Editor’s Desk

Inaugural Issue 2008

Thank you for reading the inaugural issue of The Oklahoma Revelator – A People’s Almanac and Cultural Quarterly. It’s the work of many writers who deserve our thanks for believing in our idea and being willing to contribute to our efforts to put it into your hands. It’s also appropriate for us in this first issue to explain what we’re aiming for – our intent for this project.

From our observations as life-long Oklahomans, there are voices in this state that generally go unheard. And when they are heard, they aren’t really listened to. These are not the voices of only one persuasion or another – political, religious, or otherwise. They actually represent complex identities and ideologies. They are the voices of Oklahoma’s “people’s culture,” – a culture as rich and densely beautiful as culture found anywhere – and to oversimplify them is to miss them entirely. We believe that this diversity of voices should have equal representation in Oklahoma’s public and cultural dialogues.

This project is not about starting a political movement. It’s about building morale so that all Oklahoma’s people can be freer to live according to their own wills and visions, with mutual respect for each other’s experience and perspectives.

We’ve organized our inaugural layout around columns that we believe represent primary issues – both in the past and present – on the hearts and minds of Oklahoma’s people, but that generally don’t get much thorough discussion in other venues around the state. Our regular columns focus on issues of labor, agriculture, war, and indigenous peoples, as experienced and written about by Oklahomans living and working near the heart of them. Our feature articles will change from issue to issue. We’ve also got an archival section – Lest We Forget – in which to publish archival material from Oklahoma’s files of history. In future issues we hope also to include an interview of interest and a calendar of use.

We know we’ve not assembled a complete compilation of viewpoints, and we’re looking for Oklahoma writers who are willing to contribute to filling in our gaps. If you have an idea for a column or a feature, or you’re interested in writing for us or helping us in any capacity, please send us an e-mail
WRITE FOR THE REVELATOR

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ADVERTISE IN THE REVELATOR

The Oklahoma Revelator accepts advertisements both for our web portal and for the Quarterly. We offer an innovative advertising plan on a trade and barter system as well as a standard fee-based system. If you’re interested in advertising with the Oklahoma Revelator, you can email us; you can also find complete information on the web at: oklahomarevelator.com.

Continued—The Editor’s Desk

to editor@oklahomarevelator.com, or drop us a line at P.O. Box 5029, Norman, OK, 73070.

Otherwise, we plan to have our next issue out in three months and hope you’ll find this inaugural issue compelling enough to keep watch for the next one. Please visit our website in the meantime. You can contribute to the Oklahoma Revelator project online as well – www.oklahomarevelator.com.

Yours,

Rachel Jackson

Note from the Layout Editor: Due to the bad economic times, we had to discard our beautiful color layout and move to a simpler (and cheaper to print) black and white layout. This second printing of Issue #1 has pretty much the same content as the original Issue #1 but a very different look and feel.

- James, October 2009
Common Ground and Oklahoma Character

By Davis Joyce

Introduction

Nestled in the beautiful Kiamichi Mountains of southeastern Oklahoma lies a little piece of Heaven called Common Ground.

Perhaps that sentence makes it obvious that this will not be a traditional scholarly paper?

Our daughter, Elizabeth, is one of the owners of Common Ground Farm. My wife, Carole, and I love to go there, have for over a quarter of a century. We love the people, the land, the quiet. But I am a historian, so I promise you I will try to keep my facts straight. Besides, historical objectivity is a myth, don’t you think? I learned that from Howard Zinn many years ago. The best we can do is to be open and honest and up front about our biases, then proceed to write the best history we can write, being true to the sources. That’s what I’m going to do here. Consider this a history and interpretation of Common Ground Farm, with an effort to relate it to the theme of the 2007 Red Dirt Book Festival, “Oklahoma Character.” My sources, by the way, are the documents that relate to Common Ground’s history (somewhat limited, as many were destroyed accidentally some years back), interviews (primarily via e-mail) with most of the residents and former residents, and personal experience/observation. (By the way, Common Ground is the real name, but I’m not being specific as to location and I’m using only first names of individuals involved to respect their privacy.)

Outstanding Oklahoma writer Rilla Askew wrote this as the opening paragraph of her novel, The Mercy Seat:

There are voices in the earth here, telling truth in old stories. Go down in the hidden places by the waters, listen: you will hear them, buried in the sand and clay. Walk west in the tallgrass prairie; you’ll hear whispering in the blue-stem. Stand here, on the ragged rim of a mountain in the southeastern corner; you can hear the sound rising on the south wind, sifting in the dust through the crowns of the cedars: stories told in old voices, in the pulse of blood-memory; sung in the hot earth above the ceaseless thrum of locusts and nightbirds whirring, beneath the faint rattle of gourd shells. One story they tell is about longing, for this is a place of homesickness. The land has become home now, and so the very core of this land is sorrow. You can hear it longing for the old dream of itself. Like this continent. This country. Oklahoma. The very sound of it is home.1

Isn’t that beautiful? But you know what, residents of Common Ground can state it almost as eloquently. Max, for example, one of the original four owners, said with obvious passion in his interview that being “restless” was part of the Oklahoma character. “We couldn’t have done this in California,” he said. “I’m proud to be an Okie; I claim it! I did it in reverse, came from California to here. Maybe I feel this more than others because my grandfather was from here, but to me, there’s no place more beautiful; this feels like home!” (Glen, one of the four current owners, once used the expression “reverse Okies.”) Max even noted that he doesn’t get chiggers, rarely gets ticks, two problems that just about everybody who has been to southeastern Oklahoma in the summer knows about; “it’s in the blood,” he bragged.

The Basic Story

Max, his brother Don, and their friends Arthur and Dan, first moved to southeastern Oklahoma in 1974. But Common Ground as such did not yet exist. They lived on 80 acres they called “Earthborne,” and built a cabin there. It was a while later when they purchased the current 120 acres and incorporated as “Common Ground.” Max and Don were native Texans, Arthur from California, and Dan from Washington. In Max’s case, the move involved dropping out of college and loading everything in a Volkswagen bus. Some of the men, he says, met their partners/spouses through involvement in the anti-nuclear power movement, specifically the successful effort to stop Public Service Company of Oklahoma’s proposed Black Fox plant near Inola, east of Tulsa; others met through other channels in Tulsa, including Neighbor for Neighbor, a coop. All four of the original guys remember what was to emerge as one of the central difficulties of the residents of Common Ground: making a living. At one time or another, they all worked in Tulsa and commuted; eventually, most of them got odd jobs nearby, some working for Weverhauser planting trees.

The memories of Max’s eventual wife, Alice, add an eloquent touch to all this. “It was wonderful to enter such a peaceful, healthy environment that was free from cars and the business of city life,” she says. “It was pure bliss to arrive on a dark moonlight night to see our friends gathering in the lantern-lit cabins, cooking and laughing together.” But she also remembers the hard work. Life on Common Ground, she says, “was not a breeze, as many
outsiders assumed. Actually, I had never worked harder preparing each day’s food and keeping up with the list of chores that go with living with no electricity or running water.”

Arthur remembers the combination of good times and hard work involved in “living off the land,” as well. By the time they acquired Common Ground, two women, Danna (with Don) and Viva (with Dan) had been added to the group. Arthur credits Max with creating the name Common Ground, and considers it “perfect . . . for all that was to take place on this piece of dirt in the years to come.”

Add’s Don: “To make a conscious choice, to act on it, to drop out and tune in, was an act of bravery. I always thought that our initial exodus from California was a reverse ‘dust-bowl’ effect. Okies, like my parents, left Oklahoma in the thirties to heal a hungry belly. We came to Oklahoma to heal our discontented minds. And Oklahoma nurtured us.”

The Mission Statement that the owners agreed to reads: “Common Ground is an intentional community comprised of both resident and non-resident members and owners. Through this intentional community, we are committed to working together, to enjoying each other’s company, and to sharing and preserving Common Ground Farm” Even that is powerful, I think, but documents that exist further clarifying the group’s goals include “Common Ground Philosophy Statement” which bears quoting in full:

*We are a collective group of individuals.*

*We accept the challenge to show ourselves, our children and the world that people can live together harmoniously, consciously, and happily. To that end, we understand the importance of supporting and trusting each other.*

*We value each person’s input and strive for equality amongst ourselves.*

*We practice conflict resolution in the group and individually. In doing so, we pledge to take responsibility for resolving conflict, whether that be in meetings or privately with another member.*

*We respect non-violence.*

*We are dedicated to reaching group decisions through consensus and understand that struggling together over issues strengthens the group.*

*We believe we are also gathered together to work toward ending injustice. We encourage individuals to be politically active in the larger community, and align ourselves with the philosophies of environmentalism, feminism, child advocacy, and tolerance of all races and cultures.*

*We respectfully challenge our own prejudices and ignorance, and hope to always be learning better ways to reach common ground.*

Powerful stuff, many of us might say—certainly I do. But also suggestive perhaps of why Common Grounders were initially regarded by many locals as a bunch of hippies who didn’t fit in and weren’t really welcome, of which more later.

Owners/residents have come and gone over the years, in a pattern too complex to trace in detail here, and there’s really no need. Some of those individual stories will emerge as we continue. Suffice it for now to say that there are currently four owners: Arthur, Elizabeth, Glen, and David—notice that only Arthur is left of the original four. Also, only Arthur and Elizabeth are full-time residents of Common Ground.

