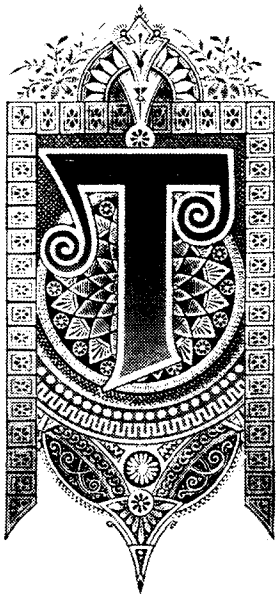


Farm Stories

(From the True Confessions conference on The WELL)

by John Coate and Cliff Figallo

illustrated by Julie Wawirka



THE CARAVAN

John: The holy-man scene was a big part of the action in the late sixties, and in San Francisco the guy who worked the local beat was Steve Gaskin. I first met him when I was 18. He was conducting Monday Night Class at the Straight Theater on Haight Street.

Steve was a guy who could trip at an extremely high level and later talk about it in such a way that an entire group could understand simultaneously his descriptions of energy and karma and what he knew about how to trip, which basically came down to how to make good decisions so as to not lose your energy. For a lot of young trippers these could be good reassuring words. It was also like a big study group where we would read and learn and talk about Eastern and Western religion, mysticism, and magic. At first it was called "Einstein, Magic, and God." Along the way Steve went from being just the teacher of a class to a Teacher as in "your guru." He once said, "I started out teaching people how to trip. Then I found out life was a trip. Then I started teaching people how to live."

It was handy that they were held on Monday, because so many people had just tripped the day before and wanted to get a handle on their experience. After awhile these gatherings grew very large with people coming down from the hills plus a core of folks who had a definite student/teacher relationship with Steve, who by then everyone called Stephen.

The first time I went to Monday Night Class Steve talked about all kinds of things I couldn't understand. It was dark in there and everyone would get into this huge arm-in-arm circle and *OM* together like some kind of circular millipede. Too strange for me, but interesting. Later after some hair-raising trips, one of which was spent alone way out in the

scrub bushes of Mount Tamalpais, I felt I had to confront something vague and scary that was inside me, like some kind of inner battle against invisible forces. I believed I could win — that I would stick with it until I did. Still, I went off by myself because I figured if anyone saw me they might try to haul me in for a thorazine shot.

Later, around sunset, I'm sitting on a hill, looking out at the fog and the ocean and I'm thinking about what I had just experienced and learned: that I can confront anything that is in my head because I always have my yes and my no just like it says in the Tao Teh Ching. And then my mind slips into a calm state. Calmer than I had ever experienced. The stillness is broken by the thought "no-mind." Then I remembered that it was one of the terms I had heard Stephen say that I hadn't understood. "No mind"? What is that?

So, sitting up there I thought "Ah! No mind . . . !" and I started to understand what he had to say.

In the summer of 1970 Stephen, who lived with his family in a converted schoolbus, was invited on a speaking tour of churches and colleges around the country. A lot of the Monday Night Class (MNC) crowd lived in buses too so naturally they wanted to go along. Pretty soon this trip was dubbed "The Caravan." There were lots of people who either didn't have money, or had money but no vehicle, or whatever and still wanted to make the trip. Steve used to have these people gather after the meeting to work out the details.

Starting a month before the October departure about 70 people met under a tree to pool money. It didn't matter how much you had. It didn't matter if you didn't have any at all. Everyone decided on a treasurer, and put their cash together. There was no voting, just someone who volunteered and looked honest. It was a lot of cash too. Probably eight or nine grand.

I was set on going but I still had to wrestle with something inside. I knew that going on the Caravan would be the Big Bus Trip, but it would also mean making a serious commitment to Stephen as a teacher. I saw it as entering some kind of mobile monastery where I had to leave the wild life behind. "Turn down the stimulus," as Stephen used to say.



I viewed the non-political counter-culture as having two basic approaches to life: Ken Kesey, the Merry Pranksters, and the Grateful Dead on one side and Tim Leary, Richard Alpert, Stephen, yoga, and natural foods on the other. The Prankster/Millbrook dichotomy.

The Ken Kesey/Merry Prankster style to me was doing acid on the streets or in some other very unpredictable place, maybe talking at length with people you've never met before and learning to be tough and glib and fast on your feet. Looking for an edge. The Dead were like that for me too. Jerry Garcia would establish eye contact with individuals and play to them until he got them off. As it is today, they were doing a lot more than playing music. Ecstatic dance. Free mind. These guys represented a wild loose style, one that isn't involved with leaders and teachers. I loved it. I took lots of trips on the

streets and went to every Dead gig I could. I used to carry a copy of the "Live Dead" album in my backpack when I hitchhiked. When people would ask me what was happening I would pull it out and say, "this is all you need to know."

So, on what you could call the Millbrook side of this you have Leary and Alpert tucked away at this huge mansion in Millbrook, NY, tripping, getting quiet and still, everything inner-reaching and working the whole Eastern religion aspect where you keep yourself high and together with meditation, or stillness, or certain diets or yogas. *Tibetan Book of the Dead. Zen Flesh, Zen Bones. Bhagavad Gita.* Structure, organization, method, technique, centering.

And I had dug this way of doing it too. As a 15-year-old I attended a Tim Leary lecture at the Berkeley Community Theater called "The Way of the Buddha," where Leary tied the LSD experience to

the Buddha's path of right living and the process of transcending material attachments. It made sense to me. Stephen took this approach more and more too. "Attention is energy," he would always say. He talked about self-discipline and creating good karma, and paying attention to being truthful and correct.

