

Interview with Gretchen Miller

Interviewer: Unknown

July 29, 1995

**Q:** I'm here with Gretchen Miller, July 29th.

**WOMAN:** Now, let me know if I'm interfering.

**A:** We'll be sure to mention it.

**Q:** Okay, well the first question is the basic nuts and bolts. When did you live communally and where?

**A:** Golly, I wish I knew. Let's see.

**Q:** You lived in New . . .

**A:** It would have been . . . it was in New Mexico, and it was . . .

**Q:** La Loma, New Mexico, I believe. Was it not?

**A:** That probably was the mailing address. It was on the Pecos River.

**Q:** Delia, New Mexico?

**A:** Delia was actually the closest community. I could find it on a map better than anything else, but it's down on the Pecos River and it's actually not real close to anything, the truth is. And it would have been in the summer of 1971.

**Q:** Just for a summer?

**A:** I was just there for a summer.

**Q:** Do you know how long the group went on?

**A:** I was down there with David, so that would have been fifteen years ago, and there were still people there. Different people completely, but there were still people there. Not very many.

**Q:** And you say you don't think it had a name?

**A:** Well, I think it might have, but I can't remember it.

**Q:** Okay, and so was it going before '71?

**A:** No. No. Somebody had acquired this land, inherited it, perhaps. In the great spirit of the '70s—the '60s and '70s—wanted to open it up to a group of people to live on communally, cultivate, all those good things. It wasn't real big. I don't remember that either, but only ten acres or fifteen acres.

**Q:** And a house?

**A:** It had a house. Had a beautiful, big adobe house and which was one big room, kind of, with another little room off of it and there were two outbuildings—chicken shed kind of things.

**Q:** So, did everyone live in the house?

**A:** Most people lived in the house. There was a married couple who lived in a sort of attached separate room. You might have thought of it as a garage except it was clearly ridiculous. Nobody would have a garage, but it didn't connect to the house internally. It had its own outside door but it was built on one side of the house. It was an extra room. I guess with adobe that would be a real sensible way to add on.

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**Q:** Mmm-hmm. How many people?

**A:** Oh, maybe a dozen, all told.

**Q:** So, what's your connection? How did you get hooked up with these people?

**A:** Well, David actually got hooked up with them. You really need to talk to him sometime. Because he was looking for a place to go. He'd gotten out of the army. He was going back to school on the G.I. Bill. He went back to school mostly because he could get out two months early if he had to get out for the start of the semester. And then the G.I. Bill would pay him to do it, all of which seemed like powerful reasons to go to school. But he didn't really want to be back in school and he got connected with these people who were selling everything and moving out there. In fact, the woman of the married couple was teaching in—what's the place in sort of north-central Missouri? There's a state college over there. She was teaching there that term. And she was so dedicated that as part of getting ready she had an appendectomy so that she wouldn't need emergency surgery while she was out in the country.

**Q:** An unindicated, unneeded appendectomy?

**A:** So they told me.

**Q:** Whoa! Huh. How was it financed? Did people put money into a common pot?

**A:** Yeah.

**Q:** Was everyone supposed to put in the same amount or was it just . . .

**A:** No, everyone was just supposed to put in just what they had as they had it.

**Q:** Put in what you had as you had it.

**A:** There was a lot of talk about it. There were a lot of meetings about it all during that winter and the spring and I didn't participate in a lot of that. But that was how it was going to be, and I know that David always said that one of the things he thought he could do would be go to Santa Fe and get a drafting job and use his money to help support the farm. But that he never really wanted to live on a farm all the time. He'd be happy to kind of connect with one.

**Q:** Ah. So, you say there was cultivating? Did people try to grow their own food? That kind of thing?

**A:** They tried to grow a lot of food, yeah. It has . . . The farm had and still has, I imagine, water rights out of the Pecos River. And in fact, one reason to get people out there fairly quickly was that nobody had cultivated the land for several years. If you don't use your water rights, you lose them. So, somebody had to get out there and start farming. And yeah, we grew a lot of things.

