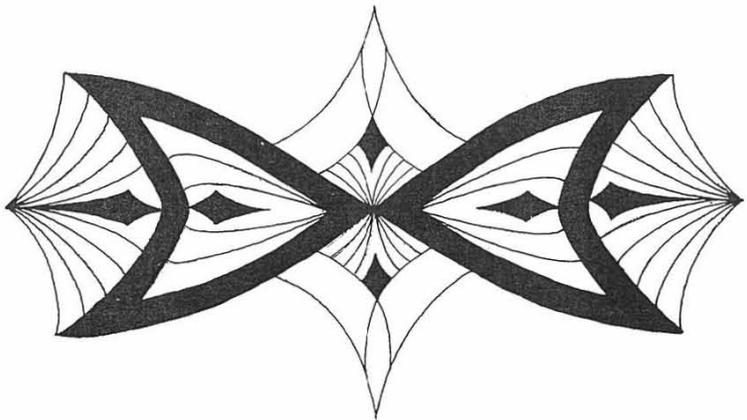
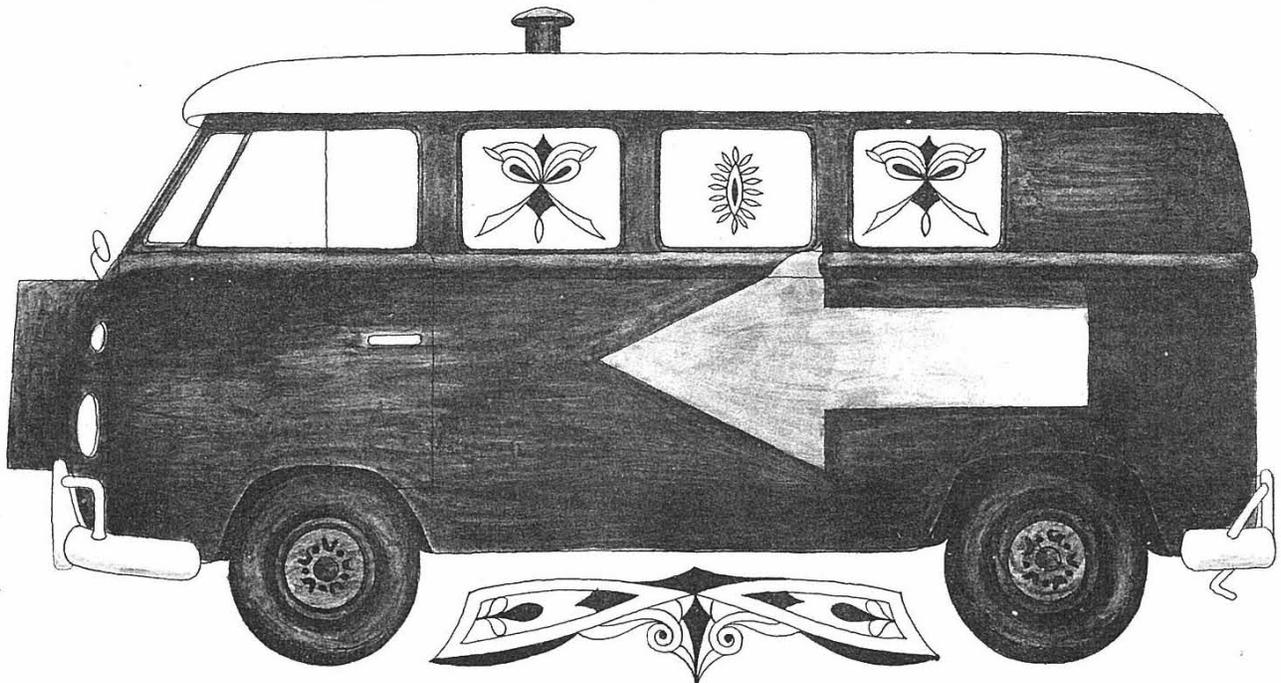


# **E**xplorations



*This first section of Explorations describes travel in psychic, geographic and historical space. In the last Newsletter we told of the departure of the first Earth Gypsies when David and Laura left on their rambling journey. Now each of them can tell of their reactions to what they saw and felt. It is good to see their freaky camper which Camas has drawn so well beside the battered New Alchemy truck again.*



