

By Frederick S. Buchanan

"Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest awhile."

Mark 6:31¹

From earliest times "desert places" have played a significant role in religious development, Amos and Jesus having used the isolation of the desert to prepare themselves for their life's work. Today in Utah's western region a group of devout believers have founded a community, Eskdale, which they view as a sanctuary from the world and as a source of inner spiritual strength. Twenty years ago, the area 90 miles west of Delta, Utah, was noted for little more than alkali soil, greasewood, rattlesnakes and horny toads, but since 1955 the determined efforts of the Order of Aaron have created a settlement of some 100 people clustered around a semi-circular community consisting of a communal dining hall, an auditorium, boarding school, a Montessori preschool, bakery, laundry and individual family homes. In other sections of the 4400 acres of desert land are located a poultry farm, fruit orchards and a dairy herd. Eventually, the Order hopes to establish a number of self-supporting specialized communes within the area, most of which was deeded to the Order of Aaron under terms of

FREDERICK S. BUCHANAN is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Utah where he teaches the history of education. He was born and educated in Scotland and has done extensive research on British emigration to Utah (including a chapter in *Peoples of Utah*) as well as on Amish and Mormon education. He is married to Rama Richards and is the father of five sons.

the Federal Desert Entry Act. Currently, Eskdale is the center of the Order's communal activities established under the charismatic leadership of the group's founder Maurice L. Glendenning. He laid claim to a revelation, Section 206 of *The Book of Elias* — a part of which is entitled "How the Levites Should Live." According to this revelation Glendenning was told that "all Levites shall live for one and one for all, that there shall be none among you who shall suffer."² As a consequence, Glendenning attempted to promote a cooperative community at nearby Partoun in 1949 and then at Eskdale in 1955. Viewed as a means of developing greater inner strength in members of the Order through confronting the inherent difficulties in a desert commune, the Eskdale settlement is also regarded as a place of refuge from the catastrophe which the Levites believe will precede Christ's second coming — an event they regard as imminent. However, in spite of the high priority which the Order places on the maintenance of Eskdale not all members of the Order live there. Those who do are known as "United Order Members" and are distinguished from "Consecrated Members" and "Tithing Members" who live in the "world" but contribute in large measure to Eskdale's financial needs.

For anyone familiar with Mormon history the terms the Levites use to describe the kinds of memberships available in the Order of Aaron would suggest a relationship between the Order and Mormonism. Further evidence pointing in this direction is the fact that the first revelation contained in the *Book of Elias* is "Section 137" apparently a continuation of the Mormon Doctrine