**Q:** Was there any central philosophy to the place? Any religious connection or any focal ideology that brought people together?

**A:** I don't think so. Self-sufficiency.

**Q:** Just the whole romantic idea?

**A:** Mutual self-sufficiency, yeah. I don't think anything beyond that.

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**Q:** Okay. Were there any kinds of ceremonies or rituals, or anything like that?

**A:** Nope. Nope. Not that I remember.

**Q:** Hm. What was a typical day like while you were there? What'd you do? When'd you get up? What happened? Did you get up and go out hoe weeds in the field?

**A:** Must of . . . yeah. Go out and garden. It was more like a big garden. Go out and work out there in the garden. Go down to the Pecos River and go swimming. Um. Tried to get . . . people realized we were going to need money and various people were trying to put things together, like David trying, as I mentioned, trying to put together a drafting job that he could do during the winter or various other people were going to figure out what kind of jobs they could put together. Road grading jobs were very valuable around there, but they seemed to be locked up by people who'd been there a long time. What kind of crops we could grow that would be financially successful.

**Q:** What did you eat? Other than these crops you grew?

**A:** Crops, what we could grow and grocery store food, basically.

**Q:** Yeah.

**A:** It seems to me those were the days of food commodities.

**Q:** Oh. So you got some government food?

**A:** Yeah. I think somebody did.

**Q:** How was work assigned? How was work handled? Chores, housework, gardening—was there any kind of systematic allocation of job duties?

**A:** It was systematic for some things, like some certain amounts of cleaning and cooking, for example, were organized. The people sort of took turns and rotated that. Not the rest of it I don't think.

**Q:** So, you're just kind of expected to pitch in?

**A:** Everybody sort of pitched in. Everybody had things they wanted to do, liked better.

**Q:** Did you have any deadbeats who just basically wouldn't do anything?

**A:** Yeah. Yeah. Definitely. There were people who came through visiting. I suspect it must have changed after it went through a winter, the people who were still there. But, that summer, there were definitely people who would just stop through sort of on vacation, stay for a week.

**Q:** Not do much?

**A:** Not do anything.

**Q:** Eat the food?

**A:** There was a couple who were eating macrobiotically, so they would only eat some of the things that we fixed and we fixed pretty simple food. Pretty basic brown rice. Homemade yogurt. Basic vegetables.

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Pretty straightforward, simple stuff. And they would only eat some of that, and then every afternoon, about four o'clock, they would disappear and drive into the nearest little town and get Snickers bars.

**Q:** The macrobiotic people?

**A:** The macrobiotic people. And the next morning they'd start again! They were going to eat macrobiotically again. They did that for about a week or ten days and then they left.

**Q:** Geez. Were there any other businesses other than gardening? Were there any cash businesses? Did anyone sell macrame at the local craft show?

**A:** Nothing got together while I was there. There was a market in Las Vegas, New Mexico—not to be confused with its larger cousin—and there were people trying to figure out what they could do to sell their . . . But, when I was there, we never did that.

**Q:** This money deal, if I could go back to that. Um. I mean if people were really supposed to throw in everything they had, did they? I mean . . .

**A:** I don't think so.

**Q:** I mean, you probably didn't throw in your life savings.

**A:** That's right. I certainly didn't, but then it was clear that I was just going to be there for the summer.

**Q:** Oh. Oh. Okay. So, people did have a long-term sense of it, some of them.

**A:** There were people. Some of the people definitely had a long-term commitment. Next time you're in Jaunday, you can talk to my friend, Nancy, who was there. She definitely planned to stay long-term.

**Q:** Oh. In Jaunday, Oregon? She lives there?

**A:** Mm-hmm.

**Q:** Well, maybe that . . . maybe so. Although that's way out there.

**A:** Yeah. It is.

**Q:** Was there any identifiable leader to the whole thing? You say there was one person who owned it, I guess.

**A:** Well, yeah. The leader was David—another guy David—and his wife, whose name I can't seem to remember. And either David—our David—or Nancy Nicholas would remember them I'm sure.

