

Interview with Linda Bryant

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

July 15, 1996

**Q:** This is Monday, July 15th, and, I don't really know anything about your background, Linda, so I'd love to hear a little bit about where you're from, and how you ended up at Twin Oaks. And I don't know if you had any communal experience before Twin Oaks?

**A:** Well, I didn't have any communal experience -- I had done a project in college, on communes, but I thought they were mostly, I think they were in the early 1900's, or 1800's. So I had read about some, like Oneida [?], and places like that. But before coming to Twin Oaks, I was basically a college student who didn't really have any real goal as far as what college was going to do for me. I was just in college, because it was a place to be that you could feel like you were getting further along in some way. It's sort of a legitimate activity. And it was fun. I had jobs that were associated with it, and all my friends were going there, so it was more of a social event than a real academically inspired event.

**Q:** Where did you go to school?

**A:** I went to Wayne State University in Detroit. I ended up at Twin Oaks by sheer accident, because I was traveling down to Florida with some friends, and one of them knew someone at Twin Oaks, and we thought it'd be fun to stop in and see what it was like, and visit -- he wanted to visit his friend. I was very impressed by Twin Oaks, and that it did work, that it seemed very orderly and organized, and had this structure that could take new people in, that was attractive too.

**Q:** When was that, that you stopped through?

**A:** Let's see, that was in '72. Maybe, it must've been '73, right after the inauguration of Nixon, so that had to be '73. So it was early '73, in January or February. I loved the climate too, it was a real warm winter. I had been coming from Michigan, and I loved the country, I'd been living in the city. So there were a lot of things besides just the communal aspect of it -- it was the climate and the countryside and things like that that attracted me. But it was nice being able to just say, "Oh, I want to live here," and, "Okay." -- be able to move somewhere that easily, having your job and your place to live and everything.

**Q:** So their membership program was a lot simpler then than it is now?

**A:** Well, I think I did visit -- I'm trying to remember what I did. I think I visited for a couple weeks too. It was simpler, they were definitely real eager to have people coming in and joining it. It didn't have as many features as it does now. As I recall then, the individual allowance was something like 50 cents a week. It was a very small amount of individual money that you got, discretionary money, I guess. Most of the buildings at that time were sort of dilapidated --not completely, but they weren't like that kitchen dining complex that's there now, Jeancoya [?], now that's really nice. Things were not so posh, I guess, at that stage. It was a while ago, 29 years ago.

**Q:** But there was something about it that attracted you, though.

**A:** Oh yeah, I liked the -- it was the spirit of the place, that was nice. There was a wide variety of people there, it wasn't all one homogenous group. I think I'm more -- well, I enjoyed a branch of Twin Oaks, they had just started having this little branch called Merion. The people that went there didn't want to be part of such a big group and stuff. The main branch, which was called Juniper, then, I don't even know if they use that word at all now, because they abandoned that whole branch idea. It used to be there were these two branches.

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**Q:** But they were all on the same land?

**A:** No, the other branch was about three miles down the road, towards Louisa, in a little farm house. I really liked the people there a lot. They were a lot into gardening, and they wanted to have goats. More rustic things.

**Q:** How do you spell Merion?

**A:** M-A-R-I-O-N [sic]

**Q:** So after you came through on your way to Florida, did you go back to move in, or did you go back to visit, or what happened?

**A:** I went back to Michigan, because I hadn't been planning to move. All my stuff was up there. So I went back up. After I was accepted to move there, because you had to be accepted, and because I was joining the small branch, I think I was just accepted by the small branch, which was about 10 people at the time, I think. I still have this little book, we used to keep a little book there, like a communal -- oh, it was M-E-R-I-O-N. In fact, when I was there, instead of having my name Linda Bryant, I was called Linda Merion, so that became my last name.

**Q:** Did everyone take the last name, "Merion"?

**A:** No, I think there were two Lindas, that's why I had to have a distinguishing name from the other Linda who lived at Juniper. But this would say everyone who lived there at the time. We kind of kept this little journal. One person was really good at art, so she did these little drawings and stuff. It was like a communal journal that we kept. It seemed like the people there -- they were more into doing a lot of the back-to-basics kind of things, like -- they had just an outhouse, they had chosen not to have a toilet, because they thought of that as being wasteful. That was all done before I got there -- wasteful of resources, needing bigger drains, or more water or something. It was more simple to just have the outhouse. Of course, Twin Oaks now makes cheese and stuff like that, but we were really into having our goats and making cheese and stuff out of our goat milk. These were things that Twin Oaks at the time wasn't really that keen on. I mean, back to the land was a whole different kind of theme. They were more really into the social -- doing things for the reason of being radical social statements, than doing these living simply -- although that's an important part of Twin Oaks, even now I think. Living lightly on the earth, or not using up a huge amount of resources.

**Q:** Had you read the book Walden Two?

**A:** I hadn't, but I had heard about it. I hadn't really run across that when I was in college. I was more hearing about it after I came down here.

**Q:** Was it a very big part of things when you showed up?

**A:** Well, I would say that that whole thing about the behavioral engineering, it wasn't very important to me. As I said, it was more liking individual people there. I didn't really -- another thing I really liked was all the different jobs and things that women could do, and that women could learn. I especially got into doing construction work, and I loved that kind of thing, being able to -- I learned to milk cows -- that wasn't unusual for a woman, but it was nice to be able to learn carpentry, and be encouraged to do

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anything. Those were the kind of philosophical things that I went for. I don't know that I had a real strong feeling, myself, about how ideal society would be if everyone were just encourage to do things more positively. Say everyone just had a positive reinforcement, if all good behaviors were reinforced, everyone would become perfect people. I don't think that really struck me as being likely or realistic, or something that I held fondly. I wasn't opposed to the idea, it seemed alright, but it didn't seem like a guiding principle of my life.

**Q:** Were other people enthused about it and talking about it, or was that period kind of gone by the time you got there?

