

Vanier's communal farm near Lake Simcoe.

College sponsored communal living — another way of life

By CARLA SULLIVAN

Calumet's communal Black Dog Farm is about an hour from the York campus and Vanier's Rivendell is a little further.

So is another commune on Avenue Road in Toronto. Yet members of all three are adamant: "The advantages of a commune," says city-dweller Victor Hayes, "outweigh the disadvantages by so much."

Indeed, even the major problem of logistics — and Vanier student Dennis Long has clocked the distance between York and Rivendell at 54.6 miles — seems almost an asset. "People who have a tendency to cut classes," he remarks, "feel obligated to go after that drive." And Calumet city-commune Sandie Goldie observes, "In residence, it's so easy to skip your classes. You have an hour break between classes, you go back to your room, sit around and rap — and it's too much trouble to put on your coat again. You're just too lazy."

More than simply a spur to increased class attendance, however, one Calumet student calls her commune "another way of life."

"You're committed," she says, "to the house and to each other."

If communes are not a new phenomenon among York students, college sponsorship of them is. Leased last summer for College parties, used during orientation week, and in the future, members hope, "whole earth tutorials", Black Dog Farm costs Calumet \$100 a month. Eight occupants, garnered by College bulletin and word of mouth, pay the remaining rent — \$175 — collectively.

Backed by \$3,000, a College-allocated emergency fund, the five occupants of Vanier's Rivendell pay a \$225 rent themselves.

"Some people say we're ripping the Council off for \$3,000," Long remarked.

But like Calumet's Black Dog Farm, the month-old Rivendell cooperative will be used as a college retreat. Moreover, the group hopes to initiate an off-campus housing cooperative — "a string of farms and townhouses" — as an alternative to residence at York.

Soryl Angel, one of seven Calumet College students living in a three-storey brick townhouse nearer the University of Toronto than York, echoes this thought. The Avenue Road commune has no financial ties with Calumet; residents bear all costs and are fully liable. But membership has been channelled largely through the college.

And Angel predicts, "In the next few years, with the lack of cheap off-campus housing, the Colleges will take on leases for student use." She adds, "The residences start emptying in January, anyway. Residence is so sterile."

Not only cheaper than residence, a successful commune, Angel elaborates, "becomes a meaningful family. I feel closer to the people in my house than to my own sister and parents. You develop a total trust in each other."

Fellow communitarian Victor Hayes adds, "There's an even greater responsibility than in your own family. You're thrust together, and you can't make your mother shut someone up. So you're more committed to keeping each other happy."

These twin ideas of trust in each other and commitment to the house as a whole are basis for operation at all three co-ops. At none is there any

allocation of tasks or rules of order. Rather, members rely on individual differences — individual skills — to insure harmony, a kind of order through disorder. Angel illustrates:

"Everybody chips in \$5 a week for food and two or three of us go shopping. I like to cook, so I usually shop and do a lot of the cooking — but somebody else specializes in salads, and one guy makes really great clam chowder."

Subscribing to this same philosophy, Black Dog Farm's Kathy Ferns recalls only one organizational problem. Come time to do the dishