder. Right: Raisa Fedotova, one of the 14 women on the tractor team. Left: A 1930 photo. A commune member teaching peasants to read and write. Far left: A young commune descendant. Bottom: A herd of pedigreed trotters.

