

What Does It Mean to Live Together? Oral History and Memories of Communality at Felin Uchaf

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The following oral history paper explores how narratives surrounding communes and counter-cultural movements in the 1960s and 70s have often been distrusted within by academics within oral history. My mother and her siblings grew up in North Wales, on a 'commune.' This project was made up of series of interviews conducted with the people who were a part of the creation of these spaces, and explores how memories of this period can be distrusted.

Stories in the oral tradition, within family in particular – hold historical and cultural meanings that, as Valerie Yow has noted, 'contribute to the shaping of individual's lives [...] and illuminate changes and experiences that are experienced on a societal level.'¹ It is the stories I heard growing up from my mother – of the 'commune' that she and her siblings grew up on, that has inspired the writing of this oral history paper. Tales of no electricity; river and waterfall to play in; rug instead of a front door; outdoor compost toilet; smell of woodsmoke.

In the early 1970s, my mother's stepfather, Peter Collis, and a few others, bought Felin Uchaf ('upper mill' in Welsh), a dilapidated corn mill with seven acres of land near the village of Cynwyd, North Wales. My grandfather, around the same time, bought Druid Mill, a few miles down the road – and later on, Peter bought Commerce House, nearby the butchers in Corwen, another village nearby. All three places, as well as a few surrounding properties, became a home to many people. Some for weeks or months – others for many years. This paper concentrates specifically upon Felin Uchaf; however, the spaces were highly interconnected, and many people moved from one place to another.

¹Valerie Yow, *Recording Oral History* (3rd ed.) (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), p. 283

The research for this project consists of four interviews conducted with four of the people (two couples) who lived at Felin Uchaf with my grandmother Linda and her partner at the time, Peter – Helen Guyon, Fransis Guyon, Ralph Aldhous and Maryke Brevet. Both couples have been together since living at Felin Uchaf in the early 1970s and raised children there alongside my mother and her siblings, before eventually moving away in the late 70s. I have known the four of them throughout my life, as part of my extended ‘family.’

Most of the hippie communes that rose out of this period were, like Felin Uchaf, relatively ‘short-lived’ and ‘un-momentous’ – yet their radical legacy somehow continues to fascinate.² It is the meaning, impact and memories that have been formed from these modes of alternative living that constitute the focus for this paper. My interest here is not in how the communes have been defined as a political movement by the existing historiography; but instead, where the relationships and boundaries between collective and individual memories of communes exist, and what oral history, personal narratives and the ‘life story’ can illuminate about their meanings. Oral history has traditionally been criticised in its ability to understand areas of history that are strongly impacted by collective memory, as the 1960s and 70s were. Sixties narratives have often been deemed unreliable, too blinded by nostalgia to accurately recall the ‘truth’ of the past. I argue here that this approach fails to integrate and understand the variety and abundance of meanings that have been created by these experiences. That it is because rather than in spite of the ‘peculiarities’ of oral history’s methodology that allows these multiple meanings and versions of the past to coexist. The life stories I heard from the four of them, and the conversations that arose from each of our interviews brought up unique, insightful memories, and I left each conversation carrying different parts of this story with me.

Memories of Community

Barry Shenker argued in 1986 that the ‘central fact,’ the *raison d’être* of the intentional communities was their ‘ideologies.’³ Using this ideological framework in understanding intentional communities can, in some ways, allow us to develop a method of categorising communities, as well as

²Barry Shenker, *Intentional Communities* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986)p. 4

³*Ibid.*, p. 71.

allowing us to define and place them within the historical movements in which they exist. The idea central to the Israeli kibbutz movement is that man is fundamentally good and inherently communal, whereas Hutterite framework is centred on the act of communal living as being an expression of one's connection to God. Many of the other communal ventures of the last few centuries fixated upon the power of mysticism to guide their way of life; such as the Diggers and the Shakers. Aldous Huxley's utopian vision in *Island*, also based upon the principles of the mystics, continued to stoke the desire for oneness and connection with the 'Ultimate Reality' into the twentieth century's communal experiments. Where the commune movement of the 1960s differed from previous movements, however, was in their vastly more individual, decentralised nature.

