

Interview with Melissa Hill and J. T.

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

August 6, 1996

Q: ... and an interview with Melissa. Why don't you tell me what led up to your communal involvement, just to get started.

MH: Let's see, my communal involvement, you want to fill in the blanks, it's all kind of a haze. I had a big Catholic family, 10 brothers and sisters. So that's pretty communal. After I graduated from high school I was living in Cleveland. I went to nursing school for awhile, and I dropped out for more fun things to do. Which -- that involved hanging out, listening to a lot of music, having a good time.

Q: About what time was this? What year?

MH: Seventy-two, '73. And I moved out to the farm, out to Frogge Hollow, I guess that would've been '72. During that time we had a house in the city too that we lived in. We worked in a restaurant, Genesis. We'd do like 3 or 4 days in the city, and then go out to the farm house. Spending part of the time in the city house and part of the time out on the farm. Did that for about a year. The winter of '73 is when we moved out of the farm. We lost the farm, so we all moved back into the city house, and I think I lasted there another 3 or 4 months. And then Steven and I moved out and got an apartment on Lakeville. I think Stoney lived with us too. So we started looking for a truck, because we decided it was time to move along. I think we found a truck that winter, or that fall, and spent some time transforming the truck. We lived in the truck for about 9 months, travelling around, had a candle factory. Did the craft fair circuit, visited a lot of friends.

Q: You supported yourselves by selling candles on the road?

MH: Yes. Sometimes got pretty skimpy, sold blood a few times. Hawked flowers on the street in Dallas. Lost one of the dogs. That was -- there was a young girl travelling with us, too. She stayed with us for about 4 or 5 months, and then she went back to Cleveland. I don't even remember her name, friend of Stoney's. So then we came out here and by that time, we were no longer a commune. End of story?

Q: I'll get you to back-track a bit then. What was Frogge Hollow like when you arrived in the country there?

MH: A lot of music. A lot of good times. Lot of psychedelia. Lot of people doing their own kind of spiritual thing. Comradery. Fun. Nothing too serious. Excuse me if I'm very brief.

Q: So you'd do like 3 to 4 day stints at the restaurant, and then come back and stay in the country for a few days?

MH: Yeah, I think so. Everything was very flexible. Little subtle pressure if you weren't pulling your own.

Q: So how would you spend your time when you were out on the farm?

MH: Lot of listening to music. American yoga. Coffee and cigarettes. Wandering around painting murals on the walls. Listening to music.

Q: Did you guys play music too, or just listen to it?

MH: Some did, I listened. Moving heavy things. Bearing horses, bearing goat carcasses that the dog attacked.

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Q: I heard about these things.

MH: Let's see, what are some other high points there? I remember building a bridge. Then there was the volunteer fire department that we wanted to join, but we were too far out for them.

Q: They didn't want you?

MH: We were too far out of town.

Q: Oh, I thought you meant too weird or something.

MH: Then we spent a lot of time entertaining visitors.

Q: Did you have work shifts at the farm you had to do, like cooking or cleaning or anything, or was it not that organized?

MH: It was not that organized, either in terms of workload, goals, specific spiritual orientations, it was pretty free flowing.

J.T.: I can remember Rama and half a dozen members of the Light of Yoga Society showing up one day. And it got to be about dinner time, and there were people coming into the kitchen, looking in the cupboards, into the refrigerator. "God, we haven't got anything to eat here, what are we going to feed these people?" I said, "Don't worry about it." The next person comes in, "God, there's nothing to eat in the house, what are we going to feed these people?" I said, "Don't worry about it." I fed everybody to repletion, and we wound up with a day's worth of leftovers. But there was nothing the house to eat.

Q: How did you pull it off?

J.T.: I knew where all the vegetables were, and we had plenty of rice. I did rice and vegetables, they were all vegetarians anyhow. A little rice and some vegetables, couple cans of cream of mushroom soup, you'd be amazed.

MH: And coffee beans. There were always coffee beans.

Unknown: Would you say we lived quasi-communally when the four of us lived at Tobin [?], when Esther was living where I'm living now?

MH: Kind of.

Unknown: Melissa and I hitch hiked to Douglas, Wyoming, in the middle of the winter.

Q: What did you do that for ?

MH: Almost froze to death.

