

Interview with Fran Beier

Interviewer: Unknown

October 21, 1995

**Q:** In what commune(s) 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:** There was almost always a political consciousness involved in communal living. But I would say that mostly communes around here were economic, which of course the very first communes were. The idea was, "If we don't do this together we won't get by." Then there was the more generalized feeling that if we all didn't do everything together we wouldn't get by. In that sense it was political. The politics of it were fairly informal. But when some political activity evolved it always involved some type of furor. I wasn't in Lawrence all the time from 1968 1975. There was a time when I lived by myself and in communities in Arkansas. I don't think I knew very many people who weren't living in a community situation. The size varied anywhere from five to ten, with ten being pretty large and ungainly. Everyone kind of decided that ten was a pain in the butt most of the time because it was so hard for that many people to come to agreement over anything. One of the things I really appreciated about that lifestyle was having come out of a very traditional home setting where decisions came from the sky downward towards us. It was the period of time in my life when I learned to reach agreement by consensus. That is probably the thing that has been, over the long haul, the most important thing I got out of that whole period of my life, to live with people and learn to come to consensus about how things should be done. Therefore, ten was a lot of people to come to consensus about all the details of a household, with five to seven being a pretty good number. That didn't include children. That was the adults involved. When I first came to Lawrence in 1970 I lived in a household with four other adults, all of them men. Three of the men and myself were all single parents. We all had children somewhere between the ages of six months and about two and one half. So for us it was an absolute economic necessity. It was also a real desire to see our children in households with other children and to see ourselves with some support for being parents. We shared all the parenting responsibilities. I think that that was true of a fair number of communal situations in Lawrence. Either couples or single parents would live with other couples or single parents with children. They felt the need for support, the need to build an extended family around their children and around their own parenting needs. I'm not sure I would survived single parenthood at that time. We were all very young, by and large. It didn't seem young at the time, but we were between the ages of seventeen and twenty two at that household. The person that didn't have a child wanted to live at this household because he wanted to be around children without having a child. The economics were real important to us though. Life would have been real hard for any of us if we had been trying to do this economically by ourselves.

**Q:** What were the economic arrangements? What was the source of money? Was money held in common? Who made spending decisions?

**A:** Everybody was responsible for their own bills. But we made things much more feasible for each other by covering one another and taking care of children. There would be a couple of people at work and a couple of people at home. On an ongoing basis, it was fairly complex to work out who was with who and when. In that household there were three full time students who also worked and two of us who weren't in school and only worked. But for any of us, at the wages you earn in the basic "working your way through school routine", for none of us to have to worry about whether \$1.25 an hour was going to go to pay someone you trusted to take care of your child was important. It meant that we all had substantial savings from pooling our efforts. One of the common feelings was that all the children

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benefited from feeling that there were lots of adults in their lives. They benefited from the different interests that different adults had and they benefited by feeling that they had family bigger than one parent. There wasn't really a community pot. There was more a community pool of energy that everybody shared and drew from.

**Q:** How was the child rearing handled? How were children educated? Was there a common ideology about child rearing?

**A:** No, there was the usual number of arguments about how it would be done. There was a consensus on some of the principles. How people see principles put into action can be pretty difficult to iron out. Also, what your principles are, as opposed to what you can stand to do on a given day, can be entirely different. That's the difference between how people think something should be done as opposed to they can really pull it off. In general, we were a fairly non structured, non authoritarian kind of crowd. Although, we were more structured than some other groups I lived with. We all believed that the kids were better off if they were in bed by ten o'clock. It was a goal. We didn't always meet that goal. We would agree on exceptions to that goal. We all really felt strongly about there being three meals in front of them everyday at predictable times. We were fairly loose about what we might predict by way of lunch or dinner. We all felt like kids should eat on a regular basis and they should eat real food. So we agreed on some specifics and then there would be the arguments. It was interesting at the time because sometimes I would think that this conversation is a nightmare. Somewhere in my brain I remember thinking at the time that these are not things that happen in real families. But over the years, being around a lot of nuclear families, I found that those are exactly the kinds of conversations people have. Moms and dads have arguments about whether so and so should be allowed to do this and whether this is an acceptable mode of behavior for so and so. With some perspective, it was about standard for any two people, let alone five, trying to decide how things should be done with children. There were some rules but I don't think we ever discussed them. In that particular household we never discussed some rules because they never came up. We were of one mind about some things. Corporal punishment was absolutely not done. It never occurred to us that anybody else would do it. Nobody ever asked and nobody ever did. Later on when I lived in houses where we had to discuss those things it would take me by surprise. It was a given that certain kinds of behavior never led to a resolution of a problem. So if you had any desire at all to resolve a problem that's not how you did it.

