

These lands are meccas where travelers come from around the world
and deep souls find each other.

As we chant and we plant, as we sing,
as the smoke rises and the sparks fly upward
and the steam rises off bodies in the
horse trough hot tubs, as the fog lifts

as earth and sky are joined
as we pray that the baggage
and wounds that we bring
do no harm and be healed,
we touch the earth and raise energy
on this hallowed ground, holy ground, these lands
that are home.

THE NORTH FORTY¹: FLORIDA (1972—PRESENT)

by Kathleen "Corky" Culver

"Forty acres of oak trees dripping with Spanish moss; sandy clearings with pine needles sparkling in the sun; long time friends as neighbors." "Long Leaf," in *Lesbian Land* (1985), p. 83.

In 1969, Corky Culver and nine other members of a Lesbian conscious-raising group started by Judith Brown² in Gainesville, Florida, formed a group to look for land to start an intentional community for Lesbians. In 1972, they bought land they called The North Forty, near Melrose, Florida. It is possibly the first Lesbian land group in the country.

Part One: How We Did It

Some of you will want to get a land group going. Here's our story to encourage you.

How is it that we were the first women's land and that we have kept it going for forty-two years? Good question, says I to myself, knowing what a hard process it can be, how impossible it can seem.

Okay. First we were a consciousness-raising group, doing it in classic women's liberation style: speaking from our own experience, developing theory, doing action. We were, granted, getting the land for ourselves, but hoping to model a feminist process that would enable other women to do the same.

1 Corky Culver, writing as Circledance, describes the land as Long Leaf in Joyce Cheney's *Lesbian Land* (Minneapolis: Word Weavers, 1985), and later expanded that piece for publication in *off our backs* (May 1, 2003). That same issue includes several essays about Lesbian land, including Kate Ellison, "Lesbian Land: An Overview," *off our backs* (May 1, 2003): 39–41.

2 Co-author of the influential pamphlet "Toward a Female Liberation Movement," known as "The Florida Paper" (Boston: New England Free Press, 1968).

Why did we want to buy land together rather than separately? As a Lesbian group in the late 1960s, we were aware that depending on our families or men didn't offer us any social security, so we decided we could be one another's social security. Odd, maybe, to think of women in our twenties thinking ahead so far, but we wanted a place where we could grow old with supportive friends. We wanted the sense of safety and support we could give each other, living close in a community, ready to help take care of animals, to help if we got sick. We decided not to go into the arrangement as couples, which, over the long haul, might not work out. Each had her own share and house, even if couples developed. We wanted a beautiful place that could have our shared values of having some wildness around us as well as small gardens and small lawns. We wanted a sense of open land where we could walk to one another's houses without climbing fences, a parklike setting.

How could we afford this beautiful oak, pine, and cedar forest interspersed with meadows for gatherings?

Most of us did not have secure jobs as yet or large enough incomes to buy on our own. Two members put up the down payment and the rest of us paid only \$15 a month for years. We each had equal ownership, no hierarchy. To protect the land as an intact piece, we didn't have separate deeds but had life estates with quitclaim deeds. Ten of us, as I remember, each for our lifetime, would have two acres personal space, each sharing communally the remaining twenty acres. With the life estate method, we couldn't put up our share as collateral to get bank loans, so our housing had to be resourceful—as in small travel trailers, hand-built frame houses, tents, according to what we could afford.

As time moved on, we were able to gather resources enough to build houses to code with all the amenities. Not like the early days when my outhouse was a hole with a frame seat over it and a view of the stars, my shower outdoors, my stove a thrift store find from a steamship (a fridge, a stove, and a sink in one quite compact



Photo by Pat Paul, courtesy of Corky Culver

Dore Rotundo standing on the platform of the house she designed, 1975. Dore, a current resident of the North 40, was one of the first women architects in Florida.

piece about the size of a big chair).

What kept us going? Paying the minimal fees and building board by board was possible with odd jobs, modest jobs. And essential were the years of orderly meetings, careful paperwork, lots of music. Our day jobs were often part-time and rural. Some were teachers, techs, house painters, architects, artists, nurses. In the early days, we planted trees, picked oranges, painted houses, managed

gas stations, clerked natural food stores, raked hay, did part-time newspaper work as stringers.

Four of the original ten remain, with four new members. Some members peeled off, often finding the meetings and the challenges of getting along with others, making decisions with others, too stressful.

To help us, other land groups shared their bylaws. The local women's community helped clear land and build. A lot of women and spirit went into it.

Lawyer friends helped with the complicated legal issues involved in cooperative ownership and keeping the land intact. We had in our membership a contractor and architect who guided the buildings and helped a lot. Women starting now could check with Lesbian Natural Resources for advice (see story p. 173).

Dear sisters, we encourage you to find a piece of land and leap in. The early days are rich with compensations for the tough

conditions. You've got camaraderie to compensate for shortages of money and amenities. You've got physically invigorating work that's visionary and significant. It's fabulous working outside with friends. You're on the cutting edge. It feels great. Good luck!!!

Part Two: Thirtieth Anniversary on the Land—"Paradise: A Work in Progress"

A bright clear day. Dea, upon arriving at the North Forty, bounds across the meadow in her long skirt and sandals headed toward Pat and me where we are setting up an outhouse for a gathering. We have a homemade box with a toilet seat over a hole, and for privacy, sheets wrapped around trees. We are singing, harmonizing on Holly Near's "Mountain Song." Dea is smiling like a beautiful piece of cantaloupe. "This is it—a clearing in the woods, pine trees, oaks sparkling in the sunlight, women singing my favorite kind of music. I arrived, thought this is great, women's land. I heard you singing, and I thought this is paradise."