Q: Why didn't you go South?

Unknown: Why didn't we go South?

J.T.: Because the fire engine was in Wyoming.

MH: The fire engine was in Wyoming, and he had job connections out there too.

Unknown: You were the first one to get a job doing drill bits.

MH: Yeah, that was high on my list of near-death encounters.

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Q: Just from being cold.

MH: Yeah. The highway patrol finally picked us up and made us go back into Cheyenne. It was really a crazy thing to do.

Unknown: We went to the Catholic church, and they wouldn't talk to us.

MH: Yeah. I think the Salvation Army finally bought us a bus ticket.

Unknown: No, it was the Presbyterian church, which I was born into, and that was the last of my connection with them, but they gave us a bus ticket, to Douglas.

MH: That was really cold.

Unknown: It was 14 below on Thanksgiving.

Q: Now you guys probably told me this already, but I've forgotten -- how did you live at the farm? Was there a big farmhouse?

MH: Yeah. And several outbuildings that were turned into little rooms. And you told her about Stoney's bus?

Q: Stoney had a bus that you covered with leaves?

MH: Compost. It was not leaves. Wood chips. You'll have to meet Stoney to appreciate him living in the middle of the compost pile.

Q: I've heard so many stories I'm getting them mixed up I think. Were the buildings adequately insulated for the winter? Or did you freeze to death.

MH: It was an old farmhouse that sat about 10 miles from Lake Eerie, and there was absolutely nothing to stop the arctic breezes coming down off the Canadian plains and just battering this house. But let's see, duct tape -- no, it was masking tape.

J.T.: And newspaper.

Unknown: Brought it up a few degrees. Above freezing.

J.T.: It used fuel oil at the rate of a 747.

MH: It was cold.

Q: So did most of the restaurant income go for the furnace bill?

Unknown: An annoying amount of it did.

J.T.: Yes, but Buddy made some marvelous wine, and that kept us going. We went through 700 gallons in the winter.

MH: Well, we had a lot of visitors too.

Q: Did you have all utilities, like electricity and running water and all that kind of stuff? Hot water.

MH: Yeah.

Q: Flush toilets?

MH: Some of the out buildings didn't, and I think there was a composting toilet.

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Unknown: Steven built that. In the Ohm cabin. As opposed to the Have a Nice Day cabin. Which wasn't as insipid as it sounds now.

Q: Did you build the cabins, or were they a part of the property?

MH: They were like chicken coops that were transformed.

J.T.: The mystery that I still have yet to solve, though, is we had a book, called The Way Things Work. It showed you diagrams of how things worked. We put it in the outhouse, so it would be there whenever someone wanted to know how something worked, you could spend the time studying. I went out to get it one day, because somebody said something, and I was going to show them just exactly how it worked, and the book wasn't there.

MH: Never did find it, huh?

J.T.: Nine months later, in a snow storm, I went out to the outhouse, because there was somebody on the john in the house. And there it is, sitting right on its shelf, where it should've been. But it hadn't been for the last nine months. And nobody knew where it had gone, or who had borrowed it, or when it came back.

Q: So what was Cat City like when you'd go into town to do your restaurant shifts?

MH: It was Babylon. Lots of music, either from the stereo system, and there was millions of records there, you name them, it was on the shelves there. Or else people were sitting around jamming. There were always fleas because there were tons of cats. There was 12, 15 people living there, plus lots of visitors floating around. Something good cooking in the kitchen. It was just jamming.

J.T.: Twenty-seven white cats. All white, every one of them, except for the grand master. He was tortoise shell. But all of the girls had white kittens, every time.

Q: So you didn't take your dogs to Cat City? They stayed at the farm? So they weren't commune dogs, they belonged to specific people?

J.T.: They stayed out at the farm.

Q: Did they go on the truck with you, around the country?

MH: Yeah. The dogs did. I think it was Missouri that Uncle Meat took off one day, and we never did see him again. He's a really neat dog, they're both great dogs.

J.T.: I laid claim to Uncle Meat being a Jack Russel terrier, even though he was part something else.

MH: Yeah, lot of Jack Russel.

Unknown: We told Deborah a lot of sad animal stories.

J.T.: Burying the dead horse, and the goat. Especially with all of those kids there, when the goat got eaten.

MH: Right, real life.

Q: What did you do at the restaurant?

MH: I waitressed, I washed dishes, I cooked, I hung out.

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Q: Pretty much everything. So how did it work at Cat City? Did you guys have to pay rent to stay there?

J.T.: A house payment.

MH: Yeah, Frogge Hollow made a house payment, as opposed to individuals.

Q: Did you also have to make a payment to Buddy then, to stay at the farm?

Unknown: No. Fuel oil.

J.T.: We hadn't replaced the wine we drank.

Q: You were contributing to the upkeep of the facilities or something? Okay.

J.T.: Plus we were improving the property with Have a Nice Day. We painted the whole chicken coop before we put "Have a Nice Day" on it, and then Jessie and Jason moved into it.

Q: At the farm, did you guy take your meals in common?

MH: Sometimes.

Unknown: Mostly, I'd say.

MH: Yeah, somebody cooked, and --

Q: So someone had to get the energy to cook for everybody, and then you'd have a meal? So it wasn't really planned?

MH: I think you did a lot of the cooking. I remember burning the hell out of my hand one time when I was cooking, so I must've cooked occasionally. Mostly I remember grinding coffee. Grinding wheat. Make that bread.

J.T.: But that was only when we had run out of the ready-ground that we got from the restaurant.

Unknown: Squeezing grapes.

MH: Make that wine.

Q: And then, you had meetings, right? Sunday night meetings? That were endless? Do you remember the meetings?

MH: Not at all.

J.T.: I think it probably dissolved into a haze of smoke.

MH: I wonder if Marsha is still living in New York City?

Unknown: Do you remember who the guru was, the one from [unintelligible] . . . John McLaughlin, and Carlos Santana?

J.T.: Was it Rumpishe [?] ?

MH: Swami Snatchadamoney. Have you been over to Nanda [?] ?

Q: I haven't, I'd like to go there.

Unknown: She's interviewed Steven Gaskin.

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Q: Yeah. I went to the Farm. But I'd like to go to Nanda. Do you know anybody who lives there? I don't have any contact names.

MH: No, I don't.

Q: It's always a little harder to get into a place when you don't have a name. But I'm going to try.

MH: I have a friend in the Bayer [?], I'll give you her name. I know she lived in a commune in Virginia for about 6 or 7 years.

Q: Do you know which one it was?

MH: In the Bluemont area?

Q: Oh, I interviewed someone who was in a commune near Bluemont, it might've been the same one.

MH: Her name is Laura Avert [?], (510)796-0546. You should call Marv Wisely, he's our neighbor. 534-9099.

Q: And he was involved in --?

MH: He is involved in Mountain Family. He's done a lot of commune research. I know he was involved in a commune for quite a while in Yam Hill, Oregon.

Q: What did you like most about your communal living experiences?

MH: The fun, the socialization, the music, the good times, the drugs.

Q: Was there a flip side, a side you didn't like so much?

MH: The crowding. I grew up in pretty crowded conditions. And after awhile, free love got real old.

Unknown: It never was free.

Q: So would you do it again?

MH: Given the time and circumstances, I probably would do it again. I certainly don't regret it. It's a big part of who I am and where my values are today. It was a very sexist existence. There were a lot of unwritten mandates that -- part of that was just not having any realization of my choices as an individual, as a woman. So there were certain scripts that I was living out. Were I to do it over again, I would want to go in knowing what I know now. Isn't that true of all of us though. Regardless of whether we're male or female, I think we're all living out certain scripts. But there were prescribed roles. Actually, the roles may have been no more different than if I wasn't doing a communal thing.

Unknown: I couldn't think of anything off-hand.

MH: I believe women were quite a bit more subservient, and we sat around and listened to the music that the men played, and did more than our share of cleaning.

J.T.: I beg your pardon? You don't talk to me about women doing the cleaning! I used to push people out of a room, that I was going to clean, still listening to music and smoking dope, into the room that I'd just cleaned, thank you very much. Don't tell me the women did the cleaning.

MH: I'm not trying to convince you of anything, it's just my perspective.

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J.T.: You're allowed to have your perspective, but don't confuse it with reality.

MH: You hear that from a few women?

Q: I have. Are there things that you learned during your communal living time that you bring forward to you life today, behavior patterns from then, ways of doing things?

