Interview with John Cunningham
Interviewer: Deborah Altus
July 14, 1996

Q: Maybe the batteries were just low. This is July fourteenth and an interview with John Cunningham. Were you part of the original group that came to Shannon?
A: Yes. One of the starting strands, as a matter of fact. I didn't have [unintelligible]. A friend of mine and I didn't have [unintelligible] in 1972. People responded with that...

Q: Yeah. Where were you living, then?
A: I was a grad student at Yale.

Q: Okay.
A: He was too.

Q: Uh-huh.
A: And that ... we got some names. People were writing, and then one of the fellows showed up in person and said, "You're talking right, but the way to do this is to get some people with a little bit of commitment and to get some money. Commitment in the form of money, that's what you are a little out of touch with. And he wanted like five or ten bucks a month, so that was the first group. We got some people that were putting in five or ten bucks a month, writing back and forth and talking about how we would set up our community. These people were serious, they were putting in five or ten bucks a month, which twenty years ago was something.

Q: Yeah. Right. And if you're a student, especially, I suppose.
A: I was a student, other people weren't though.

Q: What were you studying?
A: Economics. Doesn't fit, I have nothing to do with economics now. It was okay as a field of study but I couldn't rationalize spending my life talking to economists. It just didn't fit.

Q: Yeah. So what was your motivation to want to start a community? Or what was the motivation of the group?
A: [unintelligible] was individuals. I was looking at life ... this was the '60s, early '70s. I was culturally a child of the '60s, but not politically. I was pretty radical and left-wing, but I really didn't like the demonstrations and all that stuff. The anti-war stuff I got more and more into as I got older and they got more serious about me, but I wasn't ... I was in high school in the early '60s and didn't start getting really left until I got to college. Also got married in my sophomore year and had a kid a little bit after that. I went to grad school after that. Actually, I started doing research on communes, communities, something, trying to figure out ... I was looking for another ... I'm in economics, I'm into organization. I was looking for another way to do society. I was trying to ... I had this political life work dilemma, like hey, where am I going to work? How am I going to do this? And I really didn't like the organizations and institutions I was looking at. I was like, this just doesn't cut it. I don't want to work for the government because ... if it was a nice government, that would be great, but it just doesn't strike me as efficient, and all the right wing complaints about the government, and the left wing overthrow and stuff like that, they didn't know what the hell they were doing. So at some point I got the hit-me-in-the-head, well, I'll do an alternative way of doing ... you want to do it, you're not sure what you're doing, go do it with your friends first on a small scale, then talk about a larger scale. It seemed like a better method for social change. So that hit me one night or something like that, I jumped up and down and talked to my friend Ned, who was in grad school, and he jumped up and down and that's when we eventually got the [unintelligible] parts and that's how that whole story started.

Q: Uh-huh. So did you come down here and start looking for land?
A: Trying to decide something with people all over the country is not a [unintelligible]. First of all, you got to figure out how you're deciding things and stuff like that. We were writing back and forth and weren't getting very far. We had a meeting ... the group was disintegrating, actually. We decided to have a meeting to coincide with the Twin Oaks farm conference in 1973, summer conference, because there was a community there. We sort of stumbled onto communities, we didn't know about communities, but we sort of stumbled on them at that point. We heard about "communes" and stuff like that, and that was sort of of interest, but we ran to the communities. They were having a conference and we decided to meet at the conference and at the conference they were very receptive to some kind of half-group or something that started. "Oh good, you guys have already gotten together, you'll probably start something great. Great. We'll help you wherever we can," or something like that. We got all excited at that point and the conference ended and we sort of stayed around. We moved up north because one of our [unintelligible] other more tighter world up near Boston and we were trying to merge groups and do all that. We decided to have a conference, a joint conference in the summer of '73. We had this joint conference and the decision at the joint conference was where we were going to do the community because there was a big question ... a lot of us, myself included, were very prejudiced towards New England. Got to the conference and there was a major push for Virginia because there were a lot of communities in Virginia. We'd been there, we'd visited, it looked good, we didn't know of stuff in New England that looked like anything like we wanted. There was a sort of break with people there. The group that was from New England decided to stay nearby [unintelligible] New England, almost everybody else said Virginia. Sheryl and I, my wife at the time [unintelligible] there's a lot of people in Virginia, but probably closer to the people near Boston. But there was only a small group near Boston. We went down and visited Virginia ... oh, a bunch of people moved to Virginia. They actually rented a piece of property and everybody started moving there. It was a complete disaster. A number of people with, let's say, severe problems, major problems, they wanted to bring over the group or something like that. People we'd think were nice, but weren't at all adverse to ripping off the system, stealing. Most of us were basically middle class type kids, and we thought, nah, nah, come on, this is just not the way to do it. We don't want to do this. Anyway, that group disintegrated, or it started to disintegrate. Some of the people stayed, a lot of the people left and some of the people stayed in the area. Then there were a number of us, Sheryl and myself included that had not moved to Virginia, that were still sort of correspondent people finding things out there. A couple of guys, people were still working wanting something to happen, but one guy was looking for land, one guy went looking for land for community, another one was looking for organization and we had another conference in April of '94.

Q: '74?
A: '74, thank you, April '74, that one fellow had found this piece of land, said, I found this great piece of land, the other guy had the beginnings of an organization which was basically sort of democratic. He had based it on a shareholder thing, you could sort of buy up to three votes a month with dues and dues were based on incomes, so if you're poor, you pay twenty bucks a month for each vote and if you're rich you might be paying seventy or a hundred bucks a month for each vote. We agreed to start with that system and we agreed to buy the land. And the idea was to set up a corporation, loan money into the corporation, money that would be repaid, and then be repaid by the dues and the dues were the sort of shareholding buying votes. That's how we started. You got to get started on something like this. That's how we did it. A bunch of people loaned money in and people started to join and started paying dues. It was like overlap between the groups, but there were some people who loaned money, they weren't sure they were ready to join something but they were okay to loan money, and there were other people who were hot to join but they had no money to loan. We made the down payment on the land from that and it was a strange owner-financed deal. I'm sure no bank would loan us money, nothing like that.

It was an owner financed deal over five years. So basically we were buying off the whole piece of land over the first five years so we had to be raising 40,000 dollars a year which was a little like 90 or 100,000 in current money or something like that in order to continue the purchase. So we were idealistic not wealthy middle class kids with a major need to do a sort of fund-raising thing. We were doing loans, everybody who came by would be talking right away about what the situation was and you could give money to loan and on and on. We sort of made it about two or three years with those loans until ... and we tried a few banks, but basically they said, no no no. We actually switched banks because one bank told us they would never loan money to an organization like ours. I remember the bank [unintelligible], he said, "You can try but confidentially, this organization would never loan money to an organization like yours," so I said, alright, well, we switched banks immediately. But Dan, you just talked to Dan, was probably the key person in getting us the loan from the local bank, that took all the strain off. All of a sudden, we know we can make this. We were having to raise 40,000 a year plus interest for five years and we did that for two years, and we were doing it but it was really a horrible strain. I was one of the main people doing that, economics background and money, all that junk. But Dan got the thing and not because ... he didn't sway people with his ... it's just that we'd been around for a couple of years at that point, this was like '76 when we got the loan from the bank. We'd been around for a couple of years and Dan was a Southerner. The bank person could understand him. He could see that we were intelligent. Okay, this is a bunch of intelligent people and they've been around, and he kind of took a chance with us, which was good for him for the bank, because everybody moved all their business to that bank. That bank still has a whole bunch of business from us, even though they like merged [??] and all this other stuff because they've been reasonable with us, looked at who we are and stuff like that. That made the financing thing work.

Q: That's great that the bank president was willing to take the risk.
A: Well, yeah, that's what they're supposed to do. That's why you loan money, on handshakes and stuff like that.

