

Interview with Michael Almon

Interviewer: Kenneth Peters

October 29, 1995

**Q:** In what commune(s) did you live? Name (was it known by more than one?); location; dates active; purpose or ideology of the group; names of founders, leaders, and other notable persons.

**A:** Actually, I've been in several communal living situations over a period of years--both formal and informal. Initially, my first group living situation was very informal, it was when I was a Vista volunteer in Frederick, Maryland. Vista volunteers were, typically, living in poverty communities and living at a poverty level. Kind of like a "self chosen poverty," so to speak. We shared living quarters just to save money.

**Q:** The vista group was a government organization, right?

**A:** Yes, it was the Federal Government and it was called the "domestic peace corps." Three of us in this project--there were many involved in the project--shared a living space that was very informal kind of communal living: we shared the space, we shared the chores, and we sometimes shared kitchen duties and things like that, and shared rent, and that was about the extent of it. That was just my first experience, and it's like what a whole lot of people here in Lawrence experience, you know, they've got house mates and live together in a house and they're able to cover the rent, that kind of deal. And then, beyond that ...

**Q:** How long were you in that group?

**A:** That was a year.

**Q:** And that was only to serve the purpose of practical living when you were involved in the Vista group?

**A:** Yes. It was a practical way to deal with our low income and similar needs, similar interests. So, in a way, it was like people of like mind sharing a living space for reasons that are beneficial to all of them. And, there were, I guess I don't recall specifically, some problems that would always come up, like who left whatever go rotten in the 'fridge or stuff like that--typical stuff. So, it was very informal you know, no weekly meetings and that kind of shit. And, after I served for a year, and I was out, I decided to travel around a bit--actually, I stayed in Frederick for another three or four months, just hanging around--and traveled around to the West Coast. I looked up some Vista volunteers I had known when I was in Vista who were living out there, and ended up living in a communal house out there in the Bay Area for six months. It was pretty much an informal arrangement again, really, but, once again, it was people of like mind. These were people who were oriented towards philosophy and pursued the studying of philosophy and self-exploration and incites into one's own behavior and tendencies and blah,blah,blah ...So we did all the practical things, you know, dinners and rent and all that stuff, but then we also--more so even than Vista--we were doing this just to be together and share experiences and compare notes and write down our dreams and go ot philosophy lectures together and read things and talk about them--stuff like that. It was kind of like a study group, so to speak.

**Q:** So this would have been '71 or '72?

**A:** It would have been '71, late '71.

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**Q:** What was the name of the group?

**A:** No name. Geez, there has only been one place I can think of, actually, now, that I've lived in that actually had a name, that was more formal--well, there were two. Uh huh, that I can think of, there were two, however, I may think of others as we go along. So, that was a brief period and very enlightening and very informative. It provided me a lot of insights that I maybe had glimpses of before, but had never really looked at thoroughly. When you talk about things and compare notes with people, then things become clear, and you realize that just objectifying them in that context makes them stick. So, it was mutually beneficial for all of us for those kinds of reasons, it was kind of a growth experience. We kind of were doing our small little Esalen or primal scream or whatever kind of group, but we really weren't doing that stuff, it was kind of like that ... tea group stuff, or whatever. Oh, I could mention, incidentally, before all this, some of the training for Vista involved some of that consciousness raising and sensitivity training, tea group training kind of stuff, to get people acclimated towards another culture, because it was really a different culture that most of the volunteers were, white middle-class, although they were not exclusively that, but they were going into other cultural low-income communities very different from how we had previously lived. So, you know, that was kind of my background and my interest as well. I mean, what comes first, the interest leading to the experience or the experience leading to the interest? They further each other of course. So that's what I was doing for about six months in the Bay Area, in California, and that involved a bit of mind-altering drug use, too. It always facilitated things. An essential tool, I think, it wasn't for the purpose of recreational drugs--although that certainly had a ... there was an element there at times. But, when we were wanting to be exploring, to be exploring our inner selves and our experiences or whatever, if we did engage in any drugs, it was for insight. It was for a tool to use to gain spiritual knowledge or psychic knowledge, or whatever, of one's self. So, you know, it wasn't escapist by any means. Then I moved back to the East Coast. This would have been '72, February, March, April--I don't know--sometime early '72. I went to the District of Columbia area which was about an hour from Frederick and caught up with some other ex-Vista's there. I was living with a group of people there for a real brief period, in Washington D.C., and just kind of hanging out there and going down to Frederick to visit old friends and whatever. Somewhere along the line, I think from some friends in California, I became interested in self-directed education--what's commonly called Free Schools. What it really means is self-directed, self-guided education, self paced education. Non-hierarchical. Students aren't told what to do and what to study and when to go where, they direct their own studies and their own growth--young students, grade school, high school students--similar to what someone like yourself is doing, really, on the graduate school level, I mean, you're basically in charge of your own growth and education like most adults are. Self-guided, self-directed education for young people, essentially, gives them the respect and autonomy of an adult ... to be in charge of their own life. So I became interested in that and I was looking for a group, a school, a live-in situation, whatever, that was doing that, and there were some directories out of different people in groups and communes doing that kind of thing. I became aware of this one in Virginia--I was aware of several of them--but, this one in Virginia became kind of interesting to me because the woman who was the landlord--landlady--of the place that we were all living in, was at this school. I got to meet her and she seemed real interesting and she invited me come visit the school. It's called Nethers Community School ... Woodville, Va.

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**Q:** What was the communal group you were living in at that time called? What was it's name?

