

## [Photographs of Countercultural Celebrations in Northern New Mexico](#)

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For the past five years, I have been working on Irwin Klein's photographs of the Sixties counterculture in northern New Mexico. Klein made several visits to northern New Mexico between 1966 and 1972, spending a few months at a time, documenting the scene in Rio Arriba, Taos, and Mora counties, before returning to New York City where he lived. He photographed "the dropouts, renegades, and utopians," the "children of the urban middle class" who left San Francisco, New York, Seattle, and other cities, and "a few old beatniks" who "liv[ed] alone, in couples, families, or small groups in the little Spanish-American towns in the back country" - and the communes in the area surrounding Taos.

A self-taught photographer, Klein had begun to receive attention for his work before his arrival in New Mexico. As a graduate student in English at the University of Minnesota in the early 1960s, he used Leica cameras to photograph landscapes in Glacier National Park and the street scenes of Minneapolis, working as "an amateur," as Patricia Caulfield pointed out in her profile of the artist in *Modern Photography* (1964), in "the classic 35 mm candid tradition." The Museum of Modern Art acquired two of Klein's prints in 1966. Three years later, two photos appeared in "Vision and Expression," an exhibition curated by Nathan Lyons at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York.

Klein's arrival in New Mexico coincided with the beginning of the "great hippie migration" to the region surrounding Taos. He went to visit a close friend living in El Rito, a settlement with a population of fewer than a thousand residents, located at the edge of Carson National Forest, thirty miles north of Española, on his way from San Francisco to New York in the mid-1960s. El Rito "was a major crossroads community," in the words of historian David Farber, "and base for the region's alternative scene." Beat poets Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Emmett Grogan, one of the founders of the Diggers, an anarchistic collective based in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco, and others passed through El Rito.

Klein came to northern New Mexico, as he put it, "with much the same motives as the people [he] photographed." Although he returned to El Rito several times, using it as a base to explore the communes and other hippie enclaves, Klein never became one of the "new settlers," to use his phrase. One friend described him as more of "an observer and documenter" than an active participant in the scene in New Mexico. Another friend summed up these contradictory impulses: "I'd have to say that the communal life was the only positive life solution he saw, even if he himself could not join it. It was a hope that he entertained." Nevertheless, Klein has provided us with an enduring visual record of the counterculture in the Southwest, using his camera to record the daily activities of the new settlers of New Mexico as well as their celebrations. His photographs of a hippie wedding evoke the sense of community among the communards and their friends at New Buffalo, located in Arroyo Honda, fifteen miles north of Taos.

[nm81.jpg](#)



*Wedding gathering.*

[nm83.jpg](#)



*Wedding guests blessing food for wedding feast.*

[nm84.jpg](#)



*Wedding feast.*

In another sequence, Klein recorded the Independence Day celebrations in El Rito in 1968. Hugh Romney, one of the founders of the Hog Farm commune, appears in two photos, dressed in white coveralls and a jester hat on his head, leading a large pig, Pigasus, wearing “an Uncle Sam” hat with a silver star, a blue scarf, and red and white striped skirt, on a leash.

[4.jpg](#)



*Hugh Romney (a.k.a Wavy Gravy) in Fourth of July Parade.*

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Before their arrival in northern New Mexico, the Hog Farm had been living rent-free on a large spread outside of Los Angeles in exchange for taking care of forty hogs. "We were grooving together," Romney told the *Village Voice* in December 1968, "practicing Hog Consciousness." Members of the Hog Farm were involved in the light shows for Jimi Hendrix, Cream, the Grateful Dead, and other bands at the Shrine Auditorium in LA. In June 1968, the Hog Farm left LA in a caravan of old school buses and other vehicles, and headed to the Southwest. Klein's photographs of the Fourth of July parade and the preparations for the light show at the El Rito campground capture the spirit of Romney's description of the commune as "an expanded family, a mobile hallucination, a sociological experiment, an army of clowns."

[nm25.jpg](#)



*Hog Farmers' Fourth of July parade.*

[nm28.jpg](#)



Hog Farm camp in El Rito, NM.

*Editor's note: These photographs appear in Irwin Klein and the New Settlers: Photographs of Counterculture in New Mexico, edited by Benjamin Klein (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2016). The book was recently reviewed on [H-1960's](#); the review [can be read here](#).*

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