

Interview with Alicia Bay Laurel

Interviewer: Tim Miller

October 13, 2000

Q: ...Friday, October 13, 2000, Lawrence, Kansas, I'm talking to Alicia Bay Laurel about her amazing communal experiences. I guess the bottom line we're trying to study all of this stuff with is just, can you just tell us where you lived? You lived at Wheeler Ranch?

A: I lived at Wheeler Ranch, I was one of the founders of Star Mountain, and I also spent a winter at Packer Corners Farm in Vermont.

Q: So, obviously you've written a good deal about all of this and I've read that, I know what you have to say there. I guess one thing, I'm really curious, I've been trying to nail down in all of these interviews is how did you end up being interested in communal living? I mean, obviously there was a certain zeitgeist at work, or that's what people were doing, but I'm curious also if you had anything in your own background that would lead you that direction, like parents who had earlier lived communally or, you know, any kind of thing in your upbringing that would tend to push you that way.

A: Well—

Q: Ramon cited his father had been involved in the collectives in Barcelona before the Spanish Civil War. He came out with this whole stream of things that he thought kind of had set him up for it.

A: Well, I think that I was always wanting to be out of the city and rural. That part of it was evident to me early on. I was always finding ways to get out of the city, summer camp, Girl Scouts, you know, a Labor Zionists summer camp, and of course, I was involved in the communal vision, the vision of thescene, although I was and still am quite hesitant about wanting to live where there are bombs falling from the sky. But I just, I really have always loved nature and even though I grew up in Los Angeles, the part of Los Angeles where I grew up was a place where there were lots of tall trees, lots of plants growing, and I was intimately involved in the garden that surrounded the house. I can remember where every plant was even though this is, you know, forty-five and fifty years ago. And then, as far as being communal, previous to living at Wheeler Ranch I lived in the Industrial Center building in Sausalito and although that wasn't a true commune, certainly it was a lot of artists living in one space. Just by virtue of the way that I am and that I've developed I found myself cooking for a lot of people there and certainly food tends to define whether something is communal or not. The households that one lives in when one goes away to college are generally communal. Certainly as soon as I went away to San Francisco State College I found myself living with three other girls in San Francisco, and then, you know, periods of time in other households and other places. That desire for privacy wasn't really strong in me as a teenager and a person in my early twenties. I think that I've always been wanting to play music in ensemble in addition to playing music solo, and I mean I just derive a lot of joy from playing music and singing in an ensemble, and that's another thing that kind of involves a lot of cooperation and communication. Yeah, all of these things could be said to set me up in that direction.

Q: I read...last night. Would that have anything to do with it?

A: Yes. Well, I used to laugh when I was at Wheeler's. Often I'd say, "I'm a communist now for sure." Yeah, you know, I mean I think that, well, my parents' and my grandparents' lifestyle was contradictory to their political beliefs. They were, my grandfather had an oil company, and my grandmother loved opulence and she'd come from poverty and she wanted him to have her, you know, build her a beautiful

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house. So he built her a beautiful house in Los Angeles and my mother wanted to move out of that house when she got married, but my father, who had also grown up in poverty, wanted to live in the beautiful house. So I grew up there, in the house that my mother's parents had built in the 1920s. I mean, in a sense, that was an extended family, because we had grandparents and parents and three kids, and other people who kind of came and went and it was a big scene. But the people that I really wanted to be like were my friend Marissa's parents who lived a few blocks away in a much more modestly endowed section of town. Her father baked bread. They had a vegetable garden. Her parents got along, unlike mine, and I just idealized their scene. I just wanted to have something that was like that. It seemed like the people in the littler house were happier. Interestingly, she grew up, went to law school, married another a lawyer, and bought a house just a few blocks away from where I grew up, an even bigger one than the one I grew up in. I grew up and just, I've always lived in little places. I just don't really care about material things that much.

Q: So to jump ahead, you ended up at Wheeler's when you were what, about eighteen or something like that?

A: I was nineteen when I arrived, and I turned twenty there a few months after I arrived.

Q: So you got there, what would that be, '68?

A: 1969.

Q: '69. I guess, was Morning Star defunct by then? Had everyone moved over to Wheeler's?

