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TALES FROM TWO

With a like-mindedness primed by psychedelics, the '60s set about constructing communes. Most of them didn't last. The yearning for a small community hasn't left, though. A persistent few are trying intentional small-place living in other places, and a brave few are trying it again in a no-place kind of place. They are searching for a communion of mind primed by electronics, a slippery unity at once democratic and intimate. One of the discoveries to come up from the search is The WELL. One of the experiments the search began with was The Farm. Between the two is kinship.

The Farm was a do-it-yourself civilization hacked out of the Tennessee woods. It grew its own lingo, and transformed technology like CB radio and satellite TV into small-community tools. At their peak, Farm folks connected 1,400 lives into a "mental nudist colony." Although Farmies became experts in communication, they found they couldn't sustain living together under the guru-heavy society they had programmed. Most of them disbanded in the early '80s. Three of them regrouped in the offices of Whole Earth to reconstitute what they liked best about the Farm by hard-wiring it into The WELL. Within the virtual Farm of The WELL, 1,400 new members bare their minds, nurture another new lingo, and try to hook together into a small (it fits into a closet) community. Three and a half years old now, The WELL has become a way to live in a commune without having to live on one. It's not a substitute for a neighborhood but an affirmation of what it should be.

One of the most popular meeting places on The WELL is the "True Confessions" confessional box. Some of its most-read testimonies have been accounts by the WELL managers of their former lives in a former community. We have downloaded and illustrated them with pencil renderings from old Farm photos. John Coate begins by introducing The WELL and its caretakers, and then he and Cliff Figallo tell stories about the community of the Farm, which take place within the village called The WELL, and which are really about making a place better than either. —Kevin Kelly

A Village Called The WELL

by John Coate

I WORK AT The WELL, Whole Earth's online computer conferencing network. The WELL itself sits in an air-conditioned closet at the Whole Earth office. A bunch of phonelines come into the building and connect to these modems, which in turn are wired up to a Vax computer. There's a modem for each phone line. We can handle up to 23 callers at a time, which we often do with over a thousand people logging in each month. The Vax is about the size of a large dishwasher. When people visit us they like to go in and look at the equipment. When you see the lights on the modems flickering you know that conversations are happening. Minds are meeting.

Personal computers are amazing communication tools. Put a computer together with a modem and you can converse simultaneously with several people, collaborate on writing projects, find work, gather and refine ideas, get technical updates, swap some stories, argue politics, and get a recommendation on a good restaurant and movie without getting up from your desk. Online conferencing networks can be both a place where you meet people — like a neighborhood pub — and a tool for gathering and storing information.

I wear a few hats here. Marketing, publicity, customer service, phone support, party host, and welcome wagon to name a few. You could say that my job is to keep in touch with what's happening on the WELL and then present it to anyone who might be interested.

As I sit at my desk in The WELL office shuttling between conferences, doing mail, writing pieces like this one, and talking online as well as on the phone to new users, I check to see who is logged in every few minutes. I know most of the names. Because we have had a lot of social gatherings I know many faces to go along with the names. Many have become my good friends.

Sometimes when I'm working I feel like I'm in the wheelhouse of a big Mississippi riverboat. On the decks people are strolling and talking as they lean against the rail. There's a casino and parlors and places to eat. Way down below they're talking shop with the machinists. There are regulars and newcomers. Everyone has a unique point of view. Sometimes it's choppy, but usually it's steady as she goes.

Although there is a lot of useful information stored on the WELL,

COMMUNITIES

THE WELL AND THE FARM

like in a library, it is through conversing in conferences, e-mail and real-time that the fabric of the community is knit.

There are over ninety WELL conferences. Some are computer-specific, some are technical, and some consist of people throwing out their ideas, telling their stories or arguing social and political issues. After talking with people about all kinds of different things, over time you get the feeling that you know that person even if you have never met face to face.

You hear the word "networking" tossed around all the time these days. That can mean a lot of things. It could be people meeting to swap business cards or otherwise connecting with the idea of doing some sort of business or a project together. But before you decide to work with someone you may want to find out if they have a sense of humor or if they have cultural or political values that are compatible with your own. Or maybe you're just looking for some good conversation. So you cruise around to different conferences and you find out what people think about things. The information moves "horizontally" among the peer group of the participants. Anyone can start a discussion topic in a conference. Topics can be linked between different conferences. After a while I think the word "community" begins to describe what goes on better than "network." In a community, the interactions are ongoing. You run into some of the same people every day. Over time, professional and personal interaction can overlap. There becomes a sense of place to it. It often reminds me of an electronic Greenwich Village. Logging in can be like going down the street to check the action.

We don't have a lot of rules; we manage The WELL in a very low-key style. It really can't be done any other way. For one thing, The WELL's customers are bright and independent. A heavy management style would get us labeled as the local brain



police. We say that you own the words that you write. That means that you take responsibility for what you say and other people can't steal your words any more than they could if what you said was in print.

