Interview with Peter Laughingwolf
Interviewer: Deborah Altus
May 24, 1996

Q: This is Friday, May 24, and an interview with Peter Laughingwolf. I'd love to hear about the history of Black Bear

A: It started, I'm pretty sure, people were -- the people who founded it were involved with the Diggers in San Francisco in the '60's. And decided that the city didn't offer any hope for the future. A number of people were looking for places. One person found this ranch for sale out in the middle of the national forest, totally remote, essentially in the wilderness, in logging country. I think people first moved up there late in the summer of '69. It was a small group who were there through the first winter, living in buildings that were already on the property. The money for the down payment came from people's inheritances and things like that. And it steadily grew to, I'm guessing the high point was '72 or '73, when there were 60 or 70 people staying the winter, and the population probably reached a peak of over 200 at times during the summer. I first went up there in '71, I think. I think it's fairly unique in that it was always very anarchistic. But there was a real attempt at creating a space that was based on voluntary participation, and a minimum of a structure that everybody was supposed to adhere to. The second winter, there were 70 people living in a four room ranch house. And the next spring, there was just like this explosion. What became the dominant domicile that summer were what we called mosquito houses, which were essentially 12x12 platforms with mosquito netting over them. When I was there in '73, there were still people living in the main house. There had been five domes I think, constructed. There were still four or five structures left -- it's actually a ghost town, an old gold mining center. And there were four or five buildings left that were well over 100 years old, which all had people living in them. And then a few domes, and then a whole bunch of shacks. And campers, and you name it. Starting in '72, I would guess, there was -- people, largely due to political difference, would break off from Black Bear in groups of 20 or 30, and go start someplace else. There's a group called Hoe Dads in Eugene, which became probably the largest forestry workers collective. I'm pretty sure all of the original people came from Black Bear. Maybe just some, I'm not sure. There was another commune called Table Mountain, outside of Mendocino, that was another break off. By '75, I would say, the population had dropped to around 30 or 40 in the summer, and 20 to 30 in the winter. That was fairly stable for awhile. And then, there was kind of a cross-connection with another commune in Southern California, called Shiva Lela [?]. I'm familiar with that, because I was living in the city at the time, and we were -- we're an urban camping spot. I don't know why they came to the city, but when they did, they stayed at our house. And then in -- about that same time was when the dope scene started happening up there. There was always clear rules about no dope being grown on the property, but there were a half a dozen people living at the ranch who were cultivating marijuana in the national forest lands. Which leads to a certain amount of heat. The forester was just absolutely convinced that Black Bear was some center for some huge dope ring. They came up once. Somebody had killed a deer, I think, I'm trying to remember. Anyway, I don't know if it was just a coincidence that there was this dead deer, or if they knew there was a dead deer, but they used the dead deer as an excuse to search the place. And were totally disappointed that they didn't find any dope. They were just positive that they were going to find drying shacks and the works. It was interesting for us, because Black Bear is on what is legally a county road, even though it's just this gravel path off in the middle of nowhere. So the county road crew would come and plow the road in the winter time, I think as much as a diversion from the rest of their work as anything else. So we had -- after having been at the ranch for 10 years, we had a lot of friends who worked in the various government agencies. So we would get -- we would hear stories from the other

side, whenever they came through. But anyway, really, up until -- that's another thing I need to include. Starting in about '72, a forestry cooperative was formed, in Port [unintelligible], which is the closest town. Because there was a lot of people, not only the people who were actually who actually at the ranch, but at the time, there were certainly hundreds of people living on mining claims in that general area. That community, in addition to becoming the major energy of the local public school, formed this forestry collective, which provided the major income for everybody in the area. And that was called Ent Forestry, which was a neat name. That remained a viable business into the '80's. The last five or six years, it was a much smaller scale than it was originally. One of the things that -- the fact that people started growing dope for money, lessened people's interest in doing forestry work, which is extremely physically challenging. But also, the forest service, because that community was so active in questioning forest service practices, took at active interest in trying to drive permanent residents out of the forest. And one of the ways that they did that is ceasing to hire local forestry workers, and bring in primarily Mexican migrant laborers. The marijuana growing was a temptation, in that it was probably easier, and also it got harder and harder to get forestry contracts. So that was all going on in the '70's.

Q: I'd love to know what brought you to Black Bear Ranch, and how you got there.
A: Oh, I think I might even know. I was living on Woodby [?] Island in Washington, in Puget Sound. And I met Freeman House [?], who came from the same general group of people in San Francisco. And I was interested in converting my house truck to propane. One of the people that he knew, had already done that. And they were living in a commune in Pennsylvania, called Turkey Ridge. So I went to Turkey Ridge to meet him, and spent some time there, and spent some time at another commune called Coomb's Farm, in Maine, and in the process, heard about Black Bear. At the time, I was traveling back and forth across the country two or three times a year, it was just sort of my lifestyle.

