

Bus Life

By John Coate

April 2026

Part 1:

I came of age in San Francisco in the late 1960s.

It was a time of upheaval and change.

It was a time of experimentation in culture, music, film, philosophy, art, theater, dance and writing.

It was a constellation of new ideas and new ways of looking at life.

It was a time of counterculture. Part rejection of the rigid conformity of the 1950's and part creation of alternative lifestyles, with experiments in collective living, personal reinvention, questioning authority and psychic exploration.

It was a time of seeking. People went well beyond Judeo-Christian religion and culture and embraced a variety of disciplines, practices and religions. Yoga, meditation and chanting became popular. The ways of the mystics were explored. Many found guidance with a guru or teacher.

It was time of movements - civil rights, social justice, anti-war, women's liberation, gay rights,

the American Indian Movement, and the environmental movement.

Like millions of others in my boomer generation, I was raised in an America of unprecedented middle class wealth. Safe in neighborhoods where most of the mothers were at home and ready to help if you needed it, enjoying annual escalations in convenience and media products, riding in huge six-passenger cars that could go 100 MPH with ease, water-skiing in fast power boats or flying to vacations in places like Hawaii instead of having to just drive to the local river.

We were nurtured and protected; educated at well-funded public schools. We had incredible rock music written and played by us for us. And we had an increasing array of good stereos and radios to hear it.

All this even while gas only cost twenty-five cents a gallon and someone would fill your tank for you, clean the windows and check the oil.

It seemed like we had it made. Our parents had us dialed in. Why should we be dissatisfied with anything?

But we also witnessed the horror of our young President getting his brains blown out on TV and

we had to do these ridiculous drills at school where we hid under our little metal desks, in case a Russian nuclear bomb blew out the twelve-foot wall of windows that illuminated our modern classrooms. We were routinely sprayed with DDT to get rid of mosquitos. Our air and water got dirtier by the year.

And then they sent us to war in Viet Nam.

Growing up, we watched that war begin as an ill-advised Cold War maneuver and then expand month-by-month into a national catastrophe of historic proportions, with escalating body counts on nightly TV corresponding to increasing call-ups from the Draft Boards.

It looked to me, and a large number of my contemporaries, that the beautiful world of mid-century privilege we enjoyed had a rotten underbelly. The environment was degrading. Society was far from achieving social justice. The war machine kept growing.

Was the life laid out for us a path or a pipeline?

Many felt that radical things must be tried.

A spectrum of lifestyles emerged.

Long hair, bell-bottom pants, cultural experiments, and enjoying a toke of grass, were adopted by millions.

Farther out from there you had more radical practices: using psychedelic drugs like LSD, turning vegan or some other earth-friendly lifestyle, exploring exotic religions, living in group houses, sometimes pooling money to live collectively.

Still farther out you had true dropouts who remade their lives altogether. They sought new paths of sustainable living that allowed minimal buy-in to the culture at large. Some went off into the countryside to live as off-the-grid as possible in self-built housing. Communal experiments small and large popped up all around the country.

I grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area, the middle son of liberal, high achieving parents.

I graduated from a San Francisco high school in 1968 when the counterculture was in full flower.

The Haight-Ashbury district was an easy walk from my house. The legendary rock music halls - the Fillmore, the Avalon and Winterland - didn't serve alcohol so I could go as a minor. I went to my first Fillmore show when I was 15 and went regularly all through my teen years. All the legends of rock and

blues came through there. It was only a few dollars for a ticket and it was easy to get right up front. I went to every show I could.

But it was more than just musical entertainment. With the music, the light shows and the dancing it was a chance to mingle up close with people practicing joyful free expression.

George Washington High School in San Francisco is just a few blocks up the hill from Speedway Meadows in Golden Gate Park. A radical social benefit group called the Diggers used to feed daily hot meals to hundreds of young hippies, runaways and refugees from the culture at large. At first the Diggers set up their free food line in the Golden Gate Park Panhandle, just three blocks down from Haight Street. Then, in late 1967, they moved it all farther out in the Park to Speedway Meadows.

Numerous times I wandered down there after school to check out the food line. It wasn't because I was hungry. It was because I could witness one of the most extraordinary examples of this emerging community spirit. In addition to a set of tables and huge pots with long-haired people ladling out chow to hundreds of other long-haired people, there was often entertainment by a band set up on flatbed trucks. Some of those bands already had national recognition and are now in

the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. I saw the Steve Miller Band play once and twice I saw Big Brother and the Holding Company with Janis Joplin. Another time I heard that Jimi Hendrix played there. These weren't publicized gigs to promote concerts or records. It was a word-of-mouth chow line for people living in crash pads.

My sense of alienation with society at large grew stronger as I came of age. Martin Luther King was assassinated two months before and Robert Kennedy was assassinated three days before I graduated from high school. Kids barely older than I was were being sent to fight and die in Vietnam, including my next door neighbor who was killed in his first month over there. Racial tensions were high. Eight months after I graduated I was a witness in a notorious murder trial of an off-duty San Francisco cop who had shot an unarmed black man in an argument. I told the truth but the judge said that I had a bias against the police and instructed the jury to disregard my testimony. In 1970 the national guard shot and killed protesting students at Kent State in Ohio. I began thinking, if this is where society is going, I want no part of it.

I had been in a rock band in high school. It was with my band mates that I first smoked weed. Already some of my friends were imbibing. It looked to me like they were the only ones in school

having any real fun. They seemed to have a kind of mental freedom I had not seen in others or experienced within myself. I wanted to feel like they did.

I took LSD for the first time camping with some friends one spring weekend in 1968 out in the high emerald hills of the East Bay. The green rolling hills were covered in flowers. The clear blue sky looked infinite. I could see towns and farms and mountains in the distance and fog near the bay. I had seen it all before many times, but this time I saw a unity to it; a oneness.

