

Interview with John Keith
Interviewer: Deborah Altus
August 6, 1996

Q: Okay, so this is August 6th, and an interview with John Keith. I'd love to hear a little bit about your background, and some of the things that led up to you living communally.

A: I went to Antioch College, in Yellow Springs, Ohio, as a pre-med student. I worked in surgical research in Philadelphia, and met the woman who was to become my wife. We moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where I went to Case [?] Western Reserve University for pre-med. This is during the height of the Vietnam War, so everybody was trying to get into medical school. I did not, so I went to podiatry school instead, to become a foot doctor, and studied at the Ohio College of Podiatric Medicine. And then my senior year, I met some people -- I worked at the free clinic doing intake, met some people in a step [?] van, who were the first hippies I had ever met. Stephen, and the woman he was with at the time, Kitten. They lived in what used to be a red truck and sold candles and things like that. I was just utterly intrigued, and decided that I didn't want to spend my life doing what I saw was putting fat ladies into tight schools. So I dropped out of podiatry school in my senior year, and soon thereafter my relationship with my wife broke up, and I started living communally about four or five months after that.

Q: Where did you start living communally?

A: On a farm called Andover [?], Ohio, that's on the edge of the Pennsylvania border, just south of Lake Erie.

Q: The town's called Andover, or the commune?

A: The town. The commune was called Frogge Hollow. The business end was Frogge Hollow enterprises, and we had a tape recorded magazine for the blind, called the Frogge Hollow Gazette. It was a free, we called it an alternative press, anti-war, pretty left-wing type of magazine that we distributed to blind people, different than the Society for the Blind put out. That was our Frogge Hollow Gazette, which is still in the library of Congress, as far as I know.

Q: Was this in braille?

A: No, it was on tape. On reel to reel tape.

Q: Now, when did you move there?

A: 1968.

Q: Were you among the founders, or was it already going?

A: I was among the founders.

Q: Okay, so it was you and Stephen and Kitten?

A: Have you seen the photograph? Why don't you turn that off and I'll bring it. [tape interrupted]

Q: So the people you met, when you were at Case Western, is that --?

A: No, I was at podiatry school in Cleveland.

Interview with John Keith
Interviewer: Deborah Altus
August 6, 1996

Q: So then you guys went and looked for some land?

A: It fell together in a strange way. We were putting together that tape recorded magazine at their apartment. J.T. came out to volunteer to be a volunteer reader for the magazine, and he knew Buddy, who owned the farm. Now Buddy had previously, was into what was called The Light of Yoga Society, which is a pretty middle-class, traditional yoga organization in Cleveland, and he wanted to get an ashram going, which is not what he got with us. He got a very secular crew, as far as that goes. So we became the secular end, and we tried to help build a place for people to come out and meditate and so on. But they did not approve of us, and we thought they were very snooty, so it was kind of a tenuous relationship between the two groups. Eventually, we spent more and more time at Genesis 1:29, the restaurant back in the Cleveland, and we ended up living at a city commune in Cleveland, called Cat City.

Q: And Cat City was somehow connected with this Genesis restaurant?

A: Yes.

Q: Was that their business?

A: No. But a couple of them had worked there, and that's how we met them. So I started living more and more -- and eventually we had to abandon the farm, a couple other reasons, Buddy had to sell it. It was fun while it lasted. It lasted about 2 and a half, three years perhaps. Cat City lasted -- well, it's still going now. I don't know how many people are there, though.

Q: I'd be curious to learn what Frogge Hollow was like, in terms of how you handled the daily work, and economics, and your business, and all that.

A: Well, from my reading about other groups, we had neither a unified religious basis, nor did we have a charismatic leader. So it was kind of an ad hoc kind of approach to the entire thing. We pooled our resources, our money, with a small allowance for spending change for people going to town. Ohio winters are pretty cold, so fuel oil was a major consideration. The house was pretty drafty. Buddy had to go into town anyway, because he was a photographer, a medical photographer for a hospital in Cleveland, so we had a ride into work. It was about 90 miles. So we'd go in and stay at Cat City during the week, and then come back out. So we'd rotate people. Certain people liked to cook. J.T. was one, Kitten was one. I cooked once in a while. Those of us who didn't cook washed dishes and so on. We didn't have much of a garden. Never really used it as a farm, never raised a crop. But Jason and Tom and I and a couple of other guys would go out and bring in hay and things like that on other farmers' farms. That was another source of revenue in the fall.

Q: Did you all live in a farmhouse together?

A: There were two little cabins. Jesse and Jason and Stephen and Kitten lived in a cabin. The rest of us lived in the house.

Q: And these were existing structures?

A: Yes.

Interview with John Keith
Interviewer: Deborah Altus
August 6, 1996

Q: And the land and all belonged to Buddy?

A: Yes.

Q: So he was basically just letting you crash there, or did you have to pay him any sort of --?