Q: So tell me just a little bit about Turkey Ridge and Coomb's Farm. Were those both back-to-the-land communes?
A: Turkey Ridge was a farm that was owned by the father of one of the residents who lived in New York, and wasn't interested in the farm. It was just a farm. There were 10 or 12 adults, and 5 or 6 kids. I basically spent two springs there, most of the time helping out this neighbor who had -- this is a terrible story -- his father had died, who owned the farm. His brother and sister siblings forced him to sell the farm and buy it back from them. So he was way in debt. Then his tractor turned over on him, and he broke his back. So we were doing his -- in Pennsylvania, they grow rocks, they just come out of the ground every year. So we would help him every spring with rock removal and planting. I was there for two seasons of that. Turkey Ridge, I think, lasted for 4 years, and then somebody in the family decided they needed to sell the farm, and that was the end of it. But anyway, they were a part of the same bit family from San Francisco, as the people who started Black Bear. So I had heard about Black Bear, I came to San Francisco, somebody there wanted a ride up to Forks [?], not specifically to Black Bear. So I gave them a ride up. Somebody told me when I got there that there were a bunch of people from Black Bear on the fire fighting crew, because there was a big forest fire at that time. And they said they needed help, so why don't you just go join the fire fighting crew, and that way you could meet some people from Black Bear. So that's how I ended up in Black Bear. And I was there for a few weeks. It was a decidedly unfriendly place. This was at the time when they had hundreds of people coming through, and

basically, the way they weeded out the stayers and the leavers was by ignoring you. If you had enough persistence to make friends in that environment, you ended up staying. And I didn't, because I didn't like it, although I loved the place. I just kept going back there, probably once a year, for, till 1979 when I moved up there.

Q: So there was something about it that really attracted you, even though you weren't willing to make a commitment at the beginning?
A: It's just an absolutely gorgeous place. I just -- it's not totally safe, but people drink out of the creeks there, it's --

Q: Is it a high altitude?
A: Part of the magic of it, is the driveway, which comes over a ridge, is up over 3,000 feet, and gets snowed in every year. The ranch itself -- the driveway drops, about 1500 feet in three miles. And so it's isolated by this natural barrier, but the attitude at which Black Bear sits is, to me, like the ultimate climate. It's -- you often get, when it's raining, it's around 40 degrees in the middle of the winter. And then the clouds will go away, and you'll have below zero temperatures at night, and it will get up to 55 or 60 in the day time. In the summer, it gets pretty hot. But it's always cool at night.

Q: And it's dry.
A: It's dry, there's not a serious mosquito problem. It's just heaven, as far as I'm concerned.

Q: Before people started getting forestry work, what were they doing to support themselves?
A: There was a lot of travel back and forth between San Francisco and the ranch. And mainly, it was a continuous inflow of money.

Q: Like from inheritances or something like that?
A: Yeah, the land was actually paid off, I think, by '74, which I think is pretty unusual. I'm sure it has a lot to do with the fact that it survived, is since the land was there, then that provided a base for something to be ongoing, even though it was changing all the time. Basically, in the late '70's to the '80's, you could live there on two or three thousand dollars a year, quite comfortably. At that time, it wasn't that hard to make that amount of money. People either worked for Ent, you could easily make that money working a couple of months out of the year, or they'd go down to the city and do carpentry work for a month or whatever. So even though it wasn't that easy to live as a local year-round resident, it was very easy to live as somebody who commuted once a year to make a little money.

Q: So did most people do that?
A: Yeah. Most people did that. One of the things that was amazing about Black Bear was that there was a tremendous tolerance of people's differences. And there were people there who lived year-round and didn't make any money, and were essentially supported by everyone else. It's not like they weren't making any contribution -- there was a couple acres of gardens that grew a tremendous amount of food, orchards. So there was plenty of work for people who didn't want to go out.

Q: Now, did people pay a community tax, or was it income sharing? Did you contribute everything that you made? How did economics work out?
A: Like everything else at Black Bear, there was never any structure for enforcing rules. It was essentially voluntary. There was tremendous -- there was a downside to that kind of organization, there was tremendous social pressure that varied according to the politics of the moment. But still, -- and a majority of people simply shared all their income. There was just a bank account, and everybody's money went into it, and people took out what they needed. But there were always some people who would hold back some for special trips, and there was conflicts around that. But the enforcement of policy was strictly a matter of, you know people were giving you shit if you weren't playing the game. There's a downside and upside to that. The fact that -- to me, it was a tremendous learning experience. And it's tremendously encouraging to know that it's possible to do that, that you don't need to bring in some kind of authority structure from the outside world in order to successfully live with a group of people. On the other hand, there was continual strife. Continual battles over who's doing their share, and who's contributing what, and why shouldn't they put this money into this and that.

Q: Were there any leaders?
A: Yeah. Continuous supply. Almost consistently far too many chiefs and too few Indians.

Q: But there wasn't like one person who always carried that role?
A: There's definitely no guru. There were -- I'm not sure, I don't really know what it was in the early years, because I wasn't that interested in the politics. I was pretty turned off by the politics. But certainly, after the mid-seventies -- there were two women who carried by far the most authority. Not guru figures, but simply strong willed individuals. And they -- basically, it was a matter that they had much more influence than anybody else. It wasn't in any way -- they had no position. Probably, if more than anything, it was the power of personality. And the fact that they'd been there longer than anybody else, things like that. But as far as structure was considered, that never existed in the Black Bear.

Q: How were chores and housework handled? I guess since there wasn't much structure, you didn't have some sort of work sharing system?
A: There were dozens of work sharing systems! I think it was largely a matter of a great deal of talk, a great deal of meetings and complaints and new agreements and this sort of got that, and this sort of didn't. The work at the ranch had a lot of attractions. The people who took care of the goats were people who really liked goats. The people who gardened were people who really liked to garden. Child care was more structured, but minimal. There was -- in the early '70's, there was over 30 kids there, I think. And the kids all lived together, in their own house. And there were two adults who lived with them, rotating nightly or weekly. There were always two adults who were responsible for the kids, and they were always trading off. Basically, the kids did a lot of their own care. And since they're out in the middle of nowhere, it was a really safe place. You didn't have to run around prohibiting kids from doing this and doing that and doing that. And I would say the real beneficiaries of the Black Bear experience were the kids. They're in their 20's now, and they're some of the most self-confident and functional people I know. At one of the women's gatherings out four years ago, a bunch of 18-24 year old women showed up, and really gave their mothers hell for neglecting them as children. On the other hand, you

also had to look at the fact that they showed up, and they were capable to assert themselves and take over the conference of experienced feminists and put out their feelings. I'm not sure what to make of that. It's true that the older kids took a lot of responsibility for the younger kids, but maybe that's not so bad.

