

Introduction

IN LATE 1960S SAN FRANCISCO, a former university professor turned hippie guru set in motion a chain of events that would lead to one of the most dynamic social experiments of modern time. Like so many of his contemporaries, Stephen Gaskin was a catalyst for something much larger than himself, one component in a cultural upheaval with impact on the world at large, the founder of an iconic symbol representing the belief in a higher purpose, where people come together for the greater good, to launch a new society where peace and cooperation are the status quo.

Stephen Gaskin's Monday Night Class was a gathering of the psychedelic mind, a random collection of the best and brightest of a generation, in a quest for knowledge and understanding. From this number, a core group of true seekers set forth on an epic journey across the country in 60 school buses, a Caravan on a mission of peace and love.

Tennessee became the promised land, a place to put ideas and ideals into practice. It was here on 1,700 acres of forest and fields that babies would be born, crops grown and a town built from nothing but a collective dream and a lot of sweat.

The Farm had one purported goal: change the world. . . . And in many ways it did. But the world also changed The Farm, and in order to survive, it had to adapt.

The Farm Community was founded in 1971 with the purest of intentions—that all who came would be cared for, fed, clothed, healed, provided shelter—referencing the Book of Acts so that its neighbors could grasp what it was these hippie kids were trying to do.

*All that believed were together, and had all things in common;
And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all
men, as every man had need. (Acts 2:44-45)*

There was a delicious euphoria, an energy so alive in the birth of something new, the momentum of a thousand strong behind a shared vision. The revolution was happening, and it was a blast! A rock and roll tribe, on a quest for enlightenment and planetary consciousness, in service to the world.

But by the fall of 1983, the dream had lost its luster. Deep in debt, its members disillusioned, frustrated and no longer willing to endure a self-imposed vow of poverty, The Farm made a radical shift that will be forever known as The Changeover.

Support from the community was over. Everyone was left on their own. Literally hundreds ran as fast and far away as they could.

A core group remained on the land, saving it from foreclosure. By the early '90s, the community was debt-free and back on its feet. The century was turning, and anything was possible. The future lies ahead.

The Farm's survival for over 40 years is a testament to patience and perseverance, what is possible when remaining true to your ideals in the face of endless obstacles. The community is a new-age hybrid, a blend of rural and high-tech lifestyles, classic individualism and the power of collectivity. It remains a flagship, a model of how we as planetary citizens may choose to live, with lessons to be learned from its successes and its failures, its weaknesses and its strengths. The Farm is an ongoing experiment on how human beings can be together in a meaningful and personal way, connected to the natural world.

The Farm is not in an isolated bubble, a glass dome. It is tied to and part of the larger community outside its borders, both local and state, country, the greater society and planet on which it exists. It is affected by world politics, the economy, weather, modern trends and ancient traditions, a microcosm of the big picture.

The word “community” has become a buzzword and in the process can lose its deeper meaning. Any collection of people gathered together around an element in common, be they online, in a chat room or sharing a game, is labeled as community. These identities can fill a void that is no longer satisfied by the actual place where people live, the isolation generated by the confines of urban life, the breakdown of the family, fractured and scattered, an excessive emphasis on individualism and the shallowness present in mainstream culture. It leaves people hungry for something more.

The phrase “intentional community” represents small groups of people who choose to live together in one place and share more aspects of their lives in a direct and tangible way. You are there not because you liked the house or the school was near where you wanted to live. You are making a conscious decision to share your life with more people.

Living in community touches every aspect of how we as humans relate with each other: How decisions are made and followed through, the essence of government. How we care for each other from beginning to end. How we support ourselves and earn a living, the homes in which we live. How new members are brought into the community, and about learning how to get along.

Stephen Gaskin once said, “The revolution is not about taking over the government, but taking over the government’s function. We seceded as far as we could without them sending in the pony soldiers.”

Creating community is about creating and developing workable, functioning alternative systems that restore our sense of purpose, empower the family and bring us closer to the natural order of things. On 1,700 acres in Middle Tennessee, a small group of people have tried to do just that.

Hey Beatnik, This Is The Farm Book was published in 1974 to illustrate what was happening on this land inhabited by a bunch of hippie idealists. It described the many different parts of community, how they all fit together, how each worked and why. In a very real sense,

Hey Beatnik became a blueprint for intentional community, a handbook for getting started.

The Farm Then and Now picks up the conversation some 40 years later. It reexamines the building blocks of community and their evolution through The Farm's history, and more importantly identifies how they function in the context of the community today.

You should know that, in writing this book, I am not on the outside looking in. I have been part of The Farm for over 40 years and am proud of what it has accomplished and what the community is today. But this book is not about me being a cheerleader. Any examination of this ongoing experiment in how people live together has to include the struggles, the mistakes, the problems and lessons to be learned that arise in every community.

Most of all, I hope this book inspires you to take a look at where you are, where you're going and where you want to be. May you be brave, and move forward, taking the next step that will get you there.

CHAPTER 1

Governance

FOR ANY ORGANIZED GROUP of people, the process of decision making is at the core of how it functions and moves forward. Some might say the challenge is even greater when one of their uniting principles is to question authority. Over the course of its history, The Farm has exemplified a range of systems, often simultaneously. The Farm's greatest success, the one that has ensured its survival through multiple decades, was its ability to move beyond a central charismatic leader into a working system where each person has the opportunity and free will to control not only their own destiny, but also the direction of the community as it moves toward the future.

Teacher and Class

Going back to the very beginning, the original model around which people gathered was built on the familiar relationship of teacher and classroom. Stephen Gaskin left the world of formal academia but used this structure to begin a group analysis of consciousness and human relationships, when, in 1968 he began hosting discussions as part of San Francisco State's Free University. As the after-hours class grew from a handful of people to over a thousand, gathering every Monday night, a need arose to establish ground rules. They were simple. Each person was given the opportunity to speak without interruption.

Common courtesy. Wait your turn. However, it was clear that Stephen was both moderating and leading the conversation, which consisted primarily of questions to and answers from him.

During this period in San Francisco, Stephen took certain steps to blur the line of teacher and student, while using the skills and experience he had acquired as a university professor to maintain order and direction. Rather than lecture from a podium on a stage, at Monday Night Class, Stephen sat on a lower-level platform, just slightly above the audience. As the primary focus of attention for those assembled, he channeled the energy of the crowd and distilled its essence, interpreted lessons learned and articulated these back to the assembled group, identifying when this new awareness resonated with greater principles.