**Q:** How were chores and housework handled? How was food prepared? What was it like?

**A:** In that particular household, it really was more organic than anything else. From the outset, we agreed that there were five adults and each one would put food on the table one weekday evening a week. We kept an ongoing list of staples on the refrigerator. When you went to do your shopping then you were responsible for picking up those things. Then everybody brought their tickets and hung them on the refrigerator. Every Sunday morning we tallied it up and split it up. We also decided that as a household, because we worked different schedules and there were people in school, in order for us to not be like ships passing in the night, unless a real good reason interfered, everybody would be home and spend a certain portion of Sunday together. So the adults would decide what we were going to have for Sunday dinner. Two or three people would be in the kitchen and somebody would be dealing with the children. We didn't necessarily stand around the kitchen and work together but lots of times we did. We

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also set apart part of Sunday to be the overall cleaning of the communal part of the house. So Sunday was really our house day. We did fun things together. We cooked together and we ate together. We also had what we called the Irreverent Shakespeare Company. We all loved literature. So we would read a play, pick parts and do it together. There was almost always total chaos happening at the same time. We usually spent a couple of hours on Sunday doing the bathrooms and the kitchen, or the refrigerator, whatever needed doing. We fairly early on discovered that weekly refrigerator cleaning was a necessity in our household. Every Sunday everything came out and we at least looked at it. There was an element of being able to share some of the jobs we considered to be unpleasant. It was the also the day that the lawn got mowed. I lived in this situation beginning in 1970 and lived there a year and one half. It was on South Park Street on the corner of South Park and Vermont. It's the house that backs up to the mortuary. There were five bedrooms in it.

**Q:** Where did you live after this first situation?

**A:** I lived in a household with a single mother with two children, myself with my son Christopher, and another man and woman. That house was on Kentucky. It was a small house on a double lot at 1416 Kentucky. We lived there for a year and then moved to the country.

**Q:** Was this situation on Kentucky similar to the first household?

**A:** This house was looser, less structured, than the first house. At that house the dinner situation was real different. Everybody wasn't home at dinner every day. People's schedules were real different. We probably only ate together three or four times a week. We didn't have any regiment about how the house got cleaned. It was fairly informal. We just kind of took turns. After some fairly heated discussion, we agreed that the floors in the communal part of the house needed to be swept every day. There was never any heated discussion about this. Actually, for a little while a woman lived with us who made us all so crazy that we agreed we couldn't do it. She had a very structured way that things ought to be done in housekeeping. She was angry with us one Friday evening because she had seen one of the men there use a sponge to wipe a spill up off the floor, rinse it out, and put it back up on the counter. She lost her mind. As she said, "I'm sure this kind of thing happens all the time!" After another couple of months of trying to work out something that she could live with, we all discovered that we couldn't and she couldn't either. She couldn't stand what in her mind was our degree of filth. She was totally weirded out by the fact that we mopped the kitchen floor with a mop and no one could remember the last time they got down on their hands and knees and did it. We were making her nuts and she was making us nuts and she agreed that she should live someplace else. In every situation there were rules to work out. If your bedroom door is shut, don't knock. Everybody had their own rules. We would iron those things out usually fairly spontaneously. I remember one huge, total blowout at our house on Sunday morning. Sunday mornings were typically a time when things divided down into those people who wanted to be left alone and those people who would go to the kitchen and hang around and drink coffee. Often there would be several other adults there besides the people who lived there, their various lovers as well as their various children. Stan Sharp knocked on Roger's door to ask him if his door was shut on purpose? The people who didn't have children didn't have to get up at the crack of dawn. We could hear the argument all the way downstairs.