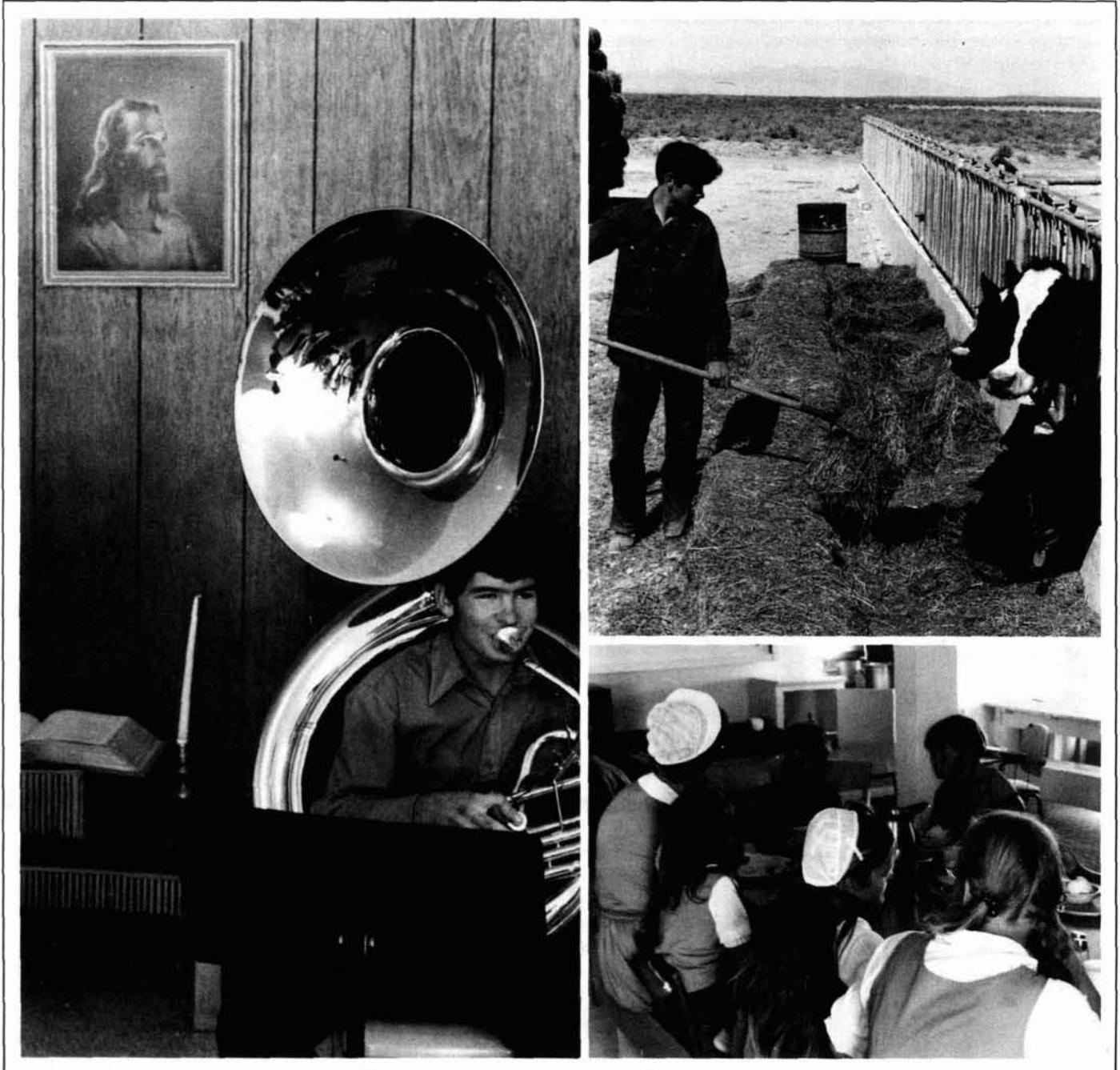
A REFUGE IN THE DESERT ESKDALE UTAH



and Covenants which concludes with Section 136. Nor can one overlook the fact that Glendenning and the present leader of the order, Dr. Robert Conrad, were at one time members of the Mormon Church as were many original members of the group. Hans Baer's thesis that they represent a "revitalization" movement emerging as a result of various social, structural and ideological tensions within the Mormon Church appears to this writer to be an adequate explanation of their origin.³ They have, however, gone beyond their immediate historic origins and have put together a life style derived from a number of diverse traditions and values. Close examination of their ideas and practices reveals Mormon influences, but they also seem to have modeled themselves after the Mennonites in dress, and the Hutterites in community

organization. They appear to combine Christian, Mormon and Jewish traditions with what might be termed a streak of "Scottish Romanticism." This eclecticism is nowhere better exemplified than in the use of their altar of a Jewish *menorah* candlestick side by side with a Christian cross derived from the Glendenning family's Scottish coat-of-arms. The names of two Levite communities, Partoun and Eskdale, are derived from the Scottish borders — the ancestral home of Glendenning's forefathers. He believed that some of the tribe of Levi settled in Scotland and that the Glendenning's are descended from this Scottish branch of the house of Israel.

In spite of evidence which shows that the Order of Aaron owes its origins to a particular historical and cul-



Photos by the author

Eskdale community members.

tural milieu, the Levites view their eclecticism as representing the reestablishment of an ancient way of life rather than being a consequence of any contact they may have had with Jewish, Mormon or Mennonite traditions. In asserting this they but follow a familiar practice — reformers are often impelled to claim that their roots are in original sources rather than accept themselves as a derivative of that which they seek to change.

Like the Old Order Amish and the Old Order Mennonites they have chosen to stress their difference from the world by adopting a standard mode of dress (for women at least). A plain blue dress and a white "prayer cap" on which is embroidered the word "Levi" make the women of the Order of Aaron easily recognizable. The men, although they do not seem to have a set uniform, often wear blue shirts on which is embroidered the word "Levi" or, if they are designated to officiate as priests, "Aaron." Like the Amish, there is a general stress on plainness, lack of ostentation and the use of dress as a symbol and witness of their belief in and acceptance of Christ.