The conference hosts are the keystone of the WELL organization. Every conference has a host. That word was very deliberately chosen. Public online conferences are a lot like ongoing parties and someone has to make sure there's ice in the cooler, food on the table, continuity in the discussions, and good general organization. As Matthew McClure puts it, "it was our idea in the be-

ginning that The WELL could turn into the electronic equivalent of the French salons during the Enlightenment period. Each salon would need a "host" who could make people feel comfortable and bring out the best from each guest."

Also there sometimes arises the need to bounce someone. WELL conference hosts have the power to censor remarks and even to ban someone who is too much of a nuisance. It's a judgement call and thankfully it rarely happens. But like in any gathering where people focus their attention, it is possible to be more concerned with

grabbing and holding the attention of the group rather than concentrating on the content of what is said. Usually when someone does that, other people in the conversation will try to talk it out, not wanting to purge someone, but rather hoping that the loquacious offender will make some modifications so the dialogue can continue.

ONLINE conferencing is talking by writing. You set up your context, get to the point, and get out. Because it's a conversation between sometimes fairly large groups, you don't want to "dominate the rap" and you don't want to be repetitive. You have to remember that people are looking at computer screens, which seem to put unique demands on people's ability to focus on long-winded pieces. If your "posting" runs longer than one or two screen lengths, it had better be pretty interesting. And you will hear from people if they think you ramble too much.

The flip side of that, though, is that if you have a good story to tell or enjoy quality repartee, or can lay out and quickly back up an argument or insight, then the chemistry can be there for a kind of ad hoc think tank that has soul and is fun. We talk about everything from war and law, music, work, birth, death, where this "info age" is going, and AIDS to online talk shows, tales of past experiences and exploits, online gift notifications (better known as Pokeybux), thoughts on human relationships, bugs in the latest version of PageMaker, reports of WELL weather, the Maddog Improvement Society, and critiques

CONFERENCES ON THE WELL		
Best of the WELL (g best)		
Business - Education		
Classifieds (g cla)	Consultants (g consult)	Consumers (g cons)
Design (g design)	Desktop Publishing (g desk)	Education (g ed)
Homeowners (g home)	Legal (g legal)	Library (g lib)
Stock Market (g stock)	The Future (g fut)	Translators (g trans)
Work (g work)	Word Processing (g word)	
Social - Political - Humanities		
AIDS (g aids)	Archives (g arc)	Berkeley (g berk)
Central America (g centro)	Drugs (g dru)	Gay (g gay)
Health (g heal)	Irish (g irish)	Jewish (g jew)
Liberty (g liberty)	Mind (g mind)	Men on the WELL (g mow)
Myths (g myth)	Nonprofits (g non)	Parenting (g par)
Peace (g pea)	Poetry (g poetry)	Philosophy (g phi)
Politics (g pol)	Psychology (g psy)	San Francisco (g sanfran)
Sexuality (g sex)	Spirituality (g spi)	True Confessions (g tru)
Words (g words)	Whole Earth (g we)	Women on the WELL (g wow)
Writers (g wri)		
Arts - Recreation - Entertainment		
ArtCom Elec. Net (g acen)	Audio-Videophilia (g aud)	Comics (g comica)
Cooking (g cook)	Crafts (g craft)	Eating (g eat)
Flying (g flying)	Fun (g fun)	Games (g games)
Gardening (g gard)	Jokes (g jokes)	MIDI (g midi)
Movies (g movies)	Motorcycling (g ride)	Music (g mus)
On the Air (g ota)	Pets (g pets)	Raslin' (g ras)
Science Fiction (g sf)	Sports (g spo)	Television (g tv)
Weird (g weird)		
Grateful Dead		
Grateful Dead (g gd88)	Deadplan (g dp)	Feedback (g feedback)
Tapes (g tapes)	Tickets (g tix)	Tours (g tours)
Computers		
Amiga (g amiga)	Apple (g app)	Atari (g ata)
Commodore (g com)	Computer Books (g ebook)	Art & Graphics (g gra)
CP/M (g cpm)	Desktop Publishing (g desk)	Forth (g forth)
HyperCard (g hype)	IBM PC (g ibm)	Laptop (g lap)
Macintosh (g mac)	Mactech (g mactech)	Microtimes (g microz)
Programmers (g pro)	Programmer's Net (g net)	Unix (g unix)
Word Processing (g word)		
Technical - Communications		
Info (g boing)	Media (g media)	Packet Radio (g packet)
Photography (g pho)	Science (g science)	Technical Writers (g tec)
Telecommunication (g tele)	Usenet (g usenet)	Video (g vid)
Netweaver (g netweaver)		
The WELL Itself		
Deeper (g deeper)	Entry (g ent)	General (g gen)
Help (g help)	Hosts (g hosts)	System News (g news)

of the latest Grateful Dead show.