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**Q:** What living situation did you become involved in after the Kentucky house?

**A:** I and one of the other women moved out and lived on a farm with another woman and four men. The farm was in the Clinton Valley, which is under water now. We wanted to be out in the country. We knew some people living in this house out there and some bedrooms came open. It was the hardest community I ever lived in because it was really difficult to come to agreement about how things ought to be done. It was the first time I lived in a community where any man would dare say he didn't do dishes. There were two men in that household with these notions. There was a thinking amongst certain men in that household that there should be a division of labor. The rest of us, particularly the women, were not interested in this. They were much more traditionally male in their thinking, causing me to deliberately sabotage one of these men's loving relationships by telling the woman all the things I knew about him that she didn't know yet. This did not befriend me to him. We're civil but we've never been close. But we did live in that household together for almost two years, maybe longer.

**Q:** How did life change since you were in a rural, as opposed to an urban, setting? Did the group garden or farm? Did it seek self sufficiency?

**A:** There were the great goat fights. It was really a whole era. Two of the men and one of the women thought goats were a good idea. I didn't know shit about goats and thought, "Well, that's OK." I came to hate goats over that period of time. They are much too smart for anyone to ever try to domesticate. They are one of those animals that just ought to be allowed to do their own thing, and will do their own thing. Goats are going to do whatever goats want to do. They are probably the smartest domesticated animal. They can figure their way out of anything. I didn't think goats were a bad idea because I didn't know. So we ended up with this herd of goats. In the end they did save themselves in my eyes. They are delightful animals because they're so smart. They have such distinct personalities. The fact that they had eaten all of the tomatoes wasn't so endearing. Even now I see these friends and if any discussion comes up about the Clinton farm, the great goat wars will be mentioned because horrible things happened to these goats. These goats did horrible things and horrible things happened to them. There was a time when all of the goats went missing. Sally Brown and Burt came home one evening. They went to milk the goats and they had all gone missing. There were six goats locked up in the double seated outhouse that we used. Someone, who never fully admitted what he had done, just decided that if he had to deal with these goats all afternoon he would lose his mind. You couldn't chop wood without one of them being right there. You were trying to protect these things that would not stay out of your way. They could jump any fences made by any of us. They were on the back porch and in the kitchen every time anyone didn't kick them back. You had to walk in the kitchen door and take a vicious kick to back them of while you got in the door. They provided us with a lot of milk and cheese and we ate a fair amount of goat meat too. The intention was that this was a good idea, but domesticating goats is really just a bad idea.

**Q:** How did people relate to each other at this household?

**A:** More often than not the big arguments would be about something like that, something entirely practical. At every household I lived we car shared. The basic rule was that you brought the car home full every time you went out. You couldn't leave it absolutely full because there was no gas station at ready access. But on your way home you always gassed the car to full so you always handed it over to

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the next person full. They topped it off again and that way everyone just paid for their own gas. It seemed like the fair way to do it and occasionally somebody would do it. There could be a fairly heated argument about "Do you know where I was when I ran out of gas?" It just didn't make much sense for all of us to own a vehicle. In the first household it was clear that none of us needed a car all of the time, but some of the time a car was really handy. We all walked to work or school, or biked. It was dandy for hauling the laundry or going to the grocery store or getting the kids somewhere when it was really snowy.

**Q:** What kinds of living arrangements were there on the farm? Did you build buildings?

**A:** We had indoor water via a pump in the kitchen from a well. Then we had a latrine. We also had a great big claw bathtub in the corner of the kitchen. When we needed to take a bath we heated water on the stove. The house was heated by wood and the upstairs was very cold in the wintertime. There were floor grates for the heat to rise through the floor if there was any leftover. The second year we were there we put in a heat reservoir tank on the second floor but it was still cold. We also raised chickens and goats.