Although a formal Commune Movement did exist from the mid 1960s, membership was relatively small, even at its peak.⁴ Most communes were unaffiliated with the official movement, and the applicability of shared ideologies between different communes of this period therefore becomes problematic.⁵ Many of the 60s and 70s communes had an individualised relationship to spirituality, mixing atheistic, religious and spiritual beliefs together. Each group existed with different rules, priorities, and economic systems. Some held very strong beliefs, such as Findhorn in Scotland (one of the most successful and longstanding British communes), for others it was simply an experiment, done 'on a whim.'⁶

Going into the interviews, I wanted to understand what their own relationship was to the language and pre-existing identities of communality and 'communes.' Cultural memories of this time did seem to partially inform – or was at least a contributing factor – in how they framed these experiences; most of them brought up the phrase and concept of 'commune' organically and without suggestion from myself. Their engagement however, with these cultural scripts was not a passive

⁴ Andrew Rigby, *Alternative Realities: A Study of Communes and Their Members* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), p.98.

⁵ Phillip Abrams & Andrew McCulloch, *Communes, Sociology and Society* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976), p.4.

⁶ Abrams & McCulloch, *Communes*, p. 84.

act. Both Ralph and Helen noted that it was not themselves who originally classified Felin Uchaf as a 'commune,' this was a label largely given to them by others. In Ralph's description of how he and Maryke came to live at Felin Uchaf, he describes how he noticed how these ideas were applied to them.

We had developed an idea – Maryke and I, that we would go to go live in the country somewhere with some people, because that was that was in the air at the time – there was a lot of talk about communes. And I mean, that word wasn't so important then as it subsequently became. So, it's one of these things – you know, the word 'commune' and the word 'hippie' which you will also hear were kind of grafted on to the past subsequently... But I mean, what we were doing was not [sighs] – it's this thing about, oh, well, it was a commune. But we didn't call it that at the time. Say, yeah, we're living in the commune – we were just there. So, we were not using that kind of language. And it subsequently becomes cleaned up and made part of a sort of historical movement. Which it kind of was, because it was part of the zeitgeist, it was what was happening at that time. And there's an awful lot of literature about it. And actually – I think that, you know, our generation subsequently did change the world. Not necessarily for the better, or the worse, it just changed it. You know, things that we did. The way that, you know – there was a huge, huge difference in Britain, between, say 1965 and 1975. A massive cultural revolution. And we were a part of that.

The complexity in how collective and individual memories can interact is brought up and commented on here; he accepts and even identifies with the wider historical meanings that places like Felin Uchaf hold, acknowledging their importance and reality, whilst asserting how, during this period, these meanings were not fully present – 'We were just there.' While speaking to Maryke, I noticed she didn't use the word commune at all, instead choosing language like 'community' and 'living communally.' The following anecdote highlights some of the ways she noticed the tensions between other people's conceptions of communal living, versus other lived experiences.

There was another hotel in Corwen. I think it's called The Red Lion. One had the rotary and the other one had the lions – you know what I mean?

And they were equal in status. Anyway, we went to the launderette, and I think we hitched. It was Linda, myself - I don't know if Helen was there. Or Helen and myself. With laundry. And this man picked us up. It was right in the beginning, in the really early times, and we didn't have anything - we had the river, but we had nothing to wash with. And this bloke picked us up. He was the publican of The Red Lion and he was – it was the early 70s you have to remember. And he said, 'Oh, and you all live together? Orgies and things?' NO! We haven't got time for that. You know what I mean! We have to get water from the river and dig the garden and look after the kids. And cut wood – you know?

Her story echoed a sentiment expressed by Bob Ploss, that the practical and the economic side of alternative living was largely ignored by the outside world – that 'sex drugs and rock/roll stories were much more entertaining and vastly more likely to sell newspapers.'⁷ Perceptions of others evidently concentrated much more on the sensational, rather than the things that made up their life experiences, raising their children, taking care of the garden. Maryke remembered how they would all eat together – 'Everything. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And Christmas meals.' At the end of the interview, I asked her if there was anything else important that she felt she wanted to talk about. 'No,' she said. 'I just want to emphasise the positivity. Because I'm sure I wouldn't be like I was. Like I am. If I hadn't been there.'