So . . . I'm pacing around Sutro Park on the Sunday afternoon that this Caravan "Bus Family" gets organized having to decide if I was going to go with the Kesey/Prankster/Grateful Dead style or the yogi/teacher/organized-community style. I wanted to be part of a real community. I had hitched all over the West Coast looking for a community that felt right and this group had the right mix of people and purpose. I almost moved to Big Sur, I almost moved to Portland, but I decided to go with Stephen.

That decision made me more of a follower than I had been and I was aware that there was a definite trade-off in doing it.

The caravan ended up down a dirt road in rural Tennessee staring at the business end of Homer Sanders' shotgun. That was the start of the Farm. The caravan was over. We had landed. The plan was to live there for generations on end. It was no longer a situation where you could turn your bus around or just not show up for the next MNC. It was considered a lifetime commitment and given the extraordinary degree of awareness that everyone had for everyone else's state of mind, if you didn't carry that dedication around with you it was obvious to great numbers of people. And it was a tough thing to fake too! This was "copping to Stephen," and as far as I am concerned therein were contained the seeds for the eventual destruction of the whole show.

The population increased from the start. What you had to do was show up, turn in all your possessions (except clothes and personal stuff), have the right attitude and "cop to Stephen." By the following summer the Farm had nearly 400 residents. In those early days before the thing got huge, you could not only know everyone there, but you also knew "where they were at" meaning that you had a feel for what their ongoing attitude/mental condition was.

Cliff: We made a point of studying other experiments in spiritual community — everything from the Shakers to the early Zen communities. We tried to learn from their mistakes and not repeat them. I guess what we mostly learned from the Shakers was to not be celibate. We believed very much in Life Force and felt, like the Catholic Church, that no artificial means of birth control was cool. So we had an instant baby boom that began on the caravan and continued through the first six-seven years of the Farm's existence. Our homegrown midwives got a lot of practice then.

They produced a book called *Spiritual Midwifery* that, for a while at least, was the most revolutionary and widely read book of its kind. We invited people from outside the Farm to come and have their kids delivered there for free, with no need to pay even living expenses. We moved them into our households; they ate with us, worked with us, and pretty much had to adopt all of our ways. During my last three years there, my family took twenty different pregnant ladies into our partially finished home. I think the birthing service was one of the most worthwhile of the Farm's activities, but it did put an excessive burden on our meager resources.

In group living situations, parents didn't have the control over the raising of their children that single families would have. The children were often forced to behave according to the standards of the most conservative adult. I cannot truthfully report that the Farm produced a generation of enlightened young adults, or geniuses, or of permanently self-actualized beings. I think we turned out a typical cross-section of types with the one difference being that they had an experience growing up unlike almost any other. My kids look back fondly on most of that experience, especially on the great camaraderie that existed among the children on the Farm.



NEIGHBORS

John: The Farm was an unusual thing to live next to, especially if your daddy made moonshine or had a fear of God that exhibited itself in spontaneous open arguments with Satan.

Our most noteworthy neighbor was Homer Sanders. He had been the caretaker of the Martin Farm where the Caravan had landed from Nashville. He took a liking to us, and soon we collaborated with him on a sawmill and other projects. He didn't have any teeth and only half of his tongue. It took real training to be able to understand the jokes he constantly told. He knew how to do everything involved with living on that land. A great guy; a living folk hero and genuine moonshiner who had fought it out with every revenue agent in the area.

When we first moved there, of course, we had to hustle to make friends with our neighbors. Other



wise they would have shotgunned us right out of there and burned the place to the ground. Since we were a religious group we decided to get into religious dialogue with the locals, matching our patchwork eclecticism to their Christian fundamentalism.

Our first foray along this line was when we invited members of the local Church of Christ to come up for three Monday nights and discuss the differences and similarities of our beliefs. The chance to preach to the heathens was something these good folks wouldn't turn down and they came up in great numbers for these meetings. At one point Stephen is telling this whole story about the Tibetan Yogi Milarepa and how he was a lot like some of the Biblical heavies in the way he had to construct these stone houses then tear them down, then rebuild them, each nine times, as a way to become unattached to the fruits of your labor and stuff when this old guy stands up and says, "excuse me . . . now I don't know about this Miller feller, but I do know that the Bible is the word of God for him too!"

Later, as a sort of sociological study, some of us went to a local pentacostal church for a few weeks. They would sing and testify. The preacher got excited, and people started babbling in a different language (although it seemed they all spoke the same one) then they would call the new people to come down and receive salvation. Certainly they wanted to save us!

One of the preachers was our neighbor, Willard Staggs. Now Willard weighed about 300 pounds, and when he put his hands on your forehead and said, "may you receive the love of JEE ZUSS!" it would knock some of the people right on the floor!

Afterwards, some of the people that we knew there, including the main preacher, Johnny Prentiss and his wife Betty, surrounded a couple of us and really lit into us. "Don't you know the things you believe are wrong?" "What will your children do when you condemn them to an afterlife of hell?" I knew it would be my last visit to the Summertown Covenant Church.