*It is a strange coincidence that the article that follows by Will Wroth was born in the same area that affected both Laura and Dave so profoundly. In many ways it parallels John Todd's in that it tells the story of a decline of a landscape and a culture. It is particularly interesting because it happened so recently and in this country and is therefore a readily traced and tragic example of annihilation in the name of manifest destiny.*

*We are not planning to concentrate solely on material that will induce a state of unmitigated gloom. A recent visitor who spends a great deal of time keeping a finger on the pulse of the state of alternative ideas has promised a report on some of the ingenious approaches that both urban and rural people have developed to survive in the jaws of the technological monster. We hope to explore Fen Shui, the ancient Chinese science of wind and water, and to hear from friends who are either travelling or developing similar communities. Sometimes in this section we will include our fantasies, and we have many. For this time, thoughts born in the mountains of New Mexico.*

"Earth gypsies" we were called in a previous New Alchemy newsletter and at the time I had to smile at the ultra-romanticism of it all. Who, us? Yet now as I feel my way back to those days on the road the inevitable nostalgia makes the term seem appropriate after all.

For three months Dave and I and our feline friend enjoyed the freedom of "life on wheels". We had no obligations, no schedules to fill, nothing to anchor us to any particular time, place or situation. I often felt we were just free-spirits, flowing in and out of a myriad of different realities, feeling what was there, giving what felt appropriate of ourselves, and then moving on.

We saw so much, yet so little. It's hard to give valid impressions of "what was out there" between East and West. What I feel so deeply is that the earth is incredibly alive where we have allowed her to breathe. Her mountains, deserts and wilderness areas reveal a magic that must be experienced to be known. As one pretty far-out member of the New Buffalo commune said of the Sangre de Cristos, "People either find a way to channel the energy creatively or get freaked out and go away."

Each natural environment has its own characteristic vibration of varying intensity which is reflected in the people who live, or try to survive, there. For example, communes in the Taos area of northern New Mexico are very different from each other in goals, structures, and even lifestyles, yet those that we visited all exhibited that rugged individualistic intensity that paralleled the roughness of the land. In contrast, as we pulled into southern California, the aura changed completely. Here the land was overridden with people, automobiles and architecture. The city vibration, to me, was chaotic, uptight, and very superficial. Even the ocean beside the urban areas seemed dull and lifeless. Later, as we left and drove north towards Big Sur, I was relieved to feel the magic of land and sea returning in full force.

Once our lack of funds forced us to assume a more stationary existence, we felt ourselves gravitating away from the city and back towards Cape Cod. New Alchemy-East has proved to be a fine home base for continuing our personal head trips and combining our energies with others. Though the farm has roots, not wheels, "earth gypsies" are we all, seeking the roads towards greater unity with our planet.

— Laura



We traveled close to nature, warmed by a necessary pot-bellied stove in our aging VW bus. I delighted in learning about wood and basic gathering to provide a warm home in the snow-covered mountains. A lesson soon encountered emphasized man's current lack of understanding in the basic technology that propels him. I became both friend and foe to our "wheels", guided in maintenance by John Muir's "VW Manual for the Complete Idiot". The resulting mobility allowed us to drive the necessary altitudes to arrive one sunny morning in Truchas, New Mexico. Here in a setting of

adobe houses and animal skulls, artist Bill Tate rambled on about an earlier visit by John Muir with his VW bus and teepee. How supportive we all become, directly and indirectly, of each other in our cycles of living!

Occasionally these threads of experience were interrupted by my demand for a scientific understanding of alternative cultures. What of alternatives are there in the jagged perspective of a rough country, rugged in its silence, yet demanding direct awareness of the uniqueness of every living thing that is connected by a struggle for survival? What of organic farming, communal living, ecology, commitment, the planet, the universe? Is man too bent upon his logic of structure and definition to answer himself? And can communication allow a group expression of alternatives?