**A:** No, no, there were people, especially -- well, when I got there was a pretty exciting time, because they hadn't had any children there yet. In fact, there were just a couple of pregnant women, and they were going to have their babies. Everyone was mostly not thinking that they themselves would be behaviorally engineered, but at least the children would be behaviorally engineered. Because you start of fresh with the kids, and you make sure that they were only rewarded for positive things, so naturally, you would only get positive results. You would only have purely perfect children, which I can't say I thought was really very likely, but there were people who spent quite a bit of effort in trying to produce these perfect children. They had a lot of meetings about how to reward things, and reward the right behaviors, and how to do the opposite to negative behaviors. Of course, it's not that easy. They had to have a lot of meetings about, "Well, what do you do if the kid just cries and cries and cries and cries and cries?" And those kinds of things. They had these air cribs, I don't know if you heard about them. They went by the wayside pretty early on.

**Q:** What did you think of those?

**A:** Well, I guess I was pretty detached from the whole child program at the time. I was kind of curious. They didn't look cozy or cute or anything. They did kind of lend sort of an air of experimenting on these little children. Have you seen them?

**Q:** I've seen pictures of them, I've never actually seen them.

**A:** They look kind of like what you might see a preemie in the hospital or something. They look kind of sterile -- although I don't think they really were. They didn't have sheets at first, they were just supposed to have this screen like thing that the urine was supposed to fall through or something like that. I wasn't too in touch with that, it was a pretty elite group of people who were handling the children, people who had spent a lot of time developing a lot of the theory about this and everything. I think it's safe to say that everybody who thought they knew very much about this really changed their minds completely and totally. Cat had her child, Cat was one of the founders. But I think there was only one other person at Twin Oaks who actually had children. And he was separated from his wife, and she had the child, so they weren't really like a presence. And that person wasn't really consulted about their experience in children. So it's kind of funny to think of all these people with maybe some experience in psychology classes or something like that, setting about to raise perfect children.

**Q:** Reading about it, but hadn't done it.

**A:** And a lot of it, I think, caused a huge amount of harm to the children and the parents that were

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involved. I'm still kind of connected to the second child that was born there. There were 3 that were born there pretty early on. I still am in touch with a lot of the people from there. I just saw the father of the first child, that was a really big deal. He ended up having 4 kids, and they've all gone off -- the first child is a car salesman now. I don't know if anybody would think, "Oh, we really turned out the perfect kid here" because of the method or techniques or anything, I doubt it. I don't know what people would think of as the perfect person anyway. Kind of a haughty notion, isn't it. But the second child I think suffered the most because of the Twin Oaks philosophy. Part of the idea was that parents weren't to have much involvement. And those parents actually did believe that more than the others, and kind of abandoned their child to the Twin Oaks program. It wasn't very good for her, and, I mean, pretty early on it became apparent that people don't marry Twin Oaks. A lot of the people who were heavily involved with her left, so she was abandoned frequently by people that had become significant to her. Eventually, I think the parents sort of realized that -- that having policy wasn't the same as having warm bodies and people. Because everyone might agree, "Well, we're not going to pick up this child up if it's crying," it's not the same as having a person who knows what's really going on with this child and is really in touch and in tune, and is loving and warm, all these kinds of things that seem like they're much more important to me now. So that was pretty sad. I had a feeling, increasingly, of the wrongness of that whole thing that was going on.

**Q:** But it's pretty different now, isn't it?

**A:** Yeah, a lot because of that child. And people also realized things. It was pretty hard to -- if you think about the kinds of things that people think about now, about being abandoned, abandonment issues and things like that, that person had to deal with a huge amount of that. But she has a fairly good relationship with her mom now. I think it's still been a lot of stuff to work on because of that. It wasn't in any way, shape, or form, an ideal situation. It did not provide security because you knew this institution was going to be there for you -- people want a person that's going to be there for them.

**Q:** How long did you live at Merion, or how long was that branch going?

**A:** I lived there until 1976. And I think it went on for maybe one or two years past that.

**Q:** So did you then move to the main part?

**A:** No, I just left it altogether.

**Q:** So you never actually lived at the main part of Twin Oaks, then?

**A:** Well, I worked there. But I didn't actually have a bedroom in one of the rooms there.

**Q:** I see, so people at Merion would go over to Juniper to work. And did you take your meals over there too?

**A:** We often did. Especially if we were working there, or being there for some other reason. We could eat at either place. We would get our supplies from there and take them up to our little place. It was really much more considered part of one unit. We had our labor credit sheet and system. We had our own amount of domestic labor that was sort of I guess supposed to be the equivalent of Juniper's domestic labor, which was somehow separated. They had a domestic labor amount, so we could handle

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our own -- we didn't get credit at our ranch for doing dishes for a certain amount of time. That was considered domestic labor, and then there was community labor. So they had separated those two things out. We had our own system for dividing up who was cooking or doing the dishes, or things like that, cleaning the house, mowing the lawn. We had a little hammock shop up there, and -- but we counted our hours making hammocks. I think now, at Acorn, that's sort of another branch idea, I guess -- well it's not really a branch, I think it's supposed to be more of a separate entity -- I think they produce a certain amount of hammocks too, but I don't think they're on the labor credit system. I think they just sell the hammocks, or make a certain amount of hammocks and get a certain amount of money for them. You might know more about that.

**Q:** Actually, I don't know much about Acorn at all, because it's sort of out of our study period, but I think you're right, it's a separate community, with maybe a contract with Twin Oaks for hammocks.

**A:** I think they're whole goal is to become a separate community. I think they're starting to pay Twin Oaks for the land. Twin Oaks gave them the seed money to get started.

