Trying Home

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The Rise and Fall of an Anarchist Utopia on Puget Sound

Justin Wadland

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"Adding salt to the sea, the *Collburnary*, which had that as its cargo, sank off Cameret, Finistère. The crew was rescued."

—Félix Fénéon, *Novels in Three Lines*

"I fully agree that babbling liberally and eloquently is extremely pleasant, while acting is a bit rough."

—Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Demons*

"Home was like any other place, except for its memories."

—Murray Morgan, *The Last Wilderness*

Introduction

In the old ledger book, the first thirty pages had been torn out long ago. On page thirty-one, a loose cursive with lots of crossings out sprawls across the ruled columns. I flip through the book, disappointed. Except for a few pages, it is blank. Why was it even saved all these years in an archival box at the University of Washington Special Collections?

I'd hoped the ledger might be a diary of sorts, a glimpse of daily life in Home, Washington, during its time as a utopian experiment in anarchism, but Jay Fox wrote these few notes late in life, perhaps in the 1950s. By then, he was an old anarchist who might pull out his ancient printing press and regale a visiting reporter with colorful stories, but he had become a mellow, congenial man of memories. In his notes, Fox reminisces on anarchism and the labor movement, topics to which he had dedicated his life. Then comes the last sentence written in the book, appearing as if a grand finale before hundreds of empty pages: "As an old warrior about to leave the battlefield my prime interest is in the youth who will carry on the struggle and finally bring about the realization of glorious freedom I have so long dreamed of and fought for."[1] The sentence crackles with a kind of prophecy and familiarity, as if I am hearing Jay Fox's own voice aloud in the quiet reading room, and as he often did in life, he speaks for Home.

Jay Fox and his anarchist newspaper, *The Agitator*, are what led me to Home. I first happened upon *The Agitator* over a decade ago, when I was a graduate student at the University of Washington, studying to become a librarian. It was but one of hundreds of small community newspapers I was helping to catalog. My job was to assign genre terms that described the intended audience of the newspapers. When I saw *The Agitator*, snippets of text immediately caught my eye: "*The Agitator* will stand for freedom, first, last and all of the time. It will insist upon the right of every person to express his or her opinion." Or in another column: "*The Agitator* will help banish all of the many varied superstitions handed down from the mystic past as much as its space will permit; but its main object of assault will be the errors surrounding the economic and political life of the people."[2] But some of the other things—references to strikes and political events and long philosophical tracts—I could not place in historical context.

I did some research into *The Agitator* and the town where it was published, and I learned that Home, Washington, was the last and most colorful blossoming of the utopian experiments that found fertile soil in the wilderness around Puget Sound during the late nineteenth century. Organized according to principles of anarchism, individualism, and liberty, the community attracted the attention of radicals across the country, as well as the ire of its more conventionally minded neighbors in surrounding small towns and in the larger city of Tacoma, about fifteen miles due east across the water. Jay Fox moved to Home in 1910, thinking that it might be an affordable place to run a printing press. His newspaper flourished for a while, but Home turned out to not be such a cozy place for Fox and his ideas. Within a year, he would be arrested for an article published in *The Agitator* and brought to trial in Tacoma. Ultimately, his case would be appealed to the United States Supreme Court.

This little community on the soggy fringe of the frontier struggled with many of the principles and ideas that would later be taken up by American society at large. Historian Charles LeWarne writes that it is too simple to say that the people of Home were ahead of their time because by definition radicals must be ahead of their time. Yet he asserts that in their general open-minded tolerance, emphasis on equality of the sexes, civil disobedience, and arguments in favor of free speech, "the individualists of Home were addressing themselves to issues that society would later be forced to confront."[3]

During Home's twenty-five years as a practical experiment in anarchism, residents faced many legal, social, and personal trials. Over the years, an undue amount of litigation complicated the lives of colony members. Various editors, writers, and even the postmistress of Home were hauled in for publishing and distributing materials considered dangerously obscene or insubordinate. Once in court, these anarchists found themselves defending core principles articulated in the United States Constitution, such as the First Amendment guarantee to free speech. Other times they were swept up in cases that made national headlines, such as when Donald Vose, a young man who grew up in Home, turned spy for the Burns Detective Agency and helped track down anarchist fugitives involved in the bombing of the *Los Angeles Times* building. Then when the community could no longer settle its disputes over commonly held land and the management of colony affairs, they were forced to resort to lengthy civil suits.

External forces may have threatened the settlement—such as when the Loyal League in Tacoma sought to wipe out the colony after President McKinley's assassination by an anarchist in 1901—but the ultimate challenge to Home's cohesion and viability came from within. As a community valuing liberty above all else and resolutely averse to coercion in any form, Home was in conflict with itself from the beginning. In the early days, the small group of pioneering founders were too busy sawing down fir trees and building houses to notice any weaknesses, and they could easily dream of Home City becoming a vanguard of civilization. As the years passed, though, and Home became more established, it attracted people who did not share the original vision of the founders. The dissonance between the aspirations of the founders and the all-too-human flaws of the participants demonstrated that the attempt to imagine a new way of life in Home was the biggest trial of all.

It would be trite to say that they failed. By definition, aren't all utopias bound for failure? Hadn't they gotten the memo that "utopia," a term first coined by Sir Thomas More in the sixteenth century, means "no place"? The flaws of the utopian impulse, the stark discord between dream and reality in the attempt to establish an ideal society, are easy to see from the outside, in hindsight. Yet the founders of Home would be the first to point out they were conducting an experiment upon themselves, and the data they collected in their own haphazard way still has relevance today. In *Trying Home*, I sift through the evidence—the newspapers, diaries, first-hand accounts, court transcripts—as a librarian and a storyteller to recreate what it was like to live through the experiment. This story demonstrates that the human organizations we take for granted, from the family unit to the nation-state, are not facts but entities enacted by our own participation in them.

