

Interview with Ann Burgess

Interviewer: Unknown

December 4, 1995

**Q:** In what commune did you live? Name (was it known by more than one?); location; dates active; purpose or ideology of the group. How did you come to get involved in communal living?

**A:** I lived in Germany from 1970-1974. I was living close to American citizens. I wasn't on an air base but I was married for a while to someone who was in the Air Force. We separated and after that I was a single mom with a kid. With the network of friends that I had I was often in a situation where I was spending a lot of time with other people. I began to consider doing this for a longer time because it was easier for me to have help with my child. It made some sense, it was a lot of fun, it was cheaper that way, and you could get help with expenses and so forth. So in 1973, three of my sisters who lived in Lawrence said they were thinking about buying some land together (in North Lawrence) and ask me if I wanted to do that? I was pretty much ready to leave Germany so I felt like getting into this kind of situation with my three sisters would be exactly the right direction for me. So I hadn't really lived with people except on a real informal basis like when I didn't have a place to live. People in Germany were living together also. I found that the hippie movement in Germany was happening there as much as it was here. I didn't really miss out on much at all by not being in the United States at that time. I wasn't like a real radical or anything but my lifestyle was probably more hippie than straight. So they ask me if I wanted to join with them to do this and I sent them my savings, which was \$1000. They put together some money of their own and borrowed money from our folks. Four other people who were not family members also wanted to put money in. We got enough money for the down payment, got a contract, and started paying it off. We bought fifteen acres. In spring of 1974, before I even was back from Germany, a few people moved out and started working on a little cabin to make it livable. It was just a chicken house before that. That was the only structure on the property. They put up a couple of tepees. I moved here in the summer and at that point there was still no place to stay except in the little cabin. Two people were living up there. My sister was living in a tepee with her child. We had a van out here that another fellow was living in. There were two women living in a tent. So at that point, almost everyone who was living here was living outside. We knew we couldn't keep living outside through the winter with children so we started scrounging lumber. We would go to lumber salvage yards and tear down old buildings and so forth so we could get enough lumber and windows to put together a very basic shed. It was heated with wood. We had no water. We had electricity that came from a big, long extension cord that came all the way down from the electric line up at the cabin. So the first winter was spent in this little five room shed. I call it a shed because the construction was just poles on the outside and huge beams that connected, with shed roofs. It was an easy style of building to put up because you didn't have to pour foundation or anything. It was a mistake to put it on a north facing slope but it was really the best view. At that point there were about ten of us living here, three kids and maybe seven or eight adults. Three people continued to stay up and the cabin that first winter and the rest lived in the shed.

**Q:** Did the community have a central religion or ideology?

**A:** Steve Gaskin's Farm was something all of us were kind of reading about. It sounded fun and practical. It kind of went along with our political views, sharing land, sharing tools, sharing things you could do to help each other and so forth. I'd say that definitely there is no religious motivation other than the general feeling at the time of love and peace and those things. This was kind of a way to live that life. It

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was less nuclear, not just sharing your life and your land with your family but with other people that were connected. It was really just kind of a coincidence that I started this with three of my sisters and the other people. It could have easily been with just friends but I happened to come from a family where everybody is friendly. We all had the same lifestyle and made the same choices. We knew that we didn't want to live in the city anymore and this was the days of the back to the land movement. This was a way to get into that and find out if we liked it or not. It just wasn't that expensive. Nowadays people say "I wish I could do what you're doing but I just can't afford it." But if they had the help of their parents and at least a half a dozen other people who could chip in on it they could do it. People just don't seem to do that anymore. Everything was right to make it happen. The price of the land was \$15,000. That seemed like kind of a lot in those days but now it seems like nothing.

**Q:** Did you have a name for the community?

**A:** We did. Originally the people in Lawrence just called it The Land. And believe me, everyone in the counter-culture knew about it then. They came out skinny-dipping and just hanging out and partying and stuff from time to time. But because four of the people that lived here were sisters, we adopted a name that was kind of an old family name. Our last name was Burgess. When I was little I had trouble saying it and I pronounced it "Obiji". So we decided that was a cute little cosmic name so let's call it Obiji Farm. We called it that for about twenty years. Now I'm the only one left of the Burgess family so people who lived here kind of approached me and said "It isn't exactly Obiji anymore, now is it?" So we may change it. When my second daughter was born, since she was born out here on the farm, we gave her that as her last name.

**Q:** What were the economic arrangements when you began? What was the source of the money?

Was money held in common? Who made spending decisions?

**A:** I subscribed to a magazine, I think it was just called Communities, and there were a lot of articles in there about different ways to handle finances. Actually I can't remember what exactly people at The Farm did, I'm thinking they just all pooled their money and expenses were just taken out of a general fund. That's how we did it. Most of us just had part-time jobs. Although everybody that was here was a graduate of college or in college. But nobody had a professional job at that time. I made \$100 a month. There were a couple people working as janitors who made \$300 or \$400 a month. We all just pooled our income except for one man who was a carpenter who did not. He put in money every month to do his share but he didn't put all of his money in. We just had a checking account and I think I was the person who wrote checks for expenses and handed out spending money. We paid our land debt off every month, paid for building supplies, paid for food, and gas for the cars we shared. So all of those expenses came out of the group's money.

**Q:** Was there a formal governing structure? How did it work? Was there a single leader or a group of leaders?

**A:** We had group meetings every month and figured out what was going to be happening that month, what our expenses would be. I don't remember voting on anything. It seems like we worked things out pretty much by consensus and cooperation, giving up a little bit. No one pushed to hard to get their

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own way. It just didn't seem that important for anybody to have it their way. Even though it was pretty informal there was just a lot of cooperation. Maybe we felt it was good ego work to have to give up a few things, a few of your own choices about what you would plant as far as a garden, or what you would do with these trees. It was very informal but somehow cooperation always seemed to work.

**Q:** Did the commune have cottage industries? Did the group garden or farm? Did it seek self-sufficiency?

**A:** We never could get far enough with anything to consider it an income. We had goats and we milked them and made goat cheese and sold it to people, informally. We raised a few things like herbs that we could sell. I used to sell herbs to the Community Mercantile. We didn't make money having a school but we did run a school for about five years. It wasn't intended to make money. It was a way to get our kids educated without having to drive them to school. My sister Jean convinced us to get goats because they are small and can live in a small area. It's very hard to get used to drinking goat's milk. It tastes kind of nasty at first. But there were so many people here that it saved us a lot of money. We would have milk and cheese that we could make from it. Cottage industry was something we just kept thinking and thinking about but it never got off the ground for us. Because we had to keep coming up with money for the land payment and to build the house, we really couldn't do the kind of experimenting and setting up that it would take to start a cottage industry. Nobody ever thought of something that could bring in big bucks. We just had little money ideas. Almost all of us ended up getting jobs in town and got our money from that. It must have been in our second or third year that we just decided to ask people to put in money for farm expenses and they could keep whatever else they had out of their salary. So if you made \$300 a month you put in \$60 for the farm. \$60 has almost always been our adult rent. We call it a rent but it isn't really. It's for farm expenses, land taxes, electricity, propane, supplies, and maintenance.

**Q:** How was child-rearing handled? How were children educated?

**A:** It was 1985 when we started the school. Originally one of our school age children went to school in town and another one went to different alternative schools in Lawrence. When my daughter got to be five she went to The Open School. She went there for a couple of years and it closed down. She went to another school that's on a farm about two miles from here called Oak Hill School. Then she went to another school in Topeka called Shawnee Country Day School. By then she was in seventh grade and decided she was ready for a social life so she started going to school in Lawrence. By the time people had more kids, we had five out here that needed to go to school, we were kind of in a quandary because we aren't actually in the Lawrence School District. We're actually in the McClothy School District which is a long ways from here. It's twenty miles from here. We had the school for four or five years. We hired a teacher from Lawrence and all the parents put in a half day each week and a small amount of tuition.

**Q:** What was the food like?

**A:** It was never a rule but everyone that ended up here was fairly happy eating vegetarian. I've never cooked meat out here. I haven't cooked any meat for twenty-five years. I think there were people who lived here that might have gone into town for meat every once in a while if they could ever afford

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to go out to dinner. But people did not do that very much. We bought our clothes at thrift shops. We got our books at the library. Everything we did was on a real low economic scale. We did a lot with goat milk. We weren't strict vegetarians. We had chickens so we had eggs and we had goats so we had milk. We had a huge garden so we had a lot of vegetables. We sometimes bartered or traded with other people for wheat and a few other things like that. Whatever else we needed we bought in town. We usually went to the Mercantile, but not always. We took turns cooking. Everyone had a night. We just kind of scrounged for breakfast and lunch but every night during the week there would be a person in charge. They would be sure that whoever was running errands in town that day would get the supplies they needed for the dinner they wanted to make. The idea of cooking together, of having a meal every evening communally that was fixed by turns, with people chipping in for dishes and so forth, that changed in about 1978 or 1979. By that time people were beginning to pair up. Some people who didn't have a partner had left. There was something about when you had a partner. It seemed natural to do more things with your partner and your kids than in the big group like we had done before anybody had a partner. At first there were people who had boyfriends or girlfriends in town, but at that time there wasn't anyone out here that was actually sleeping together. When I fell in love and my partner moved out here and Chuck fell in love and his partner moved out here, it seemed like that community thing began to kind of die out as far as the cooking. The thing of meetings, meals every evening, and putting all of our money together lasted quite a while. I don't know for sure. It was probably somewhere between three and six years, until the late 1970s.

**Q:** How were chores and housework handled?

**A:** It was all rotated. Some of the farm chores were picked by people because they had some kind of affinity or talent for it. My sister Jean, for example, did more stuff with the goats. She just liked that better. Laura did more stuff with the horse. She liked horses and I didn't. I tended to be a little more into household stuff so I was kind of in charge of purchases for the inside of the place. Ed was a carpenter so he could give directions, but he didn't really do any more work than anyone else. There were other things like getting water that were done by all of us. We had to buy water at that time and we had a truck and a big water tank. We bought water from a guy in North Lawrence and it was real cheap. It was real good well water so we'd just make a trip into town once a month to buy water then we'd pour it into our cistern and pull it up with a bucket. We also had only wood heat for a long, long time. We didn't have any gas heat out here until the mid-1980s. There was a lot of wood to be chopped but this is a great place to live if you burn wood. Enough wood dies and falls every year in this forest we're in that we never had to go anywhere else and get wood. Eventually we did have to. When we were heating a lot of rooms we went to a saw mill down the road about four miles and bought slabs.

**Q:** When did the group begin to build other buildings? What kinds?

**A:** We only had a communal house until Chuck got married. They decided that it would be best for them to take the rooms on one side and my partner and I would take the rooms on the other side. He built one direction and we built in the other direction. The other little structures weren't built because we needed more space. They were built for special purposes, like an art studio, a music studio, and a foundry. The art studio did become a living space.

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**Q:** Did the group have open-door membership?

**A:** At first it was just a matter of consensus, if everybody agreed. After I moved out here in 1974, there were probably an additional five or six new people that came out. There was only one who ever came that everyone objected to except for one person. We just realized that it would be disastrous to deny her wish so we said OK. It worked out real badly. There were lots of hard feelings about it. He left after they split up. It didn't make any sense for him to live here anymore. They weren't partners anymore. He was her roommate and she didn't like it so we asked him to leave. So there wasn't really a formal process for accepting members but like when I fell in love and wanted my partner to move out here I just asked everyone if it was OK? Generally, the people who have wanted to do that and the people they wanted to bring in were just too nice to say no to anyway. I think that only one person came from outside the group completely and said, "That looks like a lot of fun. I would like to live there. Is it OK?" So we said we would give it a try. He did end up staying out here for two or three years.