**Q:** Oh, Nancy Nicholas who lives in Jaunday?

**A:** Yeah.

**Q:** Is that right? Huh.

**A:** Yep, she got a law degree in California and she's now practicing law in Jaunday. This is all after she left this. I haven't seen her in a while, but I know she's there. I can't remember their names. He was

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some kind of like a teaching assistant at KU. And we don't know where he went after that, but he was at KU, the boy.

**Q:** Leland McCleary was at the farm?

**A:** Mm-hmm.

**Q:** Yeah. I knew him. Huh.

**A:** Yeah, wherever he is now, he'd know more about it.

**Q:** Hmm. Okay. Well that's interesting.

**A:** You just have to find him.

**Q:** Yeah. That's a good question. So, this couple were kind of the people who were in charge?

**A:** Yeah. They were . . .

**Q:** By virtue of ownership and . . .

**A:** I don't think they owned it, but they must have known the person who did it or made the connection with them.

**Q:** So, whatever, it was okay that you were squatting there?

**A:** Exactly.

**Q:** Did you build any buildings?

**A:** No. A few things, not much. Did some ... kind of remodeled and upgraded a lot of the outbuildings which were really dilapidated. And the married couple had two kids, and they got sick. Public health people came out and said that, I forget what they said—they said something that made sense and we started washing our dishes and rinsing them with bleach water. Being real careful about that. And someone decided that we had to rebuild the outhouse. It was never clear to me why exactly. I never did think it made a lot of sense. But we did. We built the world's fanciest outhouse.

**Q:** Um. Was there any indoor plumbing as well?

**A:** Just water.

**Q:** Just water?

**A:** Running water.

**Q:** Yeah. Did the group try to do anything in the direction of energy self-sufficiency? Were there any solar panels?

**A:** Yeah. No solar panels. Not really water—anything to do with water. I think that's something people would have liked to do but you have to have better investment, I guess, to do that. To put that together.

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**Q:** Were there any rules about who could live there? Was it open-door? Could anyone come and stay? Did people have to be voted on either short-term or long-term?

**A:** I don't know. I don't think it was that formal. I think as the group gathered that spring in Lawrence and we all decided we wanted to do it, they pretty much decided who was going to do this and from that point on, I think any new person would basically just have to meet with the agreement of the group.

**Q:** So, there was a kind of a test involved? Informally.

**A:** Yeah. Yeah. As to how that would work in a pinch, I really don't know because that really didn't come up.

**Q:** Hm. What were the people? There was, you say, one married couple, some unmarried couples, I suppose, and some singles.

**A:** Some singles, yeah.

**Q:** So, just a variety.

**A:** It was a mix.

**Q:** Hm. What were the relations with the surrounding culture like? Did the neighbors think this was scandalous?

**A:** The neighbors thought this was very strange. The neighbors were almost all hispanic—almost all Spanish speaking. We were neither of those. I don't think they quite figured out what we were doing there. I think that they didn't think we'd last very long. It seemed clear to me that they kept a pretty good eye on what everybody was doing. And that they knew sort of how many strangers there were and when extra people came and went and pretty much what was being planted and what was going on and once in a while somebody would stop by to offer advice or something. Somebody came, dropped one night—late at night—somebody left a grocery bag full of cucumbers on our front porch, little things like that.

**Q:** Hm.

**A:** Partly, my guess is, partly because we were less obnoxious than some of the other communes in the area. There were others. There was one down the road that was much more drugs and rock and roll music oriented, it seemed like. And those were the people who, the story was, decided since they had to go into town to do laundry every now and then at the laundromat, the most efficient way to do it was to take off all their clothes and wash them.