Ah yes, the Deadheads. There's plenty of action around the Grateful Dead. The Grateful Dead Conference is The WELL's largest, with people logging in from all over the country. It's mostly good talk, but some online collaboration happens too. Once we designed a WELL t-shirt together. We chose the design, had someone collect the money, and another person got them printed up.

The WELL is a confluence of social and cultural elements. Similar to Chesapeake Bay, where nine different rivers merge, The WELL's character comes from hackers, writers, artists, Deadheads, knowledge workers, fugitives from the counterculture, educators, programmers, lawyers, musicians, and many more.

The Info conference, for example, is regularly visited by a magazine editor, a college journalism teacher, an author, a consultant to a state assembly committee, an info-age muckraker, a retired army colonel turned info-age pioneer, a manager from Pacific Bell, a librarian, and members of the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment. We evaluate new laws, discuss government hearings, and theorize about the forces at play that are attempting to capture their piece of the action as these new information tools become more widespread. It's exciting, relevant stuff because it has to do with basic Constitutional freedoms. In these discussions, age, race, or culture don't matter. Your contribution to the discussion is the only thing that counts.

“WELL” STANDS for Whole Earth Lectronic Link.

It's the collaborative brainchild of Whole Earth's Stewart Brand and Larry Brilliant, best known for his work with the SEVA Foundation and as head of Network Technologies (NETI). Whole Earth and NETI each own half of The WELL. After spending time working on projects through the EIES network, Stewart and Larry conceived The WELL in 1985 as a place where a variety of people could meet online without spending an arm and a leg. Early on Stewart said The WELL is “the kind of thing coffee shops were supposed to be about, but are pretty hard to find these days.”

Matthew McClure was the first administrator of The WELL. He had just the right combination of technical and community experience to make The WELL float as a bootstrap operation

where the early users helped plan and design their new meeting place. At times it was almost like a barnraising.

In the summer of 1986 Matthew was ready to move on. He hired Cliff Figallo and myself to take his place. All three of us had lived together for a decade on a very large intentional community in Tennessee called the Farm. Having worked and lived with a huge number of people with every imaginable attitude gave us a balance of sensitivity and toughness that we knew would translate over to this online meeting of minds and personalities. Yet as new managers of The WELL it was essential that people trust us.

At this same time, Tom Mandel and Howard Rheingold created the True Confessions Conference. True Confessions is a place where people tell their stories — funny, sad, scary, deep, momentous. It was an instant hit that did something more than just interest people. Everyone who told something about themselves became a more identifiable human being. We began to feel like we knew each other. And for Cliff and me it was a perfect way to explain where we had come from.

At first I didn't say anything at all about the Farm. I talked about driving trucks, and tripping, and hopping freights. I thought that if people knew I had lived on the Farm all those years that they might get a preconceived idea of me based on that.

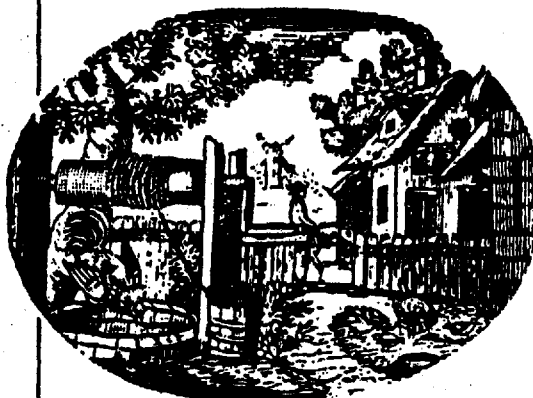
But after a while I realized that a lot of why I was working here was because I had lived there. And that a lot of the things I had learned about group dynamics came from my experiences on the Farm. So when Tom Mandel started a topic about communes it seemed like a good time to spill the beans.

THE STORIES that follow are excerpted from that topic. They are off-the-cuff reminiscences composed online and entered every few days as topic responses. □

If you can get your computer and modem to dial a phone number, you can log in to The WELL. Usually the default settings that come with the communications program work fine. The WELL does cost money to use but at \$8/month + \$3/hour the rates are among the lowest in the country for comparable facilities.

Actually, the phone company makes more on this than we do. But we have ways of tipping the balance sheet more in your favor on the cost of the phone call. If you live outside of the San Francisco Bay area you can save substantial money on the phone call by reaching The WELL via the CompuServe Packet System. If you live in the Bay Area, call us and we'll give you tips on cheaper phone access through special local lines. In addition, The WELL is one of the few places where an individual account has full access to the worldwide UNIX community through USENET and UUCP mail.

To sign up, just call 415/332-6106 with your modem and type *newuser* <cr> at the *Login:* prompt. Or call us at 415/332-4335 during office hours if you'd like more information.



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