

Voices FROM THE Farm

Adventures in Community Living
Second Edition



Edited by Rupert Fike



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Preface

The Farm has been, like all communities, a constantly changing landscape of people and situations. From 1971 to the present, The Farm has been an ongoing experiment in collective living that is still evolving and has always been as diverse as the people that inhabit it.

This book is a collection of stories from members of The Farm both current and past, a series of snapshots of Farm life at various stages. There are stories of everyday life as well as important events in the community's history—memoirs of our families, friends, jobs, and households; our hopes and fears; agreements and disagreements; our successes and failures. Our hope is that these stories convey some of the wonder, great pure effort, bewilderment, frustrations, fun, love, and lasting friendships that are part of the experience of living in community.

This book in no way intends itself as a definitive history of The Farm. Rather it is only as the title implies—a sampling of personal histories from those who devoted their total being to a grand experiment.

Preface to Second Edition

The Farm's individual stories remain as important today as they were fourteen years ago when *Voices from The Farm* was first published. And with this new edition we are pleased to include the family photographs which bring these varied accounts of idealism, determination and yes, disenchantment, into the even sharper focus they deserve.

A sentence like, "The water tower fell straight into the Big Pick Up, bouncing one big time then laying still," is arresting in its own right. But the image of an outsized cylinder's crumpling effect on a sawed-off school bus with "beatniks" standing stunned in the aftermath of a near tragedy, staring at what the laws of physics had just done, completes the story in a way words could never do on their own.

And on the micro level, one can observe the expressions of these young people who were engaged in what was unabashedly called, "Out To Save the World" in a time and place when each person's job, however menial, linked to the whole, to the success of perhaps the most important social experiment in this country's past century. It was a time when hundreds of the best and brightest of a generation decided to try and do something special with their lives by sharing fortunes, holding "all things in common" and living as "voluntary peasants" in a "spiritual school" while creating sustainable village technologies that would work just as well in Haiti or Guatemala as in Tennessee.

A teenage boy pumps a stationary bike hooked up to spin a car alternator in hopes of charging a household's 12-volt battery. Soon-to-be world renowned midwives surround the country doctor who provided their early back-up. A former moonshiner dispenses backwoods wisdom to his new neighbors who sometimes (at their peril) disregarded it. Twenty humans push a truck out of the mud (some pushing on each other's butts to get the job done). A new mother with her baby in a front-sling carries two buckets. Another mother gazes with sudden recognition at her new baby.

These are just a few of the images that enliven this book, a book that has been assigned by college professors because of its balanced perspective, a book that has attracted "new" residents to the community, a community still dedicated to the on-going vision to which this new edition of *Voices from The Farm* hopes to contribute.

It's a Farmie Thing

One afternoon about a year ago while David and I were walking into an athletic club near our home in Nashville, we ran into an acquaintance of ours, someone we had known only a short time. We explained that we were stopping in to say hello to a good friend of ours, another former Farm resident, who now managed the cafe in the club and whose daughter (along with the daughter of yet another former Farm resident and friend) worked there. David and I started to get into a very involved explanation of all our connections to this cafe and the people who worked there, but she politely interrupted us and said, "Oh, I get it. It's a Farmie thing."

And of course it was, it was a Farmie thing. This person was astute enough to know that there was such a thing, but how to explain this phenomenon, this connection that exists among all Farm folks, whether still there, just left, or long gone, whether long-time or short-time resident?

Well, above and beyond everything else, there is the religion. We were so earnest. We gathered together every Sunday morning to meditate with complete eagerness. There were no doubters (well, maybe a few visitors) in our meditation group. So many of us had taken psychedelics and had our cultural conditioning blown away enough to experience a world of higher consciousness, to know with a certainty that could not be shaken that Spirit exists and that we are all One. This was the incredible binder, a shared psychedelic vision. We were students of religion together, and we were practitioners of religion together. Our lives were dedicated to our path.

The path we choose was to build a village, from scratch. So those experiences we shared creating our little town bind us together. Because you can't be talking to just anyone and in the middle of the conversation say, "Oh, you know how it is rolling tortillas for fifty people." Or, "Wasn't that crazy and fun going on laundry runs to town in the windowless back of the Cracker Truck, to-



tally dark, sitting on seventy-five loads of dirty laundry?" Or, "Remember when we finally declared a ladies' day at the communal shower house?" These are not common American practices. All these memories of our incredibly rich, sometimes sad, very often hysterically funny experiences are ours alone. They cannot be compared to anything else—not to living



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in another city or another country, or even in another commune. They are absolutely unique, and they absolutely bind us together.

We created a language with words and phrases entirely our own. No one else but those who lived on The Farm would have any idea what “hogany” meant (a state of complaining or whining, usually by a kid). Or what was meant by someone being “into the juice,” (juice was our word for energy, so “into the juice” referred to using more than one’s share of it). No one else would get an immediate chuckle out of merely mentioning the word “yark” or understand its place in our history. (The Yark was the collective call, the howl of the pack. It was our way of saying, “I’m here, I’m here” and turning each individual voice into one—an affirmation that we were all in the same boat.) Only we would understand who the Bank Lady or the Petty Cash Lady was, or the Housing Lady. Only we knew the significance of Farm Hands, the Pumper Truck, and our annual holiday, Ragweed Day.