**A:** In Washington? It was an informal house, once again just a house and people sharing rooms and living. So, this school was the first formal communal group that I ever lived at. I ended up going there and, let's see, when did I first go there, it was probably late '72 or sometime. I'm not sure of the dates, exactly. It was a group of about eight or ten adults and about fifteen or twenty young people between the nine and seventeen or eighteen, something like that. It was a live-in situation, a bordering school, so to speak, a communal situation. There were three, four ... basically four different living quarters: there was a main house, a second house that a man had built--actually it was in progress when I got there and part of the education was learning how to build a house, learning how to make rammed-earth blocks and lay blocks. Anything was fair game for education for anybody who was interested in whatever you wanted to pursue. You did it. That house got completed a while after I had joined the group and so there were people living there, there was a geodesic dome that one person lived in, kind of seasonally, it wasn't that good of a deal for year around. There was a loft in a barn that had been finished off, into living quarters, insulated and all. Actually, there was another one, there was this small out-building of some sort that one-half of it was turned into a room, a single room. So, it was kind of a mish mosh of living situations, but, essentially, the group was one group that was on about thirty acres or something like this, in the Virginia foothills to the Blue Ridge Mountains. The group would share pretty much everything that happened there, whether it was meals or teaching and learning and taking care of the animals--there were some horses and a couple of pigs and chickens and goats and gardening--all kinds of things, and everybody would be doing all this stuff as a group and deciding who does what, when. It was one of these deals with, you know, weekly meetings. Decision making was by consensus.

**Q:** Did the community have any central religious ideology? How was it practiced? Were there any rituals or ceremonies?

**A:** As far as religiously, not really. Various people there were involved in various spiritual pursuits, but wasn't as a group. There were people who were doing meditation, people doing yoga, there were some Christian people there--they would go to church on Sunday, there were people who were atheist, and it was just a mix, it wasn't one ideology as far as spirituality goes. If there was an ideology, it had to do with education and communal living: Exploring the ethic of egalitarianism, self-guided education--self-guided lifestyle--shared lifestyle, extended family, the whole realm of ideas like that. Just to see if we can do this, you know, to see if it's possible, if it's productive, if it's creative, whatever--exploratory.

**Q:** So it was designed specifically to go against the grain, America's grain?

**A:** Oh yeah. It was pushing new frontiers into new areas where we were trying to find out if it would work.

**Q:** How did the people relate to each other?

**A:** It depended on the individual personalities. Ha,ha.

**Q:** So there were skirmishes and spats?

**A:** Oh yeah, oh yeah! Some people, in spite of the stated purpose of shared decision making and decision making by consensus, which you may know about, I don't know about the reader, but it

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involves arriving at a line of activity and a choice of activity that everybody in the group can agree with. Everybody, it's not, you know, a majority says this is the way it needs to be and this is the best way and there's a minority that says no, we don't like that. If that's the case, if there's somebody who doesn't like the proposed objective or goal or approach to solving a problem, then it's not done. By consensus, the group will only undertake activities that everybody can agree to do. It's been run around and around and around in groups for years to a greater or lesser degree of success. In that group it was--there were probably around twenty-five or thirty people, probably not that many people all the time, it varied, but upward to thirty people sometimes as few as twenty--so in that size group, for most decisions, it wasn't too hard to reach something that was mutually agreeable. But, there were of course, times, major decisions that people would have their ego invested in and wouldn't want to relinquish their position, thought they were wiser than others in spite of the fact that others didn't agree. They would say, "well you just don't understand," or "you haven't had the experience to recognize it," they felt that they knew better. A "father knows best" kind of deal. There was tension over things like that and I can't recall offhand how particular situations may have been resolved--it may have been postponed. Typically speaking, what you're supposed to do is discuss it to bring out more ideas and maybe a synthesis of various ideas, or table it and get more information to show the ramifications and implications of doing such-and-such, so that people can get a clearer idea. We probably did that--I would assume that we did. For myself, actually, my definition of consensus in decision making is listening. It's too late to ... I mean, generally, what people define as consensus is when you're making a decision, instead of taking a vote, you ask, "are there any objections to us doing this?" And, if everybody is quiet, and there are no objections voiced, you have consensus. Well, I say that that is too late to actually arrive at consensus. At that point, you're either there or not there, and what consensus means to me is everything that happens leading up to that point--all the discussion, all the soul-searching, all the listening, all the open hearts, all the respect for others opinions, whatever. All that stuff, to me, is what is consensus. Basically, it's the respect and concern for others on an equal basis as for yourself, you know, rather than assuming that I have a clearer and higher understanding of something than you do. That's kind of what I learned by going through that. I didn't know that at the time and I don't think others really did, either. Through various meetings over the years, working through consensus, that's the conclusion I've arrived at. And so we weren't really functioning at that kind of capacity, although at times we did, and like I said, it depended on personalities. Some people showed more respect and patience and listening than others, others didn't. So, depending on who's issue it was, how big an issue it was, who was proposing it and who was objecting to it, things got resolved more or less, easily or with difficulty. It was just kind of where the chips fell.

**Q:** ... and after meetings you would all eat. That brings me to the next question. What was the food like? Who was in charge of the preparation?

**A:** The chores, the food, the preparation, the washup, as any of the chores in the place, Nethers School--I think I mentioned that someplace earlier--was all set up on a basis, kind of a spinoff, of B.F. Skinner's approach to ... oh heck, what did he do? . . . there are other communities in Virginia and around the country that are based on B.F. Skinner's philosophies. Practically what they do is what they call work credits, so that everybody shares an equal amount of the work load. B.F. Skinner has to do with behaviorism, somehow, I think it has to do with ... you see we weren't actually one of those

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communities per se, we were kind of aware of some others, nearby, and we visited with them and kind of adopted some of their attitudes. But I think, basically, what behaviorism for B.F. Skinner was, was a way to encourage and induce people to share work load voluntarily, in their own self-interest, rather than have somebody order them to, and (thereby) have a boss. It was an approach to egalitarian work sharing. So, we were trying to pursue that philosophy, albeit, in our own methodologies. Anyway, we would have a chart and people would sign up for this and people would sign up for that and all the various chores that needed to be done. People pretty well did that, I mean, people didn't avoid signing up some times. Maybe some of the younger kids did it, I mean, nine was the youngest. For the most part, people were free and willing to share. Sometimes, however, when certain people--myself or anybody for that matter--sometimes would do some of the chores, it wouldn't be to the satisfaction of others. So, you signed up and did them, but did you do it well enough? Are you skimping or are you trying to get by without putting any true effort into it? So there was criticism about that sometimes, and also of standards of performance. Any time something like that would arise, it would be for discussion in meetings. The structure itself was pretty much voluntary as far as signing up and doing things.