I wish I could say that I fell in with the anarchists of Home purely out of curiosity and admiration of their noble experiment. The name itself drew me to Home for personal reasons that I was not entirely aware of at the outset. While I was growing up, my family moved just enough times that I entered adulthood with questions about the nature of home smoldering in my unconscious: *What is home? Where is home? How will I know when I've found home?* Reconstructing the story of Home made me aware of these questions, then guided me obliquely into and through them. I found along the way that at the heart of any utopian experiment is the deep-seated, human impulse to find and establish an ideal home.

I have lived in Tacoma for eight years, Washington State for thirteen, the longest I have lived anywhere, and I am just now becoming comfortable with calling this place home. Sure, the accumulation of seasons between the snows of Mount Rainier and tides of Puget Sound has had its effect on me. Moss grows easily here, but that's only part of the process. After my wife and I bought our old side-gabled craftsman house, we spent four days stripping wallpaper off the walls and ceilings in the living and dining rooms. It seemed like such a huge chore at the time, one that left us bone tired and sore, but it was the first of many projects we would undertake to cultivate a space for our growing family.

While writing this book, I witnessed the birth of my son, and we are now expecting another. The coincidence of unearthing the story of Home and becoming a parent helped me to recognize that home is not purely a place but something created by care, effort, and sacrifice. For this unexpected lesson, I owe a debt to Home.

Life at Home: Shelter

Joe Kopelle and Franz Erkelens lived in a tree house on the edge of Home. Nearby on the ground, they hosted many a meal in the canvas tent that served as a dining room. There was rarely a vacant spot at the dinner table but always a spare seat. They'd just saw off a section of log, adjusted for the visitor's height, thump it onto the boards, and roll it into place.

Joe Kopelle remembered the setting as if it were a vision of Big Rock Candy Mountain. The fare was bountiful and varied. Franz usually cooked, but a guest sometimes commandeered the stove: a vegetarian, Tildenite, Hungarian, or some other chef professing a superior diet. The person at the head of the table could lean slightly to dip a cup in the cool clear spring that ran beside the platform. The person to his or her right could reach everything on the stove without getting up, as well as the strong box kept as a cooler in the creek behind the platform.

The tree house even had an automatic dishwasher. Franz and Joe would slide the dishes, pots, and pans into the stream, and the current stripped away the remaining food. The trout would jab their heads inside the cast iron pots and nibble off any stubborn remnants. Once a boy was lying on his stomach, letting the water run through his fingers, and one of these fish swam into his fingers. "Look what I caught, mom!" he exclaimed, lifting the writhing creature out of the water.

"Hey, young fellow, put that dish-washer back in the creek!" Franz said with a laugh. "He's our friend!"[1]

Wearing a broad-brimmed hat and thick moustache, Joe had first gazed upon the tree when he was investigating the property. Long ago, strong winds had sheared off the top, leaving a massive trunk. In the years since the storm, new growth had sent shoots skyward that were stout enough to support a platform. Joe cut them level with the main trunk, nailed slats like a circular staircase up the trunk, and then constructed a floor. Four low walls and a roof provided shelter. Franz and Joe slept on bunk beds softened with cedar boughs and read books from a well-stocked shelf. "From up there the air was warm and a grand view could be had of the bay," recalled Joe. "We could see all that went on in every direction."[2]

Although Joe claimed he was drawn to the spot because he was a landscape gardener by trade and "a worshiper of nature's wonders," his decision to move to this particular parcel in 1908 also reflected that most of the prime lots in Home had been taken.[3] "The establishing of the Mutual Home Association opens up a way to many to obtaining a home," Oliver Verity had written; since he first published these words in *Discontent* in 1898,[4] a succession of people had answered his call.

A time-lapse film of the community's growth would show the Douglas firs on the hillside falling one after the other as men notch their trunks, whack with axes, then cut with crosscut saws, and roll the logs down toward the water. With the land cleared, acre by acre, the colony members converge to sink posts and piers into the loam for a foundation, raise the wall frames, and lift the roof beams. Soon enough walls are sheathed in board and batten or bevel siding, enclosing and protecting spaces that just a season ago knew only the shelter of trees and the course of wind through the forest. This happens over and over again as more and more members join the Mutual Home Association. Hammers drive nails, shovels dig wells, hands stretch stockade and slat fences between parcels. Roads and paths slice across the hillside, gardens and orchards are planted in neat rows, and in some places ornamental vines begin to climb toward the gables. As the hasty procession of the film progresses, the houses get larger and more impressive: there is the Allens' shingle-sided house with a sagging two-story porch and the Kings' huge box-style house with a wrap-around porch.[5] By the time Joe Kopelle arrives in 1908, around two hundred people live in Home in over fifty homes.[6]

"You'll find it damp," people told Joe when he bought the lot,[7] and perhaps this is why he built the tree house; or perhaps he thought it would be easier to live in the tree than remove it. In the accounts of his tree house, he only explained what he did, not why, but he certainly enjoyed his rustic living arrangement. Although Franz left in 1910, Joe stayed until 1917. Only then, when the shipyards were booming in Tacoma during the war, did he climb down through foliage that still grew upon the shoots and set foot upon the ground for good. He worked a while in the city, and when he returned to Home, he moved into a house. What he remembered of the cold seasons, of shivering through wet and windy nights, he kept to himself; when he spoke of his famous tree house, it was always summertime.