Q: Yeah. But I could see a lot of conservative bank people not wanting to deal with what looked like a bunch of hippies wanting to do a commune.
A: We wouldn't say, "commune," we still don't quite ... we don't fit, we're not a commune, technically. It's a community. But yeah, Nelson County is real poor. They had some wintergreen [??] came in, I don't think he was particularly hooked in to wintergreen, so I don't think there was money coming into the bank linked to that. So he's loaning money to all these backwoods people who can hardly read and stuff like that because that's where his bank is and that's what the customers are, his depositors are. He probably needed to take some ...

Q: That's true. You guys looked pretty good, maybe.
A: Yeah, yeah. From his perspective it was a reasonable investment. A couple years ago his successor agreed to do a mortgage on a new piece of land on another community that started.

Q: Deer Rock [??].
A: Yeah.

Q: Mm-hmm, cool.
A: And that was because of the twenty year connection.

Q: Yeah, that's great.
A: And a good song and dance for him, too.

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Q: So what were the early years like here at Shannon? When you first came here, obviously, there weren't buildings. Well, there was that building at the entry?
A: There were two houses.

Q: Two houses.
A: There were two houses here. There was one at the entry and another one half a mile in on the road.

Q: So where did you guys live? Did you all kind of hang out in those two houses?
A: We signed a contract to buy it in April. Well, the beginning was just a mess. I was real gung-ho and "we're going to make it," and a number of other people were, so that made it work, but looking at it from a older perspective, it was like, lord. The fellow that bought the land hadn't told the woman he was buying the land. He was representing a whole group of investors or something like that. He was a doctor with a number of his own problems. He was the one that found the land. He bought it in his name and his wife's name. He and his wife were divorcing at the time. They were having serious problems, but they both were in the community thing and they signed for this thing and the split up, the whole split up was happening for the first couple of years of the community. He hadn't told the owner. But they had a contract to buy. And when she found out she was selling to a group, or a commune or something, she kind of flipped out. She said, no, I'm not going to do this, I would never do anything like this. She was a Seventh Day Adventist and getting older and having aging problems plus other stuff. She was on her fifth lawyer, or she went through five lawyers or something like that, in the process of selling land. She also had discovered after her husband died or husband was ... I don't know whether he owned it and then gave it to her, they couldn't have jointly owned it. Her husband's will named his five children from a previous marriage as co-heirs with his wife and there was a small problem there in that, to my understanding, he never told his wife that he had children by another woman.

Q: Oh no.
A: She was getting older, she wanted to move, so she started to sell this land that she owns with her surprise stepchildren or something like that, so she's having all kinds of crap going on herself. So the land got transferred to the fellow and his divorcing wife. They didn't sign it over to us for another three months or so. They were going to immediately sign it over to us, we were immediately going to do a transfer right after that, but we couldn't right away because we discovered that the map that the real estate salesman had showed us in selling us the land was misdrawn slightly and there were about forty acres that we didn't own. The verbal, the physical description was accurate in the contract, but the map we had seen before was not accurate, and we were talking about suing. So we couldn't, if we transferred the land we wouldn't be able to sue, so they had to hold on land for a few months. We figured that was probably okay although we were kind of nervous about it because they were divorcing and most people were feeling the doctor was a little too far out and the wife, we were comfortable with her, this is all inside the group stuff.

Q: Yeah.
A: Anyway, we did the transfer in August from them to the group. And nobody moved in initially, because everything was kind of up in the air. Actually, I'm sorry, I take that back. We bought the land in August, they signed the contract, we agreed, the papers were signed in April, we agreed to buy the land setting the date as August, then it was transferred in August. Only two people moved in September first into the little house that was down at the entrance, two guys to sort of get us started. We were trying to figure out who was going to get to live there, why and how and stuff like that. Other people were obviously settled elsewhere, because this whole thing took time, we started from this meeting in April, people were sort of settled in. We didn't start out with, bang, with a community. We didn't have the

housing. A number of people in the area and then a number of people spread around the rest of the country that had come to the conference and agreed to either be members or contribute money. Sheryl and I moved down between the time of the conference and the time the couple got title of the land for the group. So we were down here at that point. Then we threatened to sue, we were jumping up and down hard, and the real estate agent they were just stonewalling and stuff like that, but it was six months before we transferred the land, the first six months. Basically we only had those two guys living here. Some other people sort of started showing up, the second house sort of started to have some people living there, living out of it, but it was real vague. We had an older couple who came and they wanted the house for their own and they'd provide stability and all that, and one of the guys who was down there first was all hot about them being there because there were all these Sixties people and then here's this nice older couple and that would help with the outside community if we had them living there, but the group wasn't going to give them clear claim on the second house or rent it to just them not have other people, so they left. What happened over the first fall, winter, and spring, so it was like people were coming and staying and visiting and staying in the second house, we tried to fix it up some, it was beat to hell, nobody lived in it for ten, fifteen years, but we were fixing it up, making it viable again. In the winter and in early spring people started arriving from other places, saying, "I'm here, I'm coming, we're doing the community," and camping, basically, or just camping out of the house and all kinds of oddball things. Sheryl and I moved out in the spring in a big army tent. Somebody had found some surplus army tents and bought three of them. I don't remember whether the community put together ... maybe the community bought the money [??]. The fellow that was the organization's original treasurer, he had a lot of stuff going on in his life, and he needed to concentrate on other things a little bit. He dropped the treasurer ship basically to me. I had a crash course in bookkeeping eight hours by the alternative CPA that floated through and explained bookkeeping to me. I was good with numbers and money and all that stuff, so it was like, "Alright, alright, here I go, I'm learning it." So I did fine with the books, it was very helpful to me. I do computer counting software now, so that was my beginning. So I was the treasurer and that helped. I was more of a "Democratic" treasurer. The other fellow had been more of a "Republican" treasurer, you know, hold on to all your money, we got to spend all our money on the land and do all that, we can't spend money on anything else, and I'm more like, well, we can spend money, this is for the community, it's fifteen bucks here, twenty bucks, eighty bucks, a hundred bucks there, sort of like investments in stuff that would work. I probably did pay for the army tents out of the community money. Sheryl and I had half of one tent with our two kids and the other half was two other single people down at the other end.

Q: Man.
A: We had the tent down by the first house so that we sort of had a kitchen and stuff like that. Virginia in the summer, it's not like you need to be inside, you're not going to be cold.

Q: Yeah. But still, that house had running water and all?
A: Oh yeah.

Q: Plumbing, flush toilets, stuff like that? Shower?
A: Yes. There was definitely, I guess we were using that shower, we had outdoor showers, we had work shower stuff out by the river [??]. It was ambitious, better than camping out, but ...

Q: Not much? How old were your kids at the time?
A: This was the spring of '95 [??], two and five.

Q: Wow.
A: Kids' scene was good. The kids scene here has been good since day one, in a certain sense. There were things that were missing and stuff like that, but people were very into kids, people were into making the place good for kids, you can't beat this community for a place to raise children. And we've been kid focused [??] at the beginning. I was pushing on that too, I had two small kids, hey, let's make this a good place for kids. And so there was a bunch of little kids two to about six that were living on the land initially, so it was a little pack running around. And they loved it, you know, they had their friends ... they're not, honestly, kids who might have played with each other in other circumstances, but there are a number of them. You get past a certain number of kids and there's a critical mass and they start playing together and usually having a good time. [unintelligible] adults kind of watching, making sure it's reasonable, they'll have a good time, and we did that. Anyway, we had like thirteen people living on the land. Well, what happened, this was ... I'm a systems analyst type guy, which is helpful.

