Every Monday night during the late 1960s, a group of people met at Glide Memorial Church and the Family Dog Ballroom in San Francisco to discuss religion, drugs, the war in Vietnam, and the failures of free market capitalism. Those meetings stemmed from a class called "North American White Witchcraft" offered by a dope-smoking ex-Marine named Stephen Gaskin.

From those meetings emerged an extraordinary dream of building a new, classless society from the ground up. On October 12, 1970, Gaskin and about 150 others boarded 35 buses and traveled around the nation for nearly eight months. The caravan reached its final destination near the rural hamlet of Summertown, Tennessee. There, on 1,750 mostly wooded acres, the grand experiment they called the Farm began to rise.

Although the Farm is still settled by several hundred people, less than 40 members of the original caravan remain there. The rest have moved on. Two of them currently work for Whole Earth. I wanted them to tell the story of the Farm, since what they attempted was so grand, yet reports of its fate so meager. Many looked to the Farm as a New Age community that really worked. Yet the Farm seemed to be unravelling unnoticed. What happened?

WHY WE LEFT THE FARM

Former residents of the Long House on Stephen Gaskin's communal Farm. At one time the Long House lodged 40 people. In the back row, from left, are Kathryn, Matthew, and Daniel, three who speak here.

Eight former members gathered on two evenings for a taped interview. Walter Rabideau, one of the pillars of Farm society, was lead guitarist in the Farm band. He is now a housepainter in Petaluma, California. Susan Rabideau was one of the Farm's acclaimed midwives. Kathryn McClure is a registered nurse who was an early Farm midwife. Matthew McClure was chief editor at the Farm's Book Publishing Company. He became Managing Editor of the Whole Earth Software Catalog, *first edition, and is now sysop for the WELL. John Seward also worked for the Book Publishing Company on the Farm. He is presently vice president of International Technological Development Corporation in San Francisco. Susan Seward taught school at the Farm, and now teaches in Cotati, California. Clifford Figallo was in charge of several of the Farm's Plenty projects, including a reconstruction program after the 1976 earthquake in Guatemala. He was a researcher for the* Software Catalog, *and is now the bookkeeper at Whole Earth. Daniel Luna was a photographer for the Farm. He is currently a printing lithographer.*

From 10 hours of material, I edited the conversation roughly into its present state, arranging comments by topic rather than by chronology. The transcript went back to the group for their corrections. They rewrote delicate points for clarification. On the cutting floor is enough material for a fascinating book. —*Kevin Kelly*

Matthew: We were the kind of people who came out of the drug experience of the Sixties, who acknowledged vibrations and other realms of existence besides the material plane. We'd seen the Vietnam conflict escalate and many of us had been tear-gassed in the streets. We'd had some kind of spiritual realization that we were all One and that peace and love were the obvious untried answers to the problems facing our society; many of us had given up our material possessions before we even met Stephen. That's the kind of people who started the Farm experiment.

Walter: It was more like an adventure to me. I didn't live in a house; I was already living on a bus before the caravan. I just fit right in. I got in line and was off.

AN INTERVIEW WITH EIGHT LONG-TIME MEMBERS OF THE FARM WHO LEFT THE RENOWNED GRANDDADDY OF NEW AGE COMMUNES.

Cliff: We started as a small group of people and then grew. There was almost an explosion out there on the West Coast, psychedelic drugs and everything, and pretty soon the whole country followed. Eventually, a lot of people quit taking acid, maybe went back to college, but they still had a place in their hearts for the hippies who were really trying to do it, really trying to give up material gain, trying to do it for the good of all mankind. That's what the Farm was — this group of people with these high ideals. One of the reasons for going to Tennessee was to go somewhere where we could actually practice those ideals and really try them out.

Walter: You have to picture it. The Farm was like a hippie dream — you didn't use any money, there weren't any cops, there weren't even adults. Everybody was your age. For some people that was really what they'd been looking for.

John: Smoke dope, grow your hair, do what you want.

Walter: Exactly. And it wasn't the best food, and it wasn't the best housing, but it was food and housing. Your kids were going to have a roof over their heads no matter what. Sometimes.

John: We were trying to create a society with a graceful lifestyle, one that wasn't too rich, where nobody would get hurt. We were trying to set an example for the whole planet. We were trying to arrive at a lifestyle that was within the reach of everybody in the Third World. We did everything we could to live as simple a lifestyle as possible. What we wanted to say was, We are educated people, we're graceful, we are comfortable (that was hedging), and you can be this way too, if you will only care about your brother enough to come down off your high horse and get rid of your Cadillac.

We were doing it, living communally, brotherhood, love, peace and all that, doing it for everybody. We built the biggest commune of the time — 1,500 people at one point, with a dozen satellite farms around the country. A whole bunch of people learned to grow food, and build houses, and we learned to live with a bunch of other people and what it was like to take care of your own medical trip. And doing it together made it so a lot of us could do stuff that we wouldn't have been able to do if we'd done it individually. If you had something to do, then you had the strength of a whole lot of people behind you to do it.