But soon, they set up a revival tent right outside the gate for a week and had these noisy revivals every night. I couldn't resist checking it out one more time. When I walked in the tent there was Willard standing there almost in a trance, sweat pouring off his head, having a standoff with Satan. He kept saying, "When you see Satan like I see Satan, the only thing you can do is to look him straight in the eye. You look him in the eye and you say 'Now you get out of here Satan. You just get out of here right NOW! RIGHT NOW RIGHT NOW RIGHT NOW!!!" I thought the guy was going to explode. Later they called up Woody, another neighbor who had said that he was called to preach while up in the firetower the other day. "All right! Brother Woody's

going to preach to us!" So Woody steps to the front and is so struck with the heaviness of preaching his first sermon that he freezes at the pulpit. Everyone chants, "Preach, Woody, preach!" and every time they say it he gets stiffer. His hands grip that pulpit so hard it nearly cracks. He opens his mouth and he looks into the eyes of his friends and neighbors and he can't say it.

So Willard gets back up and says, "All right Brother Woody. We'll get it next time. I think we need a song now. Let's all sing Amazing Grace. I hear you farm people like Amazing Grace."



OUR MARRIAGE

Cliff: Psychedelics are good for envisioning the possible. In relationships, they tend to dissolve the ego that keeps people from letting down their defenses. "Dropping your thing" was an act of selflessness, and extending the visions of

the psychedelic world into the straight everyday world was one of the foundations of Stephen's teachings. Entering into a spiritual marriage was seen to be one of these extensions, and Stephen had gone an extra step by marrying his marital couple with another married couple. The stakes were higher; the commitment increased exponentially. Many of his closest friends and followers emulated this example, marrying into double-couple "four-marriages," and the creation of this class of spiritual royalty was a major force in the early history of the farm.

Upon arriving in Tennessee, Anita and I started spending time with another couple. Leigh had been with the Monday Night Class scene for a while, and was not shy about eye-vibing. He could make it heavy for you, make you tingle just staring back at him. But as intense as it felt with him, it felt that comfortable with Jean, Leigh's wife-to-be. Then one night, after sipping peyote tea all afternoon, the magic happened. Staring into each others' eyes, we came to some transcendent place where we opened up completely to each other, all four of us. Not for long, but unmistakably. Together, we thought, "This must be it!" and "Why the hell not?" We stayed up the entire night mindblowing on what we felt destined to do because of this vision.

Next day, we went visiting. Dropped in on Stephen. Entering his bus was like entering a Bedouin sheik's tent. Stephen looked at us, eyebrow cocked. Skeptical. But after cursory questioning, he gave us a nod of approval. We went to visit Aaron and David's (four-marriages were called by the male's first names) bus. They had been trying unsuccessfully to start it for three hours. We sat down in the bus, Aaron turned the key, and it started. It was proof! We were packing kilowatts of energy!

The next two weeks we spent on the road as the Caravan traveled looking for a home, and the jealousies began to come out. The mistrust, the lust, the feelings that appear when you aren't hanging out in psychedelicaland — all started taking over. We would go to other four-marriages and ask for help. And they were having as bad a time as we were! I came back to the bus one night and found that Leigh had discovered my stash of leather boots and clothing, and buried them! What the hell?

By the time we got to the Martin Farm where we first settled, we were all nutty as fruitcakes. Anita disappeared into the woods with her sleeping bag after threatening to take our bus and leave. The rest of us went to Stephen, who pronounced us Not A Real Four Marriage and recommended that we get our individual couples together again.

Over the next few years all but two, of what once were maybe twelve, four-marriages dissolved. In some cases, the couples traded partners. In others, one of the couples fell apart. In all cases, the tripping was intense through the whole relationship. Many kids were born of these crossed interrelationships, and in a few cases at least, close family-like feelings remain to this day.

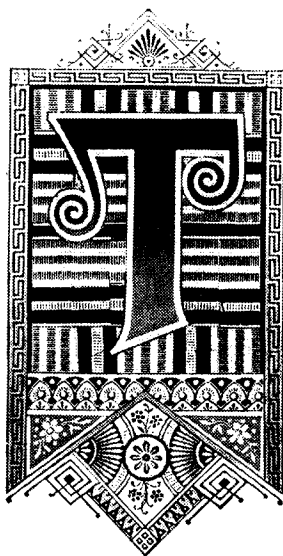
For me, it was a brief but incredible lesson in the dynamics of intimacy. It pointed out flaws in my relationship with then-girlfriend, soon-to-be wife that I should have heeded, but didn't. (Cliff-and-Anita and Leigh-and-Jean are all divorced now.) It was like having someone throw you four flaming torches and tell you "Juggle, Sucker, Juggle!"

Sexually speaking, the Farm operated on the assumption that the Basic Unit of Mankind was the heterosexual couple. This philosophy left little room for out-of-the-closet gays, and caused extreme identity problems for singles in general. There were some gays on the Farm, but there was so little action that they didn't stick around for long.

The sexual path we supposedly followed was Tantra. Lovemaking was considered an important practice for couples to follow not just as the procreative act, but as a healing exercise for the body and for the relationship. The problems arose when the protocol of making love became a part of the dogma. One of the catch phrases that came into being was, "The

man steers during the day, and the woman steers at night." God, did that put sand in the vaseline! There is nothing that does more to ruin the magic in bed than self-consciousness. The aim of all of this, of course, was to enhance the sexual act for the woman and to extinguish the old stereotype of "Wham, bam, thank you, ma'am" in the man. The mistake was in allowing it to become intertwined with the religious teachings. For the man, moving a little too much or too fast or initiating lovemaking could be grounds for censure. It became public knowledge who some of the more stubborn males were.