**Q:** Is that pretty close by?

**A:** Yeah.

**Q:** So when you moved into Twin Oaks, what kind of work did you do? Did you learn how to weave hammocks right off?

**A:** I think hammock making was the thing to do, and I did that. It was nice, I enjoyed it. They were just starting having this construction company there, that was going to go out and do construction work pretty much full time, not just for the community. They had always built their own buildings and fixed their own buildings. They were trying to organize the construction so it would have people that were really dedicated to their particular crew. They didn't want to just say, "Well, who wants to sign up to put up siding today?" and then get a hodge podge bunch of people together who might be able to get a nail in, maybe. So they tried to organize it. They decided they needed a trim crew, and an electrical crew, and a block crew, things like that. So I was really excited about that. I thought that seemed fun and neat, and I was definitely ready to do something besides make hammocks. So I signed up for three different crews, electrical crew, and block crew. I ended up doing carpentry too, exterior trim, but I don't know if I signed up for that right away, but I do know that I signed up for the others. That was kind of neat, because you'd work with this little set group of people. You could go off and do a project for the whole day, that was really different and nice too, than to just go and do 3 hours of hammocks or something. It just seemed like more of a tedious sort of work approach.

**Q:** Now, had you had any construction background, or did you learn it all on the job?

**A:** I think I pretty much learned -- I definitely didn't have any block or electrical experience. I had built some little things, some shelves, or built a little rabbit hutch or something, or a dog house, just little things that a kid might do around their house or something like that. Nothing of the magnitude that I came to learn about and do.

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**Q:** So were people pretty open to teaching you and letting people learn on the job?

**A:** Oh yeah. That was definitely -- it was like "Anybody can do anything."

**Q:** That's wonderful. Because it's hard a lot of times for women to get that kind of experience. So did you feel that the division of labor along gender lines had been broken down at Twin Oaks?

**A:** It was broken down to a pretty large degree, but it did turn out that mostly, the men knew more about the construction to start with, so they became -- they were teachers. And they were usually like the heads of the crew. They seemed fairly sincere in wanting to share what they knew. I would say that they were. They didn't know all that much, now when I think about it. They had a little bit more experience, and a lot more confidence. That was basically it.

**Q:** Are you still working in that area?

**A:** Not very much. I still somewhat do. Mary Crance [?], who was one of the other people you might interview, she became really much more involved in construction. She's running a little construction company now. I did that with her for awhile. Every now and then I work with her occasionally on a job when she needs two people. But pretty much, she's just the only person in the company, except she hires subcontractors and things like that. So she was -- and I did work with her a little bit at Twin Oaks, I think. Although, actually, I might not have worked with her. She left to join another splinter commune -- there were a whole lot of different communities sort of sprung up around the same time right about then.

**Q:** All from Twin Oaks?

**A:** Yeah. Some people having left Twin Oaks, because they were going to do something a little bit differently. Like that one was going to have a higher standard of living, eat a lot more meat, and have more modern conveniences and tidier arrangements or something.

**Q:** Did any of these splinter groups work?

**A:** Well, that one disappeared after a couple of year. That was Cedar Wood. Well, Twin Oaks had this conference every year. People would get together at the conference and think about forming a new group. So there was another one called Strange Farm that came out of that.

**Q:** Was that pretty short lived?

**A:** Very short lived, I think. There was another little group of people called Walnut something. They didn't come from Twin Oaks, they just were another little group of people that got together and ended up in Louisa County in a communal kind of situation.

**Q:** And this place, Baker Ranch, was that going on at the same time?

**A:** Yeah. I guess we would say that that was another parallel -- it didn't come from Twin Oaks, but it was a little parallel, communal activity that was happening.

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**Q:** But it had started by the early '70's?

**A:** Yeah. They were living here when I was living over at Merion. Probably they came here in '74, I would guess.

**Q:** And these were people from the Farm in Tennessee who wanted to start a satellite farms?

**A:** Right. A lot of them, they had 20 people living in that farmhouse there. They were staying in barns, sheds. They had a lot of kids. They were really into having kids. So -- there were like 4 or 5 couples, and all their kids. Some of the families had 3 or 4 kids. And they were tough. When I think about what that must've been like -- and this was really muddy, like the driveway, people were always getting stuck in the driveway. They had no money. I think they had a few men that were going out and working construction jobs to feed everybody, which was a massive undertaking.

**Q:** So do you know how long this lasted as a satellite farm?

**A:** I'm wondering if it lasted a year.

**Q:** Real short period, then.

**A:** That would be hard to really reconstruct, exactly.

**Q:** That's okay. I just wanted an idea.

**A:** We had looked at this house, Merion, a group of people, had looked at this house as a property or something that we might move into or do something with, or maybe Twin Oaks was going to start another branch here or something. So I remember seeing it before anybody had moved into it, when it was just like -- no one had lived in it in years, 5 to 10 years or something. It was pretty run down.

**Q:** So then what happened to the land after the Farm people moved away?

**A:** One of the couples, William Hail [?], who's the one I wasn't sure actually ever lived at the Farm -- see, he came from Charlottesville, and his wife came from Washington. They wanted to stay here, they didn't want to go back to the Farm in Tennessee. That's why I'm wondering if they ever lived there, that didn't seem to have a lot of meaning for them, the Farm in Tennessee. So they stayed here, and by that time, I had gotten married at Twin Oaks, and left. My husband was friends with William, they painted together and worked together and stuff. And we had a couple of other -- Willie, next door, he was one of the main -- Willie and Christine who used to live right in the house next door to me were also from Merion. They had been very early-on sort of founders, well he had anyway, founders of the offshoot branch of Merion. And they had left by that time too. They had a child, well, she had a child and had left. So all of us are so intertwined, it's interesting. They were caretaking a place, and they wanted to have their own place too. So there were several of us that had kind of left, we wanted to have our own houses, and also live near other people. We didn't really want to be isolates or anything, but we didn't want to have all of our lives completely shared, where you have to discuss everything, like, are you going to have chocolate? Are you going to have white sugar? Are you going to have white flour? Every little detail that people thought the whole group needed to agree on, makes life very different. So most people wanted to just try to work it out with their mate. So, we all, well, William found out that the people who he was renting from wanted to sell this land. So he told us about it. He didn't have enough money to buy the

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whole piece of 65 acres, and the owners were willing to sell it to all of us, as a collection of people. But we had already kind of divided it up, we had had it surveyed and decided who was going to live where and all that stuff.