Max, Alice, Don, Danna, Arthur, Dan, Glen, and Sally entered into a “Partnership Agreement” on January 10, 1979. That document still exists, and while it shows some of the high ideals of the group, is mostly a formal legal document; such principles as common ownership and consensus, however, are present even there.

There’s also a more detailed document from 1998 showing that Don and Danna, Max and Alice, and Dan are no longer a part of Common Ground, while Elizabeth, David, and Tom and Susan have been added to the ownership group. This document, entitled “Operating Agreement of Common Ground, L.L.C.,” is far more detailed and includes much legal jargon, doubtless necessary, but some of the high ideals can still be found between the lines.

Clearly, events for Common Ground had reached a bit of a crisis stage by June 12, 2002, when Elizabeth and Arthur addressed a message to “All Ground Members.” While our “interpersonal relationships are intact,” they insist, “Our intentional community relationships are waning and fading.” Insisting that there was no “blame,” that they respected “the individual choices everyone has made,” they also insisted that while “CG has been condensing for some time and the core amount left always seemed enough,” that “Non-residents seemed better than none at all,” the conclusion was that “Now, with only 2 adult members living here, the core amount is not enough.” This document is really a plea for help. Though insisting that Common Ground is still “viable and alive,” Arthur and Elizabeth are
asking for everyone’s assistance in coming up with new ideas.

One result of this crisis was the beginning of a new category of membership known as Common Ground Partners, people who participate and contribute but are not actually part of the ownership; at present there are three such people, Lucy, my wife Carole, and myself. And the most recent result, dated November 4, 2005, is a “Five Year Plan.” This plan includes five goals; each goal is followed by objectives and “Action Steps.” The first goal is “To establish an Outreach Committee;” objectives include “making Common Ground more accessible to children” and the establishment of a newsletter. Goal number two is “To prepare a 5-year budget and fundraising plan.” One of the objectives here is to “incorporate as a not-for-profit foundation,” which Elizabeth is currently working on. The third goal is “Construction of a covered shelter and bath house with attention to alternative methods.” Number four is “To enhance environmental awareness” by cleaning up junk and trash, and performing ecological/environmental awareness projects (one sub-item here is the building of a labyrinth, which is underway). Finally, the fifth goal is “To establish ‘simple cabins’ in the future for new or existing members.”

Common Ground doesn’t belong to a food cooperative as it once did; with only two full-time residents, it doesn’t seem viable, but also perhaps it is not as necessary with the availability now of such places as Wild Oats, Elizabeth suggested. Common Ground does have a membership in Sam’s Club. That will surely be surprising to some; it is used, apparently, primarily for the purchase of needed equipment.

As Arthur and Elizabeth concluded in their 2002 appeal for help and new ideas, Common Ground, while “viable and alive,” has “changed into a different animal.”

The Interviews

I submitted five questions to all current and former owners of Common Ground. Not all of them responded, but most did—enough for certain patterns to emerge, some of which seem relevant for the theme of “Oklahoma Character.”

First, I asked “When, how, and why did you become involved in Common Ground?” (And, for those of you who are no longer a part of it, when/why/how did you end your relationship?)” Some of those answers have already helped tell the basic story, but others deserve fuller attention here. Says Glen: “The concept as I have come to explain it over the years was, ‘that individually a hippie could not afford anything, but collectively a bunch of hippies investing together could afford something.’” He saw the idea as “something that might just work,” and concluded, “It obviously did work for me, as I am still involved.” Glen also noted that he was “very proud to be involved,” even though he does not get to spend much time at Common Ground; he sees it, he says, as “a haven for me to look forward to and enjoy . . . .”

Elizabeth—like Glen, involved with Common Ground since 1979—says it was two things that caused her to move there: she was “attracted first to the people and family of Common Ground. But when I came to the land is when I fell in love with the place.”

Don, though he is among those who moved on (“got to pay the bills,” he notes), seems near-ecstatic about his connection to Common Ground. “I often replay the times,” he notes,

“. . . eating beans but living large, and most importantly, helping, sharing, and loving each other and our community. A more enriching experience I cannot imagine.” Even though he, and others, have moved on, “our spirits and loves remain bonded, untouched by time or distance. This family, our family, is the living proof that the path we chose was the right one, the path with heart. Our dynamic family evolved from the heart and reaches far beyond our little place in the woods.” Don’s brother, Max, as we have already seen, though he also left—admittedly for greater comforts, such as running water, for himself and his family—still lives nearby and waxes eloquent about his love of both the land and the people of Common Ground. So does his wife, Alice. She notes that though they live and work in Dallas, they spend as much time as they can at their place just two miles from their friends on Common Ground. Writing in third person, she concludes: “Though they live in Dallas, they are Okies at heart, because they feel the most at home with the gentle, laidback folks in Oklahoma. They will one day retire . . . there and hopefully share this peaceful place they own with their friends and grandchildren in the years to come.”

Tom and Susan are among those who left Common Ground, mostly for financial reasons, but they both have strong, positive memories and feelings. Susan remembers that “the initial groups’s disbanding and discord was increasing,” but also remembers her love of the land and “more happy memories.” Tom says, “The knowledge gained about how to be self-sufficient in living with the world and in the world by gardening, foraging, and sometimes hunting raised my confidence for being able to take care of myself regardless of what the future brings.”
helped me be aware of the importance of caring for this wonderful planet and its living things.”

David’s flowing response to my questions again approaches eloquence. Just a small piece of it here: “Common Ground is as relevant to me today as it was when I first became a part of it. It is a place in the mind as much as a place on the map. It is a place of possibilities and health and imagination. It is spacious and open and accepting. It is a place to dream, to create, to recharge. It is larger than the sum of its parts, and will live on in the hearts of all who have spent time here.”

The second question allows us to get closer to the theme of Oklahoma Character—though I hope you will agree that some of what we have covered already is relevant for that theme. The question was, “What does Common Ground MEAN to you? Did being a part of it change your perspective on the world? How do you see the future of Common Ground?” As you see, these questions are not mutually exclusive; they overlap, and so, not surprisingly, the answers do as well. Thus, some individuals have already made significant comments about what Common Ground means to them. But here are a few more. Glen’s answer, in a word, is “community.” Being a part of it didn’t change his perspective, he says, as he was already part of a group of musicians focused on a common goal, so Common Ground was a logical extension of that. The future? His greatest concern is financial: The “biggest gap” in the original plan, he thinks, “was the lack of a common way to generate income for the group,” and “To continue into the future, the community has to be able to provide financial support for the community outside of the individual members.”

Elizabeth is the eloquent one here. Community is her central word, like Glen’s. The land itself would have been enough to make her want to move to Common Ground, she says, but she wouldn’t actually have done it without the community. “I came here when 20, and have been here for 28 years now,” she says. “So naturally, the land and the community has raised me. . . . I do not do well if I am gone for long periods of time away from the farm. I am spoiled by the lack of air pollution, noise pollution, crime, [and the presence of] green and fresh water, indigenous rare plants, and more rocks than I know what to do with.” As for the future, “The land will always be protected,” she says. “It will look the way it looks now, change with the weather, but be protected from corporate interests, and sheltered by our deep connection to protecting the earth. As long as I live. After that, . . . .” She leaves it up in the air that way—which is, of course, the only honest thing to do with the future.

Arthur is more practical. Community and the land are central to his answer here. But he also speaks strongly: “A simple answer to the question, ‘what does Common Ground mean to me’ would be ‘a lot.’ I’ve given it my life, so far.” Being a part of the experience has not really changed his perspective, he thinks, but rather “reinforced my belief in the idea that basically most people are good, decent souls and given a chance will come through for one another. Also, the fact that diverse people, with radically different personalities, can come together and learn to work together for the purpose of a common goal.” The future? Arthur states it in terms of what he would like to see: “For the future, I would like to see a continuance of the commitment we started. People with a commitment to each other, committed to preserving this land.”

Don didn’t divide his response to my questions, but rather gave one long, flowing answer. The part that seems most relevant here is where he boils the meaning of Common Ground down to “Love of others, love of the land, and don’t be afraid of hard work;” of course, he also adds “or being naked in the garden.”

Alice hopes that Common Ground “will go on as a legacy to our loved ones in years to come as an example of what is possible when men, women, and children join hands for the good of the earth and support of each other.”

Tom in response to this question quotes his daughter Kerra: “It’s about Friendship, Family, Love, Trust and Beauty.” “That says it all,” he concludes, and he insists that though he and his family had to move away, he hopes to be able to spend more time at Common Ground in the future.

Finally, David insists that the “great quantifier of American life—money” was secondary to him and the folks of Common Ground when he joined up. “Enjoying life, music, knowledge, making a difference, being the best at whatever we endeavored to do, being conscious and aware, living a whole and integrated life—these were our shared ideals. We had a perspective that encompassed more than ourselves and our immediate needs, and being close to nature informed our actions, our sense of community.”

My third question was “As you think back over your experience with Common Ground, what positives and negatives come to mind? In other words, strengths and weaknesses, or highs and lows...” Obviously, some material relevant to this question has already come out. Says Elizabeth, “The most positive aspect, if not downright amazing aspect, is that we have successfully pulled off an intentional community for 30 years in rural, Southeastern Okla-
homa. We have done this with consensus decision making the whole way. No law suits, just tears and hard work.”