I had never been much interested in nature, preferring urban life. But that day I felt comforted and nurtured by mother earth. I could see harmony in nature. Inner peace. I had never felt it before.

One day in May 1969 I went with some friends to a free concert in Golden Gate Park featuring the Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead. As the Grateful Dead played these long rocking jams, the crowd danced into a Dionysian frenzy unlike anything I had ever seen or even imagined. The ecstasy was palpable.

This led me to continue experimenting with psychedelics. Some experiences were better than

others. Sometimes fun, sometimes scary; they all contributed to me developing my own point of view, whatever that might turn out to be.

By the end of my teenage years, I was disillusioned by society, aimless, without direction, living in Berkeley couch-surfing with university students, unsure of what to do or where to go. I wasn't interested in college and had no career path. I was alienated from my parents and broken up with my girlfriend.

I wanted to be with people, out there somewhere, who I thought had a deeper understanding, a higher consciousness. Maybe that would lead me to something good.

This was the period of time just after the Haight Ashbury heyday when many practitioners of the counterculture spread out to enclaves all around the Bay Area. Organic food, Yoga, meditation, and investigations into one's consciousness proliferated. Many sought gurus and teachers to help make sense of all that was happening. But I didn't want to join the Hare Krishnas, get an Indian guru, consult astrology or be born again.

I started going to a San Francisco gatherings held Sunday mornings at Sutro Park, a big grassy knoll overlooking the ocean, and Monday nights at a

roller rink turned rock hall called The Family Dog at the Great Highway. These were big meetings led by a local college professor turned spiritual teacher named Stephen Gaskin. He talked about the nature of a spiritual path and how best to follow it. It was widely eclectic. He had a wonderful way of explaining things that to me had been difficult to grasp by quoting from or paraphrasing items from various religions, philosophies myths and mystical practices. He could map esoteric knowledge to everyday modern life in ways that made more sense to me to more often I went.

And he talked about tripping. This is a group for whom using psychedelics was a common pathway to the inner explorations discussed at the gatherings.

But for me the biggest draw was the crowd itself. Here was the spiritual, purposeful counterculture. People who to my young eyes seemed to know how to live in harmony with their visions and with each other. I wanted to become their friends.

Stephen got invited by various churches and universities to tour around the country and talk about what was happening with this growing anti-war counterculture, hopefully to help them make some sense of it all. Stephen and his family already lived full time on a bus so that would be

their mode of transportation. Some of his most ardent followers also lived in buses. They wanted to go on the trip too, so the whole tour turned into a caravan with dozens of buses. It was set to depart from San Francisco on October 12, 1970.

A lot of us didn't have the means to get a bus, fix it up and buy all that gasoline on our own. So starting in August after the Sunday morning gatherings at the park ended, those who did not have all the means to make the trip met in order to develop a core group who would pool resources, get buses and go.

We were about seventy people randomly thrown together. Some were couples, some already knew each other. Mostly the group was young and single. Men and women were about equally represented.

How was this ragtag collection of social dropouts and free spirits going to form into units functional enough to get old buses around a country that wasn't all that fond of hippies?

We started by sitting for hours at a time in one very large circle on that big lawn at Sutro Park.

Some people were more comfortable speaking in groups, but there was no leader; no one in charge.

After going around with introductions, we talked about what values we held.

Truth-telling was a foundational value, the basis of trust. We agreed that we must be truthful in all ways.

We agreed that we were nonviolent. That included anger, especially when expressed, even subtly, toward each other.

We agreed that the vibes of any situation matter as much as whatever is on the surface. And we agreed that each of us are responsible for maintaining our own good vibe. When the vibes were not good, we agreed on the need to discuss it openly on the spot.

We agreed that we would be collective. We would pool and evenly share our resources. While the other values were strongly influenced by the stuff Stephen would emphasize in his lectures, we came to this one on our own.

We spent a lot of time talking about what elements of our culture we liked and didn't like. Which bands lift us up in our quest for higher consciousness and which bands bring us down? Do we actively oppose the Vietnam War, racism, and

the encroaching capitalist state or do we set out to make the society we want?

“Attention is energy” was a kind of mantra for us, so we chose to focus our attention on peace, love and understanding. Make love not war. Be aware of the political world. Render unto Caesar when needed. Be in it but not of it.

We passed around a lot of joints in that circle and a couple of times a majority of the group were high on either acid or mushrooms. This raised the stakes. Are you in or out? Do you have something to say that makes sense? Or, if you aren't speaking are you listening and focused? It helped reveal who could keep their act together. Who could hold the floor with something worthwhile to say and who got lost in the weeds mid-sentence?

I sat next to a young couple who looked into each other's eyes for a long count until they let go of everything around them, and fell into each other's arms in an ecstatic laughing embrace. They are still married to this day.

Then this young guy stood up and adopted a teacherly stance that he borrowed so heavily from Stephen that it looked like he was wearing a costume. His inability to handle the attention fueled his growing incoherence. When he sat down

bewildered by it all, the guy sitting next to me said, "in the time he said that we circled the globe three times."

Some got up, wandered off and never came back. A couple of people disagreed in an angry manner and were asked to leave.

Bonding developed among many of us without saying a word.

We met and sat in that big circle several Sundays in a row.

Then the day came when it was time to put in our money. One of the older more responsible-seeming guys spread his denim jacket out on the grass. The seventy of us got in a line and one by one put whatever we had in a pile on the jacket. I put in all I had: forty dollars. Others had more, some had less. But when we finished there was nine thousand dollars on that jacket.

We trusted the guy to take the money home for safekeeping and the next day we all convened early in the morning at Stern Grove, a woodsy park in San Francisco's Sunset District. On that foggy morning there was nobody else around other than our group of seventy. We sent a few of us to a place across the bay that sold used school buses.

By mid day they came back with two buses from the 1940s.