Q: Yeah, sure.
A: We had three groups of people, the on landers, the off landers, and the outlanders. The on landers are living on the land, the off landers are living in the area, but not right on the land, and the outlanders are people living other places in the country. We're having these conferences every few months in which we plan for and schedule and make big decisions in which everybody comes in and they camp out for the weekend all over the place and we make big decisions and we decide to do things and then we go back to whatever we've been doing. From a political standpoint, all power goes to the on landers. You don't need to do that, but that's what happens because they're there working with each other and talking to each other and they develop working relationships and they know everything that's going on. And they're more focused on stuff, there's more sharing and stuff like that. We set up a partial commune situation called "Firefly" [??], partial income sharing, it was a serious forty percent of your income or sixty or something like that. We had five cars that all thirteen of us were sharing. I think there was a sixth car that a guy wouldn't put in the group and we tolerated that, we couldn't make him. We had these cars and we had one fellow that could fix cars, we had people working in town and were sending in ... we had the six o'clock car, the seven o'clock car, the 8:15 car, that's it, those are the cars that went into town during the day, and then one came back at 3:30, one came back at 4:30, and one came back at whenever. You sort of worked out who was going in the cars and stuff like that. Some things were sort of fixed, the 8:15 car took like five kids to a preschool program in Charlottesville. That was a neat scene, I liked that, but it was really fast paced. We were doing everything ... hey, this happened, oh, I'm sorry, I got sidetracked with the on landers. The off landers are the people that are living in the area. And they were really upset in general about what was going on in the land, it's too fast, things are moving too fast, you're trying to do too much, you're going to burn yourself out. In a certain sense they were correct, that's correct, that we were. In another sense, we needed to do stuff fast. We were trying to get a building up in some way so that people could live there for the winter, so we'd have our community. This happened in the spring, we had people coming there, and we'd been talking about a building ever since we got the land, putting another building up or an addition or something. We actually did start the addition that spring. The community approved it and so the treasurer was me, started dispensing checks. In a certain sense we had to move fast, we want to move fast, we want to show people progress so we'd have a place to commune and join and a place to come to and stuff like that, and the same thing happened in a new community that's setting up over at [unintelligible], same kind of pattern. The outlanders, the people living way the hell elsewhere, and they're corresponding with people on land and off land, but when we'd have the conferences, basically, people tended to side with the on landers because we had more information. We had our shit together better, and when it was some kind of group consensus on things, just because we'd been working together on things, and an off lander might make an intelligent idea but it wouldn't fit because of certain

factual things and the on landers would have already dismissed that, so we had more credibility, we just had our shit better together, even though we were burning out. So basically, the outlanders would back the on landers, and the off landers would say, much too fast, don't do this or do that, or why do you have to do all this stuff, or we don't like this, that one's good but don't do this thing. We'd be doing three projects, different off landers would be upset about different projects and happy with other projects. Anyway, we had a fire, December 11th, 1975. Pretty, kind of really, shocked us, stunned us. We were having a meeting at the one house about where people were going to live for the winter because the addition to the main house, this big enormous gargantuan architectural monstrosity that is there now, it's not so big and [unintelligible] as it seemed at that point, it was a committee decision, we compromised and stuff and got this thing. It's there, people are living there, that's what it was [unintelligible]. Built the wrong way, designed the wrong way, took a lot of extra time and just all kinds of mistakes. But it wasn't anywhere near ready and it was getting cold. Sheryl and I had moved out of the army tent into ... our family had sort of grabbed one of the rooms in the house and people were okay with that. People were sort of coalescing around one house or the other. We just sort of grabbed one house and were sleeping in one room. It was the phone room during the day and Sheryl and I pulled out beds and we slept there with the kids at night. So we were having this meeting about where people were going to live and we just decided Sheryl and I were going to have to get all the kids together up in the second house, so we were talking about Sheryl and I moving into this other house and some guy comes ... all of us were at this meeting, this was a big on lander meeting trying to deal with our problems, and some guy came up knocked on the door, "Hey, there's a fire up the hill, looks like a fire," and we all went running up, we go up there and we see the whole house is gone up in smoke. It completely radically changed everything that was going to happen. For one thing, it was insured, we got fifteen thousand dollars, which was about what the house was worth, out of it. That suddenly made the next land payment really easy. We were supposed to raise fifty-eight thousand dollar chunk, it was like, oh, we got this, piece of cake, we already got twenty or thirty thousand at that point, so another fifteen made that work.

Q: Do you know what caused the fire?
A: The fire people either said electricity or wood stove, and we know it was the wood stove because someone had set up a woodstove wrong, he just said, no, I don't think that's a good way to do it. He had the exhaust coming out of the bottom of the stove rather than the top of the stove. He was going to do something about it "real soon." But they left wood in that stove and it just ... I don't know what happened, but I'm sure that's what did it. I don't think it was electric. So he was real depressed about it, everybody was completely shocked and bummed out. Because it destroyed our whole little on land group. A bunch of people moved off the land. The people who were centered around the main house tended to stay, the people who were centered around the other house had lost everything they owned or something like that, all of their stuff in there, so they became off landers. And suddenly we had four or five on landers and everybody else is off landers and it changed everything, we just had to slow way down, we had this money but a lot of work had been put into the addition. Suddenly everybody coalesced on the addition and got that habitable and people started working in midwinter. But it just slowed down the whole pace of everything on the land because there were only four or five people here on the land, and it was that way for another ... we had the fire in '75, another three or four years. Because we just slowed down. There was no other group on the land that could do so much, four of us, five of us weren't going to try to do everything, and everybody was off the land and we had to deal with the money stuff. Fire was in '75. '76, '77 ... I can't remember when we got the bank loan, but we got the bank loan that made things easier because suddenly we weren't having to raise all this money. The other thing, after the fire some of us wanted to just give some money out of the community to the people who lost everything, just give them a thousand dollars a piece or something like that. "We don't

have that much money," or five hundred dollars, just some serious chunk of money as a gesture to them because they'd been putting all this into the community. The on landers were all in favor to that. The off landers were coming to the meeting and they were blocking that, "No, we can't afford it ... we'll set up some other fund ... we shouldn't be setting this precedent, " and all this other stuff. It totally bummed me out, but we were doing a consensus thing and the people who were burned out were just too fried out to be involved in the political process. One of the things we learned early on is, decision making stuff -- it's nice, for one thing, if you're involved in the decision if it affects you, but when it really affects you, it's really important to you and intense for you, it makes it very hard to be objective and to listen to other things like that, particularly if you're under time pressure or other pressure. It's more like the people that the decisions really affect the most, it's a very hard thing. So you don't like to be going through a political process and deciding stuff when you've got pressure and you really want to do something, it messes with your head. You got to get yourself really in a good space to be able to deal with it well because it's so important to you, and they've just been burned out, they don't have anything and they don't want to be hearing other people saying, in a democratic process with all kinds of people saying stuff, you're going to hear some really good stuff and you're going to hear some really off the wall stuff and it's really hard when your life is all screwed up and stuff like that to be held down listening to somebody coming up with some really off the wall arguments about things that you have to ... the ideal thing is to let them make their arguments and nicely say, well, you don't think this and let the whole thing fade away, but it's hard to do that when somebody's doing that it's really important. People are more likely to get upset, to get mad and leave or something like that. Anyway, bummed me out but we didn't give any money to the people. The whole "Firefly" thing, that was the communal group that sort of semi-income sharing, that was gone. So the whole community kind of turned decentralized, decentralist at that point, where we were going to have individual homes and people are going to have to finance their own homes, the community is not going to buy all the homes, that had been a big issue, is the community going to pay money for everything and sort of rent out to people so the community owns it all, more like Twin Oaks, or are we going to have individual people financing, and we went with the decentralist model at that point, which kind of slowed things down on building in terms because now we couldn't pile all our money together, put up building after building. Now we sort of had to wait for people to get their own individual trips together to put up houses and so that took another couple of years. It just made certain things slower. Am I going to fast? Am I talking too fast? [unintelligible]

Q: No, this is great. I think that's really interesting. So it was really the fire that was kind of the turning point in terms of going from a more communal model to a more private property model, I guess? Maybe private property is not the right word.
A: Decentralist is the word we were using. Where we were going to let people do their own thing and ...