**Q:** At the laundromat?

**A:** At the laundromat. And we were better neighbors than they were.

**Q:** Did they hassle you any? Did they give you any sanitation citations or . . .

**A:** No. Nope. Nobody gave us any trouble at all. A certain amount of cooperation from the public health people and the county sanitarian and our guess upon that at the time, our feeling was that they were

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just happy to find somebody kind of like them out there and they would be happy to make an excuse to come by and talk for a little while. Just make a break in their routine.

**Q:** Mm-hmm. Were there any children?

**A:** Two kids. I don't remember how old they were. Elementary school age.

**Q:** Did they go to public school?

**A:** They had not decided whether to home-school them or to send them to public school when I left. They were talking, I think they were talking about home schooling. Which in New Mexico, was then, and I think still is, real common when you live that far from any town. It's awfully hard to get kids to school in the winter.

**Q:** Were there any artists? Did anyone do any artwork?

**A:** I don't think so. Lazy, good-for-nothing hippies I think mostly.

**Q:** Well, the communes, of course, were nationally famous for sex and drugs.

**A:** Sex and drugs.

**Q:** Was there anything notable in either area? I mean was it wide open? In some places, there was kind of a certain paranoia and they were fairly straight acting.

**A:** No. I think the sex was between people who wanted to do it.

**Q:** So, it was somewhat open and free-flowing as people felt like it?

**A:** As people felt like it, but somewhat discreetly.

**Q:** Yeah.

**A:** There were enough single people there who sort of didn't know what else to do with their lives who, I think, maybe had seemed kind of rude, and all that we've heard about. There wasn't anybody there who liked them. They would be sort of let down or something. I don't know. It was very . . . just open, I guess.

**Q:** People did what they wanted to do?

**A:** Well, they did what they wanted to do.

**Q:** Well, what about dope? Any restrictions on that?

**A:** No particular rules. There was lots of marijuana and hash. If there was anything more interesting, I've forgotten. I don't think there was, to tell you the truth.

**Q:** Not LSD?

**A:** I don't remember any at the farm.

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**Q:** Hm.

**A:** It could be I've forgotten, but I really don't remember any.

**Q:** So, why did you leave finally?

**A:** Well, I really didn't want to stay there. I didn't want to be there at that point in my life. I was—hadn't finished college—and that wasn't what I wanted to do with my life. There were other people there who were in pretty much the same situation, but who really would rather stay than go back. Just a different orientation, I guess. There were people there who did stay rather than go back to town.

**Q:** So, you went back to Lawrence?

**A:** I went back to Lawrence.

**Q:** And finished school?

**A:** Uh-huh.

**Q:** And then went from there to Oregon?

**A:** Mmm-hmm.

**Q:** Huh. Were there any really notable characters there? Any people that stand out as . . . ?

**A:** Nobody was crazy or fruitcakes, no. I don't think so.

**Q:** crazier than fruitcakes.

**A:** Something like that. There was this other place down the road, and one day they came by and told us that they were going to make all the money they needed by making sacred datura the next road of choice for everybody.

**Q:** Yeah. Datura. Okay.

**A:** Get high on datura.

**Q:** Jimson weed.

**A:** Exactly. And they were going to prove it and then they were going to corner the market or something like that. This wasn't a totally well-thought through scheme. But this was their plan and they were going to be—head into this wave. This farm down the road away. And I think most everybody at our place's reaction was sort of, "That's really interesting. Tell us about it when you're a little farther along with this plan." And the next thing I heard about it anyway that was several weeks later when I heard that they had been trying various preparations of datura to figure out what's the very best way to ingest this and some preparations simply made them sick and one preparation made them see everything green. And they hadn't found one that really got them high, so the plan wasn't going very well.

**Q:** Okay. Well, if you had it to do over would you do it again?

**A:** I'm sure it was a lot of fun.



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**Q:** Yeah.

**A:** It was great. I was not very . . . I was never very committed to it, obviously not. I think a lot of the people were, but I had a good time, a lot of things became clear—a lot of very obvious things became clear—but at least I figured them out then. Like, there isn't any way you could move away. Or everywhere you go has its own well-developed culture that's all sort of put together and integrated and there's no possibility that you're going to go somewhere that's inhabited by lesser creatures who don't really understand and you'll be able to explain it to them or help them or you know clear this out. There's sort of nowhere you can go where you can be off in the wilderness and create a better society because there's just no starting point to do that. There isn't anywhere that doesn't already have one.

