

Relearning how to live as voluntary peasants

Contributed by John Siman
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JOHN'S PEAK OIL ODYSSEY - SIX MONTHS INTO IT

"Part of The Farm's original vision was to build a village for a thousand people using alternative energy systems that were economically and ecologically responsible. We believed that we could design a graceful standard of living which would be attractive to large numbers of First World people, while also being within reach of all Third World people."

- Gary Rhine on living as voluntary peasants, "So Close Yet So Far", from Voices from the Farm (1998)

Just before the Fourth of July, I left my life as a tennis-playing, wine-drinking, spoiled rich white guy to begin this radical eco-odyssey. And in the six months which have ensued, I have watched the sun rise over the Atlantic and set over the Pacific, joined Peak Oil groups in three time zones, and visited ecovillages as far apart as North Carolina and Oregon. Plus I spent a couple of months training with the Permaculture Army in Berkeley. But it is to The Farm, the thirty-six-year-old intentional community in Tennessee, that I keep returning.

I didn't hear good things about The Farm when I was on my way to visit. I had participated in the Earth First! Rendezvous in the Appalachian Mountains. There I saw former mountains apocalyptically sliced down to nothing to yield up coal which will be called "clean" to perhaps be liquefied for toxic methanol -- marketed as something disingenuous to shut Americans up about Peak Oil and Global Climate Chaos. The Farm was beckoning as a bastion of back-to-the-land activism in one of the mountain-top removal states.

At the Rendezvous I had met a young farmer who lives at The Farm. Her old VW van had broken down somewhere east of The Farm and west of the Appalachians, and she needed a ride back to it. I had still not yet given away my car (I would do so soon enough -- to firm up my eco-cred), so I was glad to help her out. "At The Farm," she told me on the way, as the big-box-bound tractor-trailers and the super-sized SUVs whooshed past, "there is no farming."

I would hear similar reports about The Farm as far away as the Left Coast. "It's a gated community now," a teacher of urban gardening in Oakland said. "It's like the suburbs now" said a permaculturist in Oregon, "and nobody wants to get their hands dirty by farming." "It's a retirement community for old hippies," said a rich young hippie in Berkeley, on his way to India.

And, well, there is no farming being done on The Farm. As I drove in, I saw thirty-year-old apple trees and thirty-year-old horses. Hundreds of acres of fields lay fallow. It turns out that a lot of Farmies drive the seventy-some miles up to Nashville to buy hyper-priced U.S.D.A.-certified organic goodies at Wild Oats (a Corporate Clone of Whole Foods, where the PR.-savvy system does not allow the cashiers to unionize, but does encourage them to wear tie-dye).

By the same token, however, there is no farming being done in the United States of America -- not on a local, sustainable scale, that is, not to any degree worthy of official attention. In fact, the U.S. Bureau of the Census stopped counting farming as an occupation in 1986 -- the number of actual, self-employed, traditional farmers had become statistically insignificant. To be sure, there are some non-corporatized farmers still around, but they exist only because they have either a reliable source of non-farm income (as I had), or because they are willing to live in real poverty (the Farmies of the 1970s lived on the equivalent of a dollar fifty per day per person).

But the bottom line is that our corporatized, industrialized, government-subsidized mega-scale methods of petro-food production have made small-scale farming virtually impossible.

And that is the heartbreaking story of American agriculture in the twentieth century, whether you're talking about grandma and grandpa's forgotten old farm or whether you're talking about The Farm. And so if you come to The Farm today looking for a working model for a sustainable, post-petroleum, ecovillaging future, you are going to be disappointed. But then again, where are you going to find such a model in the U.S.?

Back in the 1970s, when there really was subsistence-level farming being done on The Farm, Stephen Gaskin, the founder, coined the terms "Technicolor Amish" and "voluntary peasants" to make it plain how these hippies proudly and idealistically toiled in poverty. But that original hippie energy -- that original vision -- was not sustainable, and after the big Changeover (as the Farmies still call it) took place in 1982-83, The Farm ceased to be a commune. Private property has been the rule here for a quarter of a century now. Subsistence-level farming is just a collective memory, though the spirit of voluntary peasantry still thrives in the souls of some of the more uncompromising old Farmies.

Albert Bates, for example, who first came to the Farm in 1972, runs what is called the Ecovillage Training Center here, and he has just published a book called *The Post-Petroleum Survival Guide and Cookbook*. But for the time being Bates is something of a prophet without honor in his own country. Few of the Farmies share his sense of urgency about ecological crisis. And this is a real problem. For from what I've seen over these past six months, the Farmies represent the best of what's being done by the very few Americans who are idealistic enough to want to live in intentional communities and ecovillages.

