

Interview with Susan Ashline

Interviewer: Tim Miller

April 26, 1996

Q: OK, for the record it is April 26, 1996 and this is an interview with Susan Ashline. Let's see, to get it started how many communes did you live in?

A: Oh one.

Q: OK. And what was the commune, did you have a name or ...

A: We didn't have a name, it was just a group of friends on a farm.

Q: OK. And where was the location?

A: It was South of here, Lawrence, ten miles South.

Q: And what were the dates?

A: I came in, Uh, December 1971, I guess. And was there for about two years. So it would be right after I graduated so it would be 71 to 73 or so.

Q: About how many people were in the group?

A: Let's see, usually five.

Q: But it fluctuated?

A: Well we were the five of us who paid the rent on the house and then sometimes friends would stay there but mainly it was the five of us.

Q: Do remember the names of any of the other people?

A: Yes.

Q: Could you (give names)... You don't have to if you don't want to.

A: Well no, I ... Bob Trainer, Rebecca Ryan, Celan Hall, Brad Charles, and me.

Q: Did you have any specific purpose or ideology in the group?

A: I don't think we did. You know, I don't know if I should put the names or not. If I start talking about drugs and stuff maybe I shouldn't. Just for one person I know.

Q: OK, that's fine so you want those left out of the interview?

A: Yeah, Tim doesn't care. Well I guess we were all artists and that's how we knew each other and we just wanted to live in the country and have a garden and do all that kind of stuff, run around. Hedonistic, that what I would say we were.

Q: We have a couple personal opinion questions here. Why do you think that so many people flocked to communal living?

A: Well, I guess they were leaving their families they lived with, their natural families they had grown up with and gravitating towards friends who had the same lifestyle, the same ideas. I don't know, that's a tough question.

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Q: And then how about this particular commune? You said that you were all artists, do you think that's what drew you together the most?

A: Yeah, I think so.

Q: So how did you come get involved in a commune? Was the commune already running when you ...

A: They were yeah, I think the three guys had rented the house after college. So it was very loose, you know, organization. I wasn't really an organization. And then I moved in. I went to graduate school and decided to quit and left school moved out there with them just because it was more fun and then the other woman came because she was somebody's girlfriend. So, uh, I don't think it was a conscious decision in the beginning to have everybody together but that's just how it evolved into that kind of state. Together for about that length of time.

Q: So were you going to graduate school here at KU?

A: No, I was going to graduate school in Iowa State. But we had all graduated from KU the year before.

Q: So then you came back?

A: Yeah.

Q: Did you know they had this house?

A: Yes. One of my friends, one of my best friends was living there, who was a painter. And so he said, you know, come back, live with us. It didn't seem to matter very much, so I did.

Q: Oh, that's great. Did you have a predisposition to community living? In other words, did your parents ... did you have any background in it or anything like that?

A: Well, all through college I guess I lived with women in you know a house full of women. Just because we didn't want to live in the dorm and we would get a house with like four or five people. To save on rent like all college kids, I guess. So I had lived with ... like that before.

Q: How did you first hear about communal living?

A: I don't know, it just seemed like everybody lived that way. Hardly anybody had enough money to have a whole house of their own at the time. So everybody was together.

Q: When you moved back in with, when you moved back from Iowa city into the commune, did you think of yourself as moving into a commune? Would you have put that word to it?

A: No, no. I just, we just called it the Farm. It was ... Yeah.

Q: What kind of other books or literature did you read that influenced you as you began or continued to live in community?

A: Then, what were we reading? Ooo. I remember a book, some kind of sort of spiritual book, by Baba Rom Dos, but I can't remember the name of it. We would all listen to I guess was

something on tape we would all sit and listen to. I have other than that we all just read novels and stuff we always read. I don't remember reading specific books about that. Although I guess I had read stuff during school.

Q: What was the daily life like there?

A: Um, well I think we were doing we would do papa yoga in the morning. We would go out if it was nice out in the yard and try and do yoga.

Q: All five of you together?