Q: How do you feel about that change of events now looking back on it?
A: I don't know. I was a big centralist. Because the economics ... if we do things out of the center we can do things faster and do more and a very working democratic background. A lot of egalitarian stuff in there. I didn't like the idea of people with money being able to build and the people without money, or without their trips together, not being able to build. And that has conditioned the whole development of the community. The people that have sort of made it ... you got to be sort of middle class to make it here because you got to build a house and do all that, particularly with the financial constraints, you just can't get a regular mortgage and things like that. If you're poor, you don't end up ... you could have a poor little cabin here before or some other sort of alternative living situation. You can't have a house. But, I'm sitting here in this big house because I've been divorced twice so, my house here, I [unintelligible] I don't want to be sharing a house with six or seven other people, dealing with all the group dynamics. We did that, the main house did that after the fire, there was a group living situation

and everybody was coming through, we were supposed to be nice to everybody. We were the first group of [unintelligible] people that got burned out and stopped being so nice to everybody and started being grumpy at times to visitors, things like that. Just because you can't have people coming through. You can't have a regular life with people coming though all the time. You can't have a difficult discussion with your spouse without people being there and commenting. Anyway, we were a communal group on the land. We started building this house right here, the four or five people that were in the group started building this house, but the group blew up, basically, my marriage blew up, and that blew the group up. Sheryl and I are both still here, we're both in the community, that's good, and we did the joint custody thing and the kids went back and forth. The year we split up, '78/'79, we decided, I decided that community is a good place to get divorced in, too, because when you get divorced there's a real tendency for the husband goes to his friends, wife goes to her friends, you get lawyers and suddenly things get real nasty and mean and it's real hard to keep the couple working together and you really want the couple working together for the kids. You don't necessarily want them living together, but you want to be able to work together. Sheryl and I, right from the beginning, we didn't have problems, but other people had some problems and basically there's a lot of community support for people working things out. And with a husband and wife both having mutual friends, they're not able to get great support for the other person as a total creep and wipe them out and stuff like that. They get support for working things out. We had like five or six couples split up that year. Basically things got worked out. Is the tape going to catch me from this distance?

Q: Yeah, you'll be fine, if you want to go ahead and do your dishes. This has a pretty good microphone. How did you guys handle dividing up chores?
A: God, everything was voluntary. We never came up with a system. Are you talking about the group on the land?

Q: Yeah.
A: We agreed we were spending forty percent ... we put a certain percent of our income into the communal pot. The communal pot was paying for transportation, food, we were doing a lot of cooking together, we had two houses and for a while we tried to do meals at one house and then another meal down at another house and then that didn't work. So we started doing separate meals at separate houses, but we're still doing all the food together. A substantial portion of our needs were met. We had people going to town and working and putting money in, and other people were putting money in here. We were making it work , pretty much. We were just kind of fumbling along at the time, but we were doing like we were really sharing and making things work and there seemed to be people were all working ... we had new people come in, there was one guy came in we really didn't like [unintelligible] personal thing, he was trying to fit in and we were trying to fit him in, but he was living at the other house so I don't know how it all worked out. He was the one that messed up and caused the fire.

Q: Oh, gosh. Did he leave after the fire?
A: Yeah, he left and came back and then he left. He didn't really quite fit ... he had the right ... into cooperative stuff and things like that, but he had a real spiritual thing, maybe a Christian [unintelligible] or something like that too? I forget, not really Christian the way Christians are now, or, the way some of them are, but we weren't what you would call a spiritual group, and he eventually left. It was kind of anarchic in form, but everybody was working their butts off on the land, at first. We had hay. One guy bought a tractor by accident. Somebody went to an auction with the checkbook to maybe buy a couple of small things ...

Q: Oh no, and he ended up buying a tractor?
A: Anyway, "do I hear five hundred dollars?" "Well, five hundred, that'd be great for a tractor," he put his hand up for five hundred, nobody, he got it. He got a tractor for five hundred dollars, which is alright. We build a [unintelligible], picked up all the hay with it. We picked up all the hay with it, we didn't do [unintelligible] with it, we had other people raking and baling and all that stuff, but we picked up the hay, and that's the nastiest hardest part, and all the money for the haying went to the community. We made a bunch of money haying because there was a lot of hay here. We all used volunteer labor, and most of it was the people on the land and all that went to the community because the community needed money. We got this old Alabama farmer who helped us with the hay, not the first year but the second and third year. He was a character. Very nice ... get this, almost communist attitude towards things the way he wanted to do … Sixty-year-old Alabama farmer that grew up in one thing and this was all his thing and here's all these northerners and we're lecturing him on ethics and stuff like that, which he responded to, but it was amusing to watch in a certain sense.

Q: I'll bet.
A: I remember having a conversation with him and he said, "[unintelligible] niggers came up to buy some hay," which he would have sold them [unintelligible] that he wasn't in any problem selling stuff and working with people, but he had problems with these kind of people, and I said, "Wait a minute, we don't use that kind of language around here," and he got red and ... "these two colored gentlemen came up looking to buy some hay," and we went on from there [unintelligible]. He was trying. And I liked him, but he never moved here. He had family stuff in Alabama. He had kid and grandchildren problems [unintelligible] around there, and he never made it here. But he was up here every summer helping us with the hay and however we wanted to do it. We had all these characters, more characters in the beginning. Some of the characters have stayed around but it's sort of like over the long run what's happened in the community is that people who have it together to build a house and do all this are here and the people who don't have it together too well or are too artistic or can't stay with it to ... building a house is a major project, particularly if you don't have money. If you don't have money you can do it with doing a lot of the labor, but it's a major strain on relationships and everything else and learning and so on, just a horrendous kind of thing, particularly if you've got all these other things, you're volunteering and helping build the community at the same time. So basically the middle class has stayed. There's a few other people who have been here, but the more colorful people that need the economic institutions there to just plug into didn't make it. Left over time.

Q: How did you support yourself?
A: I got into computers right after I got married to [unintelligible] and I'm real good with them and I got the job. I got a job in Charlottesville. When I came down here I was looking for a regular job, and I eventually landed one with the University of Virginia that I held onto for about five years. I gradually cut from full time to two-thirds to half time. I split the job with somebody else and went half time, that was when we formed our own company when the microcomputers came around and I've been doing that ever since.

Q: Do you just do that out of your house?
A: At this point, the upstairs third of my house is our business. Two of us, my ex, first wife Sheryl and I.

Q: Oh yeah?
A: We're partners in business. It was a [unintelligible] co-op, it was set up that way initially, but we weren't real successful with the co-op and we had the problem, we downsized, we got up to eight people when things were getting better and we were selling hardware, but when hardware got

rearranged, it kept getting cheaper and K-Mart and everybody else got involved in it, we were losing hardware business and we had to cut back in a major way. Eventually our technician quit and we jettisoned the whole hardware side of business and it's just me and Sheryl left. So wow, we always did work together well, this is a little weird, but it works.

Q: That's great that you can make it work.
A: It was interesting [unintelligible] for awhile, because at one point we hired her new live in guy as a salesperson, then they got married, so at one point, I'm in an eight person co-op with my ex-wife and her new husband. We all get along fine, we're still all friends. But he was one of the first people to leave when it wasn't working because he was the hardware salesman. He could see the writing on the wall faster than everybody else.