A: We maintained the electricity and the fuel oil, and the expenses, and we helped paint, fix up the house, winterize it. That type of thing. Helped him -- he was a very good wine maker, and we helped him make wine.

Q: So you didn't have any formal worksharing system, then?

A: No. Not then. We did get one when we were back in town, because then we had to set it up to have people on certain shifts at the restaurant. But that was later.

Q: Did you have any special diet that you followed? Were you vegetarians?

A: It was primarily vegetarian, but not dogmatically so. So, seems to me a couple of us were philosophically vegetarians, but most of us were not, so most of us ate meat occasionally, when it was around. But it was primarily a vegetarian diet.

Q: How did you make decisions? Did you have meetings?

A: Yes, endless meetings. Endless, boring, difficult sometimes. A couple of us, Stephen and I particularly, were accused of trying to be the leaders and take over. I suppose you've seen this in a lot of groups -- there were those who were ideologically into it, end up doing a large amount of work, and some people were peripheral, attended, wanted to kick back and live off the system. From my reading and from my friends at other communes at the time, that was a pretty common experience.

Q: Did you try and make your decisions by consensus, then?

A: Yes. And some of it got really petty. I wish I could remember the details, but -- one of them was the wisdom of keeping the goat, because she only had one udder and put out less than a pint a day, sometimes nothing. She was quite an expense. We ended up keeping her. We weren't very practical farmers. And then we had to bury the horse, it died in the middle of the winter. If you ever tried to dig a 12 x 12 x 12 hole in the frozen ground in the middle of winter, it was quite an experience burying that poor horse.

Q: You guys had lots of animals, it looks like. The dogs are practically as numerous as the people. So what was the population usually? Was this about it, about a dozen folks?

A: We had another 3 or 4 to that. There's Mary and Melissa, and -- no, there's only just 2 women missing from the people that were there at the time. These two, Gary and Mike, were our gay couple, which, at the time was a kind of radical thing.

Q: What were attitudes like at the commune towards sexual relationships?

A: Complicated. The theory was that if you love someone, you want them to be happy, right? That's free love. So if they're happy in someone else's arms, that should make you happy. That was the theory. Of course, jealousy reigned supreme, especially for me, because, as I say, my wife had left me for tall

Interview with John Keith
Interviewer: Deborah Altus
August 6, 1996

dark and handsome, there, and I was trying to make the best of it, and it was very hard. Extremely hard. Though I guess it worked out in the long run, it was a growing experience for us all. So, it tended to be serial monogamy, I guess. There were never any orgies, for instance. But there were multiple partners.

Q: And what were attitudes like towards drug use?

A: We loved them. Especially marijuana. My dropping out, I think, was mostly, I was doing LSD when it was still legal, pharmaceutical, Sandos [?], and that pretty profoundly affected my notions of materialism and being straight and all that. I really think it affected me more than anything else in the dropping out. So by this time, this is a couple years later, I think LSD was probably illegal by then, but we did it once in a great while, but we did a lot of marijuana.

Q: Did you grow it on your farm?

A: No. It's -- I don't know if you've ever heard of Indiana dope, but it's just terrible.

Q: And that's what you smoked?

A: We tried not to. We tried to trade for good stuff. Just the wrong climate for raising it.

Q: I know you were in a rural location, but what were your relationships like with your neighbors?

A: A lot of the neighbor boys found us very attractive. And they'd come to visit. We got along with some of the old farmers, because we respected them. We never had any problem. This is also true of Cat City, it's amazing when I look back on it -- we never had any run-in with the police, in all those years. Not one. Why? Maybe someone was looking over us, but I don't know. Because at Cat City, there were people who were actually dealing it. We'll get into that later, I suppose. But it just never happened. We never were hassled by any rednecks or anything like that, that you might expect. I guess we kind of kept to ourselves, and so did the community.

Q: Did you have a lot of folks stopping through, lot of visitors?

A: No, not at the farm.

Q: Because you were off the beaten path?

A: I guess so. I suppose. Plus, we didn't start networking with other groups until we got involved with the restaurant. And then we got involved with a natural foods cooperative with restaurants all over Ohio and Pennsylvania, Michigan. Went to conferences in Athens, Ohio, and a couple of other places. Then we got to see some of the other groups and stay with them.

Q: So if you didn't have visitors, you probably didn't need to have a membership policy?

A: We didn't have one.

Q: Were most of the people in this picture ones you started with? Just sort of a group of friends?

A: With the exception of Lynn -- she knew Buddy through yoga, and she never considered herself a hippie -- the rest of us did. So we weren't real close to her. There were no fights or anything, it's just we thought she was spacey, and she thought we were degenerate.

Interview with John Keith
Interviewer: Deborah Altus
August 6, 1996

Q: So you kind of helped Buddy to his ashram thing?

A: We helped build it, yes. And their guru is named Rama, I guess a common name for a guru. The Light of Yoga Society brought him up from India. He came out to the farm, and it was kind of awkward. I guess Buddy was happy, so we were happy.

Q: How did you get the name Frogge Hollow?

A: Stephen, when he was in Dallas, he met Kitten in Dallas, and he was in a motorcycle gang called the Galactic Cowboys, and their business arm was called Frogge Hollow Enterprises, so it predated any of this, and it went back to about '65 in Dallas. Now, how they got the name, I don't know. I think it had something to do with a Texas beer called Tree Frog.

Q: Was the spelling always that way?

A: I think they changed it, with the extra "ge" just to make it weirder.

Q: Now, did you make money off of the gazette you put out?

A: No. Entirely for free. There's free franking [?] for tapes for the blind. So the postage was zero. And we just swapped tapes. They'd send us a tape, and we'd send them one filled up.

Q: Was your gazette popular?

A: We had it, at our height I think we had 50 people across the country.

Q: But it was sort of a hip alternative for blind people?

A: Yeah. We got a package of stuff from a radical group in New York called -- I don't remember them, -- Liberation News Service. They'd send us a package of materials, and we'd mostly read those. They'd be "power to the people" type deals.

Q: So that's what you'd read on the tape.

A: Pretty much, and stuff from the Mother Earth News, a mixture, kind of eclectic, music. And then when our readers, they'd add to the tapes, when they sent them back to us, they'd make comments, and we'd call that our letter department. We'd tape that on to the next one. It worked pretty well. This all came about because I had a good friend in Cleveland who was blind. He was working on his Ph.D. in psychology. I got to know him. He had gone blind when he was 14 years old. I had started reading for the Society for the Blind, and got interested in it.

Q: Did you have any money-making enterprises?

A: The restaurant, the bringing in hay, and that was about it on the farm.

Q: So some of you went in and worked in the restaurant, and stayed in town for a few days, and then come back out?

A: Exactly.

Interview with John Keith
Interviewer: Deborah Altus
August 6, 1996

Q: So why did the farm eventually break up?

A: I can't be specifically sure about that. It seems to me that there was a problem with Buddy's job, and he needed some money, and he decided he was going to look for a place in town, and he was going to sell the farm. Something along those lines. We weren't in a position to buy it, by any means. Meanwhile, Jesse had decided she didn't like communal living at all, so she moved back to town. She's a nurse in [unintelligible] so she had no problem establishing herself again. And Jason went with her. And Kitten moved out, she broke up with Stephen. I guess I eventually decided I liked Cat City better than travelling to the farm. It just kind of disintegrated by mutual consent. I talked to Buddy last year, when Stephen died. He's in Columbus, now, and he sounds like the same guy. Wonderful man, very loving man.

Q: Is he still doing the ashram thing?

A: He's still into yoga. He was also into some kind of, I forget the organization, but it was into parabinology [?], and another of other occult type deals similar to the ... Rosicrucian's. It's not that group, but the interests are similar. None of us really followed him quite down that path, so. We weren't really the group he was looking for. It was fun while it lasted.

Q: Was there much artistic expression at Frogge Hollow?

A: Kitten and I considered ourselves artists. Pencil sketches, watercolors, primarily. Also we did some murals and signs on the sides of the cabins. One was a huge ohm. I think the other one just said, "Have a Nice Day." Which wasn't as trite at the time as it sounds now.

Q: Maybe that was before the button or something. Was there much music going on?

A: Yes. We had a quadrophonic, and it was on most of the time, and a reel-to-reel deck. At Cat City, we had a collector, a music collector, he had over 5,000 albums, cross-indexed. So we had access to just about everything, in terms of rock and roll and jazz, and that type of thing.

Q: Were there any particular books, or authors that you guys were into?

A: Well, Be Here Now was real popular. I guess Allan Watts [?], and -- it's hard to remember exactly what was coming out at that time. I was very excited by Sometimes a Great Notion, Ken Kesey's book.

Q: Did you guys get involved in politics at all?

A: No.

Q: No war protests or anything like that?

A: Not at the time. I had protested earlier, when I was still married. I was involved with an anti-war group at Case Western Reserve. I was prepared to -- I wasn't going to go. Turned out later, I found out that I had been married before they dropped the married men's deferment. So they couldn't have taken me anyway. Grandfathered in -- even my draft board didn't know that. They had called me for a physical. Now Stephen was underground -- he had been called up, he went underground. When he came back to Cleveland, his father called the FBI on him, which I thought was a little cold. He stayed underground right up until the blanket amnesty that Gerald Ford gave, when he pardoned Nixon. That was a major pressure, it was incredible. And Jason was back, he did go. He and Stephen were called up

Interview with John Keith
Interviewer: Deborah Altus
August 6, 1996

at the same time. Jason went; Stephen went underground, and Jason came back just totally messed up from the war. Because he knew he had killed people. It's still affecting him to this day.