Elizabeth considers “community” to be at the heart of it all, the greatest specific positive, with perhaps the greatest weakness being the failure to “start a business specifically for CG,” thus leading to what she calls “the exodus,” lots of folks feeling like they had to leave. Though they might state it differently, virtually all respondents agreed with this analysis. Arthur—remember, the only other full-time resident left—combines the community and the land into a single “equation.” He says he remembers a meeting years ago in which someone said “It’s not the place, but the people.” “I had to disagree,” he continues, “because for me it’s very much both. Both the community and the place. You know, Community/Land. Or, Common Ground.” It has brought him great joy, he says, to “see such a beautiful group of people that are so committed to each other also sharing in such a strong commitment to such a beautiful piece of land.” Of course, he also remembers as one of the great positives “the parties,” especially but not limited to the annual “Spring Fling” with its campfires, food, music, and fellowship. Tom—a different Tom, currently a part-time resident—even made a video a few years back that was essentially a 25-year history of Spring Fling! Arthur sees Spring Fling, however, as not just a party, but also an “annual reaffirmation and testament to what all of us CG members have accomplished and committed to in the past as well as a nod to what lies ahead for the future.” Finally, on the financial point, he notes that since finding work proved especially difficult for the women of Common Ground, the group built a pizza parlor in a nearby town which still thrives.

Knowing that what I hoped to do was present my work about Common Ground at the Red Dirt Book Festival, an event I like so much, and knowing that this year’s theme was Oklahoma Character, I asked this question: “The theme of the Red Dirt event is ‘Oklahoma Character.’ What comes to your mind when you think of Oklahoma character, and how, if at all, do you think Common Ground relates?” Glen’s answer is a good start. Briefly reviewing Oklahoma history itself, he focuses on hard work, frugality, and dedication to the family—and he believes all three definitely apply to Common Ground. Elizabeth agrees. She talks about southeastern Oklahoma as in some ways a place slow to change and behind many more populated areas, but also as a place where “people will stop and assist you if you are stranded or in trouble no matter what.” In Oklahoma, neighbors are neighbors. At Common Ground, we have taken that philosophy and soaked it in an alternative lifestyle. Oklahoma character gone hippie, gone Heartful.” Arthur, thinking of Oklahoma, thinks of folks being tenacious, even stubborn, optimistic (“You know, if a tornado destroys someone’s home, they make a

statement like, well I’m just thankful I still have my garden”), and persevering/steadfast. And, he insists, “Obviously, these are all traits that have helped maintain, sustain and nourish Common Ground.” When I suggested, in my interview with Max, that the Joad family in John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath was not portrayed negatively, as some have insisted, but positively, as people who were strong, hard-working, determined, and who had a strong sense of connection to the land and the family, he agreed, and said, “That describes us also.”

My final question was simply asking each respondent if it was okay for me to use the name Common Ground and each individual’s first name only; all agreed.

The Children of Common Ground

Several of the adult respondents to my questions made significant comments about the children of Common Ground. Said Arthur: “They all mean so much to me. I’m so glad that we touched them with this wonderful perspective of the ‘other way’ of living.” Max said he believed Common Ground, with its “relation to nature,” was “wonderful for children.” David wondered if the children would cherish their time on Common Ground, “look back on it with fond memories.” Max was “confident they will respond positively.” David did not need to wonder; Max was right. In some ways, the children of Common Ground express even stronger positive feelings than their parents—we’ve already seen Kerra’s comment about friendship/family/love/trust/beauty. By “Children of Common Ground,” let me clarify, I mean those who spent at least some of their childhood there; obviously, in most cases, we have “met” their parents already. Arthur’s daughter, Ashley, says that “most of the amazing times I’ve had in my life were spent there.” She doesn’t think being a part of the Common Ground community has changed her perspective on the world, “because I’ve always been a part of it, so I’ve never had a perspective other than what I do now. However, I probably would have turned out differently if I hadn’t been a part of it.”

The questions I asked the children (all now adults) were very similar to the ones I asked the adults. I want to let each child of Common Ground speak to all the questions.

Clancey lived on Common Ground for about four years in the 80s, between about his fourth and eighth birthdays. He says he still thinks of the people of Common Ground as an “extended family.” Thoughtfully, he adds that he had trouble adjusting when he left (for Dallas) because “I was deeply entrenched in the Common Ground approach to
community involvement where everyone was close to one another, much like I think life must have been for humanity before the rise of technology and the proliferation of large cities.” He remembers fondly the “incalculable freedoms” of being raised on Common Ground, the “idyllic childhood” spent roaming through the woods and streams. He’s concerned about the future of Common Ground. Insightfully, he connects the region being economically depressed with Common Ground being such a special place: “If it had a more vibrant economy, it probably would not be as remote and isolated as it is.” Clancey came up with a long list of “positives,” or strengths, including “family atmosphere, community involvement, diversity in thinking, learning to go against the grain, environmental responsibility (before it was cool), ability to question and reason, complete freedom of expression, breaking down of barriers, be it age, sex, color, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, political beliefs, economic status.” His list of “negatives,” or weaknesses, is shorter, but significant: “the region, which has poor economic development, inadequate educational resources, and proliferation of drug manufacturing and use.” On Oklahoma character, Clancey says he’s afraid the average American views Oklahomans as “backwards” and “hillbillies,” but his own image is quite different: “everyday people who have understated personalities and carry with them an immense sense of kindness and friendliness towards others, even complete strangers. This, I think, is the true ‘Okie.'” The true ‘laid back’ and ‘down home’ personality resides in rural Oklahoma.

Skye lived on Common Ground for some thirteen years. He still goes back as often as possible, and remembers fondly that he “spent every summer standing in the swimming hole all day fishing and hunting for crawdads.” Common Ground, he believes, “had more of an impact on my life than any other source.” “I learned about neighbors and family,” he says, “and that sometimes whether technically or not they are the same.” He feels so strongly about all this that he hopes “to become more of a participating member [of Common Ground] in the near future.” Responding to the question about positives and negatives, Skye started with this sentence: “I will first start with THE negative since there is really only one and then proceed with the positives, which are never ending until I get tired of typing.” His only negative, by now not surprisingly, was “limited financial avenues.” His list of positives included safety, beautiful landscapes, and the “positive and supportive people” helping each other all the time. Skye’s thoughtful conclusion bears quoting in full: “Common Ground is people living off the land using harmony instead of force to benefit from the land. That is the essence of the rural Oklahoma way; self-sufficient practices along with ideals and hard work to achieve success. The freedom to live how we choose and practice what we believe is not only the Oklahoma way, but the basic structure around which our nation was built. Common Ground embraces those things.”

Clancey’s brother Colton says that Common Ground has been a part of his life as long as he can remember, and his experience there helped to make him who he is today. He can’t think of a single “low,” and his comment about Common Ground in re Oklahoma character is: “When I think of Oklahoma Character I think of the Native Americans and their love/affinity for Mother Earth. I can say that most who have experience and take part in the goings on at Common Ground certainly share this same love and concern for nature.”

Bill remembers being in the third grade when Common Ground began, and though he moved away with his mother some years later, he insists he never ended his relationship with Common Ground—“I have always felt as much part of the community/family as I did in the days I ran around barefoot all over the property.” His positives include the land, the family/community, and his negatives being “seen as weird hippies at first by the locals” and “the realities of finances and working.” Thinking of Oklahoma character, Bill says as he travels around the country, when he talks about Oklahoma, “people typically talk about two things: One is that a lot of folks have family in Oklahoma, and two, they speak highly of them as kind/good people.” Common Ground, he thinks, fits right in.

Autumn’s response is long, flowing, sometimes beautiful and moving. She remembers some parts of being a small child at Common Ground as being a little scary, “like going camping and never coming home,” but also “exciting.” Part of the legacy of the experience is that she still tries to live close to nature. At about ten or twelve years old, she remembers that she “began to realize that I was enjoying my summers in Oklahoma more than I was liking my life in New York City [where she was living with her father and going to school],” so she moved back to Oklahoma to start seventh grade. After a period of adjustment, involving among other things family difficulties, “I began to really find my groove. For the first time in my life I was happy where I was.” She especially loved “the huge extended family,” but also swimming, walking in the woods, etc. Autumn is moving in talking about the meaning of Common Ground for her. “Common Ground has always been a place of peace for me,” she says. “In later years as I’ve had problems with anxiety and other things I have been taught tools by professionals in which they tell you to go somewhere in your mind, somewhere you love, and picture yourself walking there and the things you see . . . . And the beauty and peacefulness of Common Ground
never fails to work!” But Common Ground is not just the place, it’s also the people: “Common Ground the people mean more than anything in the world to me and not next to my family because they are my family.” Trying to think of negatives, Autumn mentions, like almost everyone, that the “lack of resources . . . made it almost impossible to make a living.” But she also mentions some “personality clashes and differences and blow ups and tears,” and is the only one to suggest that the overwhelmingly positive nature of her Common Ground experience can be seen in one way as a negative. “I went to college and out in the world thinking that basically deep down everyone loves each other and will be there for you if you need them and will hold your confidences and was on your side no matter what and you could do anything with your life and there were no prejudices and no violence and no mean people and so on and so on. It was a rude awakening over a few years to realize that most of that is not the case in the real world.” Finally, her brief comment on Oklahoma character: “When I think of Oklahoma character, I think of good, down-home, honest, simple (not in a bad way) people that are about working hard and playing hard. And in a character way I think no differently of the people on Common Ground.” Which, I think, provides an excellent transition into....