We saw the stuff our parents did in ignorance, and we didn't like it and we wanted to make changes. That's what we went looking for, and we found the Farm.

Walter: We were an extension of the Haight-Ashbury experience, which for a lot of people lasted about six months. I mean some people left their home, went out, took a bunch of acid, got clap a couple of times, whatever, and in a few months were right back in college. "Enough of that, whew!" What happened to us?

The caravan came from Monday night class, and the Farm came out of the caravan. The first spark was Monday night class, that being Stephen and a group of followers. We called ourselves a patchwork religion, if I remember. A lot of it was just taking the points of a lot of different religions that people were sharing in Monday night class. The real truth seekers formed the caravan. Those were the people who could actually get in a bus and take off and do that. I was one of those people.

I missed the meeting after the caravan returned to San Francisco where everybody decided to go back east. I got back and I heard everybody was going back east to Tennessee or Arkansas, or wherever, and looking for land. But I wasn't ready to go. I even went up to where all the buses were parked near the Oregon border before they headed east. I just walked among my friends' buses. Most of them were all married getting ready to go out and start

their families. Go back to the land and start a community and plant themselves.

But I just wasn't ready to go. So I went back to San Francisco and stayed around for ten months. I kept dreaming about the caravan, every night. Every night, I swear to God, I would dream about Stephen's bus and the Farm. And then my mother wrote me a letter and sent me an article she cut out of the Minneapolis *Tribune* showing people taking their first hoe to the ground and stuff like that. And she said: Why aren't you there? All your friends are. And it was true, that's where all my friends were. So I ended up going after about ten months.

The famous caravan of hippie buses shortly after it arrived in Tennessee.

Cliff: I was living with a lady (we later got married on the Farm), and she had bought a school bus because she wanted to go tripping around. She always had this fantasy that she would live in a commune with a bunch of people. At home my father was asking me what I was going to do with my life and I was telling him there were different alternatives, for example there's a group of people in these buses, and they're traveling around the country. So he picked up a copy of the Washington *Post* and said: You mean these people? They were on the front page. They were in town, so we went and visited them. They seemed like nice enough folks, parked in this parking lot in downtown Washington, all these buses, and strange four-marriages where two couples were married together. I couldn't quite figure it out, but the lady I was living with was determined to leave and do it. And she did. So I showed her how to shift gears in the school bus, and she drove on out and met up with them in Nashville.

I finally got bored after a month. I took a Trailways bus across the country, and became an overnight hippie and an overnight vegetarian. For the next 12 years, I didn't cut my hair or beard. I caught up with the caravan in Los Angeles. Then we took this caravan of buses up the coastal highway to San Francisco. We were maybe the thirtieth or fortieth vehicle in a row and there were another 20 vehicles behind us. We'd come upon hitchhikers and blow their minds. By the time we got to Tennessee it was closer to 100 vehicles. We'd pull into a state and the state police would meet us at the state line and escort us to a parking place where they could put us. They really didn't know what to do with us. They wouldn't even let us stop in Kansas. They escorted us all the way across the state and dumped us in Oklahoma, where we finally got to park.

Eventually we pulled our buses up to some land. We met somebody in Tennessee who let us stay several weeks in campgrounds. Then we sent out parties of buses looking for land, and they'd all get treated like visitors from another planet.

Finally, we had to chainsaw our way through some godforsaken rattlesnake-ridden woods and we stayed there for a few months until we bought some land right down the road. We moved onto it with the school buses. Everybody lived in school buses. A lot of the single people just moved out into their pup tents or little plastic shelters and spent the rest of the fall there. For the first two winters we lived in a school bus, which often was impossible to heat. You'd wake up in the morning with icicles.

Walter: I got there on probably the coldest night of the year, sometime in November. I slept in a lean-to with a floor of poles and saplings for my bed. I didn't have any mattress or anything. I was in a flimsy sleeping bag, it was 12 degrees, and I did not sleep one wink. But I was there.

It's really hard to just say what the Farm was in a few sentences. It was a real experiment in living, a whole new thing. In some ways, of course, it had been done before — there were the Amish and other religious groups — but this was a modern-day bunch of people who were ex-college students. There were professionals and nonprofessionals and everybody mixed in together, and the reason they were there was that they all took psychedelic drugs. If that hadn't happened, the Farm wouldn't have been there.

Matthew: I believed that we were a demonstration, and that there was a possibility we could serve as the seed that might possibly spread so people might get the idea. I thought that if we could be a good enough and clear enough example we could show people that there was an alternative way of living. And I tried for a good 12 years to put in everything I had to make the world recognize the Farm as such a place.

Walter: I think you had to have completely lost all faith in America, the whole straight society, and everything else to go do something like the Farm. We were saying everything was so totally fucked that you couldn't do anything. You have to start absolutely from scratch with a piece of bare dirt and build everything, including your culture, out of

You had to have completely lost all faith in America, the whole straight society, and everything else to go do something like the Farm.

whole cloth. And you wouldn't do that unless you just had a totally apocalyptic vision brought on by the war in Vietnam and lots of acid. And that's an unusual combination.