**Q:** So they didn't apply the self-directed schooling into the kitchen area?

**A:** No! Heh, heh. The practical day to day living chores, or whatever, it was expected that everybody shared that. There were things taken into consideration, depending on age, little kids weren't expected to do auto mechanics.

**Q:** What were the economic arrangements? Did the commune have cottage industries? What was the source of money? Was money held in common? Who made spending decisions? Who owned the land?

**A:** That's a key question, and I'm sure you're aware of it considering this project you're working on. In spite of the best intentions, where there is money involved things can get kind of sticky. And it did, in this case as well. The land was owned by three or four of the people, kind of "in common." They had some sort of idea about setting up a land trust which I can't remember...I don't think they had legally set up a land trust per se, I mean there is a legal structure ...which is a shared stewardship and ownership of the land, legally. I know that there were three or four people that held the bank note or something and were responsible for the note, uh, the mortgage. Logically so, they felt kind of pressured. I mean it's their credit history and their reputation, whatever, if something happens and they can't pay the mortgage and it's everybody's problem if the place gets shutdown and repossessed or whatever. That was one of those sources of friction sometimes and it was actually one of those situations in which some people had a clearer understanding of what was going on and what the implications were, than others. You know, a lot of the people there, and the younger people particularly, had no conception of what that meant. But, they weren't really responsible for paying bills, so to speak. Most of the students there, like I said, it was a boarding school, paid a tuition. So, that was their contribution. Others like myself, staff people who were there, we made a contribution either from money we had saved or brought with us, whatever, or, some people had a part time job outside just to make some money. Each person was expected to make some type of contribution.

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**Q:** So the staff could keep their finances separate from the group, but the group had a common banking account?

**A:** Yes. Now there are some communes in this Skinnerian model that pool all their money. These ones that we were friends of, they did that ... Twin Oaks ...in Louisa, Va., they did it that way. They're the grandmamma of intentional communities--Skinnerian--Skinnerian intentional communities at least, and they had cottage industries and people all were supposed to work there. Our cottage industries, so to speak, was the school. We did do a few other things, but did we do anything for raising money? I can't recall if ... I don't think we ... hayed any fields or sold goat's milk or anything like that ... as I recall. Most of that was pretty much used for our own needs. So, I don't think that we really did any other cottage industry other than the school itself, as I recall.

**Q:** Who made the spending decisions?

**A:** There were two major people involved. A man and a woman, they weren't a couple they just two separate people, who had kind of founded the whole thing. I think, in the legal structure, they were like directors or something like that. And, holding the banknote, they did have that responsibility and they did make those kinds of decisions. They would also allocate certain funds for food and whoever happened to be in charge of shopping would have so much money to buy food. We also would mail order organic foods, whatever, from mail order houses. Back in 1973 their weren't a lot of health food stores floating around the country. Most of it was mail order. So the people that made those decisions had to work within that budget, and the budget was set by the directors. And that wasn't negotiable. They had a certain amount of money, and there were a certain amount of expenses--tractor maintenance, whatever, they would set the budget. It was a various level communal situation in which some things are more communal than others.

**Q:** Which probably would apply to the governing structure. What was the formal governing structure and how did it work? What were their rules? Did you have specific rules for membership?

**A:** Anyone that wanted to join--as a staff person, I assume you mean, as opposed to a student. A student would get screened, they would have to pay their tuition and get screened as far as what kind of educational background they had, what kind of student they were, whatever, just like any student might be. For staff people, you would be interviewed, actually, by the group, so the group would feel that this new member of the family would fit in as a member of the family. It was by consensus in that regard. Beyond that, you also had to contribute a certain amount of money--it wasn't a large sum--each year. They would want to know what your educational background, or whatever background is, too. Not a formal resume, so to speak, but they want to have an idea if you would fit into a school-staff kind of setting and they would want you to contribute to the running of the place: both the practical homestead part of it as well as the school part of it. So in that sense, those kinds of rules would apply. Going into that situation you would recognize those stipulations. If you agreed with it, that was fine. If you don't, then this isn't the place for you.

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**Q:** You mentioned something about gardening. Did the group garden or farm on a larger scale? Was the group trying to be self-sufficient?

**A:** I think the ultimate goal was once the mortgage was paid off, the place could be fairly self-sufficient through providing heat and food ... well, I'm not sure how self-sufficient ... I mean there's always vehicles and maintenance and things like that. They wanted to be as self-sufficient as possible, yes. There wasn't a lot of land in this particular parcel that was really tillable land for cash crops, for instance. There was quite an extensive garden area and there were areas for goats and chickens, but as far as ... there were no major fields ... couple three horses, bunch of dogs and cats--you know, typical. The school money was intended to be the main source of support rather than being a food and energy self-sufficient homestead--it would pay their way for the most part.

**Q:** Did the group build any buildings?

**A:** The rammed-earth block building that was in progress when I arrived was one that was built. The geodesic dome was also one that they built.

**Q:** What was the rammed-earth building used for?

**A:** It was a house. It was the director's house and he had one child and I think there was space for others to live there, too. I'm not sure if they evolved to that point or not, I was only there a year. I think they ... that's another variable in communes, too, whether the group actually lives in the same quarters and shares the same living space, or has separate domiciles. That's always a discussion and consideration in any group that's ... in this group ... was tending towards separate domiciles, but there's a mixture of both.