**Conclusion: Common Ground Farm and Oklahoma Character (or, as the Red Dirt Book Festival program put it, “Oklahoma Values in an Intentional Community”)**

As I look back over what I have written, and specifically the comments of the residents and former residents of Common Ground, I find so much about Oklahoma character—and not just in their responses to the specific question about Oklahoma character, but in all their responses. Certain traits recur over and over again, including: love of and connection to the land (or, as some stated it, being “close to nature”), the importance of family (often defined more broadly than just kin), community, hard work (the constant challenge of how to make a living), and hard play (Spring Fling is just the most commonly mentioned example of this at Common Ground). Allow me to simply list some of the traits that showed up: bravery, restlessness, cooperation, optimism, perseverance, innovation, creativity, resourcefulness, self-reliance, being “gentle, laid-back,” frugality, tenaciousness.... It goes on and on. I am aware, of course, that some of those are redundant, different ways of saying the same thing. I am also aware that some of them seem contradictory. And certainly some of them can cut both ways, so to speak. Have you ever thought of that? Compromise, for example, can be seen as a positive, a way of making things work—at Common Ground, one very interesting example is the principle of consensus that has always been used to make decisions. But compromise can also be seen as a negative, as in compromising your principles—at Common Ground, some would see the evolution from gardening to coop to buying from local markets and membership in Sam’s Club as an example. But I keep thinking of the fictional Joads, a comparison already made above. One Common Ground member wrote that “you have to learn to get along and work things out,” and followed that by saying that “There’s not much room for the rugged, individualistic American attitude of independent, ‘I’ll do what I want to’ type of thinking.” But aren’t both those approaches a part of American character, Oklahoma character, human nature?

Look back a few paragraphs at Skye’s comment about “the essence of the rural Oklahoma way.” Are the character traits mentioned repeatedly by Common Grounders distinctly rural? Perhaps. In part. But in my own experience in Oklahoma, I find many of those values in small towns as well—and even among some folks in the larger cities. And, I would argue, such values are still valuable today! Rachel Jackson, of Red Flag Press, has written:

> Oklahoma is a state founded on the values, concerns and needs of rural people. Despite the technological and urban landscape of today’s society, rural Oklahomans have valuable wisdom to offer in the public discussion of social improvement. This wisdom, about what is good and what is bad in Oklahoma, often goes unheard in today’s metropolitan political climate. Any solutions to problems currently faced in Oklahoma found in agrarian culture and rural traditions can get lost as a result.²

But the best of those traditions must not be lost; if that happens, Oklahoma will no longer be fully Oklahoma! Even Mike Jones, Associate Editor for the Tulsa World, while strongly calling for dropping the word “Okie”—“Stop it!” he writes; “You can call me about anything you care to. Just don’t call me Okie.”—acknowledges that “Modern usage suggests that the term Okie has become a symbol of pride for Oklahomans, like Yankee or Hoosier or Tex.”³

Back, for a moment, to the Joads. Fred R. Harris wrote of them in the foreword of my new book, Alternative Oklahoma: “The Grapes of Wrath is about good, hard-working, sturdy people trying their best to keep body and soul together in hard-scrabble times and conditions over which they had so little control.” And to a certain extent, though in different times, isn’t that what the story of Common Ground is about also? I wrote, in my proposal for the Red Dirt festival, that “The Joads may have been ignorant, but
they were NOT stupid/worthless, but rather strong, determined, survivors, with a strong sense of connection to family and to the land.” (I visualize the scene from the movie version in which Grandpa holds a handful of dirt and lets it sift out through his fingers saying “It’s my dirt; it ain’t no good, but it’s mine!”) Of course, part of the irony there is that it was not his dirt, since he was a sharecropper.) And then I wrote: “Though the members of Common Ground were shunned and considered suspect by the locals when they began their enterprise over 25 years ago, they have now worked their way into the community; I believe that is because they share some of those Oklahoma values! Even their common ownership of the land is related to the thinking of the original Oklahomans, Native American tribes!”

Rilla Askew contributed an essay to a recent volume from the University of Oklahoma Press entitled Voices from the Heartland. Appearing in the section of the book on “Sooner Spirit,” she called her essay “Most American.” She noted that after the Oklahoma City bombing it became common for people to refer to Oklahoma as “America’s Heartland.” But Askew writes that in her view, “they got the idea right but the anatomy wrong. This state that has long been a cipher and mystery and, like an illegitimate child, unclaimed by any region, is not the heartland; it is the viscera, the underbelly, the very gut of the nation.” Is it getting too carried away to suggest that Common Ground is somewhere close to the gut of Oklahoma? One objection some might make to that suggestion is that the political views of Common Grounders tend to be left-leaning. But those objections, I suggest, would be likely to come from those unfamiliar with our state’s long and proud progressive traditions. I like to refer to people like Elizabeth (of Common Ground), Rachel Jackson, Woody Guthrie—and, dare I include myself?—as “radical Okie patriots” (or “matriots,” perhaps, in the case of the women). To be in touch with our radical roots is also to have a sense of place, and a sense of pride in Oklahoma. During the Centennial year, while I always tried to understand and respect the desires of many of our Native American citizens to avoid celebrating, there are some things in our past I do celebrate. I celebrate Oklahoma populism, progressivism, socialism, civil rights pioneers, anti-war activists, advocates for women’s equality, green activists. And I celebrate Common Ground Farm.

John Wooley, in his recent book, From Blue Devils to Red Dirt: The Colors of Oklahoma Music, suggested that “Music seems to be a part of the people’s lives there [in Oklahoma], more so than in other states.” Actually, he quotes Capitol Records Nashville executive Buzz Stone saying that. Certainly music is a vital part of Common Ground Farm, especially the annual Spring Fling, when one of the rituals is music around the campfires and in the shed (with full amplification!). Wooley also suggests that the character of the state is related to the character of the music. “Oklahoma’s music is different, at least in part, because of the spirit of brotherhood and the character of the people—a statewide character at least partly forged by the hardships and challenges of the Great Depression of the late ’20s and ’30s, exacerbated in Oklahoma’s case by the Dust Bowl. In order for people to survive, they—at least many of them—learned that they had to take care of one another, to share what they had, to understand that everyone was in it together, and if something happened to one, it could happen to all of them. The idea is that a sense of personal social consciousness is carried like a cultural memory in the minds and hearts of Oklahoma’s musical artists.” Wooley even relates this to radical politics, specifically to the anti-nuclear power movement—which, remember, brought many of Common Ground’s original residents together. He quotes John Cooper, of the popular Oklahoma band the Red Dirt Rangers, saying that “[Bob] Childers [sometimes referred to as the “godfather” of Red Dirt music] even went to Washington during a [1979] rally and sang on the Capitol steps in front of 50,000 people. It was a huge national protest, and there was a big contingent from Stillwater and the Tulsa area because of Black Fox. That was a real galvanizing time for Red Dirt, because it brought a lot of people from the anti-nuke movement into the music.” Wooley concludes that “Bob Will’s escapism and Woody Guthrie’s social conscience, mixed into the musical forms of the day, became the philosophical and spiritual influences on the developing Red Dirt style.” Escapism and social conscience—both are heard on Common Ground.

Harry Menig wrote of Okemah, Woody Guthrie’s hometown, that it was “in a sense, Woody Guthrie’s foster parent. From its people he learned music, charity, hatred, violence, but most of all, a sense of ‘getting along’—a need for self-survival through cooperation.” Common Ground is still “getting along.”

Max, in his interview, referred to Elizabeth as the “spirit” of Common Ground and Arthur as the “hard worker.” Clearly, both are needed. And perhaps, as long as both are present—remember, they are the only two full-time residents of Common Ground left—Common Ground will survive, and we will still be able to say:

Nestled in the beautiful Kiamichi Mountains of southeastern Oklahoma lies a little piece of Heaven called Common Ground.

Article Endnotes can be found on page 20.
FARM REPORT: Three Springs Farm

by Emily Oakley and Michael Appel

As you approach our house on the driveway leading up from the creek, you will notice a sign tied around a locust tree with baling wire that reads “Registered Natural Area”. While our farm may feel like an untamed, feral jungle to those who prefer manicured lawns, it is in fact a lush growth of grasses, trees, and vines providing habitat to a wide assortment of wildlife. As small-scale organic vegetable farmers, a major aspect of our approach to sustainability involves our commitment not just to the land on which we grow crops, but also to the edges, hedges, and lands left fallow that comprise our twenty-acre farm.

Our property is divided into two ten-acre parcels. One tract includes our home and barn, and the other is enclosed by a deer fence and is where our production fields are laid out. As part of our involvement with the Oklahoma Natural Areas Registry, we have pledged to foster native habitat on all of the land surrounding our house and barn (save for a small mowed area of lawn to preserve our relationship with our neighbors) and to keep wild those areas near our fields that we are not tilling. The entire ten-acre field plot is surrounded by a fifteen-foot wide hedgerow where we have planted short leaf pines as a windbreak and left the grasses, blackberries, roses, grapes, and wildflowers to grow undisturbed. A parcel between two of our fields which is too undulating and wet for tractor work is also being left unmowed. Here we have planted black walnut, red oak, and redbud. Our goal of maximizing conserved land and minimizing productive ground may seem counter-intuitive to traditional models of agriculture, but it is the foundation of our philosophy of farming with a light touch.

