

Interview with Michael Grobe

Interviewer: Unknown

n.d.

Q: This is an interview with Michael Grobe, what commune did you live.

A: I don't think you'd call it communes actually. They were definitely cooperative living arrangements. But I imagine on a scale of commitment to communal living, these were not very committed groups, they were basically very loosely structured coops. There were two of them, one was early '70's, just a house in Lawrence, 1108 Ohio, and varying from eight to twelve people lived there at any time. We shared rent and meals, just evening meals. The other one was a few years after that with largely the same people with more decidedly computing orientation. That was even looser. Those people sometimes ate together sometimes didn't. So, I definitely wouldn't call either one of these communes, but they were cooperative living.

Q: What is the ideology behind it? Was it just for cheap rent?

A: I suppose a good portion of it was just cheap rent. These people, certainly the ones involved in the computing, shared computing as a hobby and also as a job. In a way it was very intensely vocation oriented, although we didn't necessarily work together, we had very strong interests in the same fields. Oddly enough I've always thought of computing as a community venture. When people ask me what kind of computer to buy, what I tell them is "whatever your friends have". Because when it doesn't work, you've gotta have somebody to ask, usually you don't have a warranty service arrangement with your vender, so you need to ask your friends. I've always had a lot of fun working on computer problems in groups. So, that's gotta be part of it. The other part of it is, well, the first group were people I met in college and shared late college experiences with. I think of them as being not quite ready to leave college. Sticking with those people in that living arrangement. Although I was, in fact, working at that time in the Kansas City business sector. This stuff grew out of the ferment of the '60's, so we definitely had liberal ideas that we shared, but we weren't particularly active in political groups. Two of us had been suspended for the demonstration in 1969 -1970 where the ROTC parade was obstructed or partly obstructed. There were twenty or thirty students suspended for that. Two of us had been in that demonstration, so political orientation was an issue, but we weren't actively working with political groups at the time. What I started to say about that was that I was working as a ... during the time I was living with the first group in Lawrence.

Q: Did either of the groups go by a name or just ... Did you have any type of predisposition to community living, did your parents live in a community or anything like that?

A: No they definitely never did. My grandparents weren't involved in a community as far as I know, but they did live with their parents for a while and as two couples or two families joined and hated it. I think that attitude was passed down to my parents who would just as soon have died than have lived with any other people. So it was really not part of my experience except in so far as that we got used to it in the dormitory. When I was in the dormitories as well as my friends, they were almost exclusively sexually segregated. I think in '68 in McCollum hall was the first year they had anything like sexual integration. That was women on one wing and then on two other wings of the hall with steel partitions, literally steel partitions separating the two living areas. It was not, before then it was nothing. Men were basically not admitted into women's dorms except on, I think Sundays were the visiting period, during which time, the doors to every room had to remain open. This was a different world.

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Q: Was there any certain books or literature or music that influenced you?

A: Well, we were always listening to Carole King and Bob Dylan and other music from that time. We read books about this stuff, like (World War II?), which I assume you've heard of. There was some Heinlein book that had something to do with communal living. Something called the Calan experiment which they made into a movie. I didn't exactly take that stuff seriously. But it seemed to me to be science fiction. A novel experiment, nothing else. The idea seemed easy enough, it seemed workable, but generally things that are published ... taught me about seeing the kind of popularization maybe even exploitation, especially the Calan experiment, which seemed to be the most syncretic... which maybe I question, I don't know.

Q: You said something about the war in Vietnam, what all did the war in Vietnam have to do with the people in the community and the fact that you had to band together, were most of you conscious of the tension?

A: I think I was the only student. I think there were two ... there was at least one other person who was out on a physical disability, one person was two old and one person had caused himself to have a physical disability. Basically he ... well, he shot himself in the leg actually to keep from going. Which was enough to convince the psychiatrist, well enough to enable a psychiatrist to recommend him for ... status. I thought that was a pretty brave thing to do. He learned what the psychiatrist wrote was a hoot. He described the guy as having no redeemable social value, I think being essentially a loner and alienated from society. At this time, we all felt alienated from society. At least that's the way we thought of ourselves. Typically, people in the late '60's called themselves freaks. That was the "movement" which I assume Tim has talked to you about. No one knew what the "movement" was but you could read about the "movement" in "Time" magazine. It was an understood phenomenon, which I never expected to disappear, but then I never expected blue work shirts to disappear either. I thought I'd still be wearing one today. Ask me that question again.

