

ARKANSAS LAND AND THE LEGACY OF SASSAFRAS

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From interviews with Diana Rivers and Brae Hodgkin¹

In 1972, Diana Rivers, an artist and political activist from Stony Point, New York, moved to Arkansas with her then boyfriend. Land in Arkansas was inexpensive, remote, unspoiled, and beautiful. The towns of Fayetteville and Eureka Springs drew young people who were involved in the back-to-the-land, counterculture, hippie movements of the 1970s. Diana bought 500 acres of land in Newton County and established a primarily heterosexual community of women and men called Sassafras. The land was mountainous and rugged, had no electricity or running water, and the driveway was over a mile long.

Over the next few years, the wave of feminism washed into Northwest Arkansas, and the women at Sassafras became increasingly angry as they became better informed about the oppression of women. Growing dissatisfied with their restrictive relationships with men, they began turning to each other for love and support. They became feminist, then Lesbian, then separatist. Many of the women no longer wanted to live with men.

Due to the death of her son, Diana had to leave for a while. When she returned, she was summoned to a meeting by the women of the land. They wanted Sassafras to become a women's land, and they wanted her help in making it happen. In spite of still being in pain from her son's death, she agreed to their plan with some reservations. Soon a meeting at Sassafras was called

in which the women informed the men still living there that they wanted the men to vacate and the land to become a women's land community. It was a harsh, contentious meeting that went on all day, with women's anger erupting frequently. Diana kept hoping the community would work it out among themselves, but in the end, she had to decide because the land was still in her name. (Earlier, the Sassafras community had tried unsuccessfully to get the land into a land trust.) Diana was quite a bit older than the others, so this was not her first turn at politics. Several times, she tried in vain to warn women, "Be careful! How you treat the men today is how you'll treat each other tomorrow." Unfortunately, this turned out to be all too true.

Men left and women took over the land. The only exception was that the land above the bluffs was deeded to a young couple whom the women regarded as working class and therefore worthy. Women settled into two collectives, the Blue Creek Tribe based in and around the main house (the original old farm house) and Lesperadoes living in a hippie-built house lower down on the land.

Diana went to Oregon with her girlfriend and was gone for more than a month. By the time she came back, the two collectives were at war with each other, and both complained angrily to her about the other, trying to enlist her help. It got so bad that when women from the Ozark Women's Land Trust heard about it, they left their meeting, got in their trucks and cars, and drove down from Missouri to mediate a settlement, saying that, "This kind of behavior threatens women's land everywhere and won't be tolerated." An uneasy truce ensued, and by the next week, they were all planning a Thanksgiving dinner together.

Meanwhile, in 1975, Brae Hodgkin and her girlfriend Brodie moved to Leslie, Arkansas, and later were joined by their friends Dusty and Aurelia, another couple. The land near Leslie was a forty-acre parcel purchased by an older couple named Cappy and Joan, who had met in divorce court in State Farm, Pennsylvania, and moved to the dyke community in Tucson. The Arkansas land

¹ Rose Norman interviewed Diana Rivers at *Womonwrites* on May 24, 2012. Rose Norman interviewed Brae Hodgkin at *Womonwrites* on October 15, 2011, and May 24, 2014.

was to be their retirement farm. They named it Elggurts, “struggle” spelled backwards, saying “we struggle backwards.” They invited other Lesbians from the Tucson community to move to the land and build houses.

As dykes are known to do, Aurelia and Brodie got together, while Brae and Dusty, drowning in their tears, determined to get out of town fast. They decided to hitchhike together to the Michigan Festival, even though they had no camping gear. Shortly before leaving for MichFest, Brae saw a notice about Sassafras posted at a hippie co-op store in Leslie, announcing the formation of a women-only collective. When they got to Michigan, Brae met women from Blue Creek Tribe who invited her to come live at Sassafras. She took up residence in the pottery shed near the main house.

