Making Place on the Canadian Periphery: Back-to-the-Land on the
Gulf Islands and Cape Breton

by

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ABSTRACT

MAKING PLACE ON THE CANADIAN PERIPHERY: BACK-TO-THE-LAND ON THE GULF ISLANDS AND CAPE BRETON

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This thesis investigates the motivations, strategies and experiences of a movement that saw thousands of young and youngish people permanently relocate to the Canadian countryside during the 1970s. It focuses on two contrasting coasts, Denman, Hornby and Lasqueti Islands in the Strait of Georgia, British Columbia, and three small communities near Baddeck, Cape Breton. This is a work of oral history, based on interviews with over ninety people, all of whom had lived in their communities for more than thirty years. It asks what induced so many young people to abandon their expected life course and take on a completely new rural way of life at a time when large numbers were leaving the countryside in search of work in the cities. It then explores how location and the communities already established there affected the initial process of settlement. Although almost all back-to-the-landers were critical of the modern urban and industrial project; they discovered that they could not escape modern capitalist society. However, they were determined to control their relationship to the modern economic system with strategies for building with found materials, adopting older ways and technologies for their homes and working off-property as little as possible. Living in a resource based economy, building a homestead, and cutting firewood favoured masculine strength. The thesis addresses the gendered implications of this way of life, particularly for women. At one extreme, they embraced and came to terms with the traditional roles expected of them; at the other they insisted on conquering both the masculine and feminine roles. Through the study of a newsletter for Denman Island and eye-witness accounts for Cape Breton, we get a glimpse of the fierce commitment back-to-the-landers felt for their new communities and of their willingness to defend their collective rights to clean air, water and soil. The study concludes that geography, demography and culture were instrumental in shaping the eventual integration of the immigrant and pre-existing communities. Everywhere this influx of young and enthusiastic migrants enriched their communities and provided a deeply satisfying way of life for those who succeeded in making new rural lives for themselves.
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Knowledge as a back-to-the-lander helped immensely in the research for this dissertation, particularly in arranging the interviews and then conducting the interviews. I am particularly grateful to my friends Marion Thompson and John Roberts who were part of my community in Cape Breton, who strategized with me on the interviews, supplied names of people I didn’t know, and provided hospitality and friendship on my trips to Cape Breton. Marion and John feature, as well, in the dissertation, and I am grateful to them and all the others in Cape Breton who I interviewed.

Making contacts on the Gulf Islands was more challenging, as I discuss in my methodology section. But some thanks can be given repeatedly and still won’t convey the degree of gratitude. I am particularly indebted to Bonnie Olesko, who explained the culture of back-to-the-landers on Lasqueti, including not answering the phone if people didn’t recognize the number. So she let me use her phone, her car, and rented a room, which she generously supplemented with meals and conversation. For providing written documentation for back-to-the-landers’ activities on Denman and Hornby islands, for which there is nothing comparable in Cape Breton, I want to thank Des Kennedy and Eleanor Laffin.

The research for this dissertation began when I was a Master’s student at the University of New Brunswick, where Bill Parenteau, my advisor, Gail Campbell, as co-advisor and David Frank, Gillian Thompson, and Sean Kennedy encouraged me through courses, drafts, applications for PhD programs, and then over the years kept tabs on how I was doing. They have remained important sources of support, advice, and friendship.

Beginning a PhD program is a bit like buying land. No matter how well one does the research, there is always a bit of suspense about whether a program will yield the returns one imagines. In the very best case, the yield is beyond one’s imagination, and that was the case at Guelph. Doug McCalla was a superb advisor, tough and unrelenting on getting good results, kind and funny when the going was rough, a pacer on the long stretches, and there to help me reap what had been sown, even past retirement. And when I needed to find a home for my dear cat Finnegan, while I spent five months doing research on the west coast, Doug and his wife Anna took him into their home and into their hearts. Catharine Wilson became my co-supervisor after Doug retired, and provided fresh perspective on a project that had become intimately familiar to me, pushing me, in particular to refine the chapters on gender and economics and to clarify details that seemed transparent to me, but were opaque to a new reader. Marlene Epp’s comments on
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In researching and writing this dissertation, my daughters Kris and Kimberly have been with me, sometimes at my side, always in spirit. This work is dedicated to them.
INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Marion Thompson, from Amherst, Nova Scotia, and John Roberts from Kitchener, Ontario, met in Bucklaw, Cape Breton in 1970. Marion had been travelling for three years before coming to Cape Breton; in her words “I just needed somewhere to leave my knapsack and to rest for awhile.” While renting a house with her cousin Bonnie and other friends she met John and before long they became a couple. The group of seven or eight people decided to stay in Cape Breton that fall and rented a house in Tarbot. About a year later Marion and John decided to leave in search of work. They spent more than a year away, working first in Moncton, New Brunswick, then Winnipeg, Manitoba, where John learned leatherwork from a harness maker, a skill that would later allow him to create his own business in Cape Breton. While working on Vancouver Island, they heard from friends still in Cape Breton about some property for sale. Together with five other people they managed to find enough money ($500 each) and in 1973 bought 80 acres of land in Indian Brook, Cape Breton, for $3,500. “The piece of land that we bought, although it's very beautiful now, at the time it had been pulped, so it was a raspberry patch and it was straggly spruce and it was not at all pretty.”

At the same time as John and Marion were making decisions and acquiring skills that would eventually lead them to an artisanal life in Cape Breton, hundreds of Cape Bretoners were leaving the region for cities in the west. In fact the trend was such a statement of the times that the film, Goin’ Down the Road was produced and released in 1970. A classic Canadian film, it depicts two young men who left the Maritimes in

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1Marion Thompson, interviewed in Cape Breton, March 4, 2003.
2 Ibid.
search of work in Toronto. Rural depopulation was pervasive across the country, nowhere more so than in Cape Breton. The depopulation of rural spaces in Canada and attendant urban growth is widely studied by sociologists, historians and political scientists, but there are few studies to consider the reverse phenomenon.

What were the historical forces at play that caused young people by the thousands to deviate from what might have been expected to be their life-course and travel often thousands of kilometres across the continent to settle in small rural places where they had no previous connections? The growing disquietude over the pace and direction of urban society, where unchecked growth reigned over the environment, caused many who had grown up in North American cities to question this fundamental disregard for the quality of air, water and land. Concern for the environment had surged since Rachel Carson’s publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962. There was growing awareness that humans were changing the environment for the worse. Carson alerted the world to the overuse and misuse of pesticides and particularly to the damaging nature of DDT, especially to birds. The 1969 Cuyahoga River fire in Ohio, caused by the effluents from factory run-off, was a pivotal moment in the modern environmental movement that would eventually lead to the creation of the Clean Air Act of 1973 in the United States. The first Earth Day was held April 22, 1970 in the United States and later would become an international celebration of, and focus on, the environment.

When John and Marion met in Cape Breton they had not anticipated meeting other like-minded unfettered young folk, in search of they knew-not-what, but young people were on the road by the hundreds of thousands across the continent and across
Europe. Young people in their early 20s were generally unaware that they were responding to a broader \textit{zeitgeist} and only in hindsight could they see that they were part of a large movement to settle in the countryside. Those who found themselves the new ruralists came as a result of two broad categories of decisions. One category was Canadians such as John and Marion, on-the-road exploring possibilities, attracted to the availability of cheap land, and ripe to be snagged by the right combination of opportunity and circumstance. As Marion said, “not needing much money”\textsuperscript{5} was a major attraction. The other category of back-to-the-landers was Americans of middle-class background, more likely to have attended university than Canadian participants, and often with more money. In the words of Michael Taft, who in the 1980s researched Americans living in Cape Breton, back-to-the-landers were “a bunch of middle-class, fairly well-educated, cosmopolitans who had special interests in organic gardening, log buildings, crafts and politics.”\textsuperscript{6}

This is a history of one segment of a movement that captured the public imagination throughout the 1960s in the United States, first as the commune movement, and later as a move to the countryside by couples uninterested in the challenges of group living. This continued throughout the 1970s, spreading to Canada and other countries of the developed world. Although a small number of these back-to-the-land settlers in Canada started out living communally, and some on the west coast islands continue to

\textsuperscript{4}According to professor Linda Mahood at the University of Guelph, who is writing a book on the subject of hitch-hiking, “In 1971, the \textit{Globe and Mail} predicted some 300,000 youth would pass through Winnipeg that summer, and that about 500,000 would end their hitchhiking journey in Vancouver.” http://atguelph.uoguelph.ca/2011/12/hitchhikers-dont-get-around-much-anymore/ accessed April 29, 2013.

\textsuperscript{5}Marion Thompson, interviewed in Cape Breton, March 4, 2003.

hold land in common, sharing land and sharing a house are fundamentally different.\(^7\)

This is not a history of communes; instead, this is a history of people who, mostly as couples, migrated to small communities on the west coast Gulf Islands and Cape Breton. The American communal movement was undoubtedly an influence, but the greater influence exerted on the new migrants came from the places where they set down roots, shaping their experience in quite different ways. Like back-to-the-landers elsewhere, they settled in declining rural regions, taking up abandoned farms or raw land wherever the acreage was cheap.\(^8\) These young and sometimes not-so-young settlers wanted to live as far from “civilization” as possible. Isolation precluded many modern conveniences, such as private telephone lines and even access to electricity, but this made the land more affordable.\(^9\) Back-to-the-landers viewed their move to rural spaces as an expression of environmental concern as they attempted to live in a way that required less of the earth’s resources, by living off the power grid, acquiring fewer household appliances, and growing as much of their own food as feasible in the climate. This was a move from an urban environment back-to-the-landers saw as degraded by human industry, from a culture that seemed to value only that which could be commodified – one that in Joni Mitchell’s words “paved paradise and put up a parking lot” – to a rural environment that was perceived to be unspoiled. Their motivations mirrored those of Iris Keltz, who recalls in her memoir of life on a northern New Mexico commune, that

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\( ^7 \) Communes were one manifestation of this movement. But few communes were able to survive the bickering, the lack of sanitation, the poverty, and the lack of privacy, and dissolved as a result. In some literature co-operatively held land has been referred to as a form of communal living, notably the commune Libre, in Roberta Price, *Huerfano: A Memoir of Life in the Counterculture* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004).


“[w]hile it may be said we are fleeing the deplorable conditions of contamination of the urban areas, both physical and spiritual, the real motivation seems to be a quest for a more natural way of life. Away from the plastic and putrefying conditions in the cities.”

This movement of people happened without ship manifests, lists of refugees in camps of displaced persons, and other forms of information that guided many migration studies in the twentieth century. These people came one at a time in their Volkswagen vans and so studying them is difficult because we cannot use normal statistical methods. How many young people repopulated rural Canada in the late 1960s and 1970s can only be estimated, but when we consider that this occurred in every province of the country, the movement was very much larger in scale when all these are taken together than would have been evident in any one place. Terry Simmons estimates that approximately 100,000 moved into the Canadian countryside and settled, while perhaps 900,000 repopulated the US countryside, often buying farms and in other cases, especially in British Columbia, buying logged-over land. Simmons indicates that his estimates err on the conservative side and are most likely low. We do not know very much about this rural revitalization, although we can recognize that it has had a significant impact in North America, but who went and why and how lives were created, we do not yet know much about.

Given the lack of systematic documentation, I decided that the oral interview would be the best approach to exploring these questions. Among those I interviewed,

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both Canadian and American, about seventy percent had spent at least a year at university or college and ten percent had graduate degrees. On the east coast, about forty percent of the migrants were American whereas on the west coast, according to the information gleaned from interviews, the overwhelming numbers of those who first arrived on the islands were American, though in time more Canadians arrived and stayed. Because my informants were drawn from those who have remained for more than thirty years, and because there are no records of those who may have settled for one or two years and then moved on, whether they were Canadian or American, there is no way to accurately gauge numbers. It was not unusual for Americans to visit friends, decide to stay for a year or two and then leave, or choose to remain and only then contact the Department of Immigration. Of the more than 50,000 war resisters who came to Canada, a significant minority went back-to-the-land.12 Furthermore it was possible to live and work in Canada during the 1960s and early 1970s as either a tourist or visitor from the United States without being challenged by this country’s immigration department.13 Despite strong Canadian participation in rural resettlement, local residents on both coasts perceived their new neighbours to be predominantly American, and with that assumption went a further conjecture that they were wealthy.

Returning to the land was not new and often flourished in the United States at times of economic hardship, when the ability to grow one’s own food was seen as a


13 Dickerson, *North to Canada*, p. xiii.
viable form of security in difficult times. The most recent manifestation of this had occurred in the United States and Canada during the Great Depression, when governments urged people to return to the land as a way to remove them from government support. The 1970s return to the land was something different; it was an expression of idealism that was shared in various ways by far more people than those who went back to the land – young and not so young – visible in their effort to bring economic development and better health to the inner-city and the underdeveloped world, in movements that sought to create a more peaceful world, in efforts to make a healthier and less toxic environment, and in their equality of rights work with visible minorities. Framed as a rejection of materialism, it was a quest for an alternative to midcentury consumer society. This was a very modern movement with elements of hippie culture and the idea of living communally, but as the motivations chapter addresses, it was wider than either.

This vast “countercultural” communal movement of the United States, thought to have numbered in the tens of thousands of communes, according to historian Timothy Miller, was the inspiration for Stuart Brand’s Whole Earth Catalog or WEC, first published in 1968.\textsuperscript{14} Brand, a graduate of Stanford University, had been involved with the alternative technology, or AT, movement. Historian Andrew Kirk writes, “[a]ccording to Brand, WEC was a “movable education” for his countercultural friends

\textsuperscript{14} Stuart Henderson, \textit{Making the Scene: Yorkville and Hip Toronto in the 1960s} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), p. 23, rightly problematizes the term as incorrectly indicating that any group can exist outside of the hegemonic culture. Participants of the counterculture “refus[e] to engage (for however long) with aspects of the common sense of their society. Their performances of identity undermined, stretched and (if only mildly in most cases) subverted the ideologies that informed the general common sense.” Timothy Miller, “The Sixties-Era Communes,” in Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle, eds., \textit{Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and ‘70s} (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 327-351, at p. 329.
“who were reconsidering the structure of modern life and building their own communes in the backwoods.”\textsuperscript{15} It was a tools catalogue of alternative technology sources, published to provide information to those attempting to live independently. The catalogue was conceived of as a “new information system” on where to access materials. It did not sell anything; it provided source addresses and was updated frequently, at first every three to four months, then once a year, then sporadically until its last publication in 1998.

Theodore Roszak, who used the term counterculture with his book \textit{The Making of the Counter Culture} (1969), divided the movement into two branches: the “reversionaries” and the “technophiles.” The former thought that in a post-scarcity world the best approach was to move “toward the postindustrial by returning to a simpler life in the Jeffersonian tradition. The commune and back-to-the-land movements were inspired by this ideal.” The latter thought the best approach was to be found in new technological inventions.\textsuperscript{16} Brand’s intention was to straddle both worlds with \textit{The Whole Earth Catalog}. As to its impact, in a June 2005 commencement speech at Stanford University, Steve Jobs “compared \textit{The Whole Earth Catalog} to the Internet search engine Google.”\textsuperscript{17}

\textit{Mother Earth News}, another American publication and the main competitor to the \textit{Whole Earth Catalog}, was a monthly that began to be published in 1970 by John and Jane Shuttleworth. Considered by many to be the bible of the back-to-the-land movement, it served as a reflection of the movement in the United States and Canada and


was replete with do-it-yourself articles that also appealed to those involved with ecology and self-sufficiency, and continued to appeal to this market throughout the decade.\footnote{http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother_Earth_News, accessed December 15, 2012.}

Americans often viewed Canada as the ultimate retreat. This perspective was encouraged not just through word of mouth, but in the pages of \textit{Mother Earth News}.\footnote{\textit{Mother Earth News} featured articles extolling the possibilities of finding good land at low cost and far removed from urban pollution. In its pages where numerous articles with titles like the following: “Homesteading in the Kootenays,” “British Columbia: Paradise on the Pacific,” “Alberta’s Homestead Sales and Land Leases,” “The Road to Hoodoo Lake: Homesteading in BC,” “Back Tax Land in Southern Ontario.”} For example, in a 1970 article entitled “Locating & Buying Low Cost Land,” Lawrence Goldsmith told readers that “free land was available in Canada.” In fact, he argued that “every province of Canada, for that matter, has a number of areas that might appeal to you …”\footnote{Lawrence Goldsmith, “Locating and Buying Low Cost Land,” \textit{Mother Earth News}, Issue 3, May/June, 1970. “If you have a knowledge of boats,” he suggested, “you may be interested in the islands off the coast of British Columbia.”}

About mid-decade, \textit{Harrowsmith}, a monthly Canadian back-to-the-land and environmental magazine appeared on the market, published by James M. Lawrence, out of the small village of Camden East (pop. 256), Ontario.\footnote{http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stone_Mills,_Ontario, accessed December 15, 2012.} It reached more than 100,000 subscribers within two years, a level of readership that spoke clearly to the popularity of the movement, to self-sufficiency generally and to the appeal of rural living. Canadian back-to-the-landers often preferred its in-depth coverage of material, the Canadian content, and the many contributions made by like-minded neo-ruralists. \textit{Harrowsmith} lasted well into the next decade as a Canadian publication, and the \textit{Harrowsmith} cookbooks continue to be available. All three publications also targeted an urban market with discretionary income and those frustrated with urban and industrialized domesticity.
The back-to-the-land movement was a form of internal migration driven by different forces from the poverty that drove so many migrants out of Europe over the course of the twentieth century. In fact the migrants came from a markedly different demographic; in this case it was people with choices and the ability to make decisions about the kinds of lives they wanted to lead, at least to a greater degree than the aforementioned immigrants. If this historical movement appears in larger histories of the era, it is often at the margin, and treated with a degree of condescension. That is the tone of Ian McKay’s *The Quest of the Folk*, which depicts those returning to the land as hoping to “become the folk,” as opposed to finding them.22 Bryan Palmer’s book on the 1960s, for instance, accords the movement one sentence in connection to a discussion of hippies.23 A major conference on the long decade of the 1960s held at Queen’s University in Kingston produced a publication that makes no mention of the back-to-the-land movement.24

There is, however, a growing literature from various disciplines that takes the movement seriously and that approaches it from several angles. The most recent history is Dona Brown’s *Back-to-the-land: The Enduring Dream of Self-Sufficiency in Modern America*, which takes a long-term run at the meaning of the experience.25 Her book serves as testimony to the scope, importance and complexity of the movement and its ideas, which encompassed not only ideals of getting closer to the natural world but

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attempts to address serious social issues, such as providing a better life to slum-dwellers, 
a source of food other than the bread-line during the Great Depression and more recently 
as a means to save the environment. Her study covers the recurring American impulse to 
return to the land in times of difficulty, beginning as early as the late nineteenth century 
and extending in an epilogue into the twenty-first century. She argues that the 1970s 
back-to-the-land movement differed quite substantially from its earlier iterations. Then, 
most back-to-the-landers had intended to better their material circumstances, whereas the 
1970s version “valued hardship for its own sake or flaunted it as a badge of honor.”26 To 
make matters even more difficult, the 1970s back-to-the-landers attempted to eliminate 
all things that, in their minds, contributed to damaging the environment. She argued that 
they “seem[ed] to be motivated by a desire to shake off all contact with modern life, to 
return to a kind of prelapsarian state of simplicity.”27 Brown’s work catches well the 
impractical notions initially entertained by some of those I interviewed. She finds that it 
was largely due to such unrealistic expectations that there were so many failed attempts 
to remain in the countryside.

One of the primary motivations for the retreat to the land was a strong tendency, 
as Rebecca Kneale Gould argues, to see “nature … as the site of meaning and authority 
once previously occupied … by the more traditional religious structures.”28 In her At 
Home in Nature: Modern Homesteading and Spiritual Practice in America, Gould, an 
historian of religion, also explores the move back-to-the-land in America from the late 
nineteenth century to the present. In contrast to the pragmatic 1930s version of back-to-
the-land that was explored by Dona Brown, Gould’s book addresses the idealism inherent in movements inspired by iconic figures of the past, from Henry David Thoreau to Helen and Scott Nearing. She explains that “while particular choices about homesteading differ, the practice of homesteading continually articulates an attempt to live a good and moral life, a life that might redeem society or at least the self.” Her focus on religion and spirituality, while not the subject of my investigation, reflected the reverence toward nature expressed by some of my informants. While none expressed this sentiment explicitly, moving to the land was for many a dream of being one with nature and they all worked hard to protect the environment by living and working to maintain and use resources with respect to their conservation. However, although people revered the tree, they also wanted light, which required a choice and a recognition that they were of necessity actively involved in shaping their environment.

Both Gould and Brown elucidate the almost mythical stature of the Nearings to 1970s back-to-the-landers. Brown argues that the unrealistic standards to which the 1970s neo-ruralists held themselves and their frequent failure were due in large part to the lack of readily available past examples other than the Nearings. The 1970s republication of Living the Good Life brought the Nearings into such prominence that they could not possibly live up to the myths surrounding them. Besides providing an ethnographic, sociological and historical study of the back-to-the-land practitioners, Gould also provides insight into the contemporary movement in and around the former

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31 Helen and Scott Nearing, Living the Good Life (New York: Schocken Books, 1954). Republication of the book by the authors in 1970 brought them widespread recognition as experts in the art of simple living and so many young visitors seeking knowledge that they were forced to set up a schedule.
Nearing homestead in Maine. A large portion of her book is focussed on the homesteading, philosophy and writings of both Helen and Scott Nearing. She not only interviewed Helen Nearing but later occupied her house following her sudden death in a car crash in 1995. Living in Nearing’s house, taking up Helen’s role of answering correspondence, maintaining the gardens and generally filling Helen’s shoes both literally and figuratively, Gould became a participant as well as an interviewer and an astute observer of others in the community also “living the good life.”

The differential ways moving back-to-the-land impacted men and women is a subject of Gould’s inquiry. She considers the implications of gender from the standpoint of older ways and assumptions about women’s role held by the Nearings and their contemporaries, and contrasts that view with the perspective held by young, back-to-the-land women influenced by second wave feminism.

In *Back from the Land: How Young Americans Went to Nature in the 1970s, and Why They Came Back*, Eleanor Agnew, a former participant who now teaches writing and linguistics at Georgia Southern University, asserts that “most of us who participated in the 1970s back-to-the-land movement have left the remote log cabins or farmhouses, returned to cities and suburbs, and blended into the mainstream.”

Most participants were white, middle class, educated and well aware of possible alternatives; often their dream came to an end through the experience of rural poverty and/or matrimonial disputes and divorce, difficulties faced by Agnew herself. But, she argues, the real issue underlying the return to the city was that the entire venture lost its lustre.

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32 See title in footnote above.
34 Ibid.
Some of the earliest research on the back-to-the-land movement that included a
Canadian perspective is social geographer Terry Allen Simmons’ “But We Must
Cultivate our Garden: Twentieth Century Pioneering in Rural British Columbia.”35 As
well as providing the only population estimates of the back-to-the-land movement,
Simmons confirmed that back-to-the-landers were most likely to settle on marginal
agricultural land, where routine commuting to an urban centre for work purposes was not
feasible. In this way, their property needs were not in competition with urbanites who
preferred country living within commuting distance to the city.

The most comprehensive study on the back-to-the-land movement carried out
during the 1980s and 1990s is sociologist Jeffrey Jacob’s New Pioneers: The Back-to-the-
land Movement and the Search for a Sustainable Future.36 His subjects had made their
homesteading choice at various times from the late 1960s through the 1990s. He
conducted interviews in southeastern British Columbia and mail surveys of more than
eight hundred small-holders in the Pacific Northwest and a further twelve hundred back-
to-the-landers across the United States, including retirees and those who continued to
work in the city at full-time jobs, restricting work on their property to the weekends.
Jacob asks questions that relate to their ability to disengage with consumer culture and
the sustainability of their project as a viable counter to the destruction caused by
industrial and post-industrial society. Jacob concludes that although small-holders’ or
back-to-the-landers’ accomplishments often fell short of their dreams, they represented a
means of living more sustainably within the finite resources of the natural world, by
demonstrating that there were ways of finding fulfilment outside of materialism and

35 Simmons, “But We Must Cultivate our Garden.”
36 Jeffrey Jacob, New Pioneers: The Back-to-the-land Movement and the Search for a Sustainable
consumer culture. He, like Gould, also brings to light the way chores were so often
gendered. Furthermore, his research confirms the strong environmental ethics held by
back-to-the-landers and their willingness to take a stand and fight to preserve the quality
of air, water and soil in their new communities.

As these studies make clear, the back-to-the-land movement played an important,
diverse and multifaceted role with a long history in North America. Not only did this
movement change the lives of individual participants but this inflow of educated and
committed people to small rural spaces changed and supported the many communities in
which they settled. This study catches the voices of participants thirty years after their
decision to move back-to-the-land, leaving no doubt as to their commitment and no doubt
about their ability to make a life in an unfamiliar setting. Questions of motivation, gender
and the environment form a part of this study as well as an inquiry into how people
learned to live in a rural location, and how lives were made and sustained over the long
haul. The process of community development and the ways in which settlement patterns
and migrant numbers can impact the dynamics of community formation are at the heart of
this study. By focussing on the Atlantic and the Pacific coasts, I was able to find clearly
differentiated and culturally distinct locations in which to capture the variations in
experiences of the new ruralists.

METHODOLOGY

This project grows out of my Masters’ thesis;\textsuperscript{37} both the topic and the location were
a part of my own history. In the mid 1970s and 1980s I had been a part of the back-to-

\textsuperscript{37} Sharon Weaver, “Coming from Away: The Back-to-the-Land Movement in Cape Breton in the
the-land movement and had, like many I later interviewed, expected to find myself somewhat isolated from those of my age and background in the countryside, only to find that to the contrary, many others from urban North America had made the same decision. This unexpected development had always piqued my curiosity as to the movement’s origins and dimensions. When I chose to explore the phenomenon from an historical perspective, the community I had once known was an obvious starting point. I interviewed eighteen people in Cape Breton in 2003, using their answers as the core material for my MA thesis. The oral interview provided me with the luxury of determining not only the questions but to whom to pose them. Certainly eighteen people could not provide conclusive answers to the question of origins and dimensions, but they could identify key issues and shed light on one segment of the back-to-the-land movement. For my MA I began by contacting a friend of twenty years to assist in compiling a list of back-to-the-landers in the region with contact information. Most of those who participated either knew me personally, or knew that I had resided there as a back-to-the-lander in the 1970s; thus I had no problem establishing trust, nor did I have any problem understanding the nature of the issues raised. As Donald A. Ritchie, an oral history authority, makes clear, “[t]he interviewer’s task is to do thorough research beforehand, then ask meaningful questions... .” This was simplified for me by having had eight years of experience as a back-to-the-lander.

When I began to conduct interviews in 2003, oral history remained a controversial source for history. As recently as 2006, Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, in their introduction to the second edition of The Oral History Reader, noted that “historians have

38 See table of interviews in Appendix of Interview Questions.
been notoriously wary of memory as a historical source. In challenging orthodoxies about historical sources, methods and aims...oral history has generated fierce debates..."40 Oral history allows systematic access to a target group who, in prior periods, would at best be randomly known and might in fact have left no trace in the records beyond listings in the census. It provides a way to access this community of people to achieve an understanding of “the reasons why ordinary people made decisions that in the aggregate influenced history but are nowhere written down.”41 The stories caught in this history are the result of a dialogue between the researcher and the interviewee. The questions addressed were developed from my own experiences as a back-to-the-lander and later as a researcher curious about the nature of the movement. As Alessandro Portelli argues “[t]he content of oral sources ... depends largely on what the interviewer puts into it in terms of questions, dialogue, and personal relationship.”42

The only way to gain an understanding of how back-to-the-landers lived life at the margins was through the in-depth interview. My initial idea was to interview those who self-identified as back-to-the-landers, but the term was not always well known among the actual participants. I was interested in catching people involved in the making and remaking of rural communities, and I was uninterested in creating narrow boundaries by which to qualify. My primary approach was through the “snowball” method of one interviewee recommending that I speak to another member of the community, so the term

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is loosely defined by community perception. My core objective, beyond the specific story, includes writing them in, in their own voices.

As the list of questions for my MA thesis in the appendix makes clear, I hoped to learn what prompted the move to the countryside and the specific choice of location. I wanted to understand both the push and the pull; what was behind the "flight from the city"\textsuperscript{43} and what it was about Cape Breton that attracted people from so far afield. There was a tendency on the part of many who were fed up with city living to want to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the “toxic” city and to be attracted to places of natural and rugged beauty. The availability and affordability of land in a remote setting was fundamental, but once settled the relative isolation, at least from the job market, posed the question of livelihood. If personal experience is indicative, our initial plans went out the window once we were confronted with the type of work necessary on our own property, the impracticality of selling hand-woven coverlets to a non-existent tourist market, and the unexpected availability of short-term seasonal work in the community. Furthermore, we had not anticipated how much we needed to learn from those who had always lived in the area. In fact, we soon learned that work in the community meant work in the woods industry, and so we both worked in the local sawmill and cut and hauled our own wood for the pulp wood market in winter – my husband cut while I hauled it to the road, across snow covered fields with a horse and truck sleigh. This informed my second question, as I wanted to understand how others planned to make a living or sustain themselves over time and whether those ideas changed as they learned more about the practicalities of rural living.

The question to women about their experience arose both out of personal experience and an awareness that in the latter part of the twentieth century, as women were slowly achieving greater equality, moving to a rural region usually meant moving into a resource-based economy where work was more plentiful for men. Unequal earning power can easily translate into inequality in the home. Furthermore the tendency to anti-modernity on the part of many back-to-the-landers often translated into more time-consuming means of cooking and cleaning. In the city, on the other hand, there was a greater possibility that women could earn an income closer to that of a man and, at least in theory, expect more help with the household and childcare if they both worked out of the home. Again in theory, the latest in household appliances could allow for a more expeditious completion of chores; hanging clothes on a line takes far more time than tossing them into a dryer.

Initially I had also asked the men if they had been aware of a gendered difference in responsibility for chores, but because this was not well-received I discontinued asking them. Instead I allowed the issue to arise in the course of the discussion if they considered it an important element of the past. In hindsight this may have been a mistake, because I did have more overt discussion of the specific issue of chores in these earlier interviews, whereas it did not arise as much in the later interviews. For women, on the other hand, it was frequently a topic of discussion with or without prompting.

The final three questions concerned the experience of, and relationship to, the existing community. Based on the unexpected warmth of many in the Cape Breton community in which we lived, I wanted to know if this was a common experience. By asking about contributions to the community, I hoped to learn how the newcomers
integrated into the community, whether it was through job-creation, volunteer work, or simply through populating the rural schools and thereby strengthening the community. The final question “In what ways do you feel the local community has changed you?” was sometimes well received and other times less so, in that how can we really discern such an influence? Those who found the question intriguing, however, often provided thoughtful reflections on a course they chose twenty and thirty years ago and the perceived impact on their lives due to their choice of community, whether referring to the back-to-the-lander community or the larger community into which they settled.

Back-to-the-landers settled in every province of the country, but when I set out to expand this research I was attracted to the idea of considering islands on Canada’s other coast. I wanted to explore community formation and newcomer integration in more than one region in places on the edge of the country (and the continent), delving into groups of people who chose to live at the margins of modernity. Because I wanted to understand communities and places in depth, the impracticalities of conducting interviews in multiple locations across the country forced a choice. The finite geographic limitations of an island exert an influence on the community itself depending on its size; communities become more self-contained of necessity, which allows the researcher to make comparisons between clearly defined locations. The notion that Cape Breton is at the far eastern edge of the country was attractive to back-to-the-landers who were looking for a place that represented the polar opposite of the city where all things wild and natural had long been obliterated. Islands on the west coast were attractive for the same reason both to back-to-the-landers and to me for the purposes of this study. Determining the
boundaries of a community in southeastern Ontario, for instance, would have been more difficult.

When I began to develop the current study in 2005, I kept the original six questions used for the MA and expanded the number of questions to search for more clarification. My first interviews on the west coast began with a contact on Mayne Island who supplied me with an initial list of people (and phone numbers) to approach as potential interviewees. At the end of each interview I asked for suggestions and contact information for others who might be interested and in this way expanded my list of potential informants. After conducting five interviews on Mayne and Salt Spring Islands I learned of others on Denman Island and so drove north. To my great surprise, ten short minutes on a ferry across from Buckley Bay, I drove off into a distinctly different world. There is a quiet, pastoral tranquility to Denman Island, much like an eddy in a rushing river, where the flow of mainland traffic is unheard and unheeded. Here, the owner of the bed and breakfast at which I stayed provided me with a list of back-to-the-landers. But with only a few days on the island, I had little time to arrange for interviews. I did conduct eight, but soon realized that both a car and a stretch of time in residence on the island were essential.

As I was interviewing on the west coast, I discovered that my expanded list of questions could have a stultifying effect on the interview process. On later listening to many of the interviews, I regret that all too frequently I was not attentive enough to discern an obvious follow-up question and instead focused on my research agenda.

44 A list of questions for my PhD research can be found in the Appendix to Interview Questions.
45 One of which was lost due to technical difficulties.
46 Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack, “Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses” in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., The Oral History Reader, 2nd ed. (New York:
This resulted in the loss of potentially important information and insights on the part of the interviewee. As I did more interviews I tried, though not always successfully, to exert less control over the course of the discussion, unless otherwise requested, allowing the informant more command over his or her recollections. As Neil Sutherland notes, “[o]pen-ended interviews may be disconnected, and may contain items that are not closely related ... or do not fit into a temporal sequence.”47 Even so, he found that this interview format was more likely to result in useful material.

I returned to Cape Breton in 2006 to conduct more interviews.48 The same friend helped compile a list of potential informants whom I had not previously interviewed, this time drawing from an expanded geographical range to include all of Victoria County. The eleven interviews I conducted at the time were with people who, for the most part, I had not previously known well or at all; however, we shared mutual friends. I had expanded my list of questions for this project to include questions around financial matters, which seemed to make some uncomfortable, perhaps because I had previously lived in the area and we continued to have shared friends and acquaintances, whereas interviews on the west coast did not seem to elicit the same reaction. So in the case of this question, greater familiarity did not translate into greater ease on the part of the interviewee.

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48 Following my decision to expand my research I returned to those I had interviewed for permission to use the material also for my new project. All agreed, and most also agreed that I could use their names rather than the pseudonyms that were used in the MA thesis.
In the fall of 2007 I drove out to the west coast where I remained for five months, living most of that time on Denman Island. Gaining a sense of place for each of the islands was an essential ingredient to the interviews. What did the world look like from these small, specific spaces; the pastoral quality of Denman, the unexpected countercultural presence of Hornby’s built environment, or the untamed feel of Lasqueti? I was able to conduct many interviews on Denman, and arrange for others on Hornby and Lasqueti Islands. I discovered that east coast back-to-the-landers were considered “hard core,” largely due to the added element of winter, so again, I had no trouble establishing trust and belief in the authenticity of the project. My experience as a back-to-the-lander allowed the interviewee to rest assured that I was not about to question or ridicule his or her decision; we shared a common identity facilitating trust and discussion.49

Time on the islands allowed me to become more acquainted with the landscape, the community, the availability of services and varying degrees of isolation for each location. Despite the fact that Denman Island is only ten minutes from the “mainland,” as Vancouver Island is termed, the logistics of grocery shopping, and even the need for an emergency root-canal, brought home to me the fundamental difference between living on an island versus living on the mainland. One cannot just jump into a car or hop on a bike without having to take into consideration both the cost and schedule of the ferry. The last ferry on or off Denman left at about 11:00 pm, after which “the drawbridge went up.” Casual conversations at the post office where I picked up my mail, chatting with the librarian or the book store owner, or buying bread at the bakery provided me with a more intimate feel for the community and often augmented my contact list. This knowledge

gave me a sense of context for an answer or a relationship that someone mentioned in the course of an interview.

Finding contacts on Hornby Island was made possible due to the close connections between the two island communities and their proximity; Hornby is only one fifteen minute ferry from Denman. Because the last ferry departed Hornby at 6:00 pm (except on Friday evening when it left at 9:00 pm), evening appointments were almost impossible for someone based on Denman. Through word of mouth I was able to make contacts and at the same time spend a little time exploring the geography of the island and the available services in the small “village” of Hornby Island – much more extensive than those available in “downtown” Denman, due to the greater difficulty of accessing the larger community of Courtenay on Vancouver Island, as it required the time and cost of two ferries.

Required to vacate my lodgings on Denman for two weeks around the Christmas holidays, and having learned a little about Lasqueti Island from interviewees, I was intrigued to spend some time there. My initial attempts to find accommodation on the island seemed stymied, as every place I called was closed for the season. Finally I got an answer, only to learn that this Bed & Breakfast was also closed for the season. In the course of our conversation, however, the owner mentioned that she had 165 acres of land, had lived there for 25 years, and had an organic garden. I also learned that it had taken a decade to build her place, at which point I asked if I could interview her. I was then offered accommodation in her boat-house and a ride from the ferry, as there was no car-ferry and the only on-island transportation is one taxi, whose driver was away on holiday. When I mentioned that I wanted to call around in search of other back-to-the-landers, she
said that no one answered their telephone; they just used the answering machine and if 
the caller’s identity was unknown to them, they would never answer. She only answered 
because her husband was a lawyer and they had to answer because he represented every 
drug grower-dealer on the island. Although this arrangement fell through the day before I 
was to leave Denman Island, she had contacted Bonnie Olesko, who also ran a B&B at 
the south end of the island and was willing to provide a room. Not only did she have a 
room to rent, but she too was a back-to-the-lander. Her introduction to others and the use 
of her telephone were crucial to establishing a degree of trust in those I interviewed. 
Without a car however, it was impossible to interview those at a distance while residing 
at the south end of an island 20 kilometres in length. Fortunately, the Bed & Breakfast 
owner offered me the use of her car while away for a few days, in exchange for care of 
her farm animals and a drive to and from the ferry, located at the north end. It was only 
through her help and generosity that I was able to meet and complete more interviews 
than the initial few within range of a good hike. Furthermore, it was only through her 
introductions that I was able to gain access to and establish trust in a community that 
could have been wary of strangers to the island.50

The nature of memory is such that in thinking about the past, especially a fairly 
distant past, there is a tendency to compress time. For instance, the difficulties of building 
and the minutiae of the day-to-day problems encountered are lost and what remain are 
highlights, whether they consist of achievements or problems. Over the course of time 
we tell and re-tell ourselves how we made decisions and this re-telling, both to others and

50 For this issue in a cross-cultural setting, see, e.g., Susan K. Burton, “Issues in Cross-Cultural 
Interviewing: Japanese women in England” in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., The Oral 
167.
to ourselves, is re-worked again and again, so that memory elides the many sharp edges of our experience – the real hardships, financial uncertainty, past arguments with a spouse over who did the dishes and who bedded the horses down for the night. Stories are honed to suit who we become, not necessarily who we once were. This predisposition might be even more relevant to remembrances of early relationships in the community and the difficulties encountered settling into an unfamiliar place. Corroborating documents can be of assistance in fleshing out the remembered past. Although I had not anticipated finding such evidence, *The Denman Rag and Bone* newsletter became just such a source, which spanned almost six years of the 1970s.

The compression of time and blending of past events are not the only problems with memory that the researcher must contend with. Other issues are hindsight and the change in perspective that develops with age. Difficulties encountered in the past (for example, with local residents in the early days of their move to the region) were viewed through a new lens of both greater maturity and identification with their new neighbours and with their neighbours’ age at the time of the difficulties. Consequently many of the stories of discord were seen through the lens of middle age, in which perhaps the intransigence of some of the locals is presented as more understandable and smoothed over in retrospect; or their own actions were viewed with greater criticism and seen as arising from a degree of youthful arrogance. Portelli discusses this issue, noting that changes in “the narrators’ personal subjective consciousness or in their socio-economic standing may affect, if not the actual recounting of prior events, at least the valuation and the ‘coloring’ of the story.”

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Memory can also affect the way we assess our past, such that we need to make sense of past decisions. Melissa Walker discusses how rural East Tennesseans tended to “shape their recollections of the past to fit their present needs.” Reflecting on the choice to move back-to-the-land, rather than whatever path might have been taken, necessitates a degree of reconciliation with decisions made in youth. Such a monumental choice to leave perhaps a country of origin or to leave a region where relatives continued to reside has ramifications throughout the life cycle, so that it is almost necessary to adopt rose-coloured glasses when discussing these choices. Due to these many qualifications to the nature of memory, one might question its value as an historical source. However the remembered past does have value and I hope this project will serve to demonstrate that worth, while making due allowances for the ways in which memories and interviews work. Valerie Yow reminds us that she used to believe that subjectivity is more intrusive in qualitative research because the researcher is constantly interacting with the people being studied. Yet all research is biased in its subjectivity, simply because the research begins, progresses, and ends with the researcher, who, no matter how many controls she may put on it, will nonetheless be creating a document reflecting her own assumptions.

With such a wealth of interview material there is a natural inclination to use the ones that were easiest to transcribe. My earlier interviews, done with a tape recorder, were more difficult to transcribe and did not always provide the best quality of sound. And it was normally only after the interview that I discovered that the interviewee’s voice was difficult to hear, or that there was interference in the recording, sometimes from the recording device itself. Some of these poorer quality taped interviews therefore were not

transcribed. The majority of my interviews were done with a portable MP3 player, which was much less intrusive during the interview and infinitely more reliable in terms of sound quality and battery life. In the end I worked from 86 transcribed interviews. While not all are cited in the text, all of the interviews informed my understanding of this movement; however, those transcribed played the more significant role. They also formed the basis for my calculations of numbers for citizenship, education, occupation and so forth. A list of those interviewed is included in the bibliography.

As with any historical source, some interviews play a larger role than others, depending on the interviewee’s ability to articulate and remember the past and on his or her interest in the questions. The open-ended structure of the interview sometimes resulted in interviews that were at tangents to my narrative structure. With almost 30 interviews in Victoria County, Cape Breton, I had exhausted my sources for the time I had to spend in the region. The distances between people in Cape Breton could be quite significant even within a single county, given the relative sparseness of settlement in comparison to the west coast islands. My original intentions on the west coast were to find a comparable number of informants. Once in place, however, I was drawn by the unexpected and overwhelming numbers of back-to-the-landers who had settled on the Gulf Islands, and decided to do enough interviews to allow closer consideration of each of the three main islands. I had already done a few interviews on Salt Spring and Mayne Islands, and could have done more on other islands, but reached the practical limits of a single project. Alessandro Portelli speaks to the issue of “leaving out ... narrators” by noting that “oral sources are inexhaustible” and “the ideal of going through ‘all’ possible sources becomes impossible.” And he concludes that “[h]istorical work using oral
sources is unfinished because of the nature of the sources.”\(^\text{54}\) When it came time to reflect on the material gathered, there was a certain symmetry between the numbers of interviews on the east coast and the numbers on Denman Island. Certainly I had enough material to compare Denman, Hornby and Lasqueti Islands, which provided insight into the issues of isolation from major centers, as dwellers on each island were required to spend differing amounts of time and money to reach these centers. While I did include some material from Mayne Island for the chapter on the economic viability of the endeavour, I did not use the interviews from Salt Spring Island.\(^\text{55}\)

In order to engage in oral history it was necessary first to obtain Research Ethics Board approval, which stipulates that a signed permission form is obtained for every interview conducted. The narrator agrees to the interview process and is given the opportunity to decide whether to be quoted by name or anonymously. Very few chose anonymity, but for those who did make this choice I have tried to use language that would not provide clues as to their identity. One such narrator, however, made it clear that although he wanted to be referred to with a pseudonym he was not concerned whether community members could identify him in the context of the issues discussed and his prominent role in the community.

Although one can enter into an interview with questions in mind, such a strategy does not necessarily lead to detailed responses to each question. If an interviewee is particularly interested in exploring one facet of his or her experience it is not always possible to change the course taken. The end result is a somewhat eclectic body of


\(^{55}\) These interviews did not feel in any way representative of a complex island larger than the other islands and much more integrated into the general BC world.
information that provides an often unexpected window onto the past. From there it is up to the researcher to choose a path through the corpus of information and present a study that honours the informants while it at the same time provides as clear a picture as possible of the most important issues.

Most themes were similar across the various locations; however the evidence, both oral and documentary, differed to the extent that the reader may learn about environmental concerns on Denman Island and Cape Breton, or the alternative economy on Lasqueti, or cooperatively held land on Hornby, or community development on Cape Breton. One question added to the list and not asked of my 2003 (MA) interviewees was whether they moved to the land with specific environmental concerns. I do have some discussion of environmental issues for those living in Cape Breton mostly from the eleven interviews done there in 2006; in contrast, all of the interviewees from the west coast were asked about this issue. The material for the final chapter addresses Denman Island for the west coast, due to the availability of The Denman Rag and Bone newsletter, and Cape Breton using eye-witness accounts. In both cases the written evidence provides clear chronology and supplements the interviews.

The questions that elicited the most response overall formed the basis of the five chapters in this study. Thus the questions of origin, age and the push and pull factors that eventually led participants to settle in a given area were developed into the first chapter, “Becoming Rural in the 1970s.” Participants had a lot to say about the community in which they settled, how they were received initially, which led to the chapter entitled “First Encounters.” Financial strategies were multifaceted in that one’s ability to stay over the long term depended on finding affordable land, building a house oneself and
keeping costs down by growing a garden, and for those unavoidable expenses finding a source of income, all of which material formed the third chapter: “Economic Strategies: Making Ends Meet.” “Separate Spheres Again? Gendered Roles and Rural Living” favoured the concerns of women; however, some of the men did contribute material on the masculine perspective. Material for the final chapter “Back-to-the-Land Environmentalism: Denman Island and Cape Breton” was drawn from The Denman Rag and Bone as it contained a wealth of information on the core issues that were reflected in the Denman Island interviews and eye-witness accounts for Cape Breton which supplemented the interviews for the east coast.

This is a history built on the words of those who were there and whose stories are framed by knowledge of the outcome. The stories are highlights and lowlights of how they made it to their comfortable house from a tent, shack, or an un-insulated drafty cabin through which stars could be seen on a cold wintry night. One bias, to which I freely admit, is that my approach is one of tempered celebration of this movement and of a time when the depopulation of the countryside was briefly countered with a significant reverse move to rural Canada from the city. As I was a participant, this may not come as a great surprise; however, it stands in contrast to the approach taken by Eleanor Agnew, also a past participant, whose research focussed on the myriad difficulties encountered by back-to-the-landers and their final decision to leave the countryside and their rural dreams behind. By studying people who chose this way of life, I hoped to learn how they felt about their experiences and by interviewing a large number of participants I was able to obtain a range of views and perceptions in answer to my various questions.

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56 Eleanor Agnew, Back from the Land.
After close to one hundred interviews conducted on both coasts it became clear that the history, culture and geographic dimensions of the hosting communities, in concert with the relative population density, played an important role in the initial years of migrant integration in their new communities. While there are a number of studies of the back-to-the-land movement of this period, most are American, and none have taken a comparative perspective between and amongst communities in different regions of the country. This study, like others, confirms that women faced greater challenges in the transition to a rural and resource based economy. The new settlers took an eclectic and creative approach to finding property, constructing a home, and securing an income in places deemed untenable by the many who had previously left for the cities. Furthermore, strategies were dependent on local resources and affected by transportation and relative isolation from population centers. Finally those who hoped to have escaped the depredations and ravages to the environment by the capitalist industrial priorities of late twentieth-century society discovered to their dismay that such priorities could not be outrun.
Chapter 1

BECOMING RURAL IN THE 1970S

“So we have been back-to-the-land but not farming it; we have been back-to-the-land living on it but making our living through some kind of celestial guidance or good luck; I’ve been told that you’ve got to be good to be lucky, maybe that’s true? So here we are! That’s how we got to be back on the land.”