You might wonder if all of this open space creates a problem for us with bunnies, turtles, and other hungry and curious critters eating our crops. While they are present, the damage they do is generally minimal compared with the volume of crops we grow. We would rather suffer a few bites in the tomatoes and get to see a covey of quail living off in the grass next to the field. Instead of being at war with wildlife, we see the profit they bring our farm.

Beneficial insects, like bees, love roving the wildflowers and trees for nectar and pollen. Friend and fellow farmers’ market vendor, Linda Highbarger of Hilltop Honey, has two hives at our farm. Linda makes soap, salves, lotions, and a host of other body care products from her honey and beeswax. With her business growing, she needed a new place to settle additional hives as her home in West Tulsa had all she could support. She liked the idea of bringing her bees out to our farm since we grow organically—she doesn’t have to worry about the bees bringing pesticides back to the hives and contaminating them with residue.

When Linda first approached us with the idea of moving hives out to our farm last year we thought it sounded amusing. We figured we would get a little extra boost in production from increased pollination and Linda would get a healthy place to nurture her hives. The hives are situated in the middle of our wildlife area under some shade trees. Over the course of the spring, summer, and
now fall, we have enjoyed watching them wake up in the morning, cruise the fields during the day for flowering plants, and bed back in for the night as dusk falls. Having bees seemed like a quaint and fitting addition to the farm. This past season we finally cultivated a new-found appreciation for the bees’ abilities and their role on our farm.

Many of our summer crops are pollinated by insects—melons, watermelons, cucumbers, and squash to name a few. This season, the fields came alive, buzzing with bee activity. In fact, at times it seemed the rows were going to levitate and take flight. All of those 50,000 bees living in each hive amazed us by their ability to increase our yields. There was no end to the squash and cucumbers filling up our harvest crates this summer—the bees were truly busy at work.

Our natural areas have proven to be more than a philosophical pick-me-up; they are generating revenue and a broader vision for farming with nature as an ally, not an enemy.

*Photos courtesy of Three Springs Farm*
Labor Conquers All: The Big Picture—Part One

By James H. Bligh

Factory, construction site, office, airport, oilfield, and school, and municipality - the list goes on. What do these all have in common? Labor. Each of these places cannot operate without a woman or man performing a job. Those that view labor as just a commodity, just another part of the process, fail to understand the bigger picture.

With improved technologies, safety programs, and production methods, such as “work smarter not harder,” all businesses, especially large corporations have been able to produce more and better quality products. Most, if not all of the improvements, come from the workforce, the subject matter experts, who go above and beyond their basic job descriptions. The ultimate effect of these things is more profit for the company. It only stands to reason, that if the company’s profit margin is increasing, that wages should be increasing as well.

Without increasing wages, people have had to borrow from lending institutions to survive. At least seventy percent of our economy is based on you purchasing items that you either need or want. Relying on credit cards to make up for low wages is not the answer. Credit card companies will loan you money, and continue loaning you money, knowing full well that when you can’t make a payment they will raise interest rates and charge late fees to increase their bottom line. With inflating real estate prices, people could borrow against their homes. With decreasing property values – along with increasing credit interest rates, gas and food prices, higher wages are the only thing that will provide the fuel for this consumerist society.

As Harold Meyerson pointed out in his article for the Washington Post, in the years 1947 and 1973, productivity rose by 104 percent and median family income mirrored this figure. These are arguably the only real years of Union power in this country. Between one quarter and one third of the workforce was unionized, depending on the year. For those that manage by the numbers, this must have been intolerable.

In testimony given before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, Larry Mishal, President of the Economic Policy Institute, stated that years of research has shown that Unions play an important role in defining our economic viability. Items worth noting are:

- Unions give employees a voice in the workplace, allowing them to complain, shape operations, and push for change.
- A unionized workforce can and will speak up about operations, leading to improvements that will lead to increased productivity.
- Higher pay pushes employers to find better ways to lower costs-new technology, increased investment, and better management.
- Union employees get more training, both because they demand it and because management is willing to invest more to get a return on higher pay.

(Adapted from Economic Policy Institute)

Union membership nationally is between eight and twelve percent. Here in Oklahoma, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports union membership as 5.4% for 2005 and 6.4% for 2006.

The largest travesty of not paying your workforce what they are worth is that it ultimately affects the entire nation. When the greed of those in the positions that stand to gain the most profit is allowed to manipulate opinion and legislation, the downfall of an economic system is on the horizon. The single most important section of the demographic should be given the fuel to power the machine we all depend on. Labor historically is what will make or break an economic system, nation, state, or municipality. The fundamentals of basic human needs combined with fair wages and benefits can go a long way to amending current and future economic situations.

The right to organize and collectively bargain should be included in our national Bill of Rights. The execution of these rights is an essential liberty, and as such should be considered a national treasure.

Tell your friends to check us out...
Native Beat:
JUST BECAUSE THE HEURISTIC FITS DOESN'T MEAN YOU SHOULD WEAR IT

By Jay Goombi

By most definitions (google it), heuristic pertains to judging something by the “rule of thumb” or, the way I see it, something that leads one to form a binding opinion of something in it’s entirety based on one’s own past experiences with similar “things.” Even simpler, let’s think of it as a thumbnail image that we see on the net.

Let’s go ahead and open Google to look for images of …“scarecrow.” We then find a page with many little pictures showing scary ones, funny ones and Dorothy’s floppy legged road-buddy. You rapidly scan down until you find the appropriate image of the scarecrow you need. You click on that thumbnail and it opens another page that shows the image in a larger size. That’s what a heuristic is to me.

It’s a shortcut, a label, a symbol, an abstract. These are supposed to help us get to the real information that we are searching for without having to do all that pesky research ourselves. I gotta tell ya, that is wonderful when your research paper’s due date is looming and you’ve wasted your work time and most of your Pell grant at Bricktown or down at O’Connell’s. It is a great time-saver. In our modern drive-thru society, we can pull up to a fast food place, place an order, and the guy taking the order doesn’t even have to know how to spell “hamburger.” All he has to do is to be able to find the button that has a picture of one on it. You really don’t have to think that much, push this button for a burger, this one for a shake, this one for fries, and then just tell the guy with money the number that pops up at the top of the register. It’s perfect for hurried lives these days.

However, there are dangers in a society relying too heavily on a heuristic approach. This approach relies in a large part on absolutes and generalizations. Like some academic friends of mine are fond of saying, “ absolutes will kill you every time” and “generalizations are generally inaccurate.”

Heuristics fit nicely and are utilized heavily in many forms by this modern Western society. The west needs to chop things down to their lowest common denominator. They slice and dice every culture they come across and dispose of what they see as primitive or irrelevant. They appropriate what is left and absorb it into their culture. This is the individualistic, dualistic, almost genetically ingrained worldview that leads to people to believe that tactics like assimilation, and fantasies like a global economy, are good things.

A heuristic-based society of this type can’t function in what it would describe as chaos or anarchy. It needs rules. It needs to categorize things, everything and everybody! It needs to do this in order to function.

The western society that we are living under has become streamlined. Everything is available in nice neat little packages. Heck, you can even get God, if you believe the propaganda, in a nice leather bound, personally monogrammed copy of his word. And if you would just rather go straight to the words of Jesus and see what he said, without having to understand the entire context of what was going on when he said it, you can get the copy that has everything he said in nice red, bold print letters. That way, you don’t have to worry about all those pesky little details of the fuller truth.

Guiding your life by heuristics is fine if your decisions only involve you.

However if you use the short sighted, if-it-walks-like-a-duck-and-talks-like-a-duck logic that is born from a heavily heuristic approach to make decisions that involve the greater whole, you are doing much more damage to not only yourself but to the society.

Let’s say, you don’t even bother to do the research into presidential candidates. Instead you make your decision on which presidential candidate you voted for, based on the tilted, heuristic snapshots provided to you from folks like Limbaugh and O’Reilly and their logical counterparts on the left. If you voted their way, you are directly responsible for the condition the world finds itself in today. You basically allowed them to proxy your vote. You gave it away for nothing. So, if you lost your house, your retirement fund just evaporated, or your job got shipped overseas after you embraced fear-mongering, us-against-them heuristics, you ought to think for yourself next time and do your own research.

But people can only operate and make decisions based on what they have experienced or what they’ve been taught. I don’t want to scratch at anyone’s guilt anymore. However, if you have found yourself less secure and unsure of
Coyote was running late. As he was sprinting to the gathering, he spied turkey sitting in his tree grooming himself after a long day of hunting and eating acorns and berries.

“Hey Turkey, ain’t you goin to the council?” Coyote asked.

“Nah, I’m too tired and all they do is argue and blow hot air.”

“But they said that it was an emergency and everyone was going to have to vote on something that could affect us all,” Coyote answered back.

“Ehh, go on! Leave me alone, just tell them whatever they decide will be fine with me,” Turkey said.

Coyote said, “AAAIGHT DEN!” and continued on his way.

A long time ago, all the animals were called to a great council. It was an emergency meeting and all needed to attend. As the sun began to fall, the animals gathered in the great circle around the fire, all except Coyote and Turkey.