**Q:** So was that farmhouse the only building on the property?

**A:** Yes.

**Q:** So you all had to build your own houses, then. Did you all own the land in common still?

**A:** No. We bought -- like I said, we had it surveyed, and we each bought the pieces that we were planning to occupy. So all the 65 acres took two people, William Hail, who moved out of the farmhouse. He wanted to do farming, and the person next to us wanted to farm, so they bought almost all the cleared land that you see out there. And they bought larger chunks, like 20, 25 acres. And then another couple, and my couple bought 10 acre pieces, because we just wanted a little piece of land in the woods, kind of. We weren't planning to farm. I wish they'd bought more cleared land, because I could use it for the horses now. But that's how we ended up buying our own land individually. We almost bought a piece in common, because the people had another 25 acre piece that they really wanted to sell too. We talked about whether to buy that as a communal endeavor. But it was a pretty unattractive -- all low lying land with just scrubby trees on it. The only reason to buy it would've been so no one else would buy it, which was a good reason. But at the time, when we were thinking, "How are we going to build a house," and all this, we didn't really want to be buying buffer zones -- we weren't very far-sighted in a way. Because since then someone bought it who just has piled junk on it. That's been kind of depressing.

**Q:** So how many households are there?

**A:** It started off as four. Then my neighbor over there, Willie and Christine, built a smaller kind of house to rent to somebody that they knew that wanted a place to live, but didn't have money to buy any place. So they built that. Christine's first husband wanted to start his own household with a new wife and kids and everything. He was already kind of a member here. They were, I think he was a part of this 3 person household. So he persuaded someone, William, to sell him a section of his land, like a couple acres. And some of William's old friends from the Farm who used to live in that house came back. They had been traveling all around the country, and living in California, and they had decided that Louisa was the best place they had ever found. So they persuaded him to sell them a piece of the land too, like a couple acres. So he has sold 2 two-acre parcels. Actually, I don't think they ended up buying that piece, so has another rental situation up there too. He ended up buying their trailer and everything and just renting the piece out, since he didn't really want to sell it to anybody.

**Q:** So now it's 7 households?

**A:** Yes, 7 households, and 2 of them are rented. Two of them are rented by people who were original founding members, and the other one was purchased.

**Q:** Is there any sort of community aspect to what you do there? I mean, do you garden together, or do things together?

**A:** The only thing that I think we do together, we maintain the road together. We pay for the road, and

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we used to work on the road one or two days a year, so a lot of communal activity. And that was rather difficult to arrange. But we do have a neighborhood road fund. The major accomplishment of things that we have done together is we built a pond together. That was quite complex, because it involved buying more land on the other side of the creek, and then getting, having everybody figure out what their shares would be of the pond building amount, which was substantial. And then since the pond was built, making decisions about its use, and then maintaining it. We built a sauna recently, so that was all part of the pond activities. We have a Baker Branch Pond Association. And that's really the main place we see each other in the summer, and now that the sauna's there we see each other in the winter and fall and spring too, because that kind of invites group activity, when you make a fire, have a sauna, it's like people get together and do that.

**Q:** So it's sort of like an intentional neighborhood?

**A:** Yeah, that's how I described it when we were first just -- we made up all these papers and agreements, we had a lot of agreements about things that were important to us, and called ourselves an intentional neighborhood.

**Q:** It sounds like a wonderful place to live.

**A:** It's pretty nice. It's been a little -- well the people next door, who I still refer to as being next door, have actually moved away, which is sort of sad. So that house is being rented. It has had a nicer period of time. We all kind of came here with little kids. My son was 3 years old when we moved here in 1980. Now he's off. It's sort of like this was a really safe, nice place to raise our kids up. And they had other kids in the neighborhood. It was really appealing in that way. They had free roaming, free access to all this land, we didn't worry about them. And we knew the other parents, things like that, and we had friendly relations with the other parents mostly. So it was real nice, in that way. Now it's sort of like, there's a 14 year old left in the neighborhood, that's the last child. And then having some of the original people move away, I'm kind of sad about that too. Because you can't really replace all that history. But it's still nice, and there's still enough people here that I have long term nice connections with that I am glad I live here. Especially in the winter or something, when you get snowed in, everyone kind of helps each other out and visits each other.

**Q:** Getting back to Twin Oaks and the early years, I'm curious what daily life was like. Maybe you can describe to me a little bit about how you spend your days.

**A:** Well, they were varied, which was important to me. And I remember living at Merion, which was about 3 miles down the road, I had decided I wanted to milk cows. I remember very clearly, that was a very early morning activity. There was always this problem if shuttling the vehicles back and forth -- you wouldn't want to take the car, there was only one car we mostly used. So I rode my bicycle down to Twin Oaks to milk the cows. I remember it being just beautiful, and feeling very energetic about this, and it was really fun. I don't think I actually kept that job of milking the cows for real long. It was fun to do for awhile, but it did involve a lot of extra things -- getting down there, and the routine of milking cows, I don't know if you've ever done anything like that?

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**Q:** My husband grew up on a dairy farm, so I have an idea.

**A:** Everything is done very much the same every day. Two of us would do it, and we did it manually, we milked the cows by hand, which is not the way it's done now. There would be one person on one side of the cow and one on the other, milk away. It seems so much like a distant memory now, but it was a nice way to be with another person too, and we liked the cows. It was a nice part of my work life. I expect on those days I probably did other work down at Twin Oaks at that time, either making some hammocks, or gardening, or -- later on, when the children were there, I sometimes had child care shifts, that was another job. We'd go to this building where the children were, and do things. Mostly they were pretty much babies at that time. It wasn't like teaching them to read or anything like that. It was mostly watching them and changing diapers, and feeding them and making sure they were safe and stuff like that, and not hurting each other. I'm trying to think of a particular one day -- it's easier for me to remember little pieces of days. When I was doing the construction job part, I think that we would leave also fairly early. I seem to remember the heat mostly, in the heat of the summer, leaving very early to go off and work. They would come by and pick us up. One or two other people from Merion also did construction work. So we would get picked up, and we'd go off to our site, grub around for the day and be hot and dirty, and sweaty, and joke around. I'm kind of focusing on work -- there were always romantic interests going on, and people discussing relationships with this person or that person. Jealousies, and -- they called couples "pair bonds" at that time. Pair bonding was kind of frowned upon, but it was a natural tendency that people were always having to deal with. People would get into a relationship with someone, and then they would -- maybe 3 or 4 other people would have relationships with that person too, but then eventually they'd want to be the only one, so then there'd be all these other things going on.