A: Uh, Lou and Rena were there because the county considered Lou to be the owner of the land. There were people who were sort of, actually, I don't know, I remember going over there and there being a lot of people there that summer. I don't know if it had been totally closed down, or whether there were just people coming there illegally. I remember that Rena was pregnant when I got to know her. It wasn't the first time I'd met her, interestingly, I met her on my days on the houseboats. We dated the same man sequentially. I just met her once, and when I got to know her better was when she was with Lou and she was pregnant. And then, when I was with Ramon a few years later I saw a lot more of her also because the two of them were so close.

Q: Hmm. So, you ended up at Wheeler's, and did you have to build your own house and all of that kind of thing?

A: No, it just happened that somebody moved out of a quanset hut very much like the one I described in *Living On the Earth*, you know, made of bent poles that were lashed together. A very comfortable little place, really, and I stayed there all of the summer of '69, and I guess in the autumn, I decided I was going to hitchhike to Mexico, and I started hitchhiking south, and my mother, I guess, alarmed that I was going to hitchhike to Mexico, offered to take me to Maui. And so in December of '69 I went to Maui for the first time, and there I encountered people who were living on the beach at Makenah, which was also sort of a commune and sort of not. I mean, it was public land and there were just basically people squatting there for years on end. And it looked like a wonderful scene. I have a lot friends in Maui who were part of that when they were younger. But I ended up not staying.

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Q: Did you go back to Wheeler's then?

A: Kind of. After that winter, that winter was when I finished writing *Living On the Earth*, and then I took the book to Stuart and then I was in San Francisco, you know, doing all of the things that you have to do to get the book ready to go to press and I was living with Derek and Sam in their house. And so I guess the next community that I was part of was the gay guys in the Castro district. So there were these two guys, and then, but there was like a whole neighborhood of people that kind of hung out together, and I was sort of like a mascot because I wasn't, you know, really sexually part of the scene.

Q: I guess not.

A: I was not, but they all like me, you know, they were all very loving towards me. And after that was over was when I went back to Wheeler's for the second time and I spent another year or so there before I went on tour.

Q: So you wrote the book, really, pretty quickly after you got there.

A: Oh, yeah, I started on it right away, because I created it because I felt that the living skills that I was acquiring were skills that other people would need, and so it was kind of my gift to the commune. I was going to make this little handbook for new people on the land. That was the original vision with the book. That was its purpose. It was just a surprise that when I went to find a way to try to get it printed without my paying for it, that it turned into this other thing.

Q: So, that came out, in what, '70?

A: '70, fall of '70 was when it was published, and then Random House picked it up that winter, and in spring of '71 was when the Random House edition came out. And I lived on Star Mountain just a little bit, but after the book came out I experienced a real down side of that particular communal situation which was if you are living in a situation where you're the only person, or you're only one of two or three people around that have money, everybody sees you in that light and finds ways for you to spend it on them. Perhaps the other members of the community who had been raised having lots of money and had inherited it were better at dealing with that situation, like Bill Wheeler and Moses and Delia, you know, I mean, the amount of money I had compared with them was minuscule. But, as far as everybody was concerned it was more than what they had and so I found myself running away from the commune just to get away from my friends demanding things, and they were very demanding. They felt that I owed it to them because the information that was in the book was information that they gave me. And, or, you know, they just said, "Give me an allowance."

Q: I know, that's rough.

A: I mean, it was shocking to me that the same people who were so kind and nice to me when we all had nothing became so difficult for me when I had the success with the book. So, I went away and then I stayed at Packer Corners. At Packer Corners it was like even though I don't think that the people there had more money than I did, it was more of a peer situation because all of them were published, or most of them were published, and we were writing a book together, and some of them were artists too. A lot

of them were not only living on the commune but they were, you know, teaching at colleges or they had other kinds of jobs, they had ways to bring in money—

Q: Is that right?

A: Yeah, oh yeah. So, I mean, at Wheeler's, pretty much everybody who was there was living on some form of passive income, whether it was from the government or from their families. And at Packer Corners people were actually earning their own money, there was nobody there that was on welfare. And also, communally they were farming the land in a very vigorous way, not only raising vegetables but raising animals and slaughtering them. So, it was an eye-opener for me and I felt appreciative and appreciated there in a way that I was not after the publication of my book back in California. In other words, it's very different to have someone appreciate you because you can draw pictures well as opposed to somebody who appreciates you because they might be able to get something from you.

Q: Yeah, it would be different.

A: Yeah.

Q: I can imagine the whole thing with the money, people wanting it?

A: I visited there.

Q: You know, that was run by Don McCoy, who just got his money, and he just gave away huge amounts. Everyone was being, and he said people would come up and say things like, "I'd like to have a motorcycle. Would you buy me one?" and he would. He went through a huge amount of money in a fairly short time there.

A: Yeah, people would come up to me and say, "I want to go to Hawaii, I want a sitar." Those requests I wouldn't listen to, but I did help some people get eyeglasses and dental work. I felt like that would be a kind thing to do. And, you know, I mean, I was vulnerable in that I was young and I wanted these people to continue to love me even though I had done something that they didn't do. And, so I had to leave. But I wasn't in that position when I lived at Packer Corners.

Q: So where does Star Mountain come into this story?

A: Well, when I lived at Wheeler Ranch, on Sundays I would play music with some of the other musicians at Wheeler's, and Cliff wanted to have us be an electric rock and roll band, and so I wanted to please him and I liked the idea myself. So when I got the money from the book we all went down to San Francisco and we bought, I bought us each an electric guitar, mine was an electric bass, and an amplifier, and all of the things that you need to make a rock band happen. And I said to Bill Wheeler, "We're going to rent a house in Occidental where we can go practice." And Wheeler said, "I don't, I haven't told anybody this but I own the land next door and there's a house there with electricity and I'll rent it to you." So he rented me the house on the 250 acres to the west of Wheeler Ranch. And the band members and I moved over there, and then while I was on tour, a whole bunch of people from Wheeler Ranch moved over there. By the time I got back, there were maybe twenty people over there. Well, Wheeler had persuaded me to lease the place on a yearly basis, and I had paid him a year's worth of

rent in advance. But when I got back there, everyone was kind of waiting for me to pay the bills and do the next thing, and they weren't real nice about it either. I just left. And then Moses got involved with it, and eventually bought it from Bill Wheeler, who was the owner of the commune for the period of time that he was alive. A funny thing that happened was many years later I came back and visited, and I told the story that I just told to you and some of the, there were a couple of people who were there at the beginning, and they said, "Oh, no, you didn't do that. You were one of the people who was involved at the beginning." And I said, "Oh, no, I started this thing with the money from my book and I named this commune because it was a five pointed ridge and I thought we would call it Star Mountain." Anyway, it doesn't matter to me whether they believe it or not. That's actually how that commune got going, but I didn't stick around to develop it, so in a sense I really didn't participate in creating it into the community into which it would later develop.

Q: Have you been back lately to Star Mountain?

A: I was there last June, and some of the original members are living there.

Q: Delia's still there, isn't she?

A: Delia has another piece of land in the area that's a thousand acres—

Q: Bodega Pastures?

A: Bodega Pastures, and she also is living part-time in San Diego with her partner, Jacqueline. So, she's very rarely at Star Mountain, and the person in charge actually is her and Moses's daughter Amanda who is 24 and graduated from Bryn Mawr. Amanda apparently is in South America right now, or at least was last June, so, you know, I didn't see Delia while I was there even though I was in Sonoma County for a couple of weeks. She didn't see me, and I tried to call her a couple of times but just didn't connect. She has a vision of turning Bodega Pastures into a nursing home facility, and to this end she has gotten the masters degree that's required, a masters degree in either psychology or social work, in order to run a nursing home. So she went to school and got this degree.

Q: So that's why, I knew she'd gone back to school, but I didn't know why.

A: Yeah, that's it. There's one structure built towards this end. It's called Purple Haze, and I imagine that the building of that project is very engrossing for her.

Q: Yeah, that's quite a deal.