Q: Can you explain the governing structure at Shannon Farm? Do you have officers or, how ... ?
A: Have you got this [unintelligible] or are you just getting another [unintelligible]

Q: No, I've just heard people throw out some names like treasurer and stuff like that but I don't know how it's all set up.
A: Okay. We're a corporation. We have a president and vice-president, secretary and treasurer. Actually, the secretary is a group of people, at this point, that rotate the job, because nobody wants it full time. Basically you have to go to the monthly meeting, take all these notes and get them typed up and all this junk and take care of the archives and it's a pain in the ass. The treasurer is also something of a pain in the ass. Sheryl's the current treasurer. There's some sort of power because you got the checkbook, but it's not much. You're pretty restricted with what you can do with it. You just can't spend money on things, you got to have authorization from the community, committees or something like that. Committees are real important. Let me start at the top. We have a monthly meeting, the monthly meeting is our governing thing to decide if we want to do anything. We have by-laws and all that stuff. The by-laws we try to keep in tune with what we agree at that monthly meeting. The by-laws are the official state things and they do closely reflect the way we're set up, but we'll make an agreement and then we don't change the by-laws. We don't worry about phrasing it the way the state would like it for the by-laws. We make an agreement, this is how we're doing things and at some point we [unintelligible] advise in the by-laws to make them say what we've agreed to do. We do things on a modified consensus ... we do things on a consensus, we have rules for overriding a block or how we deal with blocks in consensus. We've had a major problem with that all the way along, in terms of the community. Working with that system ... I've always picked democracy. You can argue with a butterfly [??] but at some point just vote and move on. Don't sit there and go on and on and on and on. But we've been doing that, and as we've gotten larger it's gotten more problematical and has limited what the community can do as a whole. We have a very weak central government that doesn't do anything right now.

Q: Is there a president too?
A: There is a president, and the joke used to be, "Who's the vice-president?" Now the joke is, "Who's the president?" People don't remember. "I don't know who the president is."

Q: That's really funny.
A: We need to get the president to sign things periodically, "Oh, we got to get the president, who's the president?" "I don't know, go look it up, or ask ... Sheryl probably know, she's the treasurer."

Q: That's really funny. How often do officers change?
A: Every year, we just move it around, it's a ceremonial post, it has no power, the by-law says it has no power, we put the power in the monthly meeting. We discovered committees earlier on and we try to get all major hassles and stuff worked out in committee. We like the idea of a committee working it out and bringing it to monthly meeting and everybody going, "Okay, that sounds good." If it's small stuff we got to the point where we just tell people, go argue with the committee, don't be sitting here arguing in the monthly meeting about it. IF it's big stuff, that's where we ran into problems. Committee might come up with a consensus and then take it to the monthly meeting to get shot down from different direction and the bigger we got, the harder it got. So the committees have had problems with that. But the committees are basically who does it now. Anybody can join a committee, you can show up for any committee you want and be a participant, but basically some people are committed to working with certain committees, we've got about ten or fifteen committees and that's where most stuff gets done. In small groups people work it out, this is where to get it done, we get it done and we do it. We have a budget system, the committees have every year we approve a budget for the committee, and that may involve certain projects that it's supposed to do basically, but here's the money, if it's in the budget you can spend it and that's the way it is. And the committees report back to monthly meeting on stuff they've done. Pretty much they stay in budget for certain things and it works.

Q: Does the work get shared fairly equitably? Do people take their turns on committees and ... ?
A: No. Some people are really into committees and meetings and stuff like that. They like doing that more and they go to the committee meetings and do that. Some people don't want anything to do with the meetings and they'll be here for all the work projects and stuff like that ... a few people will be here to do all kinds of work projects and I'll never see them at a committee meeting. Then there's other people that don't participate much at all in either one. We've got some phantoms, we have some people that just don't participate much. We had a labor requirement, I don't know whether it's still in the by-laws because nobody's been counting ever.

Q: Oh, is that where you had to give like a day and a half of work a month or something like that?
A: Yeah, the ideal was a day and a half of dues and a day and a half of work. [unintelligible] the day and a half of dues into seven percent of your annual income because that ...

Q: And you still do that, don't you?
A: Yep, yep that's what the dues are, seven percent of your income. Five percent for provisionals and stuff like that ... I'm sorry, well, it varies. After you've been here twelve years you only have to pay five percent, because seven percent's a lot of money.

Q: When you build your buildings, did you have any group guidelines as to how the building would be built like they had to be energy efficient or anything like that, they had to use solar power? I don't know.
A: We sort of agreed in general, we sort of agree on all those things. There's no requirements. Nobody said anything about solar power, be energy efficient. The group has to approve each house so we get the plans, but nobody's ever had any problems with any houses.

Q: Well, I noticed I've seen a lot of solar panels on peoples' houses it seems.
A: Electricity was a major thing for us because we only had electricity at that's front house and then the back house. The back house burned down but there was electricity up there so we had a cluster that kind of sprang up there. Any other building you have to ... so we have a development project here, you got to have roads, you got to have electricity, septic and all ...

Q: Septic systems ...
A: Septic systems and all that, so ... the roads we had were okay. The county had a real weak government. It's gotten stronger as more people have come in and stuff like that. It's gotten more modern. One of the reasons we chose Virginia was the government was sort of do whatever you want. Just treat people okay and the government's not going to get in your way about zoning and stuff like that. And we did a master plan for the county way early on. One of our members went to grad school in landscape architecture, so we [unintelligible] master plans, put it in front of the county, that was only the second one they'd ever seen or something like that. The first one was wintergreen, this big development down there, this was the second one. "Oh, well, looks good, yeah, go ahead and do it."

Q: That's great.
A: But electricity was a problem. People were sort of into alternative electricity. Some of us would have been happier with regular electricity. I wanted electricity, but other people, "Oh, no, we've got to do it alternative. We got to do it alternatively," so that slowed down development also. And this cluster that we're in right here that [unintelligible], was originally, we were going to do alternative electricity of some kind but what that originally was batteries and a generator. The solar was too expensive at that point, but we said, okay, we'll get the generator, we can go with [unintelligible] we got a deal with the batteries anyway in terms of other stuff, so we'll start running on batteries. And about three years into that experiment we had some other clusters start and stuff like that. Some of us were fed up with batteries. Solar was starting to come in and the people who were really tech-y were saying, "Okay, now we can do solar." But others of us who wanted more electricity were saying, "Wait a minute, we still got to do these stupid gas refrigerators, we can't trust the electricity and there's all this stuff that I have to do that I don't want to do. I don't want to be dealing with batteries. We've seen two blow up, I don't want to be dealing with this stuff. It's not safe, we work like hell for this stuff and I don't believe ... I'll just get regular electricity. So we had this big long thing that took a couple of years about what we were going to do about electricity and it was real strange, it was real strange. We were real prejudiced against the local co-op [??] because they didn't seem to be treating us very well. It was like, these people, there's something really weird going on here. And so, "We're going to do our own electricity." We decided we would buy electricity in bulk probably from ... there's two electric companies on the land. It splits something like [unintelligible], so we decided we would buy from the other electric company [unintelligible] the other place and then distribute our own electricity to people. We'd just buy big bulk electricity. We started making plans to do that then the other company said they wouldn't do it with us. Which was upsetting. We got the agreement from the community to do this. We were working out the technical aspects of it because it would be like regular electricity. All we'd have to do would be dealing with the buildings and certain big electrical stuff, transformers and all this stuff, like the regular electric company deals with, but we figured we'd have two or three people who would know how to deal with that stuff and we could deal with it. But the price kept going up about what it would cost us to do it, and then the other company said they wouldn't do it with us, and so we were dealing with that. And then the local co-op came back, somebody decided they didn't want to bid from them because it's a group process, everybody going every which way and having all kinds of ideas and some people say, well we should do that, I'm not going to approve this unless ... all this kind of junk's going on. So you end up looking at a lot of options. [unintelligible] kind of committee, business committee kind of situation, and one person went back to the local co-op to see what they would charge, and it came out they were real nice and they said they'd only charge us thirteen thousand dollars and since at that point we were looking at forty thousand dollars to our own system, someone said, "Whoa, wait a minute here." And I went down and talked to the head of the co-op and we decided that we made a big mistake in not looking at these guys because he was reasonable, he was in the co-op, he's a rural guy, bow-tie, seventy years old or something like that, but he was okay, he was just an old-time businessman but he was also