In the end, all of these restrictions did nothing to slow down our birth rate. We were also champions of natural birth control, and had taboos against all artificial methods. In their place, we developed the basal temperature/cervical mucus method which could be very effective, if you were very disciplined. Not many of us were at that time, and it took several children for most of us to either catch on to the method, or to cheat and buy rubbers anyway, or to give up lovemaking altogether.



TURN IN YOUR GUITAR!

John: There was a fair amount of pressure to get married, and if you were single, you basically had to fall for someone before you could get physically involved at all. A tough

yoga for someone coming from the "free love" scene. I was a single guy at the time and was actually trying pretty hard to keep my hands to myself, as it were. I became very attracted to a single mother whose husband had recently split. She lived next door and I cut her firewood for her.

We were friends. Good friends, but nothing really serious and certainly nothing physical. Still, there was a pretty strong charge. But Stephen had gotten the word that I was "going after" this vulnerable single mother as if I was some kind of amoral wolf. One day when I bumped into him out in front of the main house he said to me in a very loud voice that was easily heard by the twenty-five or so people close by, "I'm taking you out of the band. Turn in your guitar. I heard what you're doing. You think you're this nice guy, but you ain't a nice guy. You're



Jack the Ripper. You're a (now yelling) SON OF A BITCH!!! You have the morals of a snake. Now get out of here!"

Tough stuff to hear, and I was so intimidated that I couldn't come up with the words to defend myself, or at least discuss what was fact and what was hearsay. I acted almost like I deserved it or something. I knew if I really argued with him I would likely get pitched right off the place. To a reasonably confident twenty-one year old guy it was so deflating. I was "busted." Later I noticed that many people started to treat me differently, less friendly, no longer the hotshot guitar man, but someone almost to be pitied for his spiritual shortcomings.

So why did I stay? Because these were my people. And I felt that I had been as high as anyone there and I wasn't going to walk away in shame. So I stuck with it. I joined the motor pool full time and dedicated myself to becoming a competent hard worker.

When you got "busted" like that it really put you back to square one. I buried myself in my work, often working late into the night. I avoided a lot of socializing and dropped out of the music scene altogether. See, it was different playing there than anywhere else. You knew everyone in the crowd, and you knew that they were not only grooving on the music, but were also appraising the quality of your consciousness. That was why I preferred to play off the Farm in those early days. Nobody knew you and they expected you to give them a show. On the Farm, if you let go in the wrong direction, your style could be interpreted as an ego thing, which was what you were striving to avoid. I didn't get into another band there until two years later, after things had loosened up.

We were a "truth church." "Tell the truth and fear no man." This can get pretty hairy sometimes. After the Caravan, we were on our way back west in our bus when we stopped off in Salina, Kansas, to visit a friend.

While the bus was parked in front of her house, two Salina cop cars stopped and instructed Joel, who was onboard, to go in the house and tell us to get into the bus and follow them down to the station. No special reason was given. They apparently didn't see the need for one.

When we got there, we parked the bus and went inside where we all (there were ten of us — five men and five women) were sequestered in a room. This very burly detective guy with a butch cut came in and said, "Ok, I want to speak to all the men, one at a time." I was the last called. As each of the other guys came back in the room I asked in a whisper, "Did he ask about the dope?" Each time the answer was no.

I don't know why really, but when he interviewed me, right away he asks me if we do drugs. I said, "I smoke grass." Then he asks, "do you have any grass on your bus?"

Now when we left Sausalito, we had a kilo of grass and by this time we still had about a pound left, stashed in a compartment.

In that fraction of a second before answering, I thought, "If I lie to him and say no, then they're going to tear our bus apart piece by piece until they find it and we're all going to wind up in Leavenworth."

So I gulped a little and said, "Yes."
"How much do you have?"
(Gulp again) "A pound."
"OK, when we get through talking, I want you all to take me out there and hand it over."

I'm thinking we're all busted for sure now, but when we let the guy on our bus he sat down, looked all around at this mobile piece of Haight Street with all its physical and astral furniture done up in neo-Sarah Bernhardt, got a totally different look on his face and just said "Wow" softly.

I gave him the bag of smoke, all the while answering his questions about our lifestyle and values. Then he said, "Well, I'm sorry, but I'll have to keep this. But y'all can go."

So I guess it's true, folks, that the truth really can set you free (sometimes).

Cliff: We were very much into Truth, and at times we wielded it on others like a bludgeon. It was for their own good, of course, but it felt *so good* to lay a big fat TRUTH on someone. Almost as good as it felt bad to have one laid on *you*. Some folks were "tennis ball eaters." You would serve up your best, most compassionately worded explanation about how and why they were being assholes, and for a return you would get some lame reply that sounded like they deliberately missed the point. That was

frustrating. Especially when you were staying up until 2:00 a.m. just to "get into their thing."

John: Yeah, that was the other kind of truth-telling. "Get into your thing." I think that may have been the number one phrase. "We really had to get into his thing last night. But he finally copped to the information." My bus partner, Joel, had his "thing gotten into" the first night we spent on the farm. He told a story about a time we parked our bus out in front of the Capitol Theater in Port Chester, NY, during a Grateful Dead concert. Some of us went into the concert and some of us stayed out there to mind the bus. As Joel related the story, a cop came on the bus while we were sitting around drinking tea. We had just polished off a joint and our dope can was sitting out there with the teapot and cups.