A: And something that's needed. I found myself speaking about this to the rabbits, the dancing rabbits spoke to me when I was there a couple of days ago, and they thought that this was a very good idea because, you know, they're trying to think about a way to make a living. And I said, well, you know, the pig and the snake has passed fifty, guys. We're all going to need a place to go.

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Q: I think it's a tremendous thing for the future. I think it's got great potential. I didn't know about Delia doing that, but I do know about what Stephen Gasken is working on. He's pushing it very actively.

A: Yeah.

Q: It makes a lot of sense.

A: Yeah, well, definitely, I mean, I would want to spend those years in a place where there was alternative medicine, natural foods, and you know, higher consciousness. I wouldn't want to be stuck at some nursing home where, really, as different from the culture I consider myself to be a part of as Italians are from Chinese.

Q: Really. Well, going back to Wheeler's and such, I don't know, there are a number of directions to go with it. I've heard lots of tales about some pretty far out people who were there, far out in various ways including pretty crazy. Who would you say was a most memorable character there?

A: Wow. Who? Gosh, there was, I think what was most memorable was that there were so many characters there. I think that there were some people who were genuinely what you would call crazy, partly because this was the time when Regan was governor of California, and he radically cut back the funding to mental hospitals and they turned a lot of people out into the streets. There were a couple of people that came to the land that did some wantonly destructive things. One burned down Billy ... 's house. Another one got into our community, we had a community school bus and a community truck at one time, and this guy got into the community school bus, let loose the brakes, and let it crash into the community truck, ruining both vehicles. Yeah, I mean that was really sad. We were able to go as a group toHot Springs and bathe when we had those vehicles, or we could get into those vehicles and go make town runs for, you know, bulk quantities of grains when we had the truck. The truck was a very good thing; the bus was a very good thing. So, you know, occasionally we would get these people that were just way, way out there. But just in terms of like, ordinary, day-to-day interactions, people were much more eccentric there than they would have been if they'd been trying to live in a town where there were, you know, where they were interacting with more conservative folks. And absolutely, they were affected by, that we could all be peaceful and naked together, there wasn't stealing or violence and stuff. I mean, this was like a very exceptional situation that you could live without fear in that way, and when I think about it, here I was living in a tent, twenty years old, hardly ever wore clothes, and no one ever molested me in any way.

Q: Really? That's pretty remarkable.

A: Yeah. Everybody was pretty respectful of each other's bodies and each other's meager possessions, whatever they were. Even when I look at what Bill Wheeler had, which was certainly more lavish than what everybody else had, he lives like a monk, you know? His lifestyle is exceedingly simple.

Q: He still doesn't have electricity, I don't think.

A: I don't know if he does or not.

Q: When I was there three or four years ago he didn't.

A: Yeah, yeah, no, I think he's got a phone now.

Q: A phone in a shack up the road.

A: Yeah, no he's got a phone in his house now.

Q: Oh, does he really?

A: He has a phone and a flush toilet.

Q: Oh, really?

A: Yes, he does. And I don't know about the electricity. That would be lavish by Wheeler Ranch standards, but next to anyone else you might know somewhere else, the way he lives is poverty. So, yeah, I mean, he certainly—I would say the most memorable character in the whole scene had to be Lou. Lou because of his amazingly intelligent wit and insight, always interesting things to say, always great stories, always generous. He was very flamboyant in his behavior, and yet there was something so fantastically ethical about Lou. I mean, Lou was not out to harm or swindle anybody, ever. He really wanted to, he said when he looked back on his commune days he realized that his work was to shelter war resisters, and I hadn't even thought of us that way, but in fact that's what we all were. There were certainly quite a few people there that were hiding from the draft.

Q: Yeah, I'm sure there would be. Well, he went to his grave passionately believing in open land.

A: Yeah, he did. And Ramon is an unforgettable character. He certainly, he brought a wonderful aspect to the land which was open music. He would get all of these instruments and tune them all together so that non-musicians could play music together, or people who were too stoned to know what they were doing could play music together. He also has this amazing evenness of temperament, you know, that he could be a peacemaker in situations where people were in conflict. He's always a person with a million eccentric and extreme ideas on paper. He never pushed his trip on anybody, but if you would sit down with him even for a few minutes he could pull out just all of these things that he'd been thinking about, all of these echelons of ideas that were original and bizarre and spiritual and connected to all kind of unusual literature.