Sassafras was described as “open women’s land,” which meant that all women were welcome there. They could just show up and be part of it. The idea of open women’s land evolved from women in the hippie movement becoming radicalized and realizing that there was more to life than raising children and working in the kitchen. It was an old story that on the hippie communes, men worked in the fields and stayed outdoors while women were relegated to the kitchen and waited on the men when they came in. Many women were dissatisfied with this arrangement, and their new feminist ideas empowered them to make changes. The idea of separatism was a logical extension, as the pendulum had to swing to the other side before it could come back to the middle again. Open women’s land also provided a resting place for traveling Lesbians who needed space where they could feel welcome, as early hippie communes often could be quite lesbophobic.

The women’s community in the town of Fayetteville was very well organized, and the women in town were supportive of the women at Sassafras. There was the Ozark Women’s Trucking Collective, a food co-op, a children’s house where children of Lesbians could stay, and many women in the community owned or rented houses

that were open for women to reside. There was a women’s gym, a women’s café, and an active political community. Women set up alternative commerce connections in order to do business only with women. In typical Lesbian fashion, many, many meetings took place around issues having to do with racism, classism, spirituality, and cooperative collective structure. There also were a few “open land” communities in Missouri nearby, and residents of Sassafras often interacted with Lesbian women from Dragon in Ava, Missouri, which they considered their sister community (see pp. 25, 108 and 130 for Missouri women’s land stories).

Toward the end of the 1970s, things began to fall apart. There was a great deal of friction around issues of sexuality, race, and class, both on the land and in town, where women were trying to create a “wimmin-centric” economy. There were struggles around political correctness, with hours of processing, and disputes regarding the supposed alternative commerce method.

Brae was part of the women’s trucking collective, which worked well for a while, until some of the Lesbians went back to being straight and wanted to let men be part of the trucking collective. She sees this time as a steep learning curve, “creating our dyke culture—albeit doing it on steroids, so to speak.” The women talked a lot about anger and allowing women to be angry without being stigmatized. Brae observed that “there were many women in the community from diverse backgrounds and life experiences, some of whom were just beginning to learn their voice and express it in an environment where they were suddenly welcomed or not.”

When the Lesbian separatists tried to deal with issues, matters got even worse. It seemed that as long as it was “us against them,” Lesbians could maintain a united front, but when there were divisions from within, according to Diana, there were “lots of horrific meetings” with women, suddenly empowered, expressing anger based on oppression but twisted by personal shortcomings, leading to manipulation, accusations, guilt, and blaming rather than behaving like feminists. As the primary landowner, Diana

became the target for much of the anger. She saw the situation at Sassafras continuing to deteriorate as they failed to find common ground around differences of politics, culture, ethnicity, and class. Arguments about residency and use of the land deteriorated in one case to the point of litigation in the local court.

By the late 1970s, only a few full-time residents remained at Sassafras, with most of the wimmin traveling to town for paycheck jobs. In an attempt to bring more wimmin back to the land full time, a crafts collective was formed by Brae, Diana, Honest, and Cedar, with the intention of pooling income from making and selling T-shirts, cards, candles, bronze and copper jewelry, and other craft items. The crafts collective was called Wild Magnolia. Tensions between the women at Sassafras continued to increase significantly.

There were no women of color on the land at that time, and Caucasian women were guilt-ridden over this fact, so they went seeking women of color from the area. In 1979,² a portion of the land was deeded to a group identifying as working-class women of color. They called it Rainbow Land, established a board of directors, and formed a corporation, Arco Iris, Inc. [see p. 43 Arco Iris]. The political situation continued to worsen at Sassafras, until tensions became overwhelming, and finally the Wild Magnolia women left the land.³ In 2000, after the land had been abandoned

2 The women of color actually moved onto the land in about 1977, and the land was deeded to them in 1979. The year 1979 comes from the online *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, "Women's Intentional Communities aka: Women's Land Communities," <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=6513>, which says that before 1979, "For a short time, the women's land was operated by two collectives, the Blue Creek Tribe and the Lesperados."