**Q:** Did the group seek energy self-sufficiency? Did it pursue alternative power?

**A:** Not a whole lot. There was always wood heat.

**Q:** There wasn't much back then, was there?

**A:** As far as solar and whatever? Not particularly, no. People were starting to look into that stuff but ...

**Q:** You touched on student applications and also staff applications. Outside of these applications, did the group have an open-door membership policy?

**A:** I'm sure they had an upper limit number of people, but if somebody was acceptable to the group and they liked the group, too, if there was a mutual desire there to have this person as a member of the group ...

**Q:** You mentioned that you were a staff member. What were the differences in responsibilities between staff and student? Were you paid as a staff member, or was it deducted from your contributions?

**A:** Well, you might say it was deducted from contributions. Essentially, a person's contribution to the living status was a small cash amount and then your ongoing chores. Physical contributions, work contributions, work credits as they were called in communes, so it's like in kind service, so to speak.

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**Q:** What were the living arrangements? Were there nuclear family households or large groups?

**A:** There were a couple of nuclear families. That one rammed-earth block house I mentioned, and then the loft space in the barn was another person and her son. The woman who was a director, she lived in the main house, as did her three daughters. The daughters preferred to be a part of the whole communal group, with all the other students, rather than live as a family with their mother. She was fine with that, too, it was kind of a very informal arrangement. It could go either way. Some members preferred to live as a family unit and others didn't. It wasn't like a rule one way or the other.

**Q:** Were there any rules about dress or other matters of style?

**A:** No ... something I could mention, actually, about a common spiritual pursuit, would be sweat lodging--about the only thing that was commonly shared by everyone there (that) you might think in terms of spiritual, which for Native Americans it's a very spiritual thing and for people in this community it was, too. We didn't do sweat lodges real often, but when we did it was pretty much a group thing, and as in the authentic native kind of sweat lodges, they were done in the nude. So that is the only kind of dress code, so to speak, that held. You know, you couldn't go in there with clothes on. It wasn't that there was a requirement, it was what people wanted to do. If people felt that they couldn't handle that nudity they either didn't participate or they maybe supported it from the outside by attending to the fire or something or other, whatever, preparing food for afterwards. If you actually wanted to go into the lodge, it was nude.

**Q:** What were the relations with the surrounding culture like? Were there any hassles over zoning laws or sanitation? Drug use or other things?

**A:** No, not that I recall. I don't even know if that county was zoned, actually. It doesn't seem like there were ...

**Q:** No hassles from the state or the city or county or anything like that?

**A:** ... let me think about septic systems or something. We had a septic system and it was operational. Seemed like everything went smoothly.

**Q:** How about people living on farms around your group? How did they react ... I imagine that you all looked like hippies, long hair ...

**A:** Some did, not everybody had long hair.

**Q:** There were some more conservative types involved?

**A:** Yeah, the older woman who was a director, she was from Baltimore I think or New York, I can't remember exactly where she was from ... just kind of a typical middle class looking woman. And the man, who was even older than she was, he was probably fifty-five at the time or maybe sixty, I don't know. He was a kind of a Swedish homesteader, so to speak, from Minnesota, and he just looked like a Minnesota farmer. Which he was. There were a couple people who came from different, separate settings like ashrams in California that joined up and they kind of looked pretty normal and straight. They didn't walk around in saffron robes or anything like that. And then there were a few of us that looked like hippies, which we were, and then the students looked like typical American kids. There was



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this other woman who lived in the barn loft and she looked like a big city lady, which she was ... it was a real mix of people. It was really neat.

**Q:** What were the people like? Who were the unforgettable characters?

**A:** Oh gosh, the Minnesota farmer--the Swedish guy, he was a pretty amazing guy. He had a lot of practical knowledge. He wasn't teaching anybody how to play the violin or anything like that, he was teaching his homesteading skills. And I might mention that the line--the differentiation, the distinction--between staff and students was kind of hazy at times. Anything was fair game for learning. Anything was fair game for teaching. I was learning quite a bit myself. I was learning how to build a geodesic dome. I also learned how to make the rammed-earth blocks. I taught various people some guitar lessons and a little bit of math and some drawing. Everybody had what they had to offer and everybody also had what they wanted to learn. If there was someone there who could teach somebody else what they wanted and what they needed, then it would happen. The ones who were specifically students, who paid a tuition to be there, what they wanted to learn was academic skill. Some of them wanted to learn how to raise chickens, too, and stuff like that. One of the areas that they were definitely there to learn would be math and English and history and things like that. There was a range of educational experiences going on with everybody. I learned quite a bit from this man, his name was Eldon, and so did some other of the people. The woman who was living in the barn loft, for instance, she learned quite a bit from him and did some of the remodeling of the barn loft, with other people's help. Some of us taught other people various gardening skills, and various people taught other people cooking--whether it us kids or adults or whatever. So, I'm not sure if I'm taking a tangent from your question ... what was the original question?

**Q:** What were the people like and who were the unforgettable characters?

**A:** And another staff woman, what was her name, she was one of these people from the California ashram, can't remember what her name was, she introduced me to some spirituality things that I hadn't been aware of. I hadn't been very aware of astrology for instance. Another man, staff person, who was a long haired hippie, he introduced me to the sweat lodge thing--and a number of other people there, too, that hadn't known about that before. He was a pretty neat man, too. Gosh, I don't know, a number of the students were really fun people. That is one of the neat things about a self-guided education, is that when people are free to pursue what their interests are, rather than to pursue what somebody is telling them to pursue. They just get so enthusiastic. They just pour their energy into it because it's what they want to do. They are not sitting there going through drudgery doing this horrible math computation because they hate doing it, they are doing--if it is math that they like--they're doing it because they like it. And so, people really blossom in that kind of setting. They may not necessarily engage in the kinds of things that some board of education may want them to. They may not study history like the board of education may want them to, but whatever it is they do study, they do it with enthusiasm. Seeing these young people really into whatever it was that they were doing was inspirational in itself. It was interesting, it was inspirational to other students. If somebody was really into math, they could get some other students excited.

