‘Outside the gate, it’s still a man’s world’

As the impulse to withdraw from heterosexual society has lost its appeal to younger lesbians, exclusively lesbian communities face some of the same challenges as Catholic convents that struggle to attract women to cloistered lives

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Scenes of Alapine, a lesbian community in Northeast Alabama. The pioneering women who first made their way to St Augustine, Florida, in the 1970s to build a matriarchal community and then relocated to Alabama in 1997, say Alapine is a lesbian paradise free from the mores of a patriarchal society.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

They called it a lesbian paradise, the pioneering women who made their way to St Augustine, Florida, in the 1970s to live together in cottages on the beach. Finding one another in the fever of the gay rights and women’s liberation movements, they built a matriarchal community, where no men were allowed, where even a male infant brought by visitors was cause for debate.

Emily Greene was one of those pioneers, and at 62 she still chooses to live in a separate lesbian world. She and 19 other women have built homes on 121 rural hectares in northeast Alabama, where the founders of the Florida community, the Pagoda, relocated in 1997.

Behind a locked gate whose security code is changed frequently, the women pursue quiet lives in a community they call Alapine, largely unnoticed by their Bible Belt neighbors — a lost tribe from the early 1970s era of communes and radical feminism. “I came here because I wanted to be in nature, and I wanted to have lesbian neighbors,” said Greene, a retired nurse. She hopes the women, ages 50 to 75, will be able to raise enough money to build assisted-living facilities on the land and set up hospice care.

She walks each day in the woods with her two dogs, Lily, a border collie mix, and Rita Mae, a Jack Russell terrier and beagle mix named for Rita Mae Brown, the feminist activist and author of the lesbian classic *Rubyfruit Jungle*. Greene trims branches of oak, hickory and sassafras trees and stops by the grave of a deer she buried in the woods after it was hit by a car. She named it Miracle. “I talk to Miracle every day,” Greene said. “That is one of my joys of living here.”

These days, she and other members worry about the future of Alapine, which is one of about 100 below-the-radar lesbian communities in North America, known as womyn’s lands (their preferred spelling), whose guiding philosophies date from a mostly bygone era.

The communities, most in rural areas from Oregon to Florida, have as few as two members; Alapine is one of the largest. Many have steadily lost residents over the decades as members have moved on or died. As the impulse to withdraw from heterosexual society has lost its appeal to younger lesbians, womyn’s lands face some of the same challenges as Catholic convents that struggle to attract women to cloistered lives.

“The younger generation has not had to go through what we went through,” Greene said. She and other Alapine women described leading double lives when they were younger, playing the role of straight women in jobs and even marriages. “I came out in the middle **’60s, and we didn’t** even have the word lesbian then,” Greene said.

“We are really going to have to work at how we carry this on,” she added. “In 20 to 25 years, we could be extinct.”

Behind the gate at Alapine, about 8km from the nearest town in the southern Appalachian mountains near Georgia, the women live in simple houses or double-wide trailers on roads they have named after goddesses, like Diana Drive. They meet for potluck dinners, movie and game nights and “community full moon circles” during which they sing, read poems and share thoughts on topics like “Mercury in retrograde — how is it affecting our communication?”

The women agreed to be interviewed on the condition that the exact location of their homes not be revealed because they fear harassment from outsiders. Many in the network of womyn’s lands have avoided publicity, living a sheltered existence for decades, advertising available homes and properties through word of mouth or in small newsletters and lesbian magazines.

But the women at Alapine were willing to be interviewed because of their concern that their female-centered community would disappear if they did not reach out to younger women.

Winnie Adams, 66, who describes herself as a “radical feminist separatist lesbian,” sold her house in Florida in 1999 to move to Alapine. Earlier in her life, she had been married and had two daughters (neither of whom would be permitted to live with her now because they are not lesbians). She worked as a management information systems consultant for government agencies, she said, but when she came out as a lesbian was driven from her job by stress and discrimination.

Adams’ partner, Barbara Moore, 63, was in the Army in the 1960s, when what she described as a “witch hunt” for gay men and lesbians in the military forced her out.

Both women, who like most of the others at Alapine were once married and had children, said they were deeply scarred by their experiences.

“I did everything I was supposed to do,” Adams said. “I went to college, I got my job, I got my man, I got my two kids. But it still didn’t feel right. I didn’t know that I was a lesbian because I didn’t know what that was. It was the **’50s and ’60s and nobody ever talked about it. It took me a long** time to come to terms with it and come out.”