Stephen Gaskin, founder of
The Farm Community

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In Eastern philosophy, the role or definition of “teacher” went beyond formal academic education dealing with the material world to include the role of spiritual instructor. Spiritual knowledge attained through centuries

of study and application could be learned, taught and passed down from one generation to the next in the form of principles that serve as essential guideposts to be utilized throughout the course of a lifetime.

During the last century, individuals serving as representatives from various philosophies made their way from East to West, rising to a peak in the 1960s and '70s. Disillusioned with the hypocrisies and limitations of institutionalized Christianity, the youth of this period sought new answers and guidance, open to the solutions being put forward by these spiritual teachers and teachings emanating from India, Tibet, Japan and other Eastern countries, as well as from Native Americans and other Indigenous cultures.

And so it was that a range of self-proclaimed or officially designated spiritual teachers were working in the US and Europe. In a sense, all of them were competing to amass followings and establish themselves as teachers who could provide answers and a clear direction on the path to greater understanding of each individual's role and relationship to the universe.

These defined roles were brought into focus at an event in Boulder, Colorado, in the summer of 1969, called the Holy Man Jam. Yogi Bhajan, a Sikh from India, was a spiritual leader and entrepreneur who introduced Kundalini Yoga to the United States. Swami Satchidananda was widely known after his appearance at the Woodstock Music Festival in 1969. Representatives of Japanese Buddhism and a number of other teachers used this platform to attract a following. In a very real way, his high-profile appearance transformed Stephen from a counterculture philosopher to spiritual teacher, a person that would formally receive students committed to accepting him as a mentor. He distinguished himself from the others by acknowledging the truths to be found in all religions and spiritual philosophies, blending these into a new universal set of teachings that would relate directly to modern life and Western culture.

Warren (last names have been omitted to preserve the anonymity of individuals), a participant in the group meetings in San Francisco, remembers:

Monday Night Class and our own inner experiences provided some answers but also generated more questions. Stephen was really in a very similar boat but older. He was really good at public speaking, crystallizing the issues of the time and channeling the energy of the group. I think both he and we misunderstood this. It looked like he had the "answer," when really what he had was the energy of the group. He was a psychedelic father figure who basically said, "Come be a part of this new family where you'll be understood and accepted and you'll be given the opportunity to grow spiritually."

Defining Roles on The Caravan

The roles of leadership and organization became more defined as Stephen and his “students” left San Francisco in the spring of 1970 to embark on the cross-country speaking tour that has become known as The Caravan. What had begun as a weekly meeting, connected by an extensive network of personal relationships, was taken to a new level through daily interaction and increased responsibility. It was no simple task to coordinate the movement of a couple of hundred people travelling in an array of school buses, delivery vans, cars and trucks on a daily basis. Functioning as a village on the move, the needs of humans to be fed and cared for had to be met each and every day, a very real challenge for youth only beginning to learn how to take care of themselves.

As the public face of the travelling band of new-age gypsies, Stephen took the first steps in establishing standards of behavior and structure. For example, to maintain order and a cohesive appearance, The Caravan needed to depart as a unified group. This meant that each morning it was important that everyone begin the activities together and be ready to leave for the next destination at the same time. Stephen explains:

I started going around in the morning with a steel wrench tapping on the bumper of each bus, letting folks know that it was time to get up and moving. After a few days, one of our guys came up and said, “I can do that,” and took over that task. And that’s how it went. People were watching me to learn what needed to be done and figure out how they could step up to the plate and take on some of the responsibility for The Caravan.

While Stephen was recognized as a central authority figure, The Caravan was kept moving through the broader effort of people working together to achieve a common goal. Over the next year, more and more individuals stepped into positions of responsibility in order to keep the mobile village alive and functioning. Work crews had to be organized to generate money for gas and food. Anyone with

mechanical skills became invaluable and immediately transformed into a teacher of a unique mystical order, the mechanic. It became clear that the same focused attention and discipline that defined the spiritual path had to be applied in order to keep engines starting and buses rolling.

Living on the Land—The Straw Boss

In the spring of 1971, when The Caravan came to rest in Tennessee, the number of tasks and roles to be filled multiplied a hundredfold. Although Stephen was generally regarded as the primary person in charge, there was plenty of room for others to exert their influence and establish positions of power within the informal hierarchy that was developing.

There was an immediate need to empower decision makers and surround them with people who would follow their direction, working together to implement the tasks at hand, as well as move toward the broader vision of self-sufficiency and social change. Along the way, The Farm adopted terms to define these persons so that their positions would be clear and not constantly challenged and up for debate. Crew chiefs were called “straw bosses,” with each one representing a different aspect of community development or an important function. Larger groups, such as those dedicated to farming and raising food, might have several straw bosses, each one working with a crew of four or five to take on a specific role or manage a particular crop.

The various crew chiefs and straw bosses would meet together under the leadership of a central person of authority that provided the overview necessary to coordinate a unified effort. These leaders from each crew, be it farming, construction, health care, finances or other functions, would then meet weekly or as needed to discuss and plan, with Stephen in the background, serving as the voice of maturity and experience that helped guide all efforts.

For the most part, Stephen was not involved in the management of day-to-day operations. Designated leaders within the community

had the freedom to make independent decisions. That said, it must also be recognized that Stephen would frequently step in and exert his authority to hire and fire, installing or removing someone in a position of power.

Michael O was in charge of the Farming Crew and a widely respected leader within the community from the beginning:

With the exception of a couple of years, I was on every governing body on The Farm until the time we left in April of '82. The very first one was formed in the winter of 72–73 (aka “wheatberry winter”). It was about 12 people, all handpicked by Stephen. No one from Stephen’s family was on it. I remembered feeling really excited about having been on the list of those selected to govern the community, carefully studying who else was on it and then going up to the first meeting to find it was crashed by several people, one couple in particular I remember, who came saying that Stephen must have “forgotten” to mention them at the service when he announced the committee. No one, myself included, had the balls to say anything about it, and the meeting, and governing council, went forward with them on it.