The fact that so much ecological work remains undone and even unattempted at The Farm is frightening, not because it reflects badly on the Farmies, but because it begins to bring into focus just how horrible a place the vast majority of Americans are in now, as we see daffodils blooming in January and our government's endgame of other people's depleted-uranium-infected-blood-for-our-oil enters its fourth year.

The Farmies have not yet built an ecovillage -- this is unhappily true -- but they do know how to live in peace and kindness with their neighbors -- and they can remind us that it is possible to live as voluntary peasants. When they lived on the equivalent of a dollar fifty a day, they really did abide by the founding principle which they had taken verbatim from the book of Acts: "And all that believed were together and had all things in common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all as every man had need."

Their experience of voluntary peasantry puts the Farmies on a totally different planet from the rest of America, where the mainstream still, every day, every minute, is made more addicted to their energy-scarfing hyper-consumerism. So when the time comes and the rest of America, having been denied its right to shop, convulses and sickens in the pangs of withdrawal, the planet of voluntary peasantry may well survive Peak Oil and Global Climate Chaos, because the people on it have had some real preparation for life as involuntary peasants.

And, like it or not, that's what our future seems to hold, and that's what will force culture change (no matter how much we pray for techno-fixes): the shock of sudden poverty.

So let us go back to Gary Rhine's words quoted in the epigraph above, from his account of the founding vision of The Farm. It was about:

"... a village for a thousand people using alternative energy systems that were economically and ecologically responsible. We believed that we could design a graceful standard of living which would be attractive to large numbers of First World people, while also being within reach of all Third World people. We hoped to build the model village, live in it, and then get funding to help build similar towns in Third World countries. We also hoped to inspire other First World groups to build similar villages for themselves."

"During those years we had people living on The Farm who were at the forefront in fields such as architectural design, solar heating, and photovoltaics. We had the know-how and the manpower to build the town we envisioned. But we didn't build it.

"After a decade of struggling Third World-style in the woods of Tennessee, we were still living in a skeleton of our dream. Instead of building our town, we had been sending many of our most talented and energetic people to do relief work in Guatemala, Bangladesh, Haiti, the South Bronx, and on American Indian reservations...."

"By the early 1980s, many of the people who had been in on the original vision were tired of living in a crisis-management state of mind, with systems constantly breaking down because they weren't built right in the first place. It was frustrating because we knew how to do it right; we just didn't have the resources. So a large number of people left. I think that if at that time we had been able to build the town and been able to live within the graceful standard of living that we had envisioned as 'voluntary peasants,' a lot of us would not have left. We were so close yet so far" (from Rupert Fike, ed., *Voices from the Farm*).

Rhine, a documentary filmmaker whose special interest was American Indians, disappeared in a plane crash about a year ago -- he wasn't all that old -- and so we are led to consider the fact that just as much of the original vision for The Farm has been lost, so have many of the men and women who lived here during the 1970s already died. Yet it is out of the sadness of unrealized and never-to-be-realized dreams that we can learn from The Farm.

And so I am at The Farm as I write this. I am at The Farm to learn, and I am here to share with you what I have learned so far. My girlfriend Betsy is sitting next to me, looking over my shoulder. Betsy's a close friend of that young woman farmer whose VW van broke down on the way to the Earth First! Rendezvous last July -- whom I helped get home to The Farm -- one good turn leads to another! Betsy's been at The Farm, in one way or the other, since 1975. She was born in a teepee in Colorado in 1972-- her mother Marilyn had made it during the pregnancy -- and when Betsy was two-and-a-half, Marilyn moved to The Farm and began living the life of a voluntary peasant. For the first ten years of Betsy's life Marilyn did not even own a wallet. Right now Betsy and I are house-sitting for her -- she's gone to Washington, D.C. in a Greyhound Bus with about forty other Farmies to protest our so-called war in Iraq. (Like Betsy and me, Albert's also stayed behind; he's entertaining a reporter from *Vanity Fair* who's writing a story about the history of The Farm -- how odd a topic for *Vanity Fair*!)

And so, as Betsy looks over my shoulder, she makes sure that what I write here is both full of truth and free from personal or pointless criticism. For this is what I have to learn here. This is where our proper response to our scary future begins: in seeing things just as they are, and then reacting to them with equanimity -- by rising above our petty likes and dislikes, our self-protecting projections and false expectations, in order to be able to act with true mindfulness and compassion under any circumstances. For any circumstances are already here.

John Siman is going back and forth between the Georgia coast, where he is working on the refit of the schooner Wanderer (soon to be the Emancipator), and The Farm in Tennessee, where he is writing, among other things, a book titled Disconnectivities: Watching America Heat Up and Hubbert Down; or, Always Astonished. He can be contacted at john "at" thefarm "dot" org

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Earth First! Journal:

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