Q: About the Vietnam War.

A: Well, clearly the war ... I spent four or five years worrying about the war myself. As did the guy who got himself a psychiatric permit. I didn't want to be in school. I hated school. I liked learning about things but I hated school. But I couldn't quit. Because I would have lost my student permit, at least that's the way I thought about the problem. In fact I couldn't get out, there was a strict contradiction for a long time because it required belief in a "supreme being" which I actually did not have, at the time. But there was something that happened in 1968 or 1969 some change in the laws so you didn't have to believe in a supreme being, but you had to have conscientious objection, which I did have, which was eventually judged to be adequate.

Q: What was the daily life like in the community?

A: Well, you know it seems to me that it was just completely normal. The way it always is, except in the first group, we always had dinner together. We either had jobs or were students, so things were not very unusual. In the evenings, people would listen to music, hang around together, smoke dope occasionally we'd experiment with LSD and marijuana, you know mushrooms, but also mescaline. That

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was not very frequent, except there were a couple guys who smoked pot a lot, probably almost daily or every other day.

Q: Was there any other kind of central religion or ideology, were there any ceremonies or rituals that you would practice together?

A: Really dinner was the only ritual that we had, smoking dope perhaps could be described as ritual. In the other house we actually sat around at night and watched, every night we would cook noodles and put butter and salt on them and eat them while watching "Monty Python's Flying Circus". We were not a religious group, this was not that kind of commune. But that was something that was ritual.

Q: How did the people in the communities relate with each other?

A: Well, gee, it all seemed normal to me. There was no particular organizational hierarchy, we aimed for some kind of consensus or near consensus in decision making. I remember we wanted to have as much individual input as possible and some of us got taken to "tea" groups. Relations of five or six years were typically called tea groups or hanging groups, making people aware of group processes. We knew from those classes that the shape of the table you were sitting around could make a difference. So we went up to have a perfectly democratic group, we wanted a round table, but unfortunately the circle has a minimum perimeter and I looked into the area and we couldn't fit it into the room, so we ended up with an elliptical table. Aiming to encourage participation. There's one guy who owned the house, who really was committed to people expressing their opinions. I would say the decisions were made in basically a pretty democratic way. Responsibility was even shared that way we were stuck with responsibilities beyond the house. In terms of interpersonal relations there did seem to be big factions that had formed. There were various relationships, at that time I think all the relationships were heterosexual and I suppose there was still sexism within the group, but it would have been very subtle, or relatively subtle. I'm not sure it would be considered subtle these days. But relatively subtle. The women in the group were vocal and very bright. They expected to have full participation. As far as I could tell, they did. Two of the couples that came out of that group ended up married, or at least they were together, and they still are, which is kind of odd actually.

Q: How were the chores and housework handled so there was not too much differentiation between the sexes or did the women cook and the men mow the grass?

A: I'm sure we mowed the grass, we must have. But cooking was, the cooking for the group was done on a rotation basis. It may be that we had a male-female team in rotation. That would be an interesting thing. The men were definitely expected to participate, and some were somewhat lax in their duties. The females had to cover for them. I was one of those. I don't like to cook. I didn't want my partner to have to do all the work, but I was just, well, basically I was a jerk and a slob. I showed up to do my cooking, but I was frequently late, stuff like that.

Q: What was the food like?

A: Good question. We were not on the cutting edge of the hippie food growers. We ate the pretty standard stuff. Although we experimented from time to time. We had a big batch of textured vegetable protein once and we made chili out of that and everybody hated it. I remember getting rather criticized

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for two other things I cooked, one was frozen dinners because I was late and that pissed everybody off. The other one was one of Judy's recipes which was grape jelly meatballs. But that gives you some sense of the low self respect of the food coop. Like Deborah's in food coop that really would never eat grape jelly meatballs. Never.

Q: What was the source of most the members money, you said that most of them were students or had jobs, were most of you independent and supporting yourself?

A: For the most part we were out of school, but living pretty poor, I think I might have been one of the richest ones because I was making \$7,000 a year, approximately, working in Kansas City. \$7,000 then is probably comparable to \$14,000 now. So that's enough, some of the others were working student jobs.

Q: You said one of the members owned the house?

A: He was working here at the computer center, as a matter of fact.

Q: How were spending decisions made on things that were for the house, like when the house needed repairs or the group was out of food, or the community spending decisions.