**Q:** So the community tried to discourage people from having primary relationships? You said that pair bonding was discouraged?

**A:** Yeah, it was considered not the best way for humans to be. That was conventional and narrow and like people having children, it's sort of like it smacks somewhat of possessiveness.

**Q:** So was it considered uncool when you got married?

**A:** Oh yes. One person in the community wouldn't even talk to me. I had liked him, I had thought of him as a friend. Yes, that was a very, very radically unusual thing to do at the time. I've kind of forgot about that.

**Q:** Now did you meet your husband at the community?

**A:** Yes, he also lived at Merion too.

**Q:** And both of you decided that you preferred to leave and start your own household?

**A:** I guess so. I don't think either one of us had really contemplated what it would be like to ask the community if we could have a child or whatever. But I think gradually, as -- we were married and lived there married for probably about a year. I think we left in May or June of the year after we got married. We got married in July, so it's maybe a little bit less than a year. My husband was more into getting married. I guess -- the other thing that was happening, was that it seemed to be a very threatening place

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to try to be in a couple. The other main couple that we were living with at the time when we got married was going through a transition phase where another person was kind of coming into that relationship, and the main couple was getting broken apart. Somehow that seemed very threatening to us. And especially since the community norm was opposed to marriage, it seemed hard to maintain a married relationship there. Plus, we didn't really want to have everybody have to be part of a larger group that was always discussing domestic issues. Having children especially. We'd both kind of had similar ideas of wanting to have a little place after awhile .

**Q:** About how many people were living at Twin Oaks when you were there? Because you said in Merion there were 10 people in the farmhouse?

**A:** It wasn't just the farmhouse, I lived in a barn.

**Q:** Wow. Did you ever winter in the barn?

**A:** Yes. Well, we -- I had a little wood stove in there, and someone else lived in -- you wouldn't believe the things that people lived in. One person lived in something that must've been a chicken coop. It was so tiny. It had a little bed and a little stove, and maybe like a dresser. It was very small. I think they called it the chicken coop, I'm not sure. And then someone else had a cabin. I don't know what that had been, a corn crib. It was about 12 x 12 I guess. So that was really considered the luxurious place to be. All the places had little wood stoves, but I don't think we spent too much time hanging out there in the winter. We mostly kept the fires going in the house. Probably just went to bed in our little outbuilding places.

**Q:** Were there other people in the barn besides you?

**A:** No, well, the goats were in the barn too. Merion got goats, that was our big treat.

**Q:** I would've thought that might have been a fire danger, living in the barn.

**A:** Yeah, you'd think. I think we thought we were doing it safely. We had something under the stove. We didn't know too much.

**Q:** So if there were 10 at Merion, how much would there have been in Juniper?

**A:** I think there were 50 at the community altogether, then.

**Q:** Do you think it helped to have a separate place to go home to, for privacy, or to have more community with the people at Merion?

**A:** Oh yeah, the reason why Merion was established was that people wanted more of a little family feeling, that there would be people that they would really be getting to know more, and people that they would kind of work things [tape ends] ... for people to feel like you could really be getting to know or feel family-like with 50 people. I think they have incorporated that into Twin Oaks now, they have a couple of small living groups.

**Q:** That seems to work real well.

**A:** And people who get together just to be a closer group. I don't even know if they necessarily live together. I don't remember the name.

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**Q:** Well the small living groups live together in the buildings. Is that what you were talking about.

**A:** I thought there was something else, like people who kind of were committing themselves to talk more about their feelings and each other. I think I have heard of that. I don't think they all live together. I think they might just get together to share and be a closer small group. I hear most of this stuff from Donna, and that was probably a year ago that I heard about that. It's a vague notion that I have about that.

**Q:** What were your relationships like with your neighbors? Did Merion have any close neighbors?

**A:** Merion did. I think Merion was unusual -- well, no, Twin Oaks had some farm neighbors too, people who were living nearby and helped them out at the beginning to figure out what's what, and -- I think Merion was really into its neighbors, being a smaller group. We used to visit this elderly Black couple that was our right next door neighbor. We took the kids there in a wheelbarrow to visit them. We would just sort of hang out. Sometimes they had home made wine or something like that they would share with us. My husband in particular was very interested in -- this is my ex-husband now, we divorced quite a while ago -- but he was really into learning about how people made axe handles, and how they sharpened axes, the wet stones. He was really into native culture, I guess you'd call it. We got a lot of advice from them about raising chickens, and gardening generally. They were older and retired, and they were there a lot, and they seemed to welcome company. So we would just hang around, "How do you do that?"

**Q:** That's great. So you were never hassled by neighbors or anything for being unusual.

**A:** That wasn't my experience, ever. People would come and want us to -- one other neighbor was a little old widowed lady, she would want us to do things for her occasionally. We had -- one of our other industries was called "work for neighbors" and the time. That was one of the kinds of work that I did a lot, it was more odd job kind of than the construction company stuff, like going and cleaning out someone's house, or doing yard work, or raking leaves, or tearing down a shed. Just really little odd stuff here and there. So we got to know even a wider range of neighbors that way. I felt like the community was pretty open minded towards us.

**Q:** Did you ever have any interactions with the sheriff or any local officials?

**A:** At the time of living at Twin Oaks ... the local officials used to try to solicit votes from Twin Oaks people, because it was a large group of people, and -- I think they were all pretty friendly relations. I don't remember actually having anything to do with the sheriff at that point in time back then. Maybe, ... no. We once took in some foster children, Merion. So we had something to do with the social services department. But mostly we just were kind of in our own little group. Going into town was a big deal. That was a special job, that was a job I liked to have too, doing the Louisa trip. You'd get all these little request from everybody, what they wanted in town. Because you wouldn't have 50 people all going into town in a day. So it would be one person's job to gather up all these requests, and go into town and run around and do all these things. That was fun, I liked doing that too. And then they used to have one going to Charlottesville and one going to Richmond. I didn't like those so much, I was intimidated by big cities. I could handle Louisa, that was about it. I don't think I ran into the sheriff. Just didn't have much to do with him.