After a few years, by the mid-70s, the Farm got to be known as THE place to go, especially in the summertime, when we got all the hitchhiking people, people without homes, the free- lancers, the free spirits. They were all out there and the word started getting out.

We were getting 10,000 to 15,000 people a year (ten times our population), coming to visit the Farm, many of them just driving through on Sundays. The Farm was sealed off except for one entrance. That was the gatehouse — our front door. It became evident to us after a while that we were getting all kinds of people, from serious seekers to ripoffs to people who had just escaped from prison, so we had to have a group or crew of people manning this entrance 24 hours a day. That somebody kind of became the sheriff of the Farm. The gate crew had a four-wheel drive vehicle and access to money they could use to escort somebody off to the airport. I went on a few of those runs; we were called "stout monks." We'd buy them plane tickets, bus tickets, whatever, just to get them out of the state.

John: The first time I was head gate man I had two drunk Tennesseeans try to ride their mules into the gatehouse. They got up on the porch. Never knew what was going to happen.

Cliff: We attracted anybody. We had guided tours for local Tennesseans as one of our community obligations. We had to have enough people at the gate to do that. After a while you got so the spiel just kinda rolled off your tongue about what we were doing.

Kevin: Let's say I'm a visitor from Nashville and I want to know what you guys are doing.

Cliff: "You're from Nashville? Well, we are a spiritual community, a group of people who decided to live together in a lifestyle that everyone could attain in the world. It's a way where things are evenly distributed, fairly distributed. We don't think it is fair for the whole population of the planet for some people to have so much and some people to not have anything. We think that if you cooperate you can figure it out peacefully and be nonviolent. We are vegetarians, we're totally nonviolent, we don't allow any guns, and we don't even think it's cool to be angry with each other."

Walter: I remember working at the gate, being one of the people somebody would have to visit if they wanted to join the Farm. I would be one of the ones saying okay, are you sure you really want to live here because this is a big commitment and you have to take Stephen as your spiritual teacher. I really checked them out. If they flinched, I let them know right away to forget it.

But some people would know that if you said the right things you could stay. You got to stay for a month before you'd be asked to make a decision to live there or leave. They would stay and get about six weeks of free medical care, a roof over their heads, dope, friendly hippies, and the word was out that this was the place.

Kevin: What was the catechism they had to say?

Walter: First of all you had to say you wanted to check it out. If you got by that, that was like two days. After two days you had to say you wanted "to soak." That was the big one. You want to soak. You could soak for one, two, or three weeks. Then you'd come back after that period of time, and you'd say you weren't really sure and you'd ask to soak another week. We called those the "soakers." Then at a certain point you'd have to go to a soakers' meeting and decide whether you're going to sign on or split. So a lot of people would wait right up to that soakers' meeting. It would be a Thursday night and there was going to be a soakers' meeting the next day, and something like 30 people would be staying overnight at the gate. Come next morning, they're checking out, headed back to Colorado, or whatever. Only about a handful would end up at the soakers' meeting later that day. For a lot of people there was no way would they make a commitment to stay, but it was a way they could hang out with the hippies, and get free meals. That was a big part of the gate.

Daniel: The weird people whom nobody would accept in their houses would stay at the gate and that was as far in as they could get. And so when you did gate you'd have a houseful of the weirdest people who had come to the Farm that week or month, people who couldn't find places, couldn't find any friends or anybody that even liked them. And you have to integrate all those people and deal with that while at the same time you were the official public relations person for any media, notables, or dignitaries.

Walter: You would be handling some total crazy and they'd be just going bananas, and then *Time* magazine would show up. Or some locals, all dressed up, would pop up and say they had been waiting 11 years to come out here and they had finally decided to see what it was all about. And while they're waiting there you're trying to keep this nut at bay.

Kevin: Would you actually turn people away?

Cliff: Yes, but only if they were the real yahoos

who were there to see if the ladies really were barebreasted all the time or something, which they weren't.

Matthew: Some of the people who came and stayed were the blissed-out flower children schizophrenics who just didn't want to work but were going to get fed anyway. One of the things Stephen advertised was that no matter how crazy you were, if you came to the Farm, he'd make you sane.

Kevin: Did it work?

Walter: Sometimes. He appointed a buddy for people like that, a 24-hour person to be with that person all the time. Stephen would talk to them for five minutes, and get stoned with them, and then turn them loose on the Farm. He'd hardly see them for years, while they drove hundreds of other people insane.

An unusual moment at the Farm's gatehouse — there's not a person around. All traffic, in- and outbound, was monitored through this pass.

Daniel: He would see them again when everybody was ready to throw them off the Farm. They would go to Stephen, and he would get stoned with them again and then he would give them another two days!

Matthew: We'd always have at least one psychotic living in our house. I mean one full-blown, total, blissed out freak who would've been in a mental institution if he hadn't been on the Farm. If you were a "together couple" then you were responsible for all the untogether couples. You had to work out their marriage, and you had to work out their problems. There were always a couple or two in our household that we spent our Sundays being amateur marriage counselors for.

