

Interview with Jean Burgess

Interviewer: Unknown

n.d.

Q: In what commune did you live?

A: It was called Obiji Farm. It was 6 miles north of Lawrence, and still is.

Q: Is it still continuing today.

A: Yes.

Q: When, in what years were you there?

A: From 1974-1979.

Q: Was it founded in 1974?

A: Yes.

Q: Who were some of the founders?

A: Well, I didn't really consider it to be a commune at the time, I considered it to be just my family's farm. So it was just my sisters and I and one of my brothers, there were some other people who were also involved.

Q: Was there a certain ideology around the group?

A: Just that we were a family and that we wanted to live together. I mean, there probably was other stuff going on there, but just in general, kind of back to the land.

Q: Why was it named what it was?

A: My oldest sister, when she was a little girl and she was asked what her name was, she said her name was Ann Obiji and this was not our real last name. We figured that this was her archetypal name or something of our family or somehow the right name.

Q: When you say family, do you mean that these were all your relatives that were living with you?

A: My sisters.

Q: Your sisters,

A: and my brother in-law and there were a few other people.

Q: How many were there total?

A: Let's see, four of us were sisters, one of my brothers in-law and our children, and usually one or two others. The population fluctuated sometimes.

Q: Do you think you had some type of predisposition towards community, in the past, your family or your parents, did they live in a community or anything like that?

A: My dad came from a large family, but that's all really.

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Q: Why do you think it appealed to you to live like that?

A: It seemed like the thing to do at the time. I liked the idea of living in the country, I guess I had been living with my sister and brother-in-law for a various number of years, for a few years before that too.

Q: What kind of books or literature do you think you read that influenced your going to that phase?

A: Well, all I can think of right now is this book on midwifery, about the people on Steven Gaston's farm. Bradford Angier, a guy who talked about living in the woods, he was the guy who wrote the "Edible Planet". There were some books about building your own home, homesteading, there was a magazine called Country Woman, that kind of reinforced it.

Q: Did you have some specialty in trying to provide?

A: I think that I imagined that was going to happen over time, we had a vegetable garden and milk goats, chickens for eggs.

Q: What about energy? Did you try some sort of alternative energy sources?

A: No.

Q: Did you build any buildings out there?

A: Yes. There was an existing building that we sort of restored, a house, a full barn construction, so it was kind of an ongoing thing. There were things always being added to, when there was another child born and stuff. There were some other structures out there. There's another separate living place. A place where one guy practices music, there was a sauna in the barn.

Q: Did the war in Vietnam have any effect on you living in a community?

A: It probably did, but I wouldn't be able to say what. What effect it had.

Q: How did people relate to each other, how were the chores divided among you, between women and men, were they divided sort of across gender roles, did women do the same things as men or did women cook and maintain gender roles or did women sort of "work in the field"?

A: I think that there were attempts to be egalitarian. I would guess that the men would end up doing more of the heavy duty things, like working with power tools. We had to start with little building skills. My sister who is still there has learned a lot of building skills. I'd say she's pretty self-sufficient with that. One of the guys worked on cars, from the beginning he worked on cars.

Q: Did you eat your meals together?

A: For most of the years I was there, I guess for all of the years I was there, we did. I think they don't do that now.

Q: What was the food like?

A: Like healthy stuff, like brown rice and vegetables, cheese and mostly vegetables.

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Q: Was it the women who usually did the cooking or was it a combination?

A: A combination, I think that people sort of took turns. I think it was probably more often group cooking.

Q: How were the other chores assigned? Did everyone do what needed to be done or did you actually have arrangements where you decided “you do this today” and “you do this today”?

A: Some of those things were divided among who was interested or who had abilities in that area. Like, I was really interested in taking care of the goats, so that was my job to feed the animals and take care of the animals. Usually that’s the part of it that I would do. I would hardly ever do any cooking. That was usually what I would do.

Q: What were the economic arrangements as far as, I don’t know if there was any rent to be paid, how was it divided up, how did you buy the food you needed?

A: We bought it and it was, I think we were trying to put in amounts proportional to our income. For the first few years, we were putting in, I think everybody was putting in everything they made. But nobody had a full time job, when some people started working more hours than others and making a lot more, then I think they reserved a part of that for themselves. I at least made a distinction between the people who were buying it and the people who were staying there but not buying it. So the way I saw it, the family was buying it and the other people who were living there were renting. I don’t know if that continued, I think they changed the way they thought about that over time.

Q: Did you have electricity?

A: Yes.

Q: Were the bills then just split equally among everyone or was it still based on what you could afford to put in?

A: I’m not really sure how it was taken care of. For a long time I was just, my paycheck would go towards paying off the land payment and that was just my responsibility and somebody else would have taken care of the other stuff. I’m not real sure. I know that we did have electricity, but we didn’t have water through the city, the water was collected rainwater or we brought water out, hauled water out in the truck and stored it in the cistern. What they do now is pumping it up from the ground. So I guess that’s sort of the way that they’re being self-sufficient.

Q: Was there any kind of formal governing structure?

A: No, not a formal governing structure. I think that the idea was that it was not considered to be a democracy where things would be decided by majority rule, but it was like, we wanted a consensus, we needed everybody’s agreement and if somebody disagreed then that would be considered seriously. But also, this was like a family with an existing hierarchy of older siblings and younger siblings, so that was probably also a part of it.

Q: Did the family also, I mean the owners of the land, have more say in what went on too?

A: Yes.

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Q: Were there any certain rules or teachings that everyone was expected to follow?

A: No. I mean, I'm sure there were rules in like civility and stuff like that. But it wasn't based on a book or anything.

Q: What were the living arrangements like? You said there were several different places, did you all live in one building or did you each have your own separate building, or living spaces or how was that done?

