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FEATURES

Caravan of the disenchanted molds a new, communal life



ANN ARBOR VETERANS may remember a good-humored, lean and blonde man from San Francisco who came here in November, 1970 and lectured on religious matters for several nights. One reason you may remember Stephen Gaskin is that he came to town followed by three hundred people in fifty-five schoolbuses. He sat in a lotus position on the stage of Rackham Auditorium and talked about Zen, psychedelics and life force — and how to get that caravan of three hundred hippies across state lines.

The next summer Stephen led his caravan back to the land and certain destruction, many of us were sure, in the rolling woods and fields south of Nashville. There they founded the communal Farm. Now, three years later, relations with neighbors are amicable, Stephen and three others are in prison for growing marijuana, and five hundred acres are under cultivation.

At the beginning of August the Farm harvested a quarter of a million pounds of red and white potatoes, enough to last the winter. Water towers have been erected, as have twenty barns and buildings.

THERE'S A SALVAGE crew and a construction crew as well as a farm crew; there's an accredited school with fifty pupils; a store where people help themselves according to a ration system. The Farm also boasts a printing shop, a ham radio station and a recording studio where the Farm Band cuts its own records.

"The difference between these people and hippies is that these people work; those damn hippies don't do nothing," said Homer Sanders. Homer was one of the first of the local people to go inspect the 350 hippies who arrived in an endless stream of schoolbuses one day in 1971.

Sitting in a lawn chair underneath a shade tree, Homer recounted the time he once shot two men trying to rob his house, picking one off the roof. And how he helped police turn away a crowd of armed men who gathered at the entrance to the Farm one night shortly after the group arrived.

"These people came here and they didn't know the first thing about farming. But the difference between these people and hippies is that these people work; those damn hippies don't do anything," said a neighbor.

But the Farm folks dismiss his stories as tall-tales. "We're trying to get him to appreciate non-violence," one said.

"EYE FOR AN EYE, tooth for a tooth. That's right," said Homer. "It's in the Bible. First thing I found out about these kids was that they didn't have guns. The second is that they all work. But what I like is that they hang together and do what they say — they won't tell you a lie."

Like other neighbors, Homer has been of great technical assistance to the Farm folk. "These people came here and they didn't know the first thing about farming," he said. "They had three architects and the prettiest blueprints you ever did see. But they didn't know what to do with them."

Prophet Gaskin, who is released to the Farm on Sundays for religious services, calls the Farm gig "voluntary peasanthood." Farm folk not only work hard, but also foreswear abortion and all artificial means of birth control. They don't eat meat and dairy products, nor do they consume alcohol, cigarettes or coffee. The only drugs permitted are marijuana and natural psychedelics, but the Farm people are abstaining even from these — ever since Stephen was imprisoned.

RESIDES PREDICTING imminent financial collapse (as a result of the spiritual revolution which is also sweeping the globe), Farm folk also make evangelical plans. Stephen is to be sent on a world wide tour when he gets out of prison, to Europe if not to Australia as well.

There are plans to send food to the starving Sahel in someone's retired DC-7, currently in the Republic of Zaire. Farm folk are also looking for funds to send the great white hospital ship, City of Hope, around the world again, this time staffed with a voluntary Farm crew.

"Stephen tells us the truth straight," a Farm woman told me. "He doesn't fool around." And neither do the Farm Folk, many of whom came to the farm from the Haight Ashbury of the late Sixties.

"YOU CAN BE so creative with soybeans," enthused the woman in the Farm soybean plant. Mayonnaise, whipped cream, milk and yogurt are manufactured there, she explained, as well as soy bean meal. "It's psychedelic," said another Farm woman.

In the Park Tent, a wood floor structure in the woods where eleven single men reside, everyone was content and amicable. "If we were in the city, we'd just be sitting around getting drunk," said one resident.

In the canning plant infants were getting underfoot; outside the wood and canvas structure, a gang of eight-year-olds were alternately shucking corn and throwing it at each other.

"I feel like I can really be a woman here," said a woman softly as she cut the corn off a cob with a circular knife. "I feel safe to be a woman."

Then I asked the four women present — most of the workers in the canning operations are female —if they had been criticized by feminists for bearing children and being housewifely.

Heads nodded. "I think some of them are trying so hard to be like men that they turn macho," said one Farm woman. "It's good to go out and do what men are doing, but a lady can't forget she's a woman. Maybe they're confused about their feminity," she suggested.

"I don't think a lot of these women have any idea what a creative thing giving birth is," added another woman, "especially if all they've had are abortions."

All the Farm women have had, by comparison, is babies — two hundred of them delivered by natural methods in the last three years.

Farm women won't abort their babies because they feel the life glowing in their bellies.

Farm folk won't eat meat because they're responsible citizens of the world who refuse to rip off the protein chain.

And Farm folk sturdily bottle up all negativism, whether sathre, cynicism or despair, because such behavior only amplifies the bad vibrations.