It's where it's safe to work outside topless, bottomless, where there's no need of fences, where the individual house sites melt into communal land, where there's no need of marking boundaries, where you can walk on sand paths to the nearby houses, each nestled in a woods patch and almost out of sight of each other.

There's nothing like the feeling of stepping onto a piece of women's land, stepping out of traffic and ads and real estate signs. Each woman knows it's hers in some way, reflects her. Because women's land is about all women, not just particular owners.

We often have a special kind of harmony that feels like singing. But paradise? Not quite yet. We're working on it. But it's work.

Let's take just one issue. Pets. One of the first irritants that lets you know there's something awry in paradise.

Let's take a hypothetical:

There's the grasshoppers that Ellen thinks of as pets, eating Star's pet spider lily.

There's Alice's best four-legged friend Bruno chasing Sally's Siamese.

Greta decides to feed River's shepherd the meat the dog's been missing on the tofu diet River gives her.

River, meanwhile, removes the ant spray and roach spray from Ruth's cupboard when Ruth is away.

Ruth has gone to get her dog neutered, which incidentally, River thinks is fiendishly unnatural.

Madge adopts stray cats by the dozens. Songbirds on the land thin out.

Mary Tom's dog drags used tampons around the land, pulling them from trees where Timber has hung them to keep deer from her garden.

Maia doesn't believe in tampons but wrings out her sponges into a dish for Tinker to pour around her garden.

A parrot squawking speaks for all of us. Awk!

Back to the present moment: Shall we tell Dea or anyone on this day celebrating our being here thirty years, of the Canker under the rose, the worm under the cantankerousness? Shall we rain on the parade of their delicious sensations and idealism?

No. Of course not. But one thing must be cleared up.

"Dea, you didn't bring a dog, did you?"

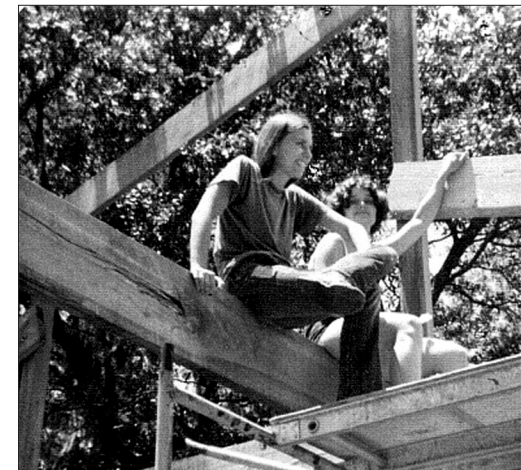


Photo by Pat Paul, courtesy of Corky Culver

Women working on the first house to be constructed on the North 40, which became Corky's home, 1975.

Part Three: Forty-Two Years on the North Forty

how it was birthed by children being cast out
 by their families, shunned or shamed as Lesbian
 betrayers of their society's, family's plans for them,
 refusing to carry the family honor and name,
 how they found peers among the others cast out,
 how they loved them and gloried in them and created
 communities and revolutions and buildings and vegetable plots

how they sought a new place in the country
 where they could honor the wild the unconventional
 the weeds and works of the hands, where they
 could shun the ways of the industrial, the commercial,
 make their own music, make clothing of the imagination,
 costumes of whimsy and difference

how by sharing they made few monies stretch to the many
 wise to how little they needed of what others valued
 how they learned the ways of their spot of earth, learned the names
 of the sparkleberries, the nettles and blazing stars, how they let
 nature stay near them, remembering to share with the deer
 and deer moss, there before them

how they learned to build for themselves, use hammers and
 chainsaws, squares and levels, how they scavenged and saved
 how they pumped water and showered outside and watched
 the path of the moon. how they were lovingly careful,
 maintained roads and houses and paid taxes and kept records
 and sang and played flutes and cherished seeing each other
 and working together.

how they made each other happy and made each other miserable
 how some left and some stayed. how they tried something very
 hard, very revolutionary. how in many ways they succeeded.

DRAGON*Dolphin Dragon*

When, at age thirty-seven, I landed at Dragon on May Day 1980, a birthday party for a six-year-old girl was in progress, and I was fairly delighted and amazed by my first taste of Lesbian community. Wimmin's land. My firsthand report only begins then.

For years, I had unhappy feelings about being cast into the role of "Southern" woman. I was only introduced to the concept of "lady" in junior high school, by my best friend, who thought it an admirable ideal. So I gave it a small chance. It was not for me, but there seemed to be future benefits in store for those who were able to so consciously mold themselves, sort of like feet . . .

I'm from West Texas, not East Texas, or South Texas, or the Hill Country. But such fine distinctions were lost on those (who I thought of as) Yankees of Chicago! After thirteen years in the Midwest and expanding my sense of geography, I did not think of Missouri as the South.

St. Louis was the Midwest, right? Therefore, all of Missouri was the Midwest?

I had not expanded my sense of personal geography (or history) enough to know that (1) Missouri was a "divided" state during the Civil War, though a "legal" slave-holding state, and (2) that the Ozarks, where I bought thirty acres, is its own entity, a sort of crypto-libertarian culture, and a Confederate guerrilla hide-out zone. All this splittedness, I reflected by deliberately regaining (after a stint in New York) my accent and maintaining it deliberately—partly as a confounding stereotypes ploy, or so I thought.

In thinking of us as Southern wimmin's land, the first questions that pop into my head are about race, hard questions: How many wimmin of color (WOC) live or have lived here? Visited? What's the attitude of the "locals"? What color are the locals?