Walter: We had couples that we were given as a project, as our civic duty. You'd get Joe and Mary, a couple who had burnt out about six households over several years' time. They were obviously not together. After much hard work, it ended up with him throwing a suitcase through our window. What could I do? It was a constant psychic circus.

Kathryn: You'd have maybe two couples in your house that were reasonably together (if you were lucky), and then you would have at least one or two people that were kind of difficult. And if for some reason or another one of them would move out, then that day the Housing Lady would call you up and give you a list of more tripped-out folks she wanted to move into your house on the spot. You never got a break.

Matthew: And she would always start off with the most tripped-out folks, and if you'd say, no, I can't possibly take them, then they'd give you the next one down. You went from zoo to zoo.

Walter: I added up the list one day and I came up with something like 250 and 300 people that I had lived with in one house over the course of several years. I decided I had to call it quits somewhere. I had to raise my family in some kind of peace and quiet sanity.

John: We prided ourselves on our anarchy. But we did experiment with self governing and were continuously trying different committees, boards, and directors. And of course there was a way that things actually worked, which was its true economics and politics, but it was never talked about or codified. And it wasn't the way we said it was. We were organizing ourselves as if it were the Garden of Eden, as if we were in some kind of state of innocence. So you don't need government.

We eventually invented a governmental board when a guy on the farming crew found out he could get bank loans and just did it. He just kept putting the paper in his back pocket. It turned out that we had borrowed a half a million dollars that we couldn't pay back, and nobody knew it. Nobody knew it had even happened. We had a meeting and said here's a chart with a big blackboard. Okay, now we're $600,000 in debt.

Walter: We took vows of poverty. We were a modern-day collective. I used to live in a commune in San Francisco and there was always this bickering over food in the refrigerator. Everybody had their names on the chocolate milk or this and that. But we didn't have to go through those kinds of things. We didn't have to share the rent, and that kind of stuff. There were no refrigerators, and there was no chocolate milk!

John: That's what a friend of mine on the Farm used to say. He said he'd taken all this acid and then the next thing he knew he was out in the middle of the woods and his refrigerator was gone.

Susan: Oh, I love my refrigerator! I love my dishwasher, that's my favorite. I think the Farm was a nice two-year experiment that lasted 12. It would have been a great two-year experience.

Cliff: Yes, really. During our Farm days we never went to the store shopping for new clothes. We never went to the movies or spent money to go to a concert. We went around trying to sell our products,

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but we would never spend money on ourselves that way. We thought that if everybody conformed to the agreements, the magic would happen. If you didn't, then the spell would be broken, and it would all fall to shit. So, boy, would we be tempted, but we just never did. We were such good soldiers.

Matthew: Our supplies came from the Farm store. There was no money involved. You went there twice a week; the store would get your order for whatever it was depending on how well the Farm was doing that week. There was no way to know how much oil you would get. Same with flour, same with sugar, same with salt. I can often remember having no salt on the Farm, or toilet paper.

Kevin: Who determined how much everyone got?

Walter: All depended on how much money the food buyer could get from the Bank Lady for that week. The Bank Lady became one of our most powerful institutions — the position rotated, but whoever had it controlled the Farm's pursestrings. The food buyer would put in her order; she'd say she needed about $1,500 worth of food, and the Bank Lady would say all she could give her is $800. So there is the store person doling out a quarter-cup of sugar per person. Sorry, I can only give you an eighth of a cup of oil per person this week.

The Bank Lady had a hard job. Everybody would come to her begging for money that they needed for absolute necessities. She would be the focus of all that, but she didn't have any control over how much money she had to distribute.

John: When I went to the Farm I thought: This is great! I didn't have any money, and I didn't have to think about money, No money passed hands for the first two or three years I was there. I never thought about money, I never touched money, I never had anything to do with money. Then later I wound up having to concern myself with money, and for the last three years on the Farm I never thought about anything but money.

Walter: Here's what would happen. We tried to get some shoes for our kid. Toes coming out the ends of the old sneakers, right? We have to get shoes. Finally we'd get ahold of the Shoe Lady after calling her for five days and we'd tell her we needed shoes for the kid. "Okay," the Shoe Lady would tell us. "We'll put you on the list. We're going to do a big buy in a week."

'Well, you see, I'm going into town, couldn't I just go in and get some?" we'd ask. "I think K-Mart has some for $2.50. I know I could get a pair right there."

"Oh, no, I think it'd be better if we just got it in the big buy. We're doing a big buy on let's see . . . next Thursday."

So we'd wait till next Thursday, then call again. "Nope, the car broke down, we couldn't make it." Days later, the shoes would finally come in, but the Shoe Lady would tell us, "Oh, no, somebody came in who really needed size 3 so we gave yours away. We're gonna do another run next Friday," or something. After enough of that you just kind of go bonkers.

I just didn't believe in the system any more. I started buying my kids' shoes on my own for the last few years. I just avoided the whole system. I'd go out and work Saturday, save the money, take the kids on Sunday, and go to K-mart or someplace.

John: An institution developed called "Saturday money" which meant you could be a capitalist on Saturday. If you went and got a job off the Farm on Saturday you could keep the money. At first you could only spend it on houses, but then it got to where you used it to get shoes.