A: The food stuff was all split equally from what I remember. The rent was divided by rent similar to how it was adjusted for the person in the building to pay. But it was done in an ad hoc way. I wouldn't be surprised if one or two of the cute girls got lower rent. But in general it was all open to discussion and reasonably equal, but there wasn't any formal...

Q: So one of the members owned the land, so you didn't have any problems with landlords, did you have any problems with neighbors?

A: No, actually none at all. We were pretty normal. There were enough people then doing pot that somehow, I had a sense that it was more accepted by the community. Now you have, the school systems training the kids to turn their parents in for smoking dope. They did some of that back then too, but I had the sense that nobody took it seriously. Now there's enough propaganda. Things like that happened back then, but we never had any problems.

Q: Did you have any type of garden or anything...

A: No, this was pre-garden time. Actually, there was a garden in the second house. That generally produced. A man who had just gotten divorced wanted a place to have a garden he built a diamond garden, that guy knew how to build a garden. His housing got taken with the divorce settlement and he was a pauper. So we had to let him. He put the garden in and we didn't really do much with it.

Q: Did you ever build any other kind of buildings or anything like that on the property?

A: Nope, but we built a fourteen foot papier-mâché hot dog, once for... you know on July 4th how they have the fireworks, they used to have fireworks in the stadium and the whole community would go out to the hill and sit down and watch the fireworks. One of the guys decided to build a big hot dog. He liked hot dogs. I was just getting into dancing at that time, so we were going to have a guy in the front and a guy in the back and have us a dancing hot dog, but unfortunately he didn't get it done in time. So we

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just took it up on the hill and left it there, it disappeared. He never even got a picture of it. We were building things, also the enormous elliptical table.

Q: Was it an open door membership policy or was there room for anybody to come in?

A: Good question. I think that it really wasn't open, I'm not sure you could consider it open. The only way people could become members is pretty much the same way it would be nowadays. Or at least the way I assume it would be. Students who want a situation to live in by group control they would almost always be friends or acquaintances it seems similar.

Q: Was there any sort of a visitor policy? Did you have people crashing there all the time or was it pretty stable?

A: We were too stable for that, there were occasional visitors, but not very much.

Q: What sort of living arrangements were there? Did you each have your own bedroom?

A: Everyone had their own room. Which probably saved a lot of conflict.

Q: What was the ratio of males to females?

A: It was about two males to one female. So six guys and three gals.

Q: Did you have any relations with any other types of communities?

A: No, not that I can think of.

Q: There weren't any children were there?

A: There was one child, at 1108, the guy who owned the house was separated from his wife, who lived there, and they had a two year old. She was going with one of the other guys who lived there. The guy who owned the house was really not interested in taking care of the kid. From what I remember his thought was that he didn't want the kid but she wanted to have it then she had to take care of it. They had an agreement on that. I might be exaggerating a little bit but that seemed to be how it was. So yeah, there was Steven ... Steven is now a graduate student in computer science at the University of Texas, Austin.

Q: Was anyone else expected to help out with the child rearing?

A: No. I would say that we liked having the kid around but we didn't have much experience dealing with children. It wasn't much of a problem, I liked having her around. But we didn't really cooperate ... the guy she was seeing spent a lot of time with her.

Q: What kinds of artistic expressions were done there?

A: You think a fourteen foot hot dog is an artistic expression? That's the only thing I can think of.

Q: Was there was music, painting, writing?

A: There was computing. The guy who built the hog dog eventually got a communication degree. There were a couple people who played recorders. Someone played the guitar, it wasn't the focus of the

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group, I wish it had been. I thought about that, no, it wasn't until the second household that I got interested in dance. ... So it was hard work. That was the only bad thing about it. That occasionally you want to make a little racket, but you can't because there are ten people at home.

Q: Who were some of the memorable characters?

A: (response is unintelligible)

Q: How do you think your life has been affected afterwards?

A: Well, I think that, when we went through the late '60's, we didn't really know what to do. How we were going to lead our lives, I had ideas about being normal, which is to say "get a job, getting married" in the normal way. Which kind of didn't seem that incorrect then. I didn't have any clear models for alternate ways to live. So, I think this was the first experiment I had with some sort of intent to define my own life, for myself. My parents didn't exactly like the idea, they weren't exactly against it either. My mother tried smoking dope, for example, which would have worked all right except that she never, I mean, she smoked but she never inhaled. So it was worthless. My father was really, bitterly opposed to my conscious objective status (?). They were really standard, they lived a very standard lifestyle, an "Ozzy and Harriet" lifestyle. So for me it really doesn't matter, no matter what happened, the fact that I did what I thought I needed to do then, that gave me a sense, it gave me a better sense of what I wanted to know.