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**Q:** What kinds of artistic expressions were present? Did the community promote painting, writing, sculpture, film, or other arts?

**A:** Visual arts, uh, there was some drawing people would do. There was a little bit of sculpture, no painting as I can recall, but quite a bit of music--both chamber music as well as folk music. Some dance, like interpretive dance. Every now and then some students would put on a performance. We did some theater.

**Q:** Did you have a performance area?

**A:** Yes. It was in the original main farm house. On the upper was a large bedroom, I guess, I'm not necessarily sure what it was used for. It was a pretty big room. There was a little bit of theater. You know, self-production, student production stuff.

**Q:** What was the relationship between psychedelics and the community, if there were drugs used? If drugs were used, what drugs? And how often, and were drugs used by most residents or only some of them? Were they allowed?

**A:** Ha, ha, ha. Drugs were definitely not central to the community. There was a knowledge that some people did use drugs, but it was also understood that it was in private, showing discretion for the surroundings or the local community, whatever was around, so as not to cause problems for Nether's Community School.

**Q:** So for the most part there really wasn't much in the way of drugs.

**A:** I don't remember any psychedelics ... some marijuana ... occasionally some wine or some beer. Really not much at all, actually.

**Q:** Was it a true pursuit of spirituality, then?

**A:** Well, I mean it wasn't a spiritual community. It was kind of like one of the ground rules really, the people that owned the land, the three or four people, I don't remember how many it was, that, they had that responsibility, they were responsible for the place legally. So they didn't want somebody else's foolishness to come down on them.

**Q:** What was the relationship between sexual expression and community? What sexual rules and attitudes and practices were present?

**A:** Well, consenting adults basically. I mean, you know, trying to do something with some students, you know adults to students, wasn't looked favorably on or allowed, really, I mean, it didn't happen as far as I know. There wasn't really that much sexual activity at all that I can recall. There were a couple of people that, I wouldn't really call them a couple, I know were intimately involved on occasion. Some of the other people may have visitors come occasionally. Similar to drugs, it was very private. It was, you know, not ... it was just acknowledged that if you do it's your business.

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**Q:** What other things about daily life can you remember? What were the best and worst things you remember about communal living?

**A:** Well, it was really exhilarating! Both, just the physical setting, the beauty of the place. It wasn't the first rural setting I'd lived in, but just living in a rural ... oh, one thing about that place that was new to me that was very beautiful for me was learning about diet. It was the first time that I really encountered people that were actively concerned about their diet--whether it's vegetarianism or kosher eating or whatever--just different dietary approaches. Some people there were involved in food combinations diets, which are in a given meal or setting, you only eat a certain kind of food in a combination with others, and certain other foods you don't eat in combination with other kinds of food. There were people who were involved in that kind of dietary thing and then there were people whose diet was a very big deal in this rural setting--you know, closed community where there wasn't a lot of access to McDonald's and crap food in the cities. I became aware of good nutrition in whole foods--in organic foods--and diet in general. That's where I pretty much started to become a vegetarian. Actually, I pretty much did become a vegetarian that year.

**Q:** So you've been a vegetarian since?

**A:** Yeah.

**Q:** Wow, that's more than two decades!

**A:** Yeah, 1972 or 1973, whenever that was. So, that was a very, very good highlight for me, about living there, another one of those physical highs, so to speak, that I felt really good about. The spiritual, ethical, educational, egalitarian kind of pursuits and explorations about consensus and all that, the whole milieu, was very, very enriching for me. It was difficult at times as was becoming vegetarian. Any lesson worth learning is going to be hard at times. It was really enriching to ... that's some of the stuff that I was learning. Some of the things that others were teaching me. Learning about homesteading skills, I really valued that, I'd grown up in suburbia and didn't really know much about any practical things like that--particularly regarding animals. Just the mere fact of learning about communal living, learning to be in an extended intentional family, so to speak. Every experience I had in communal living before that, as I said, was informal. Two of the places I didn't mention, in Frederick, before I moved to Virginia were rural farmhouse settings, but pretty much drug oriented settings. That's pretty much what the focus was in those places and it was very, very different. It wasn't what you would call a spiritual pursuit. It wasn't like drug use when I was living in the Bay Area, in Santa Clara and San Jose. It was really escapist kind of stuff, so that kind of communal setting was really different from this kind of communal setting. This really made me look at myself in many different ways. Those are definitely some of the highlights--the fact that in Nether's School I was engaged in my self exploration and spiritual pursuit in communal living, whatever, without the use of drugs. Occasionally I would smoke some marijuana, but it wasn't like you wake up in the morning, heh heh, centered, heh heh ...

**Q:** We used to always call it "getting plumb."

**A:** It was a very new learning experience--in a lot of ways-- for me. Some of the least enjoyable things were dealing with farm animals in a vegetarian setting. The whole paradox of that. That was a very difficult lesson, and sometimes very painful. For instance, we had a couple of pigs and people who