Kathryn: You'd have no oil, you'd have no margarine, no baking powder sometimes, yet you couldn't complain. You were insufficiently spiritual if you complained about the material plane.

Daniel: So you'd pocket a little change and go to town and buy something. That's what eventually happened. It was the only way you could provide for your own.

John: Graft and corruption. Capitalism.

Walter: In the later years, there was more of a double standard going on, where some people took advantage of their opportunities. It was a matter of survival to take advantage of whatever connections came your way.

Kathryn: At the gate you'd get real nervous and you'd sweat if you were going into town to get some margarine or to get a soda. You'd get to the gate and you'd have to tell them where you were going, and you couldn't tell them what you were doing. It would feel like changing money on the black market of Czechoslovakia.

Walter: A lot of times I would know the gate man. I'd go up to him, and say we're going to do a "town run." When I was the gate man, I'd just put town run, town run, town run for all these guys going out to get sodas.

But you had to be careful, because the gate wouldn't let you go out if you had too many kids in the back of the pickup or something, because it'd

Ina Mae put out the word to the nation at large. Hey ladies, don't have an abortion. Come to the Farm, and we'll deliver your baby free! Over 1000 babies were born on the Farm. We delivered all those babies for free.

look bad with the neighbors, so you'd call up the gate and find out who was there, and if it was somebody you knew then you could do it. If it wasn't you'd have to figure out some way to get by.

Kathryn: The last year we were at the Farm somebody gave a bunch of money to buy the Farm a nice meal for Christmas day. So we bought noodles and oranges. While we're eating noodles, Rose, our daughter, said, "I wish we could have noodles sometime besides just for Christmas." And I thought, my God, that's really pretty bad. I was working at the hospital in Lawrenceburg, a small, pretty poor local town, and the patients there always had noodles. It made me sure we had to leave.

Susan: Ten-year-olds and eleven-year-olds were raiding the food stashes to get some oranges that were reserved for the babies. They weren't bad kids, but that's what they had to do.

Daniel: The peasants of Guatemala who we were trying to help would say they had vegetables all the time. They'd come to the Farm and they'd decide they had it better down there.

Kevin: Was Stephen getting more?

Matthew: No, he wasn't. But he was on the road a lot, and didn't really experience the day-to-day deprivation of life on the Farm.

Cliff: We had to volunteer to have less in order to have a cooperative thing happen. In a situation like Nicaragua it might work out fine to do a cooperative thing because everybody would feel like they were all gonna raise their level by being cooperative. But we lowered our level by being cooperative, we lowered our standard of living, and it's hard when you start raising kids to face the fact that you've voluntarily lowered your standard of living.

John: Collectives don't work, basically, for all the classic reasons. One of the main reasons the Farm was collective was that Mao was so popular in the counterculture at the time.

I don't believe that a real pure collective could work unless you were some tribe in which everybody had been related for 2,000 years. That was one of our mistakes. We called ourselves a tribe, but we weren't. We were all totally unrelated people trying to be a tribe, but we weren't.

Kathryn: I agree. For example, we shared what cars we had on the Farm. When I was working at the hospital off the Farm I'd have to drive different cars in to work and they were always dirty and full of trash and junk. And I thought that if everybody were taking care of the cars as if they were their own cars, like we were really supposed to be doing, it would work. But it wasn't like it was everybody's car; it was like it was nobody's car. So nobody took care of them.

Kevin: What were the Farm's economics?

Matthew: There were three cottage industries we were hoping we could make a living with. One was solar electronics and TV satellite dishes, another was the Book Publishing Company, and another was Farm Foods.

Cliff: Our first year we built a sorghum mill to make sorghum molasses. We called it "Old Beatnik Sorghum Molasses." We cut sugarcane, just like the Venceremos Brigades in Cuba. Machetes and cane knives. All the kids and everyone would pile in the trucks and go out to the fields, cut sorghum cane all day, and bring it back to make Old Beatnik Sorghum Molasses. That lasted for the first three years, until we realized that wasn't going to do it for us.

Matthew: We didn't solicit much, but people often just sent in money. "Donations" was just the bookkeeping term for inheritances, because we were a commune and everybody turned in all their stuff. So some people put more than $100,000 into the Farm because they had a trust fund that suddenly became due.

John: We used up a big chunk of some people's inheritances just buying and running the place. That embittered those people, because if they were going to put in money they could have used to fix themselves up, they wanted at least to see some permanent changes made. But usually we would get to a financially desperate time and their inheritance or trust fund would mature, and we'd eat it. We'd go and buy food and it'd be gone. $60,000-$100,000 was shot. And we had all these plans — we're going to fix the roads, we're going to fix the school, we're going to build a community center, we're going to . . . But those projects never really got funded unless they were like the bumps in the roads, which were cost efficient to fix because vehicle repair costs were so high.

Kevin: Well, I don't understand, if everyone was working so hard how come you didn't have a road and whatnot?

Matthew: Everyone wasn't working so hard. Only a couple hundred or so were really earning money. There were 1,500 people there at one point, about half of them children.