The first thing we had to do was get rid of all the seats. Armed en masse with pliers and crescent wrenches, we unbolted all the seats from both buses and put them in a huge pile in the parking lot. Then we crammed all of the seats into one of the buses that then drove off to the dump while the rest of us hung out in the park, continuing our getting-to-know-you process. By the end of the day we had two empty buses and seventy people. We all piled into the two buses and drove out to the beach where we spent the night, thirty-five people in each bus.

The atmosphere in the bus was thick as thirty-five people jammed together into a circle, filling every available inch. I found myself sitting on the curved metal hump above one of the sets of dual rear wheels. I was tall so my head was high above the group. I didn't want to stand out like that so I traded with the short person sitting beside me.

A couple of times someone said something that rattled the group's energy and left a funny feeling hanging in the air. Then, it was collectively decided to cut loose of it, meaning let the thought and the ruffled feelings simply go. And I could see this darkish cloud lift away and everyone's face get

brighter. Physical evidence of changing vibes based on changing minds. I had read about such things. Now I could see it for myself.

It was my first night living collectively with that group. It lasted for the next twelve years.

PART 2:

We called our group of seventy the Bus Family. We even tried to register the buses under that name. Not a legal name the DMV said.

As each day progressed, we sent out various parties to find and obtain other buses. We ended up buying nine of them. Mostly school buses of varying lengths and ages plus a couple of highway cruisers with flat fronts and engines in the rear.

Populating the buses was a self-selecting process where some group of 5-8 or even 10, depending on the size of the bus, would simply say they would join up with that little group and take it on.

I ended up in one of those highway cruiser buses: a 1946 Aerocoach with a huge gas motor in the rear.

There were seven of us. Some of us vaguely knew each other already but mostly we were strangers.

Strangers who had to fix up this bus into something we could live in while traveling across the country, mostly in the winter.

The big Caravan with more than sixty buses left San Francisco on October 12, 1970 for the epic trip that would ultimately lead to the founding of the what became, for a time, the largest collective in the country: The Farm in Summertown TN.

I wasn't communicating much with my parents but my father knew that I was part of that Caravan group. Years later he said to me, "the night you and the Caravan left San Francisco, your mother and I got into bed, turned out the light, settled in and I said, 'I think he has finally lost his mind.'"

But we hadn't left. Our bus was parked over in Sausalito with the motor torn apart. We were still a good three weeks away from getting on the road.

Besides myself, there was Joel, a lawyer who, as soon as he passed the bar, headed west to volunteer on an Indian reservation then later made his way to the Haight-Ashbury. Brian, a Yale Law School dropout who, with his girlfriend Christina, had come to our group after traveling with Wavy Gravy's Hog Farm. Judith, a college graduate from Ohio who had heard the siren call of San Francisco, Terry a free spirit from Oregon, and Paul a

streetwise New Yorker who was serious about his meditation practice. At age 19, I was the second youngest person in the group. Christina was a year younger.

We parked out on the flat borderlands of north Sausalito next to the Heliport on what was then open land. In all those weeks we were parked there, no police, sheriff or anyone else came by to even ask us what we were up to, even when we had our torn-down motor spread all over a big tarp in full view of the 101 freeway.

We worked on the bus by day and by night we sat in a circle on the floor of the bus. Facing each other talking about ourselves, each other, our personality quirks and how we could find some sort of social equilibrium by identifying and taming our respective subconscious habits. It was hard work. It took persistence and a willingness to give and take feedback without emotions taking over. It can be hard to receive critical feedback. But it can also be hard to give it in a way that is fair and not too judgmental. We sat in that circle talking for hours, night after night. When things didn't seem clear enough, we kept at it. It worked. We did indeed become close.

We were San Francisco hippies living out what we saw as our core values, and frankly, our visions,

outside of political participation. Much of this was fueled by cannabis and certain psychedelics, like LSD, psilocybin, peyote and mescaline. The hard drugs like speed cocaine and alcohol were not part of the mix with our part of the culture. In those early days, while we worked on the bus during the week, on Sundays we took a psychedelic together. This heightened and condensed our atmosphere of looking into each other and "getting straight" as we called it. It took real commitment. You couldn't just be ok with it. You had to want it and embrace the changes that came with it.

In our quest to purify ourselves, one of our methods was to go on a brown rice fast where you ate nothing else for ten days. After I got through with my brown rice fast I was so hungry that I snaked a bit of money out of the money can, took it to a fish fry place nearby and bought a bag of french fries. My senses were so dulled that the Heinz ketchup I put on them burned my mouth like hot sauce. While I was eating them, one of our women came in to make a call at the pay phone. When she saw me I froze. Busted. Later that night we all had to talk it over. What was worse, taking the money for an individual treat, or the fact that I felt guilty about doing it?

Another time, while the others were gluing carpet scraps to the ceiling, I entertained them by playing

an acoustic guitar. That led to a debate: was it better for the group to work while enjoying the nice music, or was it better that I join in with the workers? I was not a very hard worker and rarely took initiative. The consensus was that it is better for the group and for me to do the work.

We drilled deeply into each other's habits, verbal tics, facial expressions, and body English. The idea was not to rip anyone down, but to make plain our hidden feelings and attitudes so that we could function with true honesty and could let go of problematic behavior.

This of course made us all pretty serious all the time. We didn't tend to see any humor in the situation.

There is a thread in a number of spiritual disciplines that could be called "erasing personal history." Those on the path should focus here and now on the path, and let go of the past or the future.

But one night, we started telling our stories to each other. Where had we come from, what had we done? Who were our families?

Through telling our stories, our struggles, our successes, and anecdotes that were often funny,

we understood each other more and we simply liked each other better.

Another night we strayed from our usual rigor of only singing and playing songs we thought were adequately spiritual, and started singing old rock and roll and folk songs, not because we saw them as spiritually uplifting, but because they were fun and we liked them. Elvis, Chuck Berry, The Beatles and many more. For the first time as a group we had an laugh-filled evening of pure fun.