For Adams, every choice she makes today — which restaurant to go to, which contractor to hire, which music to listen to — is guided by a preference to be around women.

“To me, this is the real world,” she said. “And it’s a very peaceful world. I don’t hear anything except the leaves falling. I get up in the morning, I go out on my front deck and I dance and I say, ‘It’s another glorious day on the mountain.’ Men are violent. The minute a man walks in the dynamics change immediately, so I choose not to be around those dynamics.”

In addition to the 20 women living at Alapine, some single and some in couples, 15 more own property with plans to retire there or to build a second home. One-hectare plots cost US$25,000, with seven still for sale. Some residents grow fruit and vegetables, and one couple, Ellen Taylor, 75, and her partner, Mary, 63, who did not want her last name used, keep four chickens they call the Golden Girls.

Residents keep a low profile among their neighbors, including many Baptists, and say there have been no hostile incidents, unlike at some other womyn’s lands.

“We just don’t announce our lesbianism,” said Morgana MacVicar, 61, one of the Alapine founders, who lives with her partner of 20 years. “People know who we are. We don’t want somebody who’s making a political statement here.”

The women said they sometimes heard references in town to “those women artists” or “those craftswomen.” At a recent dinner at a local restaurant, 15 Alapine members, speaking in hushed voices around a table, drew curious glances.

One obstacle to drawing younger women is employment. Many of the lesbian communities are located far from cities and other job sources. Only one Alapine resident has a full-time job, as a social worker in town. The others live on savings or income from consulting or piecemeal work.

There is strident debate within and across the womyn’s lands about who should be allowed to join. Many residents subscribe to strict lesbian separatism, meaning that men are permitted only as temporary visitors and that straight, bisexual and transsexual women are also excluded.

Recently when an Alapine resident received a visit from a 6-month-old grandson, an e-mail message went out to all residents, perhaps only partly in humor: “There’s a man on the land.”

Jane R. Dickie, a professor of women’s studies and psychology at Hope College in Michigan, who has studied one of the womyn’s lands, in Missouri, said she was struck by the differences between the residents — feminists of an earlier era — and her students.

“There was a real sense of the need to strongly identify as a woman and have women’s space,” Dickie, 62, said of the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s. “We really felt the need to be apart, to draw on our strength and our own empowerment. But young feminists today recoil at the idea of identity politics, of being in this one category.” Among the few younger women who are part of the movement, there is concern that the old-guard lesbians are too rigid at a time when they need to be more flexible, if for nothing else than self-preservation.

“I see the whole picture and the idea of a womyn’s land utopia, unless you have unlimited amounts of finances for yourself, I’ve watched one after another go belly up,” said Andrea Gibbs-Henson, 42, who lives at Camp Sister Spirit, a womyn’s land in Ovett, Mississippi, where she became executive director when her mother, one of the founders, died last year. “The bottom line is the world is too diverse. The whole idea of a feminist utopia, it’s just an ideal. We would not survive here if all we did was cater to lesbian separatists.”

Camp Sister Spirit has more flexible policies on who is allowed on the land; even at Alapine, some of the women do not believe in pure separatism.

But Rand Hall, 63, one of the newest Alapine residents, whose 50-year-old stepdaughter has joined her on the property, said separatism still makes sense today.

“Outside the gate, it’s still a man’s world,” said Hall, who retired as the publisher of a gay and lesbian newspaper in Tampa and St Petersburg, Florida, and moved to Alapine in 2006. “And women are not safe, period. It’s just that simple.”

“I don’t have curtains,” she said. “I don’t have to worry about someone watching me dress or undress. There’s also a sense of community, a sense of supporting each other.”

Hall added: “It’s not as competitive. Women, when they’re together, tend to be more cooperative. They don’t look for one to succeed and all the others to fail. In the mainstream world that’s what it is. Somebody has to be on top so everyone else has to be on the bottom.”

At Alapine, the development corporation owned by three women who started the earlier women’s community in Florida sells plots to individual owners. If someone who owns decides to resell, the development corporation has the right to buy the property. The women at Alapine have agreed that they want to remain a lesbian-only community. They acknowledge that this could make them vulnerable to a legal challenge from a nonlesbian, but they say no such challenges have arisen.

“We don’t want to spend the last 20 years of our lives fighting about another big issue,” MacVicar said. “It was hard enough fighting for the last 30 years. But now it’s a family that wants to be here and die here.”