Is it possible to escape from a world with unequal balances of power, exploitation, and aversive control to a utopian community? Skinner offered his vision in *Walden Two*, published in 1948. The search for answers still continues today ...
**Walden Two Actualized:**

**An Examination of the Behaviorist Roots of Twin Oaks Community**

Adder Oaks

*The Definitions and Purpose [of the community] shall be implemented through:*

A. Intentionality in our planning and daily functioning to discover and encourage the most desirable behaviors for individual members and the most desirable goals and methods of functioning for the Community as a whole; …

F. An emphasis in the Community’s social policy and practices on fostering responsibility and commitment, on cooperation rather than competition, and on affirming rather than punishing means for changing behavior; …


In 1967, nine ambitious idealists bought a plot of rural farmland in central Virginia with the intention of building as close an approximation to a utopia as possible. Inspired by B.F. Skinner’s *Walden Two*, the founding members of Twin Oaks Community sought to establish a community in which behaviorist principles would be implemented to establish harmony and peace among its members, and ultimately spread to the world at large. Seventy years after the publication of *Walden Two* and more than fifty years into the existence of Twin Oaks, a lot has changed. Few of the hundred or so residents of Twin Oaks today call themselves behaviorists, and many have not even read *Walden Two*. Yet, much of the structure and ideals borrowed from the imagined Walden Two community remain strong. Incentive will always influence behavior, and the founding principles inexorably shape the behavior of individuals and the community.

The most striking similarity between Walden Two and Twin Oaks is the structure of community government. Like Walden Two, Twin Oaks has managers assigned to many of the areas of life at Twin Oaks: businesses such as tofu production and hammock crafting, agriculture areas such as the vegetable garden and the dairy, domestic needs such as clothing and cooking, social needs such as holiday and recreation, and organizational needs such as labor allocation and conflict resolution. Additionally, there is a shifting group of community planners who deal with the big picture issues, or anything that grows too contentious to be handled by an individual area. The planners do not gain their position by winning an election campaign, but rather by being nominated by the current plannership, with input from the membership at large. However, Twin Oaks rests its political organization on a democratic foundation, a striking difference compared to Walden Two. In the novel, there is the supposition that the organization of the community and knowledge of human behavior guarantees that the planners and managers will ultimately be guiding the community toward the greater good of its members. At Twin
Oaks, the population is able to veto or recall planners, appeal manager decisions, and ultimately override any decision made by the planners or managers using a democratic override. Though it rarely comes to such actions, Twin Oaks’s safeguard for the good of its members is to give them a direct voice when they need it.

The way Twin Oaks makes institutional decisions may not even be the aspect of the community that most influences the way people live. Arguably, the labor system gets to wear the crown. Lifted directly from Walden Two, “labor credits” are awarded to members for the work they do, in any area deemed valuable to the community. A small sampling of labor creditable work includes the following: working in the tofu factory or hammock shop, cleaning shared space, taking care of children, organizing community social events, doing outreach work, serving as a planner or manager, maintaining the labor database, scheduling work for the week, cooking dinner, and mowing the lawn. Members secure their place in the community by earning enough labor credits to meet a weekly quota. By choosing to award labor credits for whatever work the community needs, be that industrial, domestic, or social, Twin Oaks is putting behaviorism into action by providing positive reinforcement for actions that might not otherwise be compensated in mainstream society.

In Walden Two, the incentives are fine-tuned by differentially awarding labor credits based on the community’s need for the work to get done and hardship of the job. Twin Oaks experimented with a variable labor credit system, but ultimately discarded it, instead using a system that awards a single labor credit per hour of work, regardless of the work being done. In doing so, Twin Oaks consciously traded the behaviorist ideal of optimizing incentives against another value that sits at the heart of the community: egalitarianism. Inextricably tied to the labor system of Twin Oaks is the communal economic structure. As in Walden Two, the physical and financial resources of the community are held in common. The money the community makes and the food it produces are shared. Members live in group houses, sixteen vehicles are shared for all domestic and business needs, healthcare is funded out of the communal purse, and all of the work that members do goes toward making that happen.