I heard a gentleman from Africa telling some traditional stories from his homeland. I too, am a storyteller, but by no means of this gentleman’s caliber. Afterwards, I asked if I could use one of his stories. He said it was an old African story, that didn’t belong to anyone, and to feel free to use it. I told him I would adjust it to fit my Kiowa background. He was happy with that and looked forward to hearing it someday. Afterwards, we traded stories and went on.
people be forced to carry this burden on our own. We did not choose to do this. We spoke to the two-leggeds and they said that we should decide how to best handle this. So we bring this to you. Should we take turns giving ourselves to them for their feasts or should we…”

Coyote interrupted, “I just spoke to Turkey and he said he would go along with whatever we decide. So, here’s my suggestion…”

As he got there, he saw Bear give the floor to Goose.

“As you know, we have some new white two-leggeds that have come to where we live from across the sea,” Goose stated.

He continued, “They have created a feast at which many of my people have been eaten in some sort of strange ceremony. Let me say that I don’t think it’s fair that my
The War Desk:
NINETY YEARS OF GI RESISTANCE IN OKLAHOMA

by James M. Branum

Like most kids who grew up in Oklahoma, I had to take a class in Oklahoma history to graduate from high school. History education has improved a lot over the years, but one thing I don’t recall studying back in 1990 was the history of GI resistance in Oklahoma.

GI Resistance is individual and collective action that members of the military undertake to resist the situation they are in. Such acts are inspired by many motives: conscientious objection to a particular war or to war in general, frustration with one’s command, or racial oppression. Most G.I. Resistance remains peaceful, but during the Vietnam war some GI’s went as far as “fragging” (throwing a fragmentation grenade at) officers who sent troops on senseless suicide missions. I, of course, do not condone the violent kind of resistance, but do point it out as an example of how far some GI’s have gone to fight back against injustice.

In Oklahoma history as well, there are examples of GI Resistance, both in the early part of our state’s history and in the recent past.

1918 - Drafted Oklahoma Mennonites Refused to Wear Uniforms, Sentenced to 25 Years in Prison

During World War I there was no clear law that exempted conscientious objectors from the draft. The result was that many Oklahomans were either forcibly drafted into the military at gunpoint or were prosecuted for refusing to induct into the military. For many who were forcibly inducted, these young men continued to resist. Even though they had been transported to a military base, they refused to take the military oath and they refused to put on the Army uniform.

In 1918, some of these young men made it to the pages of the New York Times.

REFUSED WAR SERVICE; GET LONG PRISON TERMS
 Forty-five Mennonites scheduled to Spend 25 Years at Fort Leavenworth

SAN ANTONIO, Texas, June 10. - Sentences of life imprisonment were imposed by court martial today upon forty-five conscientious objectors who had refused to wear army uniforms. The sentences were reduced to twenty-five years each by Brg. Gen. J. P. O’Neil, who reviewed the records. General O’Neil designated the Fort Leavenworth (Kan.) prison as the place of confinement. The men will be sent to prison immediately.

Nearly all are from Oklahoma and are members of the Mennonite faith. Some of the Mennonites have refused to bear arms, but donned the uniform and accepted work in noncombatant units. The men who were tried refused to put on the uniform and refused to work in any capacity connected with the army.

The trials were held Friday and Saturday, and no evidence was offered by the defense beyond the statement that the men were of a faith objecting to physical force. None of the defendants offered any explanation of their failure to obey the command to put on uniforms.

WASHINGTON June 10. - Other factors than refusal to (sic) wear the army uniform are assumed to here to be involved in the cases of the forty-five so-called conscientious objectors sentenced to long terms of imprisonment today at Camp Travis. War Department officials say that otherwise the punishment meted out would be extremely severe.

Disloyal propaganda among campmates and other such offenses might have been involved. It is recalled that one of the first objectors brought before a court martial was sentenced to death on account of such factors, though the sentence was modified when brought to the department for final review.

(From the New York Times, June 11, 1918)
1967-1968 – Andy Stapp starts the American Servicemen’s Union at Ft. Sill

Andy Stapp was a radical leftist college student. Like many, he opposed the war in Vietnam and wanted to reach out to those in the military to encourage them to not participate in the war, but Stapp took his desire one step further – he joined the Army.

While in the Army he was subjected to an oppressive system that he had only read about before, and realized that rank and file GI’s were treated like dirt and were seen as expendible by their commanders. From these experiences, he and other liked mind GI’s started publishing an underground newspaper *The Bond* and they went public with their desire to unionize the military under the banner of “The American Serivcemen’s Union.”

And Stapp was not alone in Oklahoma with his struggle. Many of his comrades at Ft. Sill joined the movement, and the anti-war movement at the University of Oklahoma rallied around the ASU as well.

In the end, the Army had to get rid of Stapp. Politically, it was impossible to execute him (as would have happened in an earlier era), so Stapp faced two courts-martial (the first time he was convicted of refusing to open his footlocker and hand over his anti-war literature and the second time he was acquitted of breaking restriction) and later was kicked out of the Army with an “undesirable” discharge for his actions.

The ASU lived on though and continued to fight for the rights of GI’s for the rest of the Vietnam War era. Their message remained that the military should be a democratic institution where the officers were elected by the rank and file, and that there was no place for oppression based upon race or class in the military.

2006 – Jake Malloy refuses to pick up his gun and train at Ft. Sill, after being threatened with 40 years in prison

Jake Malloy grew up as Baptist in Missouri and lived his life out of a desire to follow the teachings of Christ. Like most young people in America, he never questioned the morality of war and he decided to join the military at age 19.

Jake’s time in the reserves was uneventful but that was soon to change. With the war in Iraq looming, he was told that his unit was going to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, to train to go overseas. It was at Ft. Sill that he had an epiphany. He realized when he was aiming his gun at a human-shaped target that he was training to kill. This never had troubled Jake before (mostly because he was an Army cook and never thought he would have to shed blood), but now he knew that he could be in place of combat. There are no “front lines” in Iraq and the reality is that the soldiers in his unit would be depending on him to pull the trigger if they were in danger.

This incident led Jake to study the Bible with fresh eyes. He sought to know whether it was moral for a Christian to shed blood at the call of his or her nation. In the end, Jake came to the conclusion that the use of lethal force was forbidden to followers of Christ, because Jesus told us to “not repay evil for evil” and to “turn the other cheek” even if we are assaulted by another.

Still, Jake wanted to do the right thing. He swore an oath to the Army and he didn’t want to violate that, so he filed for conscientious objector status. Jake researched on his own the regulations that allow for a soldier to file for CO status while still in the military: (1) the soldier’s beliefs crystallized after enlistment, (2) the soldier is morally opposed to war, (3) the soldier’s beliefs are based in conscience and not just expediency, and (4) the soldier’s beliefs are sincere.
Based on his research, Jake wrote an eloquent and comprehensive statement to seek CO status and submitted it to his commander. Jake also requested that he be given non-combatant duties while his claim was being considered (as the regulations require), but Jake’s commander chose to ignore his request. The matter came to a point of crisis when Jake was given the order to pick up his gun for training. Jake respectfully refused. He was punished and threatened with prison by his Commander as a result. Jake told him that he didn’t want to go to prison, but could not violate his conscience either.

Jake was notified that he was being court-martialed for disobeying several direct orders and contacted me seeking help. At the time, I was volunteering during law school doing GI Rights counseling with Joy Mennonite Church and the Oklahoma Center for Conscience. I worked together with Oklahoma City civil rights and immigration attorney Rex Friend to prepare Jake for his upcoming CO hearing and to also be ready to fight the government if they proceeded with court-martiauling Jake.

Jake had his CO hearing and received a favorable ruling, however Jake’s chain of command argued to the higher authorities that the ruling should be disregarded. We then had the chance to write a rebuttal to the command’s recommendation, which was then sent to the head of the Army at the Pentagon.

In the end Jake’s claim for CO was denied in a one sentence response. Jake could have appealed the decision but chose not to when he was offered an “other than honorable” discharge from the Army in lieu of facing a court-martial for the counts of disobeying orders.

Conclusion

These are only three stories, but I know there are many other examples of GI resistance here in Oklahoma. These stories are all about people who heard their conscience speak to them, and chose to act no matter what the cost. We need to nurture that same kind of spirit, to be ready to respond when called to a better path, or when we witness injustice.

NOTES

1 Since this article was published prior to 1923 it is now in the public domain.
2 Stapp’s 1970 book, Up Against The Brass: The Amazing Story Of The Fight To Unionize The United States Army is out of print but is available at used book stores online. To learn more about Andy Stapp and his work in Oklahoma, see http://tr.im/DbGo and this 2003 interview with him in The Workers World: http://tr.im/Db15

To find out more about G.I. resistance both in the past and today, visit SirNoSir.com or CourageToResist.org.

NOTES


Some Inspiration for the Journey. . .

“The full moon of late July, early August it was, the Moon of the Green Corn. It was not easy to persuade our poor white and black brother and sisters to rise up. We told them that rising up, standing up, whatever the consequences, would inspire future generations. Our courage, our bravery would be remembered and copied. That has been the Indian way for centuries, since the invasions. Fight and tell the story so that those who come after or their descendants will rise up once again. It may take a thousand years, but that is how we continue and eventually prevail.”

- an Oklahoma Seminole woman, whose uncle was a leader in the Green Corn Rebellion (Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz “Growing up Okie — And Radical” in Alternative Oklahoma: Contrarian Views of the Sooner State Norman; Univ. of Okla. Press 2007.)
I was going to start out here by saying that "ever since Rachel Jackson and I started talking about her wonderful idea for a progressive Oklahoma quarterly," I have been trying to get my mind around what, exactly, is Oklahoma's culture. But then, I realized I've been doing that all my life, partly because when you're from Oklahoma, no matter where you go, you find yourself explaining that the Oklahoma seen in movies (and now TV) isn't the real Oklahoma. I imagine most anyone from anywhere could say the same. Nonetheless, since I consider myself a writer, and a writer's job necessarily entails representation, the question of how I represent the Oklahoma I know is an important one for me and has become an even more pressing question with the publication of the Oklahoma Revelator. How do I make sure that I'm telling my own bit of the truth from the grassroots, and not, like the "long haired writers" Woody Guthrie was chastising in the opening poem, either presenting "my people" as heretofore undiscovered exotics or presuming I can know and represent everything there is to know about them — about us! - measured and charted. As a writer, I must certainly be honest about our culture’s shortcomings, but I believe I should also help uncover our strengths and reveal our potential. How should I go about being an Oklahoma culture warrior?

Over Labor Day Weekend, your intrepid editors and one of our contributing writers attended a conference in Albuquerque on "Building a People's Culture." Most of the folks there were veteran culture warriors, community organizers, & activists. And by veteran, I mean they were around for 1968; in fact, they were some of the people who made 1968 (as a cultural turning-point) happen. We learned a lot from our elders but we also learned a lot from a young woman under thirty who had been raised in an activist household and who continues to serve her own community as a culture warrior. We also learned humility while listening to a woman who had lived through - just barely - the bombing of Nagasaki, a woman who has spent her entire life testifying to the horrors of nuclear war in the abiding belief that she can help prevent another. All of us at the conference were struggling with questions of what constitutes a People's Culture; how can we build upon it for social good; how do we honor what's
morally fine and sift out what's morally coarse? How can art, in all of its forms, examine, reflect, and represent the People's Culture? I'm not sure we ever came to a final answer, but we did all agree that while there are elements of previous decades' culture still extant and vital, that cultural events and objects are taking new forms in the information age. I, personally, came to the conclusion that every time we evoke a culture hero from the past (Woody Guthrie, for instance) we should also look around to see who's doing the kind of cultural work Woody was, today. I have gotten tired of hearing people say, "oh, if only Woody were around," - it's time for us to put our shoulders to the wheel. Woody's off to a well-deserved rest. But I do believe we can use models, so for this issue's column, I'd like to introduce you to two people as model culture warriors who have built their artistic contributions upon Oklahoma People's Culture and alongside a recognition of their work, I'd like to introduce you to two current Okie culture warriors, an Oklahoma City woman who has designed an amazing photographic project and the other, a fabulous alternaroots band from up Tahlequah way. I'm not really going to spend any time on the first of my model culture warriors. Woody Guthrie is a spirit guide for the Oklahoma Revelator and his work is revered worldwide. If you're living in Oklahoma and don't know much about Woody, shame on you. It's well past time you surfed on over to the Woody Guthrie Foundation and Archives and got yourself an education. While we're speaking of musicians from east of I-35, though, let me introduce you to a contemporary example: the band My Tea Kind.

I discovered the band My Tea Kind when they opened for Ani DiFranco at the Cain's in September. The band consists of three sisters – Bonnie Paine, Anna Paine, and Sarah Garde – and the odd man in, James Townsend. The first thing that caught my attention was the incredible washboard technique of lead singer Bonnie Paine. I don't think any print description could do it justice, but the closest I can come is to say that Bonnie has done for washboard what Hendrix did for the electric guitar and Béla Fleck did for the banjo - like Fleck and Hendrix, Paine has re-imagined her instrument, invented new licks, and ventured into broader musical territory. Bonnie's lead vocals are distinctive and oftentimes ethereal; her voice and the band's lyrical surrealism are somewhat reminiscent of Mazzy Star. When James Townsend takes on lead vocals in addition to his lead guitar duties, he brings a wry tone to the group's generally dreamlike sound. Townsend's guitar work is faultless and impressive, especially on "Les Chants Joyeaux," a French art song written by Louis Gallet sung in French by Bonnie, which he and bass player Anna Paine have rendered in a Django Reinhardt style. Anna Paine provides a richly complex bass line for all the cuts on the band's eponymous album, often counterpointing the top rhythm, while drummer Sarah Garde provides a consistent and subtle framework. The band's lyrics are often introspective and make use of natural imagery, particularly on the song "Let Go," with its refrain, "I am becoming part of the woods." Their album includes one overtly political track, "The Knights of the Underworld," that criticizes the Iraq war and insists that "it is ok to think for yourself." However, in songs like "Be Able," (which asks "why do we choose not to be able to/why don't we choose to/be able") and the cut entitled "Silver Streams," the band consistently interrogates how the construction of our inner lives affects how we make (or could remake) our social lives. What makes me think of this band as Oklahoma culture warriors when there's not one track on the album that could be unmistakably identified as "Okie"? Even the band's dangerous (honky-tonk) woman song, "Angel in Red," is revisionist and offers only the most distant salute to traditional country and western takes on the theme. "Fiddle" is the most "folkie" sounding song on the album, but its lyrics have the ballad's traveler-hero lighting out not for the territories, but for Atlantis. The band belongs in this column on Oklahoma culture warriors because the new Oklahoma, the Oklahoma of the present and future is really not so different from the one of the past - there is no "typical" Okie anything. For every so-called definitive characteristic of Oklahoma music, for instance, there is —what appears to those who think categorically — a counter-characteristic: there is Bob Wills and there is the Flaming Lips. There is Jimmy LaFave and there is Michael Hedges. There is Hanson and there is the late, great D.C. Minner. A similar existential category-blurring occurs in Oklahoma visual art and in some of its literary arts. My Tea Kind is a band of Oklahoma culture warriors precisely because they make music from their own roots, topographical, artistic, familial, cultural, and they don't kowtow to any pre-conceived notions of what an Oklahoma band should sound like.

There is no doubt that there are misconceptions among outlanders of what Oklahoma music is — and not only among outlanders, unfortunately. If you don't believe me, go back and have a look at all those centennial celebrations; even the folks-in-charge of that series of events didn't seem to know what Oklahoma music consisted of, outside of the usual country music suspects. Nor did they seem to know what it sounded like; as a case in point, I offer "Oklahoma Rising." I respect Jimmy Webb, but "Oklahoma Rising," is a soulless, unsingable, un-
memorable, corporate piece of pap that sounds like it was written-by-committee for an Eighties advertising campaign. The same advertising campaign included many beautiful photographs to counter the astonishing but nonetheless actually existing perceptions of outlander folks who think the entire state is a Dust Bowl – still. There are others who think the entire state is a series of picturesque mainstreets yet who neglect to mention the absence of people on those streets. Don't get me wrong; one reason I came back home after years of wandering in various deserts is because I missed the natural beauty of Oklahoma, especially those perfect early fall days, exemplified by the day I wrote this column: 76 degrees, clear blue sky; the grass and most of the leaves are still green and my tomatoes are as red as our first state flag. But there are ghosts in the land and not just a few on the streets of small towns and Molly O'Connor's *The Miss Oklahoma Project* captures the haunted emptiness of rural Oklahoma. *The Miss Oklahoma Project*, created with support from the Oklahoma Visual Arts Coalition, is a series of photographs of Barbara, "Babs," a lovely young mannequin dressed in motley finery and sporting a "Miss Oklahoma" banner across her surely out-of-proportion bosom. When the *Project* is entered through its main flash-based web portal, the photographs are accompanied by an otherworldly electronic soundscape designed by Jean-luc Cohen. The concept and photographs are those of O'Connor, one of the new guard at the Oklahoma Arts Council. She and Babs travel around the state, stopping at interesting locations; a few of the photographs are taken in cities, most are in small towns and rural areas. Babs poses for her photographer in bars and flower gardens, on empty streets and in junkyards. The photographs themselves are lovely; lushly colorful, well-framed, lit mostly with late afternoon sunlight. But there is an undeniable strangeness about them; they remind me somehow of Wallace Steven’s poem “The Anecdote of the Jar,” wherein the poet places “a jar in Tennessee” that “made the slovenly wilderness” rise up to it. Like the jar, Babs takes “dominion everywhere,” centering the Oklahoma landscape and built environment around her apparition. Although many of the photographs have been taken on recognizable main streets, there is no person other than Babs visible; her presence underscores the absence of vibrant small-town life and challenges the observer to ponder that lack, its causes and its meanings. Oklahoma often thinks of itself as a mostly rural state, but can that auto-perception be accurate when there is not one person other than this visiting simulacrum to be seen? This is not a trivial question; to ask it is to open up a series of questions about who we really are as Oklahomans and who we might become. Art is supposed to help us see the world around us in a different perspective, and O’Connor’s *The Miss Oklahoma Project* does just that.