Q: Did you guys have any sorts of rituals or routines?

A: No, well -- we'd often hold hands in a circle and do an ohm before the evening meal. That would be about the extent of it. And then we'd have our Sunday house meeting, where everybody got together to essentially argue for five hours about what to do.

Q: Did you have parties?

A: Very seldom. Either that, or continuously, depending on how you want to look at it.

Q: But no big bashes, where you invited a bunch of people?

A: No.

Q: So you weren't into things like celebrating equinoxes or solstices or anything like that?

A: No. Not on a major basis, no.

Q: Well, what was the thing you liked the most about living at Frogge Hollow?

A: Not wearing a tie and jacket, and shiny shoes, and fitting into a rigid area, being a professional. I've never regretted leaving podiatry school, except during the period when I was a runner, and I discovered podiatrists were deeply into sports medicine, and I became interested in that. I didn't foresee that I'd be getting into running ten years later, but oh well. I worked my way through college and podiatry school as a respiratory therapist, which I used out here for awhile, so I had some connection with medicine.

Q: What about the flip side, what were some of the harder parts?

A: The hardest part for me was jealousy. Especially when I was staying alone for the first time, and my wife was staying with another guy in another cabin -- it was very, very hard. I made the best of it -- there were no arguments, no screaming, nothing, but I felt emasculated by it. I, to this day, I don't know -- well, I know this whole notion of free love doesn't work for me, and I didn't see it work for anybody else. I'm sure it can, for some totally enlightened being. But for people with insecurities, I don't think it's going to work.

Q: Were there any unforgettable characters?

A: Yes. All of them. Stoney, for instance, he had a van parked out here, a Chevy van, that we covered entirely in leaves to insulate it, so he looked like a chipmunk coming out. It was a huge piles of leaves for insulation, and it worked very well, because it started composting, and it got warm, and stayed kind of warm during the winter. It looked like this huge igloo type deal. He lived in that. Stoney was dyslexic, never learned to read. Had emotional problems when he was a child. He never would have made it in the straight world, and he flowered as a hippie. Because he could be really weird, and everybody respected him for the first time in his life. I hope you have a chance to meet him.

Interview with John Keith
Interviewer: Deborah Altus
August 6, 1996

Q: So he lives out here?

A: Yeah.

Q: Now how did a bunch of you end up out here? Did you try and start a communal thing out here?

A: Okay, we have to jump forward to where we were living in Cleveland.

Q: Oh, should we go in line and do Cat City next?

A: Well, you're asking the questions. I'll give you the short of that. Stephen and his girlfriend at the time, was Melissa, and Stoney got into this unbelievably beautiful truck, I'll show you a picture of that too, called the White, and went on the road with a candle factory while Mary and I stayed at Genesis. They travelled throughout -- I know they hit Florida and they went across the South, stayed in Dallas for awhile. Ultimately made it to San Francisco, and then came up to the canyon, where they met a guy called Captain America, who was the head of the Galactic Cowboys, and that's how Stephen knew him. You probably didn't notice, but you passed a mailbox down there that's got red, white, and blue stripes on the drum that's holding it. That used to be Captain America's ranch there. So Stephen got up that far, and then he found a job as a caretaker here at Tobin [?]. And in the cabin where I live, the previous owner of our place lived, Ester Capps [?], and he worked it out for he and Melissa to caretake up here. Mary and I came out to visit, and we never went back. We abandoned our ownership in the restaurant, and -- I mean, we never went back to stay. We went back to visit once in awhile.

Q: But that's after the whole Cat City experience, I guess.

A: Exactly.

Q: Well, I'd like to hear some about Cat City. Do you know when Cat City started?

A: About '65, I think.

Q: Oh, it's an early one.

A: Yes. And it was primarily musicians. And then Bobby, who was, I guess you'd have to call him a philosopher -- he studied phenomenology, deeply into Heidegger [?], and Merlot Ponte [?], and people of that type. He was also a major dope dealer, which is what supported the house. So he did a lot of research, including into music. He had this incredible index for his 5,000 albums, before the advent of computers. Mind-boggling, all on these little file cards, millions and millions of them, kind of obsessively, I suppose. Now how we met is obscure to me at the moment. I don't remember exactly how we -- it must've been at Genesis, we met him at Genesis, at the restaurant, Genesis 1:29, which if you look it up, it says "Give you every herb-bearing seed, for ye it shall be meet," which some people believe it is a reference that people should be vegetarians. So I think that's how we met him, we stayed there for awhile. It's a 3-story house, actually with the gable it was four. Eight bedrooms, and then in the attic -- well, make it 9, not counting the basement. There was a major sound studio in the basement. It was considerably more sophisticated than the farm. Lot of university people would hang around, a lot of readers. I guess that's what kind of appealed to me, in that there was more people that were readers than I found out at the farm.

Interview with John Keith
Interviewer: Deborah Altus
August 6, 1996

Q: What do you mean "readers"?

A: People were reading things that were challenging, book readers.

Q: Oh, got it. I thought you meant like as a job.

A: No. And even though I was intrigued by Mother Earth News and back to the land, as life has progressed, I've never really gotten into gardening or farming, or composting or any of it very much. Grow some tomatoes and things, but it just doesn't fit with my personality. So, as I say, we used to just crash there at Cat City, and then as time progressed, spent more and more time there. Eventually, I got a room. Mary was still going to Cleveland State. When she graduated, she moved to Cat City. Mary currently lives next door to me. She lived with Stephen for 20 years. Who else lived there? J.T. lived there. Stephen lived elsewhere -- he lived in an apartment not too far from the restaurant. But we all saw each other on an almost daily basis. But the group finances ended there -- we kept separate finances at Cat City. We'd each make a house payment that would go into the house, and other than that, the money was no longer pooled, which I preferred. We came to informal agreements about whose turn it was to run the vacuum and things like that, but there were no long meetings or haggling or coming to decisions the way we came at the farm -- it was more individualistic. The only other decisions we had to make is set up the schedule for people working at the restaurant, which include cooks and waitresses and the dishwashers. And then when I became an owner, it required going to market 3 times a week at 4 o'clock in the morning, which I enjoyed, actually.

Q: So you actually became a part-owner of Genesis 1:29?

A: Yes, so did Mary. That gave us a half ownership, we each had a quarter interest in it. The other two owners, even though they remained owners for some time, became silent partners. Frogge Hollow moved in, and they moved out.

Q: So Cat City pretty much staffed the restaurant?

A: Yes. There were some other people who lived around. The restaurant was on the edge of University Circle, which was where both Case's engineering school, and Western Reserve University -- they're amalgamated as Case-Western Reserve now. So there was a couple of streets that were kind of bohemian, and people from there also helped staff it. Everybody was paid the same, no matter what their job was -- 80 cents an hour. And we divided the tips.

Q: Was that below minimum?

A: Oh yeah.

Q: How did you get away doing that?

A: Little organizations like that don't have to pay minimum wage.

Q: Oh, I didn't realize that. Okay.

A: Even then, that would be below minimum.

Interview with John Keith
Interviewer: Deborah Altus
August 6, 1996

Q: Yeah, it sounded like it was way below.

A: Plus, we divided the tips. That might have brought it up to a dollar an hour, or so.

Q: Was there much of a hip scene going on in Cleveland?

A: Seems to me about the time the hip scene turned on in Cleveland was when they were bearing hippies out in Haight-Ashbury -- it was all over in California, theoretically, and we were just catching on in Ohio.

Q: So Cat City was really ahead of its time for the area, then?

A: Perhaps so. It was, well it was the only hip scene in Cleveland, I suppose. The restaurant became tightly involved with the local rock station and with the free clinic, and we'd put on concerts at our restaurant. Also, we'd cater. Mary and I catered for Yes, went backstage with them, and travelled to Buffalo. As a matter of fact, one of my favorite memories, we sat in the dining room at the Buffalo Hilton, all of the group Yes, their manager, and the two of us, the cooks, and passed a joint around the table, in the middle of downtown Buffalo, New York. Because the whole restaurant was empty -- Yes had taken it over. That's a nostalgic thing. And we also catered for Genesis, who gave us a plug from onstage, and the Beach Boys, and Todd Rungrun [?], couple of other more obscure ones too. Anyway, we had concerts at the restaurant, as benefit nights for the free clinic, and the local radio station got involved. We got tremendous crowds.

Q: Was this a public radio or community radio station?

A: No, it was a local, for-profit -- right now their call letters escape me, but they were the major rock station in town. So we were kind of in and happening, and that kind of thing for awhile.

Q: What years did you live at Cat City?

A: Seventy-one, through to '73. Part-time in '71, because I was still living at the farm part-time, until about '73. Because I got out here in '74.

Q: Were there still musicians living there?

A: I believe there still are?

Q: Was there a lot of music happening at the house when you were there, then?

A: Yes, in the basement.

Q: What kind of music did they do?

A: Progressive rock. Things like Oregon [?], if you're familiar with them. Pretty sophisticated for Cleveland, really.

Q: What did you neighbors of Cat City think of the house?

A: Had almost no contact with them.

Interview with John Keith
Interviewer: Deborah Altus
August 6, 1996

Q: What kind of a neighborhood did you live in?

A: It was suburban, mixed, racially. It's funny, even though it was in Cleveland, it was east of East Cleveland. In other words, East Cleveland was west of where we lived, just because of the strange shape of the city. We were near a green belt -- it was not too bad for the suburbs, and it was a quarter of a mile from the Rapid station, which was how we got to work, or we could walk, it was about five miles.