During my conversation with Fransis, the conversation ventured for a while about the meaning of communes more broadly, what they meant, and how they managed to survive, why so many of the communal projects split up in the end. He spoke of Tipi Valley, an eco-commune in mid Wales, where they knew some people – how, like Felin Uchaf, they ended up in family units rather than a more communal structure.

FRANSIS: Well, I thought it was communal, but it didn't think it actually was. Not, you know - I'm not being very clear. I think Felin Uchaf started off as a commune. But the people, the characters involved, the personalities involved, didn't communicate. Well, yes, they

⁷Nancy Janovicek, "If you'd told me you wanted to talk about the '60s, I wouldn't have called you back': Reflections on Collective Memory and the Practice of Oral History', in Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki (eds), *Oral History Off the Record: Towards an Ethnography of Practice* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), p. 191.

communicated. But it wasn't a commune as I'd sort of imagined it. But I wasn't particularly disappointed. I was more interested in being with Helen. And being in Wales, then in the commune aspect of it.

OLIVE: So, for you, it was more that you enjoyed just enjoyed living with these people in this place, rather than it being an idealistic thing?

FRANSIS: Yes. I mean, I had come across communes – by reputation and visiting, and things, because there were lots around and I had got the impression that they needed a vision to be – to work as a commune, it either needed a vision, or a very charismatic leader. And that wasn't what was happening at Felin Uchaf. And that's not a criticism. It's just how it was... I don't think there was really a vision at all. Except that it was a group of people living together. Only they weren't really living together. They would, you know – Peter and Linda were in the house with your mum and Denzil and Jasper. Possibly Tom, I can't remember. Ralph and Maryke in the barn. And I can't remember whether we eat together, or we eat in the bus. And Ralph and Maryke eat in the – you know, I can't remember how together we were.

Although also discussing and engaging with these wider questions and meanings, Fransis suggests that his sense of meaning was about something more than Felin Uchaf's political identity and how closely they were identified with any historical movement. That his connection to this time was most closely felt through being with his family – 'being with Helen. And being in Wales.' He told me later on – 'my memory of it all was idyllic.' His testimony suggests there is something more to the story of the communes that political activism or radical countercultural identities, that there are dual meanings in existence that involve all aspects of how life was experienced – more about family and community, than 'visions' and politics.

From Helen too, it was her stories about the garden, the children, living with others that seemed to appear at the forefront of her memory. One story she told me (which I heard from Fransis also), about the day she was picked up from hospital after the birth of their children, Merion and Rhiannon, seemed to capture the importance of these meanings.

It was the day Fransis was coming to pick me up out of hospital – so he didn't pack anything away – he got to Druid and things like lentils and tea and rice and everything had fallen out and all over the floor. And it was a mess in the bus, and then he couldn't get the bus into their back garden. So, there was Donna and Freddie, and I think Linda and Peter, they were all there trying to help. And they just said to Fransis, go – go and get Helen, because I think that time that weren't going to let me out after a certain time because, you know, babies. So, Fransis came over to get me – didn't tell me any of this. So, when we got back, the bus was in situ. And it was tidy, and there was – Oh! There was an apple pie and there was bread. It makes me cry to think of it! And they'd just all got together and done it. Flowers. Oh, god! Yeah. Amazing.

I remember smiling, as I heard her tell this story. Later on, I asked her whether she would have lived at Felin Uchaf again, if she could go back to that time. 'Yes,' she said. 'I like community living. I think we're social beings. My friends have always been very important to me, because I didn't have my family when I was younger. They were in India. My friends were my family. So, they were my family at Felin Uchaf. My friends now – you know, all of you. I still think of you all as my family.'