"One of these years, about fifty from now," observed a Farm woman, "all the original people are going to be stepping off together."

"That will be very sad," I said.

"It will be very beautiful," she replied.

David Stoll was writes for the Ann Arbor Sun.



Daily Photo by STEVE KAGAN

Elizabeth Cotten: A rediscovered master devoted to the rural blues

By JOAN BORUS

TO THOSE WHO have heard of her, Elizabeth Cotten is the authoress of the well - known "Freight Train," a song which over the years has undergone countless changes at the hands of countless artists.

That she is only just becoming known in her own right is a typical pattern. She was among those rediscovered in the early sixties, when professors, folklorists, and researchers gained new interest in the culture of the blues. And like Mississippi John Hurt and other "discoveries," she is a master of the rural blues idiom.

The depth of her devotion to her music was revealed when I spoke with her at the Ark yesterday. Her recollections were a testimony to hard work and sheer perseverance.

A gentle, fragile - looking woman of 81 years, she nevertheless is still going strong. Only when she suffered an occasional memory lapse or was plagued with "frogs" in her throat was I aware of her age. Throughout our interviews she clung tenaciously to her guitar.

LIBBA COTTEN was born in 1893, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. At an early age, she began experimenting with her older brother's banjo. Not knowing how to play it, she would inadvertantly break the strings. But she played on it, broken strings or not; and after numerous trials and errors she finally mastered basic technique. However, when her brother left for Winston-Salem, the banjo went with him.

Spurred on by the need for something to play, she went door to door asking for work. After nine months of hard domestic labor she bought her first guitar — a Stella demonstration model costing $3.50.

"I thought it had more strings on it than ever I seen in my life," she said. To add to her problems, she was left-handed. Her younger brother, who played guitar, wasn't much help.

"All he said was, 'I can't show you anything; change the strings or turn it (the guitar) around.'" recalled Libba.

CHANGING THE STRINGS wasn't to her liking, so she learned to play by turning the guitar around, learning to play songs one string at a time.

"Oh I worked quite hard with it," she said, "when you're young you can think of so many things to do . . well I began to learn to play and that was all I wanted to know and I was as happy as I could be."

"Then when I got older, I joined the church," she continued with a touch of sarcasm. At the age of 14, the church told Libba that a person either served God or the devil, and that the blues or the "whirls" songs that Libba loved to play were definitely sympathetic to the devil. So she began playing church songs and got married, putting aside the guitar for many years.

AFTER SHE WAS married, Elizabeth moved to Washington, D. C., and worked at a department store selling dolls. It was here that coincidence brought about a profound change in her life. One day a woman walked in, and although Libba had never seen her, she felt a strange desire to work for her. The woman turned out to be Mrs. Seeger, Pete and Michael Seeger's stepmother, and sure enough, Libba ended up working for her as a maid about two days later. (Libba, by the way, is the name given to her by one of the Seeger children).

Once the Seeger family realized she could play, they began to record her, although Libba cannot remember specific dates. Strangely enough, "Freight Train" was the first song the Seeger Family heard her play.

"Freight Train," then, has become an inseparable part of Libba's identity. Not only did it get her started recording and traveling, but it has been responsible for several lawsuits, including one in England brought against artists that have claimed the song as their own.

"FREIGHT TRAIN" was written by Elizabeth at the age of nine. The Cotten family lived near the railroad tracks, which fascinated Elizabeth. One day when the Cotten children were playing, the conductor gave them a ride on the train.

"I thought I was in Heaven when the train moved . . . I always loved trains; it's something in me — I just love the sound of them." It is this childlike simplicity and fascination that have been preserved forever in "Freight Train", and has appealed to so many different people.

Of course, as the concerts this weekend revealed, Libba is by no means one dimensional. Her delicate, yet masterful guitarwork indicate years of hard work and thorough knowledge of the blues. And yet it is the echo of "Freight Train" that permeates through all of it — bits and pieces of its guitar riffs show up regularly throughout her performances.

IT IS THERE in spirit as well as in actuality. Just as "Freight Train" was written out of Libba's fantasies, so too are her other compositions. For instance, she played for me one composition called the "Graduation March," a song which begins in a march tempo and ends in a blues style. It was based on her recollections of the high school band, with their fancy costumes and brass instruments.

To listen to her recall the memories of the band is to hear and see it with the same rapture of the child.

Libba spends most of her time traveling these days — she goes wherever she's asked, often by herself. She also plans to make a new record in conjunction with Mike Seeger, centering upon church songs and her own compositions. Despite her years, she's still going strong, denite occasional "frogs" in the throat or memory lapses. She loves to play in college towns and seems to really enjoy being with young people — the "teenagers," as she calls them, are her biggest fans and send her the most mail. Perhaps that is fitting, for it is the "teenagers" who are the inheritors of her tradition.

Joan Borus writes regularly on folk music for the Daily.