A: Yeah, and we'd work in the garden, we would always try to have a big garden. And we usually cooked together. Couple people went to town and had jobs. Oh, and then most the time we all had, we all worked in a little store we had in town that sold art work. And we did stain glass. So we would come to town depending on whether we wanted to or not. We would go swimming, we had a pond. Mainly it was just having a good time. And we would try and cook and can things from the garden. Just, we did a lot of farm things, really. We, none of us had ever lived on a farm, we had all grown up in the suburbs, so the farm thing was really appealing to us. We kind of tried to live like the pioneers. We were all poor. So we would do that gardening thing. Go down the street to get milk from the dairy. Friends would come over.

Q: About what time would you get up to the yoga?

A: Pretty late, probably ten.

Q: Was any of that actually set, or did it just kind of evolve?

A: It evolved, yeah, we weren't very structured at all.

Q: And then would you wake each other up as you got up, or did you just leave ...

A: I guess so, I think people would hear each other and get up.

Q: So there was some effort at doing stuff together?

A: Yeah. I think we tried to have meals together. Yeah, and I was telling Tim, too, there was one of... one person that must have been more serious. Oh, he was doing TM, he was doing Transcendental Meditation. And he would always want to do that when we fixing dinner. He would always get out of cooking dinner because he would say it was his time to do that. Because we would kind of take turns doing the chores. So he would always say that was his time to meditate so he could out of doing chores.

Q: So you took turn cooking meals. And did you take turns ... was it any kind of structured thing of how you took care of household chores, or was it just kind of...

A: No, I don't think so. Whoever did it, it seemed to be fairly even. Yeah.

Q: How did the people relate to each other?

A: I think we got along really well. You mean did we have fights? No, I don't think we did. I think we argued a little bit towards the end. We would argue about somebody not doing enough in the garden or something. But basically we got along really well.

Q: Did you have leaders?

A: No, there was one person who seemed to want things to be more structured than the rest of us. And I think the four of us felt the same way and he felt he wanted more structure. And now when I think back, I think what he's done with his life and what we've done with ours, it's kind of apparent. I mean he kind of went on to a real big successful business. He sort of lived a different life than the rest of us.

Q: Are you still in contact with the other five people?

A: Um, a little bit. My best friend that drew me there that I did stay really close with has died. So, he was my main contact. He was the one I would talk to a lot.

Q: So you didn't have any rituals or ceremonies?

A: Well, we smoked dope a lot. I guess that would be one of the rituals. And we would sit around in the living room or on the front porch and do that when people came and it was just social. People would come over and would have sort of communal pot luck dinners. Sit around and smoke dope. Listen to music. Talk about everything. But no real rituals. I guess the yoga and smoking dope were the closest things to it.

Q: So you said you had five stable people? (Yeah) And then did you have other long-term people that would stay long term. The five of you were on the lease right?

A: No. I don't think so. Actually, I think only three of us, the three guys were on the lease. We would just have people come and stay for a week. A friend of a friend. I think we had some people come in a school bus once. Kind of camped outside and stayed. I think they were there for quite awhile.

Q: Did you know them?

A: I didn't. I don't know who knew them. Wow, I don't remember who knew them. So it was, you know, kind of loose like that. I remember some people came with a baby that stayed for a while, like a year old child.

Q: But pretty much they were anybody was welcome, that was invited?

A: Yeah, I think so, that seemed to fit in and not make a mess and be Ok. Yeah, I think so.

Q: What were the economic arrangements?

A: I think we split the rent five ways. We took turns buying groceries. And it was pretty unstructured too. But I know we all paid some rent. It was thirty dollars a piece. It was great.

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Q: How many bedrooms was the house?

A: Four.

Q: And then there was the one couple?

A: Yeah, and then actually, I became a couple with one of the guys. I wasn't when I first came. And then my friend, that had invited me, was gay. So he was kind of coming out. So we were... I was meeting his friends too.

Q: So did he ever have any of his gay friends stay?

A: No, no he didn't.

Q: What did the rest of the household think of the fact that he was gay?

A: Um, I'm trying to remember if we knew then. I'm not sure we knew. I think it might have been like the year after that that he really came out, and was openly gay. So, yeah, I think the other guys didn't know. I mean they do now. I forgot another thing we had. We put up, somebody put up a teepee down in the woods and we would go, I remember we would go down there sit around. And sometimes sleep down there too.

Q: So it was a permanent standing teepee?

A: Yeah, it was canvas. A really nice one. It was fun.

