

host of smaller lands, occupied by single Lesbians and couples, as well as a gay men's campground.

Since Dragon was included in *Lesbian Land* in 1985,² we have managed to burn down the Main House, pay off the pump, let the fields grow over, build a house, haul in two ready-mades, watch the garage fall down, grow food, make wine, bury one Lesbian, lose several, gain new ones, receive kind donations and moral support, and appreciate our good fortune in living here.

Now here we are: shitting in buckets of sawdust, carrying jugs of water, and warming ourselves with wood fires, none of this with quite the agility or speed as when we began.

What next? We die. Other ones come along and carry on. Hopefully. The land remains.

LANDYKE IN A STRANGE LAND, RURAL MIDDLE TENNESSEE BELLY ACRES, 1975–PRESENT

Merril Mushroom

The 1960s was an exciting time to be in New York City. I was a twenty-something transplanted Southern bar dyke turned hippie dyke living in the East Village. I worked as a schoolteacher in central Harlem and otherwise was involved with civil rights, antiwar/peace activities, psychedelics, and Lesbians. My social group was the only predominantly gay/Lesbian group in psychedelia.¹

In 1966, I opened a hippie shop in the East Village with another Lesbian and a gay man. We sold handmade crafts and worked with runaways, street kids, and antiwar protesters. We cooked and served free hot supper every evening to anyone off the street who wanted to eat—stews made from grains and beans bought with cash donations and free vegetables gleaned from the produce stands that lined First Avenue. The first Peace March happened, and the first Be-In at Sheep's Meadow in Central Park. I went to Millbrook and to Woodstock, danced at the Balloon Farm which later became The Electric Circus, and was involved with the Off-Off-Broadway theater scene. I ate peanuts at The Ninth Circle, eggs Benedict at the Limelight, steamed clams at the Riviera, pastelitos from the Argentine empanada stand next to The Hip Bagel, and macrobiotics at the Cauldron. I went to concerts at Fillmore East and hung out at the Caffe Cino, the Sea Colony, Kookie's, and the Washington Square.

1 See "The Illicit LSD Group—Some Preliminary Observations" by Frances E. Cheek, Stephens Newell, and Mary Sarett in *Psychedelics*, ed. Bernard Aaronson and Humphrey Osmond (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc, 1970). Online at <http://www.drugtext.org/The-Psychedelics/the-illicit-lsd-group-some-preliminary-observations.html>.

2 Edited by Joyce Cheney (Minneapolis: Word Weavers Press).

The next wave of feminism was approaching. I quit teaching and went to work for a motorcycle courier service as their first woman delivery rider, and I drove a taxi for a while, but not at night. There were riots at the Stonewall bar, and Women's Liberation was blossoming. We dykes tore our shirts off and danced topless, liberated, breasts to breasts, in the Lesbian clubs.

As the psychedelic 1960s began to wane, and the hippie movement became a market, some of my friends drifted into the urban corporate establishment. Others moved from The City to rural areas as part of the simpler-living, back-to-the-land, renewed intentional community movement. This idea interested me, especially in the context of working with children. I shared a communal house in Tivoli, across the road from the Catholic Worker Farm, and even though I did not live there full time, communal living appealed to me. By 1970, I was increasingly drawn to the idea of collective country living and had a growing desire to raise and teach children outside the mainstream models of family and school. My inspiration was Aldous Huxley's book *Island*. One of my head shop partners was a radical fairie I had known since the 1950s in Florida. We discussed at great length the possibility of forming a partnership where we would adopt children who were "hard-to-place" (which was any child other than a healthy white baby), leave the city, and engage in rural communal living and collective free school. We would legally marry, if necessary, to be able to adopt; but I was a Lesbian, and he was a gay man, and we had no intention of giving up our same-sex girlfriends and boyfriends or our Lesbian and gay activities.

In 1972, we departed from New York City in a big pink school bus outfitted for living with our rescued street dog and our first adopted child—a biracial foundling boy—in search of the gay hippie pie-in-the-sky paradise that awaited us in, we thought, New Mexico, where several of our New York friends had gone to live at the Hog Farm.

We traveled for over a year and covered 15,000 miles around the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Despite our plans to settle

in the West, we just did not feel at home anywhere we went. We longed for our familiar Southeast where we both had grown up, even though this was the very area we'd agreed that we should avoid as the white parents of a Black child.

But the Southeast of the 1970s was not the Southeast we remembered from the 1950s and 1960s, and tensions around race relations, although decidedly present, were not what they had been, either. Julia, in Georgia, who decided to join us in the collective, urged us to consider North Georgia, Tennessee, or Kentucky.

Meanwhile, we had run out of money and needed to get back to working at real jobs in order to be able to eat and buy gasoline while we looked for land. We decided to stop and settle temporarily in Knoxville, because it was conveniently located, and, most important, we were connected with the Knoxville Lesbian Feminist Alliance (KLFA). Friends from afar began to contact us to commit to the potential land collective.

Lesbian-feminist activity was burgeoning throughout the Southeast (see *Sinister Wisdom* issue 93). Many of my friends were becoming separatists, and I agreed wholeheartedly with them in theory—but in real life, here I was in a living arrangement with all these males!