Q: You'd walk 5 miles to work?

A: Sure.

Q: That would take a while.

A: I was in better shape then. To put it mildly. I got injured working on the railroad, and it ended my athletic career. That's how I've put on a lot of weight, is I have a sedentary lifestyle now, unfortunately.

Q: Did you into running when you were at Cat City?

A: No, that was here.

Q: What was the racial make-up of Cat City like?

A: All White. Let's see, five women, and 8 men.

Q: And you said there were like 8 bedrooms, so some people must have shared then?

A: Yes. The number of people staying there varied. Some people were couples. I was at the time, though not necessarily with the same woman for the whole time.

Q: Did you guys have rules about behavior, smoking, drinking, anything like that? Quiet times?

A: There must've been, but they were not like written down, "Thou shalt not's." There were probably some hassles about dishes, but I didn't eat any of my meals there, because I ate them all at the restaurant, so I stayed out of that. But for the people who didn't spend as much time at the restaurant as I did, there was some hassles about dishes, and the laundry room, things like that. But they were pretty minor. Most of the dope smoking was done in the living room. Casual nudity. Not promiscuity, at least, I didn't consider it promiscuous. I suppose some people would.

Q: Was there any sort of ideology or philosophy of life that held you guys together?

A: No, and that's why we didn't stay together, I suspect. I suppose we were all somewhat left of center, just because we were all anti-war. So we had that in common. And we questioned the police, of course, since we all broke the law smoking dope. Then, I did some absolutely insane things, looking back. For instance, I delivered some LSD to a guy in the ghetto, which required me going into Huff [?], which is the worst part of Cleveland -- the part that burned down in '69. I was met by an armed guard, taken up to the top of a building, went across the roofs, and finally met this guy. Now, they could've killed me [tape ends] ... that's all it was. Anyway, I got my money, which was more than a thousand dollars, went back by the same route, and lived to talk about it. I look back at some of the stupid things I did like that, and just can't believe it. I haven't done any acid since Cat City, that was plenty for me. On the other hand, when Stoney moved out here, he became a very successful pot farmer. He doesn't do it anymore, he's

Interview with John Keith
Interviewer: Deborah Altus
August 6, 1996

now "born again." So I don't think he even smokes it, much less grows it. And to make that story more remarkable is that he's Jewish.

Q: Well, I noticed driving up here, the only radio stations I could get were either Christian, or like Rush Limbaugh.

A: There's a lot of Rush Limbaugh, that's true. Of course, I guess he's everywhere. Radio reception's not very good in the canyon.

Q: Now how was the house owned at Cat City? Was it in somebody's name?

A: Yeah, Bobby's parents paid the mortgage, and then Bobby paid them back from the money he got from all of us. The house was paid off about 15 years ago or so, maybe longer than that. So it's Bobby's house, Bobby Orstemeyer [?].

Q: And does he still live there?

A: Yes.

Q: He still operates it as a communal household?

A: Well, there are fewer people, but I think so, yeah. Mary Ann, a friend of mine who I introduced to the house, still lives there, lives with him, and they've been a couple for 20 years.

Q: So it's a pretty stable scene?

A: Yeah, eventually. I think everybody got tired of the -- being as liberated as we were, security started to play a fat point, or something like that, I don't know.

Q: Were there unforgettable characters at Cat City?

A: Oh yes. And a lot more people off the street. There was one guy who was a hopeless heroine and speed addict, who I'm sorry to say, I helped shoot him up, because I was good with needles from being a respiratory therapist, and he was shaking too much. I don't know if I helped him, or helped kill him or what. But anyway, I'd help shoot him up. There was another guy called the Professor, who was schizophrenic. We considered him really far out. But looking back, he was schizophrenic. All sorts of -- lot of really colorful people. Probably looked at from the outside as the dregs of society, I suppose. But a lot of people who were perpetual students, who could've had 2 or 3 Ph.D.'s, but never quite wrote the thesis, preferred to just keep going to school, I suppose. Of course, that's true of Bobby as well. He's lectured at John Carrol [?] University, and Case Western in the philosophy departments, but he's never been published, as far as I know, and he's never gotten his doctorate, which he could've easily have done.

Q: You said there were lots of people reading there, sort of intellectual types?

A: Yes.

Interview with John Keith
Interviewer: Deborah Altus
August 6, 1996

Q: Any particular types of things they would read that would stand out?

A: Heidegger was big. Phenomenology, Merlot Ponke particularly. And Husorol [?], another German phenomenologist, from the same era. Sartre. And then to back all that up, Plato. I remember we spent months on Plato's theory of knowledge. It was like a little live-in symposium, though heavily influenced by marijuana. But -- and then philosophers and psychologists we didn't like, like Skinner, for instance. Buckminster Fuller was big. In fact, we heard him lecture in Cleveland several times. I became on a first-name basis with Dr. Spock, who was leading the anti-war movement in Cleveland, got to know him pretty well through the restaurant.

