

Communes, Communications and Community -

How the Back to the Land and Commune Movements of the 1970's influenced the internet age, social media and other aspects of life in the 21st century.

An early member of The Farm, the largest and most successful commune in the USA, Craig Issod had an early peek into both the power of community and that of electronic networks. In the years since, Craig and many of his commune cohorts have had a profound influence on many facets of modern life , including - but not limited to - internet communities, organic and healthy foods and midwifery.

In this presentation, Craig takes us on a speedy and fascinating journey from The Farm to modern times - reminding us that many of the same forces which shaped the revolutions of the 60's have now become mainstream.

Outline....

Title Slide

Real Life often mirrors **Forest Gump**, where people find themselves close to major historical events - without realizing that they are underway. I found myself attending important events such as the **largest anti-war demonstration in US History**.

At another DC event, we were parked outside the Lincoln Memorial on the same night that **President Nixon, finding himself unable to sleep, reportedly was driven there to converse with the youth** who had gathered.

I was also attendant at the **first Earth Day Celebration in Philadelphia's Fairmount Park** - another event which made history.

Many of my generation went traveling - both here and abroad, to try and reconnect with ourselves and the so-called "Real World". Myself and my close friends were enthralled by a new publication called "**Mother Earth News**", which seemed to describe entire ways of life foreign to us city and suburb dwellers. My wife and I embarked on a journey of our own to try and find America...and perhaps ourselves.

After some **relatively isolated rural living**, we decided that communal living in a rural locale might be the answer...

And so we embarked on our Journey to The Farm, arguably the most successful commune of the time. The **Farm was located on 3 square miles of land** in rural TN and populated by 1,000 souls. Idealists all, we sought not only to change ourselves, but perhaps to change the world around us.

The first years were very exciting - although **we were very poor**, we choose that way of life as a way of proving that it could be done - and, based on our budgets, we succeeded - we lived on one dollar per person per day!

We often described The Farm as our “boot camp”, that is a place where we might learn skills which could eventually put to greater use than just helping ourselves. Although many trades were involved ----looking back I can we see that many of us were being **trained in getting along - in becoming community** organizers, heads of nonprofits and charities.

We were not interested in being a lone community - our ideals included communication with the rest of world. Being as there was no internet in the early 1970's, this outreach took other forms - mostly in the way of **Book Publishing**. In addition we set up our own non-profit called “Plenty”, based upon the idea that, if we used resources in a more efficient form, there would be Plenty!

Plenty traveled all over the world helping people. This **photo is in Guatemala**, where dozens of our members built houses, installed potable water, delivered babies and taught nutrition for years after a major earthquake there.

Spread far and wide, we needed to communicate. **Our solution was Ham Radio** - we set up stations at most of the Farm outposts and had regular schedules of contact.

In the mid-1970's, CB Radio hit the scene and Farm Members were some of the first to the party. Here was a system where everyone, without the hard-to-get Ham License and expensive equipment, could participate. Putting together two forms of communication and outreach, the Farm published a **best selling book on CB Radio - the Big Dummies Guide!**

Fast forward about a decade to the mid-1980's and we see a boom in niche and small group communication driven by **Desktop Publishing**. In theory, everyone was now a printer and could create and distribute newsletters and pamphlets at a very low cost.

Finally, in approx 1986, modems became fast and cheap enough for an individual to purchase - bringing in the era of the network. I first logged into Compuserve in 1986 with **this mac (marked with a D for Drexel University)** and a 300 baud modem. Lest you think things are so much different today, we had heavy-duty back and forths in the political forums on Compuserve!

At the same time - but unknown to me - another movement was afoot - driven by a number of forward thinking individuals in the Bay Area - a low cost online project called The Well. At this time, **Mark Zukerberg was still in diapers!**

Three of the founders of The Well were formerly Farm Residents - Cliff Figallo - the longhair you saw in that photo from Guatemala, John Coate and Matthew McClure. Two of these gentlemen were on my work crew on The Farm. **Other Well Founders** include Larry Brilliant, a

member of the Hog Farm (wavy gravy) commune who went on to head Google.org, google's non-profit arm and Stewart Brand, the well known thinker and activist.

The Well put in place many of the social media and online conventions and guidelines we follow today. For example, most of the problem of trolls and bad actors was solved through the application of the maxim "you own your own words". Although that may sound simple, it's much of the reason a giant community like Facebook is relatively well behaved. That is, if people are not able to hide behind aliases, they are likely to act more responsibly.