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Kathryn: I agree. For example, we shared what cars we had on the Farm. When I was working at the hospital off the Farm I'd have to drive different cars in to work and they were always dirty and full of trash and junk. And I thought that if everybody were taking care of the cars as if they were their own cars, like we were really supposed to be doing, it would work. But it wasn't like it was everybody's car; it was like it was nobody's car. So nobody took care of them.

Kevin: What were the Farm's economics?

Matthew: There were three cottage industries we were hoping we could make a living with. One was solar electronics and TV satellite dishes, another was the Book Publishing Company, and another was Farm Foods.

Cliff: Our first year we built a sorghum mill to make sorghum molasses. We called it "Old Beatnik Sorghum Molasses." We cut sugarcane, just like the Venceremos Brigades in Cuba. Machetes and cane knives. All the kids and everyone would pile in the trucks and go out to the fields, cut sorghum cane all day, and bring it back to make Old Beatnik Sorghum Molasses. That lasted for the first three years, until we realized that wasn't going to do it for us.

Matthew: We didn't solicit much, but people often just sent in money. "Donations" was just the bookkeeping term for inheritances, because we were a commune and everybody turned in all their stuff. So some people put more than $100,000 into the Farm because they had a trust fund that suddenly became due.

John: We used up a big chunk of some people's inheritances just buying and running the place. That embittered those people, because if they were going to put in money they could have used to fix themselves up, they wanted at least to see some permanent changes made. But usually we would get to a financially desperate time and their inheritance or trust fund would mature, and we'd eat it. We'd go and buy food and it'd be gone. $60,000-$100,000 was shot. And we had all these plans — we're going to fix the roads, we're going to fix the school, we're going to build a community center, we're going to . . . But those projects never really got funded unless they were like the bumps in the roads, which were cost efficient to fix because vehicle repair costs were so high.

Kevin: Well, I don't understand, if everyone was working so hard how come you didn't have a road and whatnot?

Matthew: Everyone wasn't working so hard. Only a couple hundred or so were really earning money. There were 1,500 people there at one point, about half of them children.

Daniel: There were always only 40 or so guys who

were supporting the Farm in terms of cash, but we were still getting more single mothers, still more psychotics; and those same people, who once were supporting maybe 600 people, five years later were supporting 1,500 people.

Walter: We weren't covering the bases. We weren't feeding ourselves. The medical care was marginal. There were no boots for the kids in the winter. Roads were so far down the list of priorities that they never got much attention. That's an example of one thing that discouraged and frustrated a lot of people — after ten years there, we still had funky dirt roads and poor sanitation.

We were providing homes for lots of people who needed them. And a lot of Farm people had really important jobs, life-and-death situations all the time, midwives out delivering babies in the middle of the night by kerosene lantern and stuff. Over 1000 babies were born on the Farm — more than half were from people who didn't live on the Farm. We delivered all those babies for free. Ina Mae put out the word to the nation at large. Hey ladies, don't have an abortion. Come to the Farm, and we'll deliver your baby free!

Kathryn: We probably saved a few babies' lives that way. But that also meant that at one point one-quarter of the kids on the Farm had been dumped there.

Walter: We'd have all these pregnant couples come to the Farm six weeks before they were due and at no cost, not even room and board, we would support them for six weeks before birth and sometimes a month or two after the baby was born.

Kathryn: I used to have a hard time when Stephen would want to take a bunch of the Farm's money to go on tour with the Band, or when the Book Company would spend thousands of dollars for a phototypesetter, because I worked in the clinic and knew that there was a list of half a dozen people needing hernia repairs who had been waiting for two and three years, or people needing new glasses and having to wait years for them, or get them through the grey market of money from their parents.

John: We weren't really building a community like we should with proper sanitation, housing, a good school and the kind of things that we needed, but we were taking on all these welfare cases. Stephen would talk on Sunday morning about how you can't close your heart, don't get square, because with the good karma, doing good deeds, it'll balance out and blah blah blah. But it didn't really work that way.

Walter: We overloaded ourselves and took on more than we could handle as a result of Stephen's pep talks. You'd look at all the stuff that was wrong and you'd think, "If we just hang on, this is all going to get fixed. We can't quit now. We've already put eight years into this."

Susan: Stephen would tell us, "You can't close your heart or you're not being sufficiently spiritual."

Our hearts weren't closed; we were just overcrowded and didn't have enough to eat.

Matthew: A lot of it looked like it was just economics, and if we could only make a little more money then most of our problems would disappear. I remember Stephen saying once that we were among the few people in the world whose problems would all be solved by money.

But there wasn't much left of the original high spiritual stuff.

In the Farm's early years, sorghum was hand-cut and manually loaded onto carts to be mashed into Old Beatnik Sorghum Molasses.

Kevin: Where'd it go?

John: It went into the reality of life and economics.

Cliff: You can't take acid forever. You can't just keep taking it forever. There were a lot of people on the Farm who didn't know what they were going to do next. Some people had rich families who would send them money, and they were able to maintain an acceptably comfortable lifestyle. A lot of people didn't. A lot of people like me had been written off. My parents didn't want to send any money to the Farm. They thought it would all get communalized, that Stephen would get it all. So I was cut off. I didn't have any source of funds to fix up my house. At that point, when I saw how much it was going to take to get it together, I started realizing that the Farm was on a downhill slide, and that the system was kind of a loss.