Q: Now, why didn't you like Skinner?

A: Too mechanistic. Never believed that we were only stimulus-response, and overlooking everything else as irrelevant. I haven't cared for behaviorism at all. I still don't care for it.

Q: Did people read Walden Two at all?

A: Yes. And didn't like it.

Q: Did you guys do any networking with other communes in the area?

A: Yes. Through the restaurant, through the natural foods cooperative deal that we were putting together for the states. That was -- Mary Ann and I were the ones that were particularly into that, because we had encouraged the organic farmers, and pay considerably higher prices for things like lettuce and so on. At that time, organic produce was very expensive. And we were purist. There were a lot of things that we invested in that didn't show up on the ledger sheet. Like we used all stainless steel cookingware, rather than aluminum. Had a very complex water purifier that we even cooked with. There's no way you can charge for those things. So it was just part of our approach.

Q: Now this co-op thing, was that the Federation of Ohio River Co-ops, ORC?

A: I don't remember their name, but that sounds familiar. Because the meeting was in Athens, Ohio, which is on the Ohio River. They had a commune down there, they had a farm and a restaurant as we did. But I don't remember the name of it, off-hand. Mary Ann and I stayed down there frequently during these meetings. Just can't remember what they were called.

Q: Were there other communal households like Cat City in Cleveland?

A: There may have been, but I didn't run into them.

Q: You guys didn't network with them or anything?

A: No. It was a pretty weird thing to be doing at the time.

Q: For that area?

A: Yeah. It definitely wasn't Haight-Ashbury.

Q: Did you guys visit any other communes?

A: No. We read about them. Like we read Monday Night Class. Followed the Farm.

Interview with John Keith
Interviewer: Deborah Altus
August 6, 1996

Q: What did you think of them?

A: I was impressed by how much they had accomplished and how efficient they seemed, but I wouldn't have wanted to live there.

Q: Why is that?

A: I couldn't have handled a leader who was so strong.

Q: What was the thing you liked best about living at Cat City?

A: Sex and dope and rock and roll!

Q: Was there a downside?

A: Jealousy. I look nostalgically at this era until I sit and think about it carefully, and then I remember there was just torment -- not frequently, but enough that it was definitely the downside of the sex part of it. I don't know if there was a downside to drugs. Maybe there was. I remember it positively. But I never did needle drugs, and I didn't do acid very often. It was mainly marijuana, hashish. That was it. And then the rock and roll, no downside to the rock and roll.

Q: And so why did you end up leaving Cat City?

A: I saw this place. I thought, "This is where I want to live." That was 22 years ago.

Q: Did you guys have intentions of doing a communal type thing out here?

A: It started out more -- we started living in the bigger house. Stephen and his girlfriend Melissa, me and my girlfriend Mary. Over time, that ended up being Stephen and Mary, Melissa out of here, and me living next door, where I live now. Kind of replay of what went on with my wife. I went through another serious jealous period. But, we stayed friends, we're friends to this day. Mary's one of the best friends I ever had, but now she's a sister. It works.

Q: So do you miss communal living at all?

A: Parts of it. I miss the intellectual ferment. That's something that I have to pretty much get from my reading these days. Because on the one hand, I've learned to realize the common sense of your average workingman. I went out and did a lot of blue collar jobs, and realized how little common sense I had out in the real world, where you could get hurt with big heavy things, and realized that my life before had been intellectual. So I worked as a cowboy, slinging chain on oil rigs, and every macho job I could find. And then eight years on the railroad. Pounded spikes, and working as a gandy, which ended up screwing my body up. I thought they were going to pay me to exercise. Turned out it didn't work out that way. I learned to respect that people with very little education can often have very much more profound common sense in the day-to-day world than I did. I respect that to this day, but I miss being able to talk about things more intellectually. So as I say, most of that comes from books these days.

Interview with John Keith
Interviewer: Deborah Altus
August 6, 1996

Q: One thing I didn't ask you about, either Frogge Hollow or Cat City, was were there kids at all in this scene? No.

A: Zero kids. On purpose. Heavily into birth control. One woman had an abortion, when her birth control didn't work.

Q: Are there things that you bring forward into your life today, from your communal experiences? Any behavior patterns or ways of interacting with other people?

A: Well, I lived eight feet away from Stephen and Mary for 22 years, without an argument. Disagreements, yes, but arguments, no. So that friendship lasted. In a sense, it's communal, because we're joint tenants, we each own the whole property, with rights of survivorship. We were each one third owners, now Mary and I are one half owners. I'm still very close and feel like family with J.T. and Stoney, and Melissa. Melissa got married; she has a 15 year old daughter now. She lives not too far from J.T.

Q: Do they live in this area?

