



OUT TO CHANGE
THE WORLD

The
Evolution
of
The Farm
Community

Douglas Stevenson

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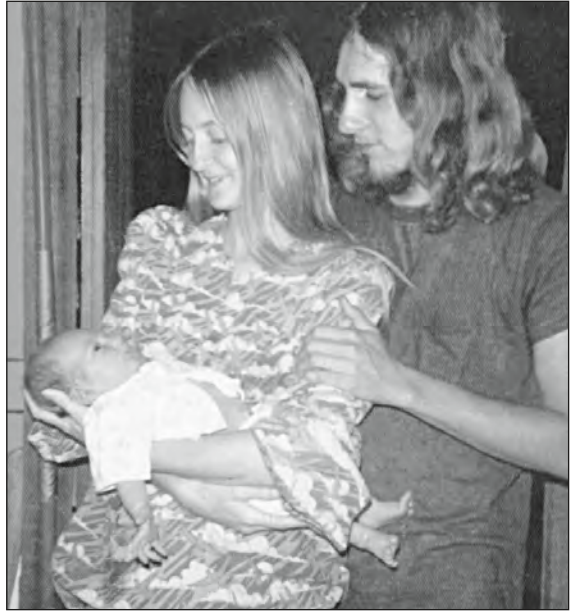
Preface

I have invested virtually all of my adult life in The Farm community. I say “invested” because I have put everything I have both materially and spiritually into it, and reaped the fruits of these efforts a hundredfold.

My wife, Deborah, and I came to The Farm in 1973, two years after the original group landed with the bus Caravan in 1971. We were both nineteen, married almost two years, and together since we were fifteen. When we arrived we were the youngest couple on The Farm.

I remember feeling that we were late to the party. We had missed the Summer of Love in San Francisco, and by the time we got to The Farm, there were already about four hundred people in the community. Now looking back over the last forty years, we have seen so much of the community’s history pass before our eyes and have been very active participants through it all.

As it turns out, 1973 was probably a good time to arrive. Those of us joining the community that year had less of our psyche invested in Stephen Gaskin as a spiritual teacher and guru. As a result, at least from my observation, more of us who arrived at that time made it through the community’s power shift and turmoil of the early 1980s, and have remained in the community to this day. I didn’t want to be “head copped,” that is to say brainwashed, into blindly following anyone, even though I did accept Stephen as a spiritual teacher. To me he was our spokesperson and a figurehead, passing on knowledge and teachings through words and example. I really didn’t have a personal, one-on-one conversation with him for my first seven years with the community.



Deborah, Douglas, and baby Jody on The Farm, 1974.

Very early on I expressed that I believed the real spiritual teacher was the community itself, with every individual committed to self-improvement by endeavoring to follow universal spiritual truths. Stephen brought these truths to our attention and awareness through his weekly sermons on Sunday, which were also transcribed, edited, and put out as books. The community, or more correctly the people you lived with, the people you worked with, were the ones who got to see the real you and would get on your case, pointing out your ego, your mistakes, and the ways you were falling short of our collective ideals. This is how you changed and grew as a person.

Our son was born in 1974 with the help of The Farm Midwives. In the late fall of that year, when our son was just a few months old, Deborah and I moved to a smaller, satellite community in Kentucky, called The Green River Farm, which started out with just one other family and grew to about twenty-five folks over the course of our two years there. During our second summer at Green River Farm, we went back to Tennessee for several months for the delivery of our second child, a daughter.

After our return, in the fall of 1975, the Kentucky group collectively decided to sell that land and a bunch of us went to another satellite Farm in upstate New York. Deborah and I stayed there for a few months and in the spring moved back to Tennessee. By the next fall we were ready for something new and went down to spend the winter at The Florida Farm, which was actually more of a city center. Come spring we went back up to Tennessee.

In the fall of 1978, we moved once again to experience the adventure of a lifetime, working with Plenty, The Farm's new nonprofit that was managing relief projects in Guatemala. I can only describe our time there as a peak life experience, and it forever changed my view of the world. Our return to Tennessee in September of 1980 was not entirely by choice. It was brought about by the dangerous political climate in Guatemala after the election of Ronald Reagan as US president, whose policies led to a brutal repression in which hundreds of thousands of Mayan people were killed and millions more became refugees in their own country and along the border with Mexico.

Things were a bit different when we returned to The Farm this time. The population had swelled to around fifteen hundred people, but the infrastructure and income needed to support that many people just wasn't there. By the fall of 1983, the communal system collapsed under its

own weight. Over the next several years, there was a steady exodus until only 100 adults and 150 kids remained. We were among those who stayed.

I started a small business. Deborah went back to school to become a registered nurse and graduated first in her class. She also received training and became one of The Farm Midwives. The kids grew up and started their lives as adults.

In the meantime, over the next several decades, I got more involved in the community, serving four years (two terms) on its membership committee, six years (two terms) on its board of directors, and eight years as community manager. I took on the tasks of public relations and interfacing with press and media. A natural extrovert, I have always used my gift of music to provide entertainment, starting with the communal households of the 1970s. Even more importantly, once the communal period came to an end, I used music as part of the glue to hold the community together, performing in bands, organizing festivals, and keeping alive our annual tribal reunion.

Starting around the turn of the century, I began developing retreats, workshops, and conferences wrapped in the various themes of community and sustainability as a way to encourage others to follow their dreams. Community provides a richness of experience that is unparalleled, deeply intertwining work and play, family and friends, joys and sorrows.

I have tried to tell our story as accurately as possible to the best of my knowledge. In the early days of The Farm, I was not part of the “inner sanctum,” or engaged in the higher levels of management. I was a worker bee like thousands of others who came to The Farm to be a part of something bigger than ourselves, to follow a spiritual path, to make a difference in the world.

It has been a very full life. I am honored to share The Farm’s story, and my story, with you.

Looking for Land

Finding land was no small endeavor. The search was a series of false starts and important lessons. Some may say that it took divine intervention for so many pieces to have fallen into place. But followers of Stephen's teachings would say that it was the result of good karma, cause and effect, and that finding the right location for The Farm was the logical outcome of setting a pure intention.

The Search Begins

As The Caravan left San Francisco for the last time, it soon became clear that the road ahead would be full of challenges. Pulling into a rest stop before the buses had even left California, a cop came up and told the group they couldn't stay there and that they should keep moving. A few hours later, when The Caravan hit the state line, fifty cop cars were lying in wait with their red lights flashing. As it turned out, however, the police were not a problem. They were happy to see the group go and made themselves available to see that The Caravan did just that. The pattern of a police escort across state lines replayed over and over again as the convoy worked its way across the country. At each state line the cops on one side would pass The Caravan over to their counterparts on the other side and say, "These guys are okay."

As The Caravan continued eastward, the question of where to buy land and settle grew more meaningful. The intent was to get land on which to build a new way for people to live, but where was this ideal place? The obvious answer was to follow the vibes.

The Caravan had received a warm reception in Minneapolis. However, that was the only thing warm about the place. The harsh winters and limited growing season quickly eliminated any states that far north from the field of choices.

If only it had been so easy to recognize. As group members sought a property to purchase, unbeknownst to them, the FBI had other ideas. And this made efforts to settle down that much more difficult. Requests through the Freedom of Information Act have revealed that Stephen and The Farm had been monitored by the FBI from the very beginning. Although most of the information in the reports has been blacked out, legend has it that the Tennessee office of the FBI was ordered to visit all the realty agents in the area with clear orders from their superiors: Do not sell the hippies any land. If they are unable to buy land, they will have to keep moving, and eventually the group will dissipate and disappear. Problem solved.

Not everyone received that message, though. Just a little way down the road from the Martin farm, Carlos Smith owned one thousand acres affectionately known as the Black Swan Ranch, named for Big Swan Creek that flowed nearby. About two hundred acres had been cleared and were being used as cattle pasture. Another one hundred acres or more had been logged recently and was starting to become overgrown with scrub shrubbery, red sumac mixed with blackberries and blackjack oak. The remaining acreage was in a majestic stand of southern hardwood forest, spread out over narrow fingers of ridgeline divided by steep valleys. A small creek bisected the land and numerous springs popped out from the hillsides.

Carlos and his family lived in a small ranch-style house near the property's edge, close to the road. There was a barn near the house, and a small shed was situated farther down a dirt road that ran through a cleared pasture. Like so many people of the time, Carlos was ready to be done with farming. This seemed like a good opportunity to sell and move on to something else. A deal was struck: one thousand acres for seventy dollars an acre. "An acre of land for less than the price of a kilo of grass," Stephen was fond of saying, with a wry chuckle.

The land purchase is one of the best illustrations of the commitment to the cause that was burning inside the hearts and souls of this core group of people who had dedicated themselves to the creation of this new community. Most of the money to pay for the property came from a few folks with small inheritances. Others who had accumulated a bit of savings contributed, too. Altogether, it was enough to pay for the thousand-acre tract in cash . . . and just like that, the hippies had their land.