Brandon lived for a short time in those early years with Stephen and his family, giving him the opportunity to observe the behind-the-scenes management of The Farm:

I can tell you how it ran during 1974. I witnessed and heard family and the usual Farm “heavies” come for visitations to discuss the governance of The Farm. As I recall, Stephen likened it to flying a kite. Everything was discussed, as well as everyone and what they were doing or wanted to do... all ending with what they “should” do. The decisions of who would do what, when and how were then managed into Farm life. Impressions of how someone was faring would be discussed with recommendations for remedial treatments. In today’s terms,

one might refer to this as “micromanaging.” Stephen would use his family and a few others for some initial feedback on his point of view, and then, his word was God’s.

Abbot of the Monastery

While the creation of the community was regarded as a new experiment in social and economic structure, at the same time, universally recognized definitions were often utilized to explain or clarify the community’s structure and organization. For centuries humans have gathered together for the purpose of seeking a more spiritual life, familiar in Christian theology as the monastery. The Farm regarded itself as a family monastery with Stephen at its head or as the abbot in charge. Each person joining the community made a personal agreement with Stephen to accept him as their spiritual teacher. Although



For the first 10 years of the community, every Sunday after an hour of meditation, Stephen Gaskin would speak at a gathering of Farm members.

the teachings were unwritten, there was a basic understanding about the type of behavior that was acceptable and general agreement on key concepts such as nonviolence and essential oneness of humanity with the universe.

As Stephen's role as the community's "guru" (a term he never used) became firmly established, the lines between teacher and cult leader began to blur. In the minds of many, he became regarded as an enlightened being, channeling life-force energy referred to as "spirit." Each person had their own interpretation and way of rationalizing their relationship of teacher and student, which to greater or lesser degrees became a form of celebrity or even idol worship.

Marian came to The Farm in the early 70s:

When I asked Stephen to be a "soaker" (a person granted an extended visit to help them make up their mind about joining The Farm), he said that he was the ultimate authority, that what he said goes. And, around the same time, while he was holding forth to a room full of seated Farm members, looking out at all those worshipful faces looking up at him did give me pause. "Stephen says" was heard frequently for the first number of years. I would say that it felt like a guru-led monastery to me, especially as there was no democracy in the earlier days.

To help explain the relationship between teacher and student, Stephen pointed out that in our modern culture we often have unacknowledged teachers and mentors influencing our direction and attitude in life. From this perspective, he proposed that you could make better choices and put your energy into someone who represented positive and moral ideals without compromising your personal integrity and free will.

Minister or Father Figure?

Again, one important factor that helped establish Stephen in his role was difference in age. When The Caravan landed in Tennessee, most members of the community were in their early 20s, with a few ap-

proaching, or over, 30 and only a very small number 40 or older. In contrast, Stephen was in his late 30s, with a much greater life experience behind him. This simple fact of maturity gave him the ability to help steer the direction and make decisions from a broader perspective. Although the term “father figure” may be applied with some reluctance, nevertheless the influence of his more advanced years was undoubtedly a key factor in the acceptance of his position and decrees.

Stephen’s primary interface with the community was through the Sunday Service, which in many ways followed a structure familiar to the audience of youth that had grown up attending weekly church services of one faith or another. After an hour of meditation, Stephen would perform marriages and then “gather the flock” in a circle around him. His talk each Sunday could be compared to a sermon and his role to that of a minister or rabbi. Throughout the rest of the week, those seeking guidance could go find Stephen for one-on-one counseling, or come as a couple if advice was needed to resolve marital difficulties.

As The Farm’s population grew and its operation became more complex, Stephen had less and less to do with its day-to-day operations. The many different work crews determined their own priorities and implementation of tasks, as outlined by the pyramid of crew chiefs in the various incarnations of governing councils. Stephen was regarded as the spiritual guide pointing the way, while the population of The Farm was expected to figure out how to manage the community’s growth and development.

Throughout its history, The Farm has always had a central governing body or board of directors to manage its affairs. However, for the first decade, directors were chosen either by Stephen or from other members of the internal government, not by the community through any type of democratic process. In general, no one really questioned this or saw it as a problem because, for the most part, people were placed in these positions because of their knowledge, skill or demonstrated ability to facilitate people working together.

Social Position

While in the early years Stephen Gaskin did have the power to make and implement decisions for the community, for its daily operation and overall planning, The Farm also operated like a consensus model. The spirit of cooperation meant it was recognized that every person's viewpoint was valid and could contribute to the group conversation.

During this period, Farm residents lived in communal households of up to 40 people, consisting of several families with children, along with quite a few single people. House meetings to organize the tasks at hand brought them together to make joint decisions, whether it was to create a schedule for washing dishes, childcare or getting firewood or who to accept as new members of the household.

It almost goes without saying that The Farm regarded equality as a human right. Stephen defined the roots of racism as thinking your kids are better or more important than someone else's. To ensure that all members held the same rights and privileges with The Farm's internal society, constant peer review would let a person know if they were assuming "social position" or an inflated view of their personal status or importance.

Question Authority—Unquestioned Authority

However, as the person clearly in charge of the monastery, Stephen's power to affect the direction and decisions by the community was unquestioned. On his say-so, any decision by people lower down in The Farm's hierarchy could be reversed. Projects could also be initiated and the resources needed to implement those projects commanded simply by his expressed desire to see something happen.

For example, in 1974 The Farm's relief and development organization, Plenty International, was founded after Stephen introduced the concept at a Sunday Service. Within a few months, the non-profit was established to serve as a channel to express the community's desire to make a positive difference in the world. Over the next several years, considerable resources, both financial and human, were dedicated to fulfilling this vision.

Plenty's work came to define the best of what The Farm was trying to accomplish. It symbolized the community's true purpose, and everyone in it felt connected to the Plenty projects taking place in the US and abroad. At the same time, while directing attention and considerable resources toward this effort, the community simultaneously neglected its own needs and the development of its infrastructure, resulting in year after year of substandard living conditions for residents.

Expanding on the idea of international outreach and no doubt inspired by the early campaigns of Greenpeace, on another Sunday, Stephen proposed that the community purchase a freighter to transport people and relief supplies on the open sea. Inspired by Stephen's pronouncement, a group of volunteers and their families moved from Tennessee to Mobile, Alabama, to earn money to buy a suitable vessel. After more than a year doing research and attempting to amass funds by working in Mobile's shipyards, they returned to Tennessee and the project was abandoned.

