Community members often use and test the hammock products personnaly. Here, chair model hammock; right, Tom Grogan saws planks from logs; below right, hammocks await shipping in the warehouse.

Tie-Dyed Communal Capitalism

Virginia's answer to a Pawley's Island is the Twin Oaks hammock, made in a Louisa County commune. MAUREEN L. EGAN drops in and finds a place where collectivism works to make a very commercially successful hammock.

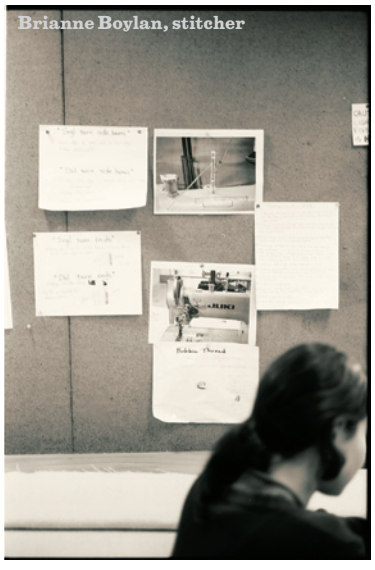
I always meant to start a commune, sharing child care and chores with friends, cooking and eating together, having deep conversations or laughing uncontrollably without having to plan togetherness. It sounded perfect, except starting a commune was just too much work.

The people of Twin Oaks, an intentional community (what communes like to be called these days) in Louisa, figured out a way of working that keeps their community self-supporting: cottage industries that fit their 'right livelihood' ethic of being ecologically sensitive. Their best known business, Twin Oaks Hammocks, has made and sold hammocks and casual furniture since 1967, and over time Twin Oaks has added a soy foods business and a book-indexing business, among others, to support the approximately 100 members on their 456-acre rural spread.

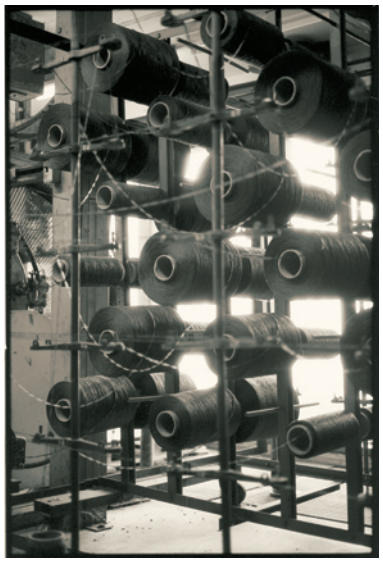
What started at Twin Oaks in 1967 as a behaviorist experiment based on the society depicted in B. F. Skinner's utopian novel, *Walden Two*, has become a multi-faceted community of approximately 85 adults and 15 children that defines itself now not as behaviorist but rather as egalitarian, income-sharing, cooperative and non-violent.

Twin Oaks Hammocks' competitors pay low wages to workers in Central America, China or India, but, in an unusual twist, Twin Oaks members handcraft rope and fabric hammocks here in Virginia,

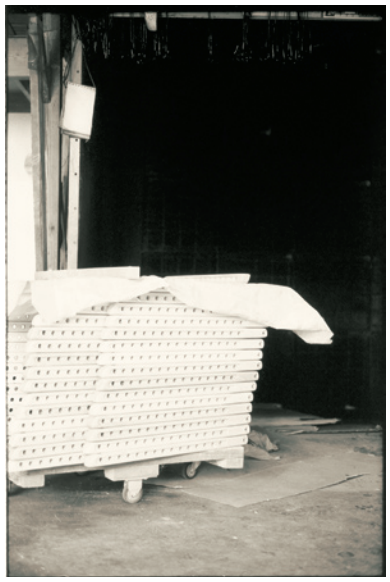
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TYLER DARDEN


Brianne Boylan, stitcher

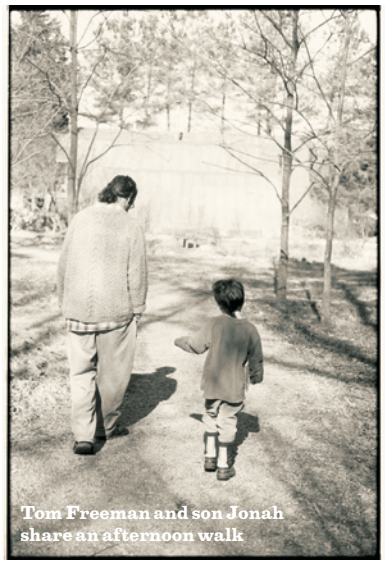
Stretcher bars await finish



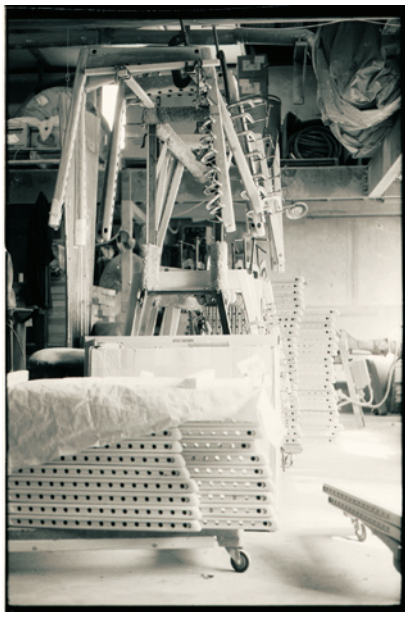
Tom Grogan, sawyer



Face-to-face weaving stations
promote community


Tom Freeman and son Jonah
share an afternoon walk

Tom Freeman



Above, wood for the support bars of the hammocks waits to be turned into Twin Oaks Hammocks. Sean Samoheyl, resident artist, shows a work in progress for an Absolut Vodka ad. Fibers are spun into rope for hammocks on antique Haskell-Dawes machine.

receiving no wages or salary. Remain cooperative and non-violent while I explain.