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weren't vegetarian there, they wanted to eat these pigs. The rest of us said well, okay, but it wasn't fun. They went and did their thing but, I didn't like it because even though I had eaten meat before, it was typical isolated U.S. middle class family (or any U.S. class family) attitude about meat is that it's plastic wrapped from the store and that's it. You know, when you have a pig there, or chickens there, that you kill, it's real different experience. So I became full faced into that realization of what meat really means. I didn't really like that very much, but it's one of those things where in a mixed group there's different attitudes and different approaches to life. It's something to deal with and work with and work around or work through. Another thing about differences in people that I didn't like was ... well, the pseudo-hierarchy, or maybe I should say the pseudo-consensus within the actual hierarchy of the people that were the directors. There were certain things that just weren't up for negotiation or discussion. I recall that that stuff was made known when you came to the place, but until I was in the situation and living in the situation, what the implications of that were, when I was anticipating being in an egalitarian, consensus decision commune. It was real different than what I had anticipated. When you're in the middle of it and you realize, well, this isn't negotiable, and you've got to live with it, you know, it's that same old hierarchy stuff. It wasn't fun. That actually came to bear on another one of the issues I didn't like which ultimately led to my leaving. How they felt, the actual students, the paying, boarding students needed to be educated. There was only so much, they could only go so far in embracing self-directed education. If some students were totally avoiding any studies at all, they couldn't accept that. It was more in the model of Montessori education in which students have to be studying something all the time--as opposed to Summerhillian education. A.S. Neal started Summerhill Schools in which it was totally open ended education. Totally self-guided and not only did the student get to choose what they were going to study, they also got to choose when they were going to study or if they were going to study. They could decide they weren't going to do anything. They could just hang out and that would be their course of study. At some point the student would come to a realization through whatever experiences, however long it took, that, "well, if I want to get that car, I'm going to need a job and I better learn how to read"--or whatever it takes to get them to realize that they need to do something to improve themselves. That's Summerhillian education which is more what I embrace so, there was kind of a built in conflict there in how I would want the students to learn and how some of the directors wanted the students to learn. They wanted them to always be studying something and if it wasn't this, then it had to be that, and if not that, then it has to be something else. I took a much freer, open approach to it and they didn't like that. They also didn't like that I more fully embraced that everybody there was a student and everybody there was a teacher, which is more Summerhillian, too. I had a lot to learn. I also had a lot to offer and I will teach something to anybody who wants me to teach it to them, but I'm not going to everyday go into a room and sit down with somebody and run them through some educational ritual just because they need to do something. I ultimately didn't see eye to eye with the directors on those two issues about education and eventually I left, because of that.

**Q:** Did this commune have a library? Did the students have textbooks? The instructors had credible credentials?

**A:** Yeah, it wasn't what they might call a certified school, per se, they may have been working towards that, I can't remember, but after students progressed a certain amount then they would take equivalency tests through the local high school. You would get a high school diploma that way.

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**Q:** So this commune appealed to high school and junior high school aged students?

**A:** Right. It was from about nine to about seventeen or eighteen. Intentionally that's what they advertised for.

**Q:** I imagine there were some kids sent there because their parents wanted to just get them out of the house.

**A:** Yeah, I think there were some situations like that. Some also wanted them to get a rural experience or more personal attention to their education, rather than, you know thirty-five kids in an anonymous classroom.

**Q:** When and why did you decide to leave?

**A:** I was there a year and it was kind of a mutual agreement. It wasn't a happy thing, I mean I don't think anybody really ... I mean we all really loved each other in a lot of ways and really were supportive and caring about each other in all kinds of pursuits that we did, whether you were teaching or learning in any given situation. There was a real felt connection there among everybody, but the philosophical approach to education more so than even the living situation was what the problem was--was what we couldn't see eye to eye on. It became more and more of a problem as time went by. It was one of those things, you know, that, "well, we'll do this and we'll do that and if any difficulty ever comes up and there's a problem then that's something for a discussion in a meeting." Well, more and more often, something like this would be discussed in a meeting and it just became more and more aggravated over time and eventually it's kind of a mutual realization of, "as much as we love each other and care for each other this doesn't seem to have the potential for really a long term working arrangement." We both had very, almost diametrically opposed attitudes about free school education. I say, "well, if it's going to be free then let's have it free." And they say, "well, it can only be free only to a certain amount because of blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." Neither was willing to budge--I wasn't and they weren't and so much for consensus.

**Q:** Do you consider this commune and your participation in it a success or a failure? Are you glad you did it?

**A:** A success. Yeah. Like I say, I learned a lot in a lot of different areas about my life and I felt enriched in the growth of a lot of people in parts of their lives, too, both academically, and spiritually and personally and philosophically ... practically. So yeah, in general it was definitely a beneficial arrangement for everybody involved.

**Q:** Any especially interesting anecdotes you can share about the group?

**A:** Hmm. Heh heh. Well, this isn't necessarily an anecdote, but kind of one of the ironies of the place. After a couple of us had researched and brought in some guy who had some knowledge about building geodesic domes and we came up with this construction technique and forms and whatever for making this dome with expanded polyurethane foam and, you know, self-insulated, whatever, blah, blah, blah, and figured out how to waterproof it and built the darn thing, it was kind of like, you know, a little meditation hut, or whatever--somebody actually lived in there some of the year--and I don't remember

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how it happened, but the darn thing burned down. Heh, heh, heh, heh. Probably really toxic with all that foam in there, too. All that effort and then it goes up in flames, literally and figuratively.

**Q:** Did you use the Buckminster Fuller design?

**A:** For the geodesic dome? Yeah.

**Q:** Do you have any documents from your communal living experience?

**A:** No. Honestly, I don't even know if they still exist. I guess they do. I haven't been back to Virginia for years. I've seen the director.

**Q:** So, you mentioned Sand Hill, another group?

**A:** Yeah, Sand Hill Farm in northeast Missouri, Scotland County, Missouri.

**Q:** Do you know when it was started?

**A:** It was started in about 1974 I believe. Some people who are mutual friends in Iowa, I can't remember what school they were at, for whatever reasons to pursue self-sufficient communal lifestyle, intentional community. They did a lot of extensive research, state by state, and county by county, and, you know, the kinds of industry and agriculture that exists in various places and the population and whatever. They decided that they could get really good land in a fairly remote setting for a really good price in northeast Missouri and so they did. One of the characteristics about that county is that it has been steadily losing population since 1900. That was one of the things that keyed them in on it. The land values kept going down and down and down and more and more farms became available. So that's one reason they ended up there. It was a pretty remote area, but really neat people. The people that are still around there, there used to be a railroad come through there and it went out so that was part of the decline, but there are a lot of Amish there, and people who have similar attitudes toward the land and towards lifestyle. That appealed to them also, people that are really spiritually tied to the land. There were four of them that started it, and then after a year, two of them left--I think it at least was partially, a personality thing. They hadn't lived together before like when they were in college. Particularly not, you know, cooped up in cabin fever style, you know, all year long, whatever. They only had one little bitty farm house. They had these dreams of building other buildings, which they have done since then. The place has grown quite a bit.

**Q:** This commune is extant?

**A:** Yeah, it is, and quite viable. But back then, it was a very intense living situation and kind of rough, you know, it's like the homesteaders. It's really rough when you first get going. In 1975, I had been living in Charlottesville, Va., where the U. of V. is, taking a few courses there, and I had gotten together with a woman who was studying there as well. We were both interested in alternative education, again, as well as communal living, and rural living, so we started looking for that kind of place and we visited several places around the country--East Coast, West Coast, Central ... and ended up visiting Sand Hill and liking it. At the end of 1975 we moved there (it was in December) and lived there for a year, through 1976. So just kind of at the tail end of what your study is. That place was much more of an egalitarian setting than was Nether's School Community. It was intended from the beginning to be a land trust, to be equally

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owned. When you speak of land trusts, it's not owned by anyone--that's the basic principle, the basic premise. The land is of itself, it's not a commodity that can be actually owned and used and controlled and exchanged for anything. The land is our source of being as the Indians or witches or others might say in earth oriented religions, "the earth is our mother." It is literally our source. Anyway, that's the basis for the land trust. The people that are there are stewards of the land. The land is literally put into a trust fund with a board of trustees separate from the people living on the land. The trustees don't own the land either, the land is, there's legal documents written up in which it's stated that the land can never be sold. Usually the way that's done is that there is an umbrella organization such as the Ozark Area Regional Land Trust, and there's others around the country that have ... they're incorporated as a long term organization and so, if for some reason the individual land trust, like Sand Hill, should fold or everybody leaves, then it would revert into the stewardship of this umbrella land trust, this overseeing land trust, this more long term ... So there's this kind of cushion layer there, of protection, so that it wouldn't just end up going on the open market again. So, anyway, they intended from the very start to do that and to this day I'm not sure that they have. The people that actually started it bought the land on equal terms. All four of them. So they started off with that kind of thing and when I moved there, this woman I was living with, it was understood that we were going to be pursuing that legal structure and we would have to kind of do it separate from the original four because two of the original four actually had left. I can't recall now if they had sold their interest to the other two, or still held a financial interest in it. It was an ongoing legal question.

**Q:** What was the reason for the formation of the group? What were their intentions?

**A:** Basically to do a land trust, first of all, so the egalitarian, in as much as access to the land, that the land is equally accessible to everybody--an equal basis. That, of itself, would avoid the problem, for instance, at Nether's Community School where the actual owners they had the legal burden really, burden and responsibilities. And so the various participants weren't really on equal legal footing. So they knew, people with the land trust attitude and philosophy, knew that that's a major stumbling block. They had done quite a bit of research and there are other land trusts around the country doing things like that for that reason. It's really difficult, if not impossible, to really do a true, egalitarian setting if there is a discrepancy in ownership of land and access to land. Any aboriginal culture will tell you that if they don't have land, their culture doesn't exist. When United Fruit Company comes in and takes all the land from the people from Honduras or wherever it is, that culture is very marginal and sometimes even disappears. It really is essential for the viability of community that there's equal access to the land. That was the main reason that they--I don't know if I can say the main reason--one of the main reasons that they decided to do this. Also it was to be self-sufficient, to get away from the industrialized culture with the conduits of petroleum based products and agri-business products, whatever, funneled and profited by the rich people at the expense of the common people. They wanted to break out of that, they wanted to ... they wanted to live rurally, they, you know, I mean there are people who are doing these various ... schools in an urban setting, too. But they wanted to do it rurally and they, at some point, wanted to do a self-guided education, too, a free school kind of setting, too. Nobody, at that point, had children and so it was like part of a future plans. There was kind of a multiplicity of goals that they had in mind and, you know, when we became aware of all these different things that they had in mind, we realized that that's what we had in mind, too, so, that's why we joined. That place does have

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cottage industries. The time that I came there, it was in its very early stages. They would have some fields, for instance. They had a few cash crops--some corn and some soybeans, and whatever. That was kind of transitional because the land hadn't been organically cared for until then and to do those kind of crops you can't do organic very easily, without a lot of difficulty. You can, but for that small of a group it's really hard to do.

**Q:** Did they have farm implements?

**A:** Yeah. While I was there, the year that I was there, we bought a used (I think it was an) Allis-Chalmers tractor and a disc and a three-bottom plow and a sickle bar and various, you know, basics. That was kind of the first stages of cash crops, but the plan was to get into other things that would be more easily done organically, and maybe even be more of a niche market. You know, higher value cash crop. What they've ... there were a couple of things, one of the first things they were doing was bee's, honey. They had twenty or more hives. I didn't get involved because I'm extremely allergic to bees. The other thing that we were developing at the time was sorghum cane syrup. Not grain, not milo, but sorghum cane syrup. It's really an exquisite sweetener and it's organic. It's somewhat related to the sugar cane, but it's more of a temperate crop. They have really developed that industry quite a bit now. They're selling I don't know how many thousands of dollars of sorghum every year. We also bought a sorghum mill when I was there. It's this great big--it can be horse driven--but, this was gasoline driven, they have various kinds. It just mashes the cane and squeezes out the juice, just like, you know, you do with sugar cane. We built a sugar shack and it's like a maple sugar shack ...same deal ...this great big pan and you build a wood fire underneath it and put down the juice into syrup. It's pretty straight forward. It takes some real skill in timing and technique to do it. So, we were learning all that stuff and developing that as a cottage industry when I was there.