into co-ops and electricity. We just had the wrong person dealing with them. He relaxed because he realized talking to me that he wasn't dealing with a bunch of backwoods nutcases. And I could see we could do business with these guys. It passed in the community that we could put in regular electricity into clusters and we'd pay a fair amount of money because they don't just put it in. The rural stuff, they only give you so much for free and then they charge you. But if we sort of piggy-backed all our stuff on each other it would only cost us thirteen thousand dollars instead of the forty thousand it would really cost or something like that to put the line ... we knew what it cost to put the lines in, it would cost forty thousand to put the lines in, but they were only going to charge us thirteen thousand because we'd be paying their regular rates from that point on. And they're going to keep fixing it forever after that, too. You know, regular electricity. But then we had to get the approval of the community. This was ten years after we started and it was tricky because the people who already had electricity, some of whom didn't like spending money, were real cheap, and, "We're gonna spend thirteen thousand ... " blah blah blah, "Well, the option is forty thousand. We got to get electricity for these people [??]." "Well, alright." We've got those people sort of uneasy about just spending money, and then we've got all the alternative people who, "No. We shouldn't spend this money. We should do it alternative ... " "Well, hey, look, we've been waiting for you and we don't trust you and you're not going to promise ... no, we can't do that." So we came up with this agreement that we'd put so much into real electricity and so much into alternative electricity. So it's funded, basically. It's funded. And it's been the people who are technically oriented are making it work and the people who are not technically oriented give up on it. That's my perception on the alternative stuff.

Q: Right, yeah.
A: And there's still some funding with it but it's sort of gone by the wayside over the years because they're not using all their funding ... there was one big group house that went with it and spent all kinds of money on it and the major components failed, spending thousands of dollars on something and it fails and the technical person left and basically they don't talk about it so much but everybody knows that hasn't worked out so well. And I think they're actually just mailing [??] it and transferring it to other people for the alternative electricity stuff. So we do have solar stuff happening here, a number of people are experimenting with it and doing with it and committed to trying to make it work and then those of us that are happy with regular old American electricity.

Q: Yeah. Huh. So what about other things like running water and heat and all that kind of stuff? How do people ...
A: Heat's basically wood heat. A few electric heaters have appeared over time because we've discovered that electric heat, while terribly inefficient for a whole house or something like that, for spot heating here and there, works. Like you've got a wood stove and you're going out, you're leaving for the weekend or something like that, you plug in an electrical heater and it will keep the house warm enough so that things don't freeze.

Q: Right. Do you use propane for cooking?
A: Most people use propane, a few people have electricity, but most people use propane for cooking and wood heat for heat.

Q: Yeah. Do most of the houses or all of the houses have running water?
A: We got some cabins that don't have running water. I don't think any of the cabins have running water. I think all the houses have running water.

Q: And do all the people have septic systems with flush toilets or do some people use outhouses?
A: Outhouses are illegal in Virginia except under certain special circumstances.

Q: Oh. Huh.
A: So ain't gonna see many outhouses around here.

Q: Okay. Why are they illegal? That's odd.
A: Um, because the rules are basically made by suburban people.

Q: Oh, alright.
A: And city people and they can't understand outhouses and there are problems with people who aren't using outhouses properly, you dig a hole down by a stream and you pollute the stream.

Q: Yeah, that's a problem. Right.
A: So they basically say no, and you got to get special permission to do them. People do other things in the county although there's less going on. This county is real mountained [??] type county. You're in the developed part of the county up here in the northern part, but the rest of the county is pretty ... people are going to do it the way the want to do it, and they don't like anybody telling them how they can go and do this. Most people have flush toilets, the cabins don't have flush toilets.

Q: How did you pump your water before you got electricity?
A: We had the generator for a while. We had a pump and we'd run the generator once or twice a day and during that time we'd automatically turn the pump on so it would fill up this ... we have a cistern, a septic tank with water, incoming septic tank, not septic, but we used it, it was the cheapest tank we could get effective. So we pumped the water into that and then the water comes out of that into to the individual houses. [unintelligible] every cluster set up their own water system so that, you know, we got one gravity feed, we've got one water tower, actually, gravity feed is supporting two clusters. One cluster has a spring box and a pump coming out of that and then another, I'm not sure how you'd call it [unintelligible]. Should know, but I don't even remember what they're doing for water. [unintelligible] I forget, and then two or three of them have wells, or pumps, actually most of them have pumps, but they're ... that's water.

Q: Do you like the cluster system?
A: Yeah. Yeah. We sort of talked like originally they'd be typed politically or something, they'd be working together.

Q: Yeah.
A: That hasn't happened. People have friends all over the place. Your friends might be in another cluster. The clusters share resources, and where the neighbors ... so we'll have neighbor kinds of relationships and there'll be some very good friendships in the clusters. But people you're friendly with aren't necessarily the people you work together best with or you want to work with on projects together or you agree with on how you would live together. So the farm is pretty much people or friends connected all over the place and stuff like that. And the clusters share some things, it's easier for the kids are in the same cluster, they go back and forth.

Q: Yeah.
A: But that's the extent of it.

Q: Right. How many clusters are there?
A: Eight.

Q: Eight clusters. Mm-hmm.
A: Seven originally, then we bought this other piece of land a couple of years ago that we're putting an eight cluster on it. Well, not all the clusters are full. I think they've all got at least three buildings on them. They've all got at least three building in them and they've all got at least two ... well, yeah, they're developing [unintelligible]. Most of them are single family houses, most of the houses are single family houses with a number of cabins and outbuildings that get used in various ways.

Q: What sorts of things do you and the communities share? Like, I've heard people talk about having a snowplow or a tractor or something, I don't know.
A: We've always had a tractor.

Q: Okay. Is that what you use to plow the snow in the wintertime?
A: We may now, we just bought a new tractor. We did a little bit of plowing before then, but when we got a serious snowstorm we had a real problem. After last winter we had a serious snowstorm. We did hire plows at one point, it cost us a fortune.

Q: Oh, I'll bet, yeah.
A: The new tractor is probably lower and it may be able to do that plowing, we'll see. When it snows everybody takes turns on the tractor. Small snows it'll work, so are some of the snows too. We've had people get out there on the tractor and do all our plowing and volunteer the people who can run the tractor do it. A lot of work-sharing but nothing on the community base [??]. The community doesn't even try to do community businesses anymore.

Q: So, what is it called, Hartwood?
A: Hartwood design, yeah.

Q: Was that originally a community business or was it ... ?
A: No, no it was ...

Q: Just individuals living in the community?
A: Yeah. Yeah, we've had a haying community business, we sort of did haying as a community business, but we gave up on that.

Q: But you do have a number of resources that you share, or maybe not, maybe "resources" isn't the right word, but things like you have your pond where you go swimming and your swimming hole, right?
A: We've got the pond and the swimming hole, we've got all the social stuff we do.

Q: And volleyball and then someone said there is like a playground for the kids?
A: Playground at [unintelligible]. The kids suffer [??]. The people with kids ... childrearing is sort of a community thing.

Q: Is it?
A: Well, sort of, I said, sort of. It's a parental thing, but because all the other kids ... there's other kids with the right age here, then your kid is over playing with them and you're in contact with the parents all

the time, you're working things out with the parents, you're doing a lot with the parents. The kids are back and forth. They do that, and so you are suddenly in a ... you're sort of doing a joint child-rearing thing with ... this is the way it should be and it is in other parts of the world. You know your child's friends and you know their parents. I think rural, you're going to know your child's friends and know their parents anyway because you got to get the kids together with them, but here they're right in the community. There's people in the community you might not have much contact with, but if I've got little kids suddenly I'm having contact with those kids' parents and stuff like that.