Q: Did you have regular meetings? That were scheduled?
A: Black Bear was in continual political flux. And there were continual problems, and people came up with new solutions continually. They all worked, sort of.

Q: But in general, would you meet weekly or daily, or monthly?
A: When I first went up there, there were daily meetings. That's when the population was huge, and they needed daily meetings. I'm not probably a good witness, but it seemed to me that there was a significant part of the population that did nothing but meet. In the early days, the women took up significantly greater responsibility for the work that needed to get done. And that's another thing that characterized Black Bear. I would say, in all of my experiences at Black Bear, it seemed to me that women had more authority there than men did. That was the basis for one of the exoduses, sort of an anti-feminist reaction. But that was one of the reasons I liked the place.

Q: But yet women were also the ones that were shouldering more of the day to day work?
A: Yeah. Which was part of the reason that they had as much authority as they did.

Q: When you made decisions, would you use consensus, or would you vote?
A: That again varied from year to year. I would say that it kind of -- what was the most common mode during that period of time was this kind of fake consensus, where you have enough of a majority that you could can browbeat everybody else into going along with you. I would say that was the dominant political form. It varied. There were times when there was more consciousness of that, real consensus. And there were times when the ranch would literally divide up into camps, and people wouldn't talk to each other. I didn't really like it that much the first ten years I was going up there. There was one time, when the men moved off the ranch. Not miles away, but they moved to the periphery.

Q: As a protest, or to get away from the female energy?
A: I don't know. I wasn't a part of it. It's neat to have that much space to play with, because it's possible to have -- 80 acres on the ranch itself, and hundreds of acres surrounding it. In the early '70's, it was pretty accessible, because the forest service wasn't at that time that concerned about controlling people's use of the forest, as long as they didn't burn it down. People were actively involved in fire watch and all that kind of stuff. So there was a lot of freedom to spread out beyond the actual legal borders of the ranch.

Q: Did you take all your meals in common?
A: Yeah. I think that was really -- I would say that was really consistent the whole time. In the summer, there was an outdoor kitchen, basically a screened cooking are and an outdoor eating area. And in the winter -- the kitchen in Black Bear is absolutely the nicest wood stove centered kitchen I've ever worked

in. A huge Army cook stove that's about 8x4. Two big ovens. We could bake 24 loaves of bread at once in it.

Q: Did you have to move that thing in there?
A: I think so. I think it came from -- I don't know where it came from, yeah, it was a mammoth project. It hasn't moved since it was moved in. I can't remember -- I think they got it from some old mining camp or something. That's one of the things that I love doing when I go up there, is cooking, because it's a very together cooking space, even though it's permanent.

Q: Was there a specific diet that people followed, like was it all vegetarian?
A: No, it was a continual war. The goat-haters and ginger-lovers, and the anti-dairy people, and the I-can't-live-without-dairy people. It was always, primarily vegetarian, because that's what would grow there. But also, you can't keep a dairy herd without either selling or eating the male kids. So there was always that level of meat eating. And there were always, the hunters and gatherers would bring in deer. I don't think Black Bear ever had any kind of unified policy about anything.

Q: So there weren't things written down? Or did things get written down?
A: I'm not aware of it. I'm sure there were, sometimes. But more likely in the form of large sheets of paper on the wall than typed documents.

Q: There wasn't like a handbook or something.
A: Oh, there actually were a series of handbooks, when I think about it. They probably still exist. There's a library that's totally just been there at Black Bear.

Q: Kind of like an archive of things like handbooks?
A: Who knows? And I don't know -- its probably still in reasonable shape, because it's upstairs from the wood shop. It's been pretty continuously in winter use, so all the books probably haven't moldered away. But I doubt if it's been organized in 15 years. So if you wanted to find stuff like that, you'd have to go look for it.

Q: That would be fun. We love getting original documents.
A: There was a nonfiction descriptive book written about Black Bear, published in the mid-seventies, called January Thaw [?], and I don't know where it's available.

Q: Have you read it?
A: Yeah.

Q: Is it any good?
A: It's reasonable narrative.

Q: Pretty accurate picture of the place?
A: Yeah, probably.

Q: At that time.
A: It definitely -- I'm sure there are people who would think it was absolutely not an accurate picture of the place. It's a pretty accurate picture of the place from the point of view of a certain segment of the population.

Q: Were there utilities? Like did you have electricity? No? Propane?
A: Propane was up there pretty early.

Q: So you had like a propane refrigerator?
A: Not until -- I think the first propane refrigerator was '78.

Q: How was food kept cold?
A: Pantries, buckets in the -- there was cold water running year-round. And of course, just eating things as fast as they were available. I'm trying to remember when -- I think the first Pelton [?] wheel was put in about the same time.

Q: What's a Pelton wheel?
A: It's a water-powered generator. It's a major project, because you have to essentially pipe -- it's effective up there because it uses high pressure, low volume. We ran a couple miles of three inch TVC [?] from a spring up on the ridge down to the house where the Pelton wheel was installed. So we had electricity from then on. That was late '70's. There were a succession of occasionally used, often breaking down gasoline powered generators. But it was used for things like washing machines.