Those two experiences led to more, rather than less, deep bonding. Stories, humor and music brought us closer together just as much as all of the group mind probing. Practiced together, the bonding cemented.

We painted our bus white with accents of lavender and magenta that kept the bus true to its 1940s style, and fixed up the interior with big bed platforms, and open main floor for sitting in a circle, a little apartment-sized propane stove and a sink. Our toilet was a five gallon bucket surrounded by a custom made wooden cover with a white toilet seat on top. The cruiser bus had storage bins below and inside luggage racks above where we stashed our clothes, which we also shared. We covered the ceiling with carpet scraps arrayed in colorful patterns ending in a carpet-

scrap sunset at the back of the bus. It was comfortable and pretty, with lots of textiles from around the world.

But the motor wasn't in good shape. It had low oil pressure and sent blue smoke out the exhaust. We tore it down and spread the parts out on tarps to clean it all. It took awhile, but we replaced just about everything that was worn out, or so we thought.

For our trip, we had a kilo of Mexican weed in brick form. Plus we had about ten hits of acid. We had that much weed because we were supposed to bring the whole stash to the other eight buses. But the Caravan got busted at the Oregon border and a frantic phone call told us not to bring it. But we weren't going to throw away that much grass and we weren't going to deal it. So we kept it.

After weeks of working on the bus, the motor and our own group mind, we were ready to head east.

We had been told by a bus mechanic that our bus engine is a good motor but has a tendency to throw rods. That weighed heavily in our minds as the oil pressure never got above about fifteen pounds. That is dangerously low oil pressure for any motor, but especially for this one. But we were so far behind schedule that we chose to push

on.

We got to Reno and decided to drop the oil pan right there on the street and look to see if there was any metal in the oil residue. There was. But we still decided to go for it and keep heading east.

We made it across frozen Utah, Wyoming, Nebraska, Illinois and on to Toledo Ohio where we stopped to visit Judith's mother.

She was delighted to see us and made sure we were all well fed. She had room for us all to sleep. It got very comfortable. After a few days it was time to get going again. But the bus wouldn't start, even with the help of Judith's mechanic brother-in-law. We had spark and fuel, but nothing worked, even after a few days of trying.

We thought then that the problem might not be with the bus itself, but with our getting too comfortable and straying from our mission. We decided that we needed to raise our consciousness higher in order to start the bus. We sat in a circle on the floor of the bus. We held hands and chanted OM with great fervor.

When we felt that we were in a good mental state, Brian went to the driver's seat, sat down and turned the key. The bus started immediately.

We were on our way.

We stopped in West Virginia for an oil change. We went down to a bus company yard and garage to see if they could help us out. At first they were pretty wary of these hippies suddenly descending on them, but soon enough it came out that we had a spiritual purpose to our journey. Some of the Christian guys in the shop felt enough of a kindred spirit that they let us drive right into their huge garage where they changed our oil and topped up the transmission and read end.

That night a local hippie guy asked us to follow him to a party where we would meet some cool people and maybe have a good place to park for the night. But when we got there the host was freaked out by our arrival. He came across the yard with his hands out in front of him saying, "no no don't stop here!" He thought we would attract the police who would bust the pot smokers inside. He had a point, so we drove on.

We were pretty far behind the Caravan by then and it was already after Christmas. We entered New York City and promptly ran out of gas midtown on 6th Avenue. I grabbed an empty gas can and ran up and down the street until I found a parking garage that dispensed fuel. Horns behind the bus

were honking madly as we got finally underway.

We had some friends to visit in the West Village. We parked along a small street that was close to a T intersection. When it was time to leave, we tried driving the bus to the left through the T, but there was a VW bug parked in our way. As we backed up and tried again and again to make the turn, a small crowd formed on the sidewalk. At one point some of the crowd, realizing we were not going to make the turn, got together and picked up the VW and placed it up on the sidewalk out of our way. When we made the turn, they picked the VW back up and put it right back where it had been parked. Everyone cheered as we drove off.

We learned that the Caravan was taking a holiday break for people to visit families in the northeast so we decided to head up to Boston to visit Joel's parents with the goal of joining the Caravan in Washington DC a few days into the new year.

Joel had graduated from Boston College and Tufts Law School and had passed the bar in Massachusetts when he went to be a Vista Volunteer on a Nevada Indian reservation. During that time, weekend trips to San Francisco and the wonders of the counterculture caused Joel to take a radical turn in his career path. His parents were not pleased and didn't seem happy to see us. At

one point Joel's grandmother came up to me with a framed graduation photo showing Joel in a nice suit and short hair. She pointed at the photo and said to me with great emotion, "this my Joel." Then she pointed at her long-haired grandson across the room and said, "that not my Joel!!"

Brian knew some people in another part of Boston so on December 31 we drove the bus over there. There was enough snow piled up along the roadsides that making tight turns was difficult. Our destination was up a long driveway that had a sharp turn in from the main road.

While trying to make the turn, we heard a loud bang from the motor.

We got out and saw oil pouring out all over the snow and the street. Opening up the back we saw a hole in the engine block about the size of an index card with one of the piston rods sticking out into the open air.

The motor was blown up and there was about nine quarts of oil on the street. Now what? No Caravan for us, that was clear.

We needed supplies so Judith, Terry and I decided to hitchhike down into Cambridge where there was a good natural foods store. After stocking up, we

thumbed back to the bus.

We got picked up by two long-haired guys in a big Chevy who took an immediate interest in us and our story. By coincidence, I learned that those two guys were returning from the airport where they had just dropped off a girl I knew from high school in San Francisco.

Back at the bus, they could see that we were in a real fix.