My commune cohorts went on to do more groundbreaking work after they established The Well. John managed the first large online newspaper effort - SFgate.com - along with it's communities and Cliff became an expert and consultant in the field. **Both have written extensively on the subject** and also still present seminars and speeches as well as being active in various community-centered endeavors.

Here is just one **outline of various community** guidelines which were put to paper and into practice by both The Well and other successful early online communities. Glancing at them, the following comes to mind:

Human Nature does not change due to faster networks, etc.

As you can see already, virtual community has been around for a long time. New Marketing terms such as "web 2.0" and "social media" are just that. The internet didn't change because they started called it "cyberspace" and virtually community doesn't change because of new marketing and sales terms or billion dollar IPO's.

Here is a rough timeline of some of the forces which shaped our current connectivity.

AOL, with their graphic interface and heavy marketing, brought millions more Americans Online - establishing the critical mass needed for more vibrant communities. AOL had all of the modern types of social media, from forums to chat room to instant messaging and email. Members, both volunteer and paid, curated the online communities. This was my first peek into being both a reader AND a provider of information to others - I was very active on the Filemaker Forums providing advice and scripts to others. I still remember the excitement which came with having dozens or even hundreds of people download my little scripts.

One of my nephews, who was 14 years old at the time, was being paid as much as 30K per year to oversee the "teen" forums on AOL. His income went to zero once AOL stopped charging by the minute - because that was the income stream that AOL shared with forum administrators. If people hung out in your forums - and therefore paid AOL \$6 an hour for doing do - you got a piece of the action!

But what really IS online community?

I suppose some of you have varying definition, but this concept of “a third place” is an important one to consider.

As to a personal and individual reason for socializing online, a virtual community can touch on at least **4 of the 6 basic human needs**. (Tony Robbins)...

Moving back to my own journey - I was not in close connection with my west coast or commune friends while this online revolution was starting. My wife and I had started a successful business selling wood stoves and other alternative energy equipment and we were busy with that and raising our family.

One day in the Summer of 1994, I hit the “Internet” button on AOL and was transported into this Brave New World. The amazing thing was - that **after only a few hours online I understood 100% what this meant for all of us!** At the time I didn’t realize that it, but in hindsight my experiences on The Farm as well as with the early online systems had given me some insight into the Bigger Picture - in this case the amazing Freedoms and Leveling of the Playing Field which were bound to come about when we all were equal communicators on the Internet.

I got very excited - perhaps you can tell that I’m an excitable boy! I immediately signed up with a local ISP and connected to the “real” internet, although doing so was an exercise in frustration. I **purchased a book called “How to be a Webmaster”** and became so pumped up that I couldn’t sleep the night after I read it. I WAS GOING TO BECOME A WEBMASTER. This was not a business plan or an ambition - it seemed to be a calling!

I put my business online - and the world immediately beat a path to our door. We were making sales and fielding questions from all over the country - and sometimes even from overseas. This is what prompted me, in the fall of 1995, to set up Hearth.com - a site which focuses on wood stoves and pellet stoves.

Here are early screen grabs of the front page and of our initial forum. We also had other parts of the site which were community orientated, such as email lists and questions and answers. I even had early blogs - called “editorial” on our site. Hearth.com quickly grew- and has grown every year since.

This is our traffic for 2013 - over 20,000,000 pages read.

For the past 18 years, until I sold the site a few months back, I have been a “community organizer” , keeping the peace, doing the dishes, taking out the trash, protecting from intruders and doing various other jobs. As the years went by, more and more of the site become interactive - today, 90% Hearth.com action is on the forums.

Summary

Social Media and online communities are nothing new. They often grew out of real communities, such as the Farm and the followers of the Grateful Dead, who were some of the most active users of The Well. Our universities were also early users of community - many of the great advances such as the Internet Browser came from the halls of academia.

More people are now connected at higher speeds - Tools have become simpler, so almost anyone can open a “mini-community” on Facebook or a blog on Wordpress or elsewhere. However, the basics of community still matter. Participants must give as well as receive and remember that they are part of the whole.

Only by looking back are many of the Farm Communes’s contributions to society visible. The same is somewhat true of the entire counterculture and baby boom generation. While it often seems that we take 2 steps forward and then one back, it’s my hope that the current generation will use the lessons learned as well as our evolving communication tools and methods to continue the betterment of our society and world.

And so, next time you logo, consider the history and **THANK A HIPPIE...**

THANK YOU....