I’ll return here in this last section to a model Oklahoma culture warrior, who, like O’Connor, has worked both inside and outside the official cultural state apparatus: Frank Parman. I’ve asked my friend and long-time Parman collaborator, Arn Henderson, to sketch out an overview of Frank’s contributions to Oklahoma cultural arts. Arn writes:

> Frank Parman has been one of the leading advocates of the arts in Oklahoma throughout the entirety of the second half of the twentieth century. As playwright and poet, he authored imaginative and original works in the voice of contemporary literature. And, as such, became a respected and primary stimulus of the avant-garde. As a co-founding partner of Cottonwood Arts Foundation, Parman’s Point Riders Press, was established for publication of poetry of the American West. Principal among
those publications were volumes by prominent Native American poets Carter Revard, Lance Henson, Maurice Kenny and Geary Hobson. Books by other poets included two volumes by the celebrated Wyoming poet Charles Levendosky, multiple volumes by Gar Bethel and books by George Economou, Norma Wilson, Jim Linebarger, Mary McNally, Michel Pons, David Slemmons, Ann Weisman, and the regional Point Riders Press Great Plains Poetry Anthology. The press has been cited as “among the best between the coasts.” Frank also established a theater in downtown Norman for productions by emerging authors, served as a staunch supporter of the Contemporary Arts Foundation, and as instrumental in the development of the Independent Artists of Oklahoma, IAO. Moreover, he knows Oklahoma literature better than any other individual in the State. He has devoted years to scholarly research yet has seldom received acclaim for this activity. On a personal level Frank and I have been close friends since 1956 when we were in the beginning design studio in architecture at OU. Much of whatever I know of the world of modern literature I owe to Frank. I had to read whatever he was reading just to keep up with him.

What an education Arn has received, reading to keep up with Frank! What I know of Oklahoma writing and writers (and the American avant-garde) was shared with me by Frank, not only through long and winding discussions full of historical and personal digressions, but also through his press. I own all (I think!) of the Point Riders books, and several of the Renegade series of chapbooks published as productions of the Contemporary Arts Foundation.

One of the markers of Frank’s artistic leadership is his multimedia, multidisciplinary, cross-cultural approach to the arts – before that approach was widely popular, and before it was reduced to a set of buzzwords on grant applications. My favorite Renegade number is Aggregate Images (Renegade 21), which announces its multiplicitous approach not only in its title, but in the material production of the cover image entitled “Bale Out,” (a title which itself holds at least a dual meaning). The image is a “collaboration of Gary Albright, George Oswalt, and Claude Anderson” – a collaborative painting! Inside, on Aggregate Images creatively-designed and laid-out pages, are more paintings, poems, reviews, essays on Oklahoma literary history, and photographs. You could put Aggregate Images up to any avant-garde journals of the period, from anywhere in the world, and it would hold its own, while at the same time showcasing homegrown artists. It is a travesty, as Arn mentions, that Frank has never received any award from official Oklahoma arts and humanities organizations (such as the Governors Arts Awards, Oklahoma Center for the Book Awards, or the Oklahoma Humanities Awards). It is a tragedy that few people working in Oklahoma arts today know about Frank and his contributions or even that he is the single most knowledgeable source of information on Oklahoma literary history.

With this article, I hope to help remedy the tragedy; perhaps the travesty will soon be rectified as well. We can’t take up the work of our predecessors if we don’t know who they are. If I hadn’t known Frank Parman, I would never have understood how much Oklahoma needs its small presses; his editorial artistry is sorely missed, and I hope that the small publishing house my husband and I have founded, Mongrel Empire Press, my co-editor’s Red Flag Press, and our collaboration as the Oklahoma Revelator, can help continue the work of Point Rider’s Press and Cottonwood Arts Foundation. Frank Parman inspires me, but more importantly, he gives me shoulders on which to stand, a history upon which to build, and precedent from which to argue for the importance of Oklahoma culture. Thank you, Frank.

There is still plenty of work to be done by Oklahoma culture warriors; we here at the Oklahoma Revelator want to help you discover who they are and what they’re doing, and, perhaps, to encourage you to make your own contribution. We’re just doing our small part to cultivate Oklahoma’s radical roots.

1 My friend Susan Kates sent me this poem after finding it in Proud to be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to Southern California by Peter La Chapelle, U of California Press, 2007
3 Arn has selflessly declined to mention that he co-authored, with Dortha Henderson, one of the essential documents on Oklahoma culture, Architecture in Oklahoma: Landmark and Vernacular, published by Parman’s Point Riders Press in 1978.
4 I hope in the future to profile Claude Anderson as a model Oklahoma culture warrior.
Lest We Forget: “Two Constitutions”

by Oscar Ameringer

Much is being said about the Constitution of the United States of America. Nothing is said about my Constitution. Yet my Constitution is by far the most important, for it is the Constitution of every man, woman, and child on the earth.

The Constitution of the United States of America was written a century and a half ago.

My Constitution was written millions of years ago.

The constitution of the United States of America, we are told, is the greatest document ever conceived by the mind of mortal man.

My constitution was promulgated by the All Father who sowed the stars into space, separated light and darkness, land and water, and breathed life into dead forms.

The constitution of the U.S.A. is written on paper.

My Constitution is written in every bone, muscle, blood corpuscle, nerve and cell in my body.

The approved way in which I satisfy the demands of my Constitution is by turning the raw materials of nature into things useful to me and my Constitution.

I work with soil, sunshine and rain, to feed and shelter my body.

I work with wind, water, and fire, to shape my tools.

I am nature and life.

I am cause and effect.

I am purpose and means.

I am the child of creation, creating.

I am born. I mate and beget and return to earth in accordance with eternal law.

The constitution of the U.S.A. says nothing about soil, sunshine, and rain; says nothing about wind, fire, and water; says nothing about the tools of my trade; says nothing about birth, mating, and death. Begotten by the puny mind of mortal man, it knows not the might of Nature.

What a queer thing this Constitution of the United States!

After declaring the protection of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, the purpose of government, the Constitution delivers life into the hands of property.

Nature knows nothing about property. It sheds its bounties in return for my labor. Yet under the Constitution I am denied access to Mother Nature and the tools of my calling unless I possess an admission ticket called title deed.

The constitution gives me the right to speak, write, and vote. It denies me the God-given right to work and eat unless I am the possessor of soil and tools.

Propertyless, I only can earn the wherewithal of my being at the suffrance of property.

Propertyless, I have neither the right to toil, beg, or steal. Under this queer Constitution, I am free to do anything but to satisfy the demands of my Constitution either honestly or dishonestly.

The other day the custodians of the Constitution of the United States said property cannot be taken, no matter how great the suffering of millions. It said, though hunger devour your very entrails, these millions of idle acres are not for you to raise food for yourself and brood. It said, though these thousands of silent factories filled with the iron slaves of science are not to create shoes for your bare feet, clothing for your naked back, roofs for your homeless heads. And though the woe of you and your kin may drive you to crime and suicide, they cannot be used by you, for they are property and property is king—now and forever, amen.

Ah, there’s the rub. If I were property, the Constitution of the United States would protect me as it protects ass, ox, bull and bank account. But alas, I am not property. My body is not property. The strength of my arms, the skill of my fingers, the cunning of my brain is not property. It is
only life. And life may be taken without due process of law by simply depriving it of access to soil and tools. So they drive life off of land for non-payment of taxes or interest. They drive it out of mine, factory, store, and office, whenever their owners decide there is no more profit in human life.

They close up their factories, oil up their machines, and let life rot in back alleys.

The plow rusts in fallow fields while discarded husbandmen seek food in garbage cans.


War comes. I am dragged from home and loved ones. My body collects lice, rheumatism, pneumonia in stinking trenches. The light of my eyes is switched off by flying pebbles and iron splinters. My ear drums are burst by detonation of murder machines. My lungs are drenched in poison gas. My entrails mix with dirt and gore. My jaws are gone, my legs blown off. I am a festering carcass in a man-made hell hole.

All this is very hard on my Constitution, but in full accord with the Constitution of the United States, for under it property is all and life is nothing. Yet my Constitution will prevail in spite of dungeon, faggots, gallows, and Supreme Court decisions. My Constitution laughs at all of them. And such is the humor of its belly laugh that it shakes down thrones, altars, charters and constitutions.

The nine old gentlemen in Washington heard the distant rumble of that belly laugh, dipped steel goose quills in black fluid and solemnly wrote —“Desist! Thou art unconstitutional!”

What a ghastly farce! My Constitution unconstitutional? My Constitution put to shame the decrees of princes, popes and kings. My Constitution swept into the rubbish chamber of history institutions declared eternal by mortals claiming authority from God Himself.

My Constitution unconstitutional, is it? I am to live and perpetuate life only with the consent of property? I am to be cast aside like a broken saw blade whenever property has no more use for me? Don’t make me laugh, gentle-

— Published circa 1931, Oklahoma City

Oscar Ameringer (1870–1943)

Born in Germany and arrived in Oklahoma in 1907 to help organize our large population of agrarian radicals, socialists and union members. He helped found the Oklahoma Farmer’s Union and fought against Jim Crow laws in the state. In 1911 he won 23% of the vote for mayor of Oklahoma City, and in 1917 he and his wife, Freda, established the Oklahoma Daily Leader, a paper primarily dedicated to opposing World War I Ameringer was known for his passionate advocacy of the dispossessed, his fine mind, his sense of humor and his kindness.
Our Contributors for this issue

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Her most recent book of poetry, Work is Love Made Visible, is available through West End Press.

“Negroes and whites at Workers' Alliance meeting listening to Stanley Clark, old-time socialist leader in Oklahoma, Muskogee, Oklahoma 1939 July” Photo by Russell Lee. Library of Congress Collection.