Q: When people came and stayed, for a week or whatever, generally where would they sleep?

A: In the living room cause it had a big couch. Or sometimes people would have vans and they would sleep outside or in the teepee.

Q: Was there any money held in common at all?

A: No.

Q: Who made the spending decisions as far as... was it whoever went to the grocery store that day?

A: Yes.

Q: And did you have to spend any money on the house itself?

A: No I think we just, I don't think we even paid utilities. I think we just paid a hundred fifty dollars rent each month. And the landlord lived down the road and he took good care of us.

Q: Where exactly was this, I'm curious.

A: It was where Pleasant Grove is now. Pleasant Grove estates, it wasn't built then so it was out above there. Yeah, I think it's still standing.

Q: The land was owned by your landlord and he lived down the street. (Yeah) What did he think of you guys?

A: Well, he uh, kind of liked us. Because we tried, you know we tried to all that farm stuff and act really normal. So he liked that, he liked the fact that we gardened and everything. But I think he was always pretty suspicious. I mean I think he always wondered what in the world we were doing there. But we got along with him pretty well.

Q: What about the neighbors? Did you have any close neighbors?

A: We had some really nice neighbors that had a dairy farm. And they were, uh, they were real nice. They'd give us milk and cream and and we would like make them a pie and do all that stuff too. So I think they were kind of interested in us. If I remember one of the neighbors, one the farmer had never been farther than Kansas City in his whole life. So we would, we were, we would talk to them a lot. And then we had some other we had other close neighbors that lived the same way we did. So there were other farms of people like us that we would go visit. They were pretty close.

Q: Would you visit back and forth? (Yeah) Would all five of you go at one time?

A: Sometimes, but not necessarily. People would have, other farms had saunas, we would go to do that. And I think we took yoga classes at this one farm that is where Clinton lake is now. A lot of people lived in abandoned... yeah... so we would go there.

Q: So the group did garden? (Yeah) What type of garden was it, vegetable? (Yeah) Was it done for the purpose of eating the food out of it?

A: Yeah, we were trying to be vegetarians and so we were, you know, eat naturally, and I mean we were we sort of did it part time. We tried. So that was our idea and of course it was harder than we thought to do all the food and the canning and all the stuff we tried to do.

Q: How successful was the garden itself?

A: It was fairly successful. Yeah, it was a great spot and we all did work in it. So we, one mistake I remember making, we spent all one day canning gourds we thought were squash, so it was completely inedible. We tried to do freezing and canning and all that kind of stuff.

Q: Where did you learn how to do it, someone in the group?

A: No, from books. Yeah, and one of the guys grow up in Oklahoma and did more of that like with his Mom and everything. He knew a little more than we did. Help correct us.

Q: What about the garden itself, was it the same thing, did you look in books for ... ?

A: Yeah and asked, that's what we talked to the landlord a lot about that. It was sort of a common ground that we had.

Q: Do you think the group tried for self-sufficiency?

A: No, I don't think. We weren't really that idealistic and that structured I don't think. We kind of worked in town and I think everybody, I think at that point, most of us just wanted to have a good time and enjoy ourselves more than be serious about taking care of ourselves.

Q: So what type of stuff did you but from town?

A: Food wise you mean? Just probably, gosh, bread cheese, all that kind of stuff. I don't think we, I don't think I was eating any meat then so probably not much meat. Maybe one or two people were, once in a while.

Q: But you didn't make any of the more complicated stuff like breads yourself?

A: Sometimes but not always we would try.

Q: What were the meals like?

A: Well, one of the guys, the guy who knew how to can was also a really good cook so he would make pretty elaborate meals. You know, fried chicken and mashed potatoes and gravy and stuff like that, vegetables. And then I remember I would try to, we would try to make rice and vegetable kind of stuff a lot, more simple things.

Q: So did the people who were not vegetarians take into consideration the vegetarians when they cooked?

A: I don't think so. They were just kind of on their own. What is was is if you didn't want shat somebody made that night, then you just ate around it. Yeah, it was like I said, it was very unstructured.

Q: When you started dating one of the men, did you move into his room then?

A: Yes

Q: What happened to the old bedroom?

A: I think when I ... Well I was, I think I was staying in the room where my friend lived who was gay and then I moved into this other guy's room, after that, so my friend who was gay just stayed just stayed in his own room.

Q: What were the people like? Can you just briefly describe each of the other people?

A: Well, I guess I would describe my friend who was a really cook and a good gardener and a easy going, he liked to do projects. Like he would like he would like say let's make pies tonight or something and we would all ... you know, he was fun to be around.

Q: And he could get the rest of you together?

A: Yeah. I think so . And then there was the gut who he would work the most and he would seem more like the dad, or something . He was I guess more responsible in a normal sense. And he would go to town and work and so he worried more than we would. And he would come

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home and fret about things a little more. He seemed a little bit more like a father, father figure then ... sometimes he would come home and we would all feel guilty like we're just having too much fun all day.

Q: so the people who didn't work in town, how did you make money?

A: I don't remember how I lived. I mean, gosh, I think I lived on, oh boy, um some money I had save, I guess. Cause I just don't know what I would have done. I must have lived on like a hundred dollars a month or something. Maybe, I know that my mom and dad paid my health insurance. That's all. I know I didn't have any bills. I had a car and no bills. I just think I just really lived hand to mouth. Worked in town once in a while. Oh, and I think I was a waitress for a while, too. I was a waitress in an Italian restaurant.

Q: Here in town?

A: Yeah. So and the other people would try to word freelance. Oh, I think the one, the young woman was still in school. And the then other guys would do freelance artwork. We did work at the store and maybe do freelance jobs too.

Q: Freelance as far as any odd jobs?

A: Art. Doing sign paintings and graphics and stuff like that.

Q: And you mentioned something about a shop in town? What shop was that?

A: It was at fourteenth and Mass. And the name of it was "May the God of the Mountains shine down shine on the lodge of your children." Something like that. And we sold letter things and ceramics. And I guess things on consignment that people would bring in and then we would do stained glass out of there too. And then the other guys would do signs. They would run their freelance things out of there too.

Q: So did all five of you contribute to the store? (Yeah) How did you get that store started? (I don't know) Do you remember who fronted the money or anything like that?

A: No, I think maybe the responsible one. Probably he did. Because I'm sure that's probably what happened.

Q: OK. So I interrupted you talking about the different personalities.

A: Oh yeah. Well, the other woman was quite bit younger than I was at the time. So she was just a young woman . She was going to KU and then ...

Q: What did she think of you guys? Were you friends with her boyfriend? Is that kind of how you met her?

A: Yeah. And then he met her and she came out and she... And she was really lovely and, and we all enjoyed her. And I think she enjoyed it. Yeah, I think she had a good time. I don't know how it did for her school, but I know she has a really successful job now so she must have done OK and survived. Yeah, she was so young. And then the guy that I lived with was ... he seemed really

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happy there. He was easy going, easy to get along with. I don't know. (It seemed like a pretty easy going community) Yeah, we were and then when it changed we all left. So we just did it while it was fun, and then we went on to do other things from that.

Q: Do you remember how the lease was set up? Was that month by month?

A: I don't remember.

Q: What kinds of artistic expressions were present?

A: Oh. Well we would do everything from... we wove things, we made paintings. And we, like I said, we made stained glass. Um, a lot of music was, we listened to a lot of music. I think somebody would try to play the mandolin. I don't think anyone was a very serious musician but we would like dabble in guitars and things like that. Mainly it was visual.

Q: What about poetry or writing or anything like that?

A: Not there. No. I read, I've always read, but just, you know, I think... I don't remember people reading that much there at all. I think, no, there wasn't much literary. It was all visual.

Q: Did you display much of this artwork around the farm?

A: Yes. I think we would hang up paintings and yeah, all over.

Q: Did you do any sculptures or anything outside?

A: No. I didn't, I don't think anybody did. I think we just, we were sort of overwhelmed with trying to... it was an old, really nice old farmstead. So outside we were always trying to work on it. The trees and the garden and all that kind of stuff.

Q: So did you build anything out there? I mean you planted the garden...

A: We started to make a sauna out of a chicken shed. But we, I don't think we finished it. And we put up the teepee. But no, we didn't build anything else.

Q: So you had a wooded area out there, and a pond, were you able to fish or anything out of the pond?

