

# Voices From the Farm, Adventures in Community Living

R U P E R T F I K E (EDITOR)

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Summertown, Tennessee Book Publishing Company. 1998. Introduction, entries, afterword. 162 pp. ISBN 1-57067-051-X (\$9.95 pb)

SUMMERTOWN AND THE LIVIN' AIN'T EASY, NO FISH ARE JUMPIN', NO COTTON IS HIGH.

The second time I read this book I was sitting in a just-burned prairie near my home in Kansas after a rain had lured the spring grasses out of the still-blackened soil. You could smell the burned trunks of small trees that are used to this cycle. There were shoots of new grass a brilliant green. There were birds and geese and a skunk looking for what was available in the grass—what survived that they could eat or use; what new items had become visible with the old growth gone up in smoke. This book seemed much the same - the old problems and the new solutions, the tried and the failed, the flame of inspiration and the meltdown, the pieces that survived and how the old things now looked.

These are tales of the early years of The Farm Community near Summertown, Tennessee – living in tents and mud, trying to scrape by, adjusting to neighbors, dealing with hepatitis and water system breakdowns, cooking for big groups and relating to other families in close-quarters relationships. This was a time for “sorting out” and “getting straight,” developing a soy-based diet, helping solve the world’s problems in Haiti, Guatemala, the South Bronx and elsewhere, delivering babies and caring for children, worrying about the constant financial pressure, creating innovations like Beatnik Bell and Community Radio, and finally needing to change the model again. The essays end at the point in 1983 where The Farm, sliding deeper into debt and collapsing under its own weight, ended the experiment in

full communal ownership, retaining only the land in common.

The selections are all by current or former residents of The Farm, mostly short reminiscences of some part of their life in Tennessee or at one of the Farm's satellite projects, published by The Farm. The titles of these pieces are remarkable in themselves in capturing the flavor of the place. My favorites include "The Letting Go and the Taking Hold" (two phases of The Farm's development), "There Had to be a Positive, Spiritual Spin on Everything We Did," "The Mayans Seemed to Us Like Distant, Long-Lost Psychedelic Cousins," "When Something Belongs to Everybody, It Doesn't Belong to Anybody," "How I Defended the State Constitution But Lost the Sprouts," and "The Raw Footage of America Kept Showing Up."

This book is not analytical – it is a contemporaneous chronicle or a remembrance of events from the 1970s that succeeds in retaining the spirit and the energy of The Farm. It does not try to place The Farm in a historical context, nor does it delve much at all into why the communal experiment ended. This is limited to a short introduction and afterword and the final two vignettes.

I was impressed with the optimism and hope, the different perspectives, how hard this life was, and how Stephen Gaskin's contributions were much like everyone else's. I was reminded of Gaviotas and the power of working together to implement novel solutions to problems. I thought of the classic Socialism in One Country about how hard it is to completely disconnect yourself from the outside market economy and establish new institutions. And I thought of this book when I saw the recent Tibetan film, *The Cup*, about how seductive such comforts as TV and sports are, even to committed and isolated communities.

I never lived or visited The Farm, but with this book I think I understand how people felt that lived there in the 1970s and how they pioneered new paths in those Tennessee meadows and woods.

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