

Birds Foot: A Commune

By Robin Streit

The idea of a commune conjures up bizarre images in the minds of many people. A common conception is one of anti-establishment flower children living off the land and engaging in frequent drug use and permissive sexual behavior. As is usually the case with generalities, this conception is distorted and no basis for truth can be found. A look at a local commune bears witness.

On Star Route, four miles south of the village of Canton, lies the Birds Foot Farm. It is a working farm, providing a large proportion of the area's fresh produce. The farm's yogurt factory enjoys a good business, taking in \$20,000 a year from the sale of its six popular flavors. The farm covers 130 miles of the North Country's beautiful fields, woods, hills and streams. And yes, Birds Foot is a commune.

In 1972, the property was purchased by a young couple who had found jobs in the Canton area. Later in that same year they were persuaded by some friends and by the roominess of the house that it might not be a bad idea for them all to live together. The friends moved in, and voila — a commune.

A woman who lived there in the early years explained the economic roots of the farm. "We had no grandiose 'Let's do something different' idea. Most people were not attached to a concept of creating a new society through communal living. It was basically an economic thing. We pooled our resources and energy. It was the best way for us to live."

There are many theoretical ways for a commune to be organized. Some consist of nuclear families who share land and farm equipment but keep their finances and households separate. Birds Foot is founded on what they call the collective theory. They have pooled their incomes and resources and own the farm together.

The residents of Birds Foot deny the presence of any rigid organization. They claim that the fairly equal influence and power over the happenings of the farm is one of the reasons for the success of the commune. They have weekly meetings structured around financial matters and farming decisions. At this time everyone has a chance to make known their opinions.

Members do have personal possessions. The commune budgets the money and provides the members with the things they need to live. One man explained, "You tend not to have money in your pocket but if you need a new shirt, you'll be able to get it. And your shirt is always your shirt."

At the present time, none of the residents have jobs outside the farm. In the past, they have had a number of people with off farm jobs. These people would work in town and contribute their salaries to the commune. This sometimes created problems because it was hard to equate money from a job to work on the farm. This created their notion of "sweet equality". A member explained, "Home work gives you the right to live here. It may not result in cash income but it is survival. The workers at home have no money to show but have food, firewood and buildings. That is just as important".

Work at Birds Foot is delegated according to the member's natural inclinations. Some members prefer working with the cows and the yogurt manufacturing. Others like the gardening work or the maintenance of the automobiles. This diversity allows everyone to specialize in the area which interests them most.

"Of course, there are many chores which fall into the realm of 'no one wants to do,'" said one resident. They



Photographs by Ellen McCurdy

have a schedule of household chores, as these tend to be the things that nobody likes to do. They take turns at the sink doing the dishes and each have a specific night to prepare the dinner.

Birds Foot members liken their environment to the extended families so common in early America. A member explained, "Long ago, most people lived in extended families. Something in our society made that fall apart. The idea of adults living and working together is still a valid one. A commune is one step beyond the extended family because you can choose the people that you want to be with."

There are ten people living at Birds Foot ranging in age from one to thirty years. There are two women, four men, one adolescent girl and three children. Only two of these people have lived there since the beginning. One of them that had, estimated that about 21 people have lived there at some time or another. The largest membership was 15 and the fewest was five. He added, "We had the same number for three years which is almost unheard of for communes. The average stay for most commune members is one year. At Birds Foot, they generally stay longer."

How does one come to live there? There are many ways. One way is to live in the area and come to know and like the residents enough that moving in seems like a good idea. Often a member will become close and intimate friends with someone who will then move in. Still another way is to be born there.

Two children have been born to residents.

When someone decides to move to Birds Foot, they first move in for a one year trial period. Sometimes a person will decide before the year is up that communal living is not for them but should they stay, at the end of the trial time they announced their decision to leave or remain. The members then have a meeting to decide whether they want the person to join. The decision must be unanimous. This has worked very well and only once did they decide not to accept someone.

When Birds Foot was founded, everyone lived in the same two story white clapboard house. Over the years additional structures have been built and some of the people live in cabins separate from the others. Their meals are still communal and taken in the main house. One such cabin is nearing completion and will be home to a man, a woman and their two children.

While none of the present commune members are married, (there have been married couples there in the past) there is some family organization. Besides the family already mentioned, there is a man with a 16-month old child. The children are basically raised by their biological parent or parents and feel the strongest ties to them but the parental roles are shared by all commune members. Each child seemed to have complete ease with all adults. The residents feel that it is very positive for the children to have many role models.

The Birds Foot Farm enjoys a good relationship with the local farmers, and feel that the longer they are there the better the relationship becomes. One man explained, "The general feeling is very welcome. One of the reasons is that there is a real lack of people our age who want to take care of the land. They (the locals) are pleased to see us work so hard." He added, "There is something about the winters here, if you make it through, they know you're not goofing off and then there is a sort of bond."

A very important reason they get along well with their fellow farmers is that they are good at what they do. They are very creative and experimental. With the various methods new to this area they have been able to produce vegetables as much as two months earlier than anyone else. Birds Foot farmers expect to have ripe tomatoes by mid-May. These methods include the use of cold and hot beds, organic fertilizers and a greenhouse in which they start their seedlings. On two and one half acres, they raise tomatoes, celery, broccoli, cauliflower, various lettuces, melons and the list goes on to include almost everything this area is capable of growing.

Ninety percent of their property is used for the dairy aspect of the farm. Thirty five to forty acres is needed for pasture for the six milking cows and three heifers. The rest of the land is used for hay. The milk from these cows is used in the making of their all-natural yogurt.

What started out as a small kitchen operation a few years ago has proven to be a big money maker for the farm. As they saw their yogurt gain popularity, Birds Foot decided to build special facilities for mass-production. After two years of preparation, Birds Foot became the smallest factory in New York State, licensed for yogurt production. The "factory" as they call it, is a tiny room attached to the back of the main house with a large vat, a sink and a lot of counter space.

Three times a week, in this small, clean room, they mix up 40 gallons of the creamy, tasty recipe which has gained them recognition in the North Country. They sell the yogurt to St. Lawrence University and sell retail through the Nature's Storehouse in Canton and the Co-op and the Super Duper market in Potsdam.

This commercial farming success is extremely important to the residents of Birds Foot. Their biggest aim is to prove that it is possible to make a decent living with a small farm. Feeling a close tie and deep respect for the land, they are against the movement which finds success through buying up much land and using unnatural ways to produce as much as possible.

Birds Foot members do not like to call their or any other commune a success or failure. One man said, "In one way, if someone moves out, you can say that it was a failure. It didn't work out that they wanted to stay. On the other hand their having lived there may have been a very positive experience and therefore a success."

They used the analogy of marriage to further explain. "You can live on 50 communes, not like any one of them and move to a fifty-first and love it. Everyone couldn't be married to everyone so why should everyone be expected to like every commune?"

The present Birds Foot residents do like their commune. They are not the hippies one thinks of imagining a group of unrelated people living together. They are a group of hard working people tied together by a strong feeling that communes are a very good way to live.