**Q:** Hmm.

**A:** A lot of things like . . . things along those lines that you just have to decide what kind of culture you want to live in. Which may sound pretty simple but . . .

**WOMAN:** Not when you're twenty-one.

**A:** Yeah, right. I'm not sure everybody got that at that point. I think in the '60s and '70s, that a lot of people thought there was a place where you could go and really start completely fresh.

**Q:** Do you have any documents from it by any chance?

**A:** I don't think I have anything at all. I might have a few pictures.

**Q:** Yeah?

**A:** Sometime I ought to look in the old picture piles. I don't know where the old picture pile is.

**Q:** Okay. That'd be great.

**A:** I know that when David and I split up, I divided them in half and gave him half and the next time I talked to him he said that his young daughter had spilled juice all over them in the car and his were ruined. But I think I probably still have half of them somewhere.

**Q:** Okay. Well, that'd be great. Well, I want to shift actually slightly. I mean, you lived in a different sort of collective environment on Augusta Street once you got to Oregon. Would you describe that a little bit?

**A:** Sure. That wasn't communal living in the sense that we all put in money every month for rent and food and expenses and everybody put in the same amount pretty much, with some small exceptions. But we did certainly all live really together. No question about that.

**Q:** Yeah. You ate meals all the time.

**A:** We ate all of our meals together, heated with wood. We got in the wood and organized all that together.

**Q:** So, how did that come together? Did that have a name other than 1995 Augusta?

**A:** Nope. We didn't have a name. Just a place to live.

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**Q:** How many people?

**A:** Well, the stamp set was the two Michaels, and me and David. That was the basic core group.

**Q:** But you had others?

**A:** There were other people through from time to time. But that core group was there for, I don't know, eight or ten years, maybe? A long time. Michael Caffrey was there. Let's see, Susan O'Keefe, who I still know, lived in a teepee out in the backyard for a while. Not too long after I got there. One summer, she lived in her teepee in the backyard and we had more guests that year because as you were hitching up and down I-5, you could see the teepee from the freeway. We had lots of company.

**Q:** That's disaster in the world of hippy communes. To be identifiable.

**A:** Yeah. That was a problem. It was okay, really. It was just a little busy. And various people came through on a longer term basis than that.

**Q:** So, you just rented the house and went from there.

**A:** Just rented the house, yeah. When David and I got to Eugene, his old junior high school buddy was living next door, and we stopped to see his junior high school buddy who said basically that his wife was having no more of his visitors, but there was a room in the house next door and maybe we should talk to them about staying for a few days, and we just never left.

**Q:** Hm. Were Michael and Michael already there?

**A:** Michael Caffrey was already there. I can't remember if Michael Anderson was already there. I think he may have come shortly thereafter. There was really only one bedroom in the house and a closed-in porch in the front and a garage that Michael Caffrey had converted into his bedroom. It's really all that it was.

**Q:** And you lived in the chicken coop.

**A:** We lived in the chicken coop. We built another chicken coop for the chickens. We had a big garden.

**Q:** So, well let's see the same questions, I suppose. What'd you eat?

**A:** Vegetarian.

**Q:** Oh, was it vegetarian?

**A:** It was all vegetarian. We would have meat occasionally, but a few times a year. We would have a turkey for Thanksgiving, but I would say maybe five times a year or so. It was very vegetarian, it was very low-budget, very much dedicated to healthy food. Chopped a lot of the food off.

**Q:** What about housework there? Did you have any formal system? The cooking and cleaning . . .

**A:** We had a formal system for meals and dishes. We didn't have a formal system for cleaning up. Everybody was supposed to do it, and I think Mike Caffrey did the most because messes bothered him the most and because he was home all day doing his jewelry and the rest of us were mostly out a lot during the day.