The agreement between member and community at Twin Oaks is that each adult works an average of 43 hours a week in both the collectively owned businesses and the domestic work of the community. In return, the community supplies a private bedroom and other shared living space, meals, child care, health care, homegrown entertainment and a $75 allowance per month. In a perk worth waiting for, one less hour of work a week is required for every year a member is over age 50. Income from the businesses is spent according to a budgetary process that takes into consideration the input of all community members.

Using an egalitarian labor credit system borrowed from *Walden Two*, Twin Oaks systematically values equally all the work done for the community, so more (43) is actually less than the workaday world's 40 hours. An hour of cleaning toilets is an hour of work. (They got that right.) So is an hour making rope for hammocks. Working on the TwinOakStore.com website for an hour is equal to an hour of providing child care or talking to tofu distributors or running errands or meeting with the membership team or milking cows or gathering firewood.

Every week, adults fill out labor sheets for the labor assigner. Not a morning person? Block off the mornings and choose from 200 kinds of work to accumulate 43 labor credits afternoons, evenings, even in the middle of the night. No one likes to do dishes here either, so everyone gets assigned a two-hour clean-up shift.

At Twin Oaks, there are no distinctions between physical and mental labor, men's or women's work. In fact, there often isn't much of a distinction between where one works and sleeps. The hammock pillow shop is attached to a residence, and the room where Twin Oaks' originally designed and patented hanging hammock chairs are produced hangs off a residence and doubles as the music room.

A little hammock history: In the early 1970s, Twin Oaks started supplying Pier 1 with hammocks regionally and eventually nationally, up to 33,000 hammocks a year. At one point, Twin Oaks had eight other like-minded communes making hammocks for them. A few years ago, in a dramatic turn of events, Pier 1 dropped Twin Oaks Hammocks, so the community suddenly lost a large chunk of its income.

Now with hammock production at about 6,000 per year, hammocks marketing manager Tom Freeman says that despite interest from L.L. Bean and Target, the community is steering clear of "mass merchants of any flavor ... because they tend to want a large volume of one or two models of hammock at the cheapest possible price. Hammocks are a seasonal item, so this stresses our labor scene to mass produce hammocks during the winter .... Also, we are not at risk if the large mass merchant decides to buy imported hammocks the next year."

Instead, Twin Oaks Hammocks focuses on its relationships with smaller dealers, who appreciate the mix of products, including their 'green' line of hemp and envirope hammocks, the latter made from 100 percent recycled polyester fiber. In addition to selling through their website, mail order, and craft fair appearances in the eastern U.S., Twin Oaks is considering opening a retail shop, perhaps in Virginia Beach. All of their hammocks carry a two-year warranty, and they pride themselves on customer service, even making special order hammocks.

Since Twin Oakers choose their own work, managers, who receive no extra benefits, sometimes use creativity (and behaviorism) to meet demand. Having fancy organic fair trade coffee, a fresh baked batch of cookies or a storyteller available only in the hammock shop has been known to help the process along.

In the post-Pier 1 era, the community relies more heavily on producing soy foods for restaurants and natural foods stores, indexing books, and a growing construction business that works off site. Even without advertising, General Manager of Twin Oaks Community Foods, Kelly Tassinari, is considering adding another production day at the Tofu Hut to meet the East Coast demand for their certified organic tofu, tempeh and vegan sausages made from locally grown soybeans.

As is common at Twin Oaks, managers often work production, too. Tassinari generally makes tofu 10-12 hours a week in addition to managing 12-20 hours a week. She and her co-workers sometimes put on tofu-cooking demonstrations, including a recent one for chefs from the food service giant Aramark, because, Tassinari admits, "Chefs aren't always so sure what to do with it."

Another mainstay of the Twin Oaks economy is the book-indexing business, begun in 1984, with primarily university presses as clients. These days, six members, working mostly part-time, bring in 15-20 percent of the community's total income. According to indexing manager Jake Kawatski, "The beauty of the work is the portability of it: ... An indexer can sit out at the edge of our pond, or in a sunny corner of the woods, choosing [highlighting] 'indexable' terms on the 'hard' copy."

A hammock in every yard, tofu in every pot and a book with an index in every hand. Not everyone's fantasy perhaps, but not a bad vision at all. It's better than a television in every car and trans fat in every gut.

Like visiting Wolfsburg to pick up a VW, visiting Twin Oaks to pick up that perfect hammock takes planning—do not show up unannounced. Three-hour tours are offered many Saturdays, but one should call or e-mail to make a reservation. TwinOakStore.com (800) 688-8946 and Twinoaks.org. (540) 894-5126.

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