A: You passed the area, it's down that way, halfway between here and Oroville [?], back the other way. It's about 30 miles from here, by road. It's about 6 miles from here as the crow flies. It's on the other side of that mountain, actually.

Q: Do you still eat vegetarian?

A: No. I was never a pure vegetarian. I probably eat less meat than most people, the average American.

Q: Was Genesis 1:29, was that vegetarian?

A: Pure vegetarian.

Q: So you didn't do dairy products?

A: We did. We weren't vegans. We did dairy and we did cheese, and we did eggs. Lacto-ovo vegetarians.

Q: So you must've learned a lot of cooking from them?

A: Yes, I enjoyed it. We'd make 8 large 3 lb loaves of whole wheat bread every morning, a little workout to start your morning at 6 AM. J.T. worked the cookie factory at night. He liked the night shift. So he'd work all night long, making these outrageous chocolate chip cookies, the kind people like when they're stoned.

Q: Does the restaurant still exist?

A: Nope. It died about -- well, it got taken over by another group, which was a -- at the time it was considered a radical feminist group. It was considerably more left-wing than we were. We weren't very political, whereas these people were Maoists. From my point of view, they had no sense of humor, took things very seriously. Easily offended, I thought. So they were glad I didn't come back. They bought out Mary's share, and they stuck me for mine, I guess, because I was a male chauvinist pig. So I didn't even get my share on the restaurant. I didn't care. It wasn't a lot of money. It was less than \$1,000.

Interview with John Keith
Interviewer: Deborah Altus
August 6, 1996

Q: And then how long did it last?

A: Less than a year.

Q: So it was early '70's or something when it closed down?

A: Yes. I think it was because they took themselves too seriously, too dogmatic. I might be wrong. I wasn't there to see it happen. Just wasn't fun anymore, it wasn't light-hearted. I'll show you our menu when we go back to my house. It's very light-hearted.

Q: Now, do you feel from your experiences at Frogge Hollow and Cat City that you've learned lessons or drawn conclusions about what makes communes work or not work?

A: I think for them to work a long time, they have to have one of two things -- either a common religious basis, where people will subordinate their individuality to the greater good, to the religious goal, or they have to have a charismatic leader. Or both. And without those, I think they probably tend to fragment eventually, because there are too many individuals. My experience made me kind of, well, if not an anti-communist, a skeptic, because I see too many parasites. I had a certain problem with private property. Two things happened. One, I had a letter to me from Bertron [?] Russell. It was in my Bertron Russel book, and somebody either stole it or trashed it, and it was gone from our communal library, and that's hurt me to this day. My other is that I had a first edition of Ulysses, the one printed in France, limited to 3,000 copies, three quarters of which were destroyed by U.S. customs, so it was a very rare book, and the covers were destroyed by somebody who just didn't care about its value. I've still got the book, but its value is almost nothing now. It's because people don't -- it's just a question of property, when it's communal property it frequently isn't as well respected, at least it wasn't in my group. It was by the people who were peripheral to the group, frequently people who had to be asked to leave. Like these two guys had to be asked to leave, eventually, because they were lazy. Not asked to leave, told to leave. So those two things -- one of my insights, taking this pharmaceutical LSD, was one of trying to give up materialism. That's what dropping out was for me. But I never -- I found out, now that's I've lived at the bottom of the income level, that it just changes your perspective. Instead of being worried about \$50,000, you're worried about \$50. But it's still there, it's still something to deal with. So, now, coming up with things that would've been fairly simple in a middle class life, like a television, is a big deal. It takes awhile to come up with it. But I guess the primary thing to say is I have no regrets. I'm glad I did it. I could never see myself in a suit and tie lifestyle, going back to that.

Q: Yeah, working on little old ladies' feet.

A: In tight shoes.

Q: As a final question, one of the things we always ask everybody, it's kind of simplistic, is, would you view -- I'll ask you first about Frogge Hollow -- would you view Frogge Hollow as a success or a failure?

A: Well, it was a success while it lasted. I don't know if success means something has to be enduring. If it does, then it was a failure. But during its time, while it was in bloom, it was definitely a success. It was fun. We had a lot of fun. I'd say the same about the restaurant and Cat City. However, I would say some of our naive, philosophical beliefs, especially the one free love, were just false. They were chimeras. Couldn't work, didn't work, never will work. At least, for unenlightened beings. Maybe for people higher

Interview with John Keith
Interviewer: Deborah Altus
August 6, 1996

philosophically than I'll ever be. But I'll say, yes, they were both successes, as far as they went. But let's face it -- neither of them were very pretentious, they didn't claim to be doing much. They didn't claim to be high spiritual. Of course, the other problem was that Cat City survived on illicit dealings, selling marijuana. I don't know how I'd view that these days. If I were running the world, I'd decriminalize it. But it doesn't have the appeal it did then. Certainly don't think it's good for your lungs.

Q: Well, I think that's all the questions I have.