Twin Oaks manifests its relationship to work and industry very differently than mainstream society, but still diverges quite a bit from the utopian ideal of Walden Two. Members of both the real and imagined community have varied labor scenes, allowing them to take part in many different aspects of the community. Twin Oaks gains some efficiency of scale in many areas of its work, be it doing dishes using an industrial dishwasher, or cooking for one hundred people at a time, or having a forestry crew fell whole trees and split its wood to use for heat. But there is not the constant eye toward efficiency or the social engineering to make the absolute most out of the minimum required input, which Walden Two sets as its ideal. Much of this is probably due to the realities of setting up organizational systems at the same time as they must be used to live, along with a shifting membership and a smaller scale of economy than the imagined thousand-person Walden Two. However, some of this difference may be due to conscious emphasis on different values. For example, Walden Two eschews “natural farming,” which surely meant something very different in 1948 compared to today. Skinner may have been wary
of trading off efficiency for an arbitrary feeling of naturalness earned from working a field by hand. While those who tend the vegetable gardens at Twin Oaks are well aware of the psychological benefits of working outdoors and producing that which they will consume, the community has a commitment to natural agriculture practices that goes beyond a personal feeling of satisfaction. Twin Oaks commits to maintaining natural resources for present and future generations, and recognizes that more industrialized agricultural methods often gain what appears to be economic efficiency by externalizing its costs, either through the steady destruction of the environment or the depletion of resources for the future generations.

Perhaps the most interesting part of an experimental community such as the actual Twin Oaks or the imagined Walden Two are the cultural differences from mainstream society. Walden Two imagines some pretty radical departures from cultural norms, while embracing certain cultural norms wholeheartedly, in a way that seems fatuous in retrospect. It induces eye rolls to read some of the comments the characters make about women and beauty, while simultaneously providing a view of women’s liberation more revolutionary than most people today would even take the time to consider. The women of Walden Two are free to choose the work they have and the lives they lead, freed by the economic security of the community and a fully communal childcare program. Twin Oaks experimented with such communal childcare in its earlier years, though now children live in the residences with their parents and have access to a range of communal childcare resources, including a morning daycare, a homeschool cooperative, and individual time for work and play with various adults of the community. Childcare, including that of a parent for their own child, earns labor credits. Valuing this sort of work, traditionally the uncompensated domain of women, along with replacing two-person economic codependency with a whole community of income sharing, shakes the foundations of the nuclear family and provides a new communal level of social and economic support.

Walden Two imagines community-grown entertainment: original music, plays, books, and more. The home-grown culture creation of Twin Oaks is one of its points of pride. The community has birthed a number of bands, who usually perform for the community, but have occasionally broken out to perform for the public and tour. The walls of the community are decorated almost exclusively by art produced within the community, and original plays tend to be put on once every few years. However, the mainstream still influences entertainment here. Though the founding members of Twin Oaks agreed to live without broadcast television, the advent of the internet has resulted in a much greater presence of mainstream movies, television, and music.

The founders of Twin Oaks held behaviorism in the forefront of their consciousness. They had read Walden Two and sought to use the science of human behavior into action. But Twin Oaks was also founded in the so-called Summer of Love, when people all over America were looking for radical alternatives to mainstream society. What was Twin Oaks to do when the hippies came knocking? In large part, Twin Oaks opened its doors – conditionally. To join the community, one did not have to subscribe to Skinnerian views or feel inspired by Walden Two. One did have to abide by the community agreements, live within communal values, and make quota by doing one’s share of labor creditable work. Because of this, Twin Oaks culture has a touch of many alternative subcultures, due to influences from a diversity of members, be they hippies, back-to-landers, revolutionaries, futurists, and whoever else this alternative lifestyle has managed to attract. In the end, however, they are all Twin Oakers, and live by the values set forth in 1967, inspired by Walden Two.

As the years go on and the original publication of Walden Two becomes a more distant memory, Twin Oaks will continue to grow and change, adapting to a changing membership and society at large. All along the way, the behaviorist systems and culture set in motion by the founding members will continue to be at its foundation, providing a powerful tool to meet the demands of these changing needs. It is impossible to guess at this point what Twin Oaks will be like in another fifty years, but one can be sure that the vision of Walden Two will live on inside it.