Q: Do you think you've sort of gotten it out of your system and you're ready to live just a regular, normal life?

A: I think that I got the idea of coop living out of my system, so to speak. I really found that to be a burden to have to live with that many people. I know that there are people who don't have a problem with that, who are very comfortable with that type of environment. But, I'm really not and I'm clear about that. But no, in answer to the question about four years after the second household, I quit work and went back to school to get a degree in computer science, a master's degree and to take dance classes. I took one dance class and one computer class for a long time. For around eight years until I got a degree. And that was in a way related because I made that decision out of doing what I felt I had to do for myself, even though I thought it was stupid in a lot of ways, to go back and get it. I didn't expect to be very good at it, I didn't expect to do it professionally, but I wanted to do it and I look back and say that it was really a part of ... I had encouragement from people I knew from the community. I had a reasonably successful communal experience, having done it because it felt like that's what I needed. So it was a matter of confidence.

Q: When and why did you finally end up leaving?

A: I think the second one I left for California. I don't know the time, it was during a rotation to California, and when I came back I lived in Kansas City. I don't really know what happened the first time, I think the guy who owned the house bumped us over and moved to Colorado. It was more or less external, people just moving out.

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Q: The fellow who moved, do you think he moved the community there?

A: He did not. He lived by himself.

Q: Are there any other anecdotes or anything?

A: How many of these kind of coops or community groups do you think existed in the '70's?

Q: I think that's what he's writing about, not really what doctrine is involved. Just from my experience with the interviews, you think at first there's just one or two in town and you end up after interviewing one person that names just keep coming and coming and it seems like everybody in that time lived communally. I really don't have any idea, there was just an explosion of that activity in that time.

A: Do you think there was more than there is now?

Q: Oh, yeah I would think so.

A: Did you live in a community?

Q: No, not really. I live in a house with a lot of people and we split meals, but I don't consider it, I guess...

A: It's not much different from what we were doing. You share meals?

Q: Yes, not all meals, but we usually do lunch, you know. I'm very interested in it though, it appeals to me. But I'm also the kind of person who needs my own space. It's hard to live with a lot of people, sometimes the conflicts...

A: Do you have your own room?

Q: No, actually I don't, we have a big room, actually, almost nine rooms kind of partitioned with sheets. It's not sound proof, really.

A: Well, see that's ... I would say it sounds like what you're doing is pretty similar to what we were doing. I never exactly considered it a "communal" experience, but then my brothers did and everybody like that. It certainly seemed quite common. I knew a lot of people were into it much more clearly, who shared more basically. But I have a sense too, for American culture, that's fairly communal. It's fairly mutual.

Q: In an individualistic society. To share anything is pretty much the rule.

A: Well, in fact, I recall around that time in the '70's about a concept of friendship in the U.S. and when you think about it, friendship, well it's true to me anyway, is very loose. I feel like I'm expected not to expect things of my friendship group. We get together and we have a good time. If we want, then we're together. It is fairly unusual to go out of our way to do a really organized event. But we're always just hanging out. But the idea of being systematic or ritualistic about it just is not ... I know that there are some people now who really intentionally organize events with their friends, but I consider that kind of bizarre. The best I can do is say, "hey do you want to go get dinner?" That's my idea of structure. I think there's a similarity.

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Q: So you probably think ... it doesn't seem like it I guess, after the Shakers and...

A: Well, exactly. Those guys in Kansas City, they seem really serious about it. And those are intentional communities. I always kind of liked that terminology.

Q: I think it has mostly to do with personalities, if you're an organizer type of person, you like to schedule things out ahead of time. If you're kind of a "go with the flow" kind of person, like I said, you just hang out, instead of making plans, having it real developed. Whereas if you have a group that's organizing, it's a definable group instead of just whoever's there at the time, I think things like that are more likely to come out.

A: I always thought they'd start one again in Kansas City. Those guys are based on M&M terms, proper conditioning, organized by the people at Dole as an experiment. They've got capitalistic duties they've got to perform and all that junk.