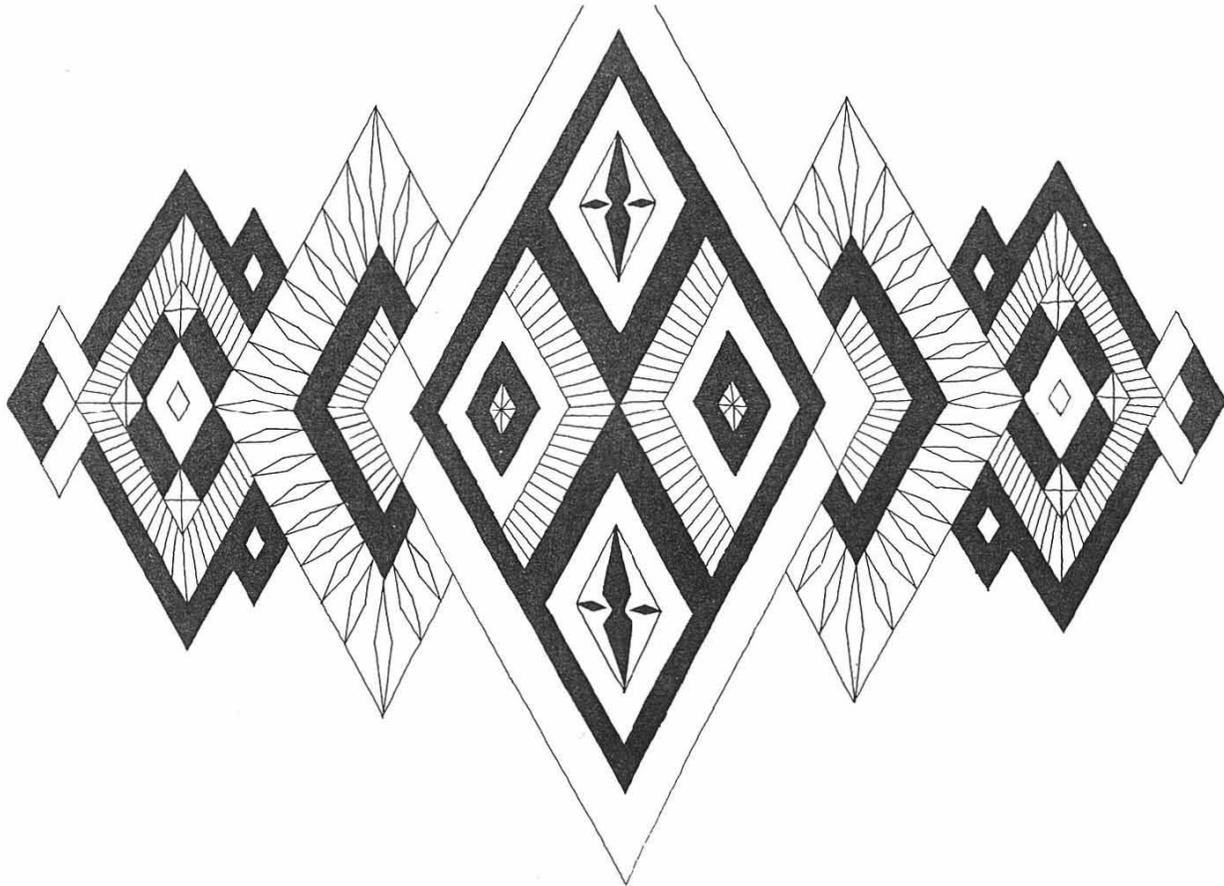
Alternatives are perhaps chosen out of a myriad of dissatisfactions, but are themselves difficult to define. We picked up a young black hitchhiker and asked him where he was going with his gym bag and golf hat. He said that he didn't know where he was going... out west somewhere. We parted and headed south into Colorado. Boom towns have erupted in this state, attesting to the popularity of ski sports. Wood is imported for condominiums, and prices for food and lodging are incredibly high. The abandoned mines still haunt the passes, not yet replaced by tow bars and fad architecture. Yet nature, specifically the mountains, drew us close in our confusion to share her secrets. Circles in the skies swirled in a visual tapestry suggestive of the liquid noise level of inner space. Ecology thus entered the fourth dimension of vibrations. We avoided the boom towns.

The land was primary in providing a basis of my consciousness of the events surrounding my perspective. Some impressions were complex hallucinations of energy carried effortlessly within the winds of the desert. Other people became amplified by a mutual respect for the surrounding environment. I met one woman in a commune's group outhouse while I was gazing at the moon. At the top of a saddleback, Robin Hood fantasies complete with paranoia persisted in the jungle fatigues of a couple of universal soldiers. There were so many trips supported by everything from creativity to welfare to occasional agriculture. Within this variability, the rituals of prayer and group feasting were a refuge, a chance to rest within the safety of human understanding.