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**Q:** Were there any leaders at Merion or at Twin Oaks, people that kind of stood out as being powerful or respected?

**A:** Oh, definitely, I would think so. They had the planners, naturally. At Merion, we didn't have defined leadership like that, but there were definitely people who were more kind of guiding, the guiding lights or something.

**Q:** So it was a positive thing?

**A:** The leadership? Yeah, I think so.

**Q:** Did you have regular meetings at Merion?

**A:** We did, and that was a source of some anxiety, and people sometimes seemed annoyed by having to go to meetings. Meeting attendance was not loved by very many people. Because some issue would have to be discussed. We had some meetings that were just to get to know somebody, those were low-key and fun, and I don't think people disapproved of those. I don't know what we would all do when we didn't have the meetings, though, now that I think about it. We didn't have TV or anything like that. We mostly had each other as entertainment. We played music somewhat. Of course, we talked endlessly about all of our relationships with each other. Little groups. We went for walks. I remember just loving -- there was a place you could walk to -- in the river, the place where people swim at Twin Oaks, I would swim over there sometimes too. But we had a place we could walk to that was real secluded and isolated from Merion, it was a real nice walk. That was really fun. That wasn't an evening activity so much. I'm trying to think, what did we do on all those winter evenings?

**Q:** Did you have electricity?

**A:** We did have electricity.

**Q:** And did you have hot and cold running water?

**A:** Yeah, we had showers. The only thing we didn't have which was really peculiar was the toilet was outside. We had a bathroom that had like a sink and a shower, and that was it.

**Q:** And then you had an outhouse?

**A:** Yeah. Obviously, no one was thinking about resale value when they were designing this.

**Q:** Did Twin Oaks eventually sell that property?

**A:** Yeah.

**Q:** Did the Merion group just sort of -- what happened to it?

**A:** Well four of us were here.

**Q:** Four of you moved to Baker Ranch?

**A:** Yeah.

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**Q:** So it just sort of gradually dwindled down, and then Twin Oaks sold it?

**A:** Yeah, I guess that's pretty much how I would describe what happened.

**Q:** Were there any kids at Merion?

**A:** Yes. In fact, I saw a child being born right there. It was my first witnessed birth. And the first child I really came to know and took care of and grew to love, I saw her last night too!

**Q:** Was there a midwife in the community, or did you bring on in?

**A:** Gosh, that was another case where we just didn't know what we were doing. Because we knew a nurse. I don't think she'd had very much experience delivering babies. But she volunteered or said she would be there and do it. I guess we all had a lot of confidence, and it was just sort of a natural thing to do.

**Q:** I'm glad it went well!

**A:** I know I -- that was one of my best friends, she lived right next door. We weren't that close then, but we were friends.

**Q:** The nurse or the mother?

**A:** The mother. And I sort of -- she became a midwife after that. She's a practicing midwife right now. But I often think, "What was she thinking?" Because we had already known one of the other births was quite a difficult birth, the second child that I was telling you about. She had to be born Caesarean, and she ended up suffering brain damage because of her birthing experience. I think the cord was compressed for too long, so she didn't get enough oxygen to her brain. Something like that. So we knew that there were complications that could happen, and it was a long delivery too, it was like 24 hours or something like that. That's all I remember, is there being that nurse. A lot of us were watching.

**Q:** Was that a bonding experience for your group, to go through a home birth together?

**A:** I think so. And then we all -- we were all pretty participatory in the care of the child. This was one of the tussles between branches, because the main branch had assumed that the child was going to stay down at the place where all the babies were suppose to stay, in the baby building. And our mother didn't like that idea very much. And none of us really liked it either. We thought, "Well, we can handle this!" We might not have had Ph.Ds.' in psychology, but we thought we could wing it through. We kind of knew enough about what was involved to handle it okay. I think it was probably pretty rough on that mother, and I think that's one of the reasons she eventually wanted to leave, having to make all these decisions about how your child is going to be treated, and how you're going to treat your child with a group of 8 or 10 people. Do you have children?

**Q:** I don't, but I can just imagine how hard that would be.

**A:** Yeah, it wasn't really that great. Although I think it was probably nice in some ways. We had general kind of agreements. No one was into corporal punishment or -- and the mother was a very patient person, that helped a lot. I think she felt like she had a lot of support too, as opposed to like -- I mean, I don't think my mother had an ideal situation of raising me, feeling isolated, like she's supposed to know

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how to do all this, and having no one to refer to. So I think there were nice parts of it too.

**Q:** Did Merion have rules about behavior that you had to follow, like smoking or drinking or drug use or anything like that, quiet times?

**A:** No one -- well actually, there was a smoker. We didn't have smoking in our group areas at all, but this one person that smoked, smoked in her room, which was in the building. So it wasn't a "no smoking at all inside the building" rule. Drugs were of course not condoned in any way by the community, but it happened all the time anyway. It wasn't -- no one was really very much strictly enforcing anything about that.

**Q:** So it was pretty loose, there weren't a whole lot of rules?

**A:** There was a big policy against having drugs on the property. There were like little places where people would go out to the woods to smoke drugs. People were concerned about being caught, having drugs be found on the property. Twin Oaks was very concerned about that. And people went along with that pretty well. I don't think people smoked drugs or anything in the house.

**Q:** What sort of person came to Merion? Was there a particular type of person that was attracted to living there.

**A:** I think it was people who wanted to have less sort of formal rules about their lives.

**Q:** Would you at that time have described yourself as a hippie, for example?

**A:** Probably. I definitely wouldn't have called myself a yuppie or anything.

**Q:** Were most folks pretty young?

**A:** I was my middle, kind of like 23, I guess. There were some people there that were older. One of the people now is 53, and I am 46, so they were like 9 years older than I was. They must've seen really old, "Wow, middle thirties!" So there were some "real old" people there too.

**Q:** So probably 20's and 30's then?

**A:** Yeah. Cat and Piper --

**Q:** Oh, did Cat lived there at Merion?

**A:** Oh, not at Merion, I thought you were talking about the place in general. I think the age range was about the same throughout the whole community. I don't think the age at Merion was younger or anything.

**Q:** Yeah, because Cat and Piper would've been on the older side of things, right?

**A:** Yeah. And David, he's turned 50 already, well, that's only 4 or 5 years older than I am. He must've been in his 30's, I guess. But there were people who'd been in the military or something, so they seemed like they had a lot more life experience. We had a Harvard and a Yale graduate at Merion. Pretty well educated group.

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**Q:** And primarily White, middle-class sort of background?

**A:** Yeah, that's what I would say.

**Q:** What did your parents or friends think about you living at Twin Oaks?

**A:** My parents didn't think too much of it. I don't think they saw it as a big upward mobility step.

**Q:** But they didn't try to prevent you from doing it?

**A:** No. I think it was -- I had moved out long before that, and I had done other wild and zany things, so it was just like another one of these things. A lot of my friends came to visit me there, and one of my friends came and lived there. So I would say that it was viewed relatively favorably by my friends, some of them somewhat mystified by the whole thing, but I don't think it was viewed as a really terribly weird thing to do.

**Q:** I guess it was a pretty popular thing to do at that time, was it?

**A:** Well, especially where I lived, living in Detroit, several people wanted to go live out in the country, and you didn't want to go live in the country on a farm by yourself, so yeah, there was kind of a movement feeling. Before I even came down to Twin Oaks, one of the people I was in a couple with wanted to start a commune. Just kind of, always was inclined in that direction. He had started a cooperative bakery, and he just liked doing things, group things, back to the land kind of things.

**Q:** Did he ever end up starting one?

**A:** No, he ended up living in the country, a back to the land kind of situation, but didn't start a commune.

**Q:** Was there much artistic expression going on at either Merion or Twin Oaks?

**A:** I'd say there's probably more, now, from the -- you know, they have that craft shop. Maybe that's the only reason I think there's more now. There was a little bit, like the Leaves was published, probably more often than it is now, I think, I'm not sure. And people would do artistic or photography kind of things for that.

**Q:** Was there a lot of music going on, did anybody form a band?

**A:** Yeah, they had a nice little blue grass band, it was fun. And we played the guitar and sang folk songs. My friend who moved down played the dulcimer and the auto-harp, and I kind of tried to learn to play the auto-harp, but I don't think it was ever really a fantastic venture for me.

**Q:** Were there any unforgettable characters, people that were sort of wild or unusual or fun?

**A:** There were a lot of those, I would say. Most of them, or a lot of them, are still in my life. I still am connected quite a bit with people who used to live at the Oaks, that's what they called it.

**Q:** I'm going to interview Jerry tomorrow, do you know him?

**A:** Yeah, Jerry Franz [?]?

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**Q:** I don't know what her last name is, but I know shoe was an early member.

**A:** She's in Gordonsville?

**Q:** Yeah. And Will.

**A:** Yeah.

**Q:** Yeah, and she called it the Oaks.

**A:** She was just out here at the pond. A lot of our group of friends are still old Oakers.

**Q:** Are there a lot of former members in this area?

**A:** Yeah. Well, Josie, the person who was the mother of the child I was telling you about had the difficult birth, she has become a doctor, and she's a doctor in Louisa now. And she came here as a child of 13 or 14. She was Cat's daughter. So she stayed right in the area.

**Q:** Does she still live at Twin Oaks?

**A:** No, she doesn't, but she lives on the way into Louisa from Twin Oaks, and she lives on Route 4. I was thinking of all the things that happened on Route 4, because I got married on Route 4, and I had my child on Route 4, different addresses.

**Q:** Has she been the doctor for the community at all?

**A:** I think she has done some doctor services, or at least has consulted with people there.

**Q:** Did the community send her to medical school, or did she have to work her way through?

**A:** I'm trying to remember how that worked. They sent her to medical school part of the time, and I think she borrowed money from the community that she was going to repay since then. Because she left, I think while she was living at the community, her tuition was being paid for, but then she left before she graduated from medical school, and I think she borrowed the money then. She did a residency and all that up in Philadelphia. I'm sure the community wasn't just saying, "Oh, we don't care if you live up there." I don't know all the dealings of it.

**Q:** I've often wondered if kids got any assistance with school?

**A:** They're better about that now. There's a person at Twin Oaks, Juana [?] maybe, did you meet her? She has a daughter who's going to college in Richmond. I think, because she's a member, they're paying for her daughter's college. There were other community members at different times who had tuition paid for and have been -- I don't know if they got, they probably got labor credits for going to college. I don't know how they ended up feeling when the person left after that, because that did happen. I guess that's been the hardest thing for Twin Oaks. I think they're dealing better with that, that people are going to leave, instead of it being a huge shock or something, or something you want to discourage at all costs, and give people \$50 when you go.

**Q:** Did you get any money when you left?

**A:** It might have been something like \$50. It wasn't very much money.

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**Q:** I would think that would be tough, after you've lived somewhere for awhile, and not have anything when you walked.

**A:** It was pretty hard. Some of the first people who left would help the other people somewhat. Like Freddy and Jenny, the people who had that first child, I think I remember them giving us \$20, and taking us out to the road where we were going to hitch hike off and seek our fortune. So that was ... and they helped people, people needed so much when they left, they need a car, and they need a house, and they need a job. All these things that seem so good coming to Twin Oaks -- you have a place to live, you have a job, you have all your friends, and then you leave and you have nothing! That's the opposite side of the -- but it wasn't that bad. It was fairly easy to get established.