As I moved through all the interviews, the aspects that seemed to feel the most tangible communications of meaning were these stories of simply sharing this space together – stories that had stayed with them over the course of their lives. Although there was clearly an awareness of the ways they were being conceptualised by others, both at the time and subsequently, as well as the wider significance of living in a commune – it seemed these external frameworks were much less important than the actual lived experiences of their lives – stories about Nell, the goat, or how they had ruined the beans one winter by 'over-salting them.' I realised that, although I was careful to give them the space to self-describe their own experiences my initial focus on political visions and whether Felin Uchaf had 'achieved things' may have simply entrenched the pre-existing historical presentations of the communes, and the cultural meanings they are assumed to hold. What also became clearer, was the ways in which Felin Uchaf, Druid and Commerce House engaged in many significant differences to general discourse about 'drop-out' and counter-culture movements, that Mark Donnelley

described as 'functioning primarily as a kind of short-lived, utopian parallel universe for the disaffected young middle class.'⁸ What I was left with instead, was the sense that it was the smaller memories of living here, working together and creating this space that had remained with all of them.

The Value in Trusting Individual Remembrances

After the advent of poststructuralism and the linguistic turn in the late sixties there seemed, increasingly, to be 'little space for the consciously reflective individual' within the oral history testimony, in lieu of a postmodern focus upon the cultural scripts that are embedded within our memories.⁹ Green argues that oral history during this period was in danger of rejecting the individual's agency and capacity to engage with their own histories.¹⁰ Understandings of memory and subjectivity within the discipline have since expanded with greater and greater nuance, and there now exists a rich oral history theory explaining the strengths of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, forgetting, selective memories and self-censorship. Some historians, however, even in more recent years, continue to heed caution in working with oral narratives of the sixties generation. There can be a marked tendency to dismiss these narratives as blindly nostalgic—over identified with the cultural motifs and collective memories of the period. As Shenker writes, 'of course, the history of communal movements is fraught more with failure than with persistence, and it is only too easy for the insider to over-romanticise, distort, apologise or be defensive within his own frame of reference.'¹¹ This perspective is what has allowed criticism of the individuals involved in the counterculture movements, as well as oral history's legitimacy in analysing their narratives.

Canadian oral historian Nancy Janovicek notes this preoccupation with collective memory in the discipline, stating how her colleagues would often joke about making sure her 'bullshit detector' is on whilst

⁸Mark Donnelley, *Sixties Britain* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2005), p. 123-4.

⁹Anna Green, 'Individual Remembering and 'Collective Memory': Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates', *Oral History*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2004), p. 42.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Barry Shenker, *Intentional Communities: Ideology and Alienation in Communal Societies* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), p. 5.

interviewing activists from the 1960s.¹² She remembered how, at conferences, doctoral students who presented papers involving oral testimonies from the 60s were met with questioning about the reliability of the memories of those they interviewed.¹³ In her own work, Janovicek challenges the premonition that all 60s narratives involve nostalgic memories of the time. As she noted in her article about interviewing the back-to-the-land movement of the West Kootenays – popular culture tends to straighten and homogenise the movement into an ‘uncomplicated celebration’ of youth culture, protest; sex, drugs and rock and roll.¹⁴ What she found was that her own research fit ‘uncomfortably’ with the accepted narratives of the ‘60s – that the stories she heard from the interviews were diverse, and often more interested in centring their experiences of farming, local communities and the environmental impact of their lives than in contributing to a collective history of the 1960s and 70s.

At Felin Uchaf, many of the ‘tropes’ typically associated with the commune movement were present; they lived rurally and relatively self-sufficiently, keeping animals and planting a variety of plants and vegetables; money was put in a communal kitty; childcare and the running of the place was a communal activity, living spaces and eating was done (to some degree) communally. Whether it had spiritual or political meanings at the time remains specific to each individual, but many aspects typically associated with the ‘hippie’ movement were present; in many of the interviews we talked about the music that was there, Hendrix, the Stones, Pink Floyd; of IT and OZ magazine, the Whole Earth Catalogue; the origins of Glastonbury. The ideas behind Felin Uchaf were cultivated with political motivation, and an aversion to the way ‘straight’ society was run. There were clearly ‘political’ aspects to Felin Uchaf which were included in their narratives – the severance of which from its whole meaning would be untruthful. My argument is not that one should dismiss the political reasons for the existence of communes in our remembrance of them. It is simply that the meanings of life experiences should be decided by those who have lived them. Part of oral history involves an acceptance that our relationship with our

¹²Nancy Janovicek, ‘Collective Memory and Oral History’, p. 186.