A: Nobody fished, I wouldn't have liked that. I don't think anybody fished. We swam a lot. We would have big swimming parties. Everybody, you know, would run around naked. You know, maybe they fished and didn't eat them. I don't remember eating fish.

Q: If you had a swimming party, would that be mainly people from other communes coming? (yeah) How about other people from just around town?

A: Yeah well friends. It would be just friends that we knew whether they lived in town or not. Mostly it seemed like most people weren't living in town then that we knew. They were in the country.

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Q: And most of them were in a communal setting?

A: Yeah, or going to school.

Q: You had the shop, where you tried to sell some of the artwork, was there any pressure to produce artwork?

A: No.

Q: Do remember, if you sold a painting, would you get the money for it?

A: We put, in the shop, we put things on consignment. And so I think the shop took thirty percent or something. And the artist would take the rest.

Q: And do you remember who got the money for the shop?

A: Um, no. Probably the guy who started it, organized it.

Q: And was there any relationship between psychedelics and the community?

A: Oh yes. People would do psychedelics, too.

Q: Which drugs were used?

A: Um. Oh, marijuana and hash and LSD. And coke too, I think.

Q: How often?

A: Well different, it depended on who it was. I mean, you know, we all had different habits, I guess.

Q: And besides doing it socially, did you have anything that surrounded it as far as ritual goes?

A: No, I think we thought of it as a ritual whenever we did it. But no, not really.

Q: Did all of the residents use drugs?

A: Yeah.

Q: Did it cause any conflicts? Was there any question of how often you should do it or what you should do?

A: Well, yeah, the only conflict I remember, that one person thinking that we, you know, he was the only conflict I remember where he would come home from town and we would be sitting around and he would make us feel like he wished we had worked harder in the garden or something like that. But, I think he probably felt the conflict more than we did. But no, the rest of us it seemed like everybody could just do what they wanted.

Q: What were the sexual rules and attitudes?

A: Well I don't think there were any rules. Attitudes, I think everybody was just really permissive and nonjudgmental.

Q: Were your relationship and the other couple monogamous?

A: Yeah. Cause it really, it was just sort of two couple and my other friend.

Q: You don't think that at this time you knew he was gay?

A: I think maybe I thought he was. And I think he was keeping his sexual relations kind of to himself because of the gay thing and it was really a long time ago. And I just think he hadn't really figured out yet what was going on. So I remember he should have friends come out, bi's and stuff but they wouldn't stay. So we really didn't quite... I don't remember if I wondered or not. I mean, I think it would have been OK with everybody. But it just didn't ... he probably didn't feel comfortable with us. And then later I went on to live with the same guy in San Francisco and I lived with three gay men for three or four years or so, in San Francisco. I can't remember exactly when this was, what I thought at certain times. I guess that was a communal experience too.

Q: What other things do you remember about the daily life? Are there any specific incidents or anecdotes that stand out in your head?

A: Well, I just remember, and I've never gotten to live in the country like that again like that really either. But how beautiful it was and how pleasant it was to live out there. It was just so pretty and pleasant. Well, I remember a couple things. I remember that the landlord gave us the jars of deer. Canned venous or and one really hot summer day they all exploded in the cabinets of the kitchen. And I just remember trying to clean up the horrible mess. I just remember having a really nice time there. You know, people coming over and just sitting around and nobody ever feeling like you had to be someplace else. It was so like you could sit around all day and now you know you fell guilty whenever you do that. But that is just what we did all the time. We had a couple dogs there when I got there. But had just four strays and we had a kitty. So it was nice to have them.

Q: You all just took care of them?

A: Yeah.

Q: What were the best and worst things you remember?

A: Well, the best things were like I said, just being in the country, swimming and having lovely dinners and having that companionship it was really nice to have a lot of friends around all the time. The worst thing I remember now that I think back on it was I don't know if it's guilt now but we had some people come in that I didn't like. And they had like a year and a half old kid and they would not watch it. And now when I think about it I should have called some I should have called child welfare or something. And I remember that being a really bad experience finding the baby outside with nobody. They had gone to town and left a year and a half old baby in the yard.

Q: And how long did they stay for?

A: They stayed for a month or so.

Q: Did they know one of you?