Joel said, "The cop says to us 'I think you're doing something illegal in here' and looks at all of our stuff. Well, our dope can looked just like a sugar can so I sort of manifested the can to be a sugar can and said we were just having tea."

One of the guys we were telling this to stops us and says, "Hold it right there. You 'manifested the can as a sugar can'? That means that even without saying it you faked the truth to the cop. That's kind of living a lie, don't you think? That isn't how we do things here."

I could see that this "truth-telling" business had already gotten pretty baroque in some people's minds.



HE TUMBLER

John: The early seventies was the time when the feminist movement was on the rise. It was obvious that almost every male in America carried around with him certain inbred attitudes that assumed superiority over females. At the Farm we were big on purging each other of all undesirable conditioning and nowhere did people's trips manifest themselves more clearly than in male/female relationships. We were all big on the idea of "ladies and gentlemen." This meant for the men that all traces of macho had to be eliminated. You had to "cop to your lady."

For a while the Farm had a special tent set up where

Stephen sent men with rough edges so that they could bump up against each other with the idea that they would smooth each other out. This tent was called the "rock tumbler" and it was especially common for some guy who exhibited some arrogance to be pitched right out of the birthing of his own child and sent to the tumbler. I lived right across the road from the tumbler and I can recall many times seeing some guy with a half-smile/half-growl on his face carrying a sleeping bag on his way to a month's stint in the tumbler. One of my buddies was Martin and he was especially skilled at ferreting out subconscious attitudes in others and working out with them for hours on end until they would "cop" and make a visible change. I was also not too bad at this activity and quite often in lieu of TV or something I would go visit Martin and sit in on one of the ongoing "sort sessions." Sort session was our term for sorting out all the subconscious attitudes and thoughts that people would have so that all would be understood and we could go back to whatever else we did, which wasn't much it sometimes seemed. My dad came to visit me that summer of '72 and later remarked that he was never at a scene like that where people would "sit down, have dinner, clean up, and then spend the rest of the evening criticizing each other."

Anyway, what follows is my attempt at reconstructing a tumbler sort session. There are five people present, M, J, W, T, and K:

M: So, where you at, W?

W: Me? Nothing.

M: I was wondering if you were still holding or did you feel cool about having your thing gotten into last night? It feels like there's still subconscious sort of hanging in the air. It's in the astral weather.

W: Well, I could dig the information, but the way you came on about it didn't come from a compassion place. Like you're putting blame on me or something because you aren't satisfied with my response.

M: It feels like you're still on a trip. You may be taking blame but I ain't dishing it out. You really haven't copped. I can tell from your aura that you haven't copped to the information.

J: There is a pretty murky astral in here. W, what are you in your head about?

T: So, what about the MCP vibes that got you sent here in the first place?

W: I feel that I see where it's at and I've already straightened up. I gotta do some fine tuning I admit. Gotta work on the old square inch. I mean like I want to get straight with my old lady. But I don't need you sticking me with every little thing you say you see.

K: But that's just a verbal cop. I can tell that you aren't coming from a pure place. Too much tight stomach. The colloid's going rigid.

J: Yark! this whole riff is backsliding . . . it isn't enough to just say you're cool about it. You have to give us some. It feels like the old swamp routine. At this rate you're kid's gonna be grown before you ever cop to your lady in a Tantric way.

M: Maybe what you need is a ten-day talking fast so when you come out of it the first thing you say will be a righteous thing instead of these verbal deflections designed to thwart us, which just makes us come on stronger till you cop. It's as above so below y'know.

This kind of thing could go on for days, with each person doing his level best to say the thing that will contain so much self-evident truth that the person in question could just say "OK, you're right! I see it now! I don't want to be that way. Now I have the handle I need." And you know, quite often that actually happened. It's important for people who live and work together to be up front with each other. If there is compassion present, you can rid yourself of a lot of ego junk pretty fast. But "reading your reviews" isn't always easy. It was like getting the barnacles scraped off your hull. Sometimes you had to brace yourself. I can remember more than once dropping over to a house where people were sitting around talking and upon my arrival they said, "Ah! Just who we were talking about! Sit down."

It was like a mental nudist colony. It was a definite flaw in our thinking to imagine that great numbers of people would be interested in that kind of thing.

I know it's hard to imagine these encounter group-gone-wild shootouts having much real benefit, and I know several people who never budged, ever. But others were able to get to the heart of their thoughts and feelings about many things. I seriously doubt that any group can survive without some way of being able to speak frankly and even bluntly to each other without the inhibitions of politeness standing in the way.

We experimented in the early days with having one person be a general labor coordinator. The first time was when we had this huge sorghum cane harvest. If you didn't have something real specific to do on a given day, you could be drafted to cut cane. Being the coordinator was a tough job, and trying to get someone to drop their plan for that day or week and do something else often resulted in a "sort session." Like this:

M walks into the community kitchen in the morning looking to fill out the crew. B is eating breakfast.