Occasionally I would meet an individual with a deep understanding of his life alternative. Then the energy of a crackling fire would flow between us and there would be no need to speak further. This is the reinforcement, the fantasy of a community based upon sensitivity, capability, and perceptions with love of fellow human beings. The forces are dynamic, however, and the "group" of one, two, or more becomes cosmic only to later fade away. The individual, however, leaves with a piece of knowledge to build his alternative. Evolution continues.

Laura and I grew separately, together, and traveled on.

— David



## traditional ways in new mexico villages

I. Z. is a Spanish-American village in the Sangre de Cristos mountains of New Mexico, north of Santa Fe. It was founded over 200 years ago as a military outpost to protect the farming communities of the valleys from Indian raids. The present population of Z. is almost entirely descended from the original settlers and the Pueblo Indians who formerly inhabited the area. Among themselves they speak Spanish. Until the last few years no more than one or two Anglos were living in the village. Due to its mountain isolation and fairly severe climate, Z. has maintained to the present day more of the traditional Spanish-American culture than most New Mexican villages.

Prior to World War II, Z. was almost totally independent of Anglo-American culture and economy. Separated by 9 miles of steep mountain dirt road which was impassable or close to it many months of the year, Z. (and other similar mountain communities in the area) was virtually a money-less economy. The people were self-sufficient to a degree that is unknown anywhere else in present day U. S. They grew all their own food:

yellow, white and blue corn, wheat, beans and squash were staples. Goat herds ranged in the hundreds and everyone kept them. Today the largest goat herd in Z. is 30. Sheep were also abundant and some cattle. All available land was farmed and an elaborate system of irrigation ditches and ponds was used to maintain sufficient moisture in this dry climate. The traditional irrigation system and the methods of water allotment and water conservation are still in use in Z. today and are exactly the same systems developed by the Moors in Spain. In addition the Moors in their development of the art of agriculture practiced the "rule of return" of all organic matter back into the soil (via composting), and the terracing of fields for maximum land utilization and preservation of topsoil<sup>1</sup>. Both practices were in use in Z. until recent years. Even today horse and cow manure are the standard fertilizers. Most Spanish and Indian farmers in the area are intuitively suspicious of chemical fertilizers, knowing that they are unnatural and bad for the soil. The remains of beautifully terraced fields may be seen all over this part of the country, but the practice has

<sup>1</sup>The Moorish-Hispano art of agriculture is outlined in detail by G. T. Wrench, *Reconstruction by Way of the Soil*.

almost died out because so little of the available land is now being farmed.

The village water system also provided a convenient source of power. Z. formerly had many flour mills along the *Asequia madre* (Mother ditch). These mills took water from the ditch (by means of a long spillway to develop pressure) to drive a horizontal water wheel on a long vertical axle which in turn drove one of the mill stones. There are in Z. two of these *molinos* remaining but not in operation<sup>2</sup>. Water power was also used for saw mills but this was mainly a commercial operation.

Until the last 20 years or so, nearly all farming was done by hand. Internal combustion machines were rare. Plows and harrows and hay wagons were all horse-drawn. Fields were planted, watered, weeded and harvested by hand. Grain and corn were hand threshed; beans were threshed by horses walking in circles over a hard adobe threshing floor, usually outdoors, crushing the pods and stalks. Z. villagers maintained (and some still do) their agricultural self-sufficiency throughout the year by canning and by drying some fruits and vegetables and by storing others in root cellars. Chickens were kept; pigs were slaughtered for lard. Beef was dried in the sun to make *carne seca*.

In Z. and other Sangre de Cristo villages self-sufficiency extended beyond the realm of agriculture to all the other concerns of life. Weaving and clothes making were highly developed. The village of C. 9 miles from Z. has long been famous for its weavers. Today there are two active weaving shops in C. and two have recently been started in Z. but these are commercial operations dependent on selling to outsiders. Few local people can afford to buy these elegant handwoven articles. The same situation exists for the traditional craft of furniture making. The little furniture now being made is sold to outsiders. But the older Spanish people still have in their houses many beautiful pieces of handmade furniture.

Building construction was a necessary task and today most of the men and women still know how to work with adobe. Bricks are still made by hand in wooden forms from a careful mixture of mud, gravel and straw. Although modern construction methods are generally gaining popularity, adobe houses are still being built and older ones are carefully maintained, usually by the women. Good exterior maintenance requires the woman of the house to plaster the bricks every year with a layer of adobe of exactly the same composition as the bricks themselves. Interiors traditionally were whitewashed with a mixture of lime which is available locally and wheat flour or other suitable binding agent - now of course commercial whitewash or latex paints are commonly used.