Starting from the early days in San Francisco, Stephen's talks and lectures were recorded, transcribed and edited down into books, records and tapes that were distributed in a number of ways. The Farm's first real business, The Book Publishing Company, was originally established as a mechanism for disseminating Stephen's philosophy and social observations nationally and internationally.

By the late '70s, this publishing business had achieved some success by expanding their list of titles to include books inspired by various aspects of life in the community, most notably a collection of birth stories, *Spiritual Midwifery*, and a collection of vegetarian recipes, *The Farm Vegetarian Cookbook*. However, in the late '70s, when Stephen announced his plan to release a hardcover of his edited lectures, the team of 60 or so people working at The Book Publishing Company rallied behind it with all their attention, pulling energy and resources away from more lucrative efforts.

Unfortunately, by that time, the counterculture movement as a whole had begun to fade, and there was less interest in spiritual

philosophy, as the youthful energy of the '60s was being absorbed back into mainstream culture. After years of relative obscurity living in the hills of Tennessee, Stephen and his style of homespun spiritual teachings were all but forgotten. After considerable investment of both time and financial resources, the book did not sell and was an economic drain on the company and ultimately the community.

Working the System

To keep The Farm moving forward, people in charge of some aspects of its operations learned how to work the system to further their goals. With money always in short supply, it became important to win favor with those controlling the purse strings in order to gain access to funds.

As manager of the farming operation, Michael O became skillful at knowing just where or who to nudge in order to gain support:

Many of us played the “system” and consciously and sometimes craftily manipulated it, even as someone in a position of power. I became the consummate schmoozer of the bank ladies, and courted members of Stephen’s family for their interest in nutrition and gardening.

In the 1976 farming season, there was strong opposition to the huge expansion of the farming operation—led by some members within the Farming Crew and other people on the Board at that time. Stephen breezed into one meeting and told those guys that Michael was “carrying a piano on a tightrope” and to back off of him. So I took my “ends” of a worker-based egalitarian, agrarian community over the “means” of having the decisions being made by some sort of democratic process or, at least, free and open discussion. It turned into a colossal error.

Inexperience, combined with a freeze that year that devastated a large cash crop (vegetables being grown as a business venture), resulted in huge financial losses for the community. It was but one more exam-

ple of how Stephen's authority could be used to override concerns or push forward agendas, sometimes with disastrous consequences.

The Elders

Toward the end of the 1970s, an effort was made to formally recognize those within the community that embodied integrity and credibility to serve as "elders," people who could be sought out for spiritual guidance, help resolve disputes and engage in determining the direction of the community. From the 1,000 or so living on The Farm at that time, representatives were chosen through the community's first democratic vote. There were no candidates or campaigns. Residents were asked to simply list the ten people that best exemplified the role of elder. Everyone was encouraged to not use age as a specific criteria to define the concept of elder, so that the resulting group would represent the broader cross section of the community, including teenagers.

The 40 people who received the most votes were announced at the next Sunday Service. It was no surprise when Mary Louise, one of the midwives respected by everyone in the community for her fairness and compassion, received the most votes. All in all, people seemed satisfied with the results, a true reflection of the people within the community who carried the most respect.

Ultimately the effort did little to alter life on The Farm. The group had no real authority or mission. They were not expected to serve as a government, but were regarded more as spiritual counselors to influence the general direction of the community. Almost as quickly as it was conceived, the elders faded back into the fabric of The Farm.

Carol N was one of those chosen. "I was on the Council of Elders for a while. I know we did the best we could at the time. I think it was an attempt at giving others some responsibility for decision making."

Another elected elder, Albert B, remembers:

There was very poor control of meetings and agendas in those days. We were accustomed to a charismatic leadership model,

and had little awareness of tools such as facilitation, consensus or conflict management. Meetings went on for hours and hours, gave everyone a headache, resolved very little and were inevitably doomed to be repeated again a week later. There was no filter for what was an appropriate item to be decided by a 40- or 70-member group, and so we would spend weeks deciding on a particular water heating system for a public building or a marital argument that may have occurred in the Florida Farm. Instead of Stephen micromanaging these issues, a group of 70 people tried to micromanage them.

Feeling the Strain

Stephen's ability to commandeer the community's financial resources became evident once again in the early 1980s when he announced that he and an entourage would be making a tour of Europe and Australia. Over the course of the '70s, The Farm's primary recruitment tool for attracting new members was to send Stephen and the community's official rock and roll band (The Farm Band) on the road for a series of free concerts, which included lectures by Stephen. After each national tour, as many as a hundred or more new people would arrive, bringing in fresh energy, donating their vehicles and limited (or even not so limited) financial resources to the community. In accordance with the collective agreement, a few large inheritances and trust funds were swallowed up to provide the money needed to meet the monthly expenses of supporting the growing community.

With the population of The Farm at now more than 1,000, those attempting to manage its finances were beginning to feel the strain of providing for the community's basic necessities. The overseas trips cost thousands of dollars, money that the community did not have. There would be little direct benefit in the form of new members. Many people, especially those managing the community's finances, began to question the wisdom or reasons for such tours. But with

no real structure in place for a community decision-making process, their concerns were simply shut down or dismissed.

Of course, after more than a decade as the established authority figure, it was not entirely necessary for Stephen to make his arguments in person. Most residents were willing to follow his direction, with those closest to him able to wield influence on his behalf.

Warren explains:

Each one of us had a part in that. If enough of us had stood up and said things had to change, we could have demanded more democracy. But we didn't. A lot of fine folks came through there and saw the problems and pointed them out, and when they saw that change was not an option, left to go live somewhere else.

Susanne, a single mother living in the community at that time, remembers: "Many of us found ourselves dumbfounded to see that certain persons with more clout and authoritarian personalities would push others to agree. That was horrible."

Michael O adds, "It is not really fair to blame the lack of democracy on the Farm on Stephen. It took the community's agreement and a strong element of peer pressure."