Q: I was going to ask you how they dealt with wash.
A: Up until -- what was usually used, up until the late '70's, I think when I was living there in '79 and '80, we actually used generator powered washing machines. But up until then, we modified washing machines to use little [unintelligible] and gasoline engines. We had a flour mill that ran off another little engine, and a washing machine ran off a little engine. We adapted a number of small electric appliances to gasoline power.

Q: And then, would you use lanterns at night time?
A: Yeah. The reason we put in propane wasn't for heat, it was for light. I can't exactly remember when that all went in. Kerosene lamps were the dominant light source.

Q: Did you have pit privies, or composting toilets ... ?
A: There was one pit privy. In '71 or '72, we dug the first big outhouse, and that had, I think, 4 seats. And then in '78, I think, we built this big octagonal outhouse with 5 sit down toilets and 3 squat toilets, and 2 little tiny toilets for the kids. That was this community center. It's just filling up now. We need to build a new one. But that was a big pit privy. We came in with a back hole [?] and dug this huge hole. It was a neat construction project.

Q: Did you build a lot of other dwellings? You mentioned some domes.
A: There's only one dome left. The spider dome is left, and then there was a not-domed shaped wooden dwelling, the crow's nest, is still there, and has been added onto. I think -- and then recently a couple of people built a fairly good sized rectangular-shaped two story house. It's two-room, two story house. I don't know -- there's this small dome that I think has been rebuilt.

Q: Were buildings constructed for energy conservancy or anything like that? Was that a concern?
A: No, cheap. One of the rationales for bringing in migrant labor was you couldn't hire the locals because they stole everything they could get their hands on. So original buildings were insulated with forest service paper, sleeping bags, but yeah, mainly - the thing is, this is at the end of a really long road, when you're talking about materials. So the main thing that effected construction that went on there was making use of what you could get your hands on. Just 6 years ago, they began to be serious about hauling garbage out. Basically, everything got used and reused until there was nothing left. The problem is that the cars have limited reusability, and finally the junk yard was growing to the point where people were uncomfortable with it, and we started hauling stuff out of there. But the major restraints in construction were what could you do with what was available.

Q: Would you say that the group had a mission or ideology?
A: Free land for free people. That really is a mission in a sense. But it was very local, in the sense of we're trying to create a space where we can all live together. If anything, it was an educational mission. There wasn't like -- it served as a refuge for people from the city, it served as a refuge for people on the run from the law, it served as -- there was interaction between the city and Black Bear throughout its history, but mainly what Black Bear was about what doing the communal living thing, figuring out how a group of people who grew up in the city can learn to live in harmony with the wilderness. More than [tape ends] ... there was a lot of activism that came out of there, directed at preserving the forest. The forest service continues to basically sell of a lot of the land, of what it seems to me should be common property, meaning of the people of California or whatever. Basically, interactions with the outside world that came from Black Bear were grounded in that connection to preserving this particular piece of land and the forest that surrounded it.

Q: Did it ever feel funny -- you guys were working for the forest service a lot, but you also were antagonistic toward it?
A: Yeah. And there was all kinds of battles around that. That's one of the magic things about a place like Black Bear, is there's people from Black Bear who are still working for the forest service, are in positions of fairly high authority and responsibility, who I'm sure that other people who lived at Black Bear would say were total sell-outs. That was -- to me, the really magical think about Black Bear is the tremendous diversity that co-existed there. All those people get together on solstice and Thanksgiving, and they talk to each other, they don't give each other a bunch of shit about what choices they made. Everybody's friendly. But, not like they talk to each other the rest of the year.

Q: Now, can you explain some about the diversity? Was it diversity in world view, or was it diversity in terms of ethnic background or class background or age?
A: Well, there wasn't much age diversity.

Q: So were most folks young, in their 20's?
A: How old was I in '70? I was 22. I was pretty young. So in 1970 the age range was probably about 18 to 26, 27. And that's remained pretty consistent. There's been a few older people, and then of course there's the whole new generation of young people that grew up there. But there's kind of a gap between the two. So it was basically a baby boomer phenomenon.

Q: And ethnicity? Class?
A: It sort of followed the hippie pattern. It was very much a -- it really had an ethnicity of its own. There were people who came from various backgrounds and joined that trip. But most of them were from White, middle-class backgrounds. And it certainly -- it was certainly centered around bourgeois values and reactions to bourgeois values. So there was a fair amount of diversity in terms of background. But in terms of the choices that people were making, there wasn't that much diversity. That's my way of picturing it. It wasn't like this tremendous melting together of different attitudes, but more of people coming from a bunch different places, and choosing this thing that was happening in the '70's.

Q: I take it there wasn't any sort of membership policy?
A: Right.

Q: So could someone just show up?
A: People did.

Q: So it was like a crash pad?
A: Except it's so far from anywhere else.

Q: But didn't you say you'd get 200 visitors a day sometimes?
A: No, not a day, the population would rise to 200. People rarely came for a day. It's a long ways to go for [unintelligible] ...

Q: And so people might just come and like it and stay for a year or two.
A: That was probably most common. Actually, I don't really know, in the early years, when population was so high. I never stayed there for more than 3 weeks. I had enough of the place after that much time. After about '75 or '76, we were actively recruiting people. We were part of the Antioch, where you go away from school for a year and work. We were part of that program, we got a lot of kids from Antioch. We were connected with the Farm in San Francisco. People would be involved with the Farm, would hear about Black Bear, and then they'd come up for however long. Sometimes just to visit, sometimes a summer or a winter. Sometimes they come up and stay.

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Q: I think you mentioned to me in an e-mail that the Farm in San Francisco had nothing to do with Stephen Gaskin's farm.
A: Totally different. The Farm in San Francisco was a local Mission institution.