Pottery was made in Z. as it was in all Spanish and Indian communities in the area. Z. potters produced a

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<sup>2</sup>I have heard of a similar *molino* in Taos county recently put back into operation by its Spanish owners.

very nice low-fired grayish-black pot flecked with tiny flakes of mica. There are very few of these pots still to be found in Z. and the last potter died many years ago - another lost art.

Metal working has survived in the form of blacksmithing. Several men in town are competent smiths and their services are still sought. Forges are still operated with hand blowers. Examples of traditional ornamental metal work can be seen in picture frames made of sheet metal cut to form with geometric patterns punched in.

Due to their remoteness, Z. and other villages had to take care of their own medical needs. Even today there are villages in the area which are 20 or 30 miles of bad road away from the nearest doctor. Every village had its own *curanderas*, women who knew how to prepare medicines from the wild plants for every conceivable illness. These women also served as midwives and delivered all the babies. Some of them also were skillful masseuses. There is one of these women now living in the area, a bright-eyed, energetic lady of 84. She still practices her art - preparing medicines from local plants - and has many patients among the older generation, while the younger seem to prefer aspirin and city doctors. She also continues to deliver babies - when there is an expectant mother brave enough to have her baby at home, without doctor, hospital or anesthesia.

The remoteness of Sangre de Cristos villages also contributed to the development of an indigenous form of religion, *Los Hermanos Penitentes*. The Penitente Brotherhood is a form of folk Catholicism which developed in this area because of the lack of formal church hierarchy. For long periods in the 17th and 18th Centuries there were neither priests nor a bishop in New Mexico. The main transmitters of Catholicism were Franciscan monks. It is believed that the Penitentes derived from the 3rd order of the Franciscans of Medieval Spain<sup>3</sup>.

Whatever its origin, it became the only religion of these Spanish villages. There were no priests; services were led by a group of elder Brothers singing and chanting. The Penitentes emphasized suffering as the way of purification and redemption. The suffering of Christ was re-enacted each year at Easter time. There has been much-to-do by modern writers about the so-called "barbaric" sufferings the Penitentes put themselves through and thus they have gained the reputation (in part fostered by the Church) as being a malevolent deviant cult. In truth, however, the physical suffering was voluntary and willingly taken on as a means of purification and of working out karma. Further, it was limited in time to a few days of the year in the week before Easter. The Peni-

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<sup>3</sup>Many Penitente practices show a close affinity to those prevalent in Medieval Europe. For instance: the singing and chanting and musical instruments used during Easter week. One instrument the *matraca* or cog rattle, had exactly the same use in Medieval Europe as it does now during Easter week in Penitente ceremonies. (cf. A. Baines, ed. *Musical Instruments through the Ages*, London, 1961.)

tenientes functioned throughout the rest of the year as the spiritual and moral backbone of the community, resolving conflict and generally taking care of the needs and problems of the people. The sense of community that remains in Z. and other New Mexican Spanish villages can in large part be attributed to the past and continuing presence of the Penitentes who today are the village elders. The actual ceremonies of the Penitentes are very simple and beautiful, certainly one of the purest forms of Christian worship in America today.

The Penitentes today operate to a large extent "underground" and are said to be dying out. The flagellant and self-mortification aspects of their Easter week ceremonies have been toned down or perhaps are now performed in secret. Modern America has become too bland to accept such deeply-felt and acted spirituality which in my mind makes their continued existence all the more important. We are used to all kinds of horrible destructive acts in America - they are easily rationalized, but any positive act involving pain is unthinkable. It is unthinkable because expiation and purification by means of suffering is exactly what the self-indulgent American ego needs the most.<sup>4</sup>

II. At the present there are still many vestiges of traditional culture in New Mexico Spanish mountain villages. In Z. the transition to modern American culture began with the paving of the highway and the development of Los Alamos during World War II. Los Alamos requires all kinds of blue collar workers and the pay-scale is equal to the highest in the nation - in one of the lowest income, "economically depressed" areas of the country. Rapid transportation, World War II and the lure of dollars at Los Alamos and other cities took the men of Z. away from their traditional way of life: many have left for the cities and have not come back. The population has dropped from 1700 to 400 in 40 years, fields lie fallow from one end of town to the other. The few crops that are grown are mainly for animal feed or for sale, not for local consumption. Fruit trees are neglected, the *molinos* are no longer in use. People are content with bleached white-flour bread and canned fruit and vegetables from the supermarket.