Q: You say in *Being of the Sun* that you and Ramon were married. Is that right?

A: Well, we weren't legally married. We considered ourselves to be partners in a real strong sense. I mean, the situation of our life was kind of extreme, why we didn't stay together. I mean, he had four kids, two of whom stayed with us occasionally. I was at the absolute height of my career. I produced probably four books during the two years that we were together. And, you know, it was a little path we were traveling around a lot, and it got tiresome for him to be traveling so much, and I wanted to be in Hawaii and he didn't want to be in Hawaii, and stuff like that. But, I think that as much as I ever felt like I was, you know, in a fantastic partnership with somebody, he was one. I mean, I really got it when I wrote my bio a couple of years ago, in preparation for what I'm doing now, and I noticed that there were maybe three of the possibly thirty people that I've been with as partners in my adult life that I felt

strongly enough to write about there. And he, because he was a profound influence upon me, and the partner that I'm with now, Joe Gallivan, and there was Wesley Gervardo who I played music with and that led to my starting the wedding business. You know, I very identified with them myself in being a musician, and I really like being with other people that identify themselves that way too, and really will do whatever it takes to stay in the arts. Ramon is devoted to the world of idea. I appreciated that about him.

Q: Speaking of Ramon's children, were there children, or very many children at Wheeler's?

A: Yeah. There were lots of children then, and actually—

Q: And were you having kids there?

A: Yeah. Well, the group of children I was the closest with were the children of John and Sue Michael. And they had found me again over the Internet. Of course, now they're all in their thirties, and one is in her early forties, but at that time, I mean, when I was twenty years old, these people were ages five to eleven, this group of four kids. The oldest of them, Peggy, we went hitchhiking together, for fun, around California when she was eleven and I was twenty, and at one point we finally got busted, and they couldn't really bust me for contributing to the delinquency of a minor because I was minor too. So they put us on the bus and sent us back to Wheeler's, where we did not go. We went to San Francisco, and bummed around there for another day or so before we went home. And now she's a nurse/midwife with kids in college, married a long time, she went to North Carolina, and, but the one who found me was the youngest of the four, Pam Miller is her name now. She's married to a guy who, she decided he was the guy because he was quoting to her from *Living On the Earth*, and she said, "My name's in that book." And her name is in that book, you know, she's one of the kids that's at the beginning of the book. Now she's thirty-eight, and she and her husband both teach kids who are, special ed, I guess is what it's called. They're both special ed teachers, and they have a farm outside of San Antonio.

Q: What do you think, was that a decent place for kids to grow up? Did it, was it—

A: I think it depends a bit on the parents, as it still does.

Q: Were there kids taking acid at age five?

A: Oh, there were, there were. I mean, these kids definitely took drugs. I don't, you know, they weren't, I mean, I remember there was this one day when somebody, some couple came up to get married at Wheeler Ranch, and they threw a big party which became known later as Black Sunday. And I missed it. It was very interesting, my mother came up to visit me the Saturday, the day before, and I was just walking down the road at Wheeler Ranch, buck naked, and all of a sudden there's my mother. And she was trying to be a good sport, you know, but she had to go to the bathroom finally, and she didn't want to squat on the ground, so we had to get into her rental car and go to Bodega Bay, and then we went down to San Francisco, and we spent the night down there, and I hitchhiked back that afternoon. And I got to Wheeler's, and everything was sort of very quiet that Sunday night, and then Monday morning I couldn't find anybody around either. I found out that what had happened was that there was this wedding, and they'd put way too much LSD in the punch, and everybody, all the adults

had completely freaked out. They were screaming and shouting and, you know, saying that it was the end of the world, but the children didn't. The children just went over into the apple orchard and laid in the grass and laughed. They had a fine time. I'm so glad, of course, that my mother hadn't appeared a day after she did. I mean, that would have been something, if she walked into that scene.

Q: Yeah, really.