The land search was continuing. Then, one day, we read in an old magazine a letter from a pair of vegetarian counterculture folks who had settled in rural Middle Tennessee where land was cheap and the locals were friendly, and they invited "like-minded folks" to come check out the area. We decided that could be code for us.

We went to visit. She was chopping the wood while he made and served the tea. We liked them. They took us to see a hill farm for sale nearby, on a hundred acres of extremely rough but very beautiful land, with two fixable houses, two usable barns, water on the land, in the perfect location, at an amazingly low price. We contacted potential collective members and pooled our money for

the down payment. In 1975, we purchased the land and named it Belly Acres.

Our initial land group could not have been a more unlikely collection of folks. The core members were myself plus radical fairie co-parent plus, by now, two very young adopted boy children, two radical Lesbian-separatists, and a heterosexual man. Several people from our old New York group came to visit, interested in joining us as well. We thought that with a large enough piece of land and separate living spaces, we could work out or, at least, bypass our sociopolitical differences.

Our first projects were cleaning the two old houses, making them marginally livable, building a proper outhouse, and creating a womyn-only space. Living on the land was demanding. We had electricity but no running water. We cooked with gas, heated with wood, and washed our clothes in the laundromat up in town ten miles away. We kept chickens, ducks, turkeys, peafowl, dogs, cats, one horse, and many children.

That same letter that attracted us also brought to the area many other kinds of counterculture folks from other places, but there were almost no other gay/Lesbian people. (That, since, has changed, and the area now is home to a tremendous GLBTQ population.) We formed our free school, which took root and persisted for almost a decade. Three more children joined the family, but the other members of the collective dropped out during the first few years. The sociopolitical differences, it seemed, did matter; but these turned out to be not the greatest of our disagreements. Much more difficult to get past were the day-to-day issues around work that did or did not get done.

Work Ethic: 1975

This afternoon, when I arrived back home from my job in the city, and I saw you
sitting on the porch wearing brand-new overalls—

both of you sitting
on the porch with the two of them, your houseguests,
all of you wearing brand-new overalls—
and yes, I could imagine how you might have said,
in the car on your way to town,
“We’ll need to buy some overalls to wear
when we work.”
I wondered,
then,
did you really intend to use those overalls properly,
or did you think it would be sufficient just to know how to
fasten the galluses?

I see
firewood not stacked, not even split yet,
compost overflowing the bucket,
water jugs still empty,
dirty dishes piled on the counter,
chickens not yet fed,
eggs not collected,
no supper on the stove,
and
the four of you sitting on the porch
wearing your nice, clean, brand-new
overalls.

Lordesses, forgive me for being pissed off. Help me
not to be so judgmental,
to hold my tongue—to understand that
people have different ideas regarding
the day-to-day priorities
of collective country living.
But hay must not stay on the ground
when the weather threatens rain!

One of my jobs was as a breadwinner in the real world, to earn the money to pay the mortgage and other bills. As folks dropped out of the collective, those who remained had to pick up the farm debt. Finally, it was just me working away from the land, and my little paycheck stretched and stretched. We grew what food we could, but our garden was rough and rocky, and the ground needed lots of organic buildup to even begin to resemble soil. We traded with our neighbors, shopped at bale stores and salvage yards, tore down old buildings in exchange for the building materials. We participated in buying clubs, work parties, and clothing exchanges, went to barn dances, and played lots of music together. We did community organizing among the locals and got along well with our neighbors.

Most of the new folks settling into the area were heterosexual hippies, breeders, and there were many, many children who all flowed in and out among households. One might think that living among all these heterosexuals—hippie or not—that I had to be lonely for Lesbians, but, truth be told, I had plenty of dykes in my joyfully nonmonogamous life. Indeed, I could not have survived without them. Friends, lovers, or just passing through, Lesbians came to visit, and I went to them, to where they lived, to conferences, festivals, networking meetings. Whenever I was not working at my paycheck job, raising the children, doing house and garden chores, hauling water, writing stories, or doing rural community activism, I was somewhere doing something with the Lesbians!

Looking back on then from now, I can't believe I squeezed so much activity into every day and still got enough sleep. Our child population continued to increase. There were foster children, "stray" kids whose moms were not able to care for them right then, and sometimes the moms stayed with us, too. Our by now five adopted children grew up with the understanding that families come in many different arrangements and configurations, that Lesbian/gay orientation is just a regular way for some people to be, and that feminist values and practices were what we should aspire for in life.



Photo courtesy of Merrill Mushroom

Wholesome, organic children raised at Belly Acres (l to r): Scott, Ananda (top), J'aime, David, Jessie (front).

By the early 1980s, I was working several paycheck jobs and had little time for anything else except children, garden, and Lesbians. I was in a monogamous relationship with a Lesbian who lived nearby. The free school had evolved into several smaller homeschooling groups. Radical fairies began to move to the formerly anarchist collective on Short Mountain, heralding the beginning of the GLBTQ population explosion in the area; and the Landykes movement was taking root in the Southeast as it was everywhere there were Lesbians.