**Q:** What were relations with the surrounding culture like?

**A:** We never got to know any of our neighbors real, real, real well. But the ones we got to know pretty well, the four closest families, two of them were very friendly and the other two were fine with us. We never knew how much they knew about us but we kind of surmised that there was lots of gossip about us. I'm sure they wondered about it. I've gotten to know some other people out here in Jefferson County that have said, "There have been some strange stories about you all." But since we didn't know them and no one was mean enough to come bother us about it, as far as we knew, everything was cool. There were other groups on down the road that had some trouble with locals. I know two groups pretty well that were operating at that time and one of them had a lot of trouble. There was a lot of speculation that their house had been burned down by people that were unfriendly to them but nobody could ever prove it.

**Q:** Why do you think this area, Jefferson County or this part of it, was such a popular site for communal living?

**A:** There were no zoning laws at the time. We bought in this county because there were no zoning laws. The way I understood it, and I don't know if this is right, was that zoning laws meant you not only had to have a building permit but you had to have people come out and look at your site. You had to have licensed electricians, plumbers, and so forth. Of course we could never have done it if we had to pay someone else to come out and do those things for us. That might be why there were others in this area.

**Q:** What was the relationship between psychedelics and community? Were drugs used? What drugs? How often? By most residents, or only some?

**A:** Drugs were almost too expensive for us. People did stuff like that but it was kind of occasional because of the money factor. It seems to me that other than pot, we experimented with acid, mushrooms, and MDA. Those were the three other things that I remember that were pretty popular. But really you kind of had to save up your money for stuff like that in those days so it wasn't something we did real regularly at all.

**Q:** What was the relationship between sexual expression and community? What sexual rules and attitudes and practices were present?

**A:** Those definitely were very incestuous days. There were a lot of people sleeping with everybody else. It was the pre-AIDS days. It was the days of open marriage and open relationships. When I moved out here, by the time I had been living in Lawrence for two or three months, I was going out with five different guys. Most people I knew were not just dating, but sleeping with several people. So multiple partners were what most people in that part of the counter-culture in Lawrence did. It wasn't just people out at the farm. What we were doing was just a reflection of what the whole community, our whole network or friends, was also doing. It was real common. It was not even questioned, except for our parents, who thought it was real terrible and dangerous. There was one guy I was sleeping with that lived here and another that I wasn't. The guy that I wasn't sleeping with was angry about that. But I don't think there was anything that went far enough to actually threaten the structure of the community or destabilize anything. Sexual jealousy and possessiveness and freedom just went rolling along all the time no matter what kind of living situation you were in. It seemed pretty minor. It was just something everybody was going through at the time. It didn't seem like it had any affect on this group really. People were kind of forced to accept it because everybody was doing it pretty much. Almost everybody I knew at the time was living with other people. Very few people were living on their own. So there was partying out here but not more than any other place in town. What you could do out here was swim. So in the summer there were definitely more people coming out here.

**Q:** Why did so many people flock to communal living?

**A:** An economic motivation was part of it. Voluntary poverty was fashionable. But so was this whole thing of living communally. It was just something that lots and lots of people did. I would say that most of the people I now know lived communally at one point or another. But then I'm kind of on the fringes of normal society still. There are parts of my life that are real respectable. I teach at KU. My husband works at KU. We have nice cars. We have a pretty nice place. We own our own home. That's all real straight, middle-class kind of stuff. But on the other hand, we don't consider ourselves very mainstream in terms of our philosophy. For example, we're not married. We weren't married when our child was born. We got married for one year because I wanted to go to Japan to teach and he couldn't go with me unless we were married. So we got married for a year, went to Japan, came back, and got a divorce. I think we would be considered a little weird by most people. It was fashionable and politically correct in those days to live with other people. It was more of a party to live that way. We were our own friends so much that we didn't have to do very much to feel like we were having fun with other people. We had each other. Even still, if I didn't have anybody come out from town I'd still have my friends. This place is kind of self-sufficient in a way as far as a social group. We need town for certain services. That's where our jobs are. It's certainly wonderful to have friends in town but the people who live here know each other real, real well. In some ways we're almost as much social life for each other as we need.