The Task Force

By 1981 it was starting to become obvious to those managing the community's finances that the amount of income being generated was insufficient and unsustainable. For most of the last decade, the principal source of money coming into the community was being earned by men doing construction work in the nearby towns. However, the first oil crisis, along with double-digit interest rates at the end of the 1970s, had put the construction industry in a tailspin. The Farm could no longer count on the 60 to 70 "basic budget boogie boys" to support its population of over 1,000. Although a number of different small businesses had been launched, none were making enough money to

pay real salaries into the community budget in relation to the workers at each enterprise.

To address the situation, The Farm created a task force of community leaders and its top business people to develop strategies for generating more income. Their solution? Tree planting.

The Task Force initiated a series of brigades, sending teams of people throughout the North and South to plant trees. An energetic tree planter could earn as much as \$100 a day, top pay in those economic times. A few folks were physically up for the grueling work and became top wage earners, but most were not suited for such intense, demanding labor. After about a year, with little to show for the community in the way of real income, the effort was abandoned.

The Tipping Point

For many people, the tipping point in The Farm's destiny and the breakdown of Stephen's authority took place on a Sunday morning in 1982. During winter months, when the weather was unsuitable to gather outdoors for Sunday Service, Stephen would address the community through an in-house cable TV system that connected about 60 percent of the households. He would talk for about an hour, delivering that morning's "sermon" and then take questions from people calling in via the community's private phone system.

Recently returned from a visit to Plenty's current outreach projects, Stephen gave what was generally regarded as a pep talk, with the goal of inspiring the community to continue its outreach and public service.

Rupert worked as a mechanic and was well liked for his great sense of humor. From his observation:

When the wheels began to come off, with the community enduring debt, over-crowding, and a ridiculously low standard of living, occasionally one of our braver members would stand up at Services to suggest that we take better care of ourselves (aka democracy)—usually this was in response to rumors of a new

inheritance or chunk of money coming our way. But Stephen would always guilt-trip us by saying we had to continue being selfless, pouring more and more energies into third world projects and “taking on more” (needy souls) on the home front—in other words, we shouldn’t spend the new money on Tennessee Farm projects that might ease our sanitation problems or otherwise make daily life less a grind (particularly for women). We were told we were a beacon, an example the rest of the world looked to, and we had only gotten to this exalted point by being selfless (working like donkeys), so if we started spending more on ourselves we wouldn’t be The Farm anymore. At this point, Stephen would kind of look around, but usually no one would rebut his take on things. And I have to say that I bought his argument every time.

But on this particular Sunday, someone did take a stand. A call came in from Michael O expressing concern over the state of the community. In his view, the community needed to do as it had in previous years and close its doors to new people for an undetermined amount of time until the community’s finances could be stabilized and improvements made to its housing and infrastructure.

It was perhaps the first and only time Stephen’s authority had been publicly questioned. The rebuke carried even more weight because, as the person in charge of the community’s farming operation, Michael (“Chairman Mo”) was himself widely respected as a charismatic leader. Stephen’s infuriation became evident the next morning. He arrived at the morning meeting of the Farming Crew wearing a pair of cowboy boots, a not so subtle symbol of a showdown. The ensuing discussion was pretty much one-sided, with Stephen coming down hard on Michael for insubordination.

Word of the incident spread quickly throughout The Farm. Stephen had crossed the line, expressing anger and using intimidation, both considered unacceptable behavior. It clearly illustrated that Stephen was not infallible; he was simply a man who had become

accustomed to power and unquestioned authority. The emperor, or in this case the abbot, had no clothes.

Within a very short time, Michael O and his family left the community. Dozens and then hundreds followed in his wake. Over the next two years, The Farm's population fell from over 1,200 to about 700.

For those leaving, the dream was over. The Farm was seen as a sinking ship about to crash on the rocks.

The Board of Directors

During all this time, the legal framework of The Farm was based on a status established by the IRS for institutions, such as Christian monasteries, called a 501(d). Like a corporation, as a 501(d), "The Foundation" was required to have established officers in the roles of president, secretary and treasurer, and those serving in these positions had been members of the Task Force charged with solving the community's financial crisis.

As part of dealing with the crisis, the elders had formed a committee to reexamine the rules and bylaws of The Foundation. By 1983 the informally organized Constitutional Committee had redrawn the structure into a more formal system with a managing Board of Directors comprising individuals fully empowered to take whatever steps were necessary to save the community from financial collapse.

One of the Board's first steps was to do a full accounting of the community's indebtedness and financial obligations. Under the relatively unstructured communal system, the different working entities within the community managed their own finances, which included the freedom to set up bank accounts and even take out loans from local banks. The Farming Crew had borrowed money to purchase equipment and finance their failed business venture. Each different, new small business had its own accounts and had also borrowed money for start-up costs.

The Farm Clinic had accumulated thousands of dollars in debt with a number of hospitals. Of course, The Foundation had its own

checkbook, the account used to purchase food, clothing and on and on, to pay all the running expenses of the community. Accounts with suppliers for food and other necessities had fallen behind and represented another source of debt.

The Board designated a man on the Farm Legal Crew as Farm auditor. He methodically examined the books of every business and made a number of discoveries. The Farm Clinic had accumulated nearly \$100,000 of debt with hospitals. There were sordid tales of failed restaurant ventures in Nashville and California,. The Book Publishing Company was selling so many of its titles at prices below actual cost, even without calculating labor, that it lost money on even its most popular books.

The truth was both shocking and frightening. The total accumulated debt was as much as \$600,000. Bank interest charges were running in excess of 20 percent. It has been estimated that those debts compounded until they reached \$1.2 to 1.4 million by the mid-1980s. With the community unable to even meet its basic weekly operating costs, the Board of Directors concluded that the communally organized economy did not put sufficient responsibility on the members.

In September 1983, an All Farm Meeting was called, and the Board made an announcement. From then on, The Farm Community would no longer pay for any living expenses. In addition, each member would be required to pay in weekly to cover the operating costs and put money toward the repayment of the many different debts accumulated over the previous 12 years as well.

The Birth of Democracy

At the same time, this single act, known by members of The Farm as “The Changeover,” transformed the community into a functioning democracy. Every aspect of the community would be analyzed, evaluated and voted on by the members to determine if the expense was essential for its operation or a luxury it could no longer afford. Many services that for years had been supported financially by the community now had to pay their own operating costs, including salaries.