A: Anyhow, these kids learned to read on zap comics and snatch comics. You know, you think about how much more appealing this reading material must have been than Dick and Jane, you know? And they all grew up to be extremely productive adults in a very sort of straight sense. I mean, all of them are professionals of one sort or another, and doing very well. They all seem to be very emotionally well-adjusted. I've seen one of them in person, and I've talked to the other ones just over the Internet, and they seem to be fine. Their life stories don't sound like they're maladjusted. Now, I think that what makes a difference in a child's life is more about whether the adults that are around them do things to them that are cruel, especially on a continuing basis, and I don't think that has anything to do with lifestyle. These children were extraordinarily loved by a pair of extraordinarily loving parents in John and Sue Michael, and I think that it really didn't matter that they were living in a tent where they had a pickup truck camper as the kitchen. They always had enough to eat, they always got to go outside and play, they were home schooled, and they were happy. Their parents were intelligent and talked to them about interesting things. If the same exact situation had been one where the kids were being scolded and beaten and stuff, then they would have turned out badly. That kind of stuff tends to turn out children that turn out badly. I think that's kind of the bottom line for raising kids. Can you be loving to them and provide them with stimulation of different kinds that's useful to them? I mean, the school program that I was around, because my mother did a lot of art projects with me when I was growing up so I naturally did the same thing with children throughout my adult life even though I didn't have any biological children I step parented a lot of children, and I worked with a couple of alternative schools over my years as well. And so, with the kids at Wheeler Ranch I just, whatever was on hand that I could do art projects with them, I did. We wrote a book together.

Q: Well, what else should I ask?

A: What else was going on there that I would like to discuss? Oh gosh, how communal was it? At Wheeler Ranch, because this place was anarchist, there was no real rules there at all, but we did have a community garden. The community garden was available to anyone who wanted to participate in it, you know, because of the nature of the way the community was. But there were, you know, a dozen or so people that worked in there fairly regularly. There was a cow. There were several cows for awhile there, and some chickens, and it wasn't just Bill Wheeler taking care of them. I think there were people who volunteered to do things. There were other things that got done around the land by means of volunteerism. So, it wasn't like we were totally all isolated in the way that people who live at Wheeler Ranch today are. When I visited there in June, and I was talking with David Hatch, who was my boyfriend for awhile when I lived at Wheeler's back in 1970, he said, "No, none of us have anything to do with one another. We have homes, we rent them from Bill for two hundred dollars a month and we

live our own lives. We maybe see each other once in a while in passing, but we don't, we never have any community gatherings or anything like that."

Q: How many people were there when you were there, would you estimate?

A: About a hundred.

Q: A hundred? That many?

A: Yeah.

Q: But they were kind of spread out?

A: On three hundred and fifty acres you could actually go all day without seeing anybody if you wanted to.

Q: And some of them were pretty far from others, wouldn't you say, like some of them lived down in the canyons.

A: In the canyons, right, yeah. If you lived at the bottom the canyon, you might not see anybody for weeks unless you went up to the top.

Q: But there were what, Sunday potlucks and various events that did tend to—

A: Yeah, there were Sunday potlucks, and there were parties on certain occasions, Easter, Mayday is traditionally and probably still is a day when people come to Wheeler Ranch.

Q: I think they do, yeah.

A: I know that Ramon says that he likes to go up to Wheeler Ranch on Mayday from the city, even now. Yeah, I mean, you know, we had events there. There were subgroups there. There was an area that was sort of to the west of the front gate off by itself called The Knoll, and the people that lived on The Knoll were sort of an odd subgroup. There was this one group of guys that identified themselves as the cat eaters. There were lots and lots of extra domestic cats there, and these guys killed them and ate them and made stuff out of their skins. It was truly disgusting, you know? But they were there, and they lived on The Knoll. And then there was another time there was a subgroup called the Oak Grove, I think, and they were a group in the sort of scary guru style, you know, where there was a charismatic leader and sort of a sexual group, you know. It was like there were six women that, I don't know whether they slept with the different guys sequentially or they were the harem of the one guy. I remember it was something kind of creepy; I didn't want to get close and find out. But they lived for awhile in one area that was right up on top of the ridge but in this oak grove that was towards the front of the land. They were there for a little while. What other groups were there? I mean, absolutely there was the musicians that were there that were closer to one another in a way, I guess you could, you could certainly call us a subgroup because we started Star Mountain, you know. I mean, because I was regularly playing music with one group of people, I thought about splitting off with them.