Money is being made, houses have been transformed from Spanish adobe to suburban American. New cars wander aimlessly up and down the roads on weekends (on weekdays their owners are busy working to make the payments). The young people are bored and have

nothing to do in Z. so they get drunk or go the cities to work.

It seems incredible to watch these people rushing to emulate white American material culture which to us and our friends has proven to be so empty and valueless. Informants tell us the community spirit that once existed in Z. was really strong. People felt a sense of duty to help their neighbors. Now with everyone off on their individual work and money trips, families are starting to grow more distant from one another, and one senses that the human isolation typical of white America is rapidly approaching here.

In Z. the deadening uniformity of modern America is evident in many areas: diversified crop and animal farming for sustenance has degenerated to cattle raising mainly for cash - with the inevitable dire consequences to the land. The existing farm land is being ruined by overgrazing of cattle and mono-crop growing of alfalfa. The result is soil depletion and weakened grass root structure, causing arroyo cutting and widespread erosion. Not only is the existing land being ruined, the Department of Agriculture is destroying valuable forest land, leveling thousands and thousands of acres of trees to make more grazing land for more cattle. The result is inevitably a decrease in rainfall in the affected areas where low rainfall is already a serious problem.

The homogenous Anglo-American material culture approaches Spanish New Mexico from many directions: cultural sterility via television, prepared food monotony via supermarkets, the bland piousness of Protestantism and modern Catholicism replacing the Penitentes. There is much talk of preserving Spanish cultural traditions but at the same time there is whole-hog adoption of Anglo-American values. Spanish is taught in the schools only as a foreign language.

These changes have the one advantage of being very recent. There are still many old people in town who have not changed at all: they speak little or no English, live in simple houses without electricity and running water. Walking is their form of transportation and they use horses for farming. These old people are the last representatives of traditional Spanish-American way of life. Their children and grandchildren have almost entirely given it up. Away from Z. in cities like Los Alamos, Santa Fe and Albuquerque many young people no longer speak or care to speak Spanish.

The recentness of these changes allows us access to traditional ways. Even the sons and daughters (people in their 30's, 40's and 50's, who work in the cities) are clearly aware of "the way things used to be" and there are not many who would say things are better now.

III. A recent phenomenon in Spanish New Mexico is the arrival of a new group of people: young Anglo-Americans who have become disenchanted with modern American material-technological culture and are seeking a simpler way of life.

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<sup>4</sup>cf. *An Interlinear to Cabeza de Vaca* trans. by Haniel Long (1935; Frontier Press, 1970). The incredible relation of a 16th century Conquistador who was shipwrecked on the Florida coast and walked from there to New Mexico undergoing terrific hardships and sufferings beyond anything modern man can imagine. The result of these trials was enlightenment and realization of the common plight of all mankind. The Conquistador mentality transformed by *suffering* to a higher level of consciousness.

This heavy influx of young people in the last few years has not been without problems: there has been tension and some conflict between Spanish residents and new arrivals, but now after nearly four years things are beginning to settle down. The young people who have stayed have become more attuned to Spanish ways. Most of the bad elements among them have gone back to the cities. It is not easy to live in this northern New Mexican country, the land is harsh and people who are not really together have not been able to stay. The ones who have stayed have bought land and built homes. They are beginning to work the land, growing their own vegetables and taking care of some livestock. A "hip" community has grown up extending from Santa Fe to Southern Colorado and includes several large communes and many single and extended families.

Some of us are really concerned to see this community achieve a high degree of self-sufficiency. Agricultural self-sufficiency seems to be a basic first step. The difficulties here are lack of water and a short growing season but people are learning the basics of gardening, farming and caring for animals. There are now several outlets for local produce: co-ops, natural foods stores and farmers' markets all of which encourage people to produce surplus for sale or trade. Besides garden vegetables we are learning to grow grinding corn (white, yellow, blue); wheat, oats and buckwheat; peas and beans (kidneys, pintos, bolitos); and are raising goats for milk, cheese and meat, and poultry for eggs and meat. These staples we hope will eventually provide year-around self-sufficiency for a large community of people.

— Will Wroth  
June 1971