Notice to the IRS

One of the first steps that the community had to take was to notify the IRS that The Foundation was no longer functioning as an income-sharing entity, meeting the IRS's qualification for status as a 501(d). A trip to Washington, DC by The Farm's lawyers, and quick backpedaling by the financial team along with a refiling of the tax reports, kept The Farm from amassing an even larger debt, one that carried the prospect of tax foreclosure. In the meantime, the lawyers restructured The Farm as a non-profit membership corporation, but one without a Federal tax exemption, using the same name as the previous 501(d), The Foundation.

This change helped define the new relationship of people who were members of The Farm and its management, or in essence, its government. Although the largest asset, the land, was set up in a separate trust, the responsibility for the management of all other assets fell to the new corporation's Board of Directors. Permanent residents of The Farm became members of The Foundation and were (are) regarded as shareholders, co-owners of the community's assets. As a member-based organization, the new corporation was required by law to establish bylaws outlining the rights and responsibilities of members, including selecting the Board of Directors. The articles of incorporation defined the length of the terms each Director would serve and detailed the process of selecting new people to the Board, a democratic vote by the members. Several on the Board who initiated The Changeover had plans to leave the community. An election of a new Board of Directors selected through the democratic process was set for the beginning of 1984.

Membership

The Changeover also made it necessary to redefine how a person becomes a member of the community. The loosely defined relationship with Stephen as a spiritual teacher was no longer a relevant factor or criteria for membership. New members joining the community would become stakeholders in the new corporation. However, in the first years after The Changeover, there was no immediate pressure to

work out all of the details on this. With the community still in a state of turmoil following the radical restructuring, it was not accepting new members. People continued to leave by the hundreds. By the mid-80s, the population had fallen from around 700 to 250, or approximately 100 adults and 150 children.

All adults (anyone over 18) who had been members of The Farm from before The Changeover were grandfathered in as members of The Foundation. They now had the responsibility of deciding who would be accepted as new members. A constitutional committee was created to establish bylaws that would outline the rights and responsibilities of the members. These included standards of behavior and the process for confronting someone who had violated the bylaws to the degree that their membership status could be revoked.

When The Farm was founded, Stephen had established the concept that the community would be based not on rules but instead on shared agreements. The idea behind this was that rules were set by an established authority, which conflicted with the general attitude of hippie philosophy that rules were meant to be broken. Agreements meant that people were choosing to act from their own free will, voluntarily accepting and cooperating with established community standards. However, as the years progressed, many of these agreements became rules that ultimately reduced the amount of personal freedom and ability of people to make their own decisions.

The core principle that everyone agreed to was nonviolence. As a spiritual community, The Farm had decided that violence of any kind was unacceptable, including anger and intimidation. The new bylaws stated clearly that no weapons were allowed in the community. Anyone who repeatedly used anger and intimidation could be called before a disciplinary inquiry by the Membership Committee. If such behavior continued and a person refused to seek counseling or make any effort to change, membership could be revoked by a vote of two-thirds of the community.

This same two-thirds vote also became the bar for accepting new members into The Foundation. However, if someone does not achieve the number of votes needed to achieve status as a full member, they

are not required to leave. The vote simply illustrates that some members do not feel they know the person well enough to vote in their favor. A person may reside in the community as a provisional member for several years before making the transition to full membership.

The Budget

In many ways, the biggest effect of democracy coming to The Farm was empowering each individual to have a voice in the community's operating budget and expenditures. Every fall, meetings were held, and items to be considered for the budget were voted on line by line, with each proposal requiring a simple majority based on a quorum of voting members in order to be added into the following year's budget. The total dollar amount of the items that received a majority vote was then divided by the number of the members, determining the membership "dues" each would be required to pay annually or each month.



The Farm holds quarterly meetings that give all members the opportunity to express an opinion and have their voice heard.

Managers of various community functions and services were required to develop a budget that would be put before the community for approval. For example, it was obvious that the community needed to keep its water system in operation. It was understood that the water manager was seeking only a reasonable amount of compensation for their time and that the other costs for the electricity to operate the pump, the purchase of chemicals and other incidentals were simply expenses that had to be covered. Still, the community went through the process of voting this position and its corresponding expenses into the budget to affirm and acknowledge the shared agreement to pay for this service.

To Pay or Not to Pay: What Are the Consequences?

With the new economic system, each adult member was now required to pay a fixed amount per month into the community, starting after The Changeover at \$135. Under the old system, those people employed outside The Farm doing construction or some other work had their paychecks turned over to the community “bank” or finance managers. Now these people kept their paychecks and were responsible to pay monthly dues directly to The Foundation. Companies inside The Farm now had to start paying their employees. Many people were forced to look for jobs outside the community. Some were able to adapt to the change rather quickly, while others struggled to get on their feet financially. If a month went by and an individual or family was unable to earn enough money to pay dues, or for personal reasons decided not to make a payment to The Foundation, this would show up in the community’s account books as a debt.

As the months (and years) went by, a number of people began to accumulate an increasingly larger amount owed to The Foundation, and this began to raise questions. In a sense, the community dues were collected through an honor system. What were the consequences to someone that fell behind in their dues payments? What

enforcement mechanism could the community use that would penalize people who did not meet their financial obligations?

Shortly after The Changeover, one family announced plans to leave and refused to continue paying the monthly dues. However, since they were continuing to live in the community and use the services provided by The Farm, the Board of Directors felt this was unfair to everyone that was honoring their commitment to cover the community's expenses and payments toward the massive debt. In an unprecedented move, the Board used the community's lawyer to put a lien against the couple and froze their bank account. The decision obviously had some amount of support from a number of community members or it would never have taken place. From a community public relations point of view, this move was a colossal error.

While perhaps freezing the couple's bank account could be rationalized, the move came across as heavy-handed and was very unpopular. Ultimately the Board withdrew the lien, and after some months, the family left The Farm.

You Pay, You Vote

One of the primary privileges for members of The Foundation under the new democratic system was their ability to vote on the annual budget. With a relatively small number of members (around 100), each vote did carry weight and some amount of power when deciding what would be funded for the coming year. However, since not all people were contributing, those who were paying began to feel it was unfair for people not meeting their financial obligations to, at the same time, be involved in the decisions regarding the community's finances. After all, these people could vote to fund a project and then not pay for it. The Board decided that anyone who fell behind in their dues payments by three months or more could not participate in the budget vote.