The impulse to rurality was not new to the 1970s, as many historians and writers have noted. Back-to-the-land movements have arisen in North America for a host of different reasons and under widely differing historical circumstances over the course of the past two centuries. The most visible back-to-the-land movements in Canada in the twentieth century came during the Depression era, when various jurisdictions sought to stem the tide of people moving to urban centres in search of work and swelling the bread lines as a result. Governments provided economic incentives to induce people to move back-to-the-land, and these initiatives met with mixed success. The back-to-the-land movement of the latter part of the twentieth century bore a much greater resemblance to the utopian movements of the past in which people sought a venue for unrestrained religious expression and/or a more genuine and simpler way of life, free from the trappings of modern society. It can be argued that the back-to-the-land movement and the related commune movement were rooted in the same desire for a retreat from a

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3 In discussion with Alan MacEachern, who also writes on this movement (noted below), he maintains that the commune movement also falls under the banner of the back-to-the-land movement and that they cannot be referred to in the way I have done above.
materialistic and environmentally destructive society, nostalgia for a pre-industrial past of greater simplicity, and a yearning for community.4

Historically, the communal movement was a particularly American phenomenon, which embodied a desire for personal growth over materialism and social status, and a rejection of the government, and culture of the day. Religious communes, such as the Shaker colonies, dating back to the eighteenth century, were not dissimilar to the religious communes of the 1960s, which included a day to day ordered existence and strict regulation of personal behaviour and spiritual development.5 Timothy Miller, who researched the 1960s communal movement, argued that such religious and anarchistic communes could be found scattered across the American landscape prior to the sixties resurgence of communitarianism, and that furthermore, there was an ongoing interchange of ideas between the established communes and members of the new movement. In fact, hippie concerns with wholesome, organically grown foods, homemade bread, vegetarianism, eccentric clothing, pacifism and communal economic sharing dated as far back as 1843, to the Massachusetts Transcendentalist commune, Fruitlands. Had it existed 125 years later, Miller argued, it would have been considered a modern, hippie commune. Such concerns and values, therefore, did not arrive on the American cultural scene of the 1960s without historical precedent.6 In fact, Miller maintains, “the urban

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5 Timothy Miller, The 60s Communes: Hippies and Beyond (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), p. 7.
6 Ibid., p. 7-8.
hippies did not create the first 1960s-era communes; it would be closer to the truth to say that the earliest communes helped create the hippies.”

As early as the end of the nineteenth century back-to-the-land movements arose in response to the growing industrialization of American cities. People migrated out of the cities in search of a more family-centred lifestyle, as a rejection of materialism, as a means of returning to nature, and for ecological reasons based on an awareness of the negative impact of industrial society on every aspect of the environment. City workers became increasingly alienated from the fruits of their labour, and became ever more aware of their alienation from the land itself. This prompted a growing movement of urbanites to give up their jobs, leave city life behind and move to the country in search of a better, more wholesome way of life. This movement died down with the First World War, but never fully disappeared. In 1922, a leading advocate of anti-modernism, Ralph Borsodi, moved to a rural property on Long Island and demonstrated a new self-sufficiency on the land, while making use of modern technology and maintaining a city job and income. He later developed the School of Living in 1936, which promoted self-sufficiency in a rural setting amongst a cooperative collection of homesteads, through reciprocal aid and individual projects. When he stepped down from leadership, his long-time associate, Mildred Loomis, continued to promote the concepts at her Lane’s End Homestead in Brookville, Ohio. She later acquired property in rural Maryland in 1965 and offered programs in the School of Living at Heathcoat Center, at which a new

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7 Timothy Miller, The 60s Communes, p. 2.
generation of communards and back-to-the-landers learned how to live efficiently on a rural holding.9

Both the back-to-the-land movement, which was based on the nuclear family unit, and the commune movement, which was committed to myriad forms of group living, were harmonious in the search for a gentler approach to life, and to some extent the back-to-the-land movement followed from the commune movement. Hugh Gardner, who researched and wrote about the proliferation of communes, both anarchistic and spiritual, in the United States during the 1960s and early 1970s, noted that there were thousands of rural communes, “wherever land was cheap, the terrain unsuitable for commercial agriculture, and the scenery beautiful.”10 Gardner noted that over the course of 300 years there had existed between 600 and 1000 communes in the United States, and although this marked a significant social movement, it made the sixties commune movement unique in terms of sheer numbers. By the beginning of the 1970s, when the rural commune movement began its decline, there was still a net out-migration of about one million people from the cities and suburbs to isolated rural areas in the United States, many of whom chose to experience rural living as nuclear family back-to-the-landers, rather than joining a rural commune.11

Why a movement towards communalism in the 1960s? Timothy Miller argued that, in part, the communal movement arose as a result of the unique circumstances that saw enormous numbers of baby-boom students separated from adult supervision, housed together on campuses, and affected by the civil rights movement and a “new politics of

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9 Miller, The 60s Communes, p. 9.
11 Ibid., p. 246 & 249.
Hugh Gardner asserted that the protest movement against the Vietnam War was an important factor, as it caused widespread feelings that a society engaged in such an immoral war must indeed be corrupt. He further posited that the combination of a shared social vision with a group of students sharing an off-campus house together often formed such close bonds that the group slowly began to conceive of itself as a family.

Although the Vietnam War and its provisions for the draft affected young American men directly, the civil turmoil created by the war had a rippling effect that went far beyond the group most directly affected, and beyond the confines of the United States. The specific provision that granted a deferment from military service while attending a college or university created an impetus to post secondary education which was enthusiastically embraced by vast numbers of white, middle class American men. University provided time in which to gain an education as well as a greater awareness of alternatives to the draft, including the prospect of moving to Canada. A decision to move to Canada not only affected the potential draftee, but girlfriends, sisters and wives were also impacted. Many young women chose to leave the United States as a result, some enthusiastically, some reluctantly. Following the implementation of the lottery system on December 1, 1969 some men who had already made plans to move to Canada discovered that because their birth date was given low priority in the lottery, they were no longer subject to the draft. Despite their good fortune, some, like Otis Tomas and Terry Henderson, both of whom moved to Cape Breton, chose to follow through with their original plan to move to Canada regardless of the draft.

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12 Miller, *The 60s Communes*, p. 7.
I liked the idea of the North; I liked the idea of it being wild and rugged sort of; I liked being not too far away from the ocean and the idea of perhaps some cheaper land and Canada seemed like a good place; good country, good government, not that I knew much about it.15

Many Americans, in fact, were simply opposed to the war. Discouraged by its continuance and disturbed by the climate of conflict in the United States many chose to leave as a form of protest. Bev Brett, who was active in the anti-war movement as a teenager, came to the decision to leave her native Massachusetts for these specific reasons as soon as she had finished university, first spending time in Banff and then moving to Cape Breton. Carmen Saunders, Annie Siegel and Jacqueline Barnett, all of whom live on Denman Island, each made similar political decisions. Swann Gartner recalled that he and his partner were living in New York City, both active in war resistance and as soon as they realized they were about to have a child they made the decision to leave for Canada. Ruth and Aaron Schneider, within hours of the birth of their first son decided they were not interested in bringing up their son to be “cannon fodder” for future wars, and so moved to Cape Breton.

Leaving the United States was one thing, but what made so many decide to leave an urban environment and seek a rural setting? This question can be asked of the thousands of Canadians who also abandoned their urban and suburban comfort for a drafty old farm house or even a tent in an unfamiliar area of the country. The historian David Walbert argued in his exploration of Lancaster County and the Old Order Amish, that, according to Charles Reich, “American culture ... had fallen prey to the decline of democracy, the artificiality of work, a loss of community and self.” He further quoted Reich who argued that uncontrolled technology “pulverise[d] everything in its path: the

15 Terry Henderson, interviewed in Cape Breton, November 2, 2006.
landscape, the natural environment, history and tradition, the amenities and civilities, the privacy and spaciousness of life, beauty, and the fragile, slow-growing social structures which bind us together.”¹⁶ Not just American culture, but Canadian culture as well, was perceived by thousands of young Americans and Canadians to have declined to the point that the only sane alternative was to move back-to-the-land and start anew.

A common theme for so many was the search for greater control over their environment. Issues ranged from a desire to grow food organically and avoid the growing use of pesticides and herbicides, escape the constant and growing level of noise found in the larger cities, a search for clean air not polluted by vehicles and factories, and a desire for visual beauty. For many, it was also a search for a safe, healthy place to raise children. Alienation from consumer culture was another common thread as so many felt like misfits in their materialist urban environments. “The rural impulse was,” in the words of Timothy Miller, “a part of the hippie preference for the natural over the artificial, the organic over the plastic.”¹⁷

The largest segment of those moving back to the country were the baby boomers, who grew up in a North American world driven by consumerism. This was the first generation to grow up with television, which beamed advertisements into every home, geared specifically to the perceived needs of the baby boomers and their parents. These ads both developed a need for and encouraged the purchase of goods on a national level, constantly changing over the life course of the boomer generation as they grew from infants, toddlers and children, through to teenagers and young adults. “Advertising has

created an American frame of mind that makes people want more things, better things
and newer things” stated Robert Sarnoff in 1956, president of the National Broadcasting
Company. Consumerism drove the postwar economic recovery and created a quarter
century of “the most sustained economic growth in history.” By the mid to late 1960s
the ethic of planned obsolescence on the part of manufacturers and the culture of the
“throwaway” society that had developed following the 15 year period of Depression and
War, began to lose its shine for many, especially for the younger generation. Many of
those moving back-to-the-land felt completely alienated from these values. People like
Bev Brett, who grew up near Boston, described herself as “sort of anti-materialistic, anti-
capitalist” and part of that “whole consciousness that came about” in opposition to “this
incredibly economically developed society.” Furthermore, she argued that the war in
Vietnam was sending people off to fight for what she “thought of as capitalistic or
materialistic values.” Otis Tomas felt similarly; he grew up in a small town on the edge
of Providence, Rhode Island, where his father taught philosophy. He remembered that
“in those days ... part of the challenge for me was in rejecting that whole middle class
lifestyle; I was very interested in the challenge of having nothing rather than having
everything.”

Becoming rural was also a search for community but many who moved to Cape
Breton did not expect to find people with whom they shared a cultural affinity, and so
they were quite surprised to meet other urban refugees. In contrast, on the Canadian west

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20 Bev Brett, interviewed in Cape Breton, March 1, 2003.
21 Otis Tomas, interviewed in Cape Breton, November 8, 2006.
coast there was a keen awareness of the growing back-to-the-land movement, such that the alternative community became part of the appeal. Phyllis Fabbi, who settled on Denman Island in 1975, recalled her awareness of an “alternate lifestyle and ... we just got swept up with the idea of building our own house from scratch, and we didn’t know a thing about anything. And it just seemed to be a disease that hit a lot of people at the same time.”

Although Canada, like the United States, was settled east to west, it seems very possible that the romance of going west in search of adventure, or in search of a place in which to build a new life, may have been retained by the American back-to-the-landers in particular. Despite the small sample, it is interesting to note the trend in this research which indicates that of the Canadians moving to the western Gulf Islands, over 80 percent came from the western provinces, most from within British Columbia, with the remainder from Ontario and Quebec. None came from east of Quebec. Of the Americans who moved to the same location, 45 percent came from the eastern United States, with the remainder drawn from the west and midwest. Of those moving to the east coast, twelve Canadians came from Ontario and Quebec, three from the Maritimes and two from the Prairies. Ten of the twelve Americans came from the eastern U.S. and two from the midwest. The east coast may have symbolized a retreat from the modern, and represented more of a search for past ways of living on the land as it was settled so much earlier. Adam, who moved to Cape Breton from Montreal, suggested that “there was something more romantic about it, more historic and traditional.”

22 Phyllis Fabbi, interviewed on Denman Island, November 5, 2007.
23 Adam (a pseudonym), interviewed in Cape Breton Island, October 29, 2006.
were more interested in moving to urban regions in the hopes of enjoying the benefits of a stronger economy – ironically, the very opportunities rejected by the modern homesteaders.

Harry H. Hiller argued in his exploration of migration to Alberta that “migration is almost always motivated by expectations that the destination holds more promise than the place of current residence.”24 Migrants most often move in search of better employment opportunities, improved living conditions, and access to more education and cultural amenities, all of which were normally found in cities. In both Canada and the United States this consistent trend of rural to urban migration changed in the 1970s. In Canada, rural areas in general experienced faster growth than had been seen in 100 years of urbanization.25 Statisticians at Statistics Canada speculated that this increase in rural growth was due to “the attraction of the rural environment (synonymous with nature and tranquility), lower municipal taxes and the greater availability of property in rural areas.”26 In the United States, “remote kinds of places” were suddenly on the map during the rural renaissance of the 1970s. Demographers discovered, to their surprise, that “non-economic quality-of-life reasons” were the draw to less settled rural regions and made up for any loss of income suffered as a result of the move.27 Inexpensive land was a pull factor for many back-to-the-landers; rural land was always less expensive than regional municipal land.

26 Ibid.
27 Walbert, Garden Spot, p. 152.
For the first time in North America thousands of people, the young and idealistic and the somewhat more pragmatic with young families and even a few older visionaries, were willing to make the sacrifices required to live in the country.\(^{28}\) For the most part, back-to-the-land settlers were baby-boomers who had grown up with a measure of security only dreamed of by their parents, which allowed them the luxury to focus on issues such as quality of life. As Doug Owram explains, this was the most fortunate generation in history; “the best fed, the best educated and the healthiest” of any preceding generation.\(^{29}\) Their relative security also infused them with the confidence necessary to just pick up and move to an area of the country and a way of life that was unfamiliar to the majority of these migrants. Undoubtedly moving to the country was much easier for domestic migrants than for international migrants, but domestic or international, such migrations required a measure of risk taking behaviour, as the outcome was never a foregone conclusion.\(^{30}\) As Hiller points out, migration creates a break from existing patterns of social interaction in their original location and “places them in a largely alien territory.”\(^{31}\) For domestic migrants the risk was mitigated by the fact that national programs such as healthcare and unemployment insurance were so portable in the 1970s.\(^{32}\) Whatever the individual motivation, whether it was an adventure, a search for cheap land and the simple life, environmental concerns, cultural alienation, or fears of social collapse, this was a form of dissent with the status quo. Myrna Kostash, originally a Canadian freelance journalist who later became an award winning author of literary and

\(^{28}\) Ibid., p. 155.  
\(^{29}\) Owram, *Born at the Right Time*, p. x.  
\(^{31}\) Ibid.  
\(^{32}\) Ibid., p. 9.
creative non-fiction, researched the sixties generation in Canada, and characterizes the choice to move to the country in language relevant to the period:

Drop out. Start your own country. Gluttony and greed, forecasts of the holocaust and horrid catastrophes, unendurable cacophony, odours, insult in the city. Leave. Retreat into the country and learn the berries, the nuts, the fruit, the small animals and plants. Learn water. Slow down, take a deep breath, listen to the silence and begin the purge of the accumulated garbage of industrial/technological urban life clogging the nerveways of your being. Buy a little piece of land, it doesn’t have to be grand, just a few acres of wood and water, join in self-supporting, self-sustaining community with others and in respectful equipoise with the spirits of the land, and get real, take responsibility for your own survival, for your food and water and heat and clothing. Pay back to earth what you owe.33

Kostash captures the essence of how the notion of counterculture in the 1960s is remembered today; however the original meaning of the term according to J. Milton Yinger, who first coined it in relation to his study of the Beat generation, was to distinguish it from a subculture, which would have its own set of normative values derived from within the culture. A counterculture, on the other hand, “represents a full-fledged oppositional movement with a distinctively separate set of norms and values that are produced dialectically out of a sharply oppositional conflict with the dominant society,” with the goal of changing the dominant culture.34 The term was later adopted by sociologists as something monolithic, argues Stuart Henderson, when in fact it was shortlived and mutable.35 Back-to-the-landers would have identified with Kostash’s description, and certainly many felt an “oppositional conflict with the dominant society”

33 Myrna Kostash, Long way from Home: The Story of the Sixties Generation in Canada (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1980), p. 188.
from a political perspective. Most who settled on Prince Edward Island, as historian Alan MacEachern wrote in his “Back to the Island: The Back-to-the-Land Movement on PEI,” were on the political left. Back-to-the-landers, while similar in appearance and leftward leaning politically, were drawn from a wider demographic than notions of hippie or counterculturalist might suggest, but they shared in wanting to “live… otherwise from the mainstream of society;” they wanted to build a life in a quieter setting.

Wayne Ngan argued that he settled on Hornby Island in 1967 to “commit myself to a place I believe in.” He was captivated by the unusual rock formations on the island, the sandy beaches, the arbutus trees and the abundance of wildlife; whale sightings were not unusual, the eagles and the millions of birds that stop on the island during migration were magical to him, “so nature-wise it’s paradise … and in the modern time it’s a very rare thing to find.” Ngan was a professional potter in Vancouver, having moved there from Canton, China, where he was born in 1937. From both a cultural and generational standpoint, he would not have identified with the countercultural movement, but the island community was anything but welcoming as he recalled:

The island people in those days were backward; they don’t able to adapt [to] new people coming in; so they kind of very hard [at] community meetings or anything like that; they always kind of think you going to steal their life away or something! [Laughter]

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37 Henderson, Making the Scene, p. 23.
By virtue of finding himself an outsider on the Island, Ngan found that he was much more comfortable with the growing number of back-to-the-land settlers who began arriving on the island within the next two years.

Heinz Laffin, also much older than the baby boom generation, was another potter from Vancouver who initially shared a studio with Wayne. His journey to the island followed a very unusual path that began in Germany, where he was born in 1926, conscripted into Hitler’s army when he was 17 and taken prisoner by Allied forces during the Normandy invasion. Laffin recalled that from there he was transported to a prison camp in Massachusetts, and then after the war he was sent to Britain to work off Germany’s reparations debt. Through these experiences he became an agricultural worker and learned to speak English well and so was able to immigrate to Canada in 1950. Heinz was clearly outside of the countercultural movement as well, but he was pulled into the culture when he married a woman 20 years his junior.39

Eleanor Laffin describes herself as a classic hippie; “went through the whole kind of hippie thing in Vancouver, going to be-ins and music things, saw Janis Joplin, Bob Dylan, all the greats! And ... did a lot of drugs and survived it all.” She, like many women, became a back-to-the-land settler because of a man in her life. Her reasons, however, were contrary to those of most women as she was trying to put distance between herself and her ex-husband. “Got knocked-up at 19 and had a kid ... and so lived with this person who was an alcoholic for a number of years.” Eleanor Laffin came up to Hornby with a friend once, but on her second trip in 1971 she was alone and the experience changed her life:

I came into some good peyote and my whole life became so clear – it was just an amazing experience actually. I was in Helliwell Park and at that point I could have died and become part of the earth and it would have been just fine. Because it all was crystal clear; I don’t know if it was just the drugs but I came home and I said to my husband I’m out of here; can’t do this anymore. So I literally just packed up everything inside of a week and moved to a little cabin on Tribune Bay; it was just beautiful; that whole bay was my front yard. And I had a 4 year old son, Parker and I thought well I’ll just try and pull my life together and see.\textsuperscript{40}

Eleanor, who grew up a Mennonite, was kicked out of the church “because I was bad,” she argued. Becoming pregnant as a teenager would have been a struggle for any single woman at the time, but being rejected by her community compounded her difficulties.\textsuperscript{41}

Social expectations placed on women by the dominant post-war society were made even more restrictive for some due to their family’s particular interpretation of those expectations, either due to religious affiliation, such as the Mennonites for Eleanor, or due to a particularly traditionalist cultural interpretation in Christine Ferris’ case. Growing up in a small, conservative, Connecticut town, her father had left when she was eleven, which made it difficult for her mother as she was shunned by her former friends who found her a threat as a divorced woman. She also had difficulty getting a job or even an apartment for the same reasons; 1963 small town America was an especially conservative society. Cold war ideology of the postwar period pervaded family life, according to Elaine Tyler May, creating a conformist society that placed tremendous cultural and economic pressures on women to conform to the prevailing family norm. May argued that through a secure job, a secure home and a secure marriage, Americans would achieve prosperity and peace in a secure country. Traditional family values were seen as the best way to ensure national and personal security; marital stability was prized

\textsuperscript{40} Eleanor Laffin, interviewed on Hornby Island, January 12, 2008.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
and few couples divorced. Ferris recalled that their relationship was fraught with tension;

Her anxiety became focussed on my virginity... I started trying to run away when I was 14 and I got caught several times and finally when I was 16 I successfully ... ran away, hitchhiked to Boston and just disappeared into all the kids that were there on the street.

Elaine Tyler May further argues that many baby boom daughters eschewed the security and material comfort of their mother’s generation and instead followed a “more autonomous path that brought them face to face with economic hardship.” Both Eleanor and Christine chose to make a complete break with their past and both were indeed willing to face whatever hardships came their way.

Christine eventually wound up living in Los Angeles and then through friends, in 1971 came north to Canada to explore Lasqueti Island. Once there she never left, and she was not alone:

[There] were a lot of Americans who were avoiding the draft and who had gone AWOL, so there was a whole ... network of people and we just ... tried to avoid the immigration authorities ... and then Canada did quite an amazing thing I think, had a moratorium and opened up ... for people who were here illegally to apply for landed immigrant status from within the country.

The immigration amnesty, labelled a last chance, actually ran from August 15 to October 15, 1973, allowing people who had entered the country before December 1, 1972 who were not legally “landed” to apply for landed immigrant status from within the country.

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Despite the amnesty, the point system for entry still applied and so in order to qualify, Christine married her boyfriend, and thus was able to remain legally. Not unlike Eleanor, living on such a small and remote island gave Christine a refuge. “Because I had left home so early and because I didn’t feel that my family was a family for me anymore, there was a real sense of community.” Eleanor as well felt she had recovered the strong feelings of community that were a part of her upbringing by moving to Hornby. Both women were successful in either re-creating or finding a place of belonging.

Richard Laskin, who was a first generation American born in 1931 of Russian Jewish parents who had immigrated in 1911, did not fit the baby-boom profile; however, he was fully immersed in the counterculture.

We used to sit around with two other academic couples and smoke dope and listen to the Rolling Stones and say you know what we ought to do, we ought to throw away our TVs and move to the country and live a good life like so many young people were doing. But we were not young people; we were older people; we were into our late thirties.

His second wife, Serena, had just joined him in Chicago, in 1965, where he was teaching sociology at the Illinois Institute of Technology and she began a PhD in sociology at the University of Chicago. They had met at the University of Alberta where he had been teaching when she was doing a Masters degree in sociology. Serena’s description of those five exciting years in Chicago places their decision to leave, and by extension that of many others, in the social context of the times:

And that’s when life as I knew it and as we knew it was wide open for observation and discussion and for turning on its head. And the phrase the counterculture became prominent at that time and being in the field of sociology we were with many, many people who were interested in examining the way in which we had been taught our values ... it was a huge awakening and education ... a PhD student at the University of Chicago and it was just a hotbed of

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radicalism ... middle class people were saying no to their middle class-ness ... the nuclear family came up for observation ... all of that had to do with the counterculture. Feminism was a part of that and [it was] getting some powerful voices in the sixties ... The communes were starting to happen then ... Hutterites and Amish had been doing it for [a long time] ... but in the field of sociology we started to take a look at them ... so the notion of intentional communities came into being at that time and the drug culture started then so it was all tied up in getting stoned, listening to the music and fantasizing ... about doing things differently. And certainly part of those ideas of let’s get out of the city, back-to-the-land, well I had never been on the land ... but started to take seed in our brain. We had three little children so they were our primary focus so we could not do anything crazy and jeopardize their wellbeing and future. The Vietnam War was the third major force that impacted on our lives and ... friends who were eligible for the draft came to us to try to help, you know, chop off a toe and this and that, it was very profound and that plus the racial tensions in Chicago, the Chicago Convention, riots, police and we lived right in the heart of it, had our baby and it was like I missed Canada, I missed my family and I wanted to get out of there, we both did.49

Richard and his wife did not have to leave the United States because of the draft, but, like others in their age category, they did not want their children to grow up in such social turmoil, nor were they comfortable with the level of pollution in the city. They became even more sensitive to the pollution following the birth of their daughter in 1969. They had travelled to Serena’s home in Calgary for their daughter’s birth, and were appalled at the smog of the city as they drove back into Chicago. In fact they initially thought it was smoke from a fire:

No this would not do, [for our baby] to live in this environmental filth, [yet] we loved Chicago for lots of things that it had; the museums, Second City, the universities, what a place; but it was environmentally horrible. We moved to Saskatoon; you can breathe; Saskatoon is a wonderful place to live.50

As Richard further elaborated, “we were not about to continue to live in the United States – well, if I’d been given a great job, maybe,” but in fact he was offered a tenured position

50 Richard Laskin, interviewed on Hornby Island, November 26, 2007. However, Richard added that “we were not unaware of polluted air, of a polluted environment, or of trying to do something to mitigate it in our own personal lives but it has not been a major factor in what we did.”
at the University of Saskatchewan, and so they moved to Saskatoon. Serena also found work teaching at the university part time, but she spent most of her time taking care of their baby and two sons from Richard’s first marriage. Offering further explanation for their eventual move to a rural setting, Serena recalled that she began to realize there was more to life than a job and money, and she had always longed to live by the ocean, and so they started to travel in the summers, visiting communes and then they decided to rent a cottage on the Oregon coast and began experimenting with the notion of living with other families with “like-minded values and ideas and ideals” but the Oregon coast was too foggy so they widened their search one summer to British Columbia51 and here Richard picks up the story:

In 1973 we took a half year off from teaching, without salary, put the kids into the VW Van and went off with our bandanas and our jinglies… a hippie professor with a Visa card. We went to explore what it said on the license plate; beautiful British Columbia. And we explored beautiful BC by coming across Prince Rupert and visiting the islands. When we got to Hornby Island, friends from back in Saskatoon had said if you’re going to BC check out Hornby Island. … And we were tired from travelling and there was a sign on the Co-op that said house for rent on the ocean and it was very cheap and we said let’s take it for a week and I’ve never left. At that time we thought this island was so beautiful and so wonderful and so rural and we could live in this rural context, we got in touch with our friends from Chicago, both professors who were on sabbatical leaves at that time ... [and] both of these families came to Hornby Island from Chicago and we all shared a house together; 6 adults, 7 kids and the values and ethics of the early 1970s; I’ll let it go at that.52

What they were looking for, aside from a setting of great natural beauty, which they certainly found on Hornby, was a rural location that was small enough to allow for face to face interpersonal exchanges with neighbours and islanders, where neighbours helped each other in times of need. Richard was searching for a community not unlike the one

he was familiar with as a child when his parents moved the family into the workers’ cooperative colony, started in 1927.  

It was the beginnings of the cooperative housing movement in the Bronx, known as “The Coop” and consisted of two square blocks of apartments … and those who lived there were treated as owners. A pivotal moment in the past was living in the Coop, 1938, when each resident in that complex, in the midst of the Depression, contributed one dollar extra to pay the rent for those who lost their job, to ensure no one was put out on the street.

Serena was also raised in a close knit Jewish community and though she wanted to break out of that community, she did not reject it as such, but rejected the basis upon which it was organized. She wanted to live in a community that was based on more than “simply identification as an ethnic group;” she was looking for an intentional community based on a connection with the land and the people, and Richard and Serena both felt they had finally found this type of relationship on their new Island.

Manfred Rupp was also searching for a cooperative community. Born in Germany, he was 13 at war’s end and at that time, he remembered, he began “to find out all these gruesome things that [had] been going on; every old person to you could be a potential murderer or mass-murderer.” And it was the legacy of that war that made him want to leave the country. He became a school teacher and taught for a couple of years, but in 1958 he immigrated to Canada. He recalled that at the time the economic circumstances in Canada were “miserable” and he arrived without any money.

The government in those days even paid your fare and you had to repay it once you were here. And we emigrated by boat, not by plane and so the first thing that we did … three of us on the ship … went down to southern Ontario into the tobacco harvest. We knew that … you could make a buck; one of the guys had been there before. And so we went down there and cheated our way into getting

53 Ibid.
a job. You have to pretend that you know what you’re doing, right, at that kind
of work.\footnote{Manfred Rupp, interviewed on Denman Island, November 27, 2007.}

Shortly thereafter Rupp went to live with a distant relative in Edmonton and found
work in administration at the University of Alberta “the only place in Edmonton that was
worth being at,” otherwise he remembered the city as “grim and dour.” He recalled that
“those were the days when the Premier, Ernest C. Manning, every Sunday morning
would preach in the Paramount Theatre. And people would flock there to listen to the
Premier preach the Gospel.”\footnote{Ibid.} This was quite shocking for a secular European who found
the social climate of the city bordering on red-neck and decidedly too conservative for his
tastes. When Manfred met Marjo VanTooren, who was born in Holland in 1936, and
came to Canada with her first husband in 1959,\footnote{Marjo VanTooren, interviewed on Denman Island, November 20, 2007.} they decided to move further west to
Horseshoe Bay and then to Vancouver. There they met three other couples who were
interested in buying land together and trying to live cooperatively. One of the couples
had purchased land on Hornby Island but when Manfred and Marjo arrived the other
couples who had preceded them “had had a big fight between them, and the whole thing
was off.” The owners of the land eventually split up. One couple moved to Lasqueti to
join a large commune but Manfred was not interested in a commune; he had hoped to
create a cooperative living arrangement where each person had their own living quarters,
and helped each other with the work load.

There was a guru type around in those days who collected people; that seems to
work better for a while, if you have one clown who is willing to play the big
kahuna and people are willing to follow. There’s more people willing to follow
than there are willing to simply see what you can do among equals. That’s at
least what I find.\footnote{Manfred Rupp, interviewed on Denman Island, November 27, 2007.}
Manfred’s search for a close-knit community had long been a pursuit of his; he had spent some months in Israel on a kibbutz in the course of his search, but given the historical relationship between Germany and Israel, he could never feel comfortable.

In Edmonton at one point I thought I would check out what it’s like to be in a kibbutz; they were kind of an experiment of cooperative living, so I went to Israel for a while and … realized that it’s an ethnically closed society; you’d have to pretend all the time that you are what you’re not, [otherwise] you’re not really … a part of it. And coming from Germany, you’re sort of in a very strange relationship to Jewish people, right?\textsuperscript{60}

Although he never quite found the right combination of people who shared his interests in living cooperatively, independent of ethnic or religious issues, he and Marjo soon found a suitable piece of land on Denman Island and settled there in 1967. His search for community allowed him to blend well with other settlers on the island, where he would become actively involved in producing and writing for an island newsletter. Politically and culturally he and Marjo were comfortable with the growing back-to-the-land community on Denman Island.

Similarly, Phyllis Fabbi, who, with her husband and three children arrived on Denman Island in 1975 recalled that “there was the whole kind of hippie thing that was going on and we ... weren’t in that age group, but in terms of the politics [we] allied with it.”\textsuperscript{61} Phyllis, like Manfred, the Laskins and others, came in search of “a close-knit community that did things together.”

I have to say too, in terms of values, I felt here that I was in a place where people shared the same values and I’d never felt that before, anywhere. I’d always felt a little sort of odd or not quite in sync with conventional life I guess, and so I found that really, really satisfying, just to share values with people.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{61} Phyllis Fabbi, interviewed on Denman Island, November 5, 2007.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
Alienation from the dominant culture and its materialist focus was a common theme among those who sought a simpler way of life. There was a tendency, however, to make assumptions on the basis of appearance, which were not always accurate, as Leslie Dunsmore found to her dismay: “I arrived with a very innocent myth in my head that everybody who wore a headband and had wild hair and wore jingly things on their clothes and East Indian saris … and walked barefoot ... were all back-to-the-land people.” Nor were they all, according to Leslie “trying to eke out a way to survive being poor.” Leslie maintained that about half the back-to-the-land settlers on Denman Island had trust funds and did not share her values. In the course of my research, similar assertions were made on both coasts, however it would be impossible to ascertain with any accuracy the degree to which this was true. Without a doubt there were those who arrived in Canada with few financial concerns, and this might have felt to some like a betrayal of fundamental values, in part because the vast majority of back-to-the-landers suffered through some very lean years financially before they finally found a little material comfort.

The decision to move to a rural location, leaving behind all that was familiar, was a momentous one. For most couples, it required a fair degree of planning and saving, so that it was usually a shared dream and joint decision. A surprising number of women who moved back-to-the-land, however, admitted to doing so because it was their husband’s dream. Eight of the women in this study, three from the east coast and five from the west coast, stated categorically that the main reason they moved back-to-the-land was due to their husbands’ wish to experience life in a rural setting. It is unlikely that either Marcelle Lavoie or Donna Mikol, for instance, would have chosen to move to

63 Leslie Dunsmore, interviewed on Denman Island, December 11, 2007.
an isolated community in rural Cape Breton on their own; they both described themselves as very naive with little life experience. Marcelle Lavoie came from a small Manitoba town and described her background as “really small town very just small town.”

Marcelle told the story of her arrival in Cape Breton as one of being swept up by the winds of change, but she saw change as something orchestrated by others.

And so when I ended up coming here, [it] was through leaving home, working in Ontario for a year, meeting somebody that summer who was from the east, and coming to visit east and staying east. This person had emotional connections with Cape Breton Island, so I just followed along. Character has a whole lot to do [with] what we do in our lives, because doers take the lead and go do stuff and followers just wait for opportunities and … you go along when it suits. That’s how I ended up here … when I was 18 … in November, at this time of year … in ’73.

Donna Mikol came from the opposite demographic, in the sense that she was born and raised in Montreal, but knew nothing of rural living:

I was totally an urbanite; I was raised in Montreal, went to university there, completely a down-town girl, that’s all I ever knew, right? And I knew nothing of anything, about anything else. Very naïve … I was only 19, so I really didn’t know any other life. But was completely happy to do whatever he wanted to do. And it was a great adventure, and … we were young, we were in love, we had a goal and nothing was impossible right, in that state, nothing.

Although second wave feminism began in the late 1960s, by the early 1970s it had not fully penetrated Canadian society, so it was not surprising at the time that two young, intelligent, women chose to simply follow the men in their lives into rural Cape Breton, ready to settle wherever their partners chose. Marcelle knew nothing of the back-to-the-land movement, yet she found herself characterized as such by the local population, and Donna Mikol, as she made very clear, had no experience or knowledge of rural living but

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64 Marcelle Lavoie, interviewed on Cape Breton, November 1, 2006.
65 Italics indicate emphasis by the speaker.
66 Marcelle Lavoie, interviewed on Cape Breton, November 1, 2006.
67 Donna Mikol, interviewed on Cape Breton, November 9, 2006.
her dedication to her husband’s vision soon made it her own. Both women arrived in Cape Breton with confident young men who had a very clear vision of what they were looking for.

Mike Crimp and Larry Mikol both wanted to return to a rural setting they had experienced as children. Mike Crimp, Marcelle’s partner, knew he wanted to settle down somewhere in Cape Breton:

When I was a kid my father and I would come up to Cape Breton and we would travel around in a canoe and tent – my father died when I was 14 – so we would travel and tent wherever, and such good memories. The seed was planted in my head, from my trips with my father. When I started traveling around the world, instead of comparing places with Dartmouth, I compared everywhere with Cape Breton and I knew I would move here one day.  

Larry Mikol wanted to return to the type of rural setting he had been used to as a child, but the Vietnam War intervened deflecting his search for land to Nova Scotia.

I came to Canada in 1968, from the Midwest. I drove through Chicago on the day of the beginning of the famous Democratic Convention. I picked up a bunch of hitch hikers and dropped them off and proceeded on my way to Canada. After kind of a long story I finally got landed immigrant status, lived in Toronto for a year, then ended up on a farm in Quebec. Now, leaving the US I wanted an adventure and I wanted to live in the country, because we were raised in the country that was becoming a suburb; you know that whole period through the 60s, or late 50s when the farms were basically being bulldozed and tracts of homes were being put in.

Motivations for the two men were markedly different than those of their partners. Both men were four or five years older and had travelled and worked in a variety of places. Mike had travelled extensively prior to his move to Cape Breton, from “oceanographic ships” and “sailing ships” to “lumber jacking in BC” to living in Florida. Throughout Mike’s years of working and travelling, it would seem that nothing quite matched the magic of the time he had spent in Cape Breton with his father. Perhaps in a

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68 Mike Crimp, interviewed on Cape Breton, August 2003.
69 Larry Mikol, interviewed on Cape Breton, November 9, 2006.
subconscious bid to recover an aspect of that lost relationship, he knew precisely where he wanted to be when it came time to settle down. Larry as well had spent a number of years trying to “dodge the bullet” of the draft, as he put it, by moving every six months in a attempt to remain undetected by the draft board, until he ran out of time and moved to Canada. Larry spent his first year in Toronto and then another year on a farm in rural Quebec where he eventually met his wife. After years on the move, he was especially anxious to “bring her to some place; I didn’t like being a vagabond.” For Larry it was clearly important that he have a place to call his own and something tangible and substantial to offer his future wife. Being an immigrant to Canada might have heightened his need to feel rooted on his own piece of land.

Moving to a rural location had great appeal for Jan Bevan, as she fondly recalled a childhood vacation spent on Salt Spring Island where she and her family “lived in a log cabin with no electricity or running water.” She remembered it so clearly as a magical time in her life and “used to … long to go back and have another vacation on this island place that was just paradise.” However it was her husband’s desire to build a house that provided the impetus to make the break with city life, as Jan explains:

What was happening in 1967 was my partner and I, his name is Robear, we had been together for a couple of years by then and he said he wanted to build a house; he was a carpenter by trade and we were living in a little house that we were remodelling in Victoria, and he said I am ready to build a house for us. He had formerly built a boat; our first home was a boat that we lived on and some friends that we had introduced to some friends … had bought some property on the island and they said do you want to come live on our place; you can build a house. So that’s how we came to be here in 1968.70

In many ways Jan and Robear epitomized the back-to-the-land movement, despite Jan’s assertions to the contrary, in that they spent years clearing a piece of land and building on

70 Jan Bevan, interviewed on Hornby Island, January 11, 2008.
it, much as the first pioneers did in order to fulfil the obligations required to alienate land from the Crown and then acquire the right to purchase at below market value.

Additionally, they were ready to start a family:

Robear came first and then I came a few months later. The other thing we were ready for was a child so we conceived a child here on Hornby Island and quite quickly built a cabin. So it wasn’t so much a philosophy, or a goal to get back-to-the-land; my husband was raised on farms and ranches so he had quite a lot of experience living fairly remote in the foothills of Alberta. So he knew all about kerosene lamps and fires and making do and animals and gardens and he was just totally confident with that kind of stuff and that was really what he wanted to do, so it wasn’t quite the hippie thing, although we sort of looked like hippies and we were certainly in that whole rebellion era of loosening up what you wore or how you did your hair, and there was all the political stuff, antinuclear, in the States there was all the integration movement, there was the sexual revolution, there was all kinds of loosening up but he was a country boy and he wanted to get back in the country where he could build a house without building permits.71

Perhaps the distinction Jan made, by characterizing their move to the island as not “quite the hippie thing” had more to do with the fact that so many young people set out to live on the land with very little expertise or realistic expectations of the skills needed and the difficulty involved in living in a rural location for the first time, especially on a limited budget, without amenities like power, running water or a furnace. Robear, on the other hand had all of the required skills in abundance with an enthusiastic wife ready to learn and make do and shoulder the burdens of their new way of life.

In contrast to the women who followed their men, only two women of those interviewed in Cape Breton made the trip entirely on their own, but this did not occur until near the end of the decade, and both women in question were single and significantly older with much more life experience behind them. By the latter part of the 1970s women had more career choices and more opportunities for education, both of which gave them the possibility of greater autonomy. Though perhaps neither woman

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had a clear vision of what they were looking for, they both knew they wanted a change from big-city life. Margrit Gahlinger, who had two university degrees, a career and a marriage behind her was more than a decade older than either Marcelle or Donna when she, at the age of 32, arrived in Meat Cove in 1977. Unlike others who arrived with friends or family, Margrit found herself in Meat Cove quite by chance, after an unusual coincidence of circumstances that turned out to be quite providential. Feeling confused and disoriented following a marriage break-up, Margrit decided to take a leave from her job as a librarian and spend some time visiting Atlantic Canada. After visiting Newfoundland for the second time, Margrit wanted to explore Cape Breton before leaving the region. On a cold, snowy winter’s day in late November, she found herself making a pot of soup to thank her host for transportation and a night’s lodging to the small fishing hamlet of Meat Cove on the northern tip of Cape Breton Island. Her host had set out at the break of day with his fishing crew, later to return with the “biggest haul of the season,” three tons of cod. Because the men had to remain on the boat to finish gutting the fish, Margrit took the soup to the crew “and I thought this [was] all pretty amazing [and] romantic you know, for a girl from Ontario, meeting these fishermen.” Fred Lawrence was among the crew and so Margrit stayed around for a few more days, and as she remembered, “I never got away. And then it became too late, because eventually I got pregnant and I got married then I got responsibilities and that’s how I ended up here!”

Mary Ann Wilson, who also had a university degree, was 30 when she drove to North River, Cape Breton in 1982. She explained her reasons for leaving her chosen career in stage production, and reminisced about her decision to make a break from city

72 Margrit Gahlinger, interviewed on Cape Breton, November 6, 2006.
living: “I really felt my aloneness … so I thought, well, you’re going to go alone. You’re going to leave this place alone; you’re not going to find a friend or a partner who’s going to want to do this.” She had become more and more disillusioned about living in Toronto, especially the growing disparity between the haves and the have-nots, and her dawning realization “that there would never be enough money to buy happiness.” Mary Ann had hoped to find a group or someone interested in moving to the country, but “I was out of sync with everyone else doing these sort of things.” She had spent a winter working in a resort in the bush near North Bay, but as much as she loved the quiet of the surroundings, what she didn’t have there was a sense of community. Originally Mary Ann made the trip to Cape Breton as a favour to her friend Carol, whose truck was not large enough for their move from Toronto. Mary Ann had planned to move to Mexico at the time, but when she arrived on Cape Breton Island she was taken with its beauty. “I still remember significant moments of that drive, through Whycocomagh and the lake [Bras d’Or] and the mist, and coming to the Englishtown Ferry and it was like it was mythical!” She found a vibrant small community with people “who were very open and ready to have more people around,” and so she stayed for the winter, despite the fact that she had no employment.

I thought if it’s a pay cheque I’m after I had a pay cheque and that wasn’t making me happy [so] that’s not what I need. I need something else and that was getting to Cape Breton and starting to feel like the door was opening on that something else.  

Leaving behind all that was familiar would have been difficult for anyone, but it took a lot of courage to make that leap from known to unknown without the support of a spouse or family, for both Margrit and Mary Ann.

73 Mary Ann Wilson, interviewed in Cape Breton, October 31, 2006.
For all who made the move to live in the countryside, those who faced the largest transition and most gut-wrenching decision-making before doing so, were the American military resisters. This group was not only making the transition from urban to rural, but like refugees everywhere, the consequences of their actions were uncertain. As Chris Turner argued in his article on the topic in the Walrus, “Before adventure or assimilation or the tending of goats, each of them had to decide that their convictions were worth more than the comforts of home and family and career.”74 The decision to move to Canada in order to avoid the draft, or as a military deserter, was made at a time when their ability ever to return to the United States, either to live or even to visit was unknown. Furthermore, the decision to move to Canada was not always made with full family support or understanding, leaving the possibility of family visits under question, which in turn left many to wonder if they would ever see their families again. Thus the decision to leave the United States was not taken lightly.

Added to these considerations was the question of their reception in a new country. John Hagan argued that their reception varied depending on their time of immigration: those arriving before 1970 felt quite welcome and in fact at that period they served as “symbols of Canadian sovereignty.” An exception to that was experienced by American military resisters who, from the spring of 1968 until the spring of 1969 were being excluded by immigration officials under a publicly undisclosed and secretive directive. Only after this issue came to light was it finally resolved in their favour as Canada finally excluded the American distinction of draft dodger and deserter, from

74 Chris Turner, “On Strawberry Hill: The hippie exodus to Canada from the United States was not a Mass Migration, but it was Close. Is it time to rethink this period, then and now?” Walrus, (Sept. 2007): 69-73, at 73.
political refugee or war resister.\textsuperscript{75} In 1970 however the implementation of the War Measures Act left many Americans wondering about the purported “freedom” of Canadian society. At the same time unemployment was on the rise and the influx of so many young people including draft dodgers to the larger cities of Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver, prompted the mayors of these cities to voice “complaints about the rebelliousness they associated with American war resisters.” This period left Americans feeling far less welcome to Canada. By 1972-1973 the climate had turned yet again to one of support for American war resisters as the government moved to implement an immigration amnesty for all those in the country by 1972 who were not officially landed.\textsuperscript{76}

Michael McNamara found refuge in Canada, not just from the draft, but also from the growing tension between political groups on the west coast; however, he was also quite surprised by the implementation of the War Measures Act. Drafted for the third time in 1969, Michael knew this time things would be different: “I always was able to get a deferment before but of course by 1969 everything was ramping up; I had graduated by then, I was working in Portland with some architects there and I decided, years before, that my alternative would be to come to Canada.” Michael recalled the contrast in the social environment that greeted him when he first arrived in stark terms: “what a difference crossing the border made; I couldn’t believe it. It was basically heading toward civil war in the States, at least on the West Coast.”\textsuperscript{77} McNamara argued that because the way you dressed or looked made your political affiliation immediately obvious, you could not escape being instantly associated with one group or another,

\textsuperscript{75} Hagan, \textit{Northern Passage}, pp. 61-62.
\textsuperscript{76} Hagan, \textit{Northern Passage}, pp. 186-187.
\textsuperscript{77} Michael McNamara, interviewed on Hornby Island, January 28, 2008.
I mean the red-necks were chasing the hippies, the red-necks were armed, the Black Panthers were armed, and the Yippies were armed. You were on one side or the other; there was no question about it ... and there was not a lot of friendly attitude between the groups.

A year after his arrival in Canada, however, the War Measures Act was proclaimed and “that was quite surprising for me because I had this idea that Canada is such a place of peace and then that happened. And I thought, you couldn’t pull that off in the United States!”

Michael and his wife first moved to Vancouver where he worked for an architectural firm for a couple of years. He had been intrigued with moving onto a piece of land and building his own house while he lived in Oregon, but “then things kind of intervened but that ideal was still there quite strongly.” So once they were settled in Vancouver, the search continued. “As soon as we got here we would spend weekends going to Vancouver Island and over to the west coast to Tofino and Long Beach and those areas; looking around at different islands. You know this whole island environment here was fascinating, still is!” Eventually, through his work on the volunteer ski-patrol at Whistler, Michael met some people who lived on Hornby Island and heard about “this guy who was building amazing stuff out of driftwood” who was probably Wayne Ngan. For the next couple of years they came to the island for the summers, but “one thing led to another until it’s 35 years ago now.”

Stevi Parker Kittleson came to Canada due to the Vietnam War, but in her case she came to be with her brother who had moved to Canada as a war resister. Stevi remembered her early years while she lived in her home town of La Honda, California and the social climate created by the spectre of war for her brothers and friends:

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78 Michael McNamara, interviewed on Hornby Island, January 28, 2008.
79 Ibid.
Well for one thing my friends were coming back in body bags, or they were coming back truly, truly, fucked-up and it was a terrible time; we were trying to protest and we were … doing all kinds of drugs and … trying not to think about it and at the same time we were right in the middle of it so we were all chanting peace … and some of us getting busted and some of us trying to figure out ways not to go [to Vietnam] … People were coming up here, [to Canada]. … My brother was drafted … and then went AWOL and … went to Canada … and I came just to see my brother initially in ’67.80

Unlike others, it took Stevi five years to gain permanent residency status, which she finally obtained when the immigration laws changed to allow points for artisanal work such as jewellery making.