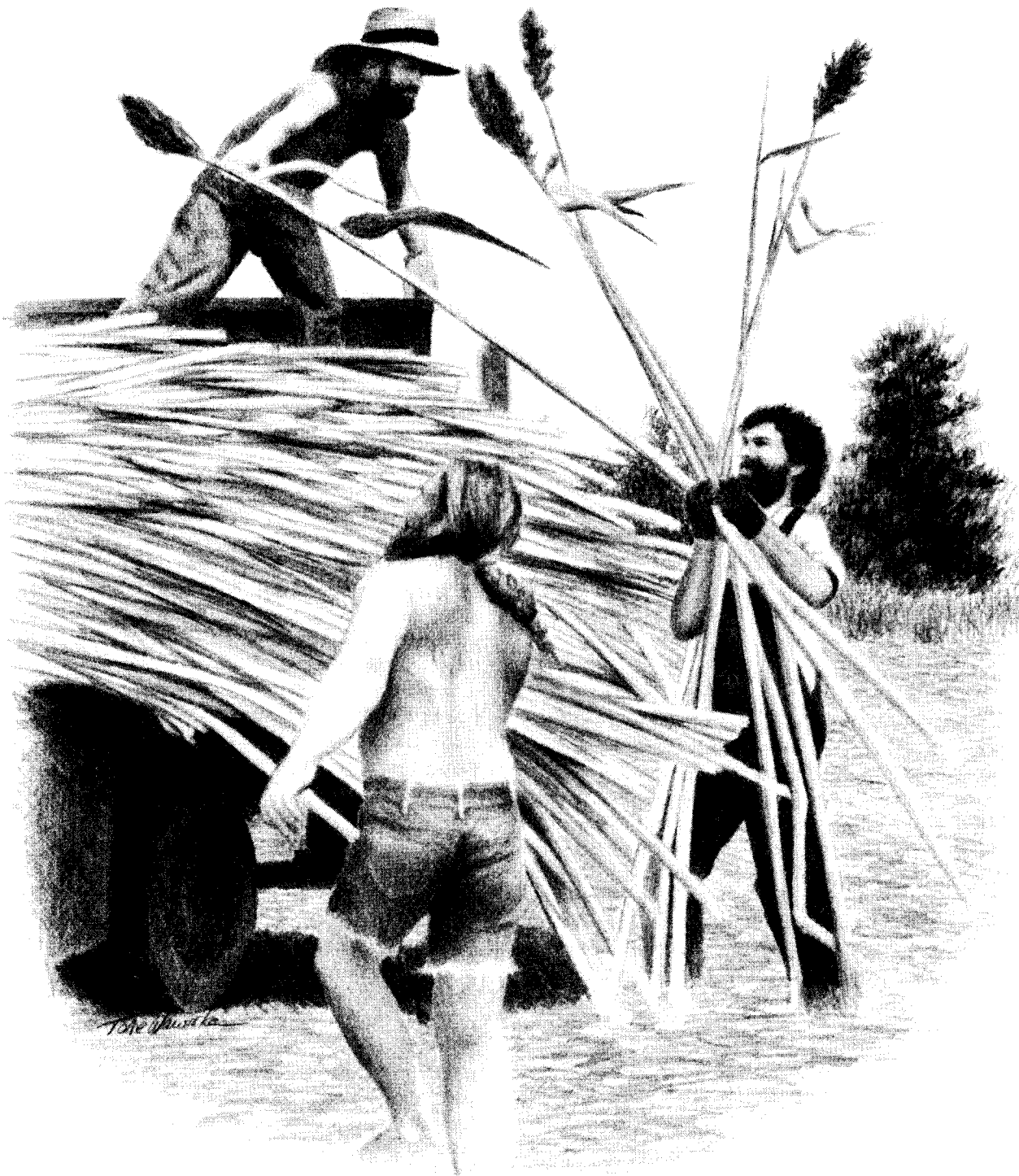
M: Hey, B, how's it going today?

B: Um . . . good!

M: What you got happenin today?

B: Well, I was going to look for diaper pails, then I have to check out some stuff in the junkyard . . .

M: Well, you know, we need some monkeys out in the field today to cut cane. We really need to "Hyah"



to get it done. Feels like maybe you could cut loose of your plan today and help out.

B: Hmm . . . well, I . . .

M: Don't hold back. You gotta cop to the group first.

B: I'm not, it's just that I was . . .

M: Well, you can't be attached to your plans sometimes.

B: But it feels like you're coming on and leaning on

me to do something, when I have to cop to some other stuff.

M: Well, I don't want to put out funky vibes, it's just that we have to cop to what we all have to get behind, you know?

Took real negotiating, getting someone to harvest cane. ▶



FARM WATERS

Cliff: When we arrived on the original Black Swan Ranch in fall of '71, we were about 300 strong with just enough school buses and vans and tents to shelter us all. The land came with one ranch-style house, which became the main office, one corrugated-

tin horse barn, which served as our meeting hall, and one "line shack" which was an aging wooden building about a mile in from the house. It became the community kitchen. There was dirt road winding down through the fields, and along the ridgetops which branched off from this main cleared ridge there ran remnants of old logging roads. There was one flush toilet, one well with submersible pump by the house, one electric line, and one phone line to the house.

The first Shower House had two sides with about six shower heads in each. Usually, due to the constant need for repairs, only one side was open at a time. Thus, we had completely Unisex bathing facilities. Nothing wrong with that, though. Naked bodies were the least of our hangups. But the visitors! That was another matter. Some of our visitors found the showers to be the best feature of the Farm and would spend hours patiently waiting for their turns. I, for one, didn't mind if they looked at me. Heck, take a good look, fellers. But our ladies and young girls found it quite disturbing, and that pretty much was the reason that the Shower House became a residential unit.

Unless you have spent time washing your clothes on rocks down by the riverside, you probably don't have any more appreciation for the luxury of having your own washing machine at home than I had. We actually did wash clothes in the creeks for a few weeks when we first settled on the Martin Farm. For years I had made it through the week on one pair of Levis and a couple sets of socks/underwear and T-shirts. So, with a minimum of clothing, I could last a month between washer loads. But that was as a college student. Suddenly, working in jungle-like heat and humidity, in the mud, I was having a harder time clothing myself than before. And having children added to the problem.