Q: What did you guys do for schooling?
A: We set up an alternative school in the county, initially, and there still is one in the county that's the successor of the one we set up. We didn't set one up as Shannon, we didn't' have enough kids at Shannon to do that. Do you want some apple juice?

Q: That'd be great, yeah, thank you.
A: We set up the school like fifteen miles away in the old black elementary school that had been given up. It was interesting. We ran into people and they discovered we were sort of resurrecting that school and, "I used to go to school there!" And that was in operation for about five years. Sheryl and I and other people with little kids helped set that up when we got here because we weren't going to send our kids to the local public schools anywhere. We didn't agree with the philosophy, too far from us.

Q: What about [unintelligible]?
A: Generalizing, the kids going to the schools were poor blacks and poor whites, and the schools were training kids for poor blacks and poor whites. Get to school on time, do this, tow the line, follow the rules, and you'll get a job. If you're lucky you might be able to go to college, otherwise you're going to get a job working industrially somewhere or something like that. And we're alternative people and into effective education and all that stuff and we just don't, "no, this is not ... we're not going to put our kids in this environment." I mean, some of the people have their kids in local schools, they're more middle class now, particularly up in this neck of the woods, but there's still the strong poor black and poor white and cultural things that go along with that, and I'm happy that my kids are exposed to that but I don't want them growing up ... like I said, there are a few people who have their kids in local schools, we don't have any rules at this point. That school eventually phased out, basically, stopped being a school, went down to being a pre-school and I think the pre-school's gone and I don't think there's anything there. But the woman that was the head teacher at that school left for a year or two and then came back to the area and set up another school for the people, they did another co-op [??] school and that one's still going. It's called Northbranch and it's part alternative, part middleclass mainstream. Open classroom approach. At this point the kids are generally going to Northbranch or a lot of homeschooling, people do more homeschooling now, and then some are going to the county schools. There's no rules about what the kids do, it's whatever people's parents do best. And we've got people moving in and out. We got one mother that's going to homeschool their kid that I never would have thought would homeschool her kid, but he's been going to the junior high and she said, oh, I'm not going to put into that junior high. That's a disaster of all the schools in the county, that's the biggest mess, so I'm not going to put him in the junior high, so I'll homeschool him for two years until we put him in high school.

Q: Does Shannon have rules about conduct here, things like smoking, drinking, drugs, stuff like that, quiet times, quiet hours?
A: We have agreements and then there's, I call it, social pressure. You don't have big drunken anythings, the community wouldn't tolerate that. There are a couple of people here, I'd say, that the American Social Workers would classify as having drinking problems, and one would definitely classify in that's.

But generally we don't have too much of that. In terms of drugs we don't have any hard drugs here. The community passed a rule banning drugs at some point, but in terms of marijuana the community doesn't try to enforce any rules on its members. What people do in their own house is their own business.

Q: Did you pass that rule to look good in the county's eyes or something?
A: We passed it about twenty years ago.

Q: Oh, okay.
A: I don't know [unintelligible] basically. But the corporation is on record against having any drugs on the land and there are no hard drugs here, and there are probably a few people that the American Social Workers would classify as having drug problems, but it they're supporting themselves and their kids are okay and they've grown up and they've been doing it for twenty years, I don't see the effects of the drug problem. So that's probably, I guess that's true not just of the community, of the county. We're sort of ensconced in the county now, and we've got a lot of people who have been members here who are no longer members here and they're either in the county or in Charlottesville or [unintelligible]. A lot of the people who have been involved with Shannon at one point. We tend to have a low turnover. But we've got our fingers in everywhere in terms of who has been members and what they've done.

Q: Yeah. Any idea why you've had such a low turnover? It seems unusual for an intentional community.
A: Part of it may be the way we define it. We've got this provisional membership. We have fairly a lot of turnover on provisional members. People will come here and you get a provisional member for at least six months, probably a year, and that's the trial period. A lot of people leave in that period. It just doesn't work, they say, I don't want to do this or they don't connect or whatever. And other people just float right through provisional membering, they say, yeah we're going to do this. They just fit right in. Once people become full members, that's where we have the low turnover. And the decentralized thing has worked with that. Sort of like, if people have their trip together when they get here, sort of like you have to have your act together in a certain sense to get to be a member here. If you don't have your act together here it's real hard to get to be a member here, just because you got to pay the dues and you got to figure out housing and all that other stuff. And the people that don't want to deal with that or can't deal with that don't end up here. And the people that come here, they've got their trip together, they decide this is what they want to do, and so they stay. Especially if you're going to build a house. It's real hard to turnover your house here. [unintelligible] sell it on the open market to the rest of the world, so you got to be pretty damn sure if you're going to build a house here.

Q: Right.
A: That's one, that's one thing, so like we do the right kind of screening stuff so the people that are going to stay around know they want to stay around are going to do that's. The decentralist thing with people having individual houses gives them their own individual space, the group is not there telling them how to live in a lot of sense. And there's a lot of tolerance for people, it's not like you have to live this way or that way. So that's helpful. People are nice, it's a great neighborhood and all that kind of thing. We have people that have joined and have not ... they're still members and they're like phantoms. They don't really participate at all, but they don't want to leave because well, they're nice people around here, I can trust my neighbors and stuff like that, so they're here. And then the kid thing. You get kids in here and it's harder to leave. It's just too good of a scene. I got divorced again, my older kids are grown up, but I've got another four year old son and a ten year old ex-stepdaughter and my ex is out of state now, but the kids are putting pressure on her, both of them, the ten year old and four year old, they would rather be here. She's looking around fora better situation and she hasn't found it yet.

Q: So they may come back?
A: We'll see. We'll see. At least for part of the year because the way things are set up, they're here a bunch.

Q: That's great. One of the questions we always ask people is what attitudes are like towards sexuality in their communities. Have things been pretty open here in terms of like, would you be accepting of, say, homosexuality or different ...
A: We had a more substantial gay contingent years ago. Now I don't even hear much talk about it at all. I don't think we have anybody that's gay here, because they're not talking if they are, and maybe a few people are doing some bisexual thing, but there's not much of that. Basically it's pretty American in essence. Just people sleeping around, there's occasionally couples who have problems. Occasionally couples will have problems when somebody will sleep with somebody else and we tend to know about it. Things are more open here than they might be in other environments. We did a lot more sexual experimentation with the whole open relationship thing in the Seventies. There's no rules or anything like that. We're not going to let any kid sex people be around here.

Q: Yeah.
A: But we're liberals. If someone's gay, so what? It's just that we don't tend to attract ... it's sort of like you get the critical mass thing. If you're gay and you're coming here, you don't see any other gay people here. Well, why would I want to live there for?

Q: Yeah, right. For you, what's the best part of living at Shannon Farm?
A: Oh, the people, the environment, the society. It's safe, it's comfortable, I know all the people here. Some I don't like, some are my best friends. I like the kid scene, it's good for my kids. You said it looks like heaven here. I'm living in heaven. I was never a Marxist, but this is a Marxian dream, whatever he was dreaming. I'm working sort of out of my house now, I'm living here in utopian kind of trees and woods and animals and kids and all that stuff is all happening. It hasn't cost me an arm and a leg and half my life to do it. I would say I've put my soul into this thing and I'm happy with what I've ... I'm not leaving here. Two or three women [??] over the years, come be with me. Just be with me and we can do this, if you don't want to live there. "No, I'm here. This is my home."