Unlike the Amish, however, the Levites, until very recently, have placed a positive emphasis upon education at all levels. Eskdale is the education center of the order and a Montessori pre-school, an elementary school, and junior high school (until recently supported by Millard County School District which hired the state-certified Levite teachers) and a four-year high school attest to the official motto of the Order of Aaron, "Education Unlimited." Education for the residents of Eskdale is, however, not confined to the traditional academic curriculum. They also emphasize vocational education and music. The latter emphasis they believe is part of their spiritual heritage — the Levites of ancient Israel were charged with making music to the Lord (See Chron. 5:12-13) and in Eskdale today every home has a piano and every student plays at least two instruments. This common stress on music is viewed by some influential members of the commune as a major unifying force — the social "glue" which holds the group together and gives them the necessary strength to "make the desert blossom as the rose."⁴

This desert commune with its lawns and flower gardens is partly sheltered from prevailing winds and the sun by a half circle of Russian Olive and stands of Siberian Elm and Poplar trees within which are arranged a dozen individual family frame homes. The simple wooden cabins of the original settlement have been remodeled to accommodate the new families who join the commune. While the new homes have a similar external appearance, inside they exhibit a marked difference in quality and extent of furnishings. When asked about this seeming incongruity in a "commune" where equality is stressed, one Levite said that it was difficult to determine how much was too much. No single standard could be applied to homes because what one person views as beautiful and pleasing another may see as overdone and ostentatious. Apparently some limit is placed on the degree to which all things *must* be held in common — a policy which may serve as a safety valve and allow for some individual expression, just as the "fancy" quilts and colored china which grace the Amish home may compensate for deprivation in other areas.

One common feature of the homes, however, is the absence of a kitchen since all meals are eaten in the communal dining hall. These common meals have taken on an important symbolic tone for the residents of Eskdale. After scripture reading, a hymn and prayer, meals in the communal dining hall are eaten in virtual silence, broken only by the clatter of silverware and dishes and an occasional "please pass." The silence is meant to promote meditation on Christ and his life. A place is also set for Christ, "the unseen guest," at each meal, symbolizing the Levite belief that the Second Coming is imminent and that the community must be prepared to welcome him at all times. Work in the dining room, kitchen, bakery, laundry and on a variety of community projects is shared on a rotated basis with some attempt made to make the practical work of the commune an aspect of formal education.

By means of sharing in work with which one may not, by training or inclination, be familiar the Levites of Eskdale hope to "purify" themselves. In such an environment there will be an exchange between the skilled and unskilled, the educated and uneducated, the strong and the weak, with a resulting "rubbing off of rough spots" and a refining of character.

In their desert retreat the Levites are attempting to create a holy community as an alternative to the secularized industrial society. The early Mormon experiments with the United Order and the attempts of the Shakers, Zoarties, the Oneidans and a host of communal enterprises attest to an incessant human drive to change the social order and to make "Utopia" a reality. In spite of this drive, however, the only group out of hundreds to maintain their original communal emphasis are the Hutterites. Their viability and endurance as a social system is explained in part by their literal commitment to supernatural authority as the basis of leadership, a strict separation and isolation from the "secular" world, severe limitations on addition of new members and a proven willingness to sacrifice all (including life) for their faith.⁵ While the Order of Aaron shares the Hutterite emphasis upon supernatural leadership and attempts to be separate from the world, they clearly do not constitute the tightly knit social unit which characterizes the Hutterite commune. Of course, the Hutterites have had centuries to perfect their institutions and Eskdale has only existed for less than one quarter of a century. Still, one might well ask the question "Will Eskdale survive (as the Hutterite *bruderhof* has), or will it like the Order of Enoch, the Amana colonies, and other attempts to combat the secular society, be compromised and accommodated to the social and economic realities of 20th Century American?" The imminent demise of such groups as the Amish has been so regularly (and mistakenly) predicted over the past fifty years that it would be obviously foolhardy to make definitive prognostications regarding the future of the Levites at Eskdale. However, when I first visited Eskdale I was struck by the emphasis being placed on higher education and wondered then if this emphasis would not in the long term, run counter to the persistence of Eskdale as a religious community separated from the world.

In terms of Troeltsch's typology⁶ and the differences he identifies as characteristic of the "sect" and the

"church" the Levites share those characteristics of the "sect-type" in their stress upon smallness, inward perfection, personal fellowship, eschatological interests, equality and cooperation (communism). The "church-type" in contrast accepts the secular order, seeks to convert the masses, cooperates with the state and is an integral part of the secular society and economic order. In conversations with Levites who had been Mormons these "church-type" characteristics are precisely what they had objected to in the Mormon Church. The Mormons, they claimed, had compromised their principles. According to Troeltsch such compromise is the essence of the "church's" relationship to the world, while hostility, or at least indifference, is a necessary component of the sect's relationship. It would appear that on the basis of the historical record those groups which have persisted in their original form did so because of their ability to keep change at a very low level and minimize the need for accommodation. The history of groups like the Mormons and Mennonites indicates that as compromise becomes part of the group's survival techniques, they lose their original distinctiveness and gradually, but surely, become church-type religions with all that this implies for loss of social separation and a truly unique life-style.