One of them said, "we live in a group house over in Newton. A guy who lives in another group house across the street from us, owns a gas station down the street. I bet he would let you park your bus there. And while you are getting it fixed, you all can stay in our big house. We have lots of room."

Sure enough, Sean, the guy across the street with the gas station didn't just let us park in his lot. He towed us back to it, no charge.

So there we were in Boston, living in a group house with a bunch of other hippies and students with a blown bus motor and not nearly enough money to replace it. It took us close to six weeks to earn that money.

We found work at first busing and washing dishes

at the Boston College cafeteria. The students clearly all had an unlimited meals plan. So the students would often go bring a second or third round of food to their table and just play with it, or throw it at each other until they got up and left. The amount of food waste was astonishing. We only lasted a few days.

Then we met this guy at a party who ran a building maintenance company who needed a crew to paint the interior of an apartment building. This got us enough money to buy a used motor at a truck parts place plus enough money to get us back to the west coast.

We had a farewell party with everyone from the two group houses attending. We expressed our love and gratitude and we were on our way back west.

We took a more southerly route and barely stopped until we arrived in Salina Kansas. Judith had a close friend there who allowed us to shower, eat and relax for a bit before we drove on.

While we were there hanging out, Joel, who had been out at the bus, comes in the house and says, "hey people there's a cop outside who is telling us that we have to all get in the bus and follow him down to the police station." Judith's friend was

outraged, but what could we do?

So we dutifully got back on the bus and followed the city police car to the station. They had us go around the back where they opened a large garage door and instructed us to drive inside. Then they closed the door, sealing the bus inside, and brought us in to the police station.

They put the women in one room and the men in another.

They did not interview the women, but one-by-one they interviewed each of us men. They started with Joel, then Brian, then Paul. Each time one of them returned, the rest of us whispered, "did they ask you about the stash?"

Each time the answer was no. They had not asked about drugs at all.

Then it was my turn.

They brought me into a small room and I sat in a wooden chair across from a policeman wearing a brown suit. His tie clip was a couple of little silver handcuffs. There were other officers present. These were stern men who all looked like Marine Corps veterans.

After a few pleasantries they got down to business. What were we doing in their town? Visiting a friend.

What are we doing out on the road like this? We're trying to bring a message of peace and trying to catch up with our Caravan, which had gone through Kansas a few weeks before.

Kansas was hostile enough to the Caravan that they stationed state troopers at every Interstate offramp to make sure they would not stop for anything but gas until they reached the Colorado border.

Then he said, "Well John, do you take drugs?"

In an instant I had to decide what to answer. And do it calmly. I figured that if I confess to smoking weed, they might not ask me about the psychedelics. I knew that if they found our little stash of tablets and mushrooms, we were in much bigger trouble.

So I said, "I smoke marijuana."

he looked me straight in the eye and said, "Well John, do you have any marijuana on your bus?"

Again I must instantly decide what to reply. If I

say no, I am sure they would tear the bus apart until they found it. So I can't say that or we're all going to prison.

What little bit of psychedelics and paraphernalia we had were stashed in another part of the bus. Maybe if I give up the weed they will not press us for whatever else we may be hiding.

So I said "yes we do."

"And how much do you have?"

I gulped inwardly and said, "about a pound."

That was enough to put us all away for many years.

"Well John, when we get done here we're all going to go out to your bus and you are going to give it to us. Now let's go out and get the rest of your group."

When I entered the room with the other guys they asked me the same whispered question..."did they ask about the dope?"

I swallowed hard and said , "yes." They all turned pale.

Then we all, men and women, went with about four policemen out to the bus. We opened up the door and we all went inside.

Our bus interior decor was not expensive, but it was well done with nice fabrics. It was clean and neat, and there was an unmistakable atmosphere inside. We had gone through so much together over the previous six months that the vibe inside seems to linger and descend on those guys.

Their faces softened. They looked around in a kind of wonder. This was the middle of Kansas. They had not seen much of the counterculture other than what was on TV and in magazines, which never portrayed people like us in a positive light.

They were clearly charmed by being in there. They relaxed. "Who are you people?"

They asked us deeper questions about our purpose and our philosophy. Yes we had long hair and fairly exotic clothing styles. But we weren't the least bit threatening. They could see that we weren't dirty. We weren't involved in some scary Manson-like cult. We were clear-eyed, and even under those circumstances, were still overtly friendly. They in turn became more friendly to us.

Soon enough the police chief says, "Ok John, it's

time for you to bring out your marijuana.”

I opened a little hidden door and pulled out the remainder of our kilo brick and handed it to him. I was sure that soon we would all be in handcuffs.

But the chief said, “well John, we’re going to keep this. And you all are going to start this bus up and drive it out of Kansas without stopping except for gas.”

“Yes sir!” we seemed to say in unison. “Um, what are you going to do with the pot?”

“Oh, we’ll use it for an exhibit at the county fair. Now you all get going!”

We drove all night and the next day until we got to northern Arizona where we met up with Brian’s brother who lived on a funky ranch out near Cottonwood. After our encounter with the Salina police, I was in a kind of fluish daze but recovered quickly out in the pristine desert wilderness. There was abundant citrus, dates, figs and other desert food. We recharged and pushed on to L.A.

Visiting with Christina’s family in LA, I used their phone to call my father.

He said, “It’s a good thing you called because there

is a letter here from the Army draft board saying that since you didn't go to your draft physical in January, you are ordered to appear for a physical in ten days and if you pass they will induct you into the army on the spot and if you don't show up they will send the FBI after you. So I suggest you return home as soon as possible. Tell your friends to take you to LAX and there will be a ticket waiting for you.

So I did. I flew home to San Francisco and my parents' nice house.

I had a week deal with being drafted.

Part 3:

In the spring of 1971 our Sausalito Bus returned to California after a six month coast to coast tour that included a six-week layover in Boston because our engine had thrown a rod sending nine quarts of oil onto a Boston street and had to be replaced, which took weeks for us to earn the money, locate a motor and install it.