Q: It was probably pretty fluid, I would suppose, people coming and going, family groups being friends with other families, I would imagine.

A: Yeah. When the big bust happened, the people with children all left, and that included John and Sue and their kids, and Errol and Sara and their three kids. And they all moved up to Whitethorn in Humboldt County, and they lived communally up there for awhile. Eventually they dispersed into different things. The only ones who are still left up there are Sara and the son that she had after she got there, who's in his twenties, you know, or thirty even, my God, he must be thirty now, Benito. So, you know, it's like I'm—the thing that really has been impressing me this year and somewhat in previous years—<<tape cuts off, end of side 1>>—previous years and especially this year is that my feelings towards some of the people that I lived with there on the land is that of blood relative. And I feel that, with the people that I lived around at Wheeler's, even though it was only a couple of years, it's kind of like one of us dies or gets married or has a baby, we pull together in the same way a blood family would pull together. I remember, when Sonny died in a car crash on Maui, people who I hadn't talked to in years were calling me on the phone and saying, "Did you hear that Sonny died?" And it was very, it was almost like an invisible network suddenly pulled together and experienced this event together. I feel the same way with the people that I lived with at Packer Corners. Maybe half a dozen of them really feel like they're cousins to me in that way, and when something happens in that group of people, whether it's a joyous thing or a sad thing, everybody knows, everybody's a part of it, much in the same way that that's so with blood relatives. I think there's something about living on land with people that's very bonding. Or maybe what it is, is that, you know, since we've spent 90,000 years as hunter-gatherers and maybe 9,000 years as an agricultural society, and only 1000 years, maybe even less, living in towns, there's so much of us that's identified with living on the land. And so when we do that with people in a tribal way, it feels like we're home, and it feels like we're with family. My sister pointed this out to me, she's a psychologist, and I think she hit it just right. She said the history of neurosis is the history of civilization and agriculture. In other words, when people lived in hunter-gatherer groups they always slept in a pile, and they knew the same people from birth to death, and so there was never a feeling of being lonely, alienated. There was always other people there with whom they could bond, and she defines bonding as physical closeness and emotional openness. When agriculture came and made houses, and so we separated into different rooms and we put babies in cradles, and that was the beginning, she says, and I think this sounds just right, of feeling lonely and alienated and scared. And the more that civilization has grown, the smaller the groupings have been, because even when there was early agriculture, there was extended families living under one roof in one house, but eventually these family groupings got smaller and smaller and then, today, you know today we have the working mother with the latchkey kid in the ghetto. That's got to be the most difficult human situation and the most likely to turn out somebody who's really severely disturbed and to do wantonly destructive acts. So that's what we were, unconsciously perhaps, but certainly reversing by going and living on the land in a tribe, was coming back to that feeling, again, of the way that human beings lived. I feel like maybe there's a cellular memory, and so that feeling of I knew you then, I knew you from that life, is very strong. Cliff, the person that I played music with a lot at Wheeler Ranch, when he came to my book signing in Sebastopol he got his copy of *Living on the Earth* and he said, "In my household this is the family Bible, not in the sense that we read it for advice, but in here is my birth certificate, my son's birth

Interview with Alicia Bay Laurel

Interviewer: Tim Miller

October 13, 2000

certificate, all of our significant photographs and all kinds of memorabilia was stuck in there," because I was a person from that time in his life when he lived that way, before he was a building supervisor and house painter in Santa Rosa. I don't think he would go back to that life, but having experienced that was very powerful for him.

Q: Well, maybe that's a good place to quit.

A: Okay.

Q: That's a pretty happy ending, with the whole purpose of the human race.

A: Yeah, yeah, well, just that purpose of the voluntary primitive commune was to reconnect ourselves with each other the planet in a way that we hadn't been for almost a thousand years.

Q: Great. Well, thank you very much.

A: You're very welcome. <<tape cuts off>>