3 At the end of her self-published book about her time on womyn of color land in Northern California, *The La Luz Journal* (1980), Juana Maria Paz describes moving to Fayetteville, Arkansas, in the fall of 1979, when "the collective [at Sassafras] had just split up" (78). She describes the time she spent living at Rainbow Land (now Rancho Arco Iris) that winter: "My tribal fantasies were fueled by the existence of another womyn-of-color land though I was heartily disappointed to find it empty." Residents were on a trip to Texas.

for some years, the two remaining members deeded 400 acres to the Arco Iris nonprofit corporation.⁴

In 1980, a number of women, including some who had left Sassafras, began meeting to discuss forming a new women's land community. The phoenix which rose from these ashes was called the Ozark Land Holding Association (OLHA). About twenty women purchased 240 acres near Fayetteville, and the community continues to this day.⁵



Photo courtesy of Merril Mushroom

Stone wall inside Diana Rivers' house at OLHA. The stones for the wall and floor were carried by womyn's hands only, and set by Diana.

OLHA was and is "the legacy of Sassafras," and much of the working structure was developed as a result of the Sassafras

4 Shiner Cardozo and Diana Rivers were the only people whose names remained on the deed to the Sassafras land that had not been deeded to others. Diana and her life partner Path Walker retained a life estate in ten acres of the 400 acres deeded to Arco Iris.

5 Lee Lanning and Nett Hart interviewed OLHA women for *Lesbian Land* (ed. Joyce Cheney, 1985), where it is called "Maud's Land." Sassafras, Arco Iris, OLHA, and other women's lands in Arkansas are described in Allyn Lord and Anna M. Zajicek, "Women's Land Groups (early 1970s–2000)," in *The History of the Contemporary Grassroots Women's Movement in Northwest Arkansas, 1970–2000*, pp. 33–36. Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2000. (75p).

experience, especially the use of contracts, which “keep it clear and clean.” OLHA established bylaws and runs by a consensus-minus-one process. Decisions are based on “triangle of interest”—how any decision will affect the individual, the community, and the land. OLHA is considered Lesbian land but not separatist. Most of the women have men in their lives, but the presence of men is restricted and subjected to member approval⁶. Housing and accommodations have evolved as members age and their needs change. Some live on the land, some have a space on the land but live elsewhere, and some live in town (Fayetteville). OLHA currently has about fifteen members. Membership cost is based on each woman’s share of the land payment. New members must be approved by the current members and can buy in only if another member wants to sell.

Diana is a resident at OLHA, while Brae lives on the North Forty, Lesbian land in North Central Florida [see story, p. 19].

⁶ Groups define separatism in different ways. Some Landykes would consider the OLHA policy “separatist.” Some groups who are regarded by others as separatist, do not regard themselves as separatist.

ARCO IRIS, RAINBOW LAND: THE VISION OF MARIA CHRISTINA MORELES

Águila

Maria Christina Moreles (b. 1953), known as Sun Hawk, recently graduated to Águila (Eagle). Águila founded and has lived on the beautiful, rugged, mountainous land that is called Rancho Arco Iris for nearly forty years. In October 2014, she told her story to Rose Norman, who helped condense that long interview for this special issue.

In the Beginning

I came to this mountain because of a vision that began as a recurring dream that started when I was just a teenager. Several tragedies occurred during my teens: I was raped when I was twelve years old, and gave birth when I was thirteen. I gave the baby up for adoption. Also at age 13, I was brutally beaten, and I witnessed a friend’s murder. When I was around seventeen, I again became pregnant after being raped, and my brother was murdered. The dream started while I was living on the streets of Dallas after being estranged from my traditional Mexican Indian family, who lived in a barrio there. The dream would often wake me, and at first, it was very frightening. In this dream, I was on a mountaintop, standing alone, looking down into a valley. The valley was like a city, but the city was in a war; I could hear shooting, bombs exploding, and people crying out. It was a terrible scene, and I felt saddened by it, but I felt safe where I stood.

I began to dream of leaving the city and finding that mountain. When I was about nineteen, I hitchhiked to Austin, and hung out on Guadalupe Street, where there was a big street fair. It rained all weekend, and I got pretty sick. A young couple, who frequently took sandwiches to the homeless, took me in. It was they who told me about this incredibly beautiful mountain: “There’s a