Doug Hamilton was able to qualify as a conscientious objector, but once he had served his time, he wanted an alternative to big-city living, and like others, thought Canada was the ultimate retreat. Initially, Doug along with a friend came to Canada in search of a commune, shortly after he had completed his two years of alternative. He had obtained his undergraduate and Master’s degree at Earlham, a Quaker college in Richmond, Indiana, which, he argued made it easy for him to avoid “having to kill people.” He had done his two years of service in Berkeley California, but he remembered that “If you were really lucky and you were cool, you could come up to British Columbia.”81 Although they found a commune, they decided it was not for them and continued their search. Upon learning that the community on Lasqueti Island was in need of a resident doctor, Doug and his friend, a physician, decided to have a look and though his friend left after his house burned down, Doug has remained ever since. His partner Penny had joined him by then and he recalled that within their first hour on the island they were overwhelmed with its beauty. “It was just so quiet and peaceful and … it was

80 Stevi Parker Kittleson, interviewed on Hornby Island, January 14, 2008.
the springtime and … everything [was] kind of psychedelic, the green just pulsed in your face … it was kind of a high energy thing and we just fell in love with it.”82

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the back-to-the-land movement of the 1970s grew out of feelings of alienation from the dominant society. The majority of those who participated in this movement were drawn from the baby boom generation, but there was a significant number of people outside of that demographic who also decided to leave an urban environment in search of an alternative, simpler way of life, less damaging to the environment. Most also came in search of community. People came to both Cape Breton and to the Gulf Islands from places as far away as Germany, or from as nearby as the same province, but the greatest numbers who came as immigrants came from the United States and most of these settlers came for reasons broadly related to the Vietnam War. The decision to move to the countryside was not easily made as it required enormous adjustment to a new and strange environment, and this decision was an even more difficult one to make as a single woman, such that few single women made that choice. Many women readily admitted to making the move at the behest of their boyfriends/partners/husbands. It was not uncommon for the men who made the move to have done so as part of a lifelong desire to recover a past attachment to rural living, made through either childhood visits or developed through childhood reading and a desire to build with their hands and create a place of their own in tangible ways. For those who immigrated, perhaps especially for those young men who felt forced to leave their homes, there may have been an added urgency to their need to set down roots.

Chapter 2

FIRST ENCOUNTERS: 1970S BACK-TO-THE-LAND

This chapter explores the differences experienced by back-to-the-landers depending on where they settled, by comparing small communities within the County of Victoria, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, with equally small communities off the east coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia. To my surprise, despite similarities as island communities bracketing the country, there were significant differences in reception between the two coasts. Small differences were also evident between fishing and farming communities on Cape Breton Island, and among island communities on the west coast. The salient factors in the differential reception experienced by back-to-the-land settlers were demography, coupled with settlement patterns, the culture of the host community, and the economy. Demographically, Cape Breton experienced a smaller influx of back-to-the-land settlers, and they were dispersed over a much larger region than the three west coast islands. The pattern of settlement in Cape Breton overlay the original land grants, in that the back-to-the-landers bought up abandoned farms that peppered the landscape, which typically ranged in size from 100 to 200 acres. The important factor was that the new settlers were completely interspersed with the local residents. In Middle River, for instance, a community of 150 people, about eight couples settled in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and along the North Shore back-to-the-land settlement patterns were only marginally denser. This stood in contrast to the west coast islands. The population on Lasqueti Island grew by fifty percent in the first few years of back-to-the-land settlement, from an original population of less than 100 in 1967-1968 to approximately 150 in 1970-1971. The rate of increase was lower on Denman and Hornby Islands, but back-to-the-land
settlers were numerous enough to have a strong impact on the fabric of island life; on all three islands, short-term squatters further aggravated the situation.

Culturally, the back-to-the-landers in the small communities of western Cape Breton were absorbed into the long established local culture that had evolved over the course of a century and a half from its original Scottish Highland roots. This process of absorption was hastened by the Celtic cultural revival that was happening at the same time, and was particularly vibrant in Cape Breton, where newcomer participation was welcomed. On Canada’s west coast, in contrast, the numbers of back-to-the-land settlers gave them a degree of cultural autonomy that was experienced by the local residents as tantamount to an invasion. For this reason alone, the reception given the new settlers was less than harmonious in the early years. Although this evolved over time, the pace of change varied greatly between the two coasts.

The economic structure of these islands in both Eastern and Western Canada was resource based and revolved around farming, fishing and forestry and a nascent tourist industry. Both coasts had also experienced a contraction of their communities as the young departed for the cities in pursuit of education and especially employment. Cape Breton lost so many young men who would normally have helped out in the fishery that there was a vacuum to be filled by the incoming back-to-the-landers. There was also work to be found cutting pulp wood and later in sylviculture. This work served as another point of integration between the newcomers and the local residents. The west coast islands were so small that such opportunities did not exist. Many of those who were unable to make their living as artisans had to earn additional income off-island, in
tree planting, for instance, which could require leaving the island for months at a time. Neither of these pursuits encouraged integration between newcomers and local residents.

Back-to-the-landers did not blend into the background of their new locations. Their appearance alone set them apart from the local residents. It would take some time for those used to the anonymity of city living to fully grasp the lack of privacy in the countryside, in spite of the fact that the rural regions of Canada are defined by their sparse population. In fact, it was the unexpected nature of the influx of young people and their curious appearance that ensured their notice. Terry Henderson, who lived down a long, bumpy un-serviced road off the power grid in Cape Breton, and who tended to prefer isolation, found that because his land had once been a working farm, “there were people that knew this area and had relatives who came from Big Hill and so a lot of these people were quite interested that there was somebody now living back here.” Not only did he receive visitors, but in fact they came bearing gifts; the fixtures in his bathroom came from their generosity.¹ While this lack of anonymity was also true of Denman and Hornby Islands on the west coast, the welcoming group was more likely to have been fellow back-to-the-landers. Lasqueti Island was the exception. Twenty kilometres in length, the island still has no car ferry service, only a passenger ferry at the north end, which meant there were few cars on the island. This made the south end ideal for those in search of isolation. As one islander noted, the ferry was the place where people got caught up with the local news, but for the small minority with their own boat, it could be years before they were known by or knew the islanders.

Those who arrived later, drawn by friends or family, or because they were attracted by the existing alternative community, experienced their new community in

¹Terry Henderson, interviewed in Cape Breton, November 2, 2006.
different ways than did the earlier arrivals. Much like immigrants everywhere, there was an immediate level of comfort to be found in a community of like-minded individuals. It was not uncommon for back-to-the-landers to look much as Richard Laskin remembered his appearance in 1975 living on Hornby Island, when he was in his mid forties: “We were in bangles and beads, I had long, long hair and a beard of course ... and we were very hippie.”\(^2\) However, appearance varied a little from region to region or even from island to island, according to Doug Hopwood’s recollection: “In those days you could go over to Parksville and everybody from Lasqueti was wearing those red plaid heavy cotton Chinese work shirts and gum boots and maybe wool fisherman’s pants and they could smell them from half a block away, so you could tell Lasqueti people in Parksville right away.”\(^3\) Back-to-the-landers were recognizable to each other wherever they happened to be, whether encountered in Baddeck, Cape Breton, or visiting Parksville or Courtenay, the nearby shopping towns for Denman or Hornby Islands.

Rather than arriving from the city with the latest gadgetry, back-to-the-landers were determined to make do with less machinery; they wanted to re-engage with older ways of managing on a rural property. This in turn created a close link with the older generation who were consulted for their knowledge, such as when it was best to plant, how to work the fields and woods with horses, how to milk a cow or goat, butcher a deer or pig, or how to find water. Hand tools were part of the desire for greater independence from fossil fuel use. The 1973 oil embargo contributed to the feeling that the society of abundance and “recess consumer behaviour” was on the brink of collapse and acted as further impetus to learn to live without the conveniences of indoor plumbing or electricity.

\(^3\) Doug Hopwood, interviewed on Lasqueti Island, January 5, 2008.
and instead use kerosene lamps for light, wood stoves for heat, and an outhouse.  
Remote rural living had its own learning curve and those who stayed on the land soon realized 
that a degree of pragmatism was necessary. On the east coast, a chainsaw was a must for 
building and firewood. On the west coast, the sheer size and magnificence of the trees 
inspired a sense of reverence for the forests, such that many back-to-the-land participants 
protested the industrial approach to wood harvesting. In fact, they were dubbed “the tree-
hugger hippies” by one local land owner. However, they still needed heat and if they did 
not own a woodlot and chainsaw they had to buy wood from someone who did. Over 
time, back-to-the-landers learned to modify their extreme rejection of all labour-saving 
devices and instead adopt a mix of local ways.

CAPE BRETON

The drama of the Cape Breton landscape can be overwhelming. Farms precariously 
perched on mountainsides that plunge into the ocean, and fertile river valleys that wind 
their way slowly to sea.

Victoria County, Cape Breton is made up of small villages and hamlets, some of 
which are not much more than a place name along the highway. The population was 
thinly scattered across the vast distances of the county, which was as the crow flies about 
100 kilometres north to south and 30 kilometres east to west, with an extensive

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4 David E. Shi, *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture* (Athens, 
Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 264.
5 Rick Black, (a pseudonym) interviewed on Denman Island, January 25, 2008.
6 Amish C. Morrell, “Imagining the Real: Theorizing Cultural Production and Social Difference 
11.
coastline. The largest village, Baddeck, the county seat, had a population of 831 in 1971. The rural regions were supported by a mixed subsistence economy of fishing, farming, and forestry, mostly pulp wood production. Like so much of rural Canada, the young were moving to the cities in search of employment. Victoria County’s population has declined steadily over the century from a high of 10,571 in 1901 to 7,823 in 1971. In fact from 1961 to 1971 the number of farms on Cape Breton Island had fallen from 1,975 to 640. As a result, the county was peppered with abandoned farms and raw land, well-described in the early 1970s by historians Jim and Pat Lotz:

The abandoned farm houses with gaping, empty windows, the collapsed barns, and the fields invaded by young trees are common sights on Cape Breton Island, even along the main highways. [T]he melancholy sight of land being lost to cultivation and of people quitting the land for the city contributes to the feeling of uncertainty about the future of the island. For the newcomer, however, it was not always evident which land or farm was actually for sale, as there were few “for sale” signs. One soon learned that a little sleuthing was sometimes necessary, even if it was just locating the neighbouring farmer for a chat. This was the best way to learn what land or nearby farm might be available. Larry Mikol’s experience in North River in 1971 was typical: “We came down this hill, saw the farm that sits at the bottom of the hill and ... it was all grown up in trees but you could see a little roof back there. And I went up to the neighbours and asked if it was for sale and she said, yup it was and here’s the phone number.” That very day he and his wife drove to Sydney to meet the owner and negotiate a price. A price was agreed upon then and there;

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7 George Geddie Patterson, James W. MacDonald, W. James MacDonald, *Patterson’s History of Victoria County, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia*; with related papers, (Sydney, N.S.: Cape Breton University Press, 1978), p. 2.
9 Ibid., p. 93.
10 Larry Mikol, interviewed in Cape Breton, November 9, 2006.
the landowner asked how much money Larry had, he said $3000, and the landowner said fine. With a handshake the price was established, and each then had time to meet their obligations: Larry to gather the cash and the landowner to recover the title as he had just let it go for taxes, which was not atypical. The ready availability of land and relatively low cost meant that though some back-to-the-landers initially rented, most in the Cape Breton region purchased a piece of land within the first year or two. The implications of this to the region were twofold: the local population was assured the newcomers were serious about living there, and the newcomers had a stake in the well-being of the community.

The influx of newcomers was significant to the region, but because the population was so thinly scattered the newcomers were easily absorbed into the existing communities. Marion Thompson, who settled in Indian Brook in 1973, described the way she and others have become integral to the fabric of the community: “We're woven into the community; we're the thread [of] another colour; it's a come-from-away colour, but it’s part of the blanket.” The back-to-the-landers clearly added a new cultural dimension to the region, but they wanted to become a part of the pre-existing web of community life. Cape Breton culture itself – with the Scottish Highland traditions of music, dancing, Gaelic singing, story-telling, milling frolics, and weaving, and especially the fiddle playing and kitchen parties – was attractive to the newcomers. Historian John Reid, in his survey of the 1970s in Atlantic Canada, noted that “in this decade cultural resources assumed great importance,” no place more so than in Cape Breton. The first

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11 Marion Thompson, interviewed in Cape Breton, March 4, 2003.
Glendale Fiddler’s Festival, which was to become a biennial event, was held in a farmer’s field on July 6-8, 1973, where over 130 fiddlers gathered and performed to an audience of 10,000 people.  

The festival arose in response to a CBC television production that had aired a year earlier, the *Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler*, in which it was argued that due to the increased influence of rock and roll music and electronic media generally, and the loss of Cape Breton youth to the west (or simply their loss of interest), the Cape Breton fiddling tradition was about to die. Marie Thompson, independent scholar and currently a CBC journalist, has argued that this obviously touched a nerve, and Cape Breton fiddlers came out of their closets to prove their tradition was alive, well, and thriving. Frank MacInnis, one of the festival organizers, argued that “[t]he biggest doubt was all these kitchen fiddlers that never played in public before ... Would they be willing to get up on a stage and perform?”

Back-to-the-landers found themselves in the middle of this revival and played an active part as either celebrants or participants. Otis Tomas, who was living in the Smokey Mountains of North Carolina when he first took up the fiddle, was drawn to Cape Breton when he learned of its music scene, and “how they had this culture of fiddle music that was unlike anything in North America or anywhere.” Otis’s first point of contact with the island was that weekend in 1973 at the Glendale Fiddler’s Festival, where he incidentally met his future wife, Deanne Cox, also an American. Both the music and Deanne kept Otis in Cape Breton and together they became immersed in the traditional music of the island. They even spent a summer touring the island in a horse-

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14 Ibid., 6.
15 Ibid., 20.
16 Otis A. Tomas, interviewed in Cape Breton, November 8, 2006.
drawn buggy stopping at community halls along the way to play and meet other musicians. Deanne found the people and the culture uncommonly warm and attractive, so much so that it became an important element in her decision to stay in Cape Breton. “I found them really joyous, it was obvious they loved where they lived and were proud of it.”\(^{17}\) Once settled on their own land, they played host to many Cape Breton kitchen parties at their home. “Music was ubiquitous and associated with relaxation and revelry” noted Marie Thompson, and some of the best Cape Breton Scottish style performers were drawn from the Irish and French descendants on the island, as well as from the Mi’kmaq community.\(^{18}\)

The new settlers in the region, drawn from a counterculture that included elements of folk and blue-grass music revivalism, dovetailed well with the local music culture. Not only fiddle music, but also bagpiping, singing, step dancing, comedy and theatre were popular means of cultural expression; later in the decade this was showcased in the production of *The Rise and Follies of Cape Breton*. Excited by the local culture and trained in theatre, Bev Brett settled in North River and quickly tapped into this rich culture to form a theatre group known as the St. Anne’s Bay Players, made up of equal parts local and come-from-away talent. Ronald Caplan, another back-to-the-land settler from the United States, began *Cape Breton’s Magazine* in 1971, in which he featured stories and interviews drawn from the long time residents. Back-to-the-landers celebrated the richness of the Cape Breton way of life and were keen to learn the local history and partake of their vibrant culture. They in turn found a ready welcome to the region.

\(^{17}\) Deanne Cox, interviewed in Cape Breton, March, 2003.  
The consensus of the back-to-the-landers was that wherever they settled there always seemed to be someone nearby who took a particular interest in their welfare. For some, the relationship began with the person who sold them the land, as in the case of John Roberts and his wife Marion Thompson, who settled on the North Shore in Indian Brook, initially with a group of friends.\(^{19}\) John recalled the vendors were like second parents to them, always ready to loan them tools or even help them build.\(^{20}\) As Marion remembered, while spending four months living in a tent “we could go there [to the vendor’s house] any time of the day or night and have tea and fresh biscuits” and such generosity “extended all up and down the shore.”\(^{21}\) Nearby neighbours were curious about the newcomers and were often the first ones to make contact. It was most often the men who would show up to meet the newcomers, and whether the new landowners lived in a tent, the back of a pickup truck, a shack or a half-built house, the men would be happy to share a cup of tea and often extend an invitation to return the favour.

Ruth and Aaron Schneider had a similar experience. As Ruth explained, “so being the first ones up here, we were very lucky, in terms of this community being curious and welcoming and coming out to see who we were and what we needed; mostly the older people.”\(^{22}\) Coming predominantly from large urban areas in either Canada or the United States, where one could live in the same apartment building and never exchange more than a nod, newcomers had not anticipated this reception. Adam, who grew up in Montreal, explained that the unexpected warmth and welcome in the North Shore region caused the newcomers to respond in kind.

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\(^{19}\) Although some of the others built on the land, John and Marion eventually bought most of the other shares, with the exception of one small piece of the land.


\(^{21}\) Marion Thompson, interviewed in Cape Breton, March 4, 2003.

\(^{22}\) Ruth Schneider, interviewed in Cape Breton, November 5, 2006.
I mean everybody was very grateful. Everybody wanted to be part of the community – they didn’t want to be, myself included, we didn’t want to be distinct from the local community, so everybody tried to fit in as best they could. Older people in particular were quite excited to see us doing some of the things that had been kind of left behind, like having animals or gardens or any of that. So they were very helpful and had lots of advice and we were only too glad to get it.  

Candy Christiano and her husband, both of whom grew up on Long Island, had been looking for land in Maine but there they felt much less welcome and detected an undercurrent of, as she described it, “a redneck kind of influence” directed at them. But when they moved onto their property in Middle River, three kilometres up an un-serviced road:

Everybody here seemed to be a character – they were saying, you’re going to go live out there!? and all that stuff – but opened their hearts and opened their Sunday afternoon doors. And listened to our stories, and laughed with us, and gave us all advice.

Marion Thompson felt there was a genuine openness toward the newcomers:

They were curious about us and we were curious about them and we respected them very much and we knew they had survived here for a long time and they had done without, the way we did without, in the early years, without running water, without electricity, blah-blah-blah and we saw what they had accomplished.

But she also pointed out that although they were treated with such warmth and politeness to their face, the newcomers were not without their detractors in the community:

I can remember one of the young women trying to tell us that the older people that lived here weren't all that great and we were romanticizing them and really, sometimes they said really nasty things about us. [Laughter] And it was like, I don't care. [Laughter] They invite us in; they give us tea and biscuits.

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23 Adam, (a pseudonym), interviewed in Cape Breton, October 29, 2006.
24 Candy Christiano, interviewed in Cape Breton, March, 2003.
25 Marion Thompson, interviewed in Cape Breton, March 4, 2003.
26 Ibid.
Whatever was said behind their backs, Marion argued, was not important. Of course people made fun of them and laughed at them but they were always treated with respect, they were picked up hitchhiking. “There were no taunts of, why don't you go get your hair cut. I mean there was none of that kind of redneck … thinking. People here knew how to get along and be friendly and polite. That was all we needed.”

The economy of the North Shore, which encompasses a number of small communities north of Baddeck, was historically based on the sea, and fishing continued to be an important source of income when the newcomers arrived. Many of the back-to-the-land men found work as fishermen’s helpers, and as John Roberts maintained, “by working with the local people who’d always lived here that just makes a common bond” between the new arrivals and the men of the community. There were also ample opportunities to join local work crews building a bridge for the Department of Highways or clearing the power lines, and this allowed the newcomers to get to know the local men on an equal footing. Fred Lawrence settled further north, in Meat Cove and later Bay St. Lawrence. His experiences were somewhat different because he was able to buy a fishing license from a retired fisherman. As he explained it: “That’s the only way you can get in, when someone retires, you can take his place. His son didn’t want the job so he passed it on to me for a sum of money.” The main reason Fred was able to fit in to such a remote, and traditional fishing community, despite looking and acting every bit the hippie – “long hair, ear-ring, smoked pot” – was that on the one hand he had the skills to

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27 Ibid.
28 Population figures drawn from the 1971 census were Indian Brook, 54, Tarbot, 70, North Shore 41, Wreck Cove, 66.
29 Population for Bay St. Lawrence in 1971 was 150, but this may also have included the nearby community of Meat Cove.
30 Fred Lawrence, interviewed in Cape Breton, November 7, 2006.
fish, because he had fished in Maine, and on the other hand, the young people were gone.

“When I first came here most of the young people were gone; they’d gone to where the jobs were, to Toronto, or Hamilton or Lynn Lake or British Columbia.” 31 Fred speculated further on his reception in the community, arguing that although “they seemed very receptive ... they’re also the highlanders; they’re very reserved, overly courteous and they’ll always tell you what they think you want to hear.”32 Ruth Schneider also commented on this particular trait. Her husband Aaron discovered that whenever he would tell his neighbours what he was about to do, they would nod their head and say “Oh yeah,” but it was only when he “learned to say ‘was that a good idea?,’ would they say ‘well, now you could do it that way, but you know you might be able to do...’ and then they’d tell you exactly how it ought to be done!”33

The economy of the regions closer to Baddeck, including Middle River, was more farm and forestry based. Fishing-based communities, explained John Roberts, worked from a single harbour which, though fishing was independent work, brought people together in the same location each day. Furthermore, because of the inherent danger of the work, fishers kept an eye on each other while on the water. Reflecting further on the issue, John suggested,

If we’d … moved here and lived like we do now – I don’t work at something along with everybody else, … [he is an artisan in leatherwork], things would have been different, but fishing and going on jobs like clearing the power lines with a power saw, 6 or 8 fellas, or building a bridge for the department of highways … put you with a different mix every job you did, you wouldn’t be working with the same guys … So you got to know different people … It just gives you that commonness that happens and … you stop in and have lunch or stop to have a cup of tea or something, so it means that even though you came from somewhere else, you didn’t grow up here, that you’re really no different …

31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Ruth Schneider, interviewed in Cape Breton, November 5, 2006.
And yeah that certainly helped integrate us in the local community … and … it wouldn’t have to be fishing, but any kind of common work that you do with other people.34

Farming communities were not structured in the same way, so that there was no equivalent opportunity to meet with a group of farmers each and every morning. Consequently, getting to know the community of Middle River took much more time even though its population in 1971 was only 150. Opportunities for work in Middle River could nonetheless be found in the local sawmill, driving the school bus, or cutting pulp wood on your own land for the mill in Port Hawkesbury. Some of the women were able to find work in Baddeck in gift shops, as waitresses, nurse’s aids at the local senior’s home, or as guides for the Bell Museum. Most of the work in Baddeck was seasonally based and put the newcomers in competition with local students in need of summer jobs. This perhaps accounts for the two informants who perceived a certain resistance and anti-Americanism. Jim Morrow, who settled in Middle River and looked like a hippie, as most back-to-the-landers did in those days, recalled an incident at the local community hall at which “[a local man] was passed out at the local dance; he looked up at me and said ‘when did they start letting people like YOU out here?’”35 Aside from such incidents, most people felt warmly received. Candy Christiano remembered the outpouring of support they received when their log cabin burnt down their first winter in Middle River; one farmer took them into his house until spring when they were able to start building again, and the community collected about $3000 to help them rebuild.

WEST COAST GULF ISLANDS

34 John Roberts, interviewed in Cape Breton, August, 2003.
British Columbia was a Mecca for the restless youth of the counterculture in the late 1960s and the 1970s and it was the destination for thousands of Americans opposed to the Vietnam War. Kitsilano, a neighbourhood in Vancouver, absorbed a large percentage of these “dropouts and draft dodgers” but the search for alternatives took many well beyond the city limits in search of a simpler lifestyle. Back-to-the-landers moved north and into the interior valleys to the east, to Vancouver Island, and to the Gulf Islands.36

Geographically and demographically, the three west coast islands that are the focus of this study are small; Hornby, Denman and Lasqueti range in size from 11.5 to 20 to 26 square miles, respectively. The 1971 census indicated that Hornby had a population of 163, Denman stood at about 250 residents, while Lasqueti, the largest of the three had 96 residents. The population on all three was made up of original families who had settled there in the mid to late nineteenth century, many of whom owned large tracts of land. All three islands had a mixed economy of farming, fishing and logging. Although the back-to-the-land settlers experienced a warm welcome by a minority of residents on each of the islands, what seemed to stand out in the early years of their influx was the indifference and outright hostility directed at them by the majority. The appearance and lifestyle of the new arrivals posed a threat to the islanders’ way of life which, on occasion, in the early years of the so-called “hippie invasion,” erupted in anger and aggression between the two groups. Lifestyle issues that created the most trouble on all three islands were nude swimming,37 dope, social activities, squatting and disregard for

37 A reader once suggested that surely there was nude swimming in Cape Breton as well, but in fact, if not the cold, then the black flies were sufficient deterrent.
private property. Also controversial were issues of land use, such as logging and subdivision. Coincidentally, in 1969, W.A.C. Bennett’s Social Credit government imposed a freeze on island subdivisions due to the impending overpopulation of the islands, beyond their perceived carrying capacity. In 1972 the Islands Trust Act was initiated, and implemented in 1974 shortly after the New Democratic Party came to power. Each island was subject to a freeze from further subdivision into parcels smaller than 10 acres, until a community plan was developed. This was locally known as the 10-acre freeze.38 According to a planning study done on Denman Island in 1971, a majority of residents were pleased with the halt placed on small lot subdivision, and from my research the findings would also hold true for Hornby and Lasqueti Islands. However, the larger landholders, according to the survey, felt that subdivision was a realistic future strategy for dealing with higher land taxes. At the same time they “wanted to avoid the worst for their properties – small lot subdivisions and hippies.”39 The newly arrived back-to-the-landers favoured limits on subdivision and controls over land use and were vocal about their position, which exacerbated tensions between groups on Denman and Lasqueti islands.

Though close geographically, the three islands differed remarkably in their response to this unexpected intrusion on their rural idyll. As Greg Halseth has argued in his examination of change in the countryside, “individuals are still important” in rural

38 Carol Martin Quinn, interviewed on Hornby Island, January 23, 2008. Carol was an Island Trustee for Hornby Island for 17 years.
39 Robin Sharpe, Planning Director, *Denman Island Planning Study 1971*, Regional District of Comox-Strathcona Planning Department, p. 12.
areas and key individuals can play significant roles in shaping a society.  

Because these communities were small, but especially because they were bounded by water, a quote from David Guterson’s novel *Snow Falling on Cedars* captures this element of small island living. Set on a fictional island in the Puget Sound region of Washington, it captures well the observations of a newcomer to a small community: “There was no blending into an anonymous background, no neighbouring society to shift toward.”

On the east coast it was always possible to drive to a different community any time of day or night to visit other like-minded individuals without having to wait for a ferry. This mobility was not possible on the small west coast islands, reliant on infrequent ferry service.

DENMAN ISLAND

*An island is a difference of opinion surrounded by water and it’s definitely that!*  

Denman Island is 12 miles long and 3 miles wide. It has two lakes, Chickadee Lake and Graham Lake, each about 35 acres in size. The island was first settled by Euro-Canadians in 1874 and was initially known as “Little Orkney” due to the preponderance of early settlers from those islands in Northern Scotland. At the time, the forests were more of an impediment to settlers than an asset. The enormity of the trees made early house building difficult; many of the logs were much too large to handle and had to be burned. Although the lumber industry was crucial to island development, it

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42 Des Kennedy, interviewed on Denman Island, January 26, 2008.
43 Sharpe, *Denman Island Planning Study*, p. 6.
did not begin in earnest until the turn of the century when it had become more feasible to handle such logs. Agriculture had been equally crucial to the island’s economy. Denman is reputed to have the best agricultural land of the Gulf Islands and access to Vancouver Island markets is only a two mile trip across Baynes Channel.\textsuperscript{45} Following the Second World War, farming declined for a variety of reasons, including a drop in rainfall during the growing season, rising taxes, transportation problems and the trend toward large-scale agriculture.\textsuperscript{46} As late as 1976, however, beef cattle and sheep were still actively farmed on the island.\textsuperscript{47} The Island Planning Study of 1971 reported that a large part of the island was then under tree farm management, and went on to argue that “logging would remain a significant industry but not an important source of income for islanders.”\textsuperscript{48} Many of the islanders at mid-century had enjoyed a fair level of self-sufficiency, and supported themselves with income from a variety of sources including “farming, shellfish, timber, contracting, investment and pensions.”\textsuperscript{49} Winifred Isbister, local historian, captured the feel of the island: “The mixed wooded and pastoral countryside with old homesteads with gabled farmhouses, large barns and sheds, cultivated fields and snake fences gives much of the island a strong rural and picturesque quality.”\textsuperscript{50}

Beginning in 1968, and accelerating thereafter, the island population, long in decline, began to grow; young people, in search of what planners described as a “new non-urban lifestyle”\textsuperscript{51} began to arrive by twos, by sixes, by tens and as many as fifteen at once. Carmen Saunders remembered arriving in a group of fifteen, most of whom made

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Sharpe, \textit{Denman Island Planning Study}, p. 5.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Isbister, \textit{My Ain Folk}, p. 45.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Sharpe, \textit{Denman Island Planning Study}, p. 5.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Isbister, \textit{My Ain Folk}, p. 5.
\item \textsuperscript{51} Sharpe, \textit{Denman Island Planning Study}, p. 5.
\end{itemize}
their living as a political theatre troupe known as Manfrog. At first they lived together communally, gardening and growing all their vegetables. Carmen remembered that they wanted to get “totally away from society [but they] became extremely disliked on Denman Island.”

Thus began the “hippie invasion” as many later referred to it.

This large group of new migrants did not blend into their surroundings; they were highly visible and posed a threat to these small tranquil places with not just their bizarre appearance, but their choice of music, dope smoking and nude swimming, all of which appeared attractive to the much younger generation. Des Kennedy explained: “We were a pretty bizarre looking bunch … the men had wild hair and big beards and they arrived en masse, in the span of a few years.” Up to that point “there was nobody like that here and then all of a sudden there were several hundred of us here.”

Because the land on the Gulf Islands was relatively expensive, and because of the ten acre freeze, group purchases were common which could mean as many as ten couples arriving within a short span of time. Juan Barker, who arrived as part of the theatre troupe, reflected on their impact: “We were changing their way of life and their kids liked hanging out with us because we played music together and smoked dope together and all these other things that were really confusing for them.”

Nude swimming became a serious bone of contention between the “hippies” and those with more traditional values. As Kennedy recalled, the issue of nude swimming was a “kind of flash point for a lot of people.”

One long-time resident, whose family had moved to the island in 1875, remembered that “Chickadee Lake [was] the one place

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52 Carmen Saunders, interviewed on Denman Island, November 28, 2007.
53 Des Kennedy, interviewed on Denman Island, January 26, 2008.
54 Juan Barker, interviewed on Denman Island, November 28, 2007.
55 Des Kennedy, interviewed on Denman Island, January 26, 2008.
where I used to swim, where all of us swam when we were teenagers and ... these guys are wandering around stripped naked, and their docks hanging down, you know, I don’t think there’s anything pretty about that, at all!” He remembered having to go up to the lake to bring his girls home when he first found out about the nude swimming. Not surprisingly, when island residents were surveyed, in 1971, and asked how they felt about their island, they reported that among their major dislikes were “hippies.”

Logging was another polarizing issue on Denman Island. Back-to-the-landers felt they had stumbled upon a paradise; the population was sparse, most of the “roads were dirt and it was quiet, really, really quiet and there was all manner of wildlife.” For Juan Barker it was “the spiritual aspect of living in nature” that had the greatest impact on him. Patti Willis as well remembered that first summer after she had travelled up from California; she “just walked the woods and it felt like a religious experience.” Des Kennedy, who had spent “eight years in a series of monastic seminaries in the eastern United States studying for the priesthood,” felt strongly about logging, and as editor of a newsletter, The Denman Rag and Bone, he had a monthly platform from which to argue his position. This newsletter was intended for all residents of Denman Island and in fact many Hornby Islanders read it as well. Its stated intention was to foster dialogue on matters of importance to islanders, but although everyone was invited to participate, and many did, it raised the ire of some islanders. As Patti Willis noted, “some of us had, like Des, very strident political opinions in those days and just put some other folks off with

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56 Rick Black, (a pseudonym) interviewed on Denman Island, January 25, 2008.
57 Sharpe, Denman Island Planning Study, p. 12.
58 Juan Barker, interviewed on Denman Island, November 28, 2007.
59 Ibid.
60 Patti Willis interviewed on Denman Island, November 23, 2007.
them, but we came from that urban tradition.”61 In the May 1974 first issue of the newsletter, following a lengthy discussion on the role played by tree worship in ancient beliefs and religions, Kennedy asked,

Do we need to cut all those trees down? Do our roads always need to be wider and wider? Do we have to batter and push and slash at everything living around us until we’ve destroyed it all? Perhaps no tree-spirit will descend and smite us for needlessly destroying living things; but if we destroy the tree of life, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, then we shall have destroyed the chance of ever becoming any better than we are now; and that, perhaps, is the worst punishment of all.62

Rebecca Kneale Gould, who researched the spiritual aspect of the back-to-the-land movement in Maine, argued that “for homesteaders, among others, nature is conceptualized as sacred.”63 To be sure, not all back-to-the-landers felt this way, but it was not uncommon, and it spoke to the strength of feeling on the issue and the fear that all of nature was on the block for whatever it could buy. From the perspective of one long-time resident and other large land holders, logging was a way of life and an important source of income; but suddenly, “what we call tree-huggers, which all hippies seem to be ... protested logging of any shape or form on Denman Island – protested in front of logging trucks and everything.”64

Denman Island inter-group relations were further exacerbated when a core of newcomers voiced their strong disapproval of small lot subdivision. They argued that not only could the ferry service not handle the additional traffic, but more importantly, the water table could not sustain the additional use. (The debate raged even though the 10-

61 Ibid.
64 Rick Black, (a pseudonym) interviewed on Denman Island, January 25, 2008.
acre freeze was in effect, preventing land from being subdivided, because islanders knew this was a temporary measure.) Des Kennedy explained the situation as he saw it:

There was a sort of red-neck core group here that did not anticipate us showing up and … were determined to make life as miserable as possible and one of them, years later, said to me “We wanted to drive you people off, we didn’t want you here.” They had thought they were going to get nice white, middle class, middle age, retired people … and the other element to it was, myself and a number of others … very quickly realized the islands were totally ripe for plucking by land speculators and developers and stuck our noses in and said that’s not what we want to have happen here. Well that was probably the major cause of friction, in the sense of who are you to tell us what to do?65

Harlene Holm, who would become one of the Island’s Trustees, concurred with Kennedy’s assessment and added that it was the original large landowners, involved in small lot subdivision, who were particularly displeased at the arrival of the back-to-the-landers.

I think they had a vision that they would make money and have all these retirees, with their similar urban interests and instead they got these snotty nosed children … in the work boots and the long skirts, and they were appalled by it and there was a whole kind of difficulty especially [with] one farm family who ran the island.66

Another blow to harmony on the island resulted from a decision by the back-to-the-landers to form a food cooperative in 1971, in order to purchase natural food in bulk, as this type of food was unavailable in rural British Columbia at the time. Because this practice was common to back-to-the-land communities around the province, these province-wide co-operatives formed a single co-op to source and warehouse this food in one location. The location chosen was Vancouver, where Fed-up Co-op was highly successful for a number of years. This central body coordinated “the collective purchases of the outlying districts” and improved their ability “to [source and] supply a wide range

65 Des Kennedy, interviewed on Denman Island, January 26, 2008.
66 Harlene Holm, interviewed on Denman Island, May 18, 2005.
Volunteers within each community would take turns putting together an order once a month, mailing it to Vancouver where Fed-Up volunteers would source and fill the order. Volunteers from each island and community would drive to the Vancouver warehouse to pick up the community order and spend an obligatory few days putting in work at the warehouse, as it was predominately run by volunteers. The food would then be trucked back to a central point on Denman, where the members could pick up the food they had ordered. One island farmer was extremely upset by this practice, according to Holm and others, because by bringing in off-island produce every two months, the co-op was effectively cutting off his long-time custom of supplying the island with vegetables. This farmer was not only from one of the founding families on the island, but was also the former head of the Ratepayers Association. This conflict eventually led to a “physical tussle” between “the hippies” and this very conservative and strong-willed farmer. Once back-to-the-lander Leslie Dunsmore realized the impact of their decision, she suggested a swap:

I said why don’t you supply us with the corn and tomatoes? Then we won’t order it on the truck ... That started to make a change but it was never enough to heal some of the hurt that went on.

An island preschool became another source of friction between back-to-the-landers and original islanders. Initially run by four mothers who took turns minding the children, this duty eventually fell to Carmen Saunders to host. “Whoever had the most children had to … do the preschool, which at that time was me because I had two, so we ran our

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70 Ibid.
As the number of young children on the island grew, it became necessary to find a more permanent location. The only available space at the time was a room in the community hall used by the seniors in the evenings for cribbage or bridge. The new island residents asked for use of the room during the day. According to Patti Willis, this suggestion was greeted with consternation: “What do you mean you don’t take care of your children all day long? What do you mean you take them some place for part of the day? That was revolutionary in this setting.” Eventually, a compromise was reached but it was never fully satisfactory and the seniors “felt increasingly nudged out,” according to Des Kennedy. “I think they just felt strangers in their own place.” The struggle over the preschool went on for years, and became so acrimonious that the seniors moved out and built their own hall.

Despite attempts over the intervening years to heal the rifts that had developed between the back-to-the-land settlers and the original island residents, not all could be put to rest because there seemed to be so many sources of disagreement in the early years. Denman Island eventually acquired two community halls: one for the original islanders and one for the newcomers, which for such a small island stands as a physical symbol of their early divisions. Some of the original islanders never overcame their anger, Dunsmore believed: “I know of one woman who refuses to ever set foot in the community hall – the old community hall – and to this day will not nod at me in the car or say hello – she’s like 80 now. And she just absolutely hated all of us 30 years ago and still hates us now.”

71 Carmen Saunders, interviewed on Denman Island, November 28, 2007.
72 Patti Willis, interviewed on Denman Island, November 23, 2007.
73 Des Kennedy, interviewed on Denman Island, January 26, 2008.
74 Leslie Dunsmore, interviewed on Denman Island, December 11, 2007.
difficulties they encountered as newcomers, are always quick to point out that issues on their islands never got as bad as they did on Denman Island.75

HORNBY ISLAND

*For me, Hornby Island was like coming home again, to a big family.*76

Hornby Island’s history was not dissimilar to that of Denman Island, although reaching the island required traversing Denman and crossing the mile-wide Lambert Channel. The island is four miles by five miles and has a mountain rising to 1,090 feet, named Mount Geoffrey. The first Euro-Canadian settlers, George Ford and Henry Horatio Maude, arrived in 1869 and married First Nations women. By 1905, the population stood at 32, most having arrived from the British Isles to farm and ranch. Because farming could not fully sustain a family, the islanders fished, worked at odd jobs and paid off their taxes constructing and maintaining island roads. Logging became more intensive by 1910 but farming continued to be the mainstay of the Islanders through the 1920s. Most islanders had cattle and chickens, harvested hay and oats, and cultivated large gardens. Logging was the other mainstay, until the depression sent prices plummeting, but it was replaced, to some extent, by commercial fishing, which began at about that time, in the 1930s.77

Back-to-the-landers began arriving on Hornby in 1967. The first were like Heinz Laffin and Wayne Ngan, who came from Vancouver, where they had taught pottery at one of the city’s arts schools. Inspired by the beauty of Hornby and attracted by the price

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75 Heinz Laffin, interviewed on Hornby Island, January 12, 2008; Eleanor Laffin, interviewed on Hornby Island, January 12, 2008; and Carol Martin Quinn interviewed on Hornby Island, January 23, 2008. All three refer to the difficult social dynamics on Denman Island.
77 Smith and Gerow, *Hornby Island.*
of land there, they bought property and set up a potting studio.78 Neither originally felt they were back-to-the-landers, but the community identified them as such, perhaps because both eventually married women who were a part of the back-to-the-land community. Two years later, when Jan Bevan and her husband Robear LeBaron arrived, they felt more warmly received by the recent, as she termed them, middle-class intellectuals (most of whom became crafts people: potters, sculptors, painters, weavers, and so on) than by the original residents. Beginning in 1970-71, there was a large influx of American Vietnam war resisters, and as both Bevan and Laffin noted, that arrival did not go smoothly. “Some of the old timers or their children were known to drive around in pickup trucks with guns.”79 Furthermore, everyone who arrived in that general period was assumed to be an American war resister, Jan and her husband included.

Heinz Laffin recalled some particularly raucous Ratepayers’ Association meetings, at which only property owners were allowed to vote. Almost all of the new arrivals were without property at first, and, as on Denman Island, they wanted to change the association to the Residents and Ratepayers, but “there was a lot of resistance by the old timers. And there was one terrible meeting ... when there was a lot of yelling going on80 and the old timers were afraid this meeting was stacked by the newcomers.”81 Bevan remembered somewhat bitterly, “the ratepayers railroaded through a new

78 Heinz Laffin, interviewed on Hornby Island, January 12, 2008. Within two years, Wayne married and bought another property.
80 Raucous meetings on Denman Island led to the opposite outcome; in relatively short order the newcomers outnumbered the original land holders and secured voting rights for non-land owning residents. This fact may have contributed to the lasting resentment felt by some of the original residents.
81 Heinz Laffin, interviewed on Hornby Island, January 12, 2008.
constitution by which certain people were not permitted to be members,” and within a short time they received a letter stating that their membership had been revoked.82

Although they did become property owners shortly thereafter, the experience left Bevan and her husband feeling estranged from the original islanders. Appearances and lifestyle proved too great a barrier at the time. Looking back, Jan recalled that her husband Robear was probably the first person to swim nude at Little Tribune Bay, “and an extremely irate farmer came and chased him away, [yelling] ‘I have a daughter!’ So we were definitely seen as the invasion of the immoral.”83 Yet most of their first decade was spent cutting down trees, pulling up stumps, creating a farm out of a forest. The irony was that this couple, through years of relentless hard work, most resembled the early island settlers as they carved out a farm from a piece of second growth forest.

Disregard for, or a different regard for, private property became a source of tension between newcomers and long-time residents. Richard Laskin and his wife Serena, sociologists, who had been associated with the University of Chicago and then the University of Saskatchewan, suggested that “both the American draft dodgers, and also the young hippies and the drugs and the marijuana and that kind of stuff ... [were] very, very destructive to the island conservative community.”84 Laskin remembered an incident in the mid 1970s when he, his wife, and another couple were walking to the water but in choosing to skirt the road, walked across private property and “there was one of the old Savoie families, Frank saying ‘STOP!’ And he was levelling a rifle at us.”85 Serena Laskin recalled that at the time she and her husband did not believe in the

83 Ibid.
85 Ibid.
existence of private property, and furthermore, did not feel that they were harming anything, so they disregarded the signs and walked across property boundaries.86

On Hornby, in the early years of this influx, “transient” hippies would squat on the beach and build rudimentary shacks. This angered local residents, as Michael McNamara explained: “The beach is everybody’s so the hippies would come and build these shacks on the beach and the guy who was running the lodge at the time was just obsessed about it; so he took his bulldozer down and cleaned up his beach.” 87 Not only were these transients Canadian, but Richard Laskin thought that there was a significant influx from south of the border due to what he saw as “the [westward] movement of young people, what I’ll call the Haight-Ashbury movement in the United States to California, where they had to stop so [they turned north to] Canada.”88 Within a fairly short period, “the young people who were coming here on a sort of lark and weren’t committed to the back-to-the-land thing in any serious way, moved on.”89 To the long-term residents, however, the back-to-the-landers and the transient hippies would have been indistinguishable. All of that however, changed, as McNamara recalled.

The people who stayed had to do all the things that anybody does in a rural environment. You’ve got to get your shelter together ... grow your food ... [get] firewood, help each other, all that stuff. So the old-timers could see that this was going on, that the people who were here seemed to be sincere [and that] they were actually pretty decent folks once you got to know them, you know? So all that friction, kind of disappeared.

Speculating on the nature of small communities and the differences between them, McNamara recalled that in “other communities ... some of those tensions carried on for

87 Michael McNamara, interviewed on Hornby Island, January 28, 2008.
89 Ibid.
years and years. It’s just the nature of community, really, every one’s different. And on the islands it’s very easy to notice the difference.”90

LASQUETI ISLAND

There is that common thread of people who live like this, I don’t know what it is, isolationism that we like and the maverick and wanting to be on the edge of society. 91

Lasqueti Island is 13.5 miles long and 5 miles wide and is 10.5 miles from Vancouver Island. It has no car ferry and no hydroelectricity, the roads are unpaved, and the telephone cables have been placed underground. The island has managed to retain a unique rural flavour that allows residents to pursue an alternative lifestyle far from the urban hustle and bustle. The first Euro-Canadians to gain title to land on the island, in the late nineteenth century, were interested in sheep ranching. By the turn of the century many more settlers came to farm. Later the Rat Portage Logging Company and a salmon cannery at False Bay attracted more residents but both operations were closed by 1920. Cheap land and the ability to live by subsistence farming, augmented with fish and game, attracted some people struggling to make ends meet during the depression years of the 1930s. The next major infusion of new residents came in the 1950s, when, attracted by the “Green Gold” of the logging boom, workers poured in and “logging took over all aspects of Lasqueti life.” Within a decade, the boom had run its course and the island population was radically reduced, only to rebound in the 1970s as young people arrived from all parts of Canada and the United States. “These were the ‘back to nature’, ’let’s save our planet’ groups as well as U.S. draft dodgers,” wrote Betty Darwin and Patricia

90 Michael McNamara, interviewed on Hornby Island, January 28, 2008.
Forbes in their visitor’s guide. Many, they suggested, were just drifters who “squatted, pillaged, and fortunately left.”\(^{92}\)

Others, through hard work, have been able to realize their dreams. With the poor economic conditions on the island, they have been able to survive by working off the island for part of the time or by cultivating the most lucrative agricultural produce in Lasqueti’s history, marijuana.\(^{93}\)

Karl Darwin, who grew up on Lasqueti, argued that the island went from being “nothing more than an impediment to navigation” to supporting a sudden invasion of hippies. He recalled them “squatting in hollow stumps and any abandoned shack that was around; then, as soon as it started to rain, [the] ferry was plugged and they were gone.”\(^{94}\)

Although Karl’s estimate of up to 400 arrivals may have been exaggerated, he makes the point that living on Lasqueti was not easy; it took commitment. Many of the back-to-the-landers who arrived between 1969 and 1971 came in groups, known variously as the White Rock Hippies, the Portland Hippies and the Hollywood Hippies, and quickly increased the population to about 150.\(^{95}\)

Bonnie Olesko arrived with her husband in 1969, one of the Portland Hippies, and she felt they were greeted with a degree of distrust; “we were kind of looked on with a lot of suspicion by the locals because we looked like hippies. We were peace and love hippies, you know not let’s drop tons of acid [though] there were a few in the crowd that

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\(^{93}\) Darwin and Forbes, *So You Want to Know about Lasqueti Island*, 4.


\(^{95}\) Lawrence Fisher, “Introduction,” to *Celebrating Our Writers: Lasqueti Island Arts Fest 2007*, edited by Kay Meierbachol, p. 2. The Census gives the population in 1971 as 96; from all accounts it was likely that there were many unaccounted-for young people squatting at the south end of the island.
were.” She argued that relations with the local population were quite good at the beginning and only became tense later. Peter Johnston and his wife arrived in 1974, to become the new principal and teacher respectively, but they were both so intrigued with the back-to-the-land culture that they quit their jobs and joined the back-to-the-land community.