Unknown: I think a lot of times we still talk in topic sentences.

Q: What do you mean?

Unknown: Instead of still going through a long rigmarole of reasoning for doing something, we got to the point where, talking to one another, we could talk in topic sentences, and cover a whole list of things.

Q: So you almost had a code, in a way.

Unknown: I think it helped me to be able to formulate things in my head as a line of reasoning, and then come out with a reason.

MH: I don't know what I could say to that questions, for what I have carried into the rest of my life from this experience, other than the friendship, and the shared history, that's really fun to have that be a part of my life, continuing with people. I think a tolerance for other people and other people's perspectives, and allowing them to be their own person and to have their own way of seeing the world and not feeling compelled to try to change their mind, convince them of my perspective or the correctness of my view. It's really hard to separate that from my early childhood too, because growing up with so many people in the family, you learned at a real early age that nobody is going to see anything quite the same as you. I think also, the whole general peace, love, tie-dye, I carry with me, because that's just a part of the times that I came into being in, was that respect for life, and a tolerance, and appreciation of diversity.

Q: Any practical skills, like vegetarian cooking?

MH: I'm a real competent cook, and it certainly honed that, both cooking in the restaurant, and being around other people providing food. I grew up in a very rural area, so a lot of that I brought with me.

Q: This is a question we usually ask everybody -- would you judge Frogge Hollow as a success or a failure?

MH: Oh, I would judge it as a success, in that it provided everyone with a good time, and a chance to try a way of living that wasn't common practice back then, [unintelligible] ... allowed to feel you were on a forefront of this mass social change. I feel that it was a success. But then, I never went into it with the feeling like it should be something that was life long. I didn't have a lot of expectations that it would be something I was going to do for the rest of my life. I remember another thing that I learned -- I don't particularly thrive in a situation where I need to be interdependent on people. That you're only as strong as the weakest link, and I don't like being that weak.

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Q: Out of your experience, have you drawn any conclusions about whether or not communal living works?

MH: Well, I think it works as long as you want it to work. But if people are going into communal living with the idea that this is a lifetime thing, then they need to have something really strong that's going to hold them all together, through life and through all the changes that come. Maybe communes of a religious persuasion are the ones that endure over time -- look at the Shakers, a couple hundred years, not even that, I suppose.

Q: There's still a few left.

MH: Shakers? Or some kind of charismatic leader. But change is inevitable, is what I see. You either get change real fast, or you get change over a long time, but there's going to be change. I think the "be here now" philosophy is something that ... I learned about through Frogge Hollow, and that's something that I carry with me, making the most out of your time, and getting the most out of every minute. Rolling with those changes, accepting them, and making the most out of them.

J.T.: If you can't find time to do it right the first time, how are you ever going to find time to come back and do it over again?

Q: Is that something you guys were studying at Frogge Hollow?

MH: We bandied it about, I'm sure.

J.T.: We bandied a lot of things about, and that was one of them.

Q: What were some of the other things that you guys were reading or listening to that were kind of hot?

MH: John McLaughlin. Music?

Q: Sure, music, books, poetry, whatever.

J.T.: I was still reading science fiction.

Q: Was that just you?

MH: Buckminster Fuller. Diet for a Small Planet.

Q: Did you guys ever try and build a dome?

MH: No. Maybe out of marshmallows and toothpicks.

J.T.: We were going to build a performance stage, and it was going to be a three-quarter dome, with an open front, and then a reflecting pond in front of it. So any music that was happening would go out and down, and bounce off the reflecting pond, so that it would spread. One of the schemes. Didn't come to much fruition, but it was a lovely scheme.

Unknown: Didn't have enough money to buy five bolts. I think the paper and the pen for drawing the picture of it was as far as we could go.

J.T.: But it looked pretty impressive on paper. Now what was that question?

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Q: The success failure question?

J.T.: I guess. I don't know. There are some that are still going on, so they must be successful.

Unknown: She's asking if you considered Frogge Hollow successful.

J.T.: Well, we're all still here, most of us are still alive, so it must've been successful.

MH: Death can be success.

J.T.: I'm not ready for that degree of success.

Q: So Melissa, when you were travelling around in the truck, did you guys visit other communes on the road?

MH: No. We connected up with friends, but no communes.