**Q:** Did any of these communities have a central religion or ideology? How was it practiced?

**A:** There would always be a mix. There were often some fairly heated discussions and late night talks about what it all meant. At Clinton there were people who absolutely professed to be atheists. There may have been some closet traditional Christian beliefs about Christ and the Holy Spirit and all that stuff. I'm afraid we made life kind of hard for those people. In truth, they a lot of times spoke the truth about what they thought and felt. In general, whatever that component was in common wasn't religious. It was an ethical understanding about how things ought to be done and how people ought to be treated. People had all different kinds of ideas and they were discussed. That was really one of the values of that lifestyle. It brought people together for long, rambling conversations about how things could be worked out. It was more a generalized belief in social and personal justice.

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

**A:** There was drug use. In general there was a real laissez faire attitude towards it. You did the drugs that you wanted to do. Nobody said anything to you unless they thought you were out of control. But it was a given that you didn't have to agree and you could tell them to get fucked. If you were out of control that's probably exactly what you told them to do. There was every kind of drug use. None of the communities I lived had heroine addicts but I knew of communities in which there was. It was a period of time when things like cocaine were really just coming into the community, like in 1973 1975, maybe earlier. All of us tried it, except one woman who never tried any of that stuff except marijuana. She had tried MDA of something and felt like she didn't have the control over herself that she wanted. That was certainly within her rights and a smart decision if that's what she thought a smart decision was. Everyone was left to make their own smart decisions about it. In all of the households I lived in there were agreements made about the children. In the first household, there were small children and certainly drug use took place around them. But certain drugs were not permitted if you were the person watching the children. We all agreed fairly early on that you shouldn't be the person responsible for the

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children and do LSD. You wouldn't keep your mind on what you were supposed to be doing. That was a rule but it didn't have to be because it was pretty easy. Everybody had times when they weren't responsible for the children in which to do whatever they wanted to do. Everybody would help each other out if it was a problematic time. But the children were all around people who were stoned on various chemicals at various times. Until I lived at Clinton there weren't any real drinkers. Alcoholism was never an issue at any of those households. In all of those households, if a person had a problem they went to the person they were having the problem with. If they couldn't agree on a solution then the whole household got involved, sometimes fairly formally because we couldn't ignore it. In general, all the people I lived with had the attitude that there really wasn't any future in thinking that we would all be in agreement on everything all of the time. If we tried to be in agreement all the time we were going to spend a lot more time talking about things than we were about doing anything else. I do know that there were communities that attempted to reach consensus on everything. Formal consensus on everything was very important to them. That wasn't true with us, in general. If we could come to some kind of comfortable working relationship about it that was good enough.

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

**A:** I can rarely think of any discussion about it. Sometimes somebody would get bent out of shape about something. But these kinds of things happened among friends. People did what they wanted to by and large. Again, if it was your turn to watch the children then that was your first responsibility. In general, the people I lived with had the same standard, which was different than the standard set by Ozzie and Harriet. We probably let our children get dirtier. We probably let our children try more things. Their time was more unstructured than the standard. We bathed our children every night because every night they were absolutely filthy. We let them play outside and get into things.

**Q:** What living situation were you involved in after the Clinton farm?

**A:** In 1974 I moved to Arkansas to live on property that seven of us had bought together. Three of us went to Arkansas and looked for land. We found a piece we thought was acceptable, came back, other people made trips, then seven of us agreed to buy this property. We sat down and hashed out a formal agreement between us about how we would manage this. We bought 75 acres in northwest Arkansas in the Boston Mountain range, east and a little south of Fayetteville. It was outside of a little town called Pettigrew. Five of us moved to Fayetteville because there were no structures on the property. We lived in a house there while we prepared to live on the property. Sometimes it was just Christopher and I living on the property and sometimes there were four or five of us living on the property.

