



pictured at left: Stephen Gaskin, Founder

## Vol. 6: Peace, Love and the Farm

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**W**e head east on Highway 20 toward Summertown. The road is beautifully lined with farmland and dotted with produce stands and country stores, many of which are inhabited by the Amish. We stop at Yoder's Market and Deli where we find shelves of

organic products and savor freshly made sandwiches. Down the road after a couple left turns, we arrive at The Farm.

We pull up to a big dome constructed of scaffolding torn from an old arena stage. The open air space has been the grounds for spiritual meetings and family outings. A small adjacent store – an adobe-like hut

painted purple – sells food, books, jewelry, soaps and clothing, all products of the Farm. Thirty-five year resident Doug Stevenson greets us. He now has grandchildren living in this hippie community.

For many, to hear the word “hippie” creates an image of tie-dye and flowing dresses and thoughts that fall short of their true

purpose. But Doug is nicely dressed and very pleasant to talk with. He's been active in land protection, and he makes a living as a video producer. He also has a band that plays “New-grass.”

Doug enlightens us on the creation of this intentional community: “The farm was established as a place where we could live with a new level of understanding and awareness, comparative to religion, and where we could put that into practice with our own voice. The land is our church.”

Steven Gaskin, who founded the Farm, was an English teacher at San Francisco State University and a leader in the hip-

pie movement. His popular Monday night class was dedicated to social issues, peace and spirituality. On a cross-country speaking tour at churches, he was followed by a caravan of 50 buses. Painted on the front of every bus was their mission: “Out to Save the World.” The tour is documented in Gaskin's book, *The Caravan*. When this tight community on wheels ended, they searched out a place to call home. They settled in Summertown, Tenn. in 1971.

“We have a vision that intersects in a lot of ways,” Doug says. “We're not all the same, we're diverse. We are unified behind non-violence and come from a realization that we are all one with the universe. We're interconnected mentally as well as physically. What you say and what you think affects the person next to you, affects the person down the road, in another city. We all share this existence, and how we treat each other makes a difference.”

Lawyers, nurses, midwives, writers, business owners and more describe the professional careers of these residents. They are a 200-person township with a board of directors and membership committee. There is no crime, no hunting, no weapons. Spread across three square miles, most of the land is protected as a nature preserve or in Land Trust. Over twenty businesses have been established along with a K-12 school attended by resident children, as well as children from other communities that relish in the more freethinking structure.

We tour the area with Doug by golf cart. The landscape is typical for this part of Tennessee with large fields and quiet, tall cedar-covered woods. It's a humid summer day and it feels a bit like a campground. Concrete roads and gravel drives lead to unique architecture. The homes, however, are quite normal, like many of us would live in, perhaps a little more modest and energy efficient. There are large, carefully tended gardens producing a wide array of vegetables.

We pass by rusted school busses with their tops popped out. They were once home for people like Stevenson. Entering the Eco-Village Training Center, we see alternative utility sources like a rainwater filtration system, solar panels and a composting toilet. Earth-made buildings are scattered around, including The Green

Dragon, which has wild designs and recycled glass molded into its walls. We meet Albert Bates, head of the training center, who teaches “by immersion” ecosystems, solar electricity and straw-bale home construction.

To our surprise, we are invited into the home of Gaskin. He's 75, a friendly man, tall and thin with gray hair pulled into a ponytail. We sit and listen to him rambling off accounts of earlier years and exuding great humor and intellect.

Describing their universal mission, he says, “It's like an IBM punch card, if you remember those.” He mimics holding a card and punching holes in it. “If we took all the religions and punched them out on IBM cards, and stacked them up, some of the holes would go all the way through. That's what we were looking for, the ones with the holes clear through.”

Gaskin has authored a dozen books and founded organizations like Plenty International, an overseas relief and development company. His wife, Ina May, holds an honorary doctorate for her work in midwifery, an internationally recognized program, and is author of *Spiritual Midwifery*.

And their social beliefs have proven to be quite productive. Opposed to nuclear arms, Gaskin explains, “If we were going to be against the nuke, we ought to know if something is hot; so, we got a Geiger counter.” As a result, the group became one of the leading manufacturers of Geiger counter technology supplied to emergency response teams like police and ambulance. They were put to use during 9/11.

The Farm has remained and sustained itself as a simple, environmentally conscious way of life. “We are all peaceful people about peace,” says Gaskin.

For the rest of us, it just takes a little understanding of the hippie way. It can make a world of difference.

[www.thefarm.org](http://www.thefarm.org)

*Rebecca Bauer and Anthony Scarlati are publishers of Nashville's TraceJournal.com, an artistic and historic portrayal of the people and places along the 100 miles of the Natchez Trace in Tennessee.*