A: There was a common kitchen and there were separate bedrooms for people that were mostly in one building in a conglomerated building, but there were times when somebody would live in a teepee for a summer or in another structure, or a trailer or something like that.

Q: How were the children handled then? Was everyone expected to help in raising the children or was it just the parents themselves, or how was that handled?

A: Everyone took some responsibility, but the parents took the main responsibility. The children were almost in all cases they were nephews or nieces of almost everybody, so they weren't...

Q: How were the children educated, were they sent to public school or were they home schooled?

A: Some were sent to public school and some were home schooled at various times and then public schools at other times. There was also a small private school that one of them went to for a while. I'm thinking more about ideology more as I go because one of the original ideas was to have a day school there and they did for many years have a school there, some of the children went to that school for a while.

Q: What kind of artistic expressions were practiced, were you painting or writing or music or sculpture?

A: I guess they were just on an individual basis. People were building and designing I think that was a creative outlet for some people, but there wasn't anything for me.

Q: What was the relationship between drugs and the community? Were drugs used, what types of drugs?

A: Most people used marijuana and some alcohol. That's about it.

Q: Did you ever grow the marijuana there?

A: I think someone else did once, like a couple of plants. It wasn't ever a big, not self-sufficient or commercial production.

Q: What was the relationship between sexual expression and the community? Most of it was family, I guess so, there probably wasn't a lot, but what kind of relationships were there?

A: One of the guys that was there was married to my sister, but then they divorced and he became attached to another sister. People brought their boyfriends or girlfriends to visit or some of them eventually ended up living there. People became partners and had children and stuff

Q: So they were mostly monogamous relationships? Pretty long term?

A: Mostly, there were some gray areas or shifting at times.

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Q: What are some more things that you remember about daily life?

A: It was a really beautiful place. I was very fond of the animals, the goats. I spent a lot of time with them. I'm interested in plants so I did that, I planted wild flowers and stuff. There was a big pond, so swimming was a big deal. There was a lot of organizational struggle around getting everybody into and out of town with not enough cars, so the calendars were always full, it was really complicated planning.

Q: I guess I never asked, how big was the land?

A: 15 acres.

Q: Was it mostly wooded?

A: Mostly wooded.

Q: What are the best things and the worst things you remember?

A: The best things were, like, happy times with my friends. The worst things were when an animal died, having arguments, just sort of the on-going struggle to get along.

Q: When and why did you decide to leave?

A: I left in 1979, I'd been thinking about it for a while I wanted to finish school and I didn't have my major yet. It was a hard life. We struggled to get in and out, it was really hard it seemed like it was always cold. It was heated with wood and it was really uncomfortable. I found it difficult to get along with all the people. There were some things that happened that made me feel that my opinion didn't matter very much. Things weren't going the way I wanted to.

Q: Do you consider the commune and your participation in it a success or a failure?

A: A success. I don't think that I was an especially good member, but...

Q: Are you glad you did it?

A: Yes.

Q: How do you think it's affected your life afterwards?

A: I no longer have a big fantasy about how nice it would be to live out in the country with all of my sisters, because I've done it. I think it was sort of a good practical exposure to the difficulties inherent in living that kind of lifestyle and getting along in really close quarters with that many people.

Q: What do your children think of your living in a community?

A: What do our children think now? My daughter is too young to be a part of it, but she really thinks it is a great place. I think the children who live there now, get bored easily and they're always wanting to be living back in town. But I think they appreciate the, having lots of adults with them and having a big family.

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Q: Do you think you'd ever move back?

A: Maybe, it's possible. I know at least one of the kids now that seems to think that she wouldn't want to live there, herself.

Q: Did you have any contact with any other communities?

A: Not really. There were a couple of other families who lived in the country that we would visit, there was another place that was two unrelated couples that we had a lot of contact with.

Q: What was your relationship with your neighbors, did they have any problems with what you were doing there? Were they aware of what was going on there?

A: We got along fairly well, I think that some were not predisposed to like us because... (break in tape)... there was a lot of antagonism between hippies and just regular folks from the community. So they were always a little bit distrustful. They didn't really know what we were about. We eventually made some friends, there were some people who were very kind and generous.

Q: Did you ever have any hassles over zoning or sanitation or anything like that? When you built your buildings, did anybody ever come out and say that it wasn't up to code or did you build your buildings to code?

A: I think they probably were built to code.

Q: You never had any trouble then?

A: No.

Q: Do you have any other anecdotes that you can think of?

A: Well I had another thought about ideology, but at one time I was thinking that it was or I wanted it to be a woman's place, with a separatist kind of mentality. I was unhappy that it wasn't that at all. But things just kind of evolved so that it wasn't really that way and that wasn't really what other people wanted. I guess there was friction from sort of, let's see, I guess I had fairly set ideas about how I wanted it to be and since there was no real structure for making decisions about that, people pretty much did what they wanted. It seemed like my older sister would invite lots of people out and was, and is a very generous person, but she would invite people out or invite people to move there, and I didn't want that to happen. I didn't like it that way. I would have liked it to have been smaller or just who I thought ought to live there. So, that caused problems.

Q: Were there any memorable characters?

A: Well there is a guy who is not related to any of us who lived out there from the very beginning years, and lives out there again now. He was really messing with my head when I just wanted to live with women because he's a real macho guy, but I've come to like him a lot. He's a carpenter. He also had a lot to contribute. His daughter was there for quite a while and it was a good experience for her there.

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Q: Anything else? Do you know of any other people who would be interested in being interviewed?

A: Well, I think someone has already interviewed my sister, and I think Tim is going to talk to my younger sister, who lived there for a while and was involved in another community situation ...