Q: And by mission you mean --
A: --The Mission District. It was a community center.

Q: Did it also have a communal component to it?
A: Yeah. Well, see, I never know quite -- there's this group that people refer to as the Family. It includes at least the old timers at Black Bear, and maybe everybody from Black Bear, and at least a dozen other communes in different parts of California. The people at the Farm, and the people in Naked Circus, just this loose group of people who are so intermarried -- everybody has lived with everybody else at one time or another in some place. And so there were always people who were moving from one of these places to another. I mean, I think one of the special things about Black Bear is -- it's funny when I say this, maybe this is a contrast between the early days and the later days -- but once Black Bear's population dropped below 20, it was always a blessing to have people come. So Black Bear became the place where people visited, and heard about -- where people met people who were doing other things, because they were all coming to Black Bear because it was a great place to hang out for a month. This thing about family, there was a wake for somebody who died of cancer a month ago, and 200 people showed up. I didn't. I'm sure there were lots of people like me who didn't feel that close to the community that centered around Ron, but even so, still, 200 people showed up.

Q: Was this person a Black Bear person?
A: I don't know if Ron was ever a Black Bear or not. But he was part of the family. I'm sure he must have been a Black Bear at some time. I don't know that he ever actually lived there.

Q: How did Black Bear get its name?
A: I think -- that was the place name. Black Bear is actually on some map, it's a real place, the end of the county road.

Q: What were the living arrangements like? When you would go up there and stay for 3 weeks, would you just put a sleeping bag on a floor somewhere?
A: It varied, it depended on how many people were living there. My camper -- I built this big camper on the back of a half truck, and it's up there. So for a long time, I had that to go live in. Not anymore.

Q: Because other people have taken it over?
A: Right. I went through some changes around this sort of assumption that anything you leave at Black Bear is community property. I knew it, but I also hadn't really gotten the ramifications of it until I left a whole bunch of my stuff there, and it all became community property.

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Q: What were your relationships like with your neighbors? I know you wouldn't have had close neighbors, but you must've known some of the people in the surrounding area?
A: Well, there weren't any neighbors as such. The closest ranch just had a couple of old people living at it. There was a minimal relationship. And then when they died, somebody from Black Bear bought the place.

Q: So it wasn't like you had to face these angry neighbors that didn't like having a hippie commune in their backyard or something?
A: Not at the ranch. There were community conflicts on the river that certainly, Black Bear contributed to the solutions of. But the ranch is like off the beaten track..

Q: Now, what do you mean, "On the river?"
A: The Salmon River has three forks, one flowing west, two flowing north, and they come together at the forks of [unintelligible] ... and flows into the [unintelligible] ... and then this mountain that's between the forks of the river, Black Bear is on this mountain. The Forks of Salmon is a little town, and [unintelligible] is a little town, and Cecileville [?] is a little town, but they're all an hour from the ranch.

Q: So there was some issues with people at Forks of Salmon, or ... ?
A: Yeah. At times, there were hundreds of people living on mining claims all along the river. And there were conflicts between the people who had been there for 20 years, and the people who were new. But -- the thing is, there was so little authority in communities like that, that the conflicts tended to be gossip more than anything. There were conflicts at the school, around how our kids were going to get educated, but still, there was only the one school, people had to work together.

Q: So you sent the kids to the public school, you didn't home school them?
A: The first couple years -- when most of the kids were really little, schooling happened at the ranch. And then we became the owners of a mining claim on the river that became the adjunct of Black Bear. And the school age kids would live there during the school year, and then come back to the ranch in the summer.

Q: Where was the school?
A: It was in Forks. And Indian Creek was six miles up the north fork, from Forks, and then another mile up that road is Black Bear Creek, and there was a five mile walk up the creek to the ranch. So it was six miles to Indian Creek, and five miles to the school. When I first went up there to stay, I brought my stuff up there basically, I was thinking of going to the Peace Corp, and I walked the forks every day. Twelve miles one way.

Q: You'd walk there and back?
A: Yeah. I'd often get a ride part of the last six miles. But that's not really that long of a walk.

Q: It sounds long to me!
A: It's a really healthy place to live. One of the kids who grew up at Black Bear came to the city when she

was in her late teens, and she and her friend she was with was in one of these city long distance foot races, and she won. She had never done any running in her life. She was in such good shape.

Q: You mentioned the pot growing, but you said something that at the ranch, there was some sort of rule that you weren't supposed to grow pot on ranch property?
A: The only rules that were strictly enforced were not to do things that would threaten the land. There's never been any trees cut down there. It's an ongoing discussion. There's still people who want to cut trees on the ranch. But people would really have to come up with a really solid argument that it was better for the land to cut the trees before they'd ever get away with it. And the reason for no dope growing on the ranch, is under current law, the government can seize property. So there are some -- I'm still not sure they're written down. Well, actually, they are now, because now it's a land trust. And all the stuff is written down.

Q: I should have asked you that in the beginning -- did they form some sort of corporation when they bought the land, or was it just in somebody's name?
A: Just in somebody's name.

Q: So then was that a hassle?
A: It was never a hassle. There was some fear about it. Richard got offered a job in the Czechoslovakian government, one of the Eastern European governments, and everybody decided, "Whoa, Richard's taking off, I guess we'd better finally get the land out of his name."

Q: Is that when the land trust was formed?
A: Yeah. That was '84 or something, '85.

Q: So that means that, like can people own houses there if they wanted to, but not land?
A: No, just like you say -- anything you leave at Black Bear becomes communal property.