It is important to note that Carlos didn't take the money and move away. He bought a house right in the middle of Summertown, just a couple of

miles down the road from his farm. In essence he was making a statement to all the Tennesseans for miles around: “The hippies are good people. I think they will be good neighbors for our community.” We always respected him for that.

The Black Swan Ranch property featured a long dirt road leading from the house for about three-quarters of a mile to the end of the cleared fields. There, a staging area had been established for earlier logging operations. From that point logging roads went down a series of ridges in several directions, almost like the fingers of a hand. The staging area was christened “Head of the Roads,” and from there the rough and rutted logging roads were numbered and named in sequence: First Road, Second Road, Third Road, Fourth Road, and Fifth Road. In August 1971, the buses made their way down each one, pulling off to park along any place that appeared to be relatively flat.

Beyond The Farm’s borders, in virtually all directions, lay thousands of acres of hardwood forest. At a thousand acres, The Farm was arguably already the largest hippie commune in the world, but land so cheap was an irresistible opportunity, so in 1973 a deal was struck to purchase the adjoining property. That gave the community another 750 acres. About one hundred acres of this land was cleared and ready for cultivation, including a “back forty,” a plot known as Shoemaker Field. The rest was in forest. The Farm was now in possession of over three square miles.

The Smith family’s 1950s-style ranch home became known as “The House,” and it was the only residential building on the property. The House was turned into the main base of operations primarily because it had the only electricity, running water, bathroom, and phone line. One former bedroom sometimes functioned as a clinic, another as an office. The living room and front porch became Stephen’s point of interface with the rest of the community. One might compare it to a guru giving “darshan” or a king holding court. Members of the community, Stephen’s “students,” would come there seeking his opinion, advice, or blessing. Crew leaders and managers in positions of responsibility gave reports. New arrivals wishing to join the community were required to make a personal connection with Stephen and make an agreement to accept him as their spiritual teacher, asking permission to stay. All of this made The House a focal point of Farm energy.

The groundwork for The Farm’s economic organization had its beginnings back on The Caravan. To keep all the buses running, those who



Living Together

Because most members at this time were in their twenties and thirties, there was still plenty of incentive for an active social life—in other words, to party. For most of us, this essentially meant hanging out and laughing a lot, listening to or making music, and having a good time. In the outside world, circles of young people often have one friend who accepts the role of party house host and whose home becomes the weekend gathering spot. When the chemistry was right, every house on The Farm felt like a party house, with large groups of young people drawn together, celebrating life by living on the edge, in a way Mom and Dad just didn't understand. It was a blast.



The energy created by so many people living together and sharing a common spiritual purpose was undeniable . . . and a lot of fun!

Working It Out

This experiment in communal living on a mass scale came to define life on The Farm in the mid to late 1970s and early 1980s. Living in such close quarters meant that people got to know each other quickly, discovering the good as well as the bad, including those character flaws that

Stephen called our “egos.” Because each person (supposedly) came to the community with the intention to grow spiritually, it was expected that those closest to you would inform you about your personal shortcomings. These typically included such habits as getting uptight; speaking harsh, unkind words; having a self-serving attitude; and displaying a number of other undesirable mannerisms.

“Working it out” was about being honest and open; it meant that we were obligated always to speak the truth to each other. If a person did or said something that made you feel uncomfortable, you were expected to address the issue. It was important to bring these issues forward so that hurt and resentment would not linger in the subconscious. When someone came forward to discuss this kind of a problem, in Farm jargon we’d say: “I have subconscious with you.” Often just bringing things out in the open would be enough to relieve the tension and help everyone remain friends.

On the other hand, when offering your thoughts on how someone needed to change, there was no guarantee that they would be open to the information. That person was just as likely to become defensive, even argumentative. When, as was often the case, the dispute was between two people, each one had a role in the situation and both naturally had something to say to each other. These conversations became known as the “sort out,” referring to the task of hearing out both sides to determine the truth. When it worked, it was a foundation for great personal growth.

Perhaps nowhere was this more evident and beneficial than in the changes that could take place within the relationship of a couple. On The Farm we observed that after the honeymoon period was over, it was not uncommon for spouses to begin taking each other for granted, falling into a pattern of bickering. Hurtful things could be said, gruff attitudes could become the norm, and a couple in a relationship might not treat each other as well as they would a friend or stranger. For couples living alone in a single-family home, these energy loops could continue to progress in a downward spiral until the relationship was beyond repair and ended in a separation.