But I had to cut the trip short in LA after I called my father who told me I needed to return home pronto to appear for my US Army draft physical. Because while I was back in Boston I had blown off my first order to appear, this time they said if I

show up and pass the physical they will induct me on the spot. And if I don't show up the FBI will come after me.

I was just a few months past my 20th birthday, which was prime age to be called up to go join my peers fighting in Vietnam. At that time there were about 250,000 Americans fighting that war.

I wanted no part of it. I was opposed to that war back when it started and by 1971 I was deeply committed to nonviolence. And my next door neighbor, who I had been close to since the second grade, was killed over there right around the time I received my order to appear.

But how do I get out of going? I was 20 and able-bodied. I had no physical ailments or handicaps that would disqualify me. And despite my nonviolent philosophy, I was not attached to a church or organization that could qualify me as a conscientious objector.

My father set up a meeting for me with a lawyer who had handled other draft cases. But he had no concrete suggestions for me other than, "if they accept you at the physical, I advise you to refuse induction, and we'll see what we can figure out after that."

I left there with no confidence that my choices were more than, go in the army, go to Canada, or go to prison. But then I remembered that a friend had told me some months before that if you visit with a psychiatrist and they give you a letter recommending that the Army not take you, they had to let you be interviewed by the Army shrink, who had the power to disqualify you for military service. This was my only chance.

I had a session with the psychiatrist father of a close friend from high school, who, after hearing my tales of psychic exploration involving psychedelics, and my bus life as part of an unusual countercultural spiritual group, he handed me a letter describing these experiences and recommending to the army that I was not a suitable candidate for military service. He was right, but would the Army think so?

By this time, the bus had arrived back in San Francisco. The Caravan had already come and gone. After returning to San Francisco the group of about 65 buses and more than two hundred people decided not to disband the community that had formed on the road. The decision was to find some land and form a permanent community. But instead of California, they headed back east to Tennessee where the land was much cheaper and there were fewer rules about building and living

out in the country.

So our little group had to decide what to do. I obviously couldn't go. Judith had a VW bug she had left with friends so she and Paul took it east. Terry went off with friends. Joel, Brian and Christina weren't sure they wanted to go live in Tennessee so they chose to stay with the bus. Pretty soon they all dispersed.

But not until Joel, Judith and Terry took me down to the Draft Board building for my physical. When I got out we decided that if I wasn't back on the street in something like three or four hours, they could assume I was not going to show up for a ride home.

For my draft physical I chose to present myself as I really was: long blonde hair, the wispy beginnings of a beard, and loose clothing that looked like I had just come from meditating at an ashram.

I wore a pullover white muslin shirt with an embroidered butterfly just below the placket that had been made and given to me in Boston by a girl I had met there. My pants were loose white cotton held up by a drawstring. On my feet were straw sandals I had bought in Japan Town. I wore no underwear. I never did in those days.

There were perhaps a hundred or more young guys there for the physical that day. The first thing we did was sit at long tables filling out questionnaires asking questions about our physical and mental health and hygiene habits. I didn't want to lie, but I thought certain answers might help get me disqualified. So I answered, sure, I wet my bed. I have recurring bad dreams. I have depression and anxiety. I'm antisocial. None of that was true and it turned out not to matter anyway.

After that they led us into a big room where we had to all line up in a long straight row. In came a sergeant who had the demeanor of a basic training drill instructor. Tough. Muscular. Mean.

He barked out his orders to us. "This is a hernia check. Drop your pants down to you skivvies!"

I wasn't wearing underwear and was generally unconcerned about nudity anyway, so I dropped my pants and stood there fully exposed. Since I was the only one without underwear, I was easy to spot.

The sarge came over to me, looked me up and down, stuck his angry face about a foot from my nose and yelled, "pull your pants up!"

I obliged and soon enough a doctor in a white lab

coat came down the line holding each person's scrotum while he coughed.

Then more tests: height, weight, eyesight, hearing, heart, lungs, and possible deformities in the feet, ankles and knees.

Each part of the physical is called a 'station.' everyone goes through the first ten stations. But if you have that psychiatrist's letter, you get to go to Station Eleven for your interview with the Army shrink.

I opened the door and entered the room. There was an officer - I think he was a colonel - sitting behind a desk. In front of the desk was a single wooden chair.

I sat down and handed him the letter. He took it and started reading. His brow furrowed deeper the more he read. Then he looked up at me and said, "why don't you want to go into the Army?"

After a few seconds I replied, "I can't kill."

Right away he looked down and started quickly writing on some form. After a few minutes he was still writing. I had no idea what was going on, so I said, "excuse me sir, but are you giving me a deferment?" which was what I was hoping for.

About a minute later he stopped writing, put his pen down, and with a stern, angry expression he said, "No. I am permanently disqualifying you from ever being able to serve in any of our armed forces. And if you ask me, if you don't shape up fast you're going to end up on skid row. Now get out of here and take this to the window down the hall!"

"Yes sir!"

I went to the window, which was like an old bank teller window with a 4 inch hole in the middle for speaking and a gap between the glass and the counter for passing papers. I handed it to the small elderly woman on the other side, who looked at it and said, "ooh...you're one of the lucky ones!"

As she was typing out a new draft card for me I looked to my left through a half-opened door and saw all of the guys I had just spent the day with standing in a row with their right hands raised to take the oath.

The woman handed my new draft card. 4-F! No chance of going to Vietnam or anywhere else they might want to send me.

Thinking later about why they rejected me, I

thought it wasn't the drugs. It seemed like half the soldiers over there were on drugs of some sort. And it wasn't religion or spirituality. The Army has chaplains for all sorts of faiths. But drugs AND religion - that must be it.

When I came out Judith, Terry and Joel were waiting for me.