In his capacity as principal for the first two years, Johnston had had time to observe the larger community and its divisions and suggested that some of the problems between the newcomers and the original residents stemmed from development issues. For instance, the original residents wanted hydro to come to the island, but the young people were against it, and this became a source of disagreement and resentment. The local residents felt they had struggled and worked hard and were looking forward to this comfort in their older age and then along came all these hippies who quickly outnumbered them and took over the island. Doug Hopwood, whose wife was an Island Trustee for five years, argued that the issue of bringing electricity to the island as well as other divisive issues such as the desire for paved roads and a car ferry were not much more than wishful thinking on the part of the residents. It eventually became clear, argued Hopwood, that neither B.C. Hydro nor the province had any intention of spending the millions of dollars required to bring electricity to the island, pave the roads, or support a car ferry. Nevertheless, this created a clash of cultures. The newcomers wanted the island to remain frozen in time; they valued the lack of development, the quiet of the

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97 Christine Ferris, interviewed in Vancouver, January 1, 2008.
country roads, and the magnificent forests. Elda Copley Mason, who left the island in the 1960s, returned for a visit in 1972 and found many troubling changes:

No, the Lasqueti that I visited in 1972 did not seem to be the same community as the one in which I had spent forty years of my life. I detected a change in the attitudes of many of the immigrants and young people. Many were drifters, looking only for an easy, uncomplicated life. Others contributed more to the community but wished no change; they expressed a desire for the Island to remain as it was without new development.99

Logging was another contentious development issue; back-to-the-landers were adamantly opposed to logging and, at least according to island lore, some sabotaged a logging truck that was being used on private land. As the saboteurs were never caught, it is unclear who actually caused the damage, but according to Karl Darwin there has been no significant logging on the island since the incident.100

Because the newcomers were so opposed to logging they would be obvious targets for blame. Perhaps most contentious of all was the growing of marijuana on Lasqueti. It became so significant that at harvest season every year the RCMP would raid the island. Karl Darwin recalled:

For a long time there was a lot of outdoor growing and the police used to come around in August and do their hack and slash and it was called the annual summer games; they’d have the cop boat down in False Bay, everybody goes to sit down in the pub there and watch!101

The original residents resented the fact that some made enough money to holiday in Mexico in the winter, something they could not afford to do. Furthermore, some original islanders, suggested Sheila Ray, suspected that the ten acre freeze and the bid to preserve Crown land on the island were really a plot “just so the people could grow pot.” She felt

101 Ibid.
there is still some resentment about it, despite the fact that there was no basis in reality for such suspicions.¹⁰²

CONCLUSION

From the Maine coast, to the pueblos of New Mexico and the Oregon rain forests, and from the highlands of Cape Breton, to coastal British Columbia and every place in between, back-to-the-landers settled wherever they could find cheap land, beauty in abundance and a paucity of people. This move to the countryside, however, could take very different local courses. The wave of social changes brought by the sixties, including doubts about consumerism itself, coupled with the growing environmental movement of the 1970s caused enormous social upheaval that began in the large urban centres of the continent and reverberated outwards to the farthest reaches of the continent. Each particular location experienced this wave differently, depending on the specifics of its history, the local culture and the relationship of newcomers and established populations to the land.

Back-to-the-landers arrived in small numbers in Cape Breton, and were well dispersed among Cape Bretoners, who became their nearest neighbours. Those who settled in Victoria County were amazed at the warmth of their reception. Part of that may be explained by the cultural trait in this region of Cape Breton of exceptional politeness toward strangers. Back-to-the-landers living here argued that the local residents knew how to get along with others – although this did not preclude the possibility of criticism and mocking of the newcomers when unobserved. This region also included a long history of leaving; Cape Breton residents watched their communities shrink and spoke of

the lights going out on the hillsides. This legacy may have predisposed Islanders to be more receptive and curious about newcomers. Furthermore the infusion of young folk helped to sustain declining rural communities. Coupled with their warm welcome was an intrigue and respect on the part of the newcomers with the strong cultural traditions of the region including its local history, Gaelic background, story-telling, and music. Back-to-the-landers brought new energy to this rich culture. Working side by side with the local fishermen, or in work crews fixing the roads or clearing wood along the power lines, brought the men, homesteader and local, together in shared tasks. This fellowship eased their acceptance into the community. As much as there was a Cape Breton experience, differences existed between the communities based on the fishery and those based on farming. Fishing brought the men together on the wharf every morning and often again in the evening. Fellowship doing a similar task, combined with the need to maintain awareness of each other’s safety, had a bonding effect. The farming communities did not offer an equivalent work experience, and so the back-to-the-landers did not feel as well integrated into these communities.

Back-to-the-land settlers on the west coast settled on each of the three small islands in numbers that overwhelmed the original islanders. They often purchased land as a group so that their nearest neighbours were one another, which created no impetus to restrain their cultural expression. With a few notable exceptions, they were greeted with indifference at best, and even outright hostility. The radically different approaches to lifestyle, the environment, and politics that existed between the newcomers and the original islanders became so fraught with tension that for the first few years there was little room for understanding and open, unemotional communication. Furthermore, both
sides engaged in negative stereotyping: the original residents were characterized as red-necks and the newcomers were equally typified as dirty, dope-smoking hippies. Most of the newcomers had more formal education than the original residents and were comfortable with debating and written communication. On Denman Island, for example, they used *The Rag and Bone* to promote their worldview in opposition to their fellow island residents. While the latter were encouraged to participate, those more comfortable with the medium were favoured. Drugs and marijuana use, and particularly its cultivation on Lasqueti Island, created anger and resentment for the hard-working, conservative-minded original settlers. Public nudity was offensive to residents on all three islands and caused moral outrage as the residents feared the impact of these perceived immoral invaders on their children. The complex issues of land use and logging directly affected the original islanders’ livelihood and possibility of future retirement, and for the newcomers the issues struck at the heart of their deeply held values that opposed increased development or logging of any kind. The newcomers feared it would not only threaten the carrying capacity of the islands’ resources, but that it would destroy the beauty and rural spaciousness of the islands that they treasured. The newcomers’ disregard for private property on all the islands, but especially Hornby, caused the local landowners to fear for their property rights.

The large numbers of migrants who arrived in the first five years of the 1970s overwhelmed the local residents and justifiably caused fear that their island life was about to change irrevocably. Richard Laskin, who had travelled across the United States researching the “youth movement,” alluded above to the westward movement of young hippies, many of whom then came north to Canada, and Michael McNamara also referred
to the “transient hippies” on Hornby Island. It would have been difficult for the local residents on any of the islands to distinguish those who were “just passing through” from those who were serious about their commitment to the island. Sometimes there was indeed overlap; some back-to-the-landers, particularly on Lasqueti, admit to squatting for long periods of time, only belatedly with permission from the land owner. John Gower, in his discussion of the alternative community in the Slocan Valley, also found this to be an issue. “By 1975 or 1976, most of the ‘weekend hippies’ and uncommitted drifters who contributed to this animosity moved on.” Only then, he argued, was it clear who was serious about their commitment, and they then began to earn the respect of the locals.  

The fundamental difference in the encounter on the two coasts comes down to demographics. The density of settlement in Cape Breton was such that the locals did not feel an imminent threat to their time-worn patterns of life. They were intrigued by and wanted to support these young couples who were arriving and buying up long abandoned farms in their region. Mutual respect characterized their relations from the outset and left room for dialogue when divisive issues arose. The same wave of migrants that washed over the west coast caused the three small islands in question to experience this migration as tantamount to an invasion. The small and bounded nature of these places left no room to blend into an anonymous background. Smaller lots forced closer contact with large numbers of both serious settlers and untold numbers of drifters, indistinguishable at first to the local residents. Reaction on the part of many locals included fear for both their property and for the loss of their way of life. Fear caused polarization and stridency and

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a loss of mutual respect, with, at first, little room for dialogue. Long after the “first encounters” there would be grounds for community building in BC, though the legacy of discord would shape its fabric.
Chapter 3

ECONOMIC STRATEGIES: MAKING ENDS MEET

*I was very interested in the challenge of having nothing rather than having everything.*

I was very interested in the challenge of having nothing rather than having everything.1

Dreams of self-sufficiency, independence and cheap land were at the heart of decisions to relocate to a rural property. Some new ruralists arrived with more realistic dreams than others, but whatever the notions about survival on a rural property, to achieve this ideal required land – and a place to live. The core back-to-the-land strategy was to move to places where the land was inexpensive, or cheap in comparison with the more prosperous farming districts of the country. Options included squatting, house-sitting, renting, or living communally, but for most of those interviewed, the key strategy was to buy land. Attitudes to property acquisition were somewhat casual; for many, the most important selling point was cost. On the west coast, where land prices were higher, sharing a larger piece of property with a group of friends or fairly like-minded acquaintances, or even complete strangers, was quite common. Few, if any considered soil quality, inclusion of a wood-lot, access to water or its quality; in fact a few even bought in the winter when the property was virtually unseen. Squatting was never a possibility on Cape Breton Island and only briefly possible on Denman and Hornby islands. But on Lasqueti it was a viable option for more than a decade, due to the island’s remoteness and to the existence of numerous absentee landlords.

Strategies for acquiring land and shelter varied depending on regional availability, bylaws, individual cash flow and preferences. Land was generally more expensive on the west coast, but British Columbia property law included two options unavailable in Nova

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1 Otis Tomas interviewed in Cape Breton, November 8, 2006.
Scotia that helped make it possible to find affordable land. One involved the purchase of a government leasehold; if a portion of the land was cleared and cultivated within a specified time and other provisions were met, the land could be purchased at a preset price, lower than market value. The second option was to purchase land as a corporate body; although the land was taxed as a single piece and could not be subdivided, the law permitted one house per ten acres (later per five acres). Roughly one-third on Hornby and Denman Islands purchased land as a cooperative.

Key back-to-the-land strategies were the minimization of expenses through doing without, doing or making for oneself, and trading and sharing with others, both in the area or within a wider network. It was necessary to generate income to purchase essential goods and services, such as taxes, vehicles, fuel and parts, electricity, tools, glass and other items for house construction. Equally vital was some sort of structure in which to live. Old, even abandoned, farms typically had a house of some kind, even if derelict, and some people started out in even more temporary and rudimentary shelter such as truck campers (typically owner-built), tents, and tepees. Still, the initial and most important task was house construction or restoration, followed closely by food security. Even for those planning to grow their own food, there was a start-up period to be managed and some foods could not be produced such as tea, coffee, and grains (to name but a few). A number of back-to-the-landers were able to stay off the power grid, either

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2 John G. Ince, *Land Use Law: British Columbia Handbook* (Vancouver: Continuing Legal Education Society of British Columbia and Centre for Continuing Education and University of British Columbia, 1977), pp. 195-6. This indicates the provision to alienate Crown land, but does not spell out the details of price versus market value. The latter point was taken from the one couple who did so, Jan Bevan, interviewed on Hornby Island on January 11, 2008.

3 The entire possibility was eliminated at a later date according to interviews but grandfathered into the revised property laws. Amongst those I interviewed in Cape Breton, there was one group purchase of land, but eventually one of the couples bought out their partners.
permanently or for many years, but the majority who were able to access power did so. Dental care was an expense that few planned for; with a little bad luck, it could unexpectedly cause havoc to the budget. Unlike their American counterparts, for whom crippling medical emergency expenses could force one to rethink the entire project, those in Canada had Medicare as a safety net. Despite the fact that most back-to-the-landers were young and healthy, the nature of the work itself and lack of familiarity with the many tools and tasks of building, cutting, hauling and splitting firewood, to name just a few, could result in far more accidents than would be encountered in an urban way of life. A complete disengagement from the market was not possible; a cash income of some sort was always a necessity.

Garden production and small scale agriculture were important to subsistence living on both coasts, but the decision to move back-to-the-land did not include the idea of developing a commercial farm. For one thing, the type and location of the land purchased would not support large-scale agricultural production; poor soil, a short growing season and remoteness from the market were why the land was available in the first place; the original settlers could not make a living farming. Back-to-the-landers responded to a deep need to find a place in the country; to get out of the city; and once a piece of land was located, the question became: how do we make enough income to allow us to stay? Han VanVugt voiced this strategy:

Most people in Western society live where they live because of a job; jobs define where they live. We knew for ourselves, well forget that. We wanted to find a place where we wanted to live. We’ll make a living however we can; we’ll adjust. If you come to Hornby, you don’t come here for the job – there are no jobs. You better be ready to make your own, or start something, have a way

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5 Ibid., p.160.
of maintaining a business off the island and there was no internet then so you were either a seasonal worker, or you were independently wealthy or you had one of the dozen jobs on the island.\(^6\)

Of the back-to-the-landers interviewed on the four islands, approximately forty percent made additional income by creating small businesses that served either the local economy or tourism, a number of whom in turn created employment for other back-to-the-landers or local residents. Another forty percent found wage work within the local economy; about one third of this group had a professional work background as a nurse, architect, teacher, or professor. Such professional positions were scarce and most required long commutes that often entailed accommodation elsewhere for some or all work days. About ten percent derived their income from farming or fishing. Commercial fishing occurred on the east coast and oyster picking on the west coast, where people might also fish for subsistence. Five percent had independent wealth, and the final five per cent either did not disclose their income or were able to keep their needs to such a minimum that little income was required.

Other important sources of income were unemployment insurance, welfare and the alternative economy. Unemployment insurance was of particular importance on the east coast, where it was a little easier to find sufficient wage work to qualify for the insurance. Seasonal work could be found in tourism, wood-cutting for local producers, clearing power lines for the department of highways, road construction and maintenance, fish boats, or local saw-mills. With the exception of tourism, few of these jobs were open to women, although the small east coast sawmills occasionally employed women. Most west coast seasonal wage-work was found off-island in canneries and tree-planting, both

\(^6\) Han VanVugt, interviewed on Hornby Island, November 27, 2007.
of which were open to women; one adventurous west coast woman had worked on a fish boat while living in Sointula, on Malcolm Island, before moving to Denman Island. Some were able to qualify for welfare. Lastly, some were involved in the alternative economy, an important sector but difficult to measure because it involved the growing and selling of marijuana. Lasqueti’s remoteness seemed conducive to this.

If relative security on the land were plotted on a graph, the long-term trajectory of back-to-the-land survival would begin at the marginal end and move to relative comfort. Such comfort was less likely to be derived from the land, as explained above, and more likely to be the result of good business decisions as artisans. Self-sufficiency in terms of food production in the garden and creative food sourcing via cooperative endeavours followed similar plot-lines; food production would became steadily more efficient. For many, however, as income security rose and needs diminished when children left home, the food self-sufficiency plot-line took a sudden dip after fifteen to twenty years, as many either reduced substantially or ceased altogether their garden production.

We used to grow our food when the kids were eating it, but now we grow just what we saw people growing when we got here, onions, potatoes, turnips, and store them. And we do wonderful with melon, but we’re not as concerned with having a root cellar full and a freezer full, you know, if it happens it happens. If it’s a bad year it’s a bad year… We still have one of the bigger vegetable gardens than my friends for summer time. We grow a lot of corn and we have a good place for it. But that’s not the work it used to be, we’re better at it now. But we only have the weekends and we get done what we get done. If we don’t get an area planted, well we sow it to buckwheat and walk away from it. No big deal. It’s not the torture that it used to be. But still, we have to ask the question what are we going to eat if we don’t grow our own. It means going into North Sydney every Saturday, for produce or something. And then there’s the co-op; [in Baddeck] it’s gotten so much better.7

The point at which self-production diminished depended on local availability, but in many cases back-to-the-lander demand for fresh produce, coupled with growing tourist

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7 Candy Christiano, interviewed in Cape Breton, March, 2003.
pressure, meant that after one to two decades the quality of produce and other staples changed for the better. Another Cape Breton back-to-the-lander, whose child had grown, had a different perspective on gardening:

Gardening is just a hobby now, it changes from vegetables to flowers … the more you garden the more you turn to flowers. Everybody says initially you can’t eat flowers, but you can’t satisfy yourself looking at broccoli either. You need a little colour in your life.  

A RURAL PLACE TO CALL HOME

We, in our kind of “hello!” way, got people together, we ended up with friends of friends we didn’t know directly and we purchased this land…

Finances were important in finding a piece of land; they determined the level of comfort while searching and through the initial years on the land. Approximately ten percent of those I interviewed were about a decade older than average for the back-to-the-land group (most were in their twenties and early thirties); they had had more time to plan, work and save before moving to the country. Often they also had the responsibility of older children, which might influence the degree to which they could “rough it” in those initial years. Moreover, not all back-to-the-landers fit the characterization of the group as “trying to eke out a way to survive being poor” according to Leslie Dunsmore. Certainly the vast majority began that way, but there were reportedly a number of “trust funders” on Denman Island. Dunsmore felt their core values were not those of true back-to-the-landers. Certainly they could afford a different perspective on financial issues, as someone who may have been a member of the privileged five percent distinguished between the back-to-the-lander and the hippie ethos:

8 Tom, (a pseudonym), interviewed in Cape Breton, August, 2003.
9 Patti Willis, interviewed on Denman Island, November 23, 2007.
I always see the back-to-the-landers as kind of an ecological, environmental, social movement and we were more, we saw ourselves as really political, as standing up to the status quo. A lot of the time we didn’t know what we were standing up for, but we knew what we were standing against and there was a line between the back-to-the-landers and the hippies, because most of the back-to-the-landers had a mortgage, … that they had to deal with and once you get into the mortgage game you can’t be as outlandish or radical, I guess. You don’t have as much movement and choice in your life as those of us who were fortunate enough not to have mortgages, or people who chose not to buy land, because they didn’t want to get into that.11

Being in debt was not, in fact, a barrier to political commitment: for example, Dunsmore, as we will see in the final chapter, was at the forefront of standing up to a local logging company. As for mortgages, it is possible that sellers might take them in order to facilitate a sale, but otherwise it is questionable if many buyers would qualify for a mortgage. Their transactions might be structured in complex ways or the land they purchased might have struck any banker as worthless. Nor could many have convinced a lending institution of the financial viability of their proposed endeavour.

Anna Miriam Leigh’s initial strategy when she moved to Denman Island in 1971 was to rent. “There were tons of rentals at that time, el cheapo, 30 bucks a month, and that was considered monstrous.” She recalled that she “always loved [the house], so when it actually came up for sale I got the money from my family, and I was quite glad to stop renting and moving around.” The house had “five acres of waterfront for $30,000, and that was considered exorbitant.” Because Anna’s parents were able to buy the property for her, she had more freedom to experiment with alternate ways of making a living that were not crucial to her tenure on the island. She became “an herb farmer, but I never made much money … I learned a hell of a lot about herbs and farming, and that I was not

11 Anna Miriam Leigh, interviewed on Denman Island, May 19, 2005.
a business person.”

Anna was the only informant to disclose that parents had been able to buy a property outright for them, but many spoke about parental help with the down payment, the appearance of cheques in the mail at opportune moments, or inheritances that might come a decade later.

Land cooperatives were one of the more common methods of land purchase. Patti Willis recalled that her first introduction to Denman came in the late 1960s when Roberta DeDoming, a former islander, showed up in Berkeley “visiting people in an apartment above with a duffle bag of apples that they had [brought] from this place called Denman Island, where they had just bought land.” After some months working in Seattle, Patti and her husband “followed that lead up to Denman” just to look it over, and

we saw this land and ended up getting enough people together to buy it. … We, in our kind of “hello!” way, got people together, we ended up with friends of friends we didn’t know directly and we purchased this land and the deal closed in July of 1970. [And], dare I say it? We bought 160 acres for $55,000 divided by ten.

Their farm was known as the Lake Farm, on Chickadee Lake, and she thought they might have had the first “kind of major shared land.” They were tenants in common, explained Patti, and “because [they] were hippies.” had fairly abbreviated agreements “that probably wouldn’t stand up in court.”

Concha Dennis and her husband Tom, who were also members of the Lake Farm, echoed Patti’s thoughts on the structure of the cooperative. Living in Berkeley, she and Tom were searching for land in places like Oregon and Washington, but when friends of friends of her neighbour asked if they wanted to be part of a large land purchase on Denman Island they agreed. “It was sort of a spur of the moment type thing. We didn’t

\[\text{12} \quad \text{Anna Miriam Leigh, interviewed on Denman Island, May 19, 2005.}\]
\[\text{13} \quad \text{Patti Willis, interviewed on Denman Island, November 23, 2007.}\]
really know everybody or what we were going into, but that’s how things were at that
time,” she explained.14

We started out, from the very beginning that there would only be ten shares that
were not sub-dividable, and some minimum guidelines on how we would work
it out. What we would pay if someone withdrew his share, don’t know how that
would work now, in this climate.15

Carmen Saunders, with her husband David Graham, settled on a jointly owned
piece of land known as High Ridge. She had been living on the island for five or six
years before making the purchase. In 1978, they and four other couples bought 56 acres
for $50,000; “we all immediately called our parents ‘can we borrow $1,000 for a
deposit?’ and we were lucky all of our parents said yes, absolutely. We got $5,000
together, made the deposit and paid off our land within ten years.” By forming a land
company they were able to keep the taxes down to $250 each. “So it’s just so
inexpensive for us to live on this property.” However, she noted that if they ever wanted
to sell they would have to find someone with $300,000 in cash due to the rise in land
values since the original purchase.16

Born in England in 1948, Alison Yarwood visited Canada in 1975. She decided
she wanted to settle on the coastal islands but first had to return to England to begin the
process of immigration. Arriving in 1979, Alison and her husband, Stephen Sharrock,
settled in Vancouver, but quickly decided the city was unacceptable because, as Alison
said, “we had kids and I wanted them to grow up rural.” “I wanted to let them grow up, I
didn’t want to have to usher them around between classes and things like that.”17 Hence
they moved to Royston on Vancouver Island, where they met a woman who was

14 Concha Dennis, interviewed on Denman Island, May 19, 2005.
15 Ibid.
17 Alison Yarwood and Stephen Sharrock, interviewed on Denman Island, May 17, 2005.
organizing a group of couples interested in finding a large rural property on which to settle and raise their children. As many as ten couples were involved in the beginning, but by the time they moved to Denman Island in 1983, there were only five, and soon that number was reduced to three. The original contact person was no longer involved; in fact Alison and Stephen did not know their land partners. “We were all strangers, but we all thought we had enough behind us and enough common interests that it would work out.” They had understood the 52 acre farm included five legal house sites, but when they were about to sign the agreement to purchase there proved to be only three. Asked why they chose the particular piece of land, Alison stated that “basically we picked it because the person who had the most money fell in love with it; it was on the market, she had the money so we came over and looked and said ‘Oh! Wonderful, yes’, so I didn’t look at any other.” Their 52 acre farm cost $150,000 which was eventually split three ways, but at first, as Alison noted, “it was pretty unequal … we only had $10,000 because my parents had given it to me.” The one person with money made the down payment and the other two couples paid the mortgage. 

Margaret Sinclair initially came to Hornby Island to work at the marina at Ford’s Cove. During that summer she observed that there were very few tourists and she noted that “things hadn’t tightened up like they have now and people were moving around and living in every manner of bus, shack, whatever … and that fascinated me... so I decided to do that too.” So Margaret bought a tent and found a place to squat on the mountain some distance away from a family that was also squatting. Next she built a sleeping platform on which to pitch the tent so that she would not be directly on the ground, and

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18 Ibid.
19 Alison Yarwood and Stephen Sharrock, interviewed on Denman Island, May 17, 2005.
20 Margaret Sinclair, interviewed on Hornby Island, on January 16, 2008.
then purchased a very essential item, what became known as a “hippie killer,” a small wood stove made of tin that was not much more than a “giant tin can.” They are no longer sold, but at the time “you could buy one for $50 or something and have a wood stove that really heated.”

I had a little hand-crank Singer sewing machine up there and otherwise I had a transistor radio and I used to listen to Max Ferguson all the time, on CBC and got introduced to all kinds of music and I read Zen and it was very introspective and all that sort of thing. I came down once in a while; I think I had one pair of pants and some long underwear and that’s about it. And once in a while I’d bring a man up, but that’s my introduction to back-to-the-land on Hornby. And now you probably couldn’t do that without people getting very upset because it’s definitely tightened up.21

Margaret lived on Mount Gregory for about a year and then met someone who lived on a house boat in Ford Cove. Eventually she moved in and spent the next ten years living on the house boat. “That was probably one of the more luxurious dwellings I had had to that point,” she reminisced. When that relationship came to an end she became concerned that she “still at that point had not bought land here,” but within a couple of years she was able to buy half an acre of land for $36,000, which, as Margaret indicated, “was considered [gasp] Oh my god!” very highly priced. Margaret explained how she managed to make the purchase:

My parents had indicated they would help me with the down payment, but the place I had been looking at that time, I didn’t buy. So some time went by and when I found the place I thought I would buy for … $36,000 but needed $11,000 down, I called them and they said “oh we spent the money because we didn’t think you were going to do that.” I was stuck so I started approaching friends … and a friend of mine, Vi Freior … who has very little money, but a little bit put away and she’s an older woman, I was just telling her the story; I wasn’t asking her for money. She said “oh, I have a bond that’s coming; I’ll loan you $10,000,” and that was it. She went to town, she got the cash, she gave it to me without anything written down, nothing at all, and I paid her back within a year, because I went to Berlin and taught three wealthy ladies how to teach Reiki and

21 Ibid.
they gave me a lot of money to do it. There she was; she did it without a second’s hesitation and this is not a woman with money.22

Margaret, like Anna, was in the minority of women to purchase land on their own. Most women who acquired land did so through divorce or separation.

Richard Laskin and his wife Serena are representative of the group of back-to-the-landers who were further along in their careers when they chose to move out of the city. They rented a place with friends and family on Hornby Island in the summer of 1973 but had to return to teaching at the University of Saskatchewan that fall. Two friends from Chicago, both of whom had year-long sabbaticals, were able to remain on the island with their families. Richard recalled that:

One day we got a phone call from one of them and he said “hey we found this really nice piece of land and it’s eighty acres … for $80,000 and we think we want to buy it; are you in?” And we said “sure.” I didn’t even know where the land was and so in 1974 the three families bought this eighty acres of land, never dreaming that we would live here, but always thinking that we would have it as our summer place and we would be a cooperative because we three families wanted to be together. We then quickly found out … that the Island Trust Regulations … would [allow] one family for ten acres maximum and we had eighty acres and we said “WOW! … Let’s get more people in.” We didn’t have to know them; if someone had a cousin in Texas and they were interested we said send us a deposit so very quickly we got five other … young couples, mostly with children. We all shared the values of wanting to live in the country someplace but from the point of view of religion, or politics or anything like that, it was just “no, you look like a nice person, come on in.”23

Richard explained that the cooperative was a corporate entity called Syzygy Cooperative Community. The corporation owns the land and the group live there as a cooperative.

Like Richard, the original couples were academics from Chicago, where he had originally taught, but one decided to sell out, making room for yet another couple to buy in. The subsequent makeup of the group was not drawn from academia, which was important to

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Richard. He specifically commented on the fact that they were drawn from widely
diverse backgrounds, and that “many of them had very, very little formal education
beyond high school.” The newcomers were drawn from as far afield as Quebec, Holland
and Australia. “Then suddenly we [had] eight families,” Serena recalled, “most of whom
did not know each other.” The Laskins wanted to create an intentional community,
which, in fact, was a focus of some of Richard’s academic research. Serena argued that
it was their love of Hornby Island and “their desire to work together in a way that would
enhance each other’s lives” that allowed the co-operative to flourish. There was a
collective desire “to help each other be what we wanted to be and do what we wanted to
do. We didn’t have any more ideology than that.”

The cooperative now has ten families here, and Serena and I are the only two
from the original group who actually live here. There’s another two from the
original group who own it but they live in Courtenay. Some day they’ll come.
So we are living in this rural cooperative. This is truly back-to-the-land because
we live on a whole lot of land.24

Han VanVugt and Laura May joined the Syzygy group in 1982, having spent
three and a half years on a rental property nearby where their first child had been born.
The pregnancy, in fact, served as the catalyst for leaving Vancouver in search of “a place
to live that was not the city.” They had been searching on the Southern Gulf Islands and
the Sunshine Coast, but an advertisement in the Vancouver Buy and Sell brought them to
Hornby, an island with which they had no familiarity. Han noted that the advertisement
was in such an unusual place because the owner of the property “was charging more rent
than the locals were willing to pay.” However, at $325 a month, only $25 more than their
Vancouver rental, they decided that 13.5 acres of ocean front property with a house,

“giant workshop and a one acre irrigated garden, and good water” was worth the additional rent. Once they had made the decision to stay, they started looking at property options.

You could buy a half acre lot for 7, 8, 9, 10, $12,000; if you spent $18,000 or $20,000 you’d have waterfront. But that was only a half acre, so small so crowded, so cramped and so we just looked at the alternatives which were a few cooperatives on the island, big pieces of property owned by groups and this is the one that worked out. And it’s probably, if there’s one decision in my life better than all the rest, this is it. Our housing costs now, well we don’t have a mortgage, our taxes are $400 a year.25

Stevi Parker Kittleson had moved to Hornby Island in order to be closer to her brother, who had left the United States as a military resister. Stevi remembered that when she first came to Hornby it was “filled with Americans” and that “the Shire had no Canadians for the first year or so.”26 The Shire was another example of group living on a single piece of land, but in this case, the land was owned by a wealthy Texan who “was just not of her family mode and tried to walk away from the money. She was always in pursuit of a more profound truth,” recalled Stevi. With reference to the name “Shire,” Stevi speculated that “Anne had named it that, probably post Tolkien reading.” 27

Jan Bevan and her husband, Robear Lebaron, built their home on Hornby on a friend’s piece of land, which they later bought.

Well, we’re fortunate we never had a mortgage. It so happens that our little house in Victoria sold and the life insurance policy that my mother had on me matured and we were able to buy our first piece of property and this was before land prices started rising and they were willing to sell it to us at the price that they would be paying per acre. So even though we got a small acreage, we got it at the price [as] if it were part of a large acreage. And we were able to keep our own house that we had built.

26 Stevi Parker Kittleson, interviewed on Hornby Island, January 14, 2008.
27 Anne was unavailable for an interview.
After living there for twelve years, they took a very different approach to land acquisition, an approach much more consistent with the ways of the past. Their second property, just to the east of their original piece (which they later sold), was acquired as a government leasehold:

and the terms of the leasehold were that we had to clear and cultivate it as a farm and if we did so, and of course we had to pay the survey, pay the fees, pay the annual lease and so on, but if we did clear and cultivate it within a certain period of time then we got to buy it at a preset price rather than market value. So we were able to do that; we cleared enough land and got it to at least the beginnings of a farm so we could buy it at that preset price, which was a good deal, much better than if we had had to buy it at market value. So what you see here – you look out and it looks much like a farm – but before we started it … was all forest.

Yeah, so we can say we are the pioneers. We’ve done everything here; everything you see on this place is our work, except the big stumps. It had been logged sixty years previous and then it had grown up to trees. So the big stumps are the loggers’ work but the rest of it is ours, and we’re still at it, as you can see. So we’re still clearing land and we’re still taking a lot of trees and milling them into lumber… so we’re still developing fields; we’re still planting orchards and vineyards and those lines you can see down there is a blueberry patch and these little cages here are young fruit trees.28

Heinz Laffin and Wayne Ngan, fellow potters living in Vancouver, were teaching at the craft school and producing and selling their pottery. When they first moved to Hornby, they bought property with a house and large barn which they converted into their workplace and studio. Wayne recalled that “in the beginning I just bought a place with my friend Heinz [and] we set up together but then we get along with relationships so he really wanted that place and someone has to leave so then I had to move to renting.”29

Within a couple of years after moving to Hornby, Heinz met Eleanor and they settled on the original property, and Wayne met Anne and moved to Downes Point where they rented at first but then had the opportunity to buy a share in “a big piece of land probably

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100 acres with maybe … 10 artists there, so there are architects, potters, painters, sculptors,” which suited both Wayne and Anne, who was also an artist.

Bonnie Olesko and her husband moved to Vancouver from Portland, Oregon, then rented on Lasqueti, as they were not convinced it was where they wanted to set down roots. Bonnie had had visions of living near white-capped mountains, wolves howling in the distance and periodic bear attacks. Lasqueti seemed a little too pedestrian:

we thought we’d start honing our wilderness skills because we wanted to become hunters and gatherers; you know the idyllic... all these ideals; live somewhere where we can live off the land; Allan can write the great Canadian novel, I’ll have three or five children and life will go on; like Mary - the garden will spring up out of nothing; the home will be built with no money.

Later, Bonnie and her husband began to see Lasqueti as the ideal place to live, and in 1969 decided to purchase land with two other couples:

Allan’s mother loaned us what seemed like a lot of money. Ourselves, the couple Anna and Gordon and a third couple who we’d met in Vancouver, Mark and Trudy DeRoche, we all went in on ten or eleven acres … right on the main road. I think it cost us $6,000, $2000 each. It seemed like a lot of money we borrowed, we came up with $600 and I think we borrowed $1400 from Allan’s mom. It was like Oh! so much money. We did it; we bought it; we were the first to start building and the other two started joining us and we built a nice little community the three of us, you know, a little cooperative.  

Aside from the above exception, the most common initial approach on Lasqueti was squatting and although that would change over time, the availability of this option might explain the relative lack of cooperatively purchased land amongst those interviewed.

Very few people lived on the south end, where large tracts of land were held by absentee land owners or were still crown land. This allowed widespread squatting. Doug Hamilton arrived in 1971-72 and recalled the state of housing:

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[30] Bonnie Olesko, interviewed on Lasqueti Island, December 21, 2007. Bonnie was the only one of my informants on this island who bought land as part of a group, which she later sold and purchased a separate piece of land at the south end, following a marriage break-up and an interlude in Victoria.
Yeah, they describe it as completely deserted here and all the houses were just there for the asking; they weren’t very solid or anything, but you could just move in. And many did and there were a lot of large absentee landlords who bought vast amounts for almost nothing and we just moved into this beach shack and started setting up and built a little shake house and had no troubles and about five years later the owners showed up and he [sic?] was a little nonplussed but we were quite low impact and we pointed out it was good to have somebody down there. It was along a really sort of deserted stretch of waterfront so people would come in sometimes by boat; build a fire on the beach in the summertime and it could be quite dangerous to start a fire, so we made ourselves valuable to him so it was fine.31

In fact Doug and his wife remained living in their beach shack as squatters for a surprising eleven years. It was only with an inheritance that he was able to buy land of his own at the south end of the island.

Christine Ferris was also living at the south end of the island during these years and had similar experiences:

And then in 1970, and ’71 and ’72, just these hordes of young people showed up and at that point there were a lot of places on Lasqueti where you could squat; you could move into a pretty derelict house, and that’s what we did. We found out who the landowner was; she lived in California. We wrote her a letter; she directed us to her brother in Nanaimo, we went to him and he said fine, but don’t ask for anything and don’t ever bother my sister; you can just live there.32

In fact, of the ten people interviewed on Lasqueti who arrived between 1969 and 1975, five spent their initial years in similar circumstances.

Sheila Ray took a slightly different approach. She arrived with her husband in 1974 as the school teacher and principal respectively, after having spent two years travelling through Europe, living in a Volkswagen van. Before Europe they had been practice teaching in Terrace, BC, which, “at that time … was a logging culture [town],

but there was that counterculture of back-to-the-landers, people who ran the health food store, so they became our friends.”

So we didn’t know what Lasqueti was going to be like, we had come from Northern BC and when the job was offered, we said well is it an Indian Reservation or is it a logging town, because we didn’t really want to be back in a logging community. And the superintendent of the time said no, it’s a group of people that march to the beat of a different drum, and as soon as we got here we both knew that this is what we had been looking for. It was more like the little communities we had experienced in North Africa, just a small community, with really close connections between people and not a lot of material wealth and for both of us it felt like oh, this is home, we’re here and that was 34 years ago.33

Within two years they had both decided that teaching was no longer what they wanted to do; they were far too intrigued with the back-to-the-lander lifestyle of the parents of the children they taught. Sheila recalled that “at the end of that year I quit teaching and I realized what I really wanted to do was just drop out like everybody else and our marriage ended and I went and lived in a little shack in the woods.” But that shack was actually owned by people who were away tree-planting so when they returned she rented another cabin for a couple of years and then built her own house.

But because I didn’t have land, and that was another odd thing about Lasqueti … we felt like we had the right to live here and absentee landowners didn’t really have any rights so lots of people build little cabins on absentee landowners’ land, often with permission. So I didn’t have land, but that wasn’t a big obstacle; so where can you build a house if you don’t have land? Well you can either squat on somebody else’s or a float house, and there were quite a few float houses at the time. So we could just beach-comb some logs and build a little house on it and there you were.34

Sheila’s ex-husband Peter quit his job two years later; he eventually remarried, to a woman who owned land on Lasqueti, and that was where Sheila finally found her small

34 Ibid.
piece of land to which she could moor her houseboat and plant a small garden. Contrary to the usual order of these things, Sheila found her house first and land later.

Settling in Cape Breton, for the most part, required the purchase of a piece of property; neither squatting nor Crown Land alienation were possibilities. Because all the land was freehold, it was acquired by buying it from the owner, either resident or absentee. Frequently the property in question had suffered long neglect and the house had been abandoned in the exodus west after the Second World War. Uninhabited houses with farm buildings near collapse were not an unusual sight along the back roads and commonly there were no “for sale” signs posted, necessitating a little detective work to locate the owner.

House-sitting provided some of the same benefits that squatting offered on the west coast. For example, Donna and John Johnson found access to a house and property in Cape Breton as caretakers. While living in Toronto, they purchased land with her brother and his wife in the dead of winter in a community about which they knew nothing. Still in Toronto, they met other people who were moving to a different community in Cape Breton. The following summer, after viewing their newly purchased property, they were uninspired and decided to move to a community where they knew someone. As luck would sometimes have it, they found an advertisement for a house-sitting opportunity in Middle River through Mother Earth News. This worked well for the winter months, but the absentee owners wanted access to their property in summer. This made for difficulties in keeping a garden, and alternative living arrangements had to be found for two weeks to two months.

Up the Geary Road we paid no rent and when we moved up the Gold Brook, we paid no rent. We only had to move out for two weeks in the summer, which at
the time seemed like a piece of cake, you know. And so we didn't need a lot of money, so it still seemed quite idyllic, because you work for six months or whatever and then you were off. Now that kind of was a bit of a problem for gardening and that sort of thing...35

Marion Thompson and her husband John Roberts had spent 1970 and 1971 in Tarbot, Cape Breton and then left for more than a year to find work out west. They returned in 1973 when they learned of a piece of property for sale.

We bought … eighty acres of land for $3,500. We'd just come from the West Coast of Canada where, maybe for ten times that amount, we could have purchased a tenth of what we got … I mean and the piece of land that we bought, although it's very beautiful now, at the time it had been pulped, so it was a raspberry patch and it was straggly spruce and it was not at all pretty. The community was beautiful, but we really learned more about that after we got here. So [the attraction] was cheap [land].36

Johanna Padelt and her husband were looking for a place in upper New York State. In fact they were thinking of abandoned farms outside of Rochester where they both had tenure as teachers. However, they had been vacationing in Cape Breton on a yearly basis since 1963 so when some unusual circumstances provided the opportunity to buy an abandoned farm in Cape Breton, they made a snap decision to do so:

Around Christmas time of 1970, we got a call from a real estate agent in Cape Breton and he was looking for some friends of ours that had looked at a farm in Northern Cape Breton and at the time … somebody was in the process of buying it. Well the deal fell through, so the real estate agent was trying to get a hold of our friends and they happened to be at our house. And so we had a little discussion about whether they wanted this property, and when they said no, we said yes. All we knew was from blueberry picking…. Our friends assured us that there was an old house on it, we had driven past and had not noticed a house. We decided to just buy it and go there until our money runs out. So we went in the spring to see the property and in June, I had already quit my job and my husband had quit his job, so in the summer of 1971 we moved to this old abandoned farm that hadn’t been lived in for 25 years.37

36 Marion Thompson, interviewed in Cape Breton, March 4, 2003.
37 Johanna Padelt, interviewed in Cape Breton March 5, 2003.
Ruth Schneider thought they were going to purchase land in the west of the country, but her husband Aaron thought they might have better luck in the east. She remembered the day in 1970 they finally agreed to go ahead with the purchase of the property:

I was very much a mountain girl and I wanted to go west. Anyway, I drove straight through Nova Scotia and hit Cape Breton and thought hmm, not bad! And actually started asking about land, and this was one of the properties that was here and by the time Aaron met me … I said, well there’s this place we could look at, … and we came back here and they were asking very little money but it was twice as much as what we had and the house had been vandalized; … and people had hung deer in what had been the dining room. They tore the ceilings down to get the copper wiring out; it was not in good shape; should have been burned down but we had no money so we couldn’t do that either … so we offered exactly what we had, which was half of what they asked and I figured that’ll do it and we’ll be on our way to British Columbia tomorrow. But they took it saying the woman had not seen the house once since it had been vandalized. [She] came out and said oh no, take whatever they offer – to my shock and dismay. And so we asked if we could camp here until the deal went through, and they said … yes we could do that.

Then Ruth had second thoughts and wanted to just forget about the deposit and leave:

It was the end of June, Sharon and the bugs, the no-seeums, the black flies, and I had a year old baby; it was just absolutely horrible. It was hot for some reason and after two nights I said okay we’re going to go. Let’s get out of here; we’ll leave … and thank them and take off. And [Aaron] took the car to go in to tell Chat Harvey, the real estate agent … to keep the deposit, and I walked up to the waterfall with the kids to try to get away from the bugs and I thought, where I grew up in Iowa, this would be a State Park; right here.

With a one year old and a three year old and no phone within a mile, Ruth was unable to contact Aaron and inform him of her discovery and second change of heart. Meanwhile, Aaron’s drive took him past the beauty of St. Anne’s Harbour, which got him re-thinking his mission:

And he gets in to Chat Harvey’s door and she’s a rather refined woman and she greeted him, hello, how are you and he goes err, umm, do you have a stapler I could borrow? And he borrowed a stapler and came home with a role of screening and he said we’ll shovel out the house and we’ll move in; and that’s how we ended up here.38

38 Ruth Schneider, interviewed in Cape Breton, November 5, 2006.
Donna Mikol recalled finding their Cape Breton property after arduous searching all one summer, when they were almost at the point of giving up and returning to Montreal.

We just would follow old roads and anything that wasn’t a beaten track and one day we came down the hill on this Meadow Road here in North River and we saw a red roof in a field that was all grown up and we said that looks like a little shack and we subsequently ended up buying that farm on a hand-shake…

Fred Lawrence moved to Cape Breton with his brother and a friend in 1973, shortly after his discharge from the Army. As a fisherman focused on his boat and the sea, Fred was not seeking a large property, just enough room for his house and a small garden. “My property in Meat Cove I bought for $1000 – you could do it in those days.” His fishing license on the other hand, was $650, low by today’s standards, but a significant outlay of cash at the time. Later he moved to Bay St. Lawrence, not far from Meat Cove, where the harbour offered better protection. He also acquired twenty acres of ocean front property with an incomparable view of the ocean from his dining room window.

Candy Christiano and her husband, Peter, settled on land that they thought was not that far off the main road, however it turned out to be four kilometers, which meant there were no services such as hydropower or winter plowing. These implications only became clear latterly, after they moved in.

We came up … New Years Eve 1971. We were camping at the end of the Big Baddeck road; [Peter] had this van and we actually were even sleeping in it. … So when Parker Donham [newspaper reporter] heard that we were camping, he said, “We have a spare bedroom” so we did go over there. … It was his first winter; he was learning with another guy from Massachusetts how to survive the winter. We stayed for about six weeks on Bouladrie Island, Kempt Head. So from Baddeck we got the real estate agent and we looked at a lot of properties, a lot that probably would have been easier to live on in the future, but we were

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39 Donna Mikol, interviewed in Cape Breton, November 9, 2006.
40 Fred Lawrence, interviewed in Cape Breton, November 7, 2006.
looking for wood, water and soil. We had our focus on growing vegetables … and I must admit we were stupid [when] we came in our road … we thought it was about half a mile and he [real estate agent] did absolutely nothing to tell us it was any longer … because it wasn’t in his interest. So that was February of 1971. So we actually moved here in June of 1973 – immigrated. We had to go back and work and it was a tax sale property so we had to let it go for a year for the clear title. And we came back up again the next winter, when Peter had time off, so we spent two winters here before we even knew about [black] flies!

HOUSING

*I make a joke now about a rule that I had: no level, no plumb, no square; we just didn’t want to live in a box.*

I make a joke now about a rule that I had: no level, no plumb, no square; we just didn’t want to live in a box.

To have a house that was owner built, unique in appearance, and made from nearby materials if possible was a back-to-the-land goal. The more of one’s talents, time and energy devoted to the building process, the more one was able to appreciate the results. With building skills that varied from complete novice to skilled carpenter, back-to-the-landers aimed to keep costs low so as not to require a mortgage. One building strategy for the novice was to build an out-building first to provide practice, before tackling the house itself. Sometimes, however, that outbuilding became the main domicile by default and slow evolution. Some women, determined to learn to use tools, built a chicken coop or small barn, although a couple of women did actually build their own home, or participate in its construction. Scrounging building materials was almost an art form on the west coast, and included taking down old buildings for the hardware and lumber salvageable, picking up items at the dump, and building with logs washed up on the tide.

Island living meant having to make do with regard to tools and other items, as hopping on

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41 Candy Christiano, interviewed in Cape Breton, March, 2003.
a ferry was expensive and time-consuming; hence, the local dumps became a source for discarded tools.

Because there was a deficit of material on the actual building process in my interviews, I have included some additional material drawn from interviews conducted on Mayne Island, one of the southern Gulf Islands. One Mayne Islander also had amazing skills furnishing his house, finding garden machinery and tools at the dump. There were no equivalent scrounging opportunities in the east, as the region lacked close proximity to large populations; however there was ready access to logs for building, and log houses were common amongst those who had to build. Milled lumber was also available from many of the small sawmills around the county, which provided another way to use local wood. More opportunities existed to renovate old farmhouses and out-buildings, even though the better course might have been to tear down and build anew, as we saw with Ruth Schneider.

The real treasure in Cape Breton was the ready offer of tools, advice and assistance from the older generation of men in the region. Jim Morrow talked about the challenges of building, something which he had not done before moving to Middle River, Cape Breton. Jim built their house with logs, which required a host of new skills, beginning with felling the trees, removing the bark, notching them to fit and setting each one in place, a challenge that grew with the wall height. Once the log structure was built there remained all the other tasks necessary to finish a house.

There were challenging days, I mean there were a lot of days when you would look at a building problem and think well how do I do this? And you would
actually sit there and look at it for hours and hours and eventually it would come you know, or if it wouldn’t come you’d go talk to Angus.43

Angus Fraser was the source of all practical knowledge for those who settled in Middle River and were lucky enough to know him. He was a genius at finding ways to fix machinery or finding a solution to a problem, and if the right tools were not at hand, he had a magician’s way with bailer twine. Back-to-the-land settlers were fortunate to have local people who took an interest in their project, followed their progress and were always ready to offer advice whenever it was sought. The local residents were available for not only consultation but also loaning their tools, as Bob Dann remembered of his neighbours on the north shore:

I started building a cabin … and we put up a barn, took down a house and moved it up on hay wagons. The neighbours were really helpful; they were happy to see young people coming in, interested in old ideas and the old way of doing things more so than the people our own age. Didn’t meet that many young people; they were usually interested in drinking and fighting. So we had good experiences with the old timers; they were really helpful. And Malcolm McLeod over here gave me an axe and a saw and he loved to talk about the old days. He was born about 1900. He said he could remember when the first saw came into Tarbotvale … you’d think saws would have been around, but he said no, it was all done by axe before that.44

The senior generation, especially those who remembered heating with wood or coal, working with older tools, before electrification, were most likely to understand and relate to what newcomers were attempting to do. These were generous people, but they would offer advice only when asked. Back-to-the-landers soon realized they knew more about how to get by in that specific location than a newcomer ever would and so learned to ask. Such appreciation of their know-how and ready assistance likely validated their past

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43 Jim Morrow, interviewed in Cape Breton, August, 2003. Angus Fraser was a fount of knowledge and ingenuity for more than one back-to-the-lander household in Upper West Side Middle River.
44 Bob Dann, interviewed in Cape Breton, August, 2003.
experience and knowledge in ways they perhaps had not previously felt. Their young people were focussed on finding work in the cities and those in their thirties and forties were more interested in finally acquiring the creature comforts more readily available in the urban and suburban households.

Phyllis Fabbi was 36 and her husband was almost 40 when they moved to Denman Island. She thought that her husband’s singular interest in building a house was what attracted him to move back-to-the-land. “Somehow I talked my husband into it, I don’t think he had the same strong feelings but he was really interested in just doing this building.”