**Q:** What kinds of structures did you build on the property? What were the economic arrangements?

**A:** It was really difficult. It was very isolated. It was difficult for us to pull it together economically there. There really wasn't any way to make a living or accrue any money other than working in Fayetteville. Over the years three, four or five people have lived there at a time. No one lives there now. Our intention was to live in Fayetteville while we worked on structures. Our agreement was that we all knew we would have to hold work until the property was paid off, which was five years. We built three structures about 20' x 20'. All of them had some kind of sleeping loft arrangement and wood heat. There

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was no indoor plumbing and no electricity. Our feeling at the time was that there were some people who really wanted to live in a house with someone else and then there were some people who really didn't want to live in a house with somebody else. They wanted to be part of a looser community. They wanted to be on the property with somebody else but they didn't want to live in a house with somebody else. My feeling was that I would have probably built one large, centralized house. When we actually made our constitution, we agreed that no one could build a structure in sight of anyone else without their permission and that people would go and pick a site. If two sites were in sight of one another you had to try to work it out. If they couldn't then everyone might get involved. But in general, what we really needed was to live in the deep country and we all had fairly strong hermit qualities. Our hermit qualities were as strong as our community qualities. Being close to people you worked together with and loved was important but not necessarily being in the same house with them. We all wanted quiet. If the other person agreed then you could build within sight of them, you just couldn't do it without their permission. There were people who agreed that they would have their structures attached. Three different people at various times lived in my house with Christopher and I. There was also a geodesic dome 18' across that was built. All these structures are probably in a fair state of disintegration because no one has lived there in seven years. I stayed in my structure for five years.

**Q:** Did the commune have cottage industries? Was there a source of money besides working in Fayetteville? Did the group garden or farm? Did it seek self sufficiency?

**A:** My plan was that life was cheap enough that I could work in Fayetteville two days a week and stayed at home the other five days. That's what I did. People had different kinds of plans. One of the men was really a good cabinet maker. He had an old car garage that he rented in Pettigrew, which was seven miles away. It had electricity and he set up a shop there. He went to Pettigrew and work in his shop for a living and what he didn't need to do with electrical stuff he did at home. Some years we made a fair amount of money off of produce. Some years we made a fair amount of money off of pot. We always grew pot. Some of the years we grew it just for us and some of the years we grew it for a cash crop. Some years it seemed too dangerous to grow for a cash crop. We had agreed fairly early on, because of the state laws of that time concerning the seizure of property, to not grow marijuana on our place. That was an easy thing since we were surrounded on three sides by national forests.

**Q:** Do you consider the communes, and your participation in them, a success or a failure? Are you glad you did it?

**A:** Absolutely. I really think that people should do more. People should continue to make that choice. In some ways there are hassles to living communally. When you live by yourself or with one other person, you know how you do things and you just do them. There is minimal opportunity for disagreement to arise about how things should be done. There is a lot of discussing to living communally. There is a lot of talking it out. But it is very enriching to who you are as a personality, at least it was for me. You come to understand not only how people approach hashing things out but also realizing and hashing things out with people and deciding you are going to live together and make this as pleasant an experience as you can. Of necessity, you have to decide that you are prepared to change your mind if you need to. As a result you open yourself up to information in a different way. You don't have the freedom to decide that you're right or that it's going to be your way. When people get large families then it gets almost

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physically impossible to house more than one family in one structure. But before people reach that stage I think they should take as much advantage of that as they can. I think it's useful and I also think it's just plain fun. I can't really see how in the future we can avoid coming back to more communal living because of the economic necessity. I don't see how people can survive, in the future that I can perceive, without coming back to pooling some energy resources, in terms of human energy. I look at the urban population I work with now, with many, many single mothers with one or two children, and it's just a crying shame that they aren't living together. It would be so much easier for them if they were. Single parenthood has its moments of hell but you can make it a joyful experience by sharing it with people. Unfortunately among the urban society it appears to be almost non-existent as an idea. When I bring it up to people it's as if they have never heard that someone might choose to live with someone they aren't related to and didn't want to sleep with. I think it is a sound idea. It's just enriching to be with people in a real sense on a day to day basis. Living with people breaks down boundaries. Whether you are having a good time with it or not, it stimulates change and creates growth. It makes you continually redefine how people are connected.