Soon after, my group dispersed - off to Tennessee, or a tour of the west in the bus.

I Couldn't go. I had to pay \$40 to the shrink for my letter and I owed another friend some money for a guitar I had bought from him.

Later, around the time summer began, I received a letter from a friend who was living in Tennessee with the Caravan, which by now had secured a stable place to park on some land about 65 miles south of Nashville near the little hamlet of Summertown.

The letter informed me that the gate was closed. No new people will be accepted for the foreseeable future. Sorry.

"Well that's that," I thought. "Can't go there. Now what?"

I had no idea where the bus was by then so I decided to spend the summer with my mother and younger brother up at a family cabin along the American River not far downstream from Echo Pass and Lake Tahoe.

At the end of the summer I went with some friends to camp in Yosemite Valley. Back then there was a walk-in campground that was away from the other campgrounds that cost just twenty-five cents per night. The 20 or so campsites were all used by hippies, stoners and other far-left characters. Each night a ranger with a pony tail under his ranger hat came by to collect our quarters. We stayed there for two months until it got uncomfortably cold.

I came home to another letter from my friend in Tennessee saying the gate was now open so come on out.

I learned through another friend that Joel was in town so I tracked him down. He had toured all the way to Yellowstone Park in the bus with Brian and Christina but they had since broken up and Brian had driven the bus down to his Phoenix Arizona home town.

Joel said he knew that Brian didn't want to keep the bus and we both wanted to move to Tennessee to be with our tribe, which had now purchased a

thousand acres almost next to the land they had been using over the summer.

They named it simply, The Farm. It sounded as if there was no other farm in their minds, but it was really based on the idea of not assigning any personality to the name.

Joel had a friend named Sam who wanted to go with us, so in November 1971 we hitchhiked down to Phoenix. But we took a roundabout route getting there.

Joel had friends who lived near Nevada City in the Sierra foothills at Ananda Village, a yoga community led by a disciple of Paramahansa Yogananda named Kriyananda. They made money by making and selling incense down in San Francisco and other places. Two of those guys, one named Harith and the other Hari Dass, were driving home to the ashram so we took a ride with them up there.

After a couple of days hanging out with Joel's friends we headed south. We stopped in Modesto and tracked down a friend who had briefly lived on the Sausalito Bus but had to leave to deal with an old pot bust. He was living in a small house with his girlfriend right next door to the Universal Life Church headquarters, who was the church's

secretary and only employee. After a couple of more days we hitched down to LA to visit more friends and finally on to Phoenix. We had a casual relationship to scheduling in those days. Ready to get going but happy to hang out.

We were headed to a hamlet on the far southwest corner of town called Laveen. Back then Phoenix was a lot smaller and a lot funkier at its edges. Now the suburbs are encroaching fast with schools, parks, tract houses and golf courses. But those last few properties on the southern edge of the city still have some dirt roads, funky ranchettes and neglected orchards set up against the raw desert leading to South Mountain Park.

The bus was parked at an informal little commune in a little ranchette along a dirt road and an irrigation canal.

The place had a ranch house in front and a smaller house in back. Behind that was a multi-acre grapefruit orchard in back with trees that had become messy tangles, but they still provided edible fruit.

Out in back among the trees was a tipi.

People came and went but the core group was two couples and a few single guys and a couple of single women. Brian's brother Steve was one of

the single guys there. Brian, by that time, was living in another part of Phoenix. Everyone at the Laveen place were all welcoming and congenial. Easy to get to know, easy to get along with. We fell right in with them.

It was great to be back with the bus and to have a firm destination and plan. But we didn't have money and would need to earn a bundle before we could head east.

The way the group made money was by making and selling carrot juice in a most unconventional and underground way.

They would take a pickup truck out to the huge carrot fields outside of Phoenix and buy up a truckload of carrots that the markets won't sell. Carrots with two forks, sometimes twisted together. Carrots that bent at weird angles. Anything they thought shoppers would reject they sold to our guys. They typically bought nine full burlap bags of carrots for a total of five dollars. I imagine if we had not bought them, they would just be thrown away.

Back at the little ranch, we would set up a bank of juicers on a long table and with rock music blasting out of some outdoor speakers, we juiced carrots by the hundreds and poured it into a few dozen one-

gallon glass jugs.

One of the guys who seemed to know every hippie in Phoenix then drove the jugs around to the houses of the friends who had ordered them. Carrot juice at the health food store was expensive back then and often not that fresh. It was a lively little underground business.

The ranch was also a place where a couple of peyote dealers stashed their buttons at various times. For us residents, it was available just about any time we wanted to partake. Which was often.

I hooked up with a young woman named Robyn who was living in the tipi out back. She decided, without knowing much about it, to go with us.

Soon, Joel, Sam, Robyn and I got jobs as late night janitors cleaning a big office building in downtown Phoenix. In a few weeks we had enough money to get the bus on the road. The cargo bays of the bus were loaded with boxes of oranges, figs, dates, and nuts. The bus had been running reliably since we replaced the motor in Boston the year before and it started right up after we said our farewells to our hosts in Laveen.

I was excited about finally going to a permanent home with my tribe. But inside I was conflicted

about it. I was disappointed that they chose Tennessee. I wanted to stay out west. And despite having grown a lot personally from the ongoing encounter-group aspect of our little bus collective, between that and all the encounters I had with the police and the military, the part of me that just wanted to be a free spirit in the counterculture was almost equally strong.

While we were in Laveen we had received in the mail from Tennessee a big printed sheet called "The Farm Report: what's happening with those beatniks in Summertown?" Stephen Gaskin insisted that we weren't hippies, but rather, beatniks. He used to say, "I'm too old to be a hippie." This never made much sense to me. I had grown up in some proximity to real 1950s beatniks and what we were doing didn't resemble that at all. I sort of understood why Stephen felt that way for himself, but as a label for all of us?