Q: Did you do any of that sort of networking when you were at Frogge Hollow, visit any other places? Or in Cleveland?

MH: No.

Q: So was Cat City kind of one of a kind? Or were there other communal group households around?

Unknown: As far as we knew.

J.T.: As far as we knew, we were unique in Cleveland. And as far as Cleveland knew, we were fairly unique as well.

MH: There was a women's collective. Didn't Barb --?

Unknown: She lived alone when I knew here.

J.T.: I think she had started in a women's collective, and then got fed up with it.

Q: She's the one that started the food co-op? Were you involved in that too, the food co-op?

MH: If I was, I don't remember?

Unknown: Bought a lot of stuff at it.

Q: I was asking you about books and things you read.

MH: The I'Ching. Tarot cards.

Unknown: Who was that astrologer you liked so much?

MH: Oh, Dan Ruger [?].

Q: Would you guys ever do any group ritual type things together, meditate, yoga?

MH: We got stoned together all the time. We ate together.

Unknown: Dropped acid.

MH: Buried horses and goats.

J.T.: There wasn't anything that was religiously ritualized.

MH: Yeah, no prayer sessions.

Unknown: Sometimes we'd have a circle.

MH: That's right.

J.T.: Especially if the Light of Yoga Society was there.

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Q: Then you had to put on some airs for them?

J.T.: No, we just accepted the airs that they put on. But they'd want us to all stand around and look spiritual and say "Ohm" before dinner, so we'd do it.

Q: So what did you think of the Light of Yoga Society?

MH: I tried not to.

Q: Why is that?

MH: It was pretentious, and it just didn't fit in to what I was doing. I was just having a good time. I was raised as an extremely traditional Catholic and had had my fill of religion by the time I was 12. The yoga was fine to me, but they all seemed like a bunch of airheads.

J.T.: Flower Pants David. This was the husband of the woman who headed up the Light of Yoga Society.

Q: The one who fell apart when Rama died?

J.T.: Yeah. We called her husband Flower Pants David, because he arrived out of Frogge Hollow in white pants with these great big red, yellow, blue, and green flowers, this size, on them. White pants to come out to a farm.

Q: So were they sort of wanna-be hippies?

J.T.: No.

Unknown: They wanted us to be them, to save us. In fact he came out --

MH: --Wasn't it kind of our motto, "Life is too important to waste on having fun." We really embraced fun.

J.T.: Because after all, life's too important to sit around wasting time having fun.

MH: And we didn't really have any pretensions toward spirituality. We were pretty hedonistic.

Unknown: At the picnic when they came out there, we had all disappeared down to the Have a Nice Day house to all get stoned.

J.T.: Staggering back, "Oh, hi there!" It tended to insure that we had a nice day. That, and plenty of coffee.

Unknown: Which they also didn't approve of.

Q: They were very pure?

Unknown: No caffeine. No tea.

MH: No fun.

J.T.: Just yoga.

Unknown: They did produce a very nicely illustrated Hathayoga [?] Asans [?] book, remember that? Very beautiful. I don't know who the artist was.

J.T.: Flower Pants David.

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Q: Do you know if the society's still going?

J.T.: In Cleveland, more than likely. God knows they had enough money to be going for the next 100 years.

Q: Did they ever build their temple to Rama?

J.T.: No.

Q: I wonder what went wrong?

Unknown: They buried the BVM. That did it.

Q: Was Rama cremated and his ashes sprinkled at the farm?

Unknown: That's a good question.

J.T.: No. They shipped him back to India. And he was burned on the banks of the Ganges, as far as I know.

Unknown: He had a following in India too.

Q: So Melissa, do you know about communes around this area?

MH: No, other than Mountain Family.

Q: And was Mountain Family here when you arrived?

MH: When I came into the area, several of the people that are now in Mountain Family were living in a cluster of houses about 5 miles down the road, in '76. And in '75, '76, they bought Eufolks' [?] house. You might also want to talk to Wayne and Laurel Pierce. His number is 533-0105. Both he and Marv are Mountain Family people. Laurel was actually in a women's commune called Lime Saddle. We were the just wanna have fun gang.

Q: Well that probably united you, at least for awhile.

Unknown: It wasn't pretentious.

Q: I don't know if you guys have any other angles you think I should take. Well, thank you.