Because couples on The Farm lived in communal households, their relationships played out before an audience that observed each person’s role. These folks brought an outside yet intimate perspective and could call the two spouses on their “stuff” (behavior and habits). Since this period on The Farm was also in step with the women’s movement, a cultural awakening in the United States during which traditional male and female roles were being challenged, frequently it was the husband who was the

The Changeover

Although the date of The Changeover was in October 1983, this was actually a process that took place over the course of several years, punctuated by the key events that led to the breakdown of the established order and triggered shifts in Farm agreements. Marked by the end of common economic interdependence and shared income, The Changeover was also the formal dissolution of Stephen's reign. No longer could he and his family set policy or make financial decisions that affected the entire community. As time wore on, we had come to see Stephen differently. He seemed less like a divinely inspired, spiritual teacher; it had become evident that he was simply a man—a good man, but one who had ego issues that were the obvious result of too much power.

The Changeover was a dramatic shift for everyone involved in The Farm. Hundreds panicked and made a hasty exit, scattering to all corners of the country. Their security shaken, more than a few found themselves starting from scratch, with nothing to show for their efforts over the previous decade. It was as if that time had vanished into thin air. When the dust settled, a core group of about 100 adults and their 150 children remained on the land. Their resolve to save The Farm from bankruptcy and dissolution, and to maintain the integrity of the land in its entirety, shaped the foundation of the community as it exists today.

The End of the Beginning

The decision was made and a meeting was called. The Community Center was packed. It seemed like everyone was there. We all knew that something big was about to go down, but no one was quite sure what was going to happen. The board of directors sat at the front of the room. One of the board members stood up and announced that our communal economy and interdependence was over. That was it.

Finding New Strengths

By the time the 1990s rolled around, the dust from The Changeover had settled. The base population on The Farm had stabilized, and those who remained had settled into some method of supporting themselves and their families. The debt on the land had been paid off by the late 1980s, so the task of operating and making new improvements to the community's infrastructure could be determined through an annual assessment and approval of a budget confirmed by a democratic vote. A working system of government was in place. We'd achieved a lot in a relatively short time. Not only had we cleared our debts, but also we'd improved our living conditions and created a new version of our original dream. The image and face of The New Farm was emerging.

If the 1980s had been a period of introspection, then the 1990s was a time when the community began to lift its head and see that it still had something to offer, that it still could be a viable example of an alternative to mainstream society. One of the more subtle, but nonetheless important, accomplishments, we felt, was that The Farm had survived the tenure of Ronald Reagan. The 1980s had been marked by a direct assault on everything that might fall under the heading of counterculture values. As the nation made a hard shift to the right, expressed as rampant materialism, it cast aside many of the social programs, alternative energy initiatives, and environmental concerns of previous decades. In a way, The Farm had taken on a new role, serving as a symbol of counterculture values, offering hope and inspiration to all those who had been forced to give up their ideals.

Teenagers

Perhaps The Farm's biggest challenge of the 1990s was dealing with a population of nearly 150 teenagers, all raised to question authority and

In 1971, more than three hundred hippie idealists—in a caravan of sixty brightly painted school buses and assorted other vehicles—landed on an abandoned farm in central Tennessee. They had a mission: to be a part of something bigger than themselves, to follow a peaceful and spiritual path, and to make a difference in the world.

OUT TO CHANGE THE WORLD tells the story of how those hippies established The Farm, one of the largest and longest-lasting intentional communities in the United States. Starting with the 1960s' Haight-Ashbury scene where it all began, continuing through the changeover from commune to collective, and culminating with the present, this is the first complete account of The Farm's origins, inception, growth, and evolution. By turns inspiring, cautionary, triumphant, and wistful, it's a captivating narrative from start to finish.

"This book is a chronicle of one of America's best-known intentional communities. Douglas describes extraordinary events in plain language, unfolding a compelling story of hope, sacrifice, disillusionment, and recovery. Although those involved with The Farm were out to change the world, Douglas reveals that in the end they were as touched by the magic of the The Farm experience as those far beyond their borders."

—**Laird Schaub**, executive secretary, Fellowship for Intentional Community

"For its hundreds of core members, The Farm was a spiritual commitment or a social experiment, depending on your viewpoint. For Douglas, it was and still is the ideal rural lifestyle. His personal story is both a shared community history and a fascinating personal journey from which we can all learn."

—**Cliff Figallo**, founding member of The Farm and The WELL online community

"*Out to Change the World* is not only an impassioned story of a brave, committed group creating something extraordinary but also a wonderful entry point for understanding the communities movement today. Although I was already familiar with The Farm's story, I found myself engrossed in each chapter, as the narrative is both absorbing and filled with heart. Any aficionado of the communities movement, or anyone who's simply curious about what it takes to start or live in a community, will enjoy *Out to Change the World*."

—**Diana Leafe Christian**, *Creating a Life Together and Finding Community*

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