Q: So it's all part of the land trust.
A: Yeah. You bring stuff to Black Bear, and as long as you stay there, it's yours, and if you leave, who knows who it belongs to.

Q: So was the culture at Black Bear similar to the hippie culture in terms of, was there a lot of freedom surrounding drug use and sexual expression?
A: Yeah, I would say more freedom than most places. There was complete freedom to do what you wanted to do, given that you had to -- it included the freedom to criticize anybody, and give them all the shit you wanted to give them for what they were doing. It's a funny kind of -- it was really, one of the frustrations for me when I was living there was that it was really hard to make changes that involved the whole group. Because if you didn't, if Fran or Gaba, the two women who had the most influence there, didn't think it was a good idea, it was really hard to get it to happen. But it wasn't like you didn't have permission to do those things, it was just, you had to get the collaboration of a big enough core group, or nothing happened.

Interview with Peter Laughingwolf
Interviewer: Deborah Altus
May 24, 1996

Q: So was there a feeling like there was sort of a leadership core of people who might be able to sway..?
A: Oh, for sure. And there was politics on who was in, and who wasn't in. Great references to Black Bear tradition, "You have no business doing this, because that's not how we do things at Black Bear," only who's to say how we do things at Black Bear?

Q: Was there much artistic expression?
A: What's "much?" There's a lot of artists, some of whom are quite successful, who lived at Black Bear and did art at Black Bear. Though if you went to the place now, I don't think you'd be blown away by the art you find there, although you might discover things in corners somewhere.

Q: I was thinking that if people came to the city to do work, and they were at Black Bear, maybe they had some more time on their hands, and then they might be more creative than typical 8-5 working people might be.
A: The thing is, I don't know. I would say that people weren't 8-5 working people when they were in the city, and there wasn't a lot of time. There was a lot of time taken up in meeting, and it's a fair amount of work to provide a significant portion of your own food, and doing child care. There was never a very big drive to automate, to bring advanced technology up there. So it was a fairly labor intensive process. I would say that the people who stayed at Black Bear were people who enjoyed that level of -- they enjoyed work and play kind of crossed over in ways that they don't in most society, that what people enjoyed doing was what other people considered work. So I don't think there was a lot more free time up there than there was other places.

Q: Were there regular community rituals?
A: The sweat lodge was certainly -- I don't know what you mean by "regular," it wasn't regular, it was often. And there's a collection of popular music for sweats.

Q: Would you celebrate solstices and equinoxes and things like that.
A: Solstice and Thanksgiving are the two big Black Bear holidays that have been consistently --

Q: --Summer solstice?
A: Yeah. There used to be winter solstice celebrations, when there was more of a winter population. I don't think it's still meeting, but there was a women's gathering every year for at least a decade. But again, just like everything else, there were subsets of the Black Bear family that would celebrate certain things, and not everybody was expected to participate.

Q: For you, what was the best part of living communally?
A: I never really had a close family when I was a kid. So just being in community has an intrinsic value. I don't know if that's a common thing or not. I just really thrive on process, on learning to get along with people, and learning to get things done, and learning to develop intimacy, all the things that to me, either there's more opportunity for, or has a very different flavor than you get in the real world.

Interview with Peter Laughingwolf
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Q: Is Black Bear the place where you learned about personal growth techniques that you're using now?
A: No. Black Bear has always needed more of that.

Q: Okay. So you'd say the work you do now, like in the prison, is not really related to your Black Bear life?
A: Only to the extent that I bring it to Black Bear. It is related in that I have a lot -- I learned, I know a lot about the barriers to communication, and the sources of conflict from living at Black Bear.

Q: But you don't necessarily know about the solution?
A: I think I know a lot about that. I think some of that, too, it wasn't -- it's just whatever's floating around in my head from experience, not like we had these great successful experiments that were happening at Black Bear that everybody can learn from.

Q: What would you say was the hardest part for you?
A: The hardest part was there was lip service given to open relationships there, and -- I don't think this was true in the very beginning, but after '75, the community was dominated by couples. And it was hard to be a single man there. When you're that far away, it's not like you've got this -- there isn't this sense of, "Somebody available is coming along tomorrow."

Q: Is that one of the reasons you left?
A: That was the main reason I left.

Q: I don't know what's happening at Black Bear right now. Would you say it still exists as a community?
A: Absolutely.

Q: Even though it's really down in numbers?
A: Actually -- I mean, I haven't heard, I don't know for sure that this is true, but my understanding is that it's up in numbers, that there's 20 people living there.

Q: Okay, for some reason I was thinking it was like 2 or 3.
A: Two or 3 was two years ago, that was the low point. And now it seems to have been reborn as a hippie/punk/dog-lover's paradise.

Q: So are a lot of young kids going up there?
A: It's all 18-26.

Q: Wow, kind of starting over again.
A: And I suspect this is the only way it could be starting over again, because teenagers today just simply do not have the economic resources that we do, and it's hard for me to imagine how -- and also, land prices have increased phenomenally. So it's hard for me to imagine how Black Bear could happen again if it wasn't there for them.

Q: Good point. That's really true. What is your feeling about why the population dropped down to 2 or 3.
A: Oh, that was the story that I never got into. Shiva Lela lost their land, and decided to move into Black Bear, with the resistance of some, and the rejoicing of some, and the consent of some. But they had extremely rigid philosophy/lifestyle, which did not work at Black Bear. They basically tried to take over the ranch. A gathering of 150 people through the mountain, people from the city, people from the Forks community, came up and met, meeting for 3 or 4 days, and then told Shiva Lela -- well, I think the resolution, they were into this whole thing about nonviolence and not exposing their children to violence. And I think the way it was finally resolved was, "We know you will leave if we tell you we're going to call the cops, because we know that you won't expose your children to that." But anyway, it was really one of the most horrible learning experiences of my life.