**Q:** What was the best part of living communally, for you? What did you like the most about it?

**A:** I guess I had mentioned that I liked the country. I guess it was -- I just loved having people and activities with people around all the time, I think I'm a pretty social person, and I liked being able to learn things with people, and -- people really had a pretty positive attitude. I mean, gossiping was really frowned on, that was considered one of the really bad things. So it was nice that there was a real positive atmosphere, generally. People were pretty accepting, and wanting to -- most people were really idealistic, that came to live there. So people were always trying to find ways to make things better. There was a real sort of positive, optimistic air that not only would people want to make things better, but it was possible to improve anything, everything. I liked working together with other people. I really liked kind of having a way to get to know kids, or get to understand kids more. I had babysat before as a teenager, but I don't think in my early adulthood I had any connection with kids at all. I didn't have any friends who had kids, thankfully, at 18 or 19 or 20. So it was like this incredible experience to me to see how neat and exciting and fun kids were. To me, it was just like, babysitting was just like this job. It took on a completely different air at Twin Oaks, because there was so much attention paid to it, and not just that attention was paid to it, but it just was a pretty neat experience. It was then that I came to think, "I would really like to have a child." Where I hadn't really given it a moment's thought before that. It seemed like they were pretty neat, special things.

**Q:** What about the flip side, what were some of the hard parts about living communally?

**A:** I guess the main thing would be feeling like all the sort of optimism and hope and this potential wonderfulness, and you're sort of every now and then reminded of people have this baser side, or they're going to be kind of nasty or mean or, not very ideal people. And that you think your opinion is going to make a lot of difference, because people are always having opinions, and discussing opinions about things, and what people want, and every one's is just a small percentage of the whole. I was quite disappointed that no one else was into horses there. Because I thought, well people were living in the country, and they looked kind of like me, so surely they'll all want to have horses too. So that was kind of disappointing. But in a way, now that I have horses, I could see how that would never have worked out, with that many people -- unless the horses were there for some real specific, clear purpose, it would've been quite a mess, probably.

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**Q:** Because they don't like having different caretakers, or what wouldn't have worked about it?

**A:** They would've needed some consistency, and handling, and they can be dangerous if they're not the right horse, or they can be injured. It seems like something that requires a lot more than I realized at the time. Sort of knowing what you're doing.

**Q:** Looking back over your life, are you glad that you lived at Merion? Or how do you feel about that time?

**A:** Yeah, I feel like it was a pretty neat time. Lot of learning, very stimulating. Just getting to know so many different kinds of people, in a pretty, not deep exactly, but fairly deep way. I mean, you see people much more than you would like if you just saw them if you went out to eat, if they were your waitress or something like that. You really get to know how people are, from being right with them. Like how you get to know your family, how they are in the morning, or how they are when they're grumpy, or how they are when they don't get their way. How they are when they want something. Things like that, that was pretty, I can't imagine -- I guess people have that experience sometimes if they live with their college roommates. I didn't have college roommates. You sort of feel bonded, I guess, to a lot of people. It was a neat experience that way.

**Q:** Do you have any feel for what keeps Twin Oaks going? Because it's unusual for an intentional community, especially a secular one, to have lasted as long as it has.

**A:** I think it sort of fulfills the same things in a lot of other people's lives that it did in mine, I guess. It gives you a chance to lead a completely different life from anything you've ever done before. People come there when they want something to change. Maybe they don't want to live in a commune for the rest of their lives, but they maybe want to learn something about relationships, or they want to learn something about what kind of work they like, or things like that. It's a good place to learn a lot. And I think that the structure, it kind of has the advantage of not being -- it's not really based too much on personalities. The institution has established ways of taking care of itself. It's a being, the institution is an entity, a being that has ... the rules that have been developed, seem to have been developed successfully to keep the institution alive.

**Q:** Would you ever live communally again?

**A:** I don't know. I have occasionally wondered about that. I thought, well, I wonder what would have to happen for that to take place? It seems like I'm pretty heavily invested in my own life. But I could imagine -- if I were to live communally again, I imagine it would probably be more for some kind of spiritual goal, like maybe living in a Buddhist community or something like where I was trying to be completely detached from the physical world, or wanting to be really focused on a particular thing like that, where everybody's all striving toward something that I also hold dearly. I can imagine that possibly. I don't think I'm anywhere near that place at this point in time.

**Q:** As a final question, do you think that Twin Oaks is a success or a failure?

**A:** Well the fact that it's surviving makes it a success. I guess it might be a failure from the point of view of, did the air cribs work? Or were any of the kids that were produced, perfect human beings? But I would say just the fact that it's surviving and thriving and looks nice. The garden looks nice ...

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**Q:** It does look nice. Because I was here about 10 years ago, and I think even between now and then, I just think it looks beautiful.

**A:** It looks good to me. New buildings being built, things are kind of becoming more upscale, I'd say. And it's growing. From the sounds of the newsletter, it sounds like there's more people. And even that offshoot, Acorn, which I wondered about, whether that would do much, that seems like it's doing pretty well too. I don't know what the average length of stay is now, compared to what it was when I was there, but I suspect that it might be longer. That would be another way to gauge success or failure I guess.

**Q:** Was it pretty high when you were there, lot of people in and out?

**A:** I think it was something like 3 years maybe. My stay was 3 years, and I think that was considered kind of average.

**Q:** That seems long to me.

**A:** Does it?

**Q:** I've heard about a lot of different communities, I guess.

**A:** Well what do you think it is now at Twin Oaks?

**Q:** I don't know, I haven't asked anybody that question, but it would be a good one to ask. I know the average age has gone up. I don't know if that makes it more stable or not. But that would be a really good question to ask.

**A:** Well considering that there are people that are still living there now that were living there when I was there, so maybe not a lot. Some people I know have been living there a long time. But there's probably a huge number of people that I don't know, and don't know how quickly they're coming or going.

**Q:** Do you go over and visit?

**A:** I haven't for a long time. I've been wanting to see the pond. I'm curious about the pond. I might figure out to do that sometime. I used to ride the horses over there, there used to be several kids there that were into riding. We would ride over there and have a little visit like that. But I haven't had any real occasion to say, "Let me just stroll over there and look at the pond." I used to go over because I had some reason to go over. And then maybe walk around.

**Q:** Well Linda, thank you for this interview.