Our first solution, for the first year, was to visit the local laundromat in Summertown. Now Summertown, in 1971, claimed to have about 600 residents.

It had a little laundromat next to its little post office, with about eight machines and four dryers. Once the Farm laundry runs began, instead of maybe a total of 100 local people using the facilities on an irregular basis, 300 additional newcomers were descending on the humble laundromat weekly with more and dirtier laundry than it could handle.

On the Farm end, a weekly laundry run would be organized, and a wild assortment of duffle bags, US mail bags, plastic buckets, flour sacks, etc. would be assembled and loaded into a box-back truck with a rotating crew of "laundry ladies" who would, in exchange for getting a ride into civilization (barely), wash and dry everyone's laundry. The weekly laundry run was one of our first and largest regular living expenses. It wasn't long before the Summertown laundry begged for mercy and we had to make a longer run into Mt. Pleasant or into the county seat of Hohenwald (now know as the Junk Clothes Capital of the World — at least of the Free World).

By the second year, our first wave of babies had arrived and the term "diaper pail" had become a big part of our vernacular. We collected used pickle buckets from the local fast-food stands and personalized them with our names and terms for product differentiation — our family's read thusly: "Figallo Shit" and "Figallo Pee." We were only funded for a certain number of diapers per kid, so after a week, you were ready to get the returns from the laundry. And during the hot summer months, the ol' diaper pails were ready to explode or to walk away on their own when it came time for Laundry Run.

One winter day when I was home with pneumonia, laid out in back of the schoolbus and gazing across the mudflats that served as roads, I spied the approaching Laundry Truck, a refurbished power company line crew truck with an enclosed crew/tool cabin in back flanked by rails and walkways. The diaper pails, full of clean, dry diapers, were lined up along either side of the cabin, contained only by the rails. The truck was preparing to "shoot the bog," getting up speed to somehow make it through the quagmire that had once been a road, to reach the residential area with our clean clothes. They must have hit 40 when they reached the really messy part, sending up twin rooster tails of mud, fishtailing from side to side. Suddenly, the truck hit a solid spot under the slop and leapt into the air. The truck came down with a splash, but many diaper pails remained suspended above as the truck bounded out from under them. They all came to rest in the bog. And I just KNEW our baby's clean, dry diapers were among the unlucky ones. I was home alone and sick, but I had to find out if my fears were true. Picking my way from one solid spot to another, I arrived at the scene of the massacre to find our lowly pail not only in the mud, but upside down in the mud — next to its lid. There had to be a better way.

One of the Farm's personalities was Robert Glesser. Robert was a bull of a guy, and he tended to be more successful working alone than he was working in a group. So, on moving to the Black Swan Ranch, he began to build the Laundromat. He actually got the building together in about a year — a 25' x 60' structure with cement floor, floor drains, concrete-block halfwalls and truss roof. He then got the funds together to score our first array of machines. I believe they were Maytag Commercials.

Robert was also the first Laundromat mechanic. He was followed by a long line of men who should all receive medals as the most dedicated and persevering of the technicians on the Farm. It is hard to fit into this limited space an adequate description of the torture and unending wear and tear that the Farm's washing machines endured over those twelve years. We must have gone through hundreds of washers and I don't know how many dryers. We ended up with stainless steel Swedish Industrial washers and two humungous clothes processors which we simply referred to as Brontosaurus. With the Bronto, you could pack your dirty laundry into a special nylon mesh Bronto bag, leave it in a perpetually renewing mountain range of dirty bags, come back the next day, and, God willing, find your clean but wet laundry in a pile under the sign for your neighborhood. I say "clean," but the Bronto never really got your clothes clean. Cleaner.

If you preferred to wash your clothes in a smaller machine (if you were one of those who cared if your clothes were really clean) or if you had to wash diapers, you had to call in to make a reservation. You would get a number and you had to check in constantly by phone to see if it was your turn. Often I would try to beat the system by lugging my diaper pail to the laundromat at 2:00 a.m. — only to find three other system beaters there waiting for the one still-operating machine to be open. I spent many an hour there reading year-old *Newsweeks* and mopping the floors to pass the time. Sitting up all night with the drone and whirr and clank of the washers while the rest of the Farm (save the night gateman) slept, and the single remaining light bulb glowed over the bare, wet cement floor and with a cold wind blowing outside, I would think of how badly things needed to improve. The laundromat was perhaps our most collective institution, and it was a degenerating mess.

No one had a "job;" we all had "gigs" and worked under "strawbosses." You either "knew where it was at" or you were "on a trip." Part of being on a trip was using too much Farm Jargon, but we all used it and it became a kind of communicative shorthand for us. We could express a lot in a few words when it came to issues of relationship or psychology. Outsiders would hear us in conversation and request translations. The shorthand became a curse, though,

because it too easily allowed us to classify each other. In Farmese, we called this "holding someone to a place." The irony was that the foundation of our belief system was that people could change and improve while the language and small-town nature of the Farm often created pressures that kept people in old roles. The ultimate irony may be that Stephen himself was "held to a place" by the expectations of the rest of the community. His early wisdom was still relied on long after the community should have developed wisdom of its own.