I bought him a broadaxe for his fortieth birthday, a real broadaxe and the beams for this house – he found logs on the beach, which I’m sure was illegal and went down there and broad-axed them for a couple of days and then, with a friend, every week they would bring a new beam up from the beach for the house. First of all, we built the studio that’s over there; it was going to be my pottery studio; I was going to be a potter here, my original intention, which never did happen. So we lived in that for five years almost, before this was ready to move into and then by that time my kids were pretty well grown up and my husband and I had split up and I ended up moving into the house with one son … it’s 1500 square feet but it looks big, you know? So especially for one person it looked like my god. So here I am in this house that’s never been finished and it’s falling apart now. And I split every shake for every building by hand.

Reflecting on the back-to-the-land philosophy from a different standpoint, Harlene Holm described how she managed a rural property as a single woman. Initially she and her partner bought an orchard on the island, in 1975, and she described how they built their first house:

[It] cost $10,000 for eleven acres and I didn’t have anything, quit my job. My partner had an offer of a job up here so he was working, lucky man, and basically, no support, other than there was a whole passle of us at the time, so work bees were part of that. We would just get together and raise somebody’s walls … so people helped and some of the city folks came but rarely came back.

45 Phyllis Fabbi, interviewed on Denman Island, November 5, 2007.
46 Ibid.
again because it was a bit more work than they wanted … I had one friend who said he wouldn’t come back until there was sky scrapers. But yeah, we didn’t have money; [after the land was paid, presumably] I had my background of growing up on the prairies [and] we didn’t have money there either. So being poor wasn’t a big deal. So we just scavenged. Scavenged the logs, scavenged the 2 x 4s for floorings and the nice part about it was if a kid came over and got sick it just went through the cracks between the boards. All the windows, everything was scavenged. So it was all put together fairly cheaply. There was actually an article in *Harrorsmith* on the houses that were built at that time. So yeah, someone would make a blackberry pie and a great soup and we’d all get together and do something.\(^\text{47}\)

About eleven years later, she and her partner split up, and she decided to remain on

Denman Island because of her involvement with the community; although she looked elsewhere, no other place offered the same “gentle setting.” Finally after more than a year of looking she was able to find a small piece of raw land. The second time around, she took a different path to building a house:

If you live in a rural community you eventually learn how to do things or you hire people to do things. I had this house built because I’m not good, but I built the chicken coops and the wood shed and that sort of thing, because if there’s a problem with it, you hit it with a sledge hammer and it settles in. And I scavenged a lot of materials [for the house], the wood was free and the metal roofing was free, so I put together stuff like that quite comfortably, but I don’t have the skills to build a house. I hired someone with a D-8 to clear the slash but once that was done and burned I used a hand rake to rake all this area that’s open so I don’t hire people unless it’s a pretty big project unless it’s something that I can’t do physically or with the kind of precision I might want. But all the rest is done by labour, none of it’s quantum mechanics, it’s just pretty straight forward. But every fence post and split rail you see out there I split and I dragged from where it was on the land. Rocks you see I scavenged from somewhere on the land and wheel barrowed them to the point where they were put in. [There’s] so much stuff that you can do physically with a wheel barrow and a shovel and time. It doesn’t have to be [expensive].\(^\text{48}\)

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\(^\text{47}\) Harlene Holm, interviewed on Denman Island, May 18, 2005. Work bees were quite common in the early years on both coasts, when most were building. Catharine Anne Wilson provides an in-depth analysis of the importance of the phenomena for the nineteenth and early twentieth century in her “Reciprocal Work Bees and the Meaning of Neighbourhood” in *The Canadian Historical Review* 82, no. 3 (September 2001): accessed online April 28, 2013.  

\(^\text{48}\) Harlene Holm, interviewed on Denman Island, May 18, 2005.
When asked what skills he brought to building his house, Richard Laskin replied:

“In Yiddish we call it chutzpah and sometimes we call it hubris; we brought no building skills at all; my training is in sociology. So it came in bits and pieces.” The Laskins lived in a pup-tent their first year, while their three children lived under plastic stretched over poles running from tree to tree, apparently quite memorable as Richard notes, “my kids will never stop telling us about it.” They bought an old school bus and drove to Courtenay, or as far as Victoria, wherever they could find buildings that were being demolished, and for a small fee secured many of the basics needed for building a house, including doors, windows, boards and electrical wiring. Richard recalled that in Courtenay, utility wood was priced at $50 for a thousand board feet. “It sounds like free, okay?” The lack of a building code on any of the Gulf Islands at that time was the key to their ability to build out of whatever materials they could find. “[P]eople I know collected dozens of refrigerator doors and hung them together to make a wall; you could build out of anything.” The other source of building materials was “the beach, which is the Hornby lumber yard and we brought back, with our two teenage boys, logs from the beach and we piled up material all over the place.”

The second summer, the Laskins lived in a home-made tepee.

Serena just spent hours and hours on an old treadle sewing machine following a pattern for a 15 foot diameter Iroquois tepee. And when we came out here, I cut the trees down – boy stuff, you know? And we lived in that tepee for a couple of years; Serena and I and two of the kids. The other one said I’ll sleep in the school bus if you don’t mind and so we did that and we lived very, very rough. We’d go into town once a week to check into a motel for showers and do our laundry. We chose to live, if I want to be unkind about it, Appalachia style, you know, very, very, poor. Why, I don’t know, just seemed like a good thing to do… we were really back-to-the-landers I guess… And so little by little we built bits of the house … without having building skills at all. I didn’t know that I really should have poured a concrete floor and bought some tools; no, I didn’t

know the difference between a finishing hammer and a framing hammer; we just
hammered away, and Serena, she built the original kitchen in there, very rustic,
very crude, some bits of it are still there. And I’ve been learning things along
the way; I did all the wiring, I did all the plumbing; I don’t know how, and so
some of it you pay the price for that.50

Serena elaborated a little more about the process of building their house and the
integration of both their cooperative and their family unit.

In terms of co-op and family, at first in the early years we helped each other
build our houses and we’ve got wonderful photos and slides of people hanging
off beams here and there and doing crazy things with the building. And because
there are no building codes here we could use any building material at all and
create any structure but we’re city people, and as I said, untrained in any of
those skills and plus we had built this rickety building not thinking that we
would live here on a full-time basis so it’s evolved over the years. We started
off with a two room cabin and five of us lived in a two room cabin and as we
could afford it we added a room and then a room, so we pushed out organically
in all directions... it was such a good thing for us to do as a family; it was a
valuable gift for all of us, and now we’re two living in six rooms and our kids
call us yuppies, but it’s still the funky old cabin that it used to be.51

Han VanVugt and his wife joined the Laskins and others at Syzygy52 as one of the
later arrivals, and so did not benefit from the earlier work bees mentioned by the
Laskins. Asked if he had the skills to build, he responded:

No, we had the ignorance to just go ahead and build. We built a one room cabin
(which was torn down since) with a chainsaw and a hammer – well, I guess you
do it like this! And we made some terrible mistakes but it stayed up and worked
for a long time and then when we decided, we hired one of the local architects
… it was going to cost way too much so we shelved that plan and went with
something a little simpler, so here we are and every year we get a little closer.53

Wayne Ngan was an artist and master potter whose approach to building a house was
decidedly artistic in its conception and especially inventive in his choice of materials. He

52 Definition from the on-line Merriam Webster Dictionary “the nearly straight-line configuration
of three celestial bodies (as the sun, moon, and earth during a solar or lunar eclipse) in a
gravitational system.” Suggested by Richard Laskin’s mother. Richard Laskin, interviewed on
moved to Hornby Island in search of cheaper land and an atmosphere more conducive to his creative energies. His philosophical perspective gave him the latitude to devise tools and building materials from whatever was at hand for next-to-no-money, while most needed the money to purchase conventional tools and materials. Ngan found freedom in his poverty as it unleashed his imagination; in his words, “when you don’t have money you have imagination.”54 Anything but conventional, his building techniques were inspirational to the new wave of settlers to the island.

I lived in a chicken coop for a while and at the same time used all the local materials to build. I hired one of my friends; he like[d] building, his name is Lloyd House and we get along quite well in those days. We talked about creativity; he’s a builder and I’m an artist so we can share the idea and then we can create something unique... So we used about 34 car tops for the roof ... you find old cars in the local area you [get] a welding torch and cut it up and then he used that for building the kiln shed. ... and then the studio building with logs and plaster wall and building with logs from the beach and the roof with ... a live tree which you take the skin off and you have nice poles for building the ceiling and so it’s quite nice like in waves of a fish ... it’s very lovely.

And that place inspired a lot of people; potters come from different places and architects and things like that because it [was] ... “no money” building ... just find things on the beach and cut bits of trees for making posts so really ... most of the wood came from the beach and then I know this old timer who was going to tear down an old barn, and I bought a lot of ... boards from the old barn and I used it ... inside my chicken coop ... This place influenced a lot of people from here to California. Play with nature and go back-to-the-land and do the thing you wanted to do, it’s cheap because you can’t afford to buy everything like furniture. I didn’t have a fire place and I want[ed] a fire place; I used to know a little welding ... and I went to the beach and ... saw this big buoy washed on to the shore and then I somehow ... I cut it up in half and used half for my fireplace...

So when you have some kind of imagination you can create the same things made from mass production places. And at the same time you connect with the land where you get it and have a little story behind and that is very meaningful for the things you own, you know where they come from.... and I find that when you don’t have money, some way or another, when you have an idea, you can create something that’s more beautiful than so-called normal way of approaching life and I find that is ... lovely.55

55 Ibid.
Some men had previous building experience, which allowed them to earn an income with their skills and to build their own house. For Bob Bickford, however, it was a long wait before he had saved enough money to buy his own property. In the interim he squatted.

Moved in to where Bonnie lives now and it was a rotting apart little house, didn’t have much of a roof and rain used to pour right in and not much glass in the windows and nobody wanted to live in it, it was not very habitable. Me and my ex-wife moved in and we fixed it up, put a new roof on, new porches, made it comfy and it was great. We lived there for thirteen years. Giome was born there; we were squating; we didn’t have any money for anything. We didn’t even have a car; we used to walk back and forth to the north end [to] the ferry all the time. [About 12-15 kilometers] But ferry was a big expense; it’s even more now, but I just didn’t have any income, and after I built the boat I had lots of work because I had this [boat] and [islanders realized that] oh this guy can do something, so I started building houses, pretty much, but not normal houses, more artsy sort of things; it was fun. Probably bought the property here with building houses, tree planting too, though.\(^5\)

Bob’s houses included cement cast figures, much like gargoyles, forming support structures or incorporated into the building in different ways, along with exquisite wood work, such that his houses were entirely unique. I walked up to a site where he had been building a new house for himself, as his ex-wife kept their home. Sadly, about a month before I arrived on the island, his newly constructed house burned down, but still standing were these amazing “creatures” that formed part of a support structure for what had been a deck.

Building strategies were radically different for Christine Ferris and her friends, who also squatted on Lasqueti Island:

It was a house with no windows, that was full of old car parts and we just cleaned it out and put plastic on the windows and a stove in and lived there for a number of years and at that point nobody was building their own houses unless

\(^{56}\) Bob Bickford, interviewed on Lasqueti Island, December 17, 2007.
they were little plastic and tar paper shelters and nobody had really much money.\textsuperscript{57}

The three Mayne Islanders I interviewed were all involved, in one way or another, in dragging a structure into another location. None of my other interviewees acquired a house in this rather ingenious way, which saved both labour and expense.

My first rental was really good and in fact the person sold me the house – he wanted me to leave because he wanted to build a house so I dragged the house down the highway with a set of chokers and skids and just left a trail of splinters and dragged it into the bush here and began clearing this place, and that was in ... late fall 80 ... when I skidded the first building in here and just cut away through the bush with a friend’s bulldozer and plunk. [Then] started clearing this area which was all forest, so yes it was definitely kind of a root, stump-bumping, clear the land situation here.\textsuperscript{58}

Another Mayne Islander found a house that also needed to be moved to a new location.

Ron Willick moved to the island in 1976, renting a property for just $165 a month that included both a house and workshop where he could produce furniture:

I decided that as nice as it was to only have to pay that much in rent, I knew that wasn’t going to last. And I thought real estate wasn’t expensive, although it was more money than I had, I had an offer from someone to lend me enough money to buy a lot and it just so happened that the junior light house keeper’s house was put out to tenders to be bought, moved, and the site levelled. I put in a bid for $250 and got the house and I still had to level off the lot and move the house, but I decided that was probably a good place to start and we did. All my friends got together and got the house all up and another friend brought his CAT over which is a big bulldozer and we pulled it down the road on logs with the CAT and moved it over to the lot and I built a foundation under it and I built myself a workshop and I’ve been here ever since. It was only one story when I moved it and I’ve added another one because I’ve had a son.\textsuperscript{59}

At that time Ron’s lot cost him $8,000, whereas the combined house and property today would have increased far more than tenfold.

\textsuperscript{57} Christine Ferris, interviewed in Vancouver, January 1, 2008.
\textsuperscript{58} Ron Pither, interviewed on Mayne Island, May 13, 2005.
\textsuperscript{59} Ron Willick, interviewed on Mayne Island, May 11, 2005.
Sandy Forest arrived on Mayne Island in May of 1974. Together with another family and a bachelor, she and her husband purchased twenty acres for $32,000:

Before we came, the guys came here and built what they called cabins [but] they were shacks ... 12 x 16 for one woman, one man and two children and a couple of dogs. But it was summer, it was nice, I was young, I was stupid, naïve … Rocky said, we’ll have a house built by winter. The phantom house never materialized. The shack … was on the other side of the property – and as it became obvious that I wasn’t going to live [there] in that schmoz, Rocky bought a bulldozer and we hooked it to the shack, and … dragged it over here. Just before that we ... added on a bedroom, so we actually weren’t all sleeping in the 12 x 16. [The bedroom addition] was 8 x 12, so it [included] a high bed for us, bunk beds for the kids [and] the baby slept in a play pen underneath our bed.

At this point the story becomes humorous, although one might wonder about the possible reaction of a Children’s Aid worker:

So we] dragged the shack over here – I called it a shack; everybody else called it a cabin. Coming over, the bedroom almost fell off – ’cause, you saw that steep hill, right? – and [we] shoved that back together ... but the sheeting was loose and actually that night … I heard this whimpering noise during the night, and it wasn’t the baby. I sort of climbed up to check David in the top bunk and he wasn’t there – he had fallen out of the house because the sheeting had come loose. So I hauled him back in and put him to sleep on the floor so he didn’t fall out again. ... I should have seen the light then, right? [Laughter.]  

Sandy’s new house never did materialize and meantime she and her husband Rocky continued to improve their “shack” so that she eventually had a living room, two bedrooms upstairs and a kitchen with a hand pump for water that Sandy installed herself. Their house in Burnaby finally sold which gave them the funds to finish the house and bring in electricity. After six years “Rocky came home one day at lunch and said he was leaving with a friend of mine.” As Sandy started to recover from the shock, she began to do a little work outside the house to earn money. Next she decided she needed a dry barn for her hens and milking goats, which meant she had to figure out how to build it.

60 Sandy Forest, interviewed on Mayne Island, May 11, 2005.
When Rocky left, my project was to build the barn. I didn’t want that crummy old shaky barn that leaked … anymore. I did a cement foundation. … I knew nothing about building a foundation. So I ordered the gravel … and I borrowed a cement mixer [from a] friend. So I did the whole foundation … And then when it came time to put on the roof, you’ve got to make these trusses, but how do you hold this one up at this end and the other one up that end at the same time? So Barry [a friend] came up that day, and my sister was here and between the three of us, we got the end things up and the cross thing well-braced in place and then when the others were gone I could put the rest in place. Then I … ordered the roofing, cut to fit … and wondered how do I do this? Well, my father showed up … and I said I’m putting the roof on the barn and he said I’m getting the next boat out of here. Well he stayed and we did it. I could never have done it by myself. As it was he was not better at it than I was …  

STRATEGIES TO KEEP COSTS LOW AND OFF-PROPERTY WORK TO A MINIMUM

“It’s a fingernail existence on these islands: do without, make it yourself, repair it, get it cheap get it free and live a really good life.”

For most of my informants, one of the motivations for moving back-to-the-land was to wrest more control over their personal time and labour than city life seemed to offer. Some had already developed marketable skills such as pottery, leather-work, jewellery making, weaving or cabinetry, while others hoped to practice their profession as a teacher, writer, architect or nurse. Others were unsure what they would do to sustain themselves, and believed that they would “figure it out.” Arriving with a small amount of money to get through that first year was customary, but eventually the money ran out and an income was needed. Those initial days before they ran out allowed people to adjust to their new setting and come to terms with the reality of living in the countryside. A common misconception was that one could supply all of one’s food, but that was soon put to rest, particularly in the Cape Breton climate. Donna Johnson’s recollection of their

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61 Sandy Forest, interviewed on Mayne Island, May 11, 2005.
initial ideas may have been mildly overstated, but she and her husband were not alone in their misbegotten assumptions:

“I thought we were going to make crafts and do that sort of thing and of course we wouldn't need that much to live on, because we'd be growing all of our own vegetables and … what would we need money for? We would cut trees down and make houses out of them and bales of hay. And what little money we did need, we would get by making things and selling them.”

Perhaps it is not surprising that the Johnsons eventually decided to settle in the village of Baddeck, where they could both rent and find work. At the other extreme were those who arrived with a profession that had relevance in a rural district, or an already well developed craft. Wayne Ngan, for instance, had already gained recognition as a potter, and today his work is internationally recognized, held, for example, by the Canadian Museum of Civilization. The vast majority of those I interviewed had skills and ideas that put them between these two extremes, most, however, closer to the Johnsons than to Ngan.

Work-bees were not uncommon for back-to-the-landers as a strategy to keep costs low, and to benefit from the skills of fellow homesteaders. Frequently the get-together was an occasion to share a meal in the form of a pot-luck. Recalled as times of social cohesiveness and overall neighbourliness on the part of my informants, such unfettered good-will was not always as it appeared, as Catharine Anne Wilson has demonstrated. It would not be a large stretch of the imagination to suspect these occasions were sometimes used as a forum by the more skilled to snicker among themselves when called upon by the less skilled among them. It could also be contested terrain for women, who wanted to play a role in the carpentry, but were either belittled with a task beneath their

abilities or relegated to making food. On the positive side these bees provided much needed assistance and they were often occasions for merriment.

Work-bees for back-to-the-landers were seldom attended by the original residents, a point noted by Wilson who argued that bees were normally attended by families of a similar status, each with a need, presumably, to derive benefit from collective assistance. However, if a local resident was specifically asked for their expertise and use of some heavy equipment that would facilitate a task such as putting joists and rafters in place, for instance, they were always cooperative. The favour would usually be returned in the form of labour. Another type of exchange somewhat common in Cape Breton, certainly in the farming district of Middle River, was the loan of equipment such as a tractor and perhaps a bailer in exchange for the participation by the beneficiary and perhaps his wife, in getting in the hay for that person in return.

The type of work available in each specific location varied significantly, as so much was determined by the specifics of location, the existing economy and the ability to travel for the purposes of employment. Denman Island provided the most convenient access to Vancouver Island and the possibility of off-island work, as the ferry was frequent and the crossing took between ten and fifteen minutes. Hornby Island required two ferries, which made daily commuting both time-consuming and costly. Lasqueti Island provided the greatest challenge to finding off-island work because the ferry did not run every day of the week, the sailings were quite infrequent and from the south end of the island it was a challenge just to reach the ferry terminal. While a ferry was not necessary for most areas of Cape Breton Island, the distances between communities were much greater, and winter road conditions could make travel treacherous. Because
geography was fundamental to the types of work available, the following discussion is
organized by location, rather than by categories of work.

DENMAN ISLAND

At least six of those interviewed on Denman Island recalled that they or their partner
made money in the first couple of years oyster-picking. Manfred Rupp and his wife
Marjo VanTooren were actually potters, but they began this way. Rupp recalled:

The guy I eventually worked for, he was Norwegian [of] very modest means
with his family who was running an oyster business and … that was the one way
to make a buck around here, to at least provide, to be willing to go out in the
cold winter nights when the tide is low and pick oysters, a load of oysters; I
think you used to get 30 bucks a tide or something like that, and a tide means
some four hours you go out [with the tide] to work and move back [as it comes
in] just picking, picking as fast as you can.65

In Marjo VanTooren’s memories she made a lot less money; either she was unable to
pick as fast as Manfred, or his recollection included their combined earnings. VanTooren
also recalled that they considered this to be temporary work:

On pottery there was never a question, but we started out by picking oysters, like
everybody else, to make money. Twelve dollars a tide and the tide was quite
often in the middle of the night, in the pouring rain, but it’s okay, picking until
the tide went down because we always picked the ones under the water. You
had to follow the tide; it changes every day, the time that you work. And then
we started building a workshop and then we started doing pottery again.66

Concha Dennis discussed her husband’s experience:

Tom started out doing oysters on the beach. That soon stopped; it was a cold
hard job that didn’t quite work out. There was another potter on the Island and
said well, he should take up potting; you can always make a living that way, so
basically he started from scratch. Our neighbour over there was doing pottery,
so between all of them he’s still doing it. So I was home and just doing the

65 Manfred Rupp, interviewed on Denman Island, November 27, 2007.
66 Marjo VanTooren, interviewed on Denman Island, November 20, 2007.
garden and raising a child until I got tired of that. So I went back to school, got a job.67

Working off-island on a daily basis was possible for those living on Denman Island but not from Hornby or Lasqueti. In Concha’s case she improved her computer skills and then worked for seventeen years for the provincial government in Courtenay. Harlene Holm took a similar route. Initially she developed an organic apple orchard, at the same time picking up odd-jobs whenever they were available:

When I first moved here I didn’t move with a job, so I had to apply [as a teacher] and I didn’t get a job for almost a year. So in that time I did sanding dry-wall, digging ditches, whatever bits and pieces of work came up and worked as a volunteer with special education kids. … There was nothing I could do even with the orchard and 800 trees … I was stymied because I’m not a good salesperson, whereas the people who now have it are really very good at marketing organic apples.

But after her marriage break-up, the property she purchased did not have even this earning potential, so off-island work seemed her best option:

There [were] a number of teachers and lots of people looking for work, so I ended up going into special education. I have retired, but it was only in the last ten, twelve years that I actually taught senior English again. But I mostly do learning systems, working with students who didn’t have English and working with students who had trouble in math and science and I took half a year off whenever I could. I would work maybe three years, take half a year off, be able to do a half year for a couple of years … depending on … the school’s [willingness] to do that. So it was always up to negotiations… I would have preferred to stay on the land, but there was no way I could, I don’t have the land, I’m not rich, and I don’t come from wealth in terms of families, so I had to earn my keep.68

Although Holm worked off-property, she spent all her discretionary time improving her property, no doubt anticipating eventual retirement from her town job. Her rural Saskatchewan roots and obvious love of working outside have allowed her to not only

67 Concha Dennis, interviewed on Denman Island, May 19, 2005.
68 Harlene Holm, interviewed on Denman Island May 18, 2005.
supplement her income with her garden and small animal husbandry but enrich her community life as she puts her produce, meat and skills to good use as a means of barter.

The one [apple tree] I have here feeds me and other people. The chickens are now keeping me in pocket money. Oh yeah, I have chickens and rabbits, cats and a horse.

Oh I have a ton and a half of compost, it’s all horse shit and around all those trees – you have to be here in the early part of the year when I mow the horse shit – every single fruit tree gets a couple of 5 gallon buckets in the feeder ring around it and after five or six rainfalls, depending on my time I then rake it into the middle. Because it was stripped, essentially, I don’t put on chemical fertilizers, I don’t put on basically anything other than what I have here, although I do fetch seaweed, so the horse is great and the rabbits I keep for the same reason, because rabbit manure is the highest in nitrogen and it doesn’t burn, like chicken manure will burn and rabbit manure gets dotted around my garden and gives it a little feed. And so what I do with the kids, I just got a litter now, I haven’t counted them because they were just born yesterday, is I slaughter them and they go to friends of mine who don’t have a lot of money and they’re mostly English [something] rabbits, so I might sell two or three, but they mostly just go to folks and I trade them for sawdust. A lot of things are trade, like the art work I have that’s trade; I take the head off any chicken for Annie Siegel whenever she wants me to, and prune her fruit trees in exchange for her work. And Michael Venice’s painting and that wooden figure is his and those are both in exchange for home-made wine. I just finally got curtains for my living room after sixteen years; the person who sewed them, I did labour for because she’s got problems with her hips so I pruned and did some digging for her. Which I’m happiest with, and that’s one thing about back-to-thelanders that’s sort of illicit, we do trade if we can and that’s my preference and a fair number of people’s preference rather than slapping down the money and charging them GST and PST. I’m not very keen on the tax man if they spend the money on the war machine and industry. I’m sorry.

When Carmen Saunders arrived on the island, she hoped to continue to make a living with ManFrog, the political theatre troop that she, her first husband and other back-to-the-landers had begun long before they moved to the island. They had travelled as far east as Quebec with their troupe, but many in the group decided to put down roots on Denman Island. Later, she decided to pursue other work instead.

69 She specifies one apple tree because she used to have an entire orchard of them. Now she has one apple tree among her many other fruit trees.
70 Harlene Holm, interviewed on Denman Island, May 18, 2005.
I came with the idea I would be an artist; I was going to make money doing political theatre; I was going to grow all my own vegetables; I was going to build my own house and I would say that kind of worked out for about ten years. So for quite a long period it worked out, until we were gone for such long periods our gardens died. Well, we had to make money and there were several other people at the Lake Farm like Patti and Bev, they’re potters, but then again they’d be gone to the festivals. So there came a point; I had gone to school to be a social worker and then this kind of phenomenon happened of British Columbia opening group homes; it was the beginning of the group home system and ... people who built with us were asked to go to Victoria to run this group home and [when] they got there and thought oh god this needs more people, so they asked us. And at that point it was a phenomenal amount of money; and it was only fifteen days of the month and it was exactly what I wanted to do; take [care of] and counsel juvenile delinquents who just got out of jail. The whole idea was just fascinating. So I did that for ten years. So I’d go down there for fifteen days of the month with David and then we’d come back here and build like crazy; we’d spend all our money on the house and lots of times we’d bring the group-home kids up here too; and we’d get them building and doing stuff they enjoyed... In fact every summer they’d come and spend the summer with us here.  

Leslie Dunsmore and her husband sustained themselves on the island as successful bee-keepers until the Varro mite devastated the industry. Next, her marriage ended and although her husband did not think she deserved half the property, the courts decided otherwise. This allowed her to build her own house and remain on the island, which was not an easy achievement for single women. Because she owed nothing on her house, she was able to remain on the island by picking up any available work. She eventually took the required courses in Victoria to become a certified mediator. By growing most of her own food and keeping her costs down, she was able to develop her art work sufficiently to be able to live on its proceeds and a half-day of work each week at the bookstore in

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71 Carmen Saunders, interviewed on Denman Island, November 28, 2007.
“I do love … my income, ten grand a year, that’s what I live on totally … and I have great fun, and I travel.”

Phyllis Fabbi was another woman who managed to remain on her property after her husband left and, like Saunders and Dunsmore, worked at anything and everything in order to keep her family going:

First of all, we built the studio that’s over there; it was going to be my pottery studio; I was going to be a potter here, my original intention, which never did happen…

I stayed [after her husband left] and just did what I had to do to survive, which was looking after kids and cleaning houses and moving out of my house in the summer and renting it by the week; I did that for twelve years.

Margaret Sinclair talked about the number of single women who, in order to make ends meet, rented out their homes, so clearly, this was not uncommon, and most likely occurred on other Gulf Islands. “It’s a way of bringing in money to keep owning your property. I know many, many single women who get out in the summer and that pays at least their taxes and maybe a new roof.”

Phyllis was quite resourceful and seems to have been always on the lookout for other ways to earn money; when one door closed she sought ways of learning a new skill:

Anything that I could do, just to survive, so I did a lot of different things: part of the craft collective that runs the craft shop downtown so a little bit of money would come from making soap; I’ve been making soap for years and weaving rag rugs and doing all kinds of different crafts, basically. Never did get to the pottery. What I did was I got waylaid into wood-working for a few years, and you know the beautiful table in your house [Orkney Farm], I worked with Victor and his partner of the time, Willa, who built that. For five years I worked with those two and they basically taught me everything. What I did was I went and I learned [how to build with wood] and I built my own kitchen. [I learned] to use the table saw and to make proper joints and sliding dovetails and all that stuff.

72 Samples of which are on her website: http://www.lesliedunsmore.com/ accessed September 3, 2012.
73 Leslie Dunsmore, interviewed on Denman Island, December 11, 2007.
74 Phyllis Fabbi, interviewed on Denman Island, November 5, 2007.
75 Margaret Sinclair, interviewed on Hornby Island, January 16, 2008.
and I ended up working with them building doors and windows and furniture but I ended up wrecking my back being too tense holding the tools, using my body like a machine and always worrying about wasting somebody’s precious piece of wood if you make a mistake. I ended up having to quit; I couldn’t pot either because my back was just a wreck. So that’s why I turned to weaving because you can stand up and weave, and you don’t have to worry about the machine eating you, so you don’t need to be tense. It’s tiring after a few hours but it was the best thing I could do in terms of a physical activity that I could still do.

The fact that she was able to grow so much of her own food is further testament to her resourcefulness because as she stated “I chose badly in terms of land; there was no soil here so I basically made my own soil inch by square inch.” Furthermore, they bought forested land, which, she later realized was a mistake; as the trees on the west coast grow so quickly, she had to regularly cut down trees in order to get sufficient sunlight.

Basically, because of this incredible climate here, one of the big goals was to eat out of the garden every day of the year, and I’ve managed that quite… well I do eat something out of the garden every day of the year; I’ve never quite managed to grow everything. I was always short of potatoes or short of carrots; one or two years I’ve managed to grow enough, but never at the same time and never consistently, but done relatively well at it and I’ve had chickens and rabbits and eggs and all that stuff in the past but I’ve given them up lately; you can’t go away and we’ve got mink and raccoons and chickens here need to be really watched twice a day, so to have somebody come up here twice a day to let the chickens out is a lot to ask. The rabbits I butchered … myself and raised them … [on] the excess from the garden, like the outside cabbage leaves and all that stuff. But hauling all that stuff from my vegetable garden got to be [too difficult] – it’s as steep as the ascent to the site – so I was hauling garbage bags full of cabbage leaves up the hill. I’ve chosen to do it the hard way. We don’t grow wheat here and you still buy the flour and that kind of thing – you don’t need to be so self sufficient. I mean if we had to we could be much more. I’ve been making all my own wild fruit wine the whole time and that’s a lot. The wild plums and the blackberries are one of the best, and whatever people have that there’s too much of [like] the rhubarb out of the garden and that kind of thing too – there’s lots to make wine out of.76

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76 Phyllis Fabbi, interviewed on Denman Island, November 5, 2007.
Phyllis was particularly proud of the fact that “I just decided I wanted to be outside, so I’ve been outside for thirty years, most of the time in poverty, which in a sense is fine.” Moreover she managed to raise three teenagers on $750 a month.  

Making-do was an important philosophy that lay at the heart of Bruce’s thinking and determined the approach he took to shaping a farm and building a sustainable way of life on Denman; minimalism, slow growth and debt avoidance were his watch-words.

This is really, really, poor [soil] but I realize that perennials is the way to go here; just adapt to what you can and live the life you can afford and this is what I can afford. It’s a good place; the seasons are really fast, there’s no kicking back, when I get the garlic in I’ve still got a bunch of tree work to do and then I’ll be starting my spring starts; so it’s just around and around the circle. There’s not that big hiatus you get up in the north where it’s frozen up and you get three months of going to visit your neighbours and hanging out. This is just a different schedule here.

Always had a minimalist thing… hard to not feel like a hypocrite no matter what you do. I try not to buy new… used to do watering-can showers… I’m trying to make a cannery right now – tomatoes, plums, pickles. You know, it’s not just a cannery, we keep seeds of all the root vegetables, we make wine, we make beer… there’s a big [amount of] processing that needs to be done. We have about a dozen producing trees and about 200 coming on line soon so, hazelnuts, and then we’ve got about thirty walnuts, but only two of them are producing and pine nuts, chestnuts, butternuts, almonds, lots and lots of things are coming as the years go by it just gets bigger and bigger and I have to deal with it now and figure out storage and drying. Didn’t think too far ahead when I started... I don’t mind sharing half of it or a third of it with the animals, that’s okay, but I do still want to make it work for us.

Of my informants on Denman Island, ten made their living in crafts, pottery, jewellery, weaving, fine woodwork and painting, all of which was on-island work. Craft sales changed over time from having to ship off island or attend craft fairs in the larger urban centers of Victoria or Vancouver or on Vancouver Island, to finally selling to tourists on-island during the summer months and at the local annual Christmas craft sale.

77 Phyllis Fabbi, interviewed on Denman Island, November 5, 2007.
78 Bruce Holden, interviewed on Denman Island, November 8, 2007.
that continues to attract buyers from nearby Vancouver Island communities. Other on-island work not already discussed included an herbal tea business, carpentry, and a bakery. One person earned/earns a living as a writer and public speaker, another now offers yoga classes, and Annie Siegel makes a living as a jazz singer and artist. Two women, one who used to work as a teacher off-island and one who used to work in the fishery, now have coffee and concession stands at the island’s two ferry docks during the summer months. Finally, one works off island tree-planting and another as a first aid attendant and tree-scaler for the woods industry.

HORNBY ISLAND

While Denman Island was uniformly flat and pastoral, Hornby Island had varied terrain, including a mountain, unusual rock formations and a more accessible shoreline. It was the more popular tourist island; however, all that tourist traffic had to first traverse Denman Island, a source of some resentment on the part of Denmanites. Richard Laskin represents one of the back-to-the-landers who managed to continue working as a professor for a period of time, but eventually gave up the security of his professional position in favour of the lifestyle offered by leaving his property less frequently. Initially he had a tenured faculty position at the University of Saskatchewan, but decided to take every other year off without pay after 1976. “Serena and I decided we don’t mind being downwardly mobile economically; we wanted other things in our life; the freedom to live here.” Finally, in 1981 after a full year’s sabbatical (with pay), he decided it was time to do something else “I resigned from my tenured position at the university which was hard to do; scary, scary, scary.” At that time, Richard was 51 and without a plan:
So a couple of things … happened in our lives. First of all, at that time BC was starting to develop its community college program and they started a community college in Courtenay, which had grown like the proverbial mushroom. I got an invitation to come and read papers of students who were doing correspondence courses at $30 a day; it was quite a come down from being a professor. Within two years I was teaching sociology courses there; the next year they developed the department and for the next ten years, until I turned 65 I was employed teaching sociology at the North Islands Community College… And I was able to arrange with the college that I would teach all my courses on Thursdays and Fridays…

At the same time Serena was doing pottery… and at the same time Serena and I got involved in the food business. … one of the members of the cooperative, in the farm building that we used to sit around in and say ohm and ohm decided they wanted to try to be a bakery; a home occupation, and Serena said she knows how to make food, she would like to participate as well; she’ll make pizzas and sell slices.

Richard added more details about the way in which their pizza business evolved:

Hmmm let me see; do we have to actually grow stuff, or can we use the stuff that’s grown? I know! We’ll use the stuff that’s grown; the flour etcetera and we’ll make pizza. Everybody likes pizza, old people, young people, fat people, thin people, vegetarians, vegans, Chinese people, everybody; little tiny kids won’t eat anything, they’ll eat the top of the pizza or the bottom of the pizza, but there’s a magic about pizza in North America... So we started doing pizza; Serena and I started doing the pizza along with the other families doing a bit of a bakery in 1981, 82, 83…

Once they started to make pizza, the concept just kept growing almost organically, as he and his wife decided they could take their pizza business on the road as itinerant marketers, attending the many fairs on Vancouver Island and eventually down to Vancouver:

[We took a] cooler and a propane stove in the back of our school bus and travel[ed] … around to fairs and we’d set up our booth and try to make enough money to pay for being at the fair while the kids ran around and had a good time.

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80 Ibid.
After a while they decided to keep the business at home, where they operated out of their cooperatively owned building and sold pizza slices to islanders and tourists throughout the summer months, but then the business evolved in a new direction:

We were at the newly created Vancouver Folk Festival and I kept looking around and said honey, we could sell a shit-load of pizza here, right, and so we applied for and zoom! We … were in it for eleven years, the cooperative, led by Serena and I because we knew how to do the pizza business, okay, so we organized.

As a co-operative, they had to pay their property taxes each year, so their idea was that everyone would put in some time at the Vancouver Folk Festival and earn enough money to cover their property taxes. The business was so successful that they were also able to purchase equipment that was useful to the cooperative as a whole.

The pizza business we (she and I) owned but as a cooperative we bought ovens and we took the cooperative to the Courtenay Fair but mainly for eleven years to the Vancouver Folk Festival where we were by far the biggest booth. We were huge, in some weekends, Friday, Saturday and Sunday, we’d sell as many as 4,000 slices of pizza; we’d gross as much as $22,000, and we used that money to buy a truck, to buy a Maytag washer and dryer so we don’t all have to have one... but the point is we used it for these cooperative enterprises; a tractor, a truck, a washer/dryer; we used our communally/cooperatively earned money, ... '85-95, so yes in that sense, we used the farm that we live on as the basis for a cooperative of people to go on this journey so we could earn money so that we could live ... for a period of fifteen or twenty years we have been very much, an active cooperative; we owned the land together, we maintain the land together and we went out to earn money together. Now eventually a couple of things happened, one is we got tired of doing it; another one, people saying now wait a minute now, I could get a job and earn the kind of money; I’d rather put the money in than go there and work, but it was fun to do, it was exciting to do that; to be the people behind the counter that everybody’s looking at while we’re just doing this as a happy family, singing; we’d have thirty and forty people working at a time, it was very exciting, very, very exciting and we had an ace in the hole as a business. [And] ... it was never planned...

Suffice to say, Serena’s idea of selling slices of pizza was timely and their marketing strategy of taking it to where the crowds were gathered for a festival of one sort or

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another was brilliant. By the time they quit, the island tourism and summer cottagers had grown to such an extent that there was no longer a need to take the business on the road. The year preceding our interview, in Richard’s words, their business had “mushroomed into a major, major business; last year we grossed $702,000 doing this business.”

For many years Han VanVught worked away from Hornby Island on a seasonal basis:

We moved to Hornby and I had enough saved up at that point so we could kind of coast for our first year here. … And when the money started to run out I tried [tree] planting and I liked it and I realized I could do the management end of this no problem and did that and that ended up being a 20 year project of going out seasonally and working in Ontario and Alberta and BC and then I decided I’d had enough of Brinkman after fifteen years and then I started training Native bands on the north coast here … so after five years I decided no more helicopters, no more float planes and so whatever you kind of focus on has the opportunity of flowering so if you want a life here on Hornby, focus here. And so we started focussing here and now we have the businesses at the Bakery in the summer.

Han’s wife Laura explained that in the early years they were able to combine work off-island with Unemployment Insurance Commission (UIC, now called Employment Insurance [EI]):

When we first moved here we rented – Han started working in tree planting, supervising … [and] I gave birth in the first year. I started teaching dance here, I was teaching 3 days a week, I taught through my pregnancy and he went out after I gave birth for 4 months, to the bush and then he was getting EI after that, which was helping us get through and then we ended up, after three years, joining Syzygy and I started to go out into the bush with him and cook and take our kids with us, so we would not only live here and build, we started with a trailer for the first year; we spent that winter in Mexico and then come spring we headed out to live in camps and live in the bush for 5 months, with our daughter, and then we both got EI during the winter months and that went on for quite a

82 Ibid.
84 Han VanVugt, interviewed on Hornby Island, November 25, 2007.
few years. Then we put up that very small cabin, which was … 10 by 16 or something and we had a trailer attached to that and sometimes I would go away with him and sometimes he would go away for four months; it just depended on the situation. I wasn’t there [tree planting] all the time but for about three or four years … I would go with him and cook, with the kids. One year we left Chantal here with a friend because she refused to go; she was three going on four.85

Carol Quinn and her first husband moved to Canada from the east coast of the United States when the country was recruiting university faculty. The best offer came from the University of Victoria. Five years later they decided to buy land on Hornby Island and for the first year her husband Peter commuted, “and then he quit.” Commuting from Hornby Island would have been extremely difficult, and would have required that he be absent from the island for the duration of his work week. Richard Laskin, as we learned above, did just that, but was able to condense his work-week. Furthermore, his commute was short and it would have been possible for him to return home in the middle of the week if it was suddenly necessary. Victoria, however, is a long-distance drive. Peter, like so many who managed to remain on the islands, chose to be flexible and made his location more important than his earning ability. Like Phyllis on Denman, he sought out the skills that would sustain his chosen way of life:

He started working as an electrician here with the old guy who was not an electrician and doing a shoddy job wiring houses; he studied to be C code and he was able to study to get his license, so he’s been a licensed electrician ever since then. Once he did that he realized that he was tired of teaching; philosophy of science was what he was writing his thesis in and he never returned to it. He became more interested in eastern religion. Actually, he became very monkish in the end and we had a lot of communication problems, me and the kids, so we eventually parted ways and he let me buy him out.86

Throughout this period, their financial strategy had included raising goats and chickens. Carol was an artist and for more than twelve years also worked at the local post office.

85 Laura May, interviewed on Hornby Island, December 6, 2007.
86 Carol Quinn, interviewed on Hornby Island, January 23, 2008.
Eventually she married again, and she and her husband ran a nursery which sold rose
stock across Canada.

Jan Bevan, who, with her husband, alienated land from the Crown, found a rather
unusual way of making additional money in order to finish paying bills and acquire a
good truck:

We actually ended up living for three years on another island, a private island
we were caretaking for a millionaire to have a steady income which allowed us
to buy that truck and pay down this land. So we paid this off and we’ve never
had a mortgage and except for buying that truck we haven’t had time payments.
So it’s been cash and so the cash comes in and it’s whatever work you can find,
fingernail existence on these islands. And do without, make it yourself, repair it,
get it cheap, get it free and we live a really good life, such that for the past
several years I’ve been teaching this to people on a daily basis in the summer,
but most of them go “oh, it’s so much work; how could I live without my
microwave?” “You don’t have a washing machine?” That’s right.87

Margaret Sinclair, like other women on their own, was willing to take on completely
new tasks in order to make ends meet. Living in her tent for a year on Mount Gregory
with little in the way of savings, she had to find a way to buy her basic supplies:

I had very little income but that was … the first year that the herring fishery
went absolutely crazy; the Japanese were buying herring roe, primarily, and so a
few of us from Hornby made a trek to Vancouver [where] we had employment
for a few weeks packing herring, and it was insane. You would be in this big
building, taking roe and packing herring and everybody there were basically
hippies like us from all over the islands and somebody would be coming along
down the line of herring packers giving them joints all along the way; people
working long hours and it got really crazy but three weeks worth of hourly
wages, which would be high wages by our standards at that time, was enough,
pretty much to keep me for the winter. And I lived on a sack of oats and a sack
of rice and I would buy potatoes; I ate a lot of starch, a LOT of starch and cheese
on top of that and then oysters from the beach and that’s what kept me going
until it came time to pick nettles in the spring and then I had greens.88

88 Margaret Sinclair, interviewed on Hornby Island, January 16, 2008.
LASQUETI ISLAND

This is perhaps the only location in the country with a phone book alphabetized by first name, with a separate “Children’s List.” Decorated with a large mosquito, it is called Lasqueti Island Phone List “Use it when you’re itchin’ to call.” As on the other northern Gulf Islands, paid employment was scarce. However, as Christine Ferris discovered, seasonal work could occasionally be found that would at least provide money for basic food:

So you did things like paint the fish boats, or every year the ferry needed a refit and the fellow who owned the ferry boat and was the captain, was a real character and he would hire some of us to paint and all that kind of stuff and you just lived as cheaply as you could. And you didn’t [go] to Vancouver; you didn’t do anything expensive, you just stayed on Lasqueti. And nobody had cars, I think there were, … among the people our age – the early 20s – there was maybe one person that had a car. So everybody walked; nobody had telephones and we all just used kerosene lamps and stuff.89

Minimalist living was a common theme among back-to-the-landers, wherever they lived. Like Margaret Sinclair, Christine Ferris also worked in the cannery, but she worked the night shift which probably allowed her to earn additional money:

I chose … to come to Vancouver and work in a fish cannery during herring season. So there’d be an intense, well I can’t remember how long it would last, not more than a month and we always worked at the same cannery down at the foot of Gore Street in Vancouver, Canadian Fish Company, because they had a harder time getting people to work – they had their regular crew that would shift over to herring, but they needed night shift workers and it was pretty good because you could make two or three thousand dollars which then seemed like a lot of money. So we’d come to town and find a place to stay or a few times we came and stayed on boats and we’d just go and work every night, worked twelve and fourteen hour shifts and then take all the money back to Lasqueti and other people did tree planting and it was a similar thing, you just do that one, fairly short intense bit of work and then you have enough money to last you for a while.

89 Christine Ferris, interviewed in Vancouver, January 1, 2008.
She and her friends took an inventive and resourceful approach to finding inexpensive ways to feed themselves:

One of the things I remember really clearly from that time was you could buy, there was a place in Qualicum, a farmer in Qualicum Beach, who raised potatoes and he sold his culls to pig farmers for 50 cents a pound, so we would buy these big sacks of potatoes and cheap oil and you could also get onions cheap and I just remember cooking these massive pans of greasy fried potatoes, but you can eat that when you’re 19 and 20 and you’re okay! And then this other guy who was living there discovered that at Buckerfield’s Feed we could buy calf replacer; it’s what they feed calves when they take them off the milk-cow, so it’s probably disgusting, I mean it’s probably got hormones, antibiotics and animal by-products in it, but he discovered that it would make really great yogurt and it was really inexpensive. So we’d buy these fifty pound sacks – it was called ‘full-of-vim’ – and we’d make yogurt, so we’d have yogurt and fried potatoes and oysters and sometimes somebody would shoot a sheep, you know and then homemade beer and wine and the wine was made out of almost anything. And then a couple of people decided to try to make stills and those were not great successes and you can get in a lot of trouble with that.

Living with friends in similar circumstances provided a sense of family and community for Christine and others; a shared vision and shared hardship brought them together.

Christine argued that “for me at that time, there was a real sense of community. It was because I had left home so early and because I didn’t feel that my family was a family for me anymore.” In fact, Carmen Saunders of Denman Island and Bonnie Thompson of Cape Breton Island, both referred to the feeling of family towards those with whom they had lived and shared good times and hardship in their early years. This was not an unusual sentiment for the times and comes from the fact that there were so many young people, living and learning as pseudo families and “living otherwise from the mainstream of society, if only momentarily.” As one of Stuart Henderson’s informants expressed it,

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90 There were feral sheep on the island, dating back to the late nineteenth century.
“there was the straight world, and it was sort of the enemy. And you had the sense of being part of a group … there was the straight world, and us.”\(^{93}\)

Bonnie Olesko and her husband had also arrived from the United States, but unlike Christine and her group, they had legally immigrated to the country. Like the majority of back-to-the-landers they came with at least a small amount of money but most of it seems to have been spent on the land. They did their best to live frugally, which in their case included welfare, and small cheques and care packages from home.

We had a cooperative garden … cleared by hand; we didn’t have the money for a wheel barrow. We went on welfare, all of us … had fake Vancouver addresses and the guys went in once a month to see the social worker and say they had looked for work; we did this for about a year and a half. Then we had baby bonuses which was $40 or $60 a month, which would probably seem like $200 a month now; it was enough to go for a good grocery shop I remember thinking. Allan would take any bit of work he could, but he was mostly working on the farm … and our parents would send us little pay cheques and … his mother’s boxes of cookies we’d live off … and there’d be a dozen eggs and some cheese for the next two weeks, but we didn’t care. And we started really loving it here; it started making sense and there were probably eight or nine couples at that point who were doing the same thing.

