

U.S.

Stephen Gaskin, Hippie Who Founded an Enduring Commune, Dies at 79

By DOUGLAS MARTIN JULY 2, 2014

Stephen Gaskin, a Marine combat veteran and hippie guru who in 1971 led around 300 followers in a caravan of psychedelically painted school buses from San Francisco to Tennessee to start the Farm, a commune that has outlived most of its countercultural counterparts while spreading good works from Guatemala to the South Bronx, died on Tuesday at his home on the commune, in Summertown, Tenn. He was 79.

Leigh Kahan, a family spokesman, confirmed the death without giving a specific cause.

By Mr. Gaskin's account, the Farm sprang in part from spiritual revelations he had experienced while using LSD, the details of which he described to thousands of disciples, who gathered in halls around San Francisco to hear his meditations on Buddhism, Jesus and whatever else entered his mind.

But to his followers, he ultimately offered more than spiritual guidance. In founding the Farm, they said, he gave concrete form to the human longing for togetherness coupled with individual expression that had energized the

counterculture.

Communes like the Farm have their antecedents throughout American history. In the 1960s and '70s, hundreds of thousands of people joined them, though most of the communities did not last long. But the Farm, which grew to 1,500 members at its peak in 1979 and has about 200 today, has outlived almost all of them. (It now includes a retirement community.)

“The cultural cliché has it that the flower children danced at Woodstock, crashed at Altamont, and gradually shed their naïve ideals as they made themselves into ice-cream moguls, media magnates and triangulating politicians,” Jim Windolf wrote in *Vanity Fair* in 2007. “But the 200 people who live at the Farm,” he added, “have managed to hang on to the hippie spirit.”

Timothy Miller, a religious studies professor at the University of Kansas who has studied communes, said in an interview that the Farm was “the archetypal hippie commune” in its commitment to higher consciousness, self-sufficiency, a clean environment and a “flamboyant hippie style.”

But where it departed from most of its counterparts was in embracing an entrepreneurial spirit: It created a book-publishing business, marketed pickles and sorghum syrup under the Old Beatnik label, and even dealt in hand-held Geiger counters to measure radiation leaks at nuclear power plants.

It also spurned insularity for outreach. Answering Mr. Gaskin’s call to “change the world,” Farmies, as they called themselves, built 1,200 houses for the victims of a 1976 earthquake in Guatemala, set up volunteer ambulance services in the South Bronx and on an Indian reservation in upstate New York, and started a school lunch program in Belize and an agricultural training program in Liberia. They were among the earliest volunteers to arrive in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

In 1980, Plenty International, a charitable organization Mr. Gaskin started, was awarded one of the first Right Livelihood Awards. Sometimes called the alternative Nobel Prize, the award is presented by the Swedish Parliament to those who have demonstrated “practical and exemplary solutions to the most urgent challenges facing the world today.”

Mr. Gaskin and his wife, the former Ina May Middleton, developed a free midwifery service for women, communard or not. Ms. Gaskin became a widely known advocate for giving birth outside of hospitals, and has written popular books on the subject.

To a degree that startled outsiders in the '60s, the Farm's young men in straw hats and beards and women in long skirts lived an almost puritanical life. They took vows of poverty and pooled their assets. Vegetarianism was mandatory. Mr. Gaskin banned alcohol, tobacco and, to the surprise of many, LSD, though not marijuana. Plenty of work — considered a form of meditation — was assigned. Artificial birth control was forbidden.

Mr. Gaskin, who became a minister under Tennessee law, decreed that if couples had sex they must be considered engaged, and if the woman became pregnant, they must marry. Men were expected to treat women with “knightly” chivalry, he said.

Mr. Gaskin was born in Denver on Feb. 16, 1935. His father was a builder. Lying about his age, Stephen joined the Marines at 17 and saw combat in Korea. He dropped out of junior college, drank heavily and ran coffee houses. At San Francisco State University, he became a teaching assistant to S. I. Hayakawa, the semanticist.

By the mid-1960s, he was an instructor at the university, giving courses on subjects like witchcraft. After the literature department declined to renew his contract, he began “Monday Night Classes” around San Francisco to delve more deeply into spiritual exotica. He sat cross-legged on a stage,

advocated getting high — with or without drugs — and was given to making pronouncements like “It’s easier to be God than to see God.” He said his skill was an ability to talk intelligently while stoned longer than most people.

When liberal Christian ministers attending a conference in San Francisco heard him, they invited him to visit churches around the United States to bring his message — minus the drugs — to alienated young people in their hometowns.

He agreed, and when followers asked if they could accompany him, he said yes, provided they brought their own wheels and paid their own way.

On Oct. 10, 1970, Mr. Gaskin led a caravan of 25 school buses and other vehicles on a tour of 42 states. Fifty more vehicles and 150 more people, including several babies born along the way, joined the tour.

After returning to San Francisco, the group was unsure what to do next. As the story goes, someone at a meeting blurted out, “Let’s go to Tennessee” — where people had been nice to them — “and get a farm.”

Another caravan hit the road. Not long after arriving in Tennessee, the group bought a 1,014-acre farm south of Nashville for \$70 an acre and began setting up tents.

Mr. Gaskin admonished his disciples to treat the local people with courtesy. The sheriff called the Farmies “a fine bunch of people.” Mr. Gaskin was nonetheless arrested and convicted on drug charges after the police found a large marijuana patch on the property, having been alerted by passers-by who had witnessed naked commune members playing flutes to the plants. He took responsibility, though he had questioned the wisdom of cultivating the plant.

More than 600 locals signed a petition protesting his three-year sentence, but to no avail. He was paroled after one year.

As the commune grew, families moved out of tents and into newly built houses. By 1982 the Farm had added 700 acres and established 10 satellites in other states. It incorporated as a “family monastery” to avoid taxes.

By then it had accepted elements of capitalism, having fallen deep into debt in the early 1970s. Some said Mr. Gaskin had pushed the community to expand beyond its capacity. He was asked to step down as titular leader in 1983 but continued to live on the Farm with his wife, who survives him.

Three earlier marriages ended in divorce. He is also survived by a daughter from his second marriage, Dana Wenig; a son, Floyd Hagler, from a nonmarital relationship; three children from his current marriage, Eva, Samuel and Paul Gaskin; a sister, Sherry Gaskin; and five grandchildren.

In 2000, Mr. Gaskin sought the Green Party’s presidential nomination but drew just 10 of 319 votes. The winner, Ralph Nader, received 295.

His campaign statement declared: “I want it to be understood that we are a bunch of tree-huggers and mystics and peaceniks. My main occupations are Hippy Priest, Spiritual Revolutionary, Cannabis Advocate, shade tree mechanic, cultural engineer, tractor driver and community starter. I also love science fiction.”

Correction: July 8, 2014

An obituary on Thursday about Stephen Gaskin, the founder of the commune known as the Farm, misstated the year he was asked to step down as its titular leader. It was 1983, not 1973.

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