A: They knew one of us, not me. They knew somebody else. And they were sort of hard people. I mean that's probably the only bad thing I remember. And then actually somebody found some marijuana to dry in our barn without telling us and it got found and the sheriff came out or the Vern Miller came out and searched our house and ended up digging up my friend's dog. My friend's dog had been hit by a car and the dog grave was in the garden and he saw the fresh dirt and he came out and dug up the dog. We were all upset about that.

Q: So Vern Miller was the sheriff?

A: He was the attorney general.

Q: I think I've heard his name before.

A: Yeah, you probably will. Because he would have surprise raids on people's houses.

Q: So was this barn on your property?

A: Yeah.

Q: Was there anyone arrested from that, do you know?

A: I don't think so, no.

Q: Did he come out on a regular basis? Did you feel like you were hassled?

A: Well, yeah I think we all felt like we were hassled by it. And we had a phone tree around then that of hippie people. That if someone heard that he was going to have a drug bust, we would all call each other. There were certain numbers you were supposed to call to warn people if it was going on. So he was making these real dramatic raids on people's houses. So we were all, oh I don't know, upset about it I guess.

Q: Did he come out very often to your place?

A: No, I think it was that one incident where he dug up the dog.

Q: When did you decide to leave.

A: Well, we decided to move to town after we were there for a couple. And I think it was after they found the marijuana and we felt like we didn't want to be there anymore. I think everybody left at about the same time. I think the one couple got married. And became born again for awhile. And then my friend moved to San Francisco. And the guy I was with and I moved to Lawrence.

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Q: And it was really just a happy ending? It was mostly just conflict from the outside?

A: Yeah. When the other couple became born again, I guess we didn't have much in common. I guess they were kind of preachy and evangelistic about it. So we kind of severed ourselves from that.

Q: Do you consider the commune and your participation in it a success or failure?

A: Well, I think of it as a really nice time. But now when I look back on what I was doing and the age and everything, I've always felt a little bit of regret. I regret that I didn't finish grad school and didn't keep pace really seriously. I really didn't get anything done during that time except have a really good time. And I guess it was Ok. But I would probably have a better job now...

Q: Do you have any documents from this communal experience?

A: I really don't. I hate it I have no photographs from that time, I didn't have a camera. I've always regretted that.

Q: How do you feel that your life has been affected by this experience?

A: Well, like I said, good and bad. I think it was affected a little bit because I dropped out and didn't pursue how I was going to make a living. I've regretted that some.

Q: Did it make it easier to drop out because you had someplace to go, or that's how you feel?

A: Yeah.

Q: And there was no pressure to go back or anything?

A: Right, it was just completely easy and fun. So that was good and bad I guess.

Q: You continued on and live communally with the three other men in San Francisco.

A: Yeah. And then with one of the men. I spent a couple years, I guess, alone, monogamous with the guy from the Farm. And then when he and I broke up, I went to San Francisco and lived with one of the other guys from the commune, the gay guy, and then, two other gay men and we lived together for I guess three in an apartment in San Francisco. But I guess it was strictly sharing the space. I mean it wasn't like we were friends but we all had jobs. And then we all decided to go out into the world and get jobs. So we all went out and worked all day everyday, came home. Sometimes we ate together and mainly just shared the apartment.

Q: Was it more like a roommate situation?

A: Yeah.

Q: Was it in town in San Francisco?

A: Yeah.

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Q: Did it make you look at anything differently when you were done?

A: I don't think it was that different then living with families or roommates in our situation. The interactions were still, sometimes they were similar to being in a family. I'm sure it did, but I can't really say without knowing what it would have been like to live alone at that time.

Q: And that was when you were about 23?

A: Yeah, 21 or 22.

Q: Do you know anybody else who might want to be interviewed?

A: Maybe Jim would still do, although he wasn't in a commune. I'm trying to think of people Tim doesn't already know. I told him about my friend Sherry. She would be good to because she lived in a commune in an old frat house on ninth street. No, I can't think of anybody. I'm trying to think of the people I was with but mostly no one is around anymore.

Q: Do you have anything else you would like to say about yourself or the commune?

A: no, I don't think so.

Q: Well, that all the questions I have. Thank you very much.

A: Your welcome, I hope its all right...