Q: Sounds awful. When did they come?
A: That must've been '78. And they were there for close to a year, 9 months, I think. They managed to alienate most of the people on the river. They could easily have stayed there if they had been a little more cool, but they weren't.

Q: What sort of things would they do that were uncool?
A: They were just really intolerant. Things had to be the way they said they had to be. They were extremely manipulative. They were very good at getting people to go along with them. But it was not because you loved them and thought they were so cool, but they would wear you down.

Q: Now did they go to Black Bear to continue Shiva Lela as a separate community to Black Bear just sharing the land, or were they actually going to try to merge?
A: There were people from Black Bear who were going back and forth between the two communes. So I think that they saw themselves as a part of Black Bear. The problem was that they weren't as much a part of Black Bear as they thought.

Q: So this all happened around '78, '79? So they left around '80?
A: I don't know. About '78 or '79.

Q: Do you know what happened to them?
A: Yeah, they moved to India, two of their kids died of cholera. They took a couple kids from the ranch, one of whom they abandoned in the Philippines, and his dad went and found him and brought him back to California, and then their guru guy got stabbed to death, who knows who he offended. And then they came back. I don't know if Shiva Lela itself exists anymore. There are certainly people from Shiva Lela -- it was primarily women. The guru guy was a male, and there were a few male hangers-on. But the real power in most of the population was female. And I've seen a few of them a couple of times. They're living in various communal situations around the west part of the country.

Q: So this whole break up led to Black Bear losing a lot of population?
A: Yeah. It was just totally dispiriting. It was really hard to lose the kids. And it was a big split. Some

people from Black Bear went with the Shiva Lelas when they left. The literal population dropped to 10 or 12. And the effect on everyone of throwing people out of Black Bear -- no one had ever been thrown out of Black Bear, ever -- would just, it just really ended an era. And since that time, Black Bear hasn't been -- it's been less dynamic somehow. It still remains a really nice place to live, but the people who were attracted to live there are much more reclusive. We'd have at the solstice and Thanksgiving gatherings, the rest of us would disappear into the woodwork until everybody else went home. But that was much more the flavor -- rather than being this focal point for the family, it was a place where the family met, but the residents weren't as attached to the large community.

Q: Now when did you decide to leave?
A: I think that was '80.

Q: And that was mainly because of the split?
A: I was moving up there just before the whole thing with Shiva Lela fell apart. My decision to live there couldn't have come at a worse time. I was one of the people who kept the scene together after, who dealt with the aftermath. And it was just really hard.

Q: Now, what was the Pit that you told me about earlier?
A: The Pit was a one-year anarchist community that happened on Whidbey Island, on Puget Sound. It was, the initial lease was paid for with profits from selling marijuana -- not growing it, but dealing it, Mexican marijuana, this was back in '71. It was a real free land and free people experiment. We had a free restaurant that served one meal a day, free bakery that distributed 24 loaves of bread a day. Free dope. Free garage. People came and learned to work on their cars, and borrowed tools. Anybody could live there who could get together some kind of shelter. It was very -- it was not nearly as together on the physical point as Black Bear. The roofs all leaked, incredible overcrowding.

Q: Now this was a big house?
A: This was an abandoned gravel pit. There was two school buses. The kitchen/restaurant was the office of the garage, where we had the free garage. And there were two lofts in the garage that people slept in. And then there were some out buildings that were converted into sleeping quarters. And a tepee. We were getting food stamps illegally -- everybody was getting food stamps from two or three different counties. We hustled merchants in Seattle for grain -- we ground our own flour -- and molasses and other stuff to bake bread with. And we had a big garden. A local -- she must've been in her 60's, I think, woman who had a little store down the road provided us with water. We found out well after the fact that the water company was hassling her the whole time, because it was an old contract from years and years before, so she just paid so much a month however how much water she used, so they were really hassling her about giving us water. She never told us. It was just this wonderful and painful experiment with abandoning the mainstream economics. The hardest thing was that we ended up caring for a lot of really dysfunctional people who had no place else to go. It lasted for a year.

Q: Were you also overtly politically involved in issues?
A: Oh yeah. I got thrown out of a local bar [?] once for carrying a Vietnam flag down the main street in

Langley, which is a town of 100. And we started a food co-op. It wasn't just people from the Pit, but we were central to all of the politics on the south end of the island.

Q: Now was that a buying club, or was it a retail store front?
A: It started as a buying club. I'm not sure, I can't remember if it was ever a retail store front.

Q: I was just wondering if it still existed.
A: Oh, it definitely doesn't still exist. And then we started a co-op restaurant in town, which also doesn't exist anymore. All this stuff mainly happened after -- the initial energy was happening while the Pit existed, but it didn't really get solid until after the Pit had already met its demise.

Q: How many of you were there? I know it must've fluctuated.
A: Three of us started it. The core group was about 8, and the population probably hit a max of 20.

Q: Why did it stop after a year?
A: Because it was totally unsustainable. It was an insane idea.

Q: So did each of you go your own separate ways?
A: Yeah, I'm afraid so. There was a lot -- we were also, we were really stretching in our attempts to be emotionally and sexually open. There's only one person that I've never made amends with. But the Pit definitely died when it died.

Q: And was it from there that you came to Black Bear? No, wait you went to those places out East, didn't you?
A: Let's see, how does that come together?