¹³Ibid, p. 188.

¹⁴Ibid, p. 187.

subjects involve a power dynamic—that we are responsible for interpreting and analysing narratives, choosing which words we deem important enough to hold ‘historical significance.’ We get to decide which histories are written about, whose life stories we decide to talk about, how to frame them.

What I noticed, during my own research, was how their narratives diverged from one another, each remembering and focussing on very different aspects of Felin Uchaf. Some of the conversation in the interviews contradicted each other or presented very different pictures of organisation. For instance, Maryke’s claim that they ate ‘everything’ together, versus Fransis’ feeling that they lived more separately – that he couldn’t remember whether they ate together regularly at all – highlight the inconsistencies of oral testimony that Portelli claims make oral history so unique. The notion that contradicting, or ‘wrong’ statements are still psychologically true is important to remember, as we look for the individual forms of meaning making that are involved in the memory process.¹⁵ It remains, within all areas of history, important to reaffirm the value in individual testimony and remembering – and to trust the ability of individuals to critically engage with their own histories.

As Paul O’Farrell wrote in 1979 – oral history is transitioning into ‘the world of image, selective memory, later overlays and utter subjectivity. [...] And where will it lead us? Not into history, but into myth.’¹⁶ His words reminded me of Jeanette Winterson’s beautiful passage in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit...* that ‘people like to separate storytelling, which is not fact, from history which is fact. They do this so that they know what to believe and what not to believe.’¹⁷ The crux of meaning here, is that oral history is storytelling, unavoidably so. The stories we tell – to others, and to ourselves, are an act of active remembrance of the past. It is the meaning that we draw from these narratives that is what allows us to make sense of our histories, both collectively and as individuals.

¹⁵ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli And Other Stories* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 51.

¹⁶ Paul O’Farrell, ‘Oral History: Facts and Fiction’, *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, no. 5 (1983), pp. 3–9.

¹⁷ Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (London: Grove Press, 1985), p. 93.

Conclusion

My mother's stories of this time I carry within me, as with my own imagination. There are many versions of this story, many different truths. The words and stories drawn from this process were unique, not only from one another's narratives but were also from the generalisations given to those involved in the counterculture movements. The 'management of meaning' that has become normalised in listening to sixties and countercultural narratives do not allow us to fully listen to these narratives, and consequently may cause some of the deeper meanings to become lost in historical translation.¹⁸ It seems that when you really listen – you hear. After each interview, I came away with a difference sense of 'what had happened' and what it had meant to them, as well as finding myself impacted emotionally in different ways, as several dynamics in subjectivity and intersubjectivity revealed. Oral history, allows, as Alistair Thompson beautifully put it, 'the many layers of individual memory and the plurality of versions of the past' to exist in symbiosis with one another.¹⁹ Felin Uchaf, along with the countless other places during this period of evolving living spaces and lifestyles, are connected to the wider meanings of the communes, but can only really become understood when looked at as composites of the individuals who make it possible, who created it for themselves. The life stories then – of 'a few people' who lived together in an old corn mill, in rural North Wales, can provide an introspective insight into one of the 70s communes,' how communality is understood, and what it meant for those whose lived experience was such. The narratives involved in my research for this project have illuminated the delicacies in subjectivity, not only in their own experiences, but also of my own – and the ways in which these have interacted to begin to tell some of the stories of Felin Uchaf.

¹⁸Nancy Janovicek, 'Collective Memory and Oral History', p. 196.

¹⁹Alistair Thomson et al, 'The Memory and History Debates: Some International Perspectives' *Oral History*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (1994), pp. 33–43.



Figure 1: The Garden at Felin Uchaf.

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