There was also the issue of the alternative economy that flourished on Lasqueti Island, although, clearly, not everyone was as well adapted to production as others:

We learned a lot; we read, we lived a life of hard work and there wasn’t any money to be made here. Pot growing had started; I never did learn to smoke pot and Allan wasn’t a big pot smoker either, but we tried gardening pot, one year. Too much paranoia; Allan couldn’t enjoy it at all. Every time a helicopter went over his hair would [rise] up and we failed miserably at that attempt. This little plot way up in the middle of nowhere that they kept forgetting to go up and water, yeah we were lousy pot growers, so we did what we could.\(^{94}\)

Evidently it could supply a significant income, for some, but could not be relied upon, because a crop could be lost in an instant and criminal proceedings were a further risk.

\(^{93}\) Henderson, *Making the Scene*, p. 120.

Because the Gulf Islands are an ideal place for expensive summer homes, back-to-the-landers had access to reusable, often high-quality, goods ranging from clothing to appliances and furniture to books and magazines, all conveniently located at the local dump. While this was never discussed by those on the east coast, it was an important feature for many on the west coast. In fact, Hornby laid claim to establishing the first “free store” in the region, developed from sorting through items left at the landfill. On Denman Island, Phyllis Fabbi was instrumental in starting recycling. The need to find a location for collecting eventually evolved into securing the school building that was no longer in use. This then became a community centre with a free store in the basement, meeting rooms and a weaving room upstairs, as well as a location for recycling.

“But Nobody buys clothes any more, ever; in fact Hornby and Denman have fashion shows – in store fashion shows!”95 On Mayne, even closer to Vancouver, Ron Pither could furnish his entire house and find agricultural tools at the dump or in the city:

And most of the furniture you see here ... is found stuff; the electronics, the household appliances; the lamps, well the floor is cork, yeah, but that magazine rack, my tools. I’ve bought very few. That roto-tiller is the first new out of the box farm purchase, after 25 years of farming; I finally got tired of fixing old ones I would find in the dump. That was the first new piece of farm machinery I ever bought. Everything else has been used, like that red tractor; it’s a 1963 and matched another one I found somewhere. But the recycling really taught me to look at what was going in and what was going out in terms of usable stuff, but what I was aghast at was what was going out into the waste stream and you know I just really got into scrounging. My girlfriend used to hate when I would go to Vancouver, because I would only drive the back alleys and I wouldn’t return on the ferry until I had a full load.96

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95 Phyllis Fabbi, interviewed on Denman Island, November 5, 2007.
CAPE BRETON ISLAND

Those who settled within driving range of Baddeck in Cape Breton had greater access to work in the seasonal tourist industry, work that would provide Unemployment Insurance over the winter months. Women frequently found work at the local seniors’ home and many worked as guides at the Alexander Graham Bell Museum. Sharon Morrow worked as a nurse’s aid for years while her husband Jim drove the school bus, which allowed him greater involvement in childcare. Eventually Jim was able to fulfill his dream of beginning a newspaper, *The Victoria Standard*, which also provides employment to two or three local residents.

Most common in the outlying regions was resource work in the woods, the fishery or farming. Tree planting was a much larger industry on the west coast, but it was not unique to that coast, and at least five Cape Breton back-to-the-landers worked in the industry, three of whom were women. Bev Brett described her tree-planting experience and how it suited the lifestyle she desired:

The whole big thing about Cape Breton, the attractiveness was the lifestyle. I mean we really didn't want to work at regular types of nine-to-five jobs; we wanted to work on our land and stuff like that and have … nice gardens. … We weren't under any kind of illusion; I'd say we weren't prepared or interested in trying to be totally self-sufficient off the land. You know to a certain degree have gardens and we didn't have power for eight years, … which is longer than a lot of people. And I guess a couple of years without a phone; we finally got a phone. But anyway, thought we could live simply off EI or whatever … and in those days we were all having a ball. I mean, we were all (Laughter) you know lots of parties and dances and … helping each other build houses and yes, just enjoying life and then working when you had to, to make enough money … get some stamps. … We … started the St. Anne's Silviculture … tree planting, and that started around 1980-81. So then that made for … sort of my perfect little lifestyle and that was lots of money, too, because we were really good at it. So that was like a thousand bucks in a week if you really killed yourself … planting trees, [so you could] get the highest stamps. You work in the spring and the fall. You enjoy yourself during the summer, and do theatre in the winter.97

97 Bev Brett, interviewed in Cape Breton, March 1, 2003.
As we have seen, fishing was a way of life along the North Shore of Cape Breton and with the exodus of so many Cape Breton youth to parts west, there was a shortage of people to help on the boats, let alone experienced fishers to step into the shoes and buy the licenses of those who retired. Fred Lawrence, who became a licensed fisher in Meat Cove and later Bay St. Lawrence, was the only person to arrive with previous fishing experience. Fred became an integral member of the local fishing community and not only is he secretary of the Board of Directors of the Harbour Authority, but for the “past fifteen years [he’s been recording secretary for] the Board of Directors of Victoria Co-op Fisheries.” He explained that six decades ago the five northern harbours in the region decided to form the cooperative, “which is wholly owned by the local fishermen.”

When I got on the board it was $750,000 a year business and it’s now a $20 million a year business; we always run in the black, we’ve got a fish plant where we process lobster, crab, cod fish, whatever, and we ship all over the world and we’ve got a million and a half dollar payroll, three or four semi trucks, seven or eight ice plants and things like that.98

Fred clearly takes pride in their joint accomplishments and he was also quite appreciative of the efficient ways the local fishing community had developed to get around not having access to some of the more costly equipment available to similar communities elsewhere.

Fred was not the only person to acquire a license to fish. His wife, Margrit, discussed in the next chapter, got her license, and a young man from Montreal, Adam, not only became a licensed fisher, but also the head of the Fishermen’s Union for that region. Adam’s wife also worked on his boat as his assistant. Adam learned to fish along with many of the other back-to-the-land men in the community, but first as an assistant to a

98 Fred Lawrence, interviewed in Cape Breton, November 7, 2006.
particular fisherman, and then when the fisherman got sick, Adam took his boat out for him:

This port is almost a model as far as the way people really work together … I was running the boat for the fellow I took over from for a couple of years. People appreciated that I was doing my best to keep this thing going for him, so they were very helpful. And once I took over myself they were very, very helpful and encouraging and they did everything in the world to help me get going. And all I had to do was follow the example of everybody else; it made life much easier.99

John Roberts was also crew on the fishing boats. The fishing season itself was relatively short but he explained that “most of the men in the area, young and old all were involved in fishing for at least the two month lobster fishery and then afterwards for mackerel and codfish, and so, I mean I fished and the others too who moved in here…” John was crew from about 1973 until 1990.

Larry Mikol’s reflections on his farm in Cape Breton at the end of the growing season, embody why so many of his generation chose a place in the country and illustrate his deep satisfaction with his decision. About two years after interviewing Larry I received word that he was battling cancer and later died. He was passionate about the work he had accomplished in Cape Breton and that makes his words even more poignant today:

Our place had not been ploughed in forty years, so there were a lot of trees, but still there was some pasture and it had potential; we could clear it little by little, which we did. And the last year I cut the hay there, something I had been trying to do for thirty years, it was like up to there – [indicated waist/chest high].

We always had fresh eggs; to me just having fresh eggs was something, but again I spent some really lean years in Quebec looking after people’s farms and hardly eating anything and see my problem is I’m a fussy eater; I don’t like rice and all the hippies were eating brown rice and I hate rice. But anyhow I found a new dish; I taught Donna to make fried potatoes and onions and we ate that a lot. So I always learned throughout all my travelling in the US and my bumming

99 Adam (a pseudonym), interviewed in Cape Breton, October 29, 2006.
days to get restaurant jobs because at least you’re going to eat good, you know? So the farm was just an extension of a way of getting food, to have that security of food.

So then I came to like potatoes which became my next favourite vegetable, which grow so easily, so plentiful, they’re so good because you can do so many things with them, and they store well. It’s a great, practical vegetable. And it turns out that farm was good for potatoes, so we did sell a lot of potatoes. Most of them were organic before organic became popular. Because I just basically used manure, built up the soil with it, I got to do that. Potatoes, you see they’re not ready ‘till about this time. [November] Because they’re so late, you have to wait almost to the middle or the end of June to plant them, here on the meadow. … But you end up digging them up in early November. [about 9 C. and rain coming down like a waterfall outside as he speaks] And this is what you’re up against, or already snow in the drills. So it was also a miserable job, digging. Finally my neighbour let me have his potato digging plough, which was a big boon to us. It would lift them up, rather than digging each hole, you know back-breaking work.

And the funny thing about the farm was at the end of the year, come September, October, November you’re looking at all this produce and that hay and those fat animals sitting there, fat from the summer and the freezer full, you felt secure. You were okay for the winter; you didn’t have to worry all winter. It didn’t matter how much snow, if the car broke down, it really didn’t matter because you had no job you had to go to; you were going to eat and you had at least the $900 to pay your taxes. That’s it. What else was there to worry about? Everything else was kind of extra. It’s a simple lifestyle but that’s what made me realize the security level; made me realize that what people really want is security.100

Artisanal production of jewelry, pottery, leather goods, textiles, wood products and artwork were common ways to make a living on both coasts. It was one thing to be a skilled craftsperson, but production, display and marketing were all necessary components to success and each step took time, energy and experience through trial and error.

John Roberts turned his attention from his initial work in local resources to focus his full-time attention on the leatherwork store he and his wife had opened in 1988. Once the store was well established they became employers of about three to four people on a

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100 Larry Mikol, interviewed in Cape Breton, November 9, 2006.
seasonal basis. John also spent years working as a volunteer fireman and first responder for a community comprising more than 600 people stretched along about 60 to 70 kilometers of road.\textsuperscript{101}

Mary Ann Wilson worked for John for years producing leather products; Carol Kennedy arrived in Cape Breton as a well-established photographer and continued in that line of work. Otis Tomas, discussed in the preceding chapter, became a talented and successful luthier and his wife Deannie became a potter and opened her own store, which required staff. Marcelle Lavoie and her husband Mike Crimp opened a gas station and local store in Wreck Cove. Marcelle recalled that they were considered capitalists by the back-to-the-land community, and hippies by the local community, which left her wondering just where she fit in. Although she and Mike later divorced, she continues to run the general store and gas bar, while Mike has opened a kayak adventure business nearby.

Bev Brett, following her Muse, started a theatre company, and one that ultimately had considerable success.

I had never directed so I just said, "Okay, if we're going to do any theatre I guess I've got to direct it" so I just found an old standby, the Mousetrap … called for auditions and … just the right amount of people showed up and then the theatre company started. And it was neat. … Because it was pretty well half come-from-aways and half local people and I think that mixture has stayed the same throughout the whole history of the St. Anne's Bay Players. And my whole philosophy was that I wanted to do theatre in the community [reflective of] the people in the community, because then I moved into doing stuff with [a] Celtic background to it to reflect the community.\textsuperscript{102}

In fact, Brett later wrote a play about the history of the group of settlers who sailed from Scotland, first settled in Pictou, Nova Scotia, later moved to St. Anne’s Bay, Cape Breton

\textsuperscript{101} John Roberts, interviewed in Cape Breton, August, 2003.
\textsuperscript{102} Bev Brett, interviewed in Cape Breton, March 1, 2003.
and then later departed for Waipoo, New Zealand. This play was so successful that she and the entire troop were invited to perform in New Zealand. *The Margaret*, the play taken to New Zealand, received help from numerous funding agencies including the Canada Council, the Nova Scotia Arts Council, Banff Playwrites colony, and Department of Tourism and Culture. The St. Anne’s Bay Players was formed in 1980 and they continue to provide the region with plays developed from themes of local history and culture.

**CONCLUSION**

Relocating to the countryside required property first. In Cape Breton, that generally meant buying land, although caretaking a property was sometimes an option. Most began resettlement after an arduous search along back country roads of the region, where they learned to look not for a “for sale” sign, but instead for the tell-tale signs of an abandoned house or barn. After locating a possibility, a search for the owner began, though frequently a neighbour would have the answer. Possibilities for settlement on the west coast Gulf Islands were broader, as they included, besides caretaking and buying, options not available on the east coast: alienating crown land, purchasing as a cooperative, or squatting. By far the most popular means of gaining a legitimate foothold on the islands was through a co-operative purchase of land, while on Lasqueti squatting was, for many, the preliminary means of settlement. It had an abundance of land owned by absentee landlords, some of whom granted permission after the fact. The entire process of finding a place to settle, along with the actual purchase of land, could take

months for some, but for a sizeable majority it was done in a heartbeat, often with a handshake. Group purchasers often consisted of couples unknown to each other.

Building differed between coasts due to the availability of vastly different resources. Property on Cape Breton most often included a wood-lot, so that log-cabins/homes were not uncommon. Additionally, the relative abundance of small sawmills made it possible to purchase locally produced lumber. Abandoned farms frequently included an old farm building in varying states of collapse that could be renovated. Land on the west coast had frequently been logged and then sold with little wood left standing, so building was necessary. Scrounging from the beach or from the local dump was fundamental to the west coast back-to-the-landers. Many considered the island beaches as their lumber-yard, a source of salvageable well-cured logs. The dump was a great place for hardware; even car parts, and tools were available there, free for the taking. Some enterprising builders placed bids on property that was to be torn down, and found hardware, lumber and even windows, doors and glass. Dragging an intact house from one location to another was another possibility. Because builders’ skills varied from the complete novice to the experienced and talented, no two houses looked the same; some were highly original, verging on being works of art.

Making ends meet was equally dictated by geography, local industries and local culture. Fishing was the basis of the economy along the North Shore of Cape Breton, in which many of the incoming young men found work and thereby became well integrated with members of the community. Work in the fishing industry on the west coast usually came in the form of work in a cannery, or work picking oysters, both of which included women. As a food source, oysters and salmon (caught from a small boat) provided those
in the west with what, at the time, seemed a boundless and nourishing source of protein in the early years. Artisanal work in a variety of mediums from leather products to silver jewelry to pottery and weaving were frequently a source of income on both coasts, as were other forms of entrepreneurialism. Work in the woods industry was common on the east and on the west coast. Cutting pulp-wood, whether eight foot logs for the local market or four foot, peeled logs for the foreign market was the type of woods work available in the east, but not on the west coast, where the trees were much larger. A tree-planting company was formed by back-to-the-landers in Cape Breton, which allowed women as well as men to make excellent wages for a short period of time. Tree-planting was the most widespread form of forest work on the west coast.

Key to making ends meet was keeping costs low, whether it was for land, housing or general living expenses. A garden was essential to the entire project; clothes were almost always second-hand and furnishing the home was also second-hand or on the west coast sourced from the dump. Back-to-the-landers took a creative approach to securing an income and made good use of UIC. Success as a back-to-the-lander required a willingness to make-do, a flexible approach to earning money, one that included a willingness to learn an entirely new skill in order to spend as little time as possible away from one’s chosen land, home and community.
Chapter 4
SEPARATE SPHERES AGAIN? GENDERED ROLES AND RURAL LIVING

When we think of the move back-to-the-land in this era, we have so far been considering certain underlying commonalities of experience that define the movement. Yet these shared experiences look vastly different filtered through a gendered lens. It is argued that we are not born with an ingrained program of what it means to be gendered male or female. Gender identity, goes the argument, is shaped within the “confines of social taboos and expectations … developed within specific social and historical contexts.” As gendered members within a specific society, we spend years learning how to play the role expected by those around us.

Etched into Canadian society were deeply held notions of what constituted proper and acceptable roles for both men and women based on patriarchal values. Notions of normal behaviour were imparted both subtly, through the daily observations of childhood, and not so subtly through school programs, magazine articles, radio and television. More insidious are the ways in which normative behaviour is absorbed and reproduced by the individual through mechanisms of self regulation. Mona Gleason, in Normalizing the Ideal: Psychology, Schooling, and the Family in Postwar Canada, describes this process as that of a net, which shapes but does not completely control behaviour. “Regulation or normalization,” she argues, “represents socially and historically contingent processes whereby some behaviours and attitudes come to be labelled as normal and good while

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others come to be labelled as deviant and bad.”2 Pushing against these deeply ingrained values took persistence, bravery or sheer doggedness over the long term.

An undercurrent of resistance to these normative roles for women had existed throughout the century from the suffragists in the first two decades, to the Voice of Women in the post-war years, but this current became stronger as more women raised their voices in protest.3 Women’s response to the new ideas of feminism, however, found them divided, feeling threatened, and left to deal with the push-back from men, argued Valerie J. Korinek in her analysis of *Chatelaine Magazine*.4 It must be remembered that the Royal Commission on the Status of Women was only established in 1967 and the report was not published until 1970. As Mary Kinnear, author of *A Female Economy: Women’s Work in a Prairie Province, 1870-1970*, makes clear, “the society into which the report was launched remained … an amalgam of contradictory attitudes, many of which refused to go away after 1970;” and that included “the notion of female dependency,” which she argued, “died hard.”5 In the latter part of the 1960s, many young and not so young women, touched by these new ideas of women’s role in society actively engaged in changing how they acted out their gendered identity. The women who moved back-to-the-land struggled with the implications of these new ideas, as most of them found themselves cast into the traditional roles assumed by rural women of the past

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century, which left them to accept, reject or strive for a middle path between these competing polarities.

Women were anything but equal to their male counterparts in urban society, but living in a rural location came with its own, often unexpected, challenges for women moving back-to-the-land. Anticipating the demands of rural life from an urban armchair was difficult. As women began negotiating their feminine identity within new rural surroundings, they were not only shaped by their own historical and culturally specific expectations and limitations, but also by the expectations of their husband or partner and by rural social customs. The physicality of rural work, even if one was not actively farming, added a new dimension to role expression. As historian Louise Carbert notes, “[t]he physically onerous side of farming seems to exacerbate differences between men and women, thus accentuating women’s relative frailty and dependence on men.”

Gender conditioning not only made it less likely that men would partake of the inside work, but it also meant that women would be unlikely to have acquired the strength, the skills or confidence to contribute to the outside work. The response of back-to-the-land women and men to their new life outside the urban environment, and outside their comfort zone, varied enormously. Such challenges were only made more so given the changing times and the rise of women’s awareness that their lives could be enriched in ways not imagined by their grandmothers. Perhaps the greatest puzzle for back-to-the-land women was finding self-fulfillment in their lives whatever they chose to do, including the choice to take on the role traditionally expected of women, but preferably not with the status of a second class citizen.

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Patterns of work on the modern homestead both inside and outside the home continued to be determined by gender. Rebecca Kneale Gould asked “does back-to-the-land mean back to the kitchen for women?” but the real question concerns whether women ever really left the kitchen in the first place. Aspirations for an equitable distribution of household chores would remain just that for most women for the foreseeable future. Women’s ability to achieve greater equality in the workplace or in gaining access to educational programs and degrees stood a much better chance of change than did the reallocation of household chores, including childrearing and childcare. How individuals and couples negotiated changes to the demands on their time and approach to work on a rural property varied significantly and changed over the life course.

Geographic change did not necessarily equate with cultural change; the young of the 1970s had been socialized in paternalistic values, which were not so easily altered, and such changes were naturally more difficult for men, as they were less likely to recognize the need for change and because they had more to lose than gain.

Jeffrey Jacob, for instance, author of New Pioneers: The Back-to-the-Land Movement and the Search for a Sustainable Future, discovered that overall chores such as gardening and animal care were fairly evenly distributed between the wife and the husband, or jointly shared. Women, he argued, were a little more likely to have greater responsibility for the garden and men slightly more likely to care for the animals. Repair work, however was likely to be done by the husband for 79 percent of the respondents. Housework, on the other hand, was generally done by women: preparing meals, 76

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percent, washing dishes, 74 percent and housecleaning, 80 percent. As Jacob rightly argues, it is small wonder women in his survey were twice as likely to be dissatisfied with the division of household chores as men, in addition to which they “carry the primary responsibility for taking care of the children.” The never-ending and constant burden of preparing meals, washing the dishes and cleaning the house does not change with the seasons, and remains the same in city or countryside. If anything these daily chores were often made more difficult on the homestead due to the use of older technologies. Older and simpler forms of technology such as the wood stove and butter churn were thought to be superior and conformed to the thinking found in popular texts such as Small is Beautiful. Curiously enough, however, seldom was the chainsaw replaced with the axe or the crosscut saw.

Back-to-the-landers often found the first few years the most difficult. Building, clearing land, caring for farm animals, or running farm equipment all involved new skills that had to be mastered. This work was most easily accomplished with a masculine skill set, which not all men held in equal measure, but their greater physical strength often helped. A number of women wanted to learn these new skills and share the workload because they found this type of work exciting, but as Jacob notes, men were less excited about sharing the work of meal preparation, child care and housework. As historian David Jeremiah Vail discovered in his investigation of 1970s era Maine small organic producers, most of whom were drawn from an urban background (in other words, back-to-the-landers): “Small organic farmers put great emphasis on the ‘Tolstoyan virtue’ of manual work, on individual (or household) self-reliance and on ‘traditional’ gender

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9 Ibid., p. 139.
Most identified with, and thought they were a part of, “the movement to create an ecological, decentralized and human-scaled ‘post-industrial’ society.” Yet although these small farmers thought of themselves as different from “conventional commercial farmers,” and considered the large-scale, “chemical-intensive” farmer to be “a part of the problem,” they adopted the same gendered approach to work as did the large commercial farmers. He speculated that the reason for this attitude was in part due to a lack of feminist awareness on the part of both men and women “and its other side, an unconscious acceptance of agrarian patriarchy and its associated division of labour.”

In concert with Vail’s findings, Juan Barker of Denman Island, in reference to the masculine perspective, argued that “certainly there was little or no consciousness around gender issues … in those days, I mean zilch.” This comment came from the only man encountered in my research who chose to speak about the challenges women faced living the “simple life.” If these university educated men had scant awareness of feminist issues, those living in the rural locations to which they moved were much closer to and more reflective of agrarian patriarchy, which in turn would have subtly re-enforced a gendered division of labour for the new settlers. Furthermore, as Vail discovered, not all women wanted to do the heavy physical work and decided the gendered division of labour made sense, especially when the labour of both was needed to maintain financial viability. The sheer amount of work required to maintain a rural household, especially when using nineteenth century technology, tended to even out the burdens. Vail explains

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11 Ibid., 28.
12 Ibid.
13 Juan Barker, interviewed on Denman Island, November 28, 2007.
that under such circumstances it was common “to cope” with such conditions “by falling back on pre-existing skills and roles: he repairs the truck … while she puts up preserves …”

Moving back-to-the-land included a determination to work for oneself if possible. Working in the high modernist cities of post war 1950s and 1960s was alienating at best and even if, as Christopher Dummitt posits, modernism and manliness were intricately linked, providing de facto privilege to men, men continued to search for work that had meaning. Independence and five acres was an ideal for which many strove in order to gain control over their time and labour. Men who undertook this escape from the ambiguities and confines of urban life would naturally choose a life that everyone could understand as manly – whether this was their explicit goal or just implicit in their decisions and choices. As John Tosh argues, in discussing the nineteenth century, the “qualification for a man's life among men … depends on their masculinity being tested against the recognition of their peers.” Though much changed over the course of the twentieth century, there can be no doubt that men still felt a need to prove to themselves and their fathers and peers that they had achieved manhood. And even if, as Anthony Rotondo argues, “manhood in our time is about achievement, reason, and inner

strength,” there was still no ambiguity that logging and house building, fishing and hunting for food, were archetypal male skills.

While not all of these skills were necessary for every back-to-the-lander, for some men a significant attraction of the movement lay in these very masculine tasks. Many had owner-built homes, which served as visual and material evidence of their skill, resourcefulness and ingenuity. Doug Hopwood found great comfort and reassurance in his achievements on the land he owned on Lasqueti Island.

That was a burning need for me when I was in my 20s, you know, build my house, have my own land, enjoy going out catching fish, all those kinds of things. If I hadn’t had the chance to do that I think I’d be a very frustrated and bitter person …

And I really enjoyed, more as a younger man than now, having the self image of somebody who could do things, could build a house, could cut down trees; could fix machines, you know, it’s kind of a – it gave a lot for my self image. And I think a lot of us are self motivated by what kind of image of ourselves are we going to see by doing it? And it was something I wanted, so yeah it was pretty satisfying. Adam, on the other hand, did not feel confident about his carpentry skills, but he did become a successful fisherman, for which he felt obvious pride, and the income then allowed him choices.

When I started to make money … I guess I felt that finally I had a specialty, which was fishing, which I enjoyed and was able to do and it made me able to afford to hire somebody who was the better carpenter and I could get them to do the work and I would work with them because I enjoyed the work but I was glad to let them call the shots because they knew much better than me and that was the way I could learn, too, I suppose.

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20 Doug Hopwood, interviewed in Vancouver, January 5, 2008. Today, Doug and his wife Chris maintain a small apartment in downtown Vancouver which was where I interviewed them, rather than on their property on Lasqueti Island.
21 Adam, (a pseudonym), interviewed in Cape Breton, November 2006.
Writing of the colonial era, E. Anthony Rotundo describes a man’s identity as shaped also by his community involvement. In his words, “a man’s identity was inseparable from the duties he owed to his community.” Given that many back-to-the-landers’ lives were bounded and embedded in a specific place and a specific community, there are strong similarities to the world in which Rotundo locates his description of “communal manhood,” at least as far as work and relationship to community are concerned. For example, Adam felt strongly that he needed to “give back” to the community that was so welcoming to him, and in so doing, he “fulfilled himself through public usefulness.”

All the skills that I need today, whether it’s working in the woods or working on the land or on the water, certainly I have learned from local people and it’s been a wonderful experience. I guess I’ve done what I could, I work for the fishermen’s union and I’m the Chairman of the Harbour Authority and I also chaired a forestry cooperative for many years that I kind of helped found in this area, so in those ways I guess I’ve tried to give something back. Now I’ve kind of left all those so I’m trying to be … involved more in the fire department. You know we’re lucky I suppose that our work doesn’t involve a hundred percent of our time so we have a lot of spare time so I know the people I admire the most … try to do the same, … give back a lot of that time to the community.

The back-to-the-land movement included an inclination to discard as many symbols and conveniences of the modern world as possible. For women, much as they tried to resist an equivalent return to separate spheres, the very nature of rural life made that difficult. It was one thing to contemplate a more equal distribution of chores in the city when both partners worked outside the home with equal time off in which to accomplish all that needed to be done. The key, as Sandy Kennedy noted in the *Rag and Bone*, was that women learn to take pleasure in their work, whatever the task:

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23 Adam, (a pseudonym), interviewed in Cape Breton, November 2006.
Certainly we have returned to a more traditional way of expressing our womanhood, and certainly the roles evolved by men and women here have become more separate than many of us experienced in our “liberated” city existences. And I do like to think that to a great extent this kind of evolution has been beneficial and enlightening, the freedom gained by this alternate life style enabling us to thoroughly respect and enjoy most of our daily activities.24

This “evolution” – really a stark change in status when compared to holding a professional position in the city – was more than some women had bargained for; in fact it was not difficult to run into women who wondered why on earth any woman in her right mind would want to move back-to-the-land and saddle herself with the gendered division of labour still common in rural society.25 “Who would want to regress to all that cooking and canning and laundry?” asked a senior academic colleague of Rebecca Kneale Gould.26 Historian Ruth Rosen suggests that women who “rejected suburban materialism” and chose to move back-to-the-land, grow and prepare their own food and make their own clothes were part of a “hippie culture that tended to glorify women as barefoot and pregnant,” and she asks why would women, who were on the cusp of greater social equality with men, make such a choice?27 Perhaps one could speculate that it was because they had the choice and wanted to exercise it. In doing so, it was counter to their peers.

Women also found it difficult to cope with their increased isolation, and with the lack of paid work available to them. As much as they wanted greater equality, the reality of living in a resource based economy where men would be more likely to find work

25 Personal conversation with a former resident of the Baddeck, N.S. area, who, with her husband, moved back to the Toronto area, where she had grown up.
away from the property often left women in charge of both the household and the garden. They had to find ways of thinking about the gendered nature of their day-to-day tasks that would reconcile their position with their original ideas about changing woman’s traditional role in marriage and in society. Sandy Kennedy’s approach was to see their situation as new, not traditional.

Over the past few years many city born and raised women have established alternate, organic modes of living in a country environment. Because of the new and natural demands of this situation we have found ourselves having to evolve a totally new framework of daily living: a new set of values and goals by which to survive.28

Such sentiments might have elicited amusement from women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Although back-to-the-land women were searching for and often tried to emulate the simplicity of life in the past, few wanted a return to pregnancy every other year. They were women of the late twentieth century with expectations to go with it. Women had to carve space for themselves not only between the competing poles of rural tradition and urban liberation, but also within yet another set of “liberated woman” standards. This new set of standards had them caught between the roles of eschewing all things feminine by wearing work boots and coveralls, learning to use a chainsaw or swing a hammer alone or alongside men, or striving to be the perfect “earth mother,” with fresh bread baking in the wood stove, having first ground the flour of course, and a nutritious meal ever at the ready from a well cultivated organic garden. Sandy Kennedy articulated the latter dilemma well in *The Denman Rag and Bone*.

I still find myself on occasion, after meeting some particularly artistic women, rushing home to the dim light of the kerosene lamp to practise rows and rows of single and double stitch crochet, only to awake the following morning realizing

I’ve already forgotten how it’s done. Just the overwhelming thought of weaving, knitting, sewing, potting, glazing, leather work, not to mention the innumerable brown rice and bean combinations I have yet to learn, can, in a weak moment, drive me to a frantic episode with MacTac and my wilted collection of last year’s pressed flowers.

I find it ironic that although I vowed years ago never to join the ranks of the unliberated urban housewife of the ‘50’s, I could be just as enmeshed in a new standard of values and duties. In some common ways I do feel most new country women have spun a macramé web of standards and roles to attain and adhere to. In some ways she cannot be organic or old-fashioned enough. I (and I’ve laughed with some other women who have been found out) have been just as embarrassed about my pot luck supper chocolate cake being discovered to come from a Twinkle Cake mix package as the traditional housewife is with cabbage smells in her kitchen. Must we women always continue to feel, even in these crazy minor ways, some pang of guilt about not playing some role well enough? Are we, in fact, just as confined to a new set of standards and roles as those we consciously at one time rejected as being constricting and unliberating?29

Sandy Kennedy’s perception that women felt pressured to conform to some role was not unfounded. Earlier and extant practitioners and writers of the homesteading life advocate a gendered division of labour, but as Sandy argued, women had to negotiate their way through these multiple ways of creating a life at remove from the dominant culture. Bill Coperthwaite, famous for his simple yurt designs,30 interviewed by Gould, argued that independent living on a small acreage required the work of two people, divided by gender, with the woman responsible for child rearing, food preparation and the garden, while the man focussed on building, repairs, maintenance and whatever cash-crop was necessary to provide mutual support.31 While Coperthwaite was a generation older than the average back-to-the-lander, his perspective fit well with the patriarchal perspective of agriculturists outlined by Vail, and indicates the pressure on women to

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conform to this role model. The choices made by those who managed to remain in their rural location for three and more decades ranged from women who embraced a traditional role within a marriage to those who chose to live separately in order to experience the full spectrum of tasks necessary to remain rural.

Perhaps the most common approach to learning to live on a rural property is exemplified by Deane Cox. Although she preferred to work outside whenever possible, she felt the traditional role divisions made sense in the countryside.

The kind of traditional roles that I had fought, really fell into place here and it kind of made sense why the roles were divided. My husband never *made* me do any specific jobs and I never made him and we were definitely fifty-fifty with the child care, and I chopped wood and hauled wood and we built the house together, but I did understand more why those roles evolved the way they did. I *still* would rather be outside … than in the house. But it was a little easier to understand why that happened – just practical reasons, if I wasn’t as strong as my husband he would do those jobs and I would do whatever else had to be done in the meantime to get everything done that needed to be done.\footnote{Deane Cox, interviewed in Cape Breton, March, 2003.}

Deane and Otis took a team approach to “whatever … had to be done” which allowed them both to contribute equally, based on skill and physical abilities. The fact that Deane felt childcare was fairly shared was reflective of their mutual respect and a barometer of equality.

A number of other women, through choice or lack of alternative employment, likewise embraced rural living. Because they did not, for the most part, travel off the land to paid employment, they made the best use of their time in order to reduce the need for cash, which was an essential ingredient in the back-to-the-land philosophy. Donna Mikol, born and raised in Montreal with no previous experience of the countryside, and even less experience cooking than her husband, made a choice to learn every skill her neighbours could teach her and in the process became an important provider for her
family. She learned from the local women who taught her the traditional skills practiced by an earlier generation of women in the countryside.

When we got a wood stove, [Sadie] told me about cleaning [it] with … shortening or … parchment paper or … whatever they used, … steel wool to keep it clean and shiny, and about the draft and … baking … of course it’s trial and error. … she was still doing all this; they had a cow, they made butter, … bread, … curds. So she’d show me … and she’d say this is how you do it, and it was very hands on. She taught me how to knit [and] about carding because we had sheep, she really taught me pretty much everything; she was great. Our next door neighbour, Sarah Ann … who was a character all on her own … they had cows and potatoes … not much else. But again, she taught me how to churn butter; she still churned, and she made the best butter in the world. Her butter was famous; people would come from Sydney to buy it because there was no buttermilk in it; it was the best sweet tasting butter.33

Donna continued to do all of the laborious food preparation, preservation, and household chores as well as animal care and gardening despite the arrival of children. This freed her husband to do the larger jobs on the property like building or clearing more land, or more often than not, working off-farm to bring in much needed cash.

But generally speaking, for all those 20 years … my work was between the farming, well more the animal care and gardening and the home, the kids that was pretty much it. And that’s … more than full time work. Because I mean, I made all my own bread and my own butter, yogurt, cheese; we had our own meat, we had the big garden, I baked everything. So, you know, I was busy – laughter – four kids, no electricity either.34

Margrit Gahlinger by contrast, also from the city, mastered skills that were normally the preserve of a man’s world and in fact in an exceedingly traditional society found that she was more comfortable in the company of the men in her community. Undoubtedly she would have been construed as an anomaly by the other women in the small fishing community where she settled. Of the women I interviewed, she was one of the few single women to arrive in Cape Breton. A former career librarian in London,

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33 Donna Mikol, interviewed on Cape Breton Island, November 9, 2006.
34 Ibid.
Ontario, she was on a tour of the Maritimes, and found herself in a remote fishing community in northern Cape Breton, where she met and married a young fisherman who had only recently arrived from Maine. Determined to learn to function in this new community, but certainly not in the ways expected of a woman, where, as Margrit argued, there were no libraries, she decided to learn to fish.

Fred needed someone to help him fish so I fished lobster with him and then his father became sick while visiting here and died and Fred went back to Maine and I didn’t know when he was coming back and I didn’t have any money so I took his boat out, which I had learned the basics of fishing with him; his little 20 foot boat with a 50 horsepower outboard. So I took that out and I started jigging cod and by the time Fred came back a month later I’d made all my mistakes and basically learned how to fish and run the boat; and start the engine when you couldn’t start it with a cord, like I learned how to take the engine apart; the outboard, so learned a lot.

I asked her how she managed to learn all this in just a month.

Well I learned it by doing, right? If anything wouldn’t start I’d ask a lot of questions and I realized that with all my education one thing I had learned to do was use my head and ask. So that’s how I … learned to tie the anchor line properly, how to tie jigs, so when Fred came back I was already somewhat comfortable in running the boat and he let me keep doing it. So I did it that fall and the boat belonged to his brother; so … Aleck Burton, who has been good to me on the ocean … gave me a lot of tips. He was in his 60s then; fished all his life. And he said what are you going to do next year? And I said what can I do, Fred’s brother wants his boat back and Alex Burton said to me “Get your own god-damed boat!” … So Fred helped me do that and I got my own boat, Orla. It’s … a Newfoundland dory. … I started in ’81 then … my sister Claudia came in ’85 and she became my crew. So I had nets and I had a bait net license and I was a bona fide fisherman; and I jigged cod and mackerel from May until December. … Then I got pregnant and I was 40, so … I figured I’d miscarry, you know, but … I didn’t. Then I realized that with a baby I wasn’t going to fish on my own; it was too much work… We didn’t have any money for babysitters and stuff like that. So then I ended up helping Fred.35

Few women could match Margrit’s nerve and determination; however, such grit was undoubtedly more common and necessary for women involved in clearing land and eking out the earliest settlements. Jan Bevan obviously did not lack strength and stamina

35 Margrit Gahlinger, interviewed in Cape Breton, November 2006.
in order to do just that – clear land and build on the BC coast. During her first year on Hornby Island in 1968, Jan became pregnant while they built their first one-room, six-sided cabin.

And we planted fruit trees and made a garden and the cabin gradually expanded; got another unit beside it and then I dug underneath and made a cellar and I dug out behind down to bedrock and we built a big cistern and put another unit over that and it was high enough that we could put an attic bedroom up there for the kids. So we started in a one-room cabin; we had two kids in a one-room cabin.36

While living in that cabin from 1968 to 1981, they began to clear land on leasehold property east of them. They transformed that property from a treed wood lot to a cleared farm, building a more substantial house.

We’ve done everything here [referring to the cleared land]; everything you see on this place is our work, except the big stumps. It had been logged 60 years [ago] and then it had grown up to trees. So we’re still clearing land and … taking a lot of trees and milling them into lumber… we’re still developing fields, planting orchards and vineyards … [and] a blueberry patch.37

In addition Jan did and continues to do all the veterinary work for their many animals, including the treatment of illness, minor operations, and obstetrics including difficult births for both goats and sheep. Routine veterinary tasks such as tail docking on lambs, de-horning goat kids and calves, castration of goats, cutting and trimming of hooves on a regular basis are all part of Jan’s seasonal work on the homestead. So as Jan explained, she went through a metamorphosis that took her from a suburban city girl into a very competent homesteader.

I still don’t like canning or butchering chickens, but I can do those things and I’ve become quite a competent carpenter, I can mix cement, do lots of gardening and have lots of those old time skills. I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else and I don’t do well in cities anymore.38

37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
Ruth Schneider, on the other hand, wanted nothing to do with the heavy work of building, cutting and chopping firewood, or tilling the garden – chores that were traditionally done by men. She stated categorically “I could not, would not, do any more than pound the nails out. I certainly wouldn’t pound any nails into anything or build anything and was quite happy to do the kitchen stuff, much as I hate cooking, because that was easy.”

The roles sort of fell into place and made sense, where elsewhere they’d never make sense. You know, why did Aaron help with the house cleaning? Because what else was he doing, after all, in New York State? But here he can’t help with the house, because otherwise we weren’t going to have a garden! Or we weren’t going to have plumbing, even into the kitchen.

Donna Johnson was also uninterested in doing the work normally done by men “I hated being outside in the cold and the woods. It was depressing so what division of labour there was I wasn't too upset about. It was fine.”

Allison Yarwood and Stephen Sharrock chose to live the simple life on Denman Island, and they, more than any other couple, eschewed consumerism and maintained that philosophy over the decades. Allison’s willingness to “make do” with very little and in fact to celebrate their relative state of material poverty allowed them to live a richly rewarding life, predicated on a traditional division of labour, on a small Denman farm. Allison stated categorically that she had “always intended to raise the kids.” As for other chores, she said “Stephen fixes the car, fixes the house, does the ploughing … I mean, [he] came with a lot of skills…” Allison admitted that “it took certain skills like

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39 Ruth Schneider, interviewed in Cape Breton, November 5, 2006.
40 Ibid.
42 Allison Yarwood and Stephen Sharrock, interviewed on Denman Island, May 17, 2005.
cooking” to raise four children. In fact they embodied well Bill Coperthwaite’s traditionalist vision of how best to manage a rural property and raise a family.

Living on Hornby Island as part of the land cooperative, Syzygy, Laura May was able to find a less traditional approach to life on a rural property, in part because of her and her husband’s close association with, and support from, other couples on the same property, and in part because she was quite determined to live her life differently. She was “not interested in debt … [or] in selling [her] soul for a 9-5 existence … [and she] was not interested in consumerism.” Laura May was and is a dancer, and that and raising her children were her primary focus. Her husband, meanwhile, worked for long stretches off island.

Well it was great because I was surrounded by single mothers and on my own I got to experience what that was like, and I loved it, I really loved it. I always thought that the ideal relationship was 6 months on and 6 months off and that’s what happened, you know, pretty much. I loved the fact that I could do everything and was able to and I didn’t need anybody else, I wasn’t reliant on a man, even though I had lots of support around me if something came up. And I also loved the fact that I was with my kids by myself because then I was calling the shots and didn’t have to discuss with him things that were routine and … I needed that because I was young; [her husband is 10 years older]. I needed to feel self reliant and not dependent on somebody else and I think because of that people don’t group Han and I together, we’re seen as individuals, because I was here, I was teaching dance, I was involved in the community and on my own. Like any single parent, it’s hard, it can be really hard but we were always used to trading kids we were always looking after each other’s kids so there was lots of opportunity to ship them off to a friend’s place if I’d had enough; there was tons of support…

Due to the long winters in the east, it was tough to survive as a single parent, especially for a woman in rural Cape Breton without family support; and of course back-to-the-landers more often than not were without extended family. Long cold winters were more difficult to manage as a single person and complicated many times over with

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43 Laura May, interviewed on Hornby Island, December 6, 2007.
children. Although work for women was a little easier to find than in the Gulf Islands, a vehicle was a necessity, for instance to get to Baddeck. Few women had the skills to keep an old beater on the road, and generally minimum wage jobs meant they could not afford a better car.

Single parenting is difficult whatever the circumstances; thus, it would seem unlikely for a single woman with a young child to leave a familiar location and choose to settle on a relatively remote island. And yet, that is exactly what a number of women elected to do in the 1970s. The frequency with which I encountered women on the west coast who lived alone among my interviewees was significant compared with the east coast, despite the fact that employment opportunities were few on the Gulf Islands. Among those I interviewed in Cape Breton, there was only one woman who lived on her own for about a year before she found another partner, which makes Ruth Schneider’s comment interesting in this context: “I was surprised at how stable the married relationships were within the come-from-away community.”44 One can only speculate on the degree to which this phenomenon was impacted by the problems of managing a rural property as a single parent in a particularly intemperate climate.

Anna Miriam recalled that when she first arrived on Denman Island in 1971, “there were a lot of us women who came alone, with our children.” She thought that there were about 30 single women with children on the island the first winter she arrived. I am unable to substantiate that figure three and a half decades later, but even a third of that number of single women with children would be far more than the number in Cape Breton. Relatively mild winters on the west coast islands combined with comfort drawn from a critical mass of single women choosing a similar lifestyle provided a degree of

44 Ruth Schneider, interviewed in Cape Breton, November 5, 2006.
ease and support, as articulated by Laura May above, not found on the east coast. Another factor supporting these numbers would be the proximity of large cities to the region. Furthermore, the communal movement and subsequent back-to-the-land movement were much more prevalent on the American west coast, which put a significant population of people interested in rural living nearby. So perhaps it is not difficult to imagine so many single women choosing to venture into the near countryside of the Northern Gulf Islands. Such a large community of like-minded women would have provided more latitude to explore their newly developing sense of liberation from the patriarchal restrictions of their upbringing. Reflecting the spirit of the independent and sexually evolved woman, Anna recalled that “a guy used to come on [the island] and we’d pass him around!” The likelihood that this attitude was widespread amongst island women, despite the times, was slim; however it did represent an element of bravado to make the claim. Eleanor Laffin left a difficult marriage in Vancouver and arrived on Hornby Island on her own with her four year old son, Parker. She found a cabin on Tribune Bay that she was able to rent for about a year, but, she recalled, “I needed to be out by May and so Heinz said he needed a housekeeper and did I want to move in and I said no, I’ll sleep with you, but I’ll never keep house for another man!” Clearly they found a workable compromise, because they were still together more than thirty years later.

Before Hornby, or any of the other Gulf Islands, experienced the influx of back-to-the-landers, the original inhabitants were largely unfamiliar with divorce. For the new

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45 Victoria is about 220 kilometres south, Vancouver is about half the distance southeast, plus a two hour ferry crossing, and Seattle is only 320 kilometres away. The closest city to Cape Breton is Halifax, similar in size to Victoria, and about 350 kilometres distant.
46 Anna Miriam Leigh, interviewed on Denman Island, 2005.
47 Eleanor Laffin, interviewed on Hornby Island, January 12, 2008.
inhabitants, divorce became a weightier issue than it might have been in an urban setting because with divorce one risked losing not only house and/or property, but also the ability to remain on the island and the consequent loss of community. In a city one could always find alternatives and maintain their friend network. Jan Bevan spoke about relationship break-up in this regard on Hornby Island:

People really like Hornby; when they come here, they really like it. And so if a couple comes here they often don’t manage to stay here as a couple, but they both want to stay, so one will move down the road and another couple has done the same thing, so couples split up and take up with people’s ex-partners, so this whole island is a chain of step children, half children, full children, ex children, ex partners; you need to be actually quite careful who you speak to about whom because that may be that person’s ex husband’s new wife’s ex husband’s daughter, so it takes thinking about. In the old days communities were like that because there wasn’t much social contact and people – families just intermarried. Denman and Hornby intermarried a lot. But then this more recent generation, it’s a little different; it’s serial monogamy and the serial just more or less stays on the island, it just moves down the road.48

Laura May echoed Jan’s memory of marital instability. Her recollection would not have extended to the 1970s, but reflected the lore of those in her cooperative and in the wider community:

There was a lot of partnership changing, because of our closeness; … there was a lot of that going on and everybody just experimenting. The family unit wasn’t quite as solid. Like the biggest confused day is father’s day on Hornby! I mean the 70s was really bad; the stories of who used to be with who – that was the biggest talk you know? It’s still surprising to find out... And some of us survived experimenting and some of us didn’t. There was sort of [an understanding] if you’re going to break the rules, you may as well break all of them, right?49

Clearly the partner changing and experimentation discussed by both Laura and Jan were not limited to Hornby Island. The pill and the sexual revolution allowed women to experiment and explore their sexuality with a freedom not available to their mothers.

49 Laura May, interviewed on Hornby Island, December 6, 2007.
However, the counterculture and “the sexual revolution arrived on men’s terms. For
women, the price of sexual freedom seemed so much more costly than for men.”

Jacqueline Barnett discussed how she felt about her husband’s unfaithfulness:

He was always running around with other women. You know the men from that
period were absolutely disgusting; they were talking about anti-war, this and
that, but … you know they could go around and screw whoever they wanted; the
women were just not given a lot of credit or respect. Especially the kind of man
I married … women got the short end of the stick where that was concerned, you
know. In retrospect, shame on them.

Barbara also felt strongly that the counterculture, including the back-to-the-land
movement, was fraught with difficulties for women stemming from their vulnerability,
especially those with children, to suddenly finding themselves alone to manage a rural
property. While Barbara experienced that particular scenario, living as she did on 160
acres jointly owned by ten couples, she was keenly aware that not all back-to-the-land
men behaved in such a manner:

I saw the women in poverty because you know, all of a sudden he’d leave,
you’d break up; what’s she going to do, buy him out? Hold on? Log? With two
kids, how do you work, 2 or 3 years old, that’s what I saw, over and over and
over. And I saw women going into poverty and the best years of their lives
helping the guy, build the house build the barn … and he runs off with a
neighbor and you’re like okay, I should have been in grad school. I’m not
saying it to be mean; I’m just saying I think our generation wasn’t as evolved as
they thought they were. And I think the men in the 60s and early 70s … it
seemed that their behavior came from the hind part of their brain, but some men
weren’t like that, and they were stand out. … Certainly there was a good side,
you know the organic food, self-sustaining, non-consumerism but there was that
other side with the sexuality and I didn’t see that that was any better for women
than the 50s; probably less. … You know most of these places have changed
hands simply due to divorce.