The decision had the desired effect. Often right before a community vote, those delinquent in their dues would come into The Foundation office and pay the money they owed. Another way they could

get special permission to vote would be to agree to a payment schedule with The Foundation in order to catch up and stay current.

While the voting restriction did provide consequences and an incentive to meet the dues obligations, people who were unable to pay began to feel the new economic system was becoming taxation without representation. People with larger incomes could make the decisions regarding what people of lower incomes would have to pay for in the coming year. The decision about whether someone who was behind in their dues could be excluded from voting was finally brought to a community vote. The majority was in favor of maintaining the pay-to-vote status, no real surprise since those voting were also the people who were current with their dues. Over the next two years, the issue was brought before the community three separate times. Finally, by the third vote, in the interest of cooperation and to ensure everyone felt included in The Farm's decisions regardless of their income level, the policy was rescinded.

At the same time, it was also decided that a person could not lose their membership or have it revoked only for financial reasons or debt. The community's bylaws outlined the conduct and behavior that was expected of members, and it was felt that these were the primary matters of importance regarding membership and that it would go against Farm philosophy to ask someone to leave or take away their membership because of financial hardship.

Faults in Majority Rule

The Farm operated in this manner throughout the '80s and '90s, with budget meetings held every fall followed by a community vote to determine the budget for the year ahead and, by default, the amount of monthly dues for each person. Some years, certain budget items were fixed payments carried over from the year before. For example, a massive road improvement project with a budget of \$40,000 was financed (using money from the community's savings account) and paid back over four years. After being approved in the budget, it was not necessary to vote again on this for the following three years. A

\$70,000 budget for a new water tower was financed the same way for a period of seven years. These parts of the annual budget became fixed and non-optional until the loans were paid off.

It also began to feel redundant to vote every year on other budget items that were no longer seen as optional. For example, a bookkeeper or accountant was an essential service for the operation of the community. The water system had to be maintained and in compliance with state standards. The community maintained a liability insurance policy. These and other items with fixed costs were eventually recognized as non-optional budget components. The Board submitted the idea that only budget proposals for special projects or non-essential services within the community, which may vary from one year to the next, would require a vote.

Coming into the '90s, most Farm members had achieved some degree of financial stability, although members had different levels of income. Some of the businesses operating on The Farm may have become well-established, but were only able to pay modest salaries. A person who had developed professional skills might be doing fairly well, while a young person just starting out on their own might still earn little more than minimum wage. Young families face the many expenses that come along with raising children and won't have the same level of discretionary income as an older couple whose children have left home. Every year, a few individuals or a family had to endure an unexpected financial burden, such as extra medical expenses or the inability to work due to injury or illness.

When it came time for a budget vote, a quorum of voting members were required to cast a ballot for the vote to be legitimate. For 100 eligible voters, a quorum would be 75. Budget votes were passed by simple majority, which meant a proposal might need only 38 voters in order to pass and there were generally always enough people supporting any proposal to produce a majority vote. This meant that the total monthly dues were always the total of all proposals, no problem for people with good incomes, but a strain for those with more expenses or low incomes. Some were also beginning to resent having to pay for

services that they never used or projects that did not personally benefit them. If emotions ran high or an issue was particularly sensitive, a few disgruntled members might protest by “going on strike” and refusing to pay.

The result was that, for a variety of reasons, often people would fall behind, accumulating debt to The Foundation, and The Farm was on its way to creating a sub-class of debtors.

It became necessary for the Board to modify the annual budget to compensate for these losses, which over time amounted to tens of thousands of dollars. Although there might be over 100 people eligible and expected to send dues into The Foundation each month, the budget was based on a total of 85 people paying, with the understanding that, from one year to the next, approximately 15 percent of the total population would fall short for one reason or another.

The Pledge System

As The Farm transitioned into the next century, the Board of Directors and a group of volunteers serving on a Finance Committee began to consider a new budget model that could alleviate the economic pressures for those on low incomes, provide a solution for those with grievances, but still make it possible for special projects and services to get the necessary financial support. Outlined and discussed at a number of community meetings, the new budget model was put to a community vote and passed.

Under the new Pledge System, every person would be required to pay a minimum amount that consisted of all non-optional items. The list was expanded to include budgets for aspects of the community used by everyone, such as the maintenance and improvements of roads and public buildings. Beyond this minimum, the budget items vying for pledge dollars would include all projects and proposals, their total costs and the monthly amount per person if everyone contributed. Individuals were then given the opportunity to write in how much they would pledge in support of each project. It could be zero or go beyond the suggested contribution, which meant that the

people truly supporting a specific proposal could pay more to compensate for the people who wrote in zero.

At the bottom of the budget paper, each person filled in their total pledge, which included the non-optional figure, and then signed the form, in a sense, establishing a contract with The Foundation. Unlike the previous budget vote with private ballots and majority rule, under the Pledge System, by signing their name, the individual was expected to take responsibility and honor their commitment to pay the pledged amount.

In all honesty, the Pledge System has had mixed results. If one considers the big picture, it has been successful, with the community able to meet its annual budget demands and even expand on the number and variety of projects. In fact, the total amount of money collected is greater than under the previous line item budget vote.

This transition from democratic vote to personal pledge demonstrates that psychological factors are intertwined with the material results. Because each person is given the freedom to determine how their money is spent, the new system has alleviated the concerns and grievances of those “on strike” or simply made people believe that they can truly feel good about what they are pledging to pay. Those who can only afford the minimum are not forced into debt or resented by those paying a higher amount. Instead of feeling like they can’t afford to pay for what others voted for and therefore paying nothing, in general people will always at least pay the minimum. Ultimately, this means the total number of people contributing is higher than ever before.

The Pledge System also eliminates the separation between the established permanent members and new people categorized in status as “residents” or “provisional members.” Everyone pays the same fixed amount and has the option and opportunity to pledge beyond the minimum.

Virtually every pledge item receives some amount of money, and when possible, the Board looks for ways to fund the entire amount requested. If the allocation falls short, the person or people behind

a project must make adjustments. In some cases, they may find it necessary to keep an item on the pledge ballot for two years or more in order to accumulate the entire amount needed to undertake their project or proposal.