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**Q:** Did you do any gardening there?

**A:** A big garden.

**Q:** Yeah. So that cut down on the food expenses, did it?

**A:** Yeah. We had to go out into the garden.

**Q:** Did you build any buildings there other than the chicken coop?

**A:** I think just the chicken coop. Remodeled the chicken house to live in. We remodeled some.

**Q:** The visitors that came, you say that people stayed for various links of time, but in teepees or . . . ?

**A:** Usually in teepees or a tent or some kind of an outbuilding, temporary thing like that. There just really wasn't any room in the house to put anybody else. There was a guy who came from France—now I can't remember why—he came from France, just to visit and got hepatitis. He lived on our couch for months while he got better. There wasn't anywhere else to put anybody!

**Q:** I see.

**A:** And he was too sick to go on. So, he stayed on the couch for a long time while he got well enough to travel.

**Q:** Um, what about psychedelics and stuff there? Did the dope still flow at that place?

**A:** Yeah. There was dope.

**Q:** Like at the farm?

**A:** It did. It did.

**Q:** What are the dates? When did you go up there? When did you start there?

**A:** '72 and must have been about '80 or '81. After 1980. Must have been about '81 when we left. Yeah.

**Q:** So, quite a while.

**A:** Yeah. It's been a long time.

**Q:** Can you describe the best and worst thing that you remember about the place?

**A:** It was a lovely place. This marsh out in back that was very wet and beautiful flowers in the spring and just a lovely place in that sense. We could have a garden and we could have chickens and it's a fairly short bicycle ride to town. It was such cheap living, that we were able to kind of do anything we wanted to do and still live there. It was so inexpensive. I was able to go through law school and live there, and pay for law school, basically, because I didn't have to pay living expenses like most people did.

**Q:** How much did you have to pay to live there?

**A:** Well, toward the end of the time we were there, the total rent for the place was \$88.

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**Q:** The rent?

**A:** We were splitting that four ways. Or five or six, depending on how many people were there. And we had some electricity bills, but since we heated mostly with wood, those were low. And food. That's about it.

**Q:** Still, that's pretty cheap alright.

**A:** Yeah. Pretty cheap.

**Q:** So, you only left that when you changed relationships, right? Isn't that right?

**A:** Actually, it was all kind of at the same time. I changed relationships and we all got evicted.

**Q:** Oh you did?

**A:** The landlord wanted to have his son move in.

**Q:** Ah. So he wanted it back.

**A:** He wanted it back. So, that . . . everybody basically had to scatter at that point.

**Q:** Are you in communication with very many people from either one of the groups, either Augusta or New Mexico, today?

**A:** Not regularly. David and Nancy from New Mexico. And from Augusta Street, I could probably find all three of them if I had to, although it might take a while to find Michael Anderson who moved back to Pittsburgh. But he's there somewhere. I suppose we could find him if we had to. Not in communication, no. He calls once in a while, usually late at night. Every two or three years. And Susan O'Keefe, who lived in the teepee in the backyard, is Alexi's best friend's mother, which was entirely fortuitous that later on we discovered we had these kids who were born at the same time and sort of re-connected. But Eugene's the kind of place where you tend to see people again.

**Q:** Yeah, right. I wanted to ask one other question, basically in terms of this list, what other . . . you said there were some up and down the road in New Mexico and stuff. I wonder, should I get a line on what else there was?

**A:** You're going to have to ask David or Nancy, and they'd probably remember. There are probably people involved in this who have some kind of a memory left. And in fact, if you're hard up for these things, you might ask Nancy what she knows about communes in Hawaii because after she left the place in New Mexico, she went to Hawaii, and she had some hair-raising experiences there. But I can't remember the names of any of these places.

**Q:** Hm. So, she stayed in the communal circumstances in Hawaii. Is that right?

**A:** Well, she lived with extended family, and I'm not sure what I'd call it exactly. I think you'd have to ask her.