Q: Oh, you don't have to worry. But I was going to ask you about Coombs' Pond.
A: Gene Coombs was the owner of the pond. He had his own nuclear family. And then there was this whole collection of young people who worked the farm and lived in the barn and various outhouses. I was amazed when I got there. I had just finished planting in Pennsylvania, drove up to Maine, this is the first week of June. There were two blizzards the first week I was there. These people are living in an unheated barn -- not totally unheated, there was a little stove.

Q: What part of Maine was this?
A: Troy, sort of central. And they had -- their tractors had broken down, and they didn't have anybody who was mechanically inclined. That's why we went up there, we had heard that they needed help with their tractors, so we went up to fix the tractors. I just thought they were all completely out of their mind. During the week when all the blizzards happened, everybody's huddled around the wood fire around this huge vat of maple sap.

Q: Now were they over winter there?
A: Yeah.

Q: God! If it was that bad in June, think about what it was like in January!
A: I know! I was blown away. And Fran, who became one of the heavies at Black Bear, I met her at Coomb's Farm. She probably went to Black Bear because I told her about it. And I just went up to visit Black Bear, and she comes walking down the road, I hadn't seen her since I saw her in Maine.

Q: ...anything about what happened to Coomb's Farm?
A: No, I don't know. I know that it went through changes and resurrections. But I don't know how long it survived, or if it still survives. Gene was really an incompetent farmer. So I would be real surprised.

Q: Now was he a middle aged person that let younger people come live on his land? Okay, got it.
A: Yeah, it was a very funny scene.

Q: Now getting back to Black Bear, where folks at Black Bear politically involved?
A: It was very political. Around forestry issues, it was a focal point. Also, like I say, it was kind of, it was a retreat place for people who were politically active in the city, and it was also a refuge for people who were politically active and under attack from the government.

Q: So maybe people who were dodging draft? Or at that point was the draft no longer going on?
A: No, it was more people who -- it was usually more serious than draft dodging. People who had killed somebody, or had been accused of killing somebody. Panthers, people who were under serious threat from the law. And also people who were busted for drugs.

Q: So would you ever get visits by the FBI looking for people?
A: Not as often as one might think, but more than once. It was a dumb place for them to come looking for people, there was no way that you wouldn't know that they were coming in, and you had hundreds of acres to hide in. They never found anybody there.

Q: Black Bear's lasted a tremendously long time. You mentioned before that you thought one of those reasons was that you bought the land. Are there other reasons for the glue that keeps it together?
A: The whole thing about land being the center of community, I think, is really significant. There are hundreds of people who have a very strong investment in that land continuing to be an identifiable piece of free land, a piece of land that isn't controlled by the dominant culture. So it gets a lot of care. Whatever else happens, that's something that will insure that it'll continue to exist. How the particular residents choose to live -- it could turn into a suburban development, not construction-wise, but it could turn into a collection of nuclear families, and it would be fine. But the land will always be preserved, and the place will be preserved, because that was the only focus of Black Bear.

Q: Would you describe Black Bear as a success?
A: I think it was for the kids who grew up there. Other than that, it would be hard to use that term too randomly. The solstice and Thanksgiving gatherings are -- an example: two Thanksgivings ago, for a couple of reasons the issue of sexual abuse came up. And so that was the focus of our holiday, to talk about what our history was, and what we can learn from that, what we want to do as a family. I chaired

that meeting, and I was really impressed with the fact that in two days, we were able to come out with a statement that was extremely affirmative of kids, where people came to consensus, agreeing to not only share their history, to make talking about sexual issues okay to talk about, but also to pay attention to how we disenfranchise children in general. That the idea of adults telling children what's okay and what's not okay is part of what leaves them feeling powerless when they're faced with sexually related problems. I was hesitant to chair the meeting, and I was really blown away with what we were able to do in two days, because it was really a powerful statement. So in the sense that that is the family that has grown up around Black Bear, maybe you could call it a success. Depends on what's valuable to you.

Q: Are there things in your life today that you carry forward from your time, living in community?
A: No. I wish there were. I'm still working on it.

Q: Nothing that you feel you've learned that you've used in your life today?
A: I think people find me pretty easy to live with because of those experiences. The things that's hard for me is that I've never abandoned the ideal that was the basis of Black Bear. I don't find people who really embrace that, and that's why I'm not living in community now. I'm really also willing to acknowledge that I've never really said, "Okay, this is the most important thing for me, I'm going to go out and find it." But at the same time, I've been promoting Black Bear since I left, and promoting that kind of open consensually based community. I don't find any takers. I'm really curious what's going to happen with this new batch of young people. But also, next year, I'm going to be the only person over 30, you know. It's really exciting to me to think about moving back to Black Bear with a half a dozen people my age. I think that would be totally cool.

Q: Now, let's say a group of people were going to form a community -- what advice would you give them?
A: To build a collective understanding of the consensus process before you try to do anything. I think once you get that down, there's no problem you can't deal with. I just think consensus is a very magic thing, in that it so empowers people to meet their needs within community, that once people learn -- it's a funny process for people who are used to democratic processes to learn, but once you get that it really does empower you to get what you need, it changes the whole flavor of collective work. And it allows you to find what is uniquely appropriate to that particular group. So I think -- to me, that's the essential core to living collectively, is learning how to make that process work for you.

Q: Just as a final question, so living communally is definitely something that you would consider doing again if you found the right kind of people and the right place?
A: Yeah, no question. And my attitude that I take is that it's a lot easier to live communally as a whole person, and I needed this time away from communal living to discover who I was, to get in touch with my feelings. I keep expecting that things are all going to fall into place any day now.

Q: I hope it does. Maybe when you get the Directory you'll find the ideal community.