Consensus

Consensus is a group decision-making process, often deemed by its proponents as superior to a democratic vote. A voting system results in winners and losers, with sometimes as much as 49 percent dissatisfied and unhappy. In a community, this amount of disagreement can foster factionalism and create obstructive hurdles when attempting to fulfill the mandate voted in by the majority.

When using the consensus model, a moderated group discussion allows every point of view to be heard. Elements of common ground are identified, and attempts are made to reach a unified agreement that satisfies all concerned. Under the classic consensus model, one person who does not agree has the power to block consensus, and the discussion must continue until their concerns have been dealt with to their satisfaction. This individual also has the option to register their concern but agree to stand down and not block the group from reaching consensus. You might say they reserve the right to say “I told you so” should their concern turn out to manifest itself and present a problem later.

The downside of the consensus process is that it can be very slow. Some call it the “tyranny of the minority,” in that a small segment of the population has the power to block the majority from moving forward. The amount of compromise necessary to reach full agreement between opposing arguments results, some say, in decisions that become watered-down versions of the original vision. However, most generally recognize that the strongest decisions are made when everyone is in full agreement, and whenever possible, full consensus is seen as the ideal.

Over the many decades at The Farm, it has been found that the range of opinion is like a belly button (or other distinctive part of

the anatomy): everybody has one. When dealing with a population as large as The Farm's, reaching 100 percent agreement on any issue becomes virtually impossible. Reaching an informed decision can require making an effort to research a proposal and become truly knowledgeable of all its aspects and implications. With demanding careers and family situations, many people just do not have the time to become educated or participate in lengthy meetings and drawn-out discussions. This does not necessarily stop them from expressing that uninformed viewpoint during a community meeting and blocking the move toward unified agreement.

A Network of Committees

One of the primary ways The Farm has developed to facilitate decision making on key issues or common aspects of community development is through the formation of committees. Because the committees are staffed with volunteers, the core members are passionate and (hopefully) knowledgeable about the issues that the committee is asked to address. Because these volunteers are not elected by the community, committee decisions are recognized as recommendations to the Board of Directors, who can accept, choose not to accept or bring the matter to a broader community discussion and, if required, a vote.

Ideally committee members are able to reach decisions or recommendations by consensus. Their presentations to The Farm community during regular quarterly meetings outline the important points and the research behind decisions or proposals, informing the greater population. Digital communications like group email lists are also used to engage the community in discussions in order to educate or to gauge popular opinion. The community relies on the expertise or greater knowledge of committee members, and if they are able to present convincing recommendations, these are accepted and implemented.

Still, at times, a committee may consist of members representing two sides of an issue, both equally convinced that they represent the best approach and support of the majority opinion. If the committee

is unable to reach consensus, a vote within the committee takes place and the results of the vote presented to the Board and to the community. Depending on the issue, it may be resolved by a community vote or tabled for further discussion until a solution becomes clear.

Because the Board of Directors is an elected committee, its decisions have the power to be implemented without a community vote. It has been purposely structured to consist of seven people, in order to facilitate a tie-breaking vote and prevent a stalemate.

It All Works Out

For the most part, The Farm Community accepts decisions made by a majority vote, and those who lose are willing to let a decision stand. Votes of this type usually revolve around large expenditures or purchases and proposals with budgets over \$5,000. Those not in favor generally allow the will of the majority to take precedent, understanding that time will reveal the wisdom or folly of the decision. Quite often, many who voted against something become later converts, won over after a project or expenditure has been implemented. By allowing decisions by the majority to proceed with no impediment, community members agree to trust the greater vision represented through the vote. If things do not go as planned, do not flow smoothly or run over budget, again the nay voters will have the power of “I told you so” to use when the subject is reviewed or further discussion is necessary.

Community Participation

In its transition to a democratic collective, The Farm also gave people the freedom to not participate. Members exhibit all levels of involvement, from Type A overachievers to hermits. As one might expect, the greater community consists of the middle ground, with most people involved in one or more aspect of community life beyond caring for themselves. Votes generally receive nearly full participation, and attempts are made to reach each person so that their vote can be included. While there can be elections with multiple candidates for the

Board, anyone who truly desires can find a way to participate in the decision-making process and serve in positions of The Farm's government.

The challenge for the future is The Farm's transition from its founding first generation to the next wave, people who were not from the original movement of '60s idealists. The Farm's next generation is made up of those who were born there and have continued to make it their home and young people of a similar age who have found The Farm and resonate with its ideals. As The Farm evolves, there is a slow but positive shift as positions of responsibility as well as seats within The Farm's government are filled by people representing a younger demographic. It is difficult to predict when that shift will tip in a new direction, when the Board, the Membership Committee and the many volunteer committees will not consist of baby boomers born in the 1940s, '50s and '60s, but the generation born in the 1970s and forward.

This age ratio in The Farm's government is also affected by The Farm's general population demographic. When it comes to filling positions of government, the younger generation is simply outnumbered by the founding members and cannot provide as many candidates. Members of the first generation are no longer raising small children or starting careers and have more free time that can be dedicated to serving the community.

Many variables will need to change before The Farm's government is taken over by the next generation. The community's population also consists of a growing number of another generation, the grandchildren. Just as the important roles of government during The Change-over created what The Farm is today, the decisions by today's Farm will affect their lives and the legacy of the community that the third generation will inherit.

The Farm's history points to the inherent weaknesses of a charismatic leader based organization, but also demonstrates that a community or organization can rise above this, just as The Farm did over 30 years ago. When questioning how a group of intelligent and aware

people could be drawn to accept and empower the authority of a central figure, it is important to recognize that most of society gives as much or more control over their lives to their boss at work as members of The Farm did to Stephen. For an example in the greater culture, think Steve Jobs at Apple, messiah and powerful control freak, all rolled into one. Stephen's strength was to help people bring out the best in themselves in the service of humankind. When it became clear this was no longer enough to ensure survival, the people of the Farm took control of the community and changed its destiny.

The Farm's democratic governmental system answers the need in people to be involved in the decision making that directly affects them. While they may not always be satisfied with every outcome, the fact that their voice was heard and their vote was counted the same as everyone else produces a feeling of equality and empowerment that enables the community to continue and progress. A working government is at the heart of a community's stability and its ability to endure.