**Q:** How is the communal situation you live in now different than when you began it in 1974?

**A:** We spend less time together as a whole group, partly because we don't get together for common meals anymore. We very seldom have meetings anymore. One reason for that is because there is a little tension here since one person is divorcing another. There's some tenderness over that. They kind of keep us from working really well together. We meet from time to time when something comes up but we don't really do it too much anymore. Informally there are some of us together on a given day but the whole group of us doesn't get together for meetings or any specific bonding ceremony or celebrations except for Christmas or when we have a party. So we are all together sometimes but we don't cause ourselves to be together that often. The economics are a little bit different. We used to put all of our money together in one big pool. Now we share in the expenses equally but one person does the business for us and pays the bills. We give money directly to him every month. It varies a little depending on if we've had a year with more farm expenses. But it hasn't changed too much. We pay about \$70 per adult to maintain the farm. That includes things like insurance, getting water supplied here, and propane, things like that. I am surprised that the farm has turned into the beautiful and well-functioning place that it is. For so many years we were so incredibly poor and everything we did was just the minimum of what we could afford to do. Originally we were just all barely making enough money at shit jobs to be able to buy food and gas every month. Now we've all got enough money to take little vacations and spend a birthday in a hotel. We spend \$100 on a Christmas for a kid instead of making everything from scratch. So I'm surprised that I've gotten into the situation where my financial situation is this comfortable. But I'm a lot more in debt than I was then too. Almost everybody out here is in the same situation. We all make a lot more money and we spend a lot more and our lives are nicer and more comfortable. That has been a pretty good change that I never thought would happen. I would say that we never had anything very formal as far as long-term aspirations or goals but our children were very important to us. Even the people that didn't have kids cooperated and helped with child care. It was real obvious that that was one of the biggest benefits. Having people to help you raise your child was a better way to raise them than if you were a single parent or a nuclear family. We really were sure that this was a wonderful way to raise kids. They would not have two role models, but seven or eight. Seven or eight people who loved them and took care of them. Second, it has been really good financially. My partner and I pay \$160 a month rent. Even though the land is paid for, \$160 a month isn't much to pay for all the support systems that go on. The fun that we have cooperating on projects is neat too. That was something that I hadn't really thought about. Many years we've had a real big vegetable garden or flower garden. We put a fence around the pasture and then took the fence down from the pasture when the goats were gone. Those kind of group projects we've done have been real wonderful. We built a sauna and we burned the sauna down. The ways we've taken care of the land and the things we've added to it have been a great way to share with other people. There are a lot of ways to live conveniently and efficiently this way if the chemistry works between the people. That has had its ups and downs. But generally it has been pretty good. I think that's what usually makes communes fall apart.

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**Q:** Do you consider your communal experience to be a success? Are you glad you decided to do it?

**A:** I don't regret it a bit. It has been wonderful. I'm kind of sorry that none of my sisters live here anymore. The people who have come out here have definitely become my family. It's not like I lost my sisters. It's more like I've gained a couple of brothers and sisters and all of my children instead. I would say that the two things that are best about this place are the people I live with and the natural surroundings. This place is incredible. It is really magical. Every day I'm so grateful that I get to live with this may trees and wild animals and this much sky. I value the lack of noise from town, the lack of pollution, the lack of interference. The amount of privacy that we have here is just wonderful. To get to live out in the middle of the real world, what I would consider to be the more important part of the real world, the land and dirt and trees and plants, to learn the cycles or those things, to get to see stars every night, the connection with the land is what I think makes everybody who lives here feel glad to live here. I'd say the connection with the land is as strong as the connection with the people.