Women who experienced divorce, with or without children, often chose to stay
put and even to remain single. Sheila Ray took a slightly different approach to marriage

52 Barbara (a pseudonym), interviewed on Denman Island, January 13, 2008.
dissolution. Determined to remain on Lasqueti Island, she nevertheless chose to leave her marriage in order to be more independent, despite having a one year old child. She learned to build a float-house, cut fire wood, and maintain her motor bike; and she was able to garden on a friend’s property. Sitting in her float house that was now secured to a piece of land, I asked her how living like this, so independently and successfully, made her feel:

Mostly I felt really strong and empowered, I mean in order to get to the strength there were days when I was really, you know things would go wrong, the chainsaw would break, the firewood was wet, I mean there were lots of times of just feeling overwhelmed and frustrated and a lot of days with tears and “I can’t do this!” But I had people that – it was such a supportive community and there was always help and I felt like I was learning so much and I really think I gained a lot of confidence and a lot of ability. And when my son reached high school age and we moved to Victoria for four years while he went to high school I felt that the confidence I had gained by living here and learning to be independent, it was easy for me to go to Victoria and find – I worked with a gardener and I worked as a waitress and I didn’t want a permanent job because I knew that I was coming back here, but I felt like I had an air of confidence about me. I felt that I could cope with whatever; it felt so different than when I was younger and had just graduated from the university and I was living in the city; it all felt overwhelming and I didn’t belong there and now going back I still felt like I didn’t belong but I felt stronger about who I was this time.53

By making the decision to live on her own, and raise her son, Sheila learned that she could make-do as a single mother in tough circumstances that were obviously not part of her upbringing. She achieved a level of independence and self-assurance sought by many women. Twelve to fourteen years later, she felt few qualms about moving to a new city while her son attended high school (there were none on Lasqueti Island), and finding work for the four year period.

I think one of the reasons I left Peter was he is a very confident person and he would just do everything and being a single woman gave me the opportunity to learn all those things… The first relationship I was in after Peter … he really helped me learn to live independently and instead of saying I’ll do that he’d say

your motorcycle’s broken down, I’ll show you how to put new rings in, but I won’t do it for you. Sometimes that was a difficult relationship to be in but I learned so much and I came away with a real feeling of strength and independence and confidence and knowing that I could survive without a lot of resources. … but there were days when I’d still hate carpentry … can’t get a piece of wood to fit where I wanted to and it’s frustrating, but in general I think it’s been really empowering.54

Phyllis Fabbi continued to live on her Denman Island property after her husband moved away. She made ends meet on an income that amounted to less than the old age pension.55 Jacqueline Barnett, who had arrived on Denman Island with her husband in 1974 from Chicago, suddenly, and within a few years, found herself alone, single, and struggling to make ends meet. “I lived for 10 years without water or electricity up here. And I’m still kind of roughing it, because I’m 71 years old and still cutting my own fire wood.”56

One might wonder to what extent their male counterparts were aware of the difficulties encountered by the “new country women”? One Denman Island woman, Ro DeDoming, apparently felt there was a need to speak to the issue and so she wrote an article in the island newsletter. She began her argument with the statement that “there are many more single mothers than fathers on the Island…” and that society makes it too easy for men to leave their children:

There seems an unspoken assumption that young children belong to women, that the care of young children is woman Karma and that women are ‘naturally’ better at it …

Women often rationalize male behavior that removes fathers unnecessarily from their children as “he is doing his own thing or he is working on himself”. She then takes onto herself all the adjusting and changing. Often this means taking on virtually all the child rearing activities except for whatever pittance she can squeak out with the limits of this game. And often much of her life work for years is all the stuff that “goes without saying”; housework, laundry,

55 Phyllis Fabbi, interviewed on Denman Island, November 5, 2007.
meals and of course the endless challenge of being with and working with small children.

There seems a tacit support system for men who leave their children. Even if it is a silent system, it is one that allows a man to go on with his new life unchallenged. His friends will not often point out to him that he is “copping out” on his children. And woman (sic) tend to create a special space in their minds for such men. The problem here is that they are accepting from him behavior which from a woman would be considered a “cop out,” an unnatural act.57

Juan Barker was one of the few men who spoke of the double standard for women within the culture of those who went back-to-the-land, and opined that it had been particularly difficult for women in terms of gender equality.

The aspirations if you came to Denman Island was that you get an old lady and a pick up truck, you know? And that would somehow start to qualify you for who you were and … I would say 80 percent of the people who did arrive here were buying parcels of land, relatively cheap and building their own houses and so that’s fairly physical hard labour and that’s not to say women can’t do that work, but it was work that pretty generally fell to men, so the division of labour was starting to get very clear … So in this new world that was being created, some of the old paternalistic and patriarchal values were being inculcated quite strongly and we were pretty oblivious to that. There were a few articles [written about it] here and there but essentially it was not much. Those who did talk about it were, you know … joked about and made fun of … That did come to change … but not in the first ten years.58

According to Juan, men had scant awareness of the difficulties encountered by women in the move to a rural location. Why would they, if such awareness was barely on their radar in an urban environment, where there was no justification for the double day allotted to women? While heavy lifting was no longer integral to city life, it was unavoidable in the countryside and men naturally gravitated to it, often blithely unaware that women found being relegated exclusively to child care and the kitchen sheer drudgery.

57 Ro DeDoming, “Toward a More Balanced Nuturing (sic),” *The Denman Rag and Bone* 30 ([1979]): 2.
58 Juan Barker, interviewed on Denman Island, November 28, 2007.
Sheila Ray echoed these sentiments and argued that there really was little room for feminism within the back-to-the-land culture. “There was the back-to-the-land ethic and the feminist ethic and they [didn’t] come together. I would guess for me at that time the stronger ethic … was back-to-the-land and I think it was a lot easier for me being single.”

In fact, Sheila left her relationship for the very reasons that other women found themselves struggling with their role, “because,” she argued,

[for] a lot of my friends, the roles were so segregated into who did what and I mean feminism wasn’t a big part of that lifestyle. … And just the roles that women were put into; … we were raising kids and … men were doing what seemed to me the more interesting work and that’s what I wanted to do and that’s why being single I was able to.

Although Sheila maintained that the back-to-the-land ethos was more important to her than feminism, in fact it was her desire to learn to do the things her husband was so capable of doing rather than focus on child care and house work solely that were at the root of her marriage breakdown. She was also frustrated with her husband’s lack of participation in childcare and house work, despite the fact that they were both working at the time. A more equitable distribution of tasks and the back-to-the-land philosophy could not be reconciled within her marriage.

While traditional gender roles worked for some women, others were not happy with being “stuck” in the kitchen, and embraced the move to the country as an opportunity to break away from these cultural norms. They, like Sheila, revelled in their physical abilities and were determined to learn to do everything the men in their lives could do, and wanted a chance to learn and be able to make mistakes without their partner immediately stepping in to do it more efficiently. For Serena Laskin, mastering some of

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60 Ibid.
the skills required to live in the country, including the tasks normally done by men, was part of the adventure for her.

It was very important to me as a woman that I learn all of the skills that any man has to learn. And I remember those early years being angry with Richard or any man that would try to take the hammer out of my hand, just because I had to hit the nail 50 times and bent it mostly, but there was no way they were going to take it from me and do it better. I know they could do it better; the thing is I needed to do it; it empowered me to learn all that. I remember one early birthday present for me, my birthday’s in June, Richard bought for me a little chainsaw, so you know that was thrilling. I didn’t use it very much; scared me to pieces, but I had it; it was mine. And I had my own tools.61

Leslie Dunsmore, who fully participated in building her first home, argued that “[t]here’s been a patriarchal process where women just fell into believing that the things men do are very complex, very hard to learn. A male that knows how to make a little rocking horse for his three-year old [is considered] a very smart, very creative man! No he isn’t – the pattern’s in a book!”62

As women attempted to explore and critically assess their role in society during the nascent years of the women’s movement, many took part in consciousness-raising groups on campus or in urban centres. Informal groups of eight to ten women, without a leader, they met on a regular basis to discuss any and all issues of interest to them, including “personal relationships with men, sex and sexuality, body image, or friendships and attraction between women.”63 Many back-to-the-land women were familiar with such groups and responded to the challenges encountered in their new surroundings by organizing local women’s groups. Learning to live without modern conveniences, negotiating task division with their partners and adjusting to their new communities, they

found support and encouragement with other back-to-the-land women through these groups. Ruth Schneider recalled that on the North Shore of Cape Breton this happened almost immediately:

Well you know one of the things that happened that first year, thanks to people like Marion and Judy Fuller and others was that the women’s group got going. That was really Marion’s initiative, I’m sure. So the women had some time to sit around and talk about gender roles and things like that. This was a very supportive thing. You know … the men and the women [get together] and all you hear about is stacking wood because that’s all the men talked about, or building something and that was pretty boring too. So the women would get together and talk about other things, and it was a very supportive environment, and it was all again come-from-away women, because they needed it. … I think that group, which I was only involved with in the summers … was very useful for women here.  

Denman Island had particularly strong and long lasting women’s groups, which proved to be good sources of support. Sandy Kennedy placed an ad in The Denman Rag and Bone in the October 1976 issue indicating that a women’s group was starting up in November and inviting women to contact her if interested. She also included a two page description of the group in which she was involved, including the variety of subjects addressed, which ranged across topics such as self-esteem, living arrangements, loneliness, depression, monogamy, child rearing and mothering, jealousy, birth control, health, pregnancy and child birth. The group of eight began with sharing life stories, and setting ground rules that included no gossiping, and confidentiality. “All of us, being only too aware of the negative aspects of gossip that small community living can foster, an extremely high emphasis was put on the fact that what someone said in the group,

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64 Ruth Schneider, interviewed in Cape Breton, November 5, 2006.
65 Sandy Kennedy, ad, The Denman Rag and Bone 19 ([1976]): 13.
stayed within the group.”  Phyllis Fabbi still belongs to her women’s group, which began in 1979. Asked how the focus had changed over the years and she replied:

We’re a lot happier now that we’re older; I can remember an awful lot of weeping and wailing in those early years. Everybody was always crying about something and no, people don’t seem to be – yes, it’s quite amazing, watching wisdom – yeah, it’s quite interesting.  

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Sheila Ray discussed her introduction to feminist theory, which only occurred while she spent time in Victoria during her son’s high school years, and given that he was born in 1974, it would mean she moved to Victoria between 1986 and 1988.  

Well when I went to live in Victoria I went to work for the Status of Women and I realized that by being isolated in a rural community I had missed a lot of the theoretical part of the movement and I spent that time learning a lot… Being in … a rural community, roles are generally really separate … so when I came back here I started a woman’s group [1990 to 1992]. We still meet probably about … once a month … and we only read books by women and yeah we are feminists. It’s interesting knowing younger women; there’s very few… living on Lasqueti now that live their lives like we did … just the dress and the way they embrace their sexuality. Which we didn’t; to be so outwardly feminine was a thing we didn’t feel comfortable doing.  

In a rural setting, men had more status than women, so it was typical for women to try to do anything and everything a man could do in order to feel confident. Not only did they strive to acquire men’s skills, they also dressed more like them by wearing “overalls, work boots [or] hiking boots” and as Sheila said, did not feel comfortable expressing their femininity so outwardly.  

Jan Bevan did not recall a women’s group on Hornby Island, but what she did recall was women getting together over the issue of child-care, which was an issue for the preschool age group. Women wanted their children to learn to interact with other children

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67 Phyllis Fabbi, interviewed on Denman Island, November 5, 2007.  
and they also wanted a break from the hard work and isolation that came with their chosen way of life. This was in fact an issue wherever I interviewed women.

We started a little preschool in an empty house right here in Strachan Valley, which lasted for a few months; the house was really cold in the winter and some of the people had to come from clear around the island, so it kind of petered out, so that would have been when my boy was one and a half, so that would have been ’70. So in a sense that was a women’s group but it wasn’t a feminist women’s group.\footnote{Jan Bevan, interviewed on Hornby Island, January 11, 2008.}

Sheila recalled a similar scenario on Lasqueti Island.

There were lots and lots of women my age with young kids [and] one day a week we’d put all the kids together and one or two mothers would stay with the kids and everybody else would get the day off to do chores or visit, so it just had a real sense of community.\footnote{Sheila Ray, interviewed on Lasqueti Island, December 20, 2007.}

Carmen had similar memories for Denman Island.

There were four of us … that ran the local preschool. Whoever had the most children … at that time [it] was me ‘cause I had two so we ran our preschool out of our house and then they’d go to school from grade one to … six.\footnote{Carmen Saunders, interviewed on Denman Island, November 28, 2007.}

Women’s groups also allowed women to share important information including issues of pregnancy, child-birth and where to find the best prenatal and birthing care.

Eleanor Agnew argued that “[t]he counterculture demonized Western medicine in general; in fact she argued that this backlash “vibrated through the pages of \textit{Mother Earth News}.”\footnote{Eleanor Agnew, \textit{Back from the Land: How Young Americans Went to Nature in the 1970s, and Why They Came Back} (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2004), pp. 154-5.} Access to affordable and timely medical attention is a problem in all rural areas, but it was of particular concern to Americans due to the structure of their health care system. Back-to-the-landers on both sides of the border tried to keep costs low, which meant few had medical insurance, a virtual necessity in the United States.

Additionally the women’s movement in Canada and the United States had been
struggling for years not only to allow women to choose whether or not to give birth, but as well to wrest control over where, when and how to give birth from the predominantly male medical establishment. The high rates of induced labour and Caesarean deliveries were cited as evidence of unnaturally reduced labour time to suit the schedules of male practitioners, rather than the health of either the mother or child.\textsuperscript{73} Classes in breathing techniques became popular as ways to give birth without medical assistance, and home births, though less widespread in Canada, were seen as a way to restore greater control to the experience of childbirth.\textsuperscript{74} Back-to-the-land women, due to their relative isolation, were at greater risk of giving birth in unanticipated locations. Women on Lasqueti Island were at a particular disadvantage in that there were few cars on the south end of the island, where many chose to live. Additionally, parturition for first time especially, but any pregnancy, is hard to predict, which left women with a dilemma.

Isolation came with new challenges of getting to a hospital on time. Winter conditions such as un-ploughed or icy roads could make a trip to the local hospital almost impossible at times in Cape Breton. Gulf Islanders had to consider ferry schedules (and the fact that the ferry service was far from a 24 hour service), access to a vehicle, state of the roads, false labour or real labour – none of these decisions were easily made. None of the islands had a resident doctor, with occasional exceptions; in any case, few, if any, doctors would agree to a home birth. Even Denman Island, with the shortest ferry traverse to the mainland and a hospital, had no ferry service after eleven o’clock at night. Hornby islanders faced not only double the distance but the need for two ferry crossings

\textsuperscript{74} Pierson, “The Politics of the Body,” p. 102.
and their ferry service ended at six in the evening. Lasqueti not only had fewer sailing
times but there were days with no service whatever. As a result, women were forced to
make difficult decisions as to when or whether to ask the ferry service and the necessary
crew to run an emergency crossing for them.

Despite the difficulties encountered by many women in their relationships with
men, some men, as Barb mentioned above, “were standout.” As far as Larry Mikol was
concerned, it was his wife who was “standout.”

I watched all the kids be born; same doctor delivered them in the Baddeck
hospital and ah, I must say … my respect for women grew … when I watched
that birth, but I didn’t ever want to watch the literal birth again so I stood
around on the other side for the next three because I almost fainted. … it was
remarkable what women go through … men would never do it. I mean they’d
have one and that would be it. Ever. They’d pass the word around … don’t do it
buddy! … So women have great endurance. I have great respect for Donna for
raising four children in a little two room house, having … two in diapers at one
point which was hard and always … cooking everything, because that’s the
cheapest way to go.75

Gerry also discussed the birth of his children, with evident pride that two of three
children were not born in a hospital. He had fixed up a house at the south end of Lasqueti
that at the time had no roof, doors, or windows and even the floor boards had
disintegrated. His ability to transform a house deemed unliveable by the owners of the
land into a home suitable for his wife and newborn child spoke to his skills as a carpenter
and his competence as a provider.

[So] they let me do it and I ended up having one child born there and Bonnie
was the midwife – she didn’t do a lot of it; but that was her first birth I think and
there was about 5 or 6 of us there that came to the birth. And there was another
just the other side of this hill here and my son Seaborn was born off of the south
end of Hornby, [on his sailboat] and the other one because of [my wife’s] blood
type was born at the Comox hospital. But I would [have preferred] that he’d
been born here but that was the thing; home births were coming on and we were

75 Larry Mikol, interviewed on Cape Breton Island, November 9, 2006.
Gerry indicated his awareness of the risks inherent in home births, especially in a location as remote as the south end of Lasqueti, where there was no recourse to medical assistance in the event of birth complications. Perhaps his somewhat defensive question about the odds of birth complications indicate a reconsideration of the situation on later reflection, especially in light of the midwife’s obvious lack of experience at the time. The isolation at the south of Lasqueti not only created the perfect setting for all those who dreamt of the great escape from all that was detestable about modernism, but the same conditions would also have created a bond between and amongst fellow travellers. This feeling of fellowship, which Bonnie Olesko referred to in her interview with me, would explain the fact that there were so many in attendance at the birth; it would serve as a sign of solidarity, mutual support and perhaps a source of help in the case of an emergency.

Bonnie Olesko, the aforementioned midwife, remembered that particular stormy night of her first delivery as a midwife:

I got some books on maternity at UCLA at the library there, and came back feeling pretty bold, all over it, I was all of 22 or something. And out on Squiddy Bay … there was a little cabin there then and we did our homework and we got ready and got our little kit together and I got called one night and I was living on the North end then and went down and delivered her baby and it was fabulous. I had never seen a baby’s head come out and the sagittal sutures overlap, they look like this but when it’s getting forced they overlap so it’s all kind of lumpy and nubbly looking when you see it when it’s crowning and of course we had flashlights and kerosene lamps and “Oh my god! It’s deformed and I don’t know what I’m going to tell her; oh! It’s crowning here it’s definitely deformed!” [laughter] I mean it’s funny now but, and of course it was a dramatic, howling windy night just everything, all the drama and I thought well we’ll just deliver it and see what it looks like and I was trying to run through all the deformity protocols and out it came, beautiful little baby, everything fell into place.77

76 Gerry (a pseudonym), interviewed on Lasqueti Island, December 20, 2007.
In fact, Bonnie would deliver 30 babies over the course of her clandestine avocation, half on Lasqueti and half during more than a decade she spent living in Victoria, where she became quite active in the fight to have midwifery legalized.

Not long after Bonnie and her husband had settled on Lasqueti, one of her older sisters, Darlene, moved to the island as well. She, with her son from her first marriage and her new partner, Raymond, took up a caretaking position on Bull Island, which lay about a kilometre off the eastern Lasqueti coastline. They lived on Bull Island for two years in a tent, but just as she was getting close to delivering her second child, they were offered a caretaking position on Boho Island for an absentee Oregon surgeon, where they would live in “a little cabin with windows and a wood stove and lights and electricity – we came up in the world!”

I had a doctor named ... Mark Hirsch, who was a hippie doctor with wild black hair; he was visiting friends here; Doug and Penny in Windy Bay ... so Raymond went over and got him. Now I had a son previously at home in Portland, Oregon. I had chiropractors; in those days they were the only ones who would come to your house and deliver a baby. I had two men in suits; they looked like Jehovah’s witnesses and they came and delivered my baby; that was a home birth; it’s how you did home births in Oregon in 1969.78

Darlene (Daz) was fortunate to have had previous experience with a home-birth and here again, given the isolation in which they lived, she had three in attendance plus Raymond:

I felt confident because I had my sister Sherry, and a very good girlfriend, and this doctor. Well partway through the labour I was telling him what to do next; now I need an episiotomy and he gave me the little cut, ... he was prepared; he seemed a little nervous. Mopsy Jane came out; everything was fine; he stitched me up, two little stitches. After it was all done and I was cleaned up and I’m laying there in the nice little water-front cabin, I said Mark, how many babies have you delivered? “Daz, I’ve never delivered a baby; I’ve had a course in it, but mostly in New York I deal with drug overdoses and car accidents.” I could sort of tell. So when I would tell him it’s coming he knew by the book but he didn’t seem to have the real experience.79

79 Ibid.
Jan Bevan had two children while living on Hornby Island and she too learned enough from her first experience to have greater control over her second birth. For Jan’s first pregnancy, the doctor was in Courtenay, which required two ferries, and then another drive of about twenty kilometres to Cumberland. Jan recalled the difficulties of getting to Courtenay for her monthly examinations, especially since they did not have a car at that time:

I was 9 months pregnant and here I was helping to push a car out of the ditch so we could get on the road to go to Courtenay so I could have my prenatal exam. Why didn’t I just stay home! But there were all these books that said it’s really important to do this and this; I’d no experience, what do you do? There was no one around with experience; there were no lay midwives around who would have said you don’t need to go to the doctor’s you’re doing fine.80

As she got close to her due date, in the middle of a supper party, her water broke. At this time of the year the dirt roads were muddy quagmires; cars and trucks, according to Jan, were stuck in the mud all over the island. “There was one vehicle that was going through … a neighbour [with] a four-wheel drive truck.” So they had to call out both the ferry to Denman Island and the ferry to the mainland only to get to the hospital at midnight and discover her labour had stopped:

So it was entirely unnecessary; I could have stayed home that night and just gone on the regular shift. The ferry crew were very kind but they weren’t excited about being called out on a freezing night through the mud. So had I known, things would have been different...

Jan’s second birth was a study in contrasts and demonstrated the importance of growing experience:

The second child I said look, I know how to do this and by then there was a doctor on the island so we just stayed home. I had all the arrangements made so I could go if anything was not feeling well, but there were no problems so I stayed home and had the baby at home. An hour or so after the baby was born

we got in the car and went around to the other side of the island and walked in on the doctor and she said “What do you have there!?” So that was our daughter, she was born on the island. So she lives on the place with us, though not with us, just down there and she has a baby that was born at home three years ago.81

On Denman Island, although the ferry trip is only ten minutes across the strait, Carmen Saunders faced similar challenges “I tried to have Amber off the island and ended up having her on the ferry in the front seat of my Volkswagen.”82 Larry, who lived on Hornby Island, recalled that his “wife gave birth to their first child in their Volkswagen van and weighed their baby at the Coop scales.”83 All their children were born at home in fact, which is not surprising given the difficulties of timing a birth to the ferry schedules.

Although giving birth while living in the countryside of Cape Breton still came with challenges, these were mostly related to road conditions that could change with the seasons. Giving birth on the small islands off the B.C. mainland came with another layer of logistical problems and resulted in a much greater number of home births and sometimes births in transit. Although back-to-the-land women wanted more control over the venue and the nature of support during birth, above all, they wanted a safe birth.

CONCLUSION

Concern for quality of life issues such as environmental pollution and for an alternative to the alienating way of life and work in the cities drove a significant number of young people into the countryside in search of a more authentic life lived closer to the land. But in this rush to the countryside, women’s demands for gender equality were

81 Ibid.
82 Carmen Saunders, interviewed on Denman Island, November 27, 2007.
83 Larry (a pseudonym), interviewed on Hornby Island, January 28, 2008.
further challenged by rural notions of patriarchy, readily accepted by their partners who had no reason to question such gender arrangements. Living in rugged conditions, clearing land, building, managing a woodlot, foraging for food and the rural resource based economy allowed men to flourish and exult in their manliness. Women, on the other hand, were challenged to carve out a new role for themselves as modern homesteaders and to decide what that role entailed. Women found a myriad of different ways to live on the land or in a rural location, by drawing on the skills of local women in their region while at the same time maintaining their late twentieth century drive for greater equality. For some, the older notions of women’s role finally “made sense” in their new rural setting, but other women were less intrigued and found ways to create a role that allowed them to fully partake of life in the countryside incorporating both feminine and masculine skill-sets in a fuller expression of womanhood.
In the 1970s, environmental unease among North Americans intensified, moving from the margins to the mainstream. The emergence of the environmental movement provided ordinary people a sense that they could have a say. Ecological disquiet often motivated back-to-the-landers, with many arguing that their way of life testified to their environmental concerns: gardening without pesticides, herbicides or artificial chemicals, heating with wood, building with local materials, and opting out of consumer culture all demonstrated their environmental credentials. ¹ By moving to relatively remote areas such as the Gulf Islands or Cape Breton, back-to-the-landers were trying to escape the long reach of capitalist, industrial society. However, they quickly discovered that they could not entirely break free from it. Even those for whom the environment was not a primary motivation were quick to defend a right to clean water and clean air.

In both settings, issues of chemical spraying galvanized islanders and highlighted the place back-to-the-landers now occupied in their new locations. While this is mainly an oral history thesis, I wanted to address environmental concerns as the back-to-the-land community encountered the issues in chronological sequence with the immediacy of sometimes monthly updates, when the outcomes were far from predetermined. Use of *The Denman Island Rag and Bone* as a resource provided the chance to set my interview material alongside a source that systematically recorded views over the span of almost six

¹ This chapter is adapted from a paper presented at the Workshop on the Counterculture and the Environment, held on Hornby Island, BC, July 5-6, 2011, to be included in a forthcoming collection of Workshop papers, edited by Colin Coates, for the University of Calgary Press.
years. It not only confirmed and validated my recorded sources and memories, but provided the historical tension of the moment. Interviews, on the other hand, as discussed in the methodology section, are filtered through the lens of the present and recounted from the perspective of maturity. Such a rich source was not available for the other islands, however, I was able to use material written by past participants in the protest to the spraying of chemicals in Cape Breton, which fills in details of the story and provides sequential structure to past remembrances.

DENMAN ISLAND

On 14 August 1979, Leslie Dunsmore of Denman Island testified before the British Columbia Herbicide Appeal Board, arguing against the use of Tordon 22K by Weldwood of Canada. In *The Denman Rag and Bone*, a local newsletter, editor Des Kennedy reported on her impressive performance:

I can’t see anyone in the room who isn’t listening intently. Her presentation moves like a just-honed scythe through dry grass. She discusses her own livelihood as a beekeeper, the potential for contamination of domestic water supplies, the soil classifications and topography of the area, the properties and hazards of Picloram, forest management alternatives and the limitations of the licensing and appeal processes. Her text is laced with references to experts, commissions of inquiry and scientific studies.²

Following her brilliant testimony, Weldwood’s cross-examination faltered and sputtered out, reported Kennedy. As we have seen, Dunsmore and Kennedy were both back-to-the-landers. Both came from large urban centres where they had obtained university degrees and while their degrees were not in science, their education gave both the confidence to question authority and to do their own research. Kennedy reported that “being at the Hearing made one feel proud and happy to be from Denman, to have neighbours of such skill and dedication.” This fight against the

spraying of herbicide was one of a series of environmental struggles that Denman Islanders had engaged in over the previous six years. Through local media and debates, back-to-the-landers on Denman Island confronted very local environmental pressures, and in a number of cases and despite the odds against them, they succeeded in changing decisions and regulations. Their successes were frequently predicated on their ability to engage the concerns and energy of other islanders.

SMALL ISLAND ECOLOGY

Small island ecological systems have been at the cutting edge of environmental concerns and science since at least the seventeenth century.\(^3\) Resource depletion on small islands becomes evident long before it can be detected on the mainland and serves as a warning, much like the proverbial canary in the coal mine, to unsustainable draws on natural resources. Their small, bounded geography allows no easy solution to the unexpected collapse of a resource. Both French scientists on Mauritius and English scientists on St. Helena alerted their metropolitan governments to the threats posed to the islands’ viability by the unrestricted use of resources such as timber, fruit and water.

Ironically, Denman and other small Gulf Islands, located on one of the world’s wettest coasts, face serious water problems. Sitting in the rain shadow of Vancouver Island’s mountains, they are arid, having rainfall half that of the Vancouver region.\(^4\) In years of light winter rainfall groundwater is not replenished, and summer shortages are more likely. Because groundwater from island wells is the principal source for domestic and agricultural water, in addition to the two small lakes, the summer rise in population

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of cottagers and tourists exacerbates water problems. Overuse of aquifers can lead to saltwater intrusion,⁵ and by the 1970s, this potential threat to the water table became a source of concern for most Islanders, old and new settlers alike.⁶ As well, the cutting and hauling of timber contributed to water degradation, and with increased settlement the impact of logging on water resources became more alarming.

Because of their extraordinary beauty, unique ecosystems and biological diversity, the Gulf Islands had come under increased developmental pressure during the 1960s.⁷ Growing public alarm over uncontrolled development, possibly beyond their carrying capacity, led W.A.C. Bennett’s Social Credit government to impose restrictions in 1969, limiting island subdivisions to lots no smaller than ten acres. Previously, the lack of planning for the islands arose out of the fact that British Columbia provided only a reduced framework for local governance outside of municipalities. With the creation in 1965 of twenty-nine Regional Boards spanning the entire province, citizens living in rural districts obtained a limited form of governance, which was clearly inadequate as district boundaries combined municipalities with surrounding unincorporated areas.⁸ Because the voting weight of each elected member to a regional board was determined by population, this usually resulted in the islands having little to no individual representation on these boards. As an example of scale, in 1981, within the Regional District of Comox-Strathcona, with a total population of 68,621, Denman Island had a population of 589,

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⁵ Ibid., p. 30.
⁶ Although the focus here is on Denman, this issue was also posed on Hornby, according to Quinn, who was an Island Trustee for Hornby for 17 years. Carol Martin Quinn, interviewed on Hornby Island, January 23, 2008.
and Hornby Island, 686. With next-to-no input from island residents on any of the boards, little time or effort was devoted to island issues. As a result, many islanders viewed the imposition of policies by the larger region as “illegitimate uses of political power” and the problem “resulted in considerable dislike for regional district government in some rural areas.”

Acknowledging “the special planning needs of island environments,” the New Democratic Party government held meetings on the 13 most populated islands in 1973 for input on how best to create a governing structure for those islands. Out of these consultations, the Islands Trust Act was proposed and enacted in 1974. The Islands Trust was to act as a regional board for the thirteen islands that fell under the new legislation, with two elected Trustees from each island, who, as of 1979, then elected a chairman and vice-chairman. The freeze from further subdivision into parcels smaller than ten acres was continued until a community plan could be developed on each island. It was hoped that the new legislation would put in place controls to preserve and protect the rural qualities of the islands, “given the uniqueness of island environments, the insignificance of island concerns in regional districts and the sense of community that exists among island residents.”

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9 Ibid., p. 60. The source for population figures is the 1981 Census of Canada. Not only was there a lack of island representation on the regional boards, but some islands were assigned to regional districts that made little geographical sense. Lasqueti Island, with a population of 316 permanent residents, was part of the Powell River Regional District, population 19,364, which was far to their east on the mainland with no transportation links between them. It would have made far more sense for Lasqueti to have been in the same regional district as Denman and Hornby Islands, with which it has social and cultural similarities.

10 Bish, Local Government in British Columbia, p. 59.
11 Ibid., p. 46.
12 Ibid., p. 59.
13 Ibid., pp. 59-60.
14 Ibid., pp. 60-61.
THE DENMAN RAG AND BONE

The importance of local environmental concerns is evident through an analysis of *The Denman Rag and Bone*, a newsletter begun by Des Kennedy and Manfred Rupp in 1974. Kennedy stated in an interview that

> myself and a number of others, sort of more politically oriented people, very quickly realized ... the islands were totally ripe for plucking by land speculators and developers and stuck our noses in and said that’s not what we want to have happen here ... and that’s where *The Denman Rag and Bone* sprang out of, that desire to mobilize the community around the need for, at least from my perspective, for that kind of vigilance, because you could see it start to happen, whether gyppo loggers coming in and just butchering the place, ... or land speculation and development.\(^\text{15}\)

Conceived of and launched as a community newspaper, it encouraged islanders to communicate with each other. In the span of five and a half years, *The Denman Rag and Bone* reported on numerous issues that constituted a threat to the island’s ecosystem and which local people tackled. Concerns included issues regarding inappropriate recreational use of Chickadee Lake, road maintenance, and the impact of summer tourism on island capacity, all of which required wider discussion. The threats posed to the contamination of the water table by excessive subdivision development and proposed herbicide spraying by both BC Hydro and Weldwood were particularly alarming to Denman Islanders. With each of these environmental concerns we see how the repeated stresses on Denman Island’s small ecosystem became inescapable and how residents were forced to address them and in the process, reconfigure social alignments.

Fundamentally a back-to-the-land source, the newsletter included the voices of others as responders or guest contributors, and ran from May, 1974 until December, 1979. It featured local, regional or provincial developments that might affect the island

\(^{15}\) Des Kennedy, interviewed on Denman Island, 26 January 2008.
and thereby fostered a greater sense of community. Small as Denman Island was (the size of Manhattan Island with 379 permanent residents in 1976\textsuperscript{16}), gossip and informal networks were inadequate for the dissemination of complex information, especially material needed for informed voting. My research in the newsletter and through interviews made it clear that Islanders felt that a few key figures unaccustomed to sharing information with fellow residents controlled bylaw decisions and development policy. A newsletter delivered to each mailbox about six times a year seemed the best way to share information, create informed discussion and perhaps circumvent the established powerbrokers. The newsletter was delivered free of charge up to and including issue number 25, after which the cost was twenty-five cents in the General Store, or ten issues for $4.00 on island and $5.00 off island.\textsuperscript{17}

While environmental matters were an important part of the content, a typical issue included art work, poetry, short fiction, recipes, children’s or school pages, editorials, letters to the editor, and occasionally pieces from other islands or elsewhere in the province. Gardening was featured as well as a page or two under the heading of either “Rumours Galore” or “Bits & Pieces,”\textsuperscript{18} with short paragraphs about individuals on the island, upcoming meetings, ongoing issues, and almost always a paragraph on the roads. Notices appeared about the food co-op and forthcoming meetings of the Ratepayers Association, the Fire and First Aid Committee and the Recreation Committee. The

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item\textsuperscript{16} Sandy Kennedy, \textit{The Denman Rag and Bone}, 18 (July 1976): 7. Kennedy worked for Statistics Canada as a ‘Census Taker’ and the figure is listed as the approximate number of permanent residents. The number of permanent households was approximately 167, and vacation homes approximately 55.
\item\textsuperscript{17} J. P. Kirk, \textit{The Denman Rag and Bone}, 25 (February 1978): 2.
\item\textsuperscript{18} “Bits & Pieces” or “Bits and Pieces” – the title format sometimes changed within the same issue.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
newsletter also contributed to island history, frequently in the form of an interview with a long-time resident. Women contributed to the newsletter both as writers and workers. Their contributions included topics that were typically associated with women’s concerns such as children, food and gardening, but they, as well as a few brave men, also wrote about women’s changing role in society, motivated by the growing awareness created by the feminist movement. Fifteen to twenty people contributed content and about ten volunteers typed and laid out the text and ran the Gestetner to produce each issue. Then, to ensure a wide readership, volunteers delivered the newsletter to every island mailbox.

For the first two years Des Kennedy and Manfred Rupp, the two founders of *The Denman Rag and Bone*, were the strongest voices in the newsletter. Des Kennedy was born in Liverpool, England in 1945 and moved to Toronto with his family at age ten. “I then spent eight years in a series of monastic seminaries in the Eastern United States, studying for the priesthood,”¹⁹ which he left in 1968 to move to Vancouver where he met his wife Sandy, while they were both employed as social workers. As a former monk, Kennedy was drawn to the quiet and seclusion of the woods, a sentiment shared by his wife Sandy, and so together they spent their weekends “weather permitting, out in the woods somewhere … camping.” Rather than have to “drag” themselves “back to the city” every Sunday evening they bought land on Denman Island in 1971 and took up permanent residency in 1972. “I had an ambition to be a writer and so we were looking for simplicity, frugality and quiet.”²⁰ Kennedy planned to support himself as a professional writer and with his exceptional gardening skills wrought a wondrous transformation of his eleven acres on Denman Island, and then wrote popular gardening

¹⁹ Des Kennedy, interviewed on Denman Island, 26 January 2008.
²⁰ Ibid.
books among other genres. Manfred Rupp and his wife Marjo Van Tooren bought land on Denman Island in 1969 and were some of the earliest to arrive amongst the back-to-the-lander group. Born in Germany in 1931, Rupp recalled that as a teenager he would spend his summers at an international work camp organized by Quakers. The camps would be located wherever help was needed, for instance, one summer the group cleaned up after a flood in Holland, another year they worked on a road in Norway. These were formative experiences, he reflected, so that when he and his wife bought a small property on Denman Island, Rupp thought he might attempt to live in a way that mirrored the cooperative spirit he had learned from the Quakers. When his son was about to enter school, Rupp decided to return to Germany where his son would learn German and become acquainted with his extended family. With Rupp’s departure, Kennedy became chief editorialist and frequent “Bits & Pieces” columnist. Although his voice and politics tended to dominate The Denman Rag and Bone, others’ viewpoints also appeared regularly. They were not always in agreement with Kennedy. The newsletter conveyed countercultural approaches to island living, but it also attempted to address the concerns of the entire population, which were frequently discussed at the local community meetings.

The Ratepayers’ associations and community clubs were important forums for debate on all of the islands. Meeting on a monthly basis, these small island populations had a chance to discuss issues of concern to the community, in an atmosphere that “resembled old-fashioned town meetings … instead of the professionalized, superficial,

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21 Manfred Rupp, interviewed on Denman Island, 27 November 2007.
22 Ibid.
mass media presentations so often found in the larger urban municipalities.\textsuperscript{23} \textit{The Denman Rag and Bone} regularly recorded concerns and debates raised in the Ratepayers’ meetings on Denman. Not surprisingly, the back-to-the-landers and some of the long-time residents often held different perspectives. With regard to the Islands Trust legislation, the back-to-the-landers, alarmed over resource depletion and uncontrolled development, welcomed the possibility of greater control that the new legislation represented. Back-to-the-land settler values often clashed with those of the other stakeholders on the island.\textsuperscript{24} The larger landowners, in contrast, worried over what the new Act might mean for their ability to manage their property, including their right to subdivide should they wish. Inhabiting the middle ground in the debates were the recent retirees and perhaps a substantial number of island residents who were not large landowners.

How representative of the back-to-the-land opinion was \textit{The Denman Rag and Bone}? Given the large number of contributors both to its production and content over the years of its existence, the letters of response to its editorials, and the thirty interviews I conducted, it seems safe to conclude it reflected the back-to-the-land opinion accurately. As for land development issues, certainly some people held land cooperatively, which meant their interests in subdividing that land might have differed somewhat, but not substantially. The key issues with development, according to \textit{The Denman Rag and Bone}, were scale and resource use, including in particular depletion of the water table and

\textsuperscript{23} Bish, \textit{Local Government in British Columbia}, p. 40.
potential bottlenecks at the ferry terminal. As Kennedy phrased it in the first issue, “logging and road widening … along with rip-off subdivisions do far more to destroy the ‘unique amenities and environment’ than does some poor citizen erecting a supplementary outhouse …”\(^{25}\)

When *The Denman Rag and Bone* was founded, back-to-the-landers had been on the island for no more than five years. With the imminent passage of the Islands Trust Act in June 1974, the newsletter provided timely information to islanders about the many issues surrounding this piece of legislation.\(^{26}\) At this point the actual control each island would have in developing its own bylaws and policies was yet to be determined, as were the duties of the elected Trustees. An editorial in *The Denman Rag and Bone* read “we believe that this island is at a critical point in its current stage of development. How we approach that point will in large measure determine the kind of place it will become.”\(^{27}\) Writers for *The Denman Rag and Bone* were concerned that every citizen living on the Island have a clear understanding and full awareness of the many issues facing the island.

Despite initial enthusiasm for the new legislation and the possibility of thereby gaining increased control over the pace of development on the island, *The Denman Rag and Bone*’s enthusiasm did not represent an unmitigated endorsement:

Lest our apparent editorial bias in favour of the Trust Act be misconstrued to mean uncritical acceptance, we repeat certain questions asked in our first issue. An obvious one: while the act clearly intends to muscle into Regional Board territory … it seems to avoid very adroitly stepping on the toes of fellow ministers such as

\(^{26}\) Islands Trust Act, S.B.C.; 1974, C43. “The Islands Trust is a unique form of government, created by the province in 1974 to control unbridled development and to ‘preserve and protect’ the islands.” [http://www.islandstrust.bc.ca/poi/ita.cfm](http://www.islandstrust.bc.ca/poi/ita.cfm) accessed 16 June 2011.
\(^{27}\) Editorial (unsigned), *The Denman Rag and Bone*, 2 (June 1974): 2.
Highways and Forestry. What influence will the Island Committee have on the policies of those departments, as they affect the islands?28

Whether these issues concerned the two lakes on the island, road widening, herbicides, tourism, BC Hydro, or development, any one of them had the ability to impact negatively the environment of Denman Island and the quality of life. Fundamentally, water quantity or quality underlay all of the issues.

By the end of 1979, when *The Denman Rag and Bone* ceased publication, much had been accomplished in averting some of the more flagrant disregard of bylaws by developers. Logging companies and even government departments had learned to consult islanders before unilaterally initiating action on the island. Ratepayers meetings were much better attended, a new environmental group had been created, ACE or Alternatives for Community and Environment, and a Bylaw Support Group to research and support the island’s zoning bylaws had also come into existence.

**CONTESTED VISIONS**

**CHICKADEE LAKE**

One of two lakes on the island, Chickadee Lake was a source of contention between new and longer-term residents, and it was discussed frequently in *The Denman Rag and Bone* during its first years of publication. Tension built over the fact that many of the newer residents (by no means all) enjoyed nude swimming in the lake which, not surprisingly, offended some of the original islanders. The most vocal of those who took offence was Wes Piercy, president of the Recreation Committee at the time. Piercy, like many local islanders, had fond memories of swimming there as a child and wanted his

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grandchildren to be able to enjoy the lake as he had, and nude swimming by a bunch of “hippies” did not fit with his vision. Weldwood of Canada, a subsidiary of United States Plywood, had acquired a portion of the land adjacent to the lake, which it managed as a tree farm, and out of civic duty, ostensibly, but more likely for strategic reasons, had proposed a picnic-site development at the lake, which involved “opening it up”. The company proposed clearing away trees and brush, hauling in loads of sand, creating a parking lot, and adding garbage cans and picnic tables. This proposal seemed the perfect solution to Piercy; it would open the site to greater public scrutiny and effectively reduce the likelihood that nude swimmers would find the lake an attractive location. At a July Ratepayers’ meeting, W.A. Hopwood, the company’s representative, informed the community that it planned to construct a logging road nearby, asserting that “no permit is needed [for the road], we just build it.” Furthermore, to ensure there was no confusion over the notion that a tree farm meant maintaining a woodlot through selective cutting, Hopwood informed those present that a “[t]ree farm relates to tax status, not forestry status.”

Close proximity of a logging road would hardly enhance enjoyment of the new picnic site, to say nothing of the obvious environmental impacts to the lake and the quality of water. Rupp, in an editorial, questioned whether the increasing demand for recreational access to the lake was compatible with the necessity to preserve a potable freshwater supply. Beyond the back-to-the-land crowd, according to a later editorial, the Denman Island Planning Study of 1971 had recommended the lake be preserved in its “natural” state, as did the Regional District’s Evaluation of Proposed Greenbelt Sites, which went a step further and suggested acquisition of the lake and its surrounding land.

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to “prevent developments harmful to wildlife.” Finally, the proposed Community Plan recommended that the lake be “preserved in its natural state and not opened up for tourist use.”

Peter McGuigan, Harold Walton (president of the Ratepayers Association), and others visited the lake to provide recommendations for Weldwood. They discovered that the company had already begun to dump sand in a “tasteless nature” but had been forced to desist by adjacent property owners. When McGuigan reported their findings at the next Ratepayers meeting, “instead of discussion,” he encountered “loud shouts of comic book treason … from the back bench” which ended “with a suggestion that those who didn’t agree [with the company’s actions] should leave the island.” In fact, McGuigan reported, he had wanted to suggest that a small picnic site be developed on Chickadee Lake providing attention was paid to the ecology of the lake and its long-term value to islanders and the people of the province. Finally, the Ratepayers Association concluded that none of the sites suggested by Weldwood was acceptable to the community.

Thinking the matter settled, those attending a subsequent Ratepayers meeting were surprised to discover that Piercy, of the Recreation Committee, had made a behind-the-scenes agreement with Weldwood approving the site rejected by the Ratepayers. Asked by Piercy to support his action, Walton insisted on a meeting between Weldwood, Ratepayers and the Recreation Committee. Apparently no resolution was achieved because a year later Walton, in his role as one of the newly elected Island Trustees, asked

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32 Walton was not a back-to-the-lander, nor an original settler, but one of the retirees who moved to the island permanently.
the Islands Trust to intervene to help save the lake, as Weldwood had made the arbitrary
decision to go ahead with building a logging road a mere 110 feet from the lakeshore.
This meeting was chaired by the Islands Trust Manager, Judy Parr, and although it was
reported that Weldwood managed to side-step the entire matter, the final result was that a
small picnic site was established at the lake, but the proposed logging road was averted
due to the large consensus amongst islanders. As for nude swimming there were hopes
that a compromise could develop, similar to the one proposed by Jerry Bernhaut, who
hoped that “[i]f people show each other some respect and consideration, it shouldn’t be
too hard to designate different areas for clothed and nude swimming.”35

ROAD MAINTENANCE

Concern over roads and their impact on the watershed was not limited to logging
roads, however; the impact of road widening at the expense of waterways or aesthetics
was not as readily evident and required more time and discussion. Roads and the
decision-making process within the Department of Highways endlessly frustrated many
islanders, who found themselves pondering whose authority determined what seemed to
be a continuous round of widening and grading, and what logic was employed to make
these decisions. Furthermore, the heavy equipment used had to be ferried over for each
job, occupying valuable ferry space. Manfred Rupp editorialized on why the roads kept
changing and who made the decisions that led to the “dreadful mess we see spreading
along our roads.” He argued,

> if we didn’t know any better we would have to conclude that what we see is one
> bunch of machines preparing the way for another bunch of machines, with no
> observable interference from human intelligence. You talk to any of the higher-ups

Rupp’s frustration lay in the fact that decisions about roads in unincorporated areas were made by the provincial Ministry of Transportation and Highways, and actual road maintenance work involved little interaction between the local population and the decision makers. The Denman Island road foreman, Cliff Grieve, stated that road maintenance and budgetary decisions were made in Courtenay. Taking matters into their own hands, islanders formed a Roads Committee charged with investigating problems. In their report to the Ratepayers Association, they found that in addition to excessive widening, roadside vegetation was destroyed, topsoil removed, cliff-top vegetation uprooted, potentially leading to erosion, and the old cedar fences for which Denman was known often carelessly battered down. Kennedy noted in an editorial that “road ‘improvement’ is a touchy subject hereabouts, especially with certain local statesmen who tend to go into an irrational froth when the subject is raised.” The reference to “local statesmen” was no doubt directed at the two elected trustees, Harold Walton, former president of Ratepayers Association, and Marcus Isbister, whose family had lived on the island for generations. From the back-to-the-land perspective, winding, tree-lined roads, seldom found in the city or suburbs, formed a fundamental part of the island’s unique attractiveness, and the Department of Highways’ uniform approach of standardizing roads across the province was ruinous to the Gulf Islands. In Kennedy’s opinion, the Trust had not “demonstrated much leadership” on the issue and he hoped that Ratepayers could fill the breach; in fact he suggested that “if you’re interested,

39 Kennedy, *The Denman Rag and Bone*, 16 (March 1976) 2.
Ratepayers is where it’s happening.”\textsuperscript{40} This last quip marked a significant change in the make-up of the association in fact, as it had only been two years since Ratepayers had seemed to exclude the back-to-the-landers, but by attending Ratepayers’ meetings and becoming involved in the issues, the newcomers had gained a voice in island politics. Now, he was proud of the fact that discussion was already “under way concerning the construction of pathways for pedestrians, cyclists and horse riders along main roadways.”\textsuperscript{41}

On a more humorous note, beaver ponds were found to be another casualty of the Highways Department, which found the ponds and their inhabitants a nuisance to road maintenance. The department’s idea of a solution was often to fill in the pond or at least the portion deemed necessary to the road, culvert, or bridge. Not surprisingly, this caused yet more friction between the department and islanders, or at least the islanders with strong notions about watershed preservation and equally strong beliefs that roads and bridges tended to be overbuilt. Following a recent bridge-building project along his road, Kennedy reported that the Department of Highways had sent:

\begin{quote}
\textit{a stiff reprimand to the residents of Pickle’s road who were accused of feeding fertility pills to the beavers in a baldfaced attempt to undermine the Highways Dept bridge-building endeavour. The Catholic members of the accused were particularly shaken because pills (to stop or multiply) are a no-no in Papist circles. A Papal Bull threatening excommunication to anyone counselling fertility manipulation of any kind (other than the Rhythm Method – never very popular with beavers) has been posted on the new bridge which, despite a certain appearance of overkill, has been well constructed and will, we hope, serve Island needs for years to come…\textsuperscript{42}}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{42} Beverly Meyer and Des Kennedy, \textit{The Denman Rag and Bone}, 12 (Summer 1975):18.
TOURISM

Road debates highlighted both aesthetics and watershed worries and fed into discussions of island tourism. Although tourism was the third largest industry in B.C., it remained an industry islanders loved to hate, and on this point, both newcomers and old-timers could agree. As Kennedy argued, “they’re just folks away from home,” but “too often they’re a pain in the ass.”