**Q:** Obviously there were numerous outbuildings built then. Did you help build any of those?

**A:** I helped build the sugar shack. The first one, not the one they have now. It's actually a lot bigger. Just the first basic little shack. There was a barn there already, and a farmhouse. We made some improvements to the house, there was also a storage shed. You know, fixed these things up--we didn't really build anything as far as that ... We built a farmyard you know, put fence up, fixed up places for cows and goats--had a few of each--and chicken house and yard and whatever else, that kind of stuff.

**Q:** How many people were involved?

**A:** When I was there, there was four, the original two and myself and this woman I was with. We were, as a group, always advertising in various communal journals. Occasionally we would get queries and people would come to visit. But, in that year that I was there, nobody actually decided to come and join the group. There were a few people that came and stayed for a few weeks or a month or whatever, just to see what was going on and get a feel for the group. At this time, there is probably ten people living there with ... which is also a couple of kids. One of the kids was born there to this couple and another one moved there. I think it's a couple of kids or something like that. They're doing other industries, too, I mean they're doing various cash crops from gardens like, they grow a lot of garlic and market that. They've made pesto and market that. They've made tempe, it's a soy product. Oh gosh, I'm not sure what else they've done. They still sell honey. They sell quite a bit of sorghum. A lot of what they have



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there, the food, whatever, is for their own stock. They have an orchard that they freeze and can for their own use and a lot of the garden stuff is frozen and canned. The goats and the cows and whatever, the chickens, is for their own use.

**Q:** So they are not vegetarian?

**A:** No. Well, some of them are. It is a mixed group. And, it is a group that is a consensus decision making group and probably more successful than the one at Nether's Community School just because the financial arrangements were more egalitarian to start with. I was pretty happy there, myself. The woman I was with had a personality conflict with the other man there. They were probably both the same astrological sign or something. I can't remember, but they were just like at each other all the time. We decided that what we wanted to do was start our own commune. So to speak. We wanted to figure out if we could pursue something else on our own, maybe with another group or something. We had decided that we were going to move to the city for a period, a temporary period of time, whatever it took, get some jobs and save money to buy land. And to kind of go from there. It was kind of undecided exactly what we would do. That's why we left, because we were wanting to do something on our own. But, it's a neat place and I've been back to visit there several times. I'm interested in meeting the new people that come there. They've been there well, let see, they've been there ten years. So, I think it was '94, they're twenty years, I mean twenty years young.

**Q:** How are their children educated?

**A:** Well, let's see. How old are those kids? They're not real old. I'm not sure if they're doing home schooling or what they're doing, actually. I don't know.

**Q:** Do the newer members live in other buildings that have been constructed since you were there?

**A:** Yeah, one of the buildings that they made is kind of like a dormitory thing. It's not a big open room dormitory really, it's a ... almost like an apartment house. It's kind of a nice solar heated and a lot of south facing glass, well insulated, and there is probably four rooms on the second floor. The first floor is like a shop, a great big kitchen of some sort, I think maybe for the processing of some of their garden produce, I believe. They need a certified kitchen. I'm not sure what all is on the first floor, more utility room stuff. They built a much bigger sugar shack that has a large area for storing firewood dry and keeping cane in there. Attached to that is another little living space. The main house has been enlarged a little bit so it's more of a living space than it was.

**Q:** What kind of response do they get from their neighbors which, you said, were predominantly Amish?

**A:** Real good. They, I think they do this in Virginia, too. They were pro-active in coming there and getting involved in the community. They would go to the--I don't know if it was the Grange or whatever--they attend the local activities and probably go to some local churches occasionally. It wasn't a melting point necessarily, to be actively involved in religion but, they made an effort to go and meet their neighbors and they made an effort to not be some weird strange isolated removed hippies over there on the land that nobody knows what's going on over there. They definitely were pro-active about it which is always wise. In keeping with the Amish attitude, and the people in general around there about community ... I don't know if the reader of this knows, but as you know, the Amish do a lot of work sharing and

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community time sharing of barn buildings and literally, around there, people build barns together. I've seen one go up, and they go up in a couple of days. And so, we did that a lot with our neighbors, too. We would trade haying somebodies field for use of their combine, or something like that. They would come over and custom combine our corn and we'd help them put up their hay, or we'd help them cut down some wood in their wood lot. They'd just trade different kinds of things that people in that kind of community would do ... help building or whatever. There was a definite effort to be a part of that community and it still is on going, and they were very well received. They learned how to make sorghum from this old couple, I did, too, that's the year that I was there, who had been making sorghum syrup, gosh, I don't know how long--they were like in their 80's and still doing this. It's not easy, I'll tell you. It's straightforward task, but physically it's demanding. They learned it from those folks and they would have these get togethers when the cane came in from the field and the neighbors would all come and help, and you know, it was just one of those deals. If your tractor ever gets a flat tire, somebody is going to come and help, or if somebody needs a ride somewhere or whatever. It's just, that's the way the community is there, and that's really what they were looking for when they wanted to set up community. It's one of the neat things about the way that Sand Hill is working. Much more so than Nether's School, not because of the nature of the people necessarily, because people at Nether's School did outreach in the community, too, but just the nature of the activities. They were doing a school. They weren't doing haying and raising corn and combining at Nether's School. There wasn't necessarily that stuff to barter and trade with. So, just by definition of the activities that Sand Hill was doing in northeast Missouri, it kind of naturally allowed them to participate much more openly and easily with their neighbors. Which really appealed to me, too. So, that's kind of it in a nutshell, there. I could also mention that Sand Hill is a member of the Federation of Egalitarian Communities, intentional communities. There is any number of intentional communities around the country, and they have come together in an organization representing all these different communities. That place in Virginia, Twin Oaks, as I said, was one of the early ones. The grandmother of them all. And they are involved in other groups like theirs. That's another way that they can share in a co-operative setting, co-ops co-operating among co-op. They take this to various levels within their own community, with the local neighbor and neighbors local community level, and then at this national level of the communities around the country.