Susan: We made the mistake of thinking we could actually take on and help people before we were even helping ourselves, before we had enough for our own families. Some of that came from one of Stephen's main spiritual teachings: Believing your kid is better than anybody else's is one of the roots of racism. You couldn't think more about your kids than you did about all the kids in the Third World. ►

And on a level, that's how it should be. I mean kids are kids; they all need food, they all need everything. But your own kids are right here in front of you, and they don't have boots.

Matthew: My kids were one of the main reasons I left the Farm. I arrived at the decisions that put me on the Farm from a fairly informed place. Yet on the Farm that same set of information was not available to my kids. Our kids were programmed to think along these revolutionary Third World lines, which may or may not be bad, but I'd prefer that they had this along with the same kind of information that I had, which was a pretty global perspective. I tripped around in Europe, and I'd been to Stanford and I was exposed to all the intellectual highlights at the time. Seeing all that, I made a choice to drop out and go be a hippie.

Matthew and Kathryn McClure (who married on the Farm) with daughters Rose (left) and Grace, 1975.

But for the first 12 years my kids only saw the Farm and hippies. They didn't see anything intellectual; there was a strong anti-intellectualism on the Farm, stemming from Stephen's teaching to beware of "conceptual thought" at the expense of real experience. Our kids didn't have any real concept of internationalism, because they'd never been outside Summertown, except when we went to the grandparents for a vacation. They were seriously culturally deprived — they didn't know how to make change or call information — and they were as far from real planetary consciousness as they could be, in spite of the way we were talking. As the kids started growing older, it became obvious that the education they were getting was inadequate in part because of the atmosphere of anti-intellectualism on the Farm. I wanted my kids to have the material wherewithal they needed to arrive at a spiritual decision that they could live with.

Kevin: Would you say the demise was a spiritual demise?

Matthew: I think it was. I think it's really important to recognize that Stephen at least professed to think of himself as a fully enlightened spiritual teacher on a par with Buddha and Christ. The avatar of the Aquarian Age.

We learned a lot of spiritual skills. The experiment was to find out how many people's minds can you mesh with yours to become one mind.

Kevin . . . What's the answer?

John: I still think it's infinite.

Kevin: When did you stop believing that Stephen was the guru?

Walter: That's a good question. It was real gradual. I guess one of the real big turning points was when Stephen became the second drummer in our band. I saw that he wasn't a fully enlightened drummer. It was so obvious that he was so wrong. I mean rock'n'roll's pretty basic, if you can count to four. He couldn't make it from one to four without screwing up in the middle. But he insisted on playing drums. I couldn't find ways in the most simple musical terms to explain to him how to correct it. Even when I could figure out how to say it, I couldn't get the words out of my mouth — I would just get choked up. He had a tremendous power over vibrations in the room; he was a teacher of truth. And, the strange phenomenon that I started to realize was that you couldn't tell the truth to him if it was about him! In the greater context of the Farm, there was an "Emperor's New Clothes" mentality that kept people from saying what was obviously true when it concerned Stephen.

So I found myself over the years just kind of getting in this situation where I would be constantly compromising myself, agreeing with stuff that he would agree with, like the drums for instance. I would just put up with it, looking the other way when stuff was just obviously not right, but because he thought it was neat, it was okay.

If somebody asked me what I learned from the Farm experience, I would say I learned to kiss ass. To keep my position in Stephen's inner circle I had to learn what to say, but more importantly what not to say. For me, Stephen went from being the best friend I had to being someone that was impossible for me to talk to.

John: The Farm was a diversion of energy in a lot of ways. That energy got diverted to Stephen and taken to Tennessee and isolated so that it continued going while the rest of that culture died, evolved, and went on. There were a bunch of things built into the Farm that made it so the Farm couldn't learn from its mistakes. If we'd been able to learn from our mistakes and evolve it'd still be happening.

If anyone indicated anything like doubt Stephen would always put it on them that they were not

The worst thing about the Farm was that people learned from experiments, but then the change was not allowed to happen. The Farm couldn't learn from its mistakes.

only lacking in faith, but also that their doubt was going to make it impossible for the rest of us to make it. What that meant was that anybody that had doubtful thoughts running through their head was in fairly short order forced to split, because you couldn't maintain that feeling and stay there without bringing everybody down. So there was never any big impetus to radically change how things were because anybody that started thinking that was just steered out.

Daniel: It was like you were on the bus or off the bus.

Kevin: What other kind of things would you design into a Farm so that it could learn from its mistakes and correct itself?

John: No gurus. The worst thing about the Farm was that people learned from experiments, but then the change was not allowed to happen. If there started to be a growing feeling that maybe we shouldn't all live crammed together, that maybe we shouldn't keep taking on new people, or maybe we should do this or that, then the people that started feeling that would get squeezed out of the Farm and forced to leave, rather than have that create a change in the Farm. Because in spite of Stephen's embracing of the motto, "Question authority," we were institutionally not supposed to think for ourselves in some areas. We weren't allowed to change.

