



The Farm

Lewis County commune made big news in the 1970s

Story by Bill Carey • Photographs by Douglas Stevenson

In 1970, a group of around 300 young people left San Francisco in a caravan of school buses and traveled across the country looking for a place to call home. Because of their clothing, hair length and lifestyle, the “hippie caravan” made big news.

After a journey across America, they settled in Lewis County in Middle Tennessee and started their community, which they referred to as “The Farm.” For the next few years, it was mentioned in books, newspapers and television news shows as the “largest” and “best known” commune in America. When Peter Jenkins’ bestselling 1977 book “A Walk Across America” contained an entire chapter about The Farm, even more Americans became knowledgeable about it.

At The Farm, everyone was welcome and given a place to sleep and food to eat. But they were also given a job to do, and if they didn’t want to work, they were asked to move on. The work was hard — residents did everything from cook in the kitchen to till the fields to empty the sewage system. Most of them worked from sunrise until dark, six days a week. The seventh day of the week was reserved for “group meditation” under the guidance of their spiritual leader, Stephen Gaskin.

In terms of Tennessee places, The Farm is in some ways comparable to Rugby, the Cumberland Homesteads or Ruskin —



The Farm School is the largest passive solar building in the state. The roof is designed to block the higher elevation summer sun, while light from the lower elevation winter sun passes through the translucent panels to strike cinder block walls that conduct heat into the cement slab floor, creating a large thermal mass. The Farm School (K-12) serves both children who live inside the community and those from the surrounding area, including a large number of children who are home-schooled.

other attempts by people to build a community based on different societal rules. But there is one big difference between The Farm and the other three places (which were all very short-lived). Founded in 1971, The Farm still exists, though under a different setup than first established. Today its residents refer to it as an “intentional community,” and life on The Farm is still different than anywhere else in Tennessee.

At one time, about 1,200 people lived at The Farm. At that time, The Farm was still run as a commune, which means that all possessions and income were held by everyone who lived there. The Farm had a communal dining room, a motor pool, a laundromat and even its own crude phone system (known affectionately as “Beatnik Bell”).

The people who lived there became adept at everything from how to fix a car to how to find and install a water tower.

But in 1983, The Farm was reorganized. Today the 1,750 acres are still owned by the community (technically under a trust), but the 170 people who live there have their own things, including their own homes. People who live there either work at outside jobs or have employment with one of the many small businesses that operate there.

The Farm also has its own school — a small, kindergarten-through-12th-grade private institution attended by children who live there and some who live nearby. In typical Farm fashion, it was built with an environmentally friendly design — with huge south-facing windows that maximize solar heat in the winter.

The Farm School also reminds us that, over the years, hundreds of children have grown up at The Farm. During its days as a commune, The Farm unofficially “adopted” many children; in fact, The Farm had a general policy of accepting all babies, children and teenagers who were left at its doorstep, and some young ladies there adopted and raised numerous foster kids.

So what’s there to see at The Farm? The first thing to point out is that this is not a national park or a museum. In some ways, coming to The Farm is like visiting any other small com-

The Farm Yoga Studio operated by Deborah Devoursney, Farm community member since 1973, provides residents and people from the surrounding area an opportunity to stretch, relax and interact with each other.





munity — most of the time, people are just minding their own business (unless you visit during a so-called Farm Experience Weekend.) Nevertheless, The Farm does have a few things that other small communities don't have. Since the entire place is private property, it has a gate and visitor's center, where we were greeted by a friendly woman named Vickie Montagne.

Once you are admitted to The Farm, you would perhaps enjoy a trip to the Farm Store, which sells some health food items you might be surprised to find at a place so remote. Beside the store, you'll find a structure unlike any you've ever seen — a steel dome that towers over a small playground. In the early 1980s, people who worked at The Farm removed this steel from abandoned buildings throughout the surrounding counties and welded this structure together. We were told that they never quite finished it, but it looks impressive nonetheless.

Keep your eyes peeled while you move around The Farm, because there's a lot more than you might realize, including

such interesting enterprises as a radio station, a dairy that produces soy milk, a book-publishing company and a midwifery operation (where women come to deliver babies). In fact, the advancement of midwifery as an accepted practice is one of The Farm's contributions to Tennessee law; a few years ago, a representative from The Farm successfully lobbied the Tennessee General Assembly to pass a bill recognizing the practice of midwifery.

The Farm also serves as headquarters for a few nonprofit organizations. The biggest of these is Plenty International, an organization started by Farm residents in the 1970s when a devastating earthquake struck Guatemala. More than 100 volunteers from The Farm went to Guatemala and helped rebuild hundreds of homes, schools and



Community dinners, held as weekly fundraisers throughout the school year, give residents a chance to network and develop deeper friendships.

government buildings, passing on much of what they had learned during their experiences at The Farm. Today, Plenty International remains active in countries such as Guatemala, Belize, Mexico and Liberia. And here in Tennessee, Plenty's Kids To The Country program brings children from homeless shelters and refugee centers to the peaceful refuge of The Farm where they have the opportunity to do things like swim, ride horses and pick blueberries.

Also at The Farm you will find the Ecovillage Training Center, where people come from all over the world to learn about alternative building methods and earth-friendly living. Speaking of things you won't find very often, at the Ecovillage Training Center is a house made of straw!

Ironically, the one thing that you really won't find at The Farm anymore is an active farm. Although many residents still keep vegetable gardens and tend to a large blueberry patch, the large collective farm on which people worked so hard in the 1970s is long gone. At The Farm, most of the buildings are in the woods. The wide-open fields are now a soccer field and disk golf course, and the rest of it is a big nature preserve. The Farm is flanked by about 1,500 acres set aside for hiking and nature-loving by yet another Farm related nonprofit called the Swan Conservation Trust.

To learn more about The Farm, go to www.thefarmcommunity.com. And to read some great first-person stories about life on The Farm in its commune days, buy a copy of "Voices from The Farm: Adventures in Communal Living," edited by Rupert Pike. ☺



The Farm is host to many different types of workshops and retreats throughout the spring, summer and fall. Visit its Web site, www.thefarmcommunity.com, to see a full calendar listing of activities open to the public.



Ramona Christopherson prepares rolls for a community dinner, one of many small fundraisers that help support the community school and other Farm-based nonprofits such as Plenty International and Swan Conservation Trust.



Tennessee History for Kids

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For more great stories of Tennessee history, go to www.tnhistoryforkids.org.