HARMA COMBAT

John: Copping to Stephen meant copping to the "Farm agreement" and vice versa. I have seen that power does corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Everyone I knew who had some power over

other individuals got crazy behind that power to whatever degree they had power. Of course Stephen had total power. And he was inclined to surround himself with advisors who over time seemed to much prefer advising to nail banging, hoeing, or wrenching. And he sometimes delegated great authority to single individuals, some of whom were utterly unqualified to handle it.

We were trying to be tribal. To get back to something that white Euro/American culture had lost. For a few years we felt like we had at least begun to achieve it. And compared to anything we had seen in American suburbia I think it was true. It didn't last long enough for there to be great traditions to hand down through the generations, but the closeness was pretty extraordinary too. That's what all that "getting straight" and "sorting it out" was about. Trying to get real close real fast, so we can get on with the trip. We thought that if there was something you felt about another person that didn't feel right, that you should go right to that person, preferably with "fairwitnesses" around, and get straight with that person. Of course you can get kind of carried away, but without TV, the evening conversations can get pretty interesting.

I saw it as dharma combat. The Zen tradition says that any wandering monk can go into a monastery and challenge the master to dharma combat — outwitting the other person verbally, and thus showing

superior understanding — and the monk can take over the monastery. Steve was pretty impossible to top, but we tried it on each other all the time. I really saw myself as a young monk who wore a jean jacket instead of a robe, going out into the world each day seeking enlightenment for myself and the planet. I believed also that the battles that Arjuna waged in the Bhagavad Gita take place each day within each of us. So I didn't care much about money, and I enjoyed the intensity. In fact that was the real key: *it wasn't enough to handle the intensity, you had to thrive on it.* Living with a people who believed that in great measure, and liked to get high, and were willing to sort it out and then recognize and get high on the mutual understanding when it comes about, can get to feeling pretty tribal. I still feel that way toward many people from those days. And in a loose way that tribe still exists, it just didn't maintain the structure of living together. But you know, I'd be a liar if I said I didn't miss that intense interaction sometimes.

I would also like to say that I never held any position of power on the Farm. I was never the boss of anything, never went on a tour, or had a job that wasn't a real knuckle-buster. And I put up with as much personal shit as anyone who ever lived there. I say this so that when I say something positive about the experience, it comes from someone who might have at least some credibility in making such statements.

Looking back on all of this, I think about the trade-offs involved in joining something or following someone. The teacher has all these heavy trips and then those experiences get sort of codified. The followers can just go through the motions, or even may believe and practice everything and even mature tremendously, but they will never have enough of their own experiences. That's why I am into communities, but not leaders or teachers. One reason I was involved with transportation on the Farm was so that I could get away and have some adventures of my own. I doubt I would have lasted very long otherwise. As soon as the pioneer hacks his way through the bushes and a path is laid out, it isn't the same anymore. We each have to cut our own path.

In '74 Stephen and three others were sent to the Tennessee State Pen for a year over a grass bust that had occurred a couple of years before. Quite frankly, to me this was a big relief. Not that I wished jail on the man, far from it, but the reins of power shifted to Ina May and the rest of his family and I knew that they wouldn't have nearly the grip that Stephen had.

From the very beginning, many people on the Farm had the notion that in the serious quest for group enlightenment, there was no room for satire. Not

that people didn't want to have fun, but all that ego-peeling that went on made one cautious to crack very many jokes. And our purpose was so high and serious. But down in the motor pool, where I worked, if you didn't have a sense of humor about the whole thing you were really in trouble. I mean, how many frozen engine blocks and empty gas tanks can you put up with before it all becomes just too funny? Another controversy was sports. A lot of us were closet sports fans. The only physical activity was hard work or yoga. Some of us wanted to play a little touch football. This was an unspeakable notion — to play or watch a "violent" game. We got this old black-and-white TV working and set it up in the motor pool office so we could watch baseball, football, and car races. I don't think I've ever enjoyed watching a World Series more than seeing the Reds play the Red Sox on that fuzzy old tube. So these two notions, satirical humor and enjoying competitive sports, emerged together and began a major change in what became the Farm's "rebel element."

We had some great characters at the pool. And because we worked on the cars we had to take a lot of test drives. We would go into town and buy soda and cookies (Farm contraband), bring them back and work into the night. The father of one of the guys sent down a bunch of nuts and bolts and other sundry hardware from his company's surplus. While digging through these cans I found a bunch of tie clips that were painted gold with bolts stuck to them. I had the idea of creating "The Secret Order of the Golden Bolts." I wrote a speech for our fearless leader, Mr. Kaputi, and found him this funny suit of clothes and sun glasses. We had this ceremony giving a bolt to selected members. The criterion for getting in was that you had to have made some sort of huge blunder. Mine was tipping over the boom truck on its side. From then on we had solid laughs. We started playing football on the big lawn in front of the pool. We had great games every day. Some people were very dismayed by this behavior but others were right with it. The construction crew was undergoing a similar loosening up. We formed our football team, The Golden Bolts, and challenged the other guys on the Farm to a game. So one Saturday we had the big Bolts vs All-Stars game down in the meadow. We all wore yellow shirts and had plays worked out. We killed them. I think the score was 49-7.

Those were fine moments, the best to be had.

So, that's why I stayed. Because the good times were so incredibly good. When someone would holler "Joint Break!" across the shop and we would retire to the woods for our communion, I felt that we were living on liberated soil. I could look around at the woods and my buddies and say, "this is ours." What could be finer than that? ■