But what gave me the most pause were the photos. Not the one of the beautiful mother and newborn baby. It was the stern expressions on the faces in the other pictures. Our Sausalito Bus trip had deviated a lot from the actual Caravan. While we were staying in Boston we made numerous excursions around the area. We went up to Maine and Vermont visiting with others engaged in their own version of what we thought of as a New Age.

And some of us were big fans of the Grateful Dead and the more freewheeling ethos they represented. We had picked each other apart many times but came through it with our sense of humor intact. Did I really want to go live in a state that didn't interest me among people who were going to continue aggressively to peel back whatever layers of subconscious I might still be exhibiting? Deep down I wasn't sure.

But I felt a responsibility to bring the bus to its rightful place with the tribe. And I wanted to be a part of it. And I knew I could always leave if it didn't work out.

Sam and Robyn had not experienced the same things Joel and I had. Sam was a big strong but gentle guy who carried with him a number of strong convictions that were already compatible with the group he was about to join.

But Robyn didn't know any of the people and may or may not have shared all of our practices. And I think my inner conflicts didn't much help her prepare for it. She had no good idea of what to expect. As it turned out she didn't last long there.

But I would only know how I felt about it all after arriving and living there for awhile. So I put my misgivings aside and committed to pushing on to

Tennessee.

The trip there was not too eventful. I got a traffic ticket in Alamogordo New Mexico for pulling the bus onto a well-lit street at night, turning the headlights on once in the lane rather than before we had moved. I thought it was an unfair ticket and never paid it. Later, I got threatening letters from the New Mexico Attorney General for a couple of years but nothing came of it. And I bonked an old late-40s car in a parking lot giving it a small dent. But the old gentleman who owned the car said to never mind, he didn't care.

We picked up a couple of hitchhikers along the way. One told us he thought there was a monastic air in the bus. Another entertained us by reciting, spoken-word style, the lyrics to numerous cowboy and gunfighter songs like "El Paso" "The Ballad of Ira Hayes" and "Don't Take Your Guns to Town."

It was winter and as we traveled east and into the midwest, the arid land became frozen cropland and bare trees. The excitement grew as we crossed the Mississippi River at Memphis and turned onto US Highway 64 that would take us almost directly to Summertown.

We had to stop and ask for directions to the actual front gate of The Farm. You go west on highway

20 and turn on a chert road called Drake's Lane. Then another turn that heads down and then up a small but fairly steep gully and at the top of the little rise there it was: The Farm's front gate. We arrived just as the sun was going down on a clear February evening. It was three weeks past my twenty-first birthday.

There was a tiny hexagonal building on the right just past the actual gate, which was open. About fifty yards ahead was a small house with a porch full of people looking eagerly our way.

When we pulled up and stopped, the gate man emerged and came up the first step past our open bus door.

"Howdy!," he said. "Welcome."

We told him that we were the Sausalito Bus. We had spent more than a year trying to catch up to the Caravan and finally, we had.

He opened up the ledger book he was holding and said, "I'm Leslie. What are y'all's names?"

Joel, John, Robyn and Sam.

Leslie said "Sam. Is that your full name? We use our full names here."

Sam said, "well, no. Actually the name on my birth certificate is Frank, but nobody ever calls me Frank. I've always been Sam since I was a baby."

Leslie said, "but since we go by our real names here, you have to be Frank."

"But I don't want to be Frank..."

All this time I can see our friends anxiously awaiting us to come in for a big greeting so I said, "Can't we sort this out later?"

Leslie says, "no, we really can't go further until we resolve it. Using our full real name is one of our agreements."

So, Sam finally says, "Ok, put down Frank then."

Finally we drove in. Later Stephen arbitrated the whole thing by changing Sam to Samuel, which is what everyone called him for years until we let go of enforcing that convention and he went back to being Sam.

There were a dozen or more people on the porch including Judith and Paul. We shut off the motor and stepped out to greet our friends with warm hugs.

Stephen Gaskin, emerged from the porch. He knew me a little since I had spoken with him several times in the past. And as soon as Judith saw the bus she told him who we were.

He said, "it's been a long caravan."

After more greetings, hugs and introductions, we drove the bus down the long dirt road into the Farm. The tribe had moved onto this land just a few months before so the former cattle ranch was still mostly undeveloped.

We spent that first night parked next to a small old oak cabin that had been there for many years. It had once been a shack used by moonshiners. But now it was called The Community Kitchen.

I was excited and nervous. Excited because I had finally arrived after more than a year of trying. The people I most wanted to be with were here. Nervous because I had never much committed to anything before. I had no idea how this was going to go. Attending the gatherings in San Francisco was one thing. And we had never caught up to the Caravan itself. While our little bus group started out in rigorous pursuit of an almost absolute purity, over time we became more and more free-spirited. We missed out on growing our commitment to the

teacher and the group as a requirement for continuing, which everyone here in Tennessee had done. Stephen called the Farm a family monastery with him as the Abbot. I had only an abstract notion of what that meant.

But I had come this far. I was not going to turn away or back out. I had to find out for myself. I stayed for eleven years.

I arrived as a 21 year old single guy and left at age 32, married with four kids. During my Farm years I learned to farm, repair vehicles, professionally drive an 18-wheeler, and work as a house remodeler. I played guitar in three different bands. I had numerous run-ins with Stephen, some which resolved and some not so much. I lived five years on Satellite Farms in New York City and Washington DC.

The Farm is still going though it changed years ago from a collective to a cooperative where you pay dues to live there. I have returned a few times since I left in 1983, when there was a large diaspora of residents who didn't want to continue a student-teacher relationship with Stephen. Many, if not most, of the original Caravan members returned like me to live in California. But whether I go back there or not, I will always have that which I most wanted from the start: to be part of the

tribe, this now dispersed community that continues to nurture us through our many deep and abiding friendships.