We named our vehicles and spoke of them familiarly, affectionately—the Diamond T, the Lark, the Bank car, the Big Pickup. We named our houses, sometimes for the material from which they were constructed, sometimes for their site, sometimes for more esoteric reasons: the Adobe, Kissing Tree (two trees in the front yard, their trunks delicately touching), Honey Base (Anthony kept bee hives there), Philharmonic Hall (Philip, a musician, was an original resident). Over time, the houses developed reputations and personalities of their own: some households were known for how well the core couples got along, others were known for how poorly they got along, some houses always found space for pregnant women, some made room for teenagers, some were “well-manifested,” others were not. Their stories and the stories of The Farm’s community buildings—the Community Kitchen, Canning and Freezing, the Soy Dairy, the Sorghum Mill, to name a few, became part of our folklore, part of our shared history. We had institutions that belonged only to us: we “did” the Gate, we “did” the Visitors’ Tent, got sent to the Rock Tumbler (living quarters for hard-edged men who needed



their corners smoothed a bit), we got sent out for “relativity,” occasionally got “put on a thirty-dayer” (a month-long sentence away from the land to thereby better appreciate it).

We all, at some point or another, ran out of wood for the fire on freezing cold nights. We all got ourselves on the laundromat list and then were called by the household ahead of us on the list when it was our turn—3 a.m., twenty degrees, twenty loads of laundry, five or six diaper pails. We all got up and stumbled through the pitch dark to the outhouse. We also all sat in meditation together, then talked about what was in our hearts and minds together. We argued and gossiped together, tried to fix each other, tried to keep our sense of humor when someone else was trying to fix us. We tried very hard and sincerely to take care of those among us who were very young and very old, and to provide a refuge for people who had need of sanctuary.



We were in perfect agreement about doing those things, bound by our ideals. Our collective character was courageous and spunky but also sweet, gentle, and compassionate. And this was our common knowledge.

The land was ours. The open fields fed us and our horses. The meadows gave us our meditation site and a place for all-night boogies. We stomped paths in the floor of the woods from one household to another, from building to building, from hill to hill and hollow to hollow, and along every creek. These were our paths. They became as familiar to us as our hometown streets had been. The creeks showed us their beauty and gave us cool refuge from the heat. We named them and the meadows and, of course, the old logging roads which we reclaimed from the woods with our bulldozer. In the Native American sense we felt a mystical relationship to this land we had bought, and our love for it bound us together.

Our diet was something else that was our own creation. Though some households were more creative with what was available from the store run during a given week, we were pretty much a town that ate the same food every night. Sometimes those foods and the events surrounding their appearance were rather weird—the mere mention of them causes simultaneous laughs and moans: Joshua steaks (early mass-produced vege-gristle that chewed nicely but caused horrific gas); day-old Bunny Bread (originally bought for “sickies,” everyone soon got a taste for this nickel-a-loaf white bread that we sometimes had to pull away from

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pig farmers); survival crackers (just that—from fallout shelter provisions); and then there was wheatberry winter, where every night, there they were on your plate, beside the blighted potatoes: boiled wheat berries.

But mostly our diet was creative, innovative, and delicious. It nourished us in more ways than just physically. We loved our tofu and soymilk—we built our own dairy to make them and exported the soy dairy concept to protein-poor peoples in other countries. Soybeans and soft tortillas—simple, nutritious, wonderfully satisfying—became our national dish.

We are like the Jews of the Bible, those of us who lived on The Farm and left. We created our own diaspora. When our paths cross, we recognize each other with a kind of recognition that goes beyond mere sight. We may not have hung out or even liked each other all that much. We may not have too much to say to each other beyond the initial how are yous. But we have a shared past which creates a connection, the tie our friend referred to as “a Farmie thing.” We are bound by religion, by language, by institutions, by land, by diet, by this unique experience called The Farm.

Marilyn Friedlander



*“We are bound by religion, by language, by institutions, by land,
by this unique experience called The Farm.”*

—Marilyn Friedlander

In 1971, at the height of the counterculture movement, several hundred hippies drove their school buses into southern middle Tennessee and founded one of America's largest, modern-day intentional communities, The Farm. In its heyday, the community was home to over 1,500 optimistic young people and the young-at-heart.

Their purpose for coming together was to support each other in a quest for personal growth. But this search led them to the realization of a greater need: alternative lifestyles that could help raise the standard of living for impoverished people around the world while conserving the planet's resources. The experiments in lifestyle that resulted were not always predictable, but were always interesting, and created lasting bonds among community members that are still strong today.

The Farm remains a vibrant, working environment for change. Why has it lasted so long? Discover the answers as members past and present become the Voices for some of their more memorable experiences.—Albert K. Bates



“One afternoon I was out on the sidewalk. . . and here came Mother Teresa herself along with some other Sisters. First she put her hand on my son Kyle's head and blessed him. Then she shook my hand and said, 'Oh, The Farm and Plenty. You are the heroes of the world.' She had tears in her eyes when she said that, so I started crying too.”

—Nancy Housel

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