Matthew: I think another problem the Farm had was our youthful arrogance, multiplied by the power of the psychedelics that we took, multiplied by the power of having that many people all doing things in unison. Because we had the temerity to think of ourselves as a microcosm of the entire planet, we believed we should allow anyone with a belly button to come in and live on the Farm. But if I were going to do a Farm, I would be selective. I would only let a certain few people in. I would restrict the number of Looney Tunes to about zero. People I was comfortable with sharing my mind intimately, I'd let in. People who wanted to come in and share my mind intimately that I wasn't comfortable with, I would run from, rather than let them come live with me. And I think that was a central problem that we had, that the gate in a way had low standards for what it would accept. In a spirit of compassion, the Farm in its youthful arrogance tried to do too much by trying to take on too broad a spectrum of people.

Kathryn: You always thought the thing was wrong with you, not with the Farm or what was happening. If you felt doubt, it was something wrong with you. Toward the end we started to figure out it wasn't us — we were right all along.

Cliff: For the Farm to keep growing, Stephen had to not be the up-front guru. It would have worked much better if Stephen had realized that he was a catalyst and then had stepped back and let the action happen. One of the things that I appreciate about Stewart Brand is that he'll start something and then step back and see what'll happen with it. Sometimes it falls flat on its face, sometimes other stuff happens, or it evolves into something else. And at that level the Farm is evolving into something else.

Walter: As I understand it now, things have changed, and they seem to be doing a little bit better. Their population is down to around 280. It isn't a collective any more; it's a cooperative. People are working for themselves. Independent families in their own houses on the land, which is just about paid off. It's not really the Farm any longer.

Kevin: Would you say the reason why the Farm isn't significant now is because it helped accomplished the goals of the era so there was no more need for it?

Matthew: Oh, no, no. That's wrong. The goals of the era have not been accomplished. The same people are in power and they've consolidated their power since the Sixties. They've gotten smarter. They saw the way that the revolutionaries acted, and they found ways to channel the revolutionary energy so that it wouldn't be dangerous to their power structure. The way things are now are in many ways parallel to how they were in the Sixties, except the oppressor is smarter, better equipped, and more popular now than in the Sixties. It's going to take another five or ten years before the people get the idea of what's going on, if they ever do.

Kevin: You think then that some other generation might decide to try a vision like the Farm again?

John: Yes. Sooner or later it's bound to happen.

Kevin: What kind of advice would you give them?

John: Loosen up. Don't follow leaders. Don't take on more than you can handle financially. Get enough money together before you start.

Kevin: It sounds like starting a business.

Matthew: It is. Or starting a marriage. It's often not a good idea to start off in poverty. ►

On a wintry Tennessee day, Stephen Gaskin gives his Sunday Morning Service, the Farm's equivalent of his Monday night class in San Francisco.

John: Another thing I wouldn't do is have the idea that you are somehow responsible for the whole world. Everybody on the Farm carried around the idea on their shoulders of being responsible for the whole world. Every act, everything you said, everything you did, the way you lived, the way you dressed, everything was having a vast effect all over the planet, and you had to take that into consideration all the time. With everything you were doing! I think that's nuts. And this was also another thing that prevented us from trying a lot of things.

Matthew: All of us there believed that we were in fact the hope of the world, that if anything happened to that small group of acid heads the world was going to collapse. . . .

Kevin: Did you really believe that?

John: Oh, yeah. I totally believed it. Stephen would come and say that every Sunday and I believed it. I believed that we were keeping it together for the entire world because we were a demonstration that people could live together in peace and harmony. I mean nobody would have gone there if they hadn't believed that.

The Farm was formed around Stephen being some sort of guru. That was a mistake. But then the Farm saw itself as being the guru for the rest of the world. It didn't succeed in transforming the world because that was a mistake. It was a mistake the way the Farm was organized around Stephen. And the Farm's attitude concerning its relationship with the rest of the world was a mistake. I don't think that kind of movement ever has lasting effect, whether it's the Farm or any other thing like it. I would never do that again.

Walter: The mistake was in giving Stephen so much control over our lives. It was several years before we realized what was happening. But he was the founder, and we did agree to start a community following his spiritual teachings.

Kathryn: We were faced more with the hard-core reality of how you have to live. You have to raise your kids, you have to feed them, you have to clothe them. It got to the point where just day-to-day living was so difficult that trying to have a good time, or at least not to have a horrible time, and still get the laundry done today, was starting to loom larger than any spiritual ideal.

Matthew: You can't be hungry and help somebody else. You have to be together and smart and well fed and know everything in your home is taken care of before you help others.

Kathryn: Well, that's what we always said, and then we never did it.

Walter: But I think we all agree that the friendships and camaraderie from the Farm were some of the most valuable things we have. The Farm created a lot of deep and lasting friendships that we'll all treasure for years — there was a very strong bond among those of us who spent all those years trying to make it succeed. A lot of people worked very hard, and I hope their efforts will be respected. ■