It is precisely this possibility which confronts the Levites and their experiment at Eskdale. Until recently they have encouraged education at all levels — an attitude which separates them from the typical "sects." Perhaps they are attempting to be a "sect" and a "church", to be both out of the world and in the world. The extent to which they do *not* restrict contact with secular learning and thereby restrict the intrusion of alien ideas may be the extent to which Eskdale, as a religious community, will disintegrate. This possibility may be counteracted, however, by a recent trend, reported by Hans Baer, toward their becoming more Protestant Fundamentalist in their theological orientation and stressing technical and vocational education over academic higher education. But even this move toward a fundamentalist orientation, while ostensibly a means of conserving the Levite way of life, may have the opposite effect and produce its own set of difficulties by promoting tension between the older "pioneer" generation of Levites and the younger generation. The latter may very well begin to question Glendenning's view as not in conformity with a fundamentalist Christian interpretation of the New Testament. The persistence of Eskdale is then partly dependent upon the ability of its leaders to mediate successfully between the demands of higher education, the Old Testament type traditions regarding the Levitical calling, and Glendenning's revelations, and the demands of a Protestant type revivalism.

Notwithstanding the unifying effects of music and the serious attempts to bridge the gap between the sophisticated technological society and the simple rural society, Eskdale commune faces other threats to its persistence. Unlike the lush and fertile physical environment which attracted the Zoarites and Harmonists to the Middle West, Eskdale is a most inhospitable place for an economic experiment. The commune as an economic enterprise is not presently self-sustaining and depends for

support on those Levites who, ironically, are financially successful in the world. As the many failures of communal schemes indicate, they depend for success on more than good will and high ideals. Attempts to produce fruit at Eskdale have been continually thwarted by uncooperative weather patterns; rising feed costs have led to a curtailment of the poultry farm and the withdrawal of state funds for the payment of elementary and junior high school teachers has reduced the commune's income substantially.

Perhaps, however, material success in the venture is of secondary importance to the emphasis upon spiritual growth and character development. As one student expressed it: living in Eskdale forces one to confront oneself and others — there is no escape and personality problems must be solved there and then for the good of the commune. Whether indeed such an environment produces "superior" character is, of course, debatable and must be viewed as a statement of faith, but evidently many of the Levites believe enough to commit their lives and resources to its fulfillment. All told, it is a rather audacious enterprise — this attempt to challenge what is conceived by most people in the United States as the good life — a life of ease, affluence and convenience. The Levites like the Amish and the Hutterites remind us rather forcefully and uncomfortably that religion couched only in theological abstractions is a dead letter. At the same time the history of attempts to stem the tide of "progress" lends itself to a sense of futility that it can't be done. However, in attempting to change the face of this desert land the Levites of Eskdale are demonstrating a firm conviction that their efforts will not be futile in spite of history. Perhaps, of course, the secular society is too prone to judge success in such a venture using criteria which do not really apply. If the main purpose of the Eskdale commune is viewed as the development of individuals with a deepened awareness of their place in the scheme of things and the nurturing of spiritual values, then questions of economic and social efficiency may be out of place. The immediate process of wresting a living from their desert refuge may in the long run be more important to individual Levites than the ultimate success or failure of the communal experiment. In this audacious *attempt* lies the meaning of Eskdale for Levites, Mormons and others who want to believe that the best response to the fragmented and impersonal life of the big society is the small, planned, integrated community.

Footnotes

¹This quotation was used on the cover of the Eskdale High School's student-produced yearbook in 1973.

²*The Book of Elias or the Record of John*. Published by the Aaronic Order, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1944, p. 84.

³Hans Baer, "The Levites of Utah: The Development of and Conversion to a Small Millenarian Sect." Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of Utah, 1976.

⁴For a more detailed treatment of the Eskdale schools see Frederick S. Buchanan and Larry W. Stott, "The Eskdale Commune: Desert Alternative to Secular Schools," *Intellect* (Jan. 1974), 226-230.

⁵John A. Hostetler and Gertrude E. Huntington, *The Hutterites in North America*. (New York, 1967), pp. 110-111.

⁶Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, translated by Olive Wyon (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), Vol. I, pp. 328-343.