

SLOWING DOWN TO LISTEN BETTER

TIM SMITH'S NUANCED
LOOK AT THE DEERBOINE
HUTTERITE COLONY

BY LAURENCE BUTET-ROCH

Though just miles away from his home in Manitoba, Tim Smith found himself exploring a community unlike his own. In doing so, he has strived to strike a fine balance, one that will help shed light on the Hutterites' ways without reducing them to the "simple life."

Tim Smith was cruising along the grid roads of Manitoba when he stumbled upon the Deerboine Hutterite colony. A group of women were tending the garden, and he felt this would make a beautiful feature photograph for *The Brandon Sun*, the local newspaper he worked for. As he was snapping away, one of the girls took pictures of him with her phone. "Like many people, I had preconceptions since I rarely had any interactions with them growing up in Winnipeg, other than seeing them occasionally when they would descend on my family's garage sales. I suppose I had an idea that Hutterites were technology-averse, so when a young woman pulled a cellphone out of her dress that was a very immediate clue that I really knew nothing about them. It also triggered my curiosity to learn as much as I could," recalls the Canadian photographer.

A branch of Anabaptist Christians, like the Amish and

the Mennonites, the Hutterites embrace communal living, where all goods and tasks are shared among the members of the group. Mostly self-sustaining, they thrive on working the fields, ranching, and, in certain colonies, manufacturing. They arrived in North America in the 1800s after being persecuted in Russia, settling first in North and South

Dakota before migrating to the Canadian Prairies as American citizens were being drafted in the First World War. Hutterites are unwavering pacifists. Their colonies now extend throughout western Canada and the northwestern United States.

"It's easy to show a simplified view of Hutterite life because they're people who look different and live differently than us. If that's the hook, then it's lazy at best and discriminatory at worst. Humans inherently look to simplify the world around them, to put things into different boxes, each one separate from one another. This leads to all sorts of problems in understanding each other and connecting with one another. Nuance is incredibly important in addressing that. The more time I've spent learning about the Hutterites, the more I know I don't know. So, what I want to show are the complexities of this society," adds Smith.

Take the teenagers for instance. Yes, they may dress differently than most youth and might be less focused on extravagance, but they still act their age. They try to stand out and express their

Chantel Hofer wears bright pink DC-brand sneakers with her homemade dress outside her family's home at Deerboine Colony. Although conformity is the ideal on Hutterite colonies, individuals, especially young women, look for ways to express their individuality.



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individuality within the limits they're afforded. This means wearing neon pink skateboarding shoes or pastel green sunglasses as much as it implies engaging in the same youthful activities as their peers from other cultural backgrounds. Case in point: here too, social media is very popular especially since it's becoming harder and harder to provide them with a flip phone—necessary for communication on the estate—rather than a smartphone.

Bearing witness to how the generally insular group negotiates this growing connectivity is a central part of Smith's

work. He wants to record the transformations taking place within the colony as well as how the shifts happening in society writ-large affect them. "Every community changes and evolves," he reflects. "This is a key moment for them and their culture. As digital technology spreads, the elders are having a harder time keeping outside influence from streaming in." Not that Hutterites are against innovation per se; in truth their operations are often very technologically advanced. In fact, this is a prime example of the types of myths that need to be dispelled, especially as the boundaries between the different

Kristiane Hofer sends a text while riding in the back of a pickup truck with Angela Hofer. Texting is extremely popular on colonies where cell phones have been accepted to make farming and business more productive. Individual colonies make their own decisions about how much technology to allow in, but their leaders are all aware and interested in how their fellow colonies are handling the issue.

worlds recedes. "They have been hurt by journalists in the past who have often portrayed them in flawed simple terms," explains Smith. "Coverage lacked research and nuance, which is an unfair way to approach any community."

To avoid repeating such mistakes, Smith chose to put relationships first. After seven years, he now calls many residents of the Deerboine colony friends. In the process, he noticed subtle but revealing social dynamics. For instance, though a strict patriarchal society, women turn out to be more outgoing and outspoken than their male counterparts. Their



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playfulness and wit is evident in many of his photographs. Similarly, the picture of a young Hutterite girl donating blood goes a long way to challenge assumptions about their inward-looking ways. In times of need, they often volunteer to help their neighbours, regardless of their persuasions.

That said, Smith is careful not to paint them in too romantic of a light and acknowledges the downsides of more dogmatic societies. That line can be difficult to tread. “Hutterite colonies are not perfect, and most members would be the first to say that. If I were asked to shy away from that, I’d be

Young men from Deerboine Colony socialize while fishing from the bank of the Assiniboine River at sunset on a warm June evening.

concerned. So, the best way I can avoid potential issues is to be as open and honest as possible from the outset, informing the members of the community of my intent and then continually engaging in a dialogue with them. While I want to produce an honest body of work, I don’t want to hurt or betray the people that have trusted me and whom I’ve been fortunate enough to photograph,” he says, a reminder that with unparalleled access comes great responsibility.

Smith’s dedication to documenting the layers of Hutterite culture is far from over. An important aspect of their beliefs is the ability for

individuals to choose at their own pace if they want to be baptized and uphold the traditions for the rest of their lives. At eighteen, some go explore other ways of living, moving to nearby cities and fending for themselves. According to Smith, who hopes to examine the choices these young people make, many return: “As an outsider, though I love going there, I know I wouldn’t be a good Hutterite. Still, I can see the appeal. It’s hard to resist the sense of security and of belonging that such a community can give you. It’s powerful not to have to worry about bills, to know that you’ll be cared for from cradle to grave.” ■