Q: What about the flip side? What are the drawbacks or the hard parts?
A: I would like the community to be doing more. The community doesn't do much because of the whole consensus thing. It gives permission for people to do things and I'd like the community to be able to do more. I'd like to be working more in a more cooperative organizational way of putting things together. I would like to be building a whole society of more cooperative institutions and if Shannon is doing it it's a very slow growing plant. It hasn't gotten more involved or we haven't made more communities. I would have loved to see a lot more communities like ours go up.

Q: Well, you guys have been instrumental in Deer Rock, right? Getting that one going?
A: Yeah, yeah, and I don't know whether it's going to make it. It's struggling right now, in my perception, worse than we struggled. Financially they're doing fine, at least right now, but they're not growing in membership, and we had no such luxuries. We were very open at the beginning. We came up with membership rules over time, at the beginning we'd take anybody, you just start paying dues you can be a member because we needed all that money at the beginning.

Q: You said that consensus kind of slows things down. Do you wish you used another process, that you just had majority rule, or ... ?
A: I'd like a modified consensus. I'd like to talk for a while then we vote if we get eighty percent ... I'd like some kind of modified democracy or some democratic consensus blend so that we [unintelligible] for a while, but if you got an overwhelming majority you just go ahead and do it and not get into this blocking and everybody has to agree. Or if we're going to do a consensus, we define it real carefully. We've come up with this formal consensus stuff ... it was out of the anti-nude demonstrations [unintelligible], the people came from this process called formal consensus about how to do consensus and it's got a book out about how to do it and we've been switching over to that system and that's looking like it's helpful and if we actually get to it ...

Q: That's the Butler one? Is that right?
A: Yeah, C.T. Butler, yeah.

Q: You think that might work a little better.
A: Yeah, it seems to be working better. We're working more on that and if we actually get to do the whole thing and then solve the big mucky thing that they didn't deal with in formal consensus, there's a hallowed system and we can see it and we're going to run into it and if we can solve that's hole [??] then we have a real interesting democratic way of doing things. I'm helpful in the support of that, but the communities gotten so big with the consensus stuff that it's very frustrating to try and work with it. You're either doing something that's so non-controversial and acceptable to everyone that everyone says, oh yeah, that's fine, which is a pretty rare thing. But [??] they bought a new tractor recently and somebody did all the research and the people wanted the tractor for the plow and stuff like that and no problem with the tractor so, yeah, we can spend thirteen-, fifteen-thousand dollars for a new used tractor, whatever. That just flew through. It was something of a surprise, but it was so non-controversial everybody did it. But anything that involves controversy, unless you're totally dedicated with working with a kind of funky political process, you're shot. It won't happen. And most people don't have those capabilities like drive or desire or the tenacity to stay with it or something like that, so they end up giving up and they can't do anything. People come here and they ... we had a potter that was real interested in the place and people were really trying to get him here. Real nice guy, a family, but he was a potter and that was the problem. He wanted to do his kiln fires and he had to be in a certain part of the land, he's an artist, he wants to do things a certain way and they joined but they quit after a few months because they were just getting ... people were really trying but some other people, "Oh, we don't want all that smoke here. What are we going to do about all that smoke when they do kiln fire? What about all the people coming onto the land to see the pottery? We don't want to have all those people on the land." Which are understandable considerations, and the thing probably could have been worked through if somebody sort of stayed with it, but these people were new and they were just coming in and it's their life and he's doing his pottery, stuff like that, and you get all this junk, people coming back with this stuff. It's the thing I said before. When something's really important to you and then you're in meetings with it getting buffered [??] around all the place and you sort of have to play the politics of it, it's real hard to play politics and be nice with people when [unintelligible] so important to you. And you don't really have the option. If this does not go through your way you're either out of here or your life is really screwed up or things like that's. You can't be nice and work things through as well that's way. You're not objective. You're very committed to making something happen and the other people know that and some people can be very sympathetic to you, but then you'll always run into some bozos that you're trampling on their values in some way by what you're doing. Or other people that just aren't interested and if you're not nice ... it's just hard, it's just hard to do with the consensus process. With the

democratic process, with all the rules, if you're inside the rules you can do what you want to do. Put your house next to somebody that hates you because you own the land, and here, you couldn't.

Q: Well, as kind of a final wrap up question, if a group of people were going to live together communally, what
A: Group of people want to live together communally. The Beech [??] cluster, it's their second attempt of people trying to [unintelligible], that's the way to do it. 'Cuz communal sounds good, but when you're living with six or seven other people it's sort of like you're married to them. You're living with them, you're in their lives. Things happen. You meet their friends, good and bad. You hear their problems, they hear your problems. Lovers complicate things. They come, they go for some people. All that stuff's sort of public when you're in a communal group. And there will be turnover, unless you're into some totally committed super-spiritual trip with all that stuff going on, if you got people sort of living their lives, you're going to have some turnover because somebody's going to meet the love of their life and they'll leave, or somebody will meet the love of their life and the love of their life is going to move into your group! Communal stuff tends to be for single people, the couples tend to retreat into family just because they're trying to have the whole family set up and they don't need all the extraneous things going on. But the Beech cluster, what they've done is they've ... well, the idea is what you do is you build a big group house that has a nice kitchen, all the communal kind of things you want, big kitchen and all that stuff. Then what you want to do is have little outbuilding, cabins, real close by. They might have stoves in them, they have whatever the individual people want in them, but the idea is they have some private space. And noise [??] private space, I suppose you could do it in a big apartment kind of set up, too, but I like the little cabin thing, at least what we could do here. So if you got the little cabins out there, you can go off in your little cabin and you can really withdraw a lot if you need to, for a while, but in your own space. But then you got the kitchen hang out area where you can see other people and hang out with other people and have that extended family kind of scene a fair amount of the time. A lot of people have played with this, it's sort of hard to get together because you sort of have to get the group and you have to build the group house first. One of the clusters tried to do this as a cluster, but they built the ... they couldn't wait, they sort of started working on the group house because some people wanted to get in there so they got their own little house in their, well, little house, suddenly they've got a toilet and it's got the kitchen and it's got everything and pretty soon it was a little house. Then somebody put their little house up there, they hadn't finished the big house, and pretty soon they all had little houses, they ended up putting additions on little houses because they were too small, but they had all the amenities in their little house and the group house never got the energy and focus into it to make it happen in the first place.

Q: Did they eventually build a group house?
A: Yes, there was group house built, it was a big central area for meetings and they could have stuff there, but everybody had their own kitchens, they do have a kitchen there, it's just a funky little building, no bigger than anything else, and that was going to be their group house, everybody's hanging out at their own houses with their own families at that point. They didn't' hang out in the group house it was just this thing that was there. And then one fellow put his personal space -- he got the permission of the group to attach it onto the group house, and so it's sort of one house now. There is this stuff that is the group house, and the group can come in there any time, they got a laundry there. I guess that's worked out well for that group, they've got their laundromat there. They all have the same laundry [??]. Some people have their own washers and driers, but a couple of the people use the group laundromat. But other than that, it's more like that guy's house and eventually probably will be his house except he's renting it to somebody else right now. Because that was built last, everybody sort of substituted a little

bit. They made their own little spaces bigger and nicer than they might have otherwise, and that became their house.

Q: Yeah, right. So building the group house first is a good piece of advice then?
A: And you build it, you put all your energy, you get the group house up, even if you have the people living there for a little. They had people living in there, then they're going to build their outbuildings and people can move into their outbuildings. I like that plan. My second ex-wife and I were talking about doing that, something like that's with this house, because this was going to be a group house and now I'm here all by myself. Well, the upper third is the computer business, so that's being utilized fully, but the rest of it is a little underutilized.

Q: Mm-hmm. Well, I guess that's all the questions I had. I really appreciate your time. I hope I didn't take up too much of your day.
A: No, that's fine, that's fine.