A 1971 article by Doras Kirk who was born and raised on the island, was quoted by Kennedy to demonstrate, presumably, that it was not just island newcomers who harboured antipathy to tourists. Drawing from a survey, Kirk stated that “Denman Island Ratepayers want Denman Island for Denman residents, not tourists.” The survey reported that residents believed a significant influx of tourists would create severe problems, including inadequate supervision of parks, increased fire hazards and garbage disposal issues. Both of Denman’s lakes, licensed for water supply, would be unsuitable for tourists, as the lakes were small and vulnerable to overuse. As well, city folks, used to an endless supply, would use excessive amounts of water, affecting Denman’s water table. Finally the report also noted that an increase in tourist traffic would stir up more dust from unpaved roads.43

Five years later not much had changed; a great number of tourists still posed problems due to inadequate facilities, Kennedy argued. Summer homes were “popping up on East road…, like chickweed amongst the cabbages.” They seemed to go hand in hand with “the grating whine of trail-bikes” which was “becoming as familiar as long ferry line-ups.” “Sahara-size dust-storms chase speeding cars down gravel roads. And it

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43 Des Kennedy, The Denman Rag and Bone, 18 (17 on cover), (July 1976): 2.
leaves a trail of debris behind it. Beer bottles, candy wrappers and other crap begin to litter the shoreline of our beloved Chickadee Lake." As transient hippies were initially lumped in with back-to-the-landers due to their appearance, it is possible that summer residents, who returned year after year and often owned property on the island, were being unfairly lumped in with the casual tourist. Nevertheless, although some summer residents probably made an effort to partake in community events, for the most part there was a sense that they were there only fleetingly, sometimes for as little as a week or two, thus adding nothing to the community other than contributing to traffic congestion and an increase in property taxes. The community and the Trustees, argued Kennedy, had to come up with innovative ways to accommodate tourists and especially consider what kind of tourist they wanted to attract. In this case the Islands Trust was mandated with a dual and somewhat conflicting mandate. On the one hand, it was to preserve the rural flavour of the islands, but on the other, it had to balance that with its mandate to preserve the islands for all residents of the province. Tourism that involved hiking, bicycling, horse-back riding, sailing and kayaking were activities that best fit the bill, suggested Kennedy. It seemed there was a certain degree of consensus amongst islanders on this matter. The survey reported by Kirk demonstrated that the antipathy towards tourists was not exclusive to back-to-the-landers. Opposition towards outsider use of precious water supplies was not limited to tourists. Islanders were particularly sensitive to development and created strict by-laws to protect island resources. Disregard of such laws by an outsider brought all islanders together in opposition.

44 Ibid., 3.
45 As property taxes rose for all islanders, it can be argued that summer residents obviously had the income for a second residence, whereas, islanders were limited in their ability to generate greater income year after year.
OVERUSE AND ABUSE OF ISLAND WATER

The newsletter was even more effective at galvanizing support and organizing protests concerning water resources, framed as outsider interference with island laws, or as serious threats to health.

GRAHAM LAKE SUBDIVISION

Frank Rainsford, an off-island developer, was at the heart of a long-running and contentious issue on the island. His proposed subdivision on Graham Lake, known as Seaview Estates, was to consist of twenty-two lots, but Rainsford later sought approval for fifty-three lots. Though it is unclear whether the twenty-two lots were formally approved at the time, many islanders considered the fifty-three lots an overly dense subdivision. “In 1976, Trustees Walton and Isbister received Island support to avert [this] flagrant disregard of Denman’s Community Plan, Trust objectives, and local land development restrictions” reported Paul Bailey. Disallowed by the province in 1976, the proposal reappeared in 1979, and this time the Senior Approving Officer for the Provincial Government, Don South, suggested he saw no reason to prevent the development. “Two years ago,” according to Paul Bailey, “the same man had told Denman representatives that he would take Rainsford to court rather than offer final approval status.” As early as 1974, Harold Walton, then president of the Ratepayers Association, had reassured fellow islanders, with regard to the impending Trust legislation, that “Denman Island is one of a few islands fortunate enough to have

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47 Bish, *Local Government in British Columbia*, p. 112, notes that “for the unincorporated areas of regional districts, the approving officer is an employee of the Ministry of Highways and Transportation.”
subdivision and zoning by-laws already in effect.” He also noted at the time that “as Municipal Affairs Minister [Jim] Lorimer has stated unequivocally, the new legislation will not be used to either change or circumvent these existing by-laws.” Additionally, in the past the minister had vetoed the wishes of islanders, whereas the new legislation offered recourse to the courts. In a letter dated 30 May 1974, Lorimer also stated that, “it is the intent that the formation of the Trust will actually give the people of the Islands more say in their own affairs.”

But a change in government with the election of Bill Bennett’s Social Credit had apparently negated these gains.

Rainsford’s proposal and the provincial response left islanders justifiably furious at this flagrant disregard for their bylaws. “To combat this recent insult to public and Island political and legal sensibilities,” Bailey wrote, “Denman Trustees Glen Snook and Harlene Holm have contacted the news media to spread the word.” The Victoria television station, CHEK TV, “featured a short but to-the-point interview with Harlene [Holm] and C.B.C. aired the story twice on their ‘Good Morning Show’.” Both Trustees later received phone calls and letters pledging moral and even financial support should the issue become a class action suit. At the same time they also learned that other islands had had similar problems with the same developer. The only people they had not heard from were Don South or Alex Fraser, Minister of Highways.

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50 Kennedy noted in an earlier edition of the The Denman Rag and Bone that “approval of subdivisions still rested with the Department of Highways; planning and zoning remained under Regional Board control. The trust participated in these matters on an advisory basis. It quickly became evident that Regional Boards resented Trust interference in what had been their sole domain.” 22 (May 1977): 16. This could explain the Dept of Highways apparent about-face.
This issue was finally resolved, but only after Islanders took their collective protest to Victoria. On 9 July 1979, eighty islanders held a by-law funeral in front of the Parliament buildings. All eighty, young and old, back-to-the-landers and original residents, marched in two-by-two formation and quietly followed an R.I.P. sign representing the death of their bylaws; next came a drummer beating a dirge, and finally a coffin containing the island bylaws. As they stood solemnly tossing bylaws into a bonfire, “[w]ord came … that the Minister of Highways had consented to meet with a smaller group in the near future.” The public demonstration by so many islanders coupled with the media attention had the desired impact; the province rescinded approval for the development. Well-organized street theatre had convinced the provincial authorities to respect local attitudes to development proposals. Respect for island bylaws by both outside developers and government drew islanders of all ages to protest, but the underlying issue was the overconsumption of water from Graham Lake.

BC HYDRO’S PROPOSAL

Similarly, The Denman Rag and Bone helped inform and rally supporters to protest a proposed underwater 500 kV transmission line from the mainland interior, Cheekye to Dunsmuir, Vancouver Island. This line would not span the entire distance but would terminate and then run overland at Lasqueti Island or possibly Hornby or Denman Islands. It would take months of study before BC Hydro and the government were able to determine the best route. In the meantime, residents from all three islands did not waste time; they provided pages and pages of evidence that among the biggest threats posed by

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51 Kel Kelly, The Denman Rag and Bone, 32 (Summer Special, August 1979): 2-3.
52 Kennedy, The Denman Rag and Bone, 33 (Christmas 1979): 3.
these kinds of power lines anywhere were the herbicides used to keep brush under control. The herbicide of choice, they discovered to their dismay, was 2-4-D. Allegedly, the use of this herbicide on Galiano Island in 1972 had contaminated the water source for two pregnant women whose children were born with deformities.\textsuperscript{54} On 25 March 1978, a special meeting was scheduled at the Hall that would include speakers from Lasqueti Island, and a proposal to form “a coalition of B.C. communities being adversely affected by Hydro policies.”\textsuperscript{55} This proposed power line brought B.C. Hydro’s entire operation, from their stated need for this power to their finances, under scrutiny.\textsuperscript{56} Opponents confronted officials at public meetings. People from Denman, Hornby, Lasqueti and various districts on Vancouver Island drove to these meetings to present damaging findings that questioned the very competence of the company and the government to make these decisions. A protest action was scheduled for Parksville for 18 April 1978, and a public meeting at Courtenay, for 20 April 1978.\textsuperscript{57} In another article the readership was informed that “Don Lockstead, MLA for Mackenzie … called for a full public enquiry, as have the Islands Trust and the Lasqueti Defence Committee.”\textsuperscript{58} Kennedy attended an Energy Coalition conference on Lasqueti Island to which fifty delegates came.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{55} Kel Kelly, Ad Hoc Committee, \textit{The Denman Rag and Bone}, 25 (February 1978): 17.
\textsuperscript{56} Kel Kelly, \textit{The Denman Rag and Bone}, 25 (February 1978): 17.
\textsuperscript{57} Alternatives for Community and Environment (ACE), \textit{The Denman Rag and Bone}, 26 (April 1978): 4.
\textsuperscript{58} Robbie Newton, \textit{The Denman Rag and Bone}, 26 (April 1978): 15. The Lasqueti Defence Committee was started by back-to-the-landers, and once it became clear to the original residents on Lasqueti that the proposal did not include supplying the island with power, they too became a part of the opposition to this proposal. Doug Hopwood, interviewed in Vancouver, January 5, 2008.
from across the province, at which it was agreed that the local “Ad Hoc Hydro committee … will continue to focus on the proposed Cheekeye-Dunsmuir transmission line…”

Finally, in the fall of 1978, the islands learned their fate. BC Hydro had made the decision to “cross the strait directly from Texada Island to Vancouver Island thus eliminating further island hopping over Lasqueti or other islands.” Dave Fraser noted that

after a year of claiming an island crossing was necessary to avoid an underwater splice, BC Hydro has reversed its position and will use an underwater splice! This was a victory of sorts for the Lasqueti Islanders and a relief to us on Denman Island.

WELDWOOD ON HERBICIDES

Despite their success in avoiding the use of herbicides in this case, islanders had to remain vigilant to other threats to their ecosystem. On 28 June 1979 the Denman Island Trustees received a copy of a permit from the Pesticide Control Board, granting Weldwood permission to manually spray Tordon 22K on a section of its wood lot to control the growth of maple trees, which the company did not want on its land. Maples were to be felled and the stumps treated to prevent sprouting. Islanders had been warned of the proposal; however the notice was so obscure that only one islander happened to find the sign. Leslie Dunsmore had been walking her dog some distance behind her house in an area without roads or obvious paths, much of which was marshland. Weldwood had already logged this quarter section, so it was not easy walking, but Dunsmore explained that she “liked bush-whacking.” Despite the relative inaccessibility of the spot, she “saw a sign that was posted where nobody would ever see

61 Leslie Dunsmore, *The Denman Rag and Bone*, 32 (Summer Special, August 1979): 18.
it, which really made me mad!” The sign informed the unlikely reader that Weldwood was soon going to “hack and squirt spray” Tordon 22K on the quarter section block of woodland to control weed species. The public were asked to report any concerns to an address on the sign. Dunsmore immediately wrote a letter of complaint and asked if they knew there were about five wells off the marshland adding that she was “concerned that the actual chemical could poison my bees and I made my living as a beekeeper.”

Dunsmore received a double registered letter saying I was scheduled to be heard before this panel. I later found out that I was to appear in an actual court of law. So we started looking into it and found out that Tordon 22K is the main ingredient in Agent Orange. It was me who had to present because it was an actual court of law, but there were eight of us.

Dunsmore wrote an article for The Denman Rag and Bone, outlining the research she and the others had conducted into the toxicity and impact on humans of Tordon 22K (or Picloram), the herbicide Weldwood proposed to spray on maple stumps, on Section 7 close to the Hornby Island ferry dock. Dunsmore made the obvious point that maple seeds seldom sprout in a conifer forest, as the firs shade them from the light at a crucial time in summer. Furthermore, maple seeds are wind-born. “Thus the maple seeds surrounding Section 7 will easily spread their seeds right back into the forest patch being eradicated this year.”

The Herbicide Appeal Board heard the appeal to rescind the permit on 14 August 1979.

“I literally stayed up and crammed the night before,” Dunsmore recalled. Kennedy attended the public hearing and reported on Dunsmore’s presentation of her

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63 Leslie Dunsmore, The Denman Rag and Bone, 32 (Summer Special, August 1979): 19.
64 Leslie Dunsmore, interviewed on Denman Island, December 11, 2007.
twenty-eight-page brief: “After something more than an hour, she stops. There is a split second of rapt, attentive silence and then the room explodes into prolonged applause. One senses palpable delight at having witnessed an extraordinary tour de force by a superb mind.” Kennedy concluded his article noting that “widespread involvement on the herbicide issue forced Weldwood to cancel its controversial spray program.” The Weldwood manager admitted that the company “had not anticipated this level of public reaction.” Dunsmore’s presentation and Kennedy’s presence at the hearing, and the applause, indicate the high and effective level of community engagement with the prospect of pollution of water sources on the island. Despite differences within the community, issues related to water could elicit a greater degree of consensus.

CAPE BRETON

At much the same time, Cape Bretoners were confronted with a threat to their waterways and water supply. In 1976, Nova Scotia Forest Industries applied to spray 100,000 acres with the organophosphate fenitrothion. Unlike the folks on Denman Island who had a shared resource that provided news to the community, back-to-the-landers in Cape Breton were more or less broadsided by the news of a spray program on the island. Within weeks of hearing the announcement, the group, Cape Breton Landowners Against the Spray, was formed to oppose the proposed aerial spray programme. This group included both original and newly arrived land owners.

Although quite a number of those I interviewed in 2006 were involved in the protest against the possible spray program that developed, here too there is written

65 Kennedy, *The Denman Rag and Bone*, 32 (Summer Special, August 1979): 20.
documentation to supplement and organize the story, with the oral material reinforcing it. To provide background to the import of the protests, I have drawn from the writings of two people who took part. Elizabeth May, today leader of the Green Party of Canada, cut her environmental teeth by helping to provide information to those actively organizing a protest. Although she would not think of herself as a back-to-the-lander, she identified with the community while she lived in the region.\textsuperscript{67} In fact it was her parents who chose to move to the island from the United States, which makes her a back-to-the-lander child. Charles Restino was another American back-to-the-lander who settled in Big Baddeck with his family and later published an analysis of the budworm spray controversy.\textsuperscript{68}

The forest industry was led by Stora Kopparberg, a Swedish company, which wielded significant power in the province as it had built a pulp mill at Port Hawkesbury and controlled all of the provincial crown land forests of the highlands in Cape Breton, and much of those covering the eastern mainland of Nova Scotia. Rather than cut the less accessible ageing forests of the highlands, the company ignored the recommendations of provincial foresters and opted for the more easily accessible forests of the lowlands of Cape Breton and the eastern mainland.\textsuperscript{69} By 1975 a spruce budworm outbreak became an epidemic on the Cape Breton highlands, at which point Stora Kopparberg began ringing the alarm bells and made plans to aerially spray fenitrothion, a toxic chemical, across vast acres of woodland to control the outbreak. Urged by the Swedish forest company and others in the industry, but against the advice of the Department of Lands and Forests, the

\textsuperscript{67} Elizabeth May, \textit{Budworm Battles} (Halifax: Four East Publications, 1982).


\textsuperscript{69} Restino, "The Cape Breton Island Spruce Budworm Infestation," p. 3.
Liberal government of Gerald Regan approved the proposed spray program across the Cape Breton highlands in February of 1976.\textsuperscript{70}

Petitions against the spray began to appear within a week, circulated by Cape Breton Landowners Against the Spray, to emphasize that it was local residents taking this action, rather than a foreign corporation. Three thousand signatures had been collected in the course of a month. The first meeting, attended by thirty people from across the island, was held in the Baddeck Court House in late March.\textsuperscript{71} For back-to-the-landers, opposition to the proposed spray program was immediate, but for those whose livelihood was based on the woods, whether as a pulp wood cutter or mill worker, the decision might well have been more difficult. Although back-to-the-landers took a leading role in the anti-spray movement, it was not long before all island residents were on side. Sharon Morrow, a back-to-the-lander in Middle River with a grandmother living in the same community, which gave her insight into the concerns of the original settlers, recalled the impact of this threat on the local population, including her children:

> We were pretty active through all that and those were stressful times, because things like that, while there's a lot of rationale and logic and fact in them, there's also a lot of emotion. So they were emotional experiences for communities and they were emotional experiences for people in their own homes. And I think for us, too, our children were both very young then and we really felt like it was their health and their future that was at stake. Not just them, but everyone.\textsuperscript{72}

Although the approval was revoked within 6 weeks due to concerns that the spray might cause Reye’s Syndrome in children, this did not stop the company from heavy lobbying to have the spray program re-instated the following year and, in fact, every year until 1981. Without this, it argued, the pulp mill would have to close within as little as

\textsuperscript{70} May, \textit{Budworm Battles}, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{71} May, \textit{Budworm Battles}, p. 18.
\textsuperscript{72} Sharon Morrow, interviewed in Cape Breton, March 3, 2003.
five years due to a lack of wood supply. The company took the issue so seriously that its
president and CEO, Eric Sunblat, flew in from Sweden to pressure the government to
authorize a spray program at taxpayers’ expense with fenitrothion, telling Nova Scotia
citizens over local television news that: “Nova Scotia is sick. It must take the
medicine.” 73 The budworm infestation finally collapsed in 1981, without the need for
toxic chemicals, so that in the end the protesters were the winners. Fenitrothion was
never used in Nova Scotia.

Meantime, the company had been clear-cutting the forests for years, as it was the
least costly method. This approach allowed it to use heavy machinery to do the job
quickly. In the process, however, the cut-over forest the company left behind was a
jumbled mess of tangled wood. The first new growth is normally hardwood, but this
was of no interest to Stora Kopparberg; it was only interested in softwood for its pulp
mill. Just when Cape Bretoners thought they had laid to rest the notion of covering
the land with toxic chemicals as a way to manage the region’s forests, they were
faced with another battle, in the summer of 1982, over the proposal to eliminate the
growth of unwanted hardwood, pin cherry and birch in this case. Although all three
political parties had agreed to a no-spray policy, the newly elected Conservative
government of Premier John Buchanan found a loophole in their position to allow for
the aerial spraying of the herbicide 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T, also known as Agent Orange,
rather than a pesticide. 74 The first group to mount a challenge to this new threat in
Cape Breton was the Mi’kmaq Nation, whose reserve at Whycocomagh was just

73 Elizabeth May, At the Cutting Edge: The Crisis in Canada’s Forests (Toronto: Key Porter
74 May, At the Cutting Edge, p. 88.
below one of the proposed sites of the aerial spray, which was the source of their drinking water. Their public protest put an end to this proposal, or so it was thought. Soon, however, it became clear that the permit had simply been varied, rather than cancelled as was announced. The subsequent permit allowed the same chemicals to be used on the same sites, but by ground rather than aerial spraying. This time the only way the Cape Breton landowners were able to put a stop to the spray program was to ask for a court injunction to prevent the spraying until their suit was decided.75

Adam, a back-to-the-lander living on the North Shore, who had also taken an active role in the resistance to the budworm spray program, recalled a meeting he chaired about the court injunction, and the subsequent trial that became known as the Herbicide Case:

I remember there was a meeting called at Indian Brook and because I had always been very involved in the issue … and I suppose at the time because I was chair of the wood-producers coop, I was asked to chair the meeting. And the fire hall was absolutely packed and I felt very nervous; I mean I didn’t know what the heck I was doing. Anyhow I explained you know, I’m not really an expert but this is what I understand about the whole thing and there was going to be a big trial. People were actually putting their property on the line to try to force the issue and make the case and at the end of the meeting people came up with their cheque-books and wrote all kinds of – there was so much money gathered up and I’m talking all local people … the support from the community was absolutely overwhelming.76

Seventeen plaintiffs used their land as collateral toward the costs of the court proceedings and managed to raise nearly a quarter of a million dollars with the help of local support groups. According to Elizabeth May, Stora Kopparberg’s lawyers “resorted to every procedural obstacle imaginable to force the plaintiffs into bankruptcy before the trial

75 May, *At the Cutting Edge*, p. 89.
76 Adam (a pseudonym), interviewed in Cape Breton, October 29, 2006.
could begin.”\footnote{May, \textit{At the Cutting Edge}, p. 89.} In fact her family lost eighty acres as a result. Perhaps because so many people were risking so much by putting their property up as collateral, the community support was striking. Ruth Schneider also recalled the generosity of those in the various North Shore communities:

> When we moved here and got into the Herbicide case that Jane Grosse and I were both involved in … this community was exceedingly supportive of the two of us who were both come-from-aways … And we would be given money on the ferry; people would just hand us $20 and I’d say “Oh no, if you give it to Connie Schell, she’ll write you a receipt.” “No, no, no, no; you need it; you take it.” Auctions were held and this community gave a lot of money to fight that case. And of course there were people here by that time who became fisherman’s helpers and fishermen themselves, from the come-from-away community, and I’m sure all that helped too.\footnote{Ruth Schneider, interviewed in Cape Breton, November 5, 2006.}

Adam speculated further on the reasons for not just a lack of conflict between the local population and the alternative community when it came to these environmental issues, but for the fact that within a very short period of time, Cape Bretonners were unified against the spray:

> This isn’t an area that’s had heavy agricultural crops and heavy chemical use, so certainly when there was issues about herbicides and budworm spraying although people did care about the wood, they could understand very quickly that that wasn’t going to make the difference in saving the woods and they also understood that their water is coming from the woods and they didn’t want it polluted.\footnote{Adam (a pseudonym), interviewed in Cape Breton, October 29, 2006.}

Although Cape Bretonners took a unified stand against spraying toxins across the land, it is not clear that the community would have been as vocally opposed had this occurred prior to the arrival of the back-to-the-landers. Adam maintained that one of the prime reasons the newcomers were so well accepted by the local people was their culture of acceptance.
Here, people are friendly but it’s very reserved, you know? They will not pass judgement on you very quickly and as a matter of fact they might never; just sort of wait for fifty years before they can figure out if you’re a good guy or not. But they’ll just sort of accept who you are and in those ways I suppose that’s why some of us will fight government or agencies that try to do things in the environment that we don’t want to see more than local people who are more accepting.\textsuperscript{80}

In the end the plaintiffs were unsuccessful. The judge decided that there was nothing wrong with the proposed chemicals, despite the fact that they were banned from use in Sweden, the U.S. and three Canadian provinces. Before Stora was able to apply 2,4,5-T, ironically, Dow Chemical finally agreed with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency not to sell old stock.\textsuperscript{81}

CONCLUSION

By the 1960s, the provincial government of British Columbia recognized the vulnerability of the Gulf Islands to overdevelopment, a timing which coincided with the arrival of the back-to-the-landers. Residents on each island covered by the Islands Trust legislation had legitimate concerns about threats to the preservation of the quality and quantity of water, whether by over logging, improper road construction, increased tourist pressure, small lot development or contamination with poisonous chemicals. Indeed, the public generally had become increasingly aware of the latter threat with the publication of Rachel Carson’s \textit{Silent Spring} in 1962. By a convergence of circumstances and personalities, \textit{The Denman Rag and Bone} newsletter on Denman Island provides a venue for such discussions at the time, linking old-time residents and new arrivals in a grass-roots exercise over a series of environmental issues. \textit{The Denman Rag and Bone} fought

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{81} May, \textit{At the Cutting Edge}, p. 90.
the battles and recorded the victories in the struggle for local control over development plans and the quality of water resources. Like The Denman Rag and Bone itself, these victories were largely those of the counter-culture. Many back-to-the-landers to Denman Island, as elsewhere in Canada, were recent arrivals attempting to flee the impacts of industrial capitalism, only to discover that instead of flight their only choice was to stand and fight.

Back-to-the-landers everywhere were more likely than local islanders to “tell truth to power.” Not only did they have more education, which gave them both confidence and greater awareness of citizenship rights, but they were part of a generation that questioned mores, rules, laws and law makers, as well as cultural and social conventions. Furthermore, back-to-the-landers placed great value on their independence; they did not work for anyone but themselves, or if they did it was for a short period of time, often just long enough to earn the money needed for a specific project or to keep them going for another year, but they were not defined by this outside work. Ironically, the perception of an environmental threat on either coast, whether air-borne or water-borne, forced a response that required group action. Public meetings, ratepayers associations and newsletters became sites of collective action and resistance that paradoxically fostered the creation of community. In Cape Breton in particular, even if back-to-the-landers were never accepted as “true” Cape Bretonners, they achieved recognition for their commitment to preserving the local environment.
CONCLUSION

Can we use the term “back-to-the-land, when at least ninety-five percent of those interviewed for this study had never before lived in the countryside? They came from places that ranged in size from Amherst, Nova Scotia, to New York City. From an individual standpoint the term “back” to the land is clearly a misnomer. From an historical standpoint however, it is relevant. The fact that it is necessary to use the term “rural” history today marks a change; in the not too distant past, most history was rural, because that is how most people lived in this country. As Ruth Sandwell tells us “it was not until 1941 that, for the first time, a slight majority (51 percent) of Canadians were living in communities larger than 1,000 people.”¹ In this sense it can be argued that the people of this study were moving “back” to the land.

Reasons for the decision to settle in the countryside were many. The pull side of the equation included the availability of cheap land, while the push included a desire to escape from large urban centres that seemed to respond only to the needs of industry. Some responded to just the pull, some to just the push, although most responded to a combination of both. A sizable subset of those who made this choice hoped to model a better approach to the issues of over-consumption and abuse of the environment. For many of the Americans in this study, their choice to become rural arose in part from their country’s involvement in the Vietnam War and in part from the perception that north and Canada seemed synonymous with remoteness, and that was their goal.

Once living along the back roads of Victoria County, Cape Breton the new ruralists were amazed with the warmth of their welcome by the local residents. That welcome did not come without criticism. However, any bumps along the road were soon smoothed over by the enthusiasm with which the newcomers embraced and helped sustain the vibrant, Scottish infused, Cape Breton culture. The welcome was facilitated in part by the manner in which the new settlers were sprinkled across vast distances with their nearest neighbours local residents, who offered assistance and support to the newcomers. This close proximity to islanders integrated and embedded the back-to-the-landers in their new communities and provided them with a vested interest in not offending local sensibilities.

The road to harmony was rockier for the west coast settlers, due in part to the size of the newcomer population relative to the existing communities on the small and somewhat isolated islands off the east coast of Vancouver Island. The newcomers, as we have seen, overwhelmed the original inhabitants on each island, frequently settling in large numbers on a single, although sometimes relatively large, piece of land held co-operatively. This meant their nearest neighbours were each other, thereby allowing them full expression of their cultural differences such as nude bathing and perhaps pot smoking. Such practices often caused offense to the original islanders and made for fraught community relations.

Each of the three western islands studied in detail developed somewhat differently, due to the particularities of the existing community and the means by which the newcomers negotiated that territory. By the 1980s most, if not all, disagreements and misunderstandings between the back-to-the-landers and the existing populations had been either resolved or a compromise of some sort achieved, or at least lines of communication
had been established. As these new residents on both coasts became more rooted in their communities, and as they began to construct their identity around their land and place in the countryside, they were all the more unwilling to countenance any perceived threats to the environment. Outside threats to air and water quality, in fact, played a role in community formation on both coasts, exemplified on Denman Island, where a large percentage of the population felt strongly enough about the issues to travel to Victoria and protest in front of the Legislature.

Economic strategies were fundamental to the viability of the entire project, beginning with the cost of land and the ability to construct a house from materials found on one’s own property, abandoned on a beach or scrap yard, or procured cheaply from a local mill. Unavoidable monetary expenses like gas, taxes or tools had to be financed through the local, usually seasonal, job market, the production of crafts or farm products for sale, or all of these strategies over the course of the year. Occupational pluralism, a term applied to the study of nineteenth century life on marginal land in rural districts such as Cape Breton, for instance, continued to be the only viable strategy to making ends meet in the 1970s. It was, for the most part, a subsistence economy in the early years and continued as such for many of the women who were single parents.

Unlike earlier generations of settlers whose land purchase was done with the intention of making a living farming, this was most often not the case for the back-to-the-landers. Property was nevertheless the base of their independence as they succeeded in making their way in particular places. The land supplied a subsistence through substantial gardens that would provide all of the family’s vegetable needs and for those with an orchard, apples and sweet apple cider. Orchard windfalls in Cape Breton might
also attract and feed deer, which could result in a supply of venison for the winter. A woodlot for firewood was an important component toward relative self sufficiency. The natural beauty of the areas on both coasts acted as a draw for urban tourists, who wanted a share of that beauty through the purchase of a piece of it, whether in the form of a local craft, or time in the region. Those with the right locations and properties could earn income by opening a craft shop, or renting either bed and breakfast style accommodation or entire living spaces on a seasonal basis, as did many single women on Hornby and Denman Islands.

Key to making it work was keeping costs low and needs modest, even foregoing, in some cases, good nutrition – potatoes and onions were a popular source of sustenance in the early years for a number of people on both coasts. Used clothing, used furniture and recycled hardware for the house, such as doors and windows, all contributed to ultimate viability. Some back-to-the-landers exchanged skills for art work, such as the exchange between Harlene Holm who butchered Annie Siegel’s hens for art work. Work bees were not uncommon in the start-up years, when everyone was building – those who arrived later were not able to benefit from this community assistance.

Off-property work was a necessity for many, although time away was always kept to a minimum. In contrast to settlers of northeastern Nova Scotia a century earlier, who were able to earn only a “minimal livelihood” from off-farm work, their counterparts in the third quarter of the 20th century could earn a comfortable living, for instance with a few months tree-planting. One contrast was the availability of substantial UIC income.

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that might last the entire winter. From the middle class urban perspective, the many part-time and seemingly inconsequential bits of work engaged in by back-to-the-landers may have looked quite marginal, yet all these kinds of income accumulated to make a dynamic, successful economy in the eyes of participants. The perceived marginality of these new ruralists was simply a difference in perspective. Back-to-the-landers valued place and community over income or status derived from scaling the corporate ladder.

Moving to the country provided no escape from the impact of industrial society on the environment, nor was there any escape from patriarchy for back-to-the-land women. Steeped in patriarchy from their earliest years, men and women both had to negotiate new ways of living with each other in a culture and regions where traditional masculine skills and strength made the tasks of building, renovating or cutting fire wood more easily accomplished. These same abilities could be exploited in the labour market for greater profit than could traditional female skills. The ability to meet such expectations validated many men’s sense of manhood, though not all men came with such capabilities and the process of acquiring them could be both difficult and daunting. Women had to decide how best to construct and express their femininity in the context of a nascent feminism evident in urban centres just departed, and the climate of rural patriarchy manifest in the culture of their new rural communities, and in ways that were not repellent to the men in their lives. Women sought the company of other women for support as they negotiated the conflicting demands on their time, on their physical abilities and on their roles as wife, mother, back-to-the-lander, and educated woman. Jan Bevan’s words reflect the changes many women saw in themselves over the course of two and three decades “I’ve

gone from being a suburban city girl to a very competent homesteader. I still don’t like canning or butchering chickens, but I can do those things and I’ve become quite a competent carpenter.”

A majority of back-to-the-land settlers moved from much larger areas, frequently cities, where they might not know even their nearest neighbour. Moving to these extremely small communities provided a different type of learning experience. As their lives became embedded in the communities, they were forced to learn that they were no longer living in anonymity. Island living, especially on the small Gulf Islands, accentuated that experience, reflected in Darlene Olesko’s discussion:

Because Lasqueti is an island you have to face [the] consequences of what happens here; it’s a big playpen and when you make a mess in one corner we’re going to keep going around in circles and hit that mess over and over again. The local community changed me pretty much by the factor of stability and we were perhaps exposed to the mistakes that you make or positive actions that you take. It was my first time living in a small town on Lasqueti Island because living in Portland Oregon, even in the hippie enclaves, there was a flow of people; you know the San Francisco to Seattle crowd would always pass through Goose Hollow, but on Lasqueti it was a bit of an eddy...

Ron Willick reflected on the island experience as well. Coming from the Hamilton, Ontario region, he found that his new location on a small island presented him with an unexpected opportunity for personal growth:

I would say living on Mayne Island and maybe in rural environments, but probably more so on an island … is different than any other rural environment because of the way an island focuses people’s attention inward. It tends to focus on itself and the people within the community. Lots of people hate that because they feel they’re too on the spot. I love it because it takes shy people and gives them an excuse to interact, where they might become reclusive somewhere else. They at least have a greater possibility of interaction with people they might not, and I think usually with very good benefits to how people grow.

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4 The entire population of Lasqueti would not constitute a village, much less a town.
Many of my informants are today comfortably middle-class in their log-cabins and alternatively designed homes, having found success in the artisanal marketplace or through the creation of local businesses. Feeling they have earned it the hard way, without mortgages or credit, they are no doubt happy to enjoy some comforts as they get older. Stevi Parker Kittleson expressed some misgivings in her view of their evolution:

I thought we were going to be smarter, I really did. I probably thought I’d never have a Tupperware container in my life, you know? I certainly didn’t foresee cell phones, [and] I didn’t foresee that I could drive to the store.7

This is not to argue that original values have been entirely abandoned, but that there has likely been a slow change from the extreme anti-modern position from which many started.8 Doug Hopwood spoke to this particular evolution:

Back in the early 70s, you were going to have a loom and make your own fabric and … grow all your own food and make your own cider and … wine and have a cow and some of that pretty quickly [went by the wayside.] And now … some … people … don’t do anything; they don’t have a garden, they just go over to Parksville once a week and bring home the meat on the little Styrofoam blister pack. So I think Chris and I have a happy medium; we still have a big garden, we still cut our own firewood, do all our own building, still really interested in what sustainability means in our lives, what’s an environmentally sound way of living, what’s healthy eating, all these things, but we don’t try to drive ourselves crazy doing everything.9

What is clear is that back-to-the-landers have become key players in the functioning of their adopted communities. The value of the land on which they built has increased enormously, particularly on the Gulf Islands, due to changing leisure economics, so that many successful urbanites are in a financial position to have a second home not just a few hours drive away, but a few hours flight away. This trend has become strong enough to

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7 Stevi Parker Kittleson, interviewed on Hornby Island, January 14, 2008.
warrant regular flights from Calgary to Comox, which is the nearest airport to Denman and Hornby Islands. The population of both islands increases enormously each summer season and this can result in substantial profits for any back-to-the-lander who might choose to sell. Few, however, want to leave the communities in which they have now lived for the better part of their lives and where their children were born and raised. Those who might choose to sell and leave, or have already done so, have health concerns that require tests and procedures and specialists unavailable on the islands. Settlers on Hornby and Lasqueti islands in particular must cope with costly and lengthy commutes to Vancouver Island. Carol Quinn has had thoughts of pulling up stakes for these reasons.

We toy with moving away from the island sometimes because of the ferry rates [and to be] closer to hospitals. He’s [Carol’s husband] still under heavy medication and he’s got a stress test coming up; he has trouble with his weight.10

Those in the most complicated circumstances in regard to selling and moving closer to medical services, for instance, purchased land in a co-operative. Richard Laskin reflects on the nature of intentional and co-operative communities, something that had always interested him from an academic standpoint. While he and his wife celebrate the success of Syzygy, they recognize the opportunities and limitations of this method of holding land.

The literature on intentional communities talks about the ones that are successful or not; the Hutterites are successful … the Kibbutzim were for a long while, the Farm and all the others, but they had something in common: a religion or a political agenda or something. And you know what? We have none of that and we’ve been here for thirty-one years now. So there’s an interesting lesson on intentional communities, because … there’s no way to untie it; there’s no way we can sell out; we’re here, we own our house but we don’t own the land underneath it.11

10 Carol Quinn, interviewed on Hornby Island, January 23, 2008.
As the senior couple in the cooperative, not only in terms of tenure, but also with regard to age, it is understandable that the Laskins have become much more conscious than younger members over the implications of this mode of land tenure and its long-term repercussions. As others, including the Laskins, have argued, cooperatively held land was an excellent and inexpensive way to gain access to property, but this method of land tenure provides no way to benefit from the massive increase in property values that have accrued over the course of the past four decades.

For better or for worse, we find ourselves trapped in the good thing that we did. We put our family life into the Syzygy cooperative community and it’s a bond; it’s not easy to get away from. So what it’s done for us is trapped us in a way, to continue this lifestyle whereby we might very well have said that was enough of that, ten or fifteen years ago if we were not involved in the Syzygy cooperative community as well as in our own family.12

Serena Laskin then responded to her husband’s argument. She explained that due to their inability to borrow, their house was constructed in a piecemeal fashion, which also might affect its value on the housing market. She notes as well that they could not possibly afford to buy elsewhere, necessitating a philosophical perspective, as they were left with limited choices.

That’s a good point. I think though, the life, the commitment of being here and sticking with it, partly is the function of the structure we’ve created, because it’s a land co-op, for instance, no bank would give any mortgage, so we could only build when we had the money to pay for it; so everybody’s houses have just been slowly evolving. You add a room as you could afford it, or whatever, and we also, with our philosophy, meant that this was not intended as a financial investment. That in the selling of this property, without the possibility of getting a mortgage from a bank, it meant that our price is diminished and we really can’t make hardly anything, so therefore if we wanted to sell, we couldn’t afford to buy in anywhere else, anything else. We’re kind of stuck in a way; we’ve created a trap, a comfortable trap but it has also contributed to our commitment of being here.13

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Richard continues with his reflections:

We start a family, we’re young and energetic and youthful and sexy and all that kind of stuff and then as time goes by we get older and older and older; the kids go away, we get older … [When] we started out we had 36 people … 16 adults and 20 children … we’re now a bunch of old farts with very few children around. What’s going to happen to our family as we get older and older and pass on? What will happen to this cooperative, as we get older and older? It’s very important to us … so it continues to be a learning experience, and sometimes painful.\(^{14}\)

This dilemma is relevant to many other west coast island settlers, where the possibility of purchasing land as a cooperative existed at a time when so many, mostly Americans, moved to the islands and purchased as a group. As we have seen, this was never a possibility in Cape Breton. Even if their land has not increased at anywhere near the same rate of increase on the west coast, as owners in full possession of their land and house, they can at least realize a modest profit that might allow more choices than those available to the Laskins. The greatest challenges faced by Cape Bretoners come from the quickly eroding services provided by government and even banks to small rural communities. Despite these challenges on the east coast, land prices have steadily increased, according to my informants, due in large part to the attractiveness of the land to German buyers.

The children of these new ruralists found themselves in the same position as Cape Bretoners and ruralists generally have found themselves, needing to “go down the road” in search of education and work. Few have been able to return or remain in the communities chosen with such enthusiasm by their parents. Land was relatively cheap when their parents bought, but that is no longer the case. Even if they could afford to

buy, most back-to-the-land children are looking for a different way of life, one based on a secure income, the possibility of an interesting career, and many of the creature comforts not available to them while growing up. Some have commented to me the instant bond they have felt when learning that the person down the hall at their university dorm, for instance, also grew up without television, without running water and eating home-made whole wheat bread. While some embraced the values and lifestyle in which they were steeped, others rebelled: “As the adult daughter of flower children, I crave structure, tidiness, and lots of sugar.”

There are a number of web pages, books and articles devoted to this theme, in fact.15

Finally, what were the long-term implications of this movement to the countryside by so many relatively young people? Despite the initial culture clash, there was a net gain for these small places that sustained the fabric of community life over the decades. Back-to-the-landers, with their education and widely diverse backgrounds, brought new ideas and strong commitment to supporting older ways of making a living and creating new business, many of which provided jobs for others. Their children kept schools open, teachers employed and busses running. Their commitment to organic food had an impact on the food ways in these small places, as they opened bakeries and small restaurants and over time grocery stores brought in more, and better quality, produce. Over the years back-to-the-landers became volunteer members of the local fire and emergency response

teams. They brought with them new ideas and strong dedication to protecting the environment, from a multitude of standpoints. Jan Bevan had some final comments about their small farm on Hornby Island, where she gives tours and talks in the summertime:

We have had an impact; we take child volunteers; they … get to dress up in costume; they get to help feed the animals and show people around and answer questions. So, for some of those kids that was actually a turning point in their life, to get out of the city, to come to Hornby Island for their vacation and volunteer at Old Time Farm. And I know because parents have come back and told me that’s happened. And a few adults have been inspired … and some of our WWOOFers17 have made it from urban to rural, so I’m proud of that. That is one way we’ve made some changes in the world. Maybe all those people who wanted their microwave, they have at least seen that it’s possible [to manage without]. And I know a lot of people now buy organic eggs because of my talk on battery eggs and battery chickens.18

Back-to-the-landers had an impact on the communities in which they settled in a variety of ways, including the local economy. The many businesses they created not only boosted the economy in terms of job creation but also through spending their income earned at local stores. Their crafts, bakeries and restaurants helped to draw in more tourists which in turn rippled throughout the region. Back-to-the-landers became part of the existing economy; they worked on the fishing boats and became fishers, they cut pulp wood shoulder to shoulder with the local residents, and they worked in the local sawmills. Candy Christiano and her husband even opened a hard-wood mill in Middle River, Cape Breton that employs local people and ships kiln-dried hardwood all over the world. Instead of dropping out of the modern economy, they chose to participate in it on their own terms, and in many cases, with some considerable sophistication. Having established a successful business creating and selling leatherwork in Cape Breton, John

Roberts became expert on historic recreations, such that he made the many items crafted from leather for the 18th century Fortress Louisbourg, Cape Breton and for 19th century Fort Henry in Kingston, Ontario. The Laskins exceeded their expectations with the success of their Cardboard House Bakery and pizzeria on Hornby Island and there are many others whose success was quite unanticipated.

The peculiarities of memory and the manner in which the past is conveyed mean that the threat of imminent failure has faded, although surely it must have been uppermost in the minds of many back-to-the-landers, two, three and even ten years into their experiences. Much is taken for granted in the telling of these stories, so the reader will need to supply a sense of the drama in struggles, decisions, and choices made when outcomes were unknown but that now seem preordained to those who are telling about their experience.

Back-to-the-landers did not so much become rural in local terms, but their lives and activities mirrored those of others already there in ways they had not anticipated. Not only did some of their children marry into local families, but over time they learned to appreciate the local knowledge that develops over generations. The kind of knowledge that can tell them when is the best time to plant, how to haul wood out of the woods in the winter, how to butcher a pig, how to set lobster traps and how to churn butter. Living in these small communities was an acquired ability as well; as Darlene Olesko and others learned, sometimes the hard way, differences of opinions or of politics had to be handled with some delicacy in small communities and especially on small islands. The anonymity of the city was a thing of the past, as islanders came to learn that “an enemy on an island” could become “an enemy forever, which imposed upon islanders certain
duties and conditions foreign to mainlanders.”19 Perhaps it is not surprising that a number of people on the western islands eventually took courses in conflict resolution. As Peter Johnston reflected on his greater tolerance and acceptance of people, he found that “it’s made me more accepting that there isn’t one right answer, that there isn’t one right way of living and it’s mine and you guys are all wrong.”20 For those who were shy, as Ron Willick described, the small communities also brought out the best in people as they felt they had found a place of belonging.

Christine Ferris, who moved so far from her original home on the east coast of the United States to Lasqueti Island as a teenager, reflected on the impact of that choice and what it had done for her life.

I think that that period of history ... influenced who we are ... in ways that I appreciate. I think it was generally a positive experience. I think for me coming from a place of deep insecurity when I left my home, and finding that (security) and the acceptance you could have, it was acceptance – there’s lots of different ways in society that people get a sense of belonging and for me it was being part of that whole movement to go back to the land.21

Doug Hopwood, interviewed in Vancouver but living on Lasqueti Island, reflected on the meaning of rural in the larger society. Lasqueti, he argued, is an ideal place to model environmental sustainability. “It’s easy enough to install a renewable energy system … so people can see … that it works.” To model such a system in Vancouver, he maintained, would be prohibitively expensive.

It’s a good place for artists and writers to be, so I think there’s a real place for those communities and a real function in the bigger society and that’s what I’m interested in. Not so much the retreat from society as what’s the role of the rural community in society and how does it evolve to be a healthy part of the mix? Because certainly the vast majority of Canadians are urbanites but there’s probably hundreds of thousands of people right here in Vancouver who have

never seen the night sky, who’ve never stepped on anything but pavement or a lawn … never stepped on the actual surface of the planet … never breathed air that’s not tainted by cars, so just that there’s a place where people can go and do that is pretty neat too. And that there are people who live that way so they can bring that perspective to the discourse of society about where it should go, because if nobody’s ever had that experience, nobody’s going to miss it when it’s gone.22

Even many of those who have left – including the back-to-the-landers who packed up and decided it was not for them and the children reared in the countryside and now living in the cities – have taken that awareness and appreciation with them for the simple pleasures of seeing the night sky and unique beauty of a quieter way of life still possible in the countryside. Having experienced the so-called “simple life,” however, those who left knew only too well that making a life in the countryside was anything but simple. The back-to-the-landers who remained, despite the drawbacks and difficulties, the second thoughts and fears of financial ruin, which must once have been a part of the story and reality, but no longer much present in their narratives, made a rich and rewarding life for themselves and for their families along a road less travelled. In the process they wove themselves into the fabric of community life and became integral to the very sustenance of those communities. The energy, education and commitment evident in their stories has contributed to the on-going resilience of rural places on the Canadian periphery.

APPENDIX

Questions for 2003 interviews:
1. What made you decide to move to a rural property in Cape Breton? Were you leaving something in an urban environment?
2. What were your initial plans to make a living and did those plans change?
3. Did you experience a gender division of labour other than what you might have expected in an urban environment?
4. How were you received by the local community?
5. What contributions do you feel you made to the local community?
6. In what ways do you feel the local community has changed you?

Expanded question list attached to my REB application in 2005:
Questions for back-to-the-land participants
When did you move here? Where were you from? How old were you when you arrived?
What prompted the move to a rural location?
What made you pick this specific property? What others did you consider? What did you
know about it beforehand?
How much did it cost you and how much did you have when you started out? What
networks of support could you draw on?
Have you moved or are you still on the same property? How did you make decisions
about buying, selling land, houses. Did you leave and come back?
Did you arrive with family/friends? Did you move here because of family/friends?
Did family/friends join you later?
What kinds of jobs/education did you have before moving here?
What did you know about farming, building a house, gardening, preserving, etc.? When,
where and how did you learn to do these things?
Did you have farm animals? How did you learn to care for them? What about
butchering? Did you hunt?
What were your initial plans for making a living, and did those plans change over time?
When did they change and what brought it about?
How did you divide up tasks between you when you first arrived? Did this
change over time?
Did you feel like your experience as a woman/man was different from that of
the men/women on the farm? In what ways?
How did you divide up childcare responsibilities?
Did you send your children to local schools? Did you home school?
Did your children have to travel some distance to go to school? What was this like?
Where have the children gone?
Did you arrive with specific environmental concerns and did they change over time?
In your opinion, how were you received by the local community?
Has your concept of community changed over the years, has it broadened perhaps from
other Btl types to include the entire island/islands? Or are there multiple and overlapping
geographies?
What was the nature of your community involvement?
Were there jobs available in the community on a seasonal or part-time basis?
Did you create jobs for people in the community by opening up a new business?
Was there medical care on the islands?
How often did you travel to other islands or to Vancouver or Vancouver Island?
In what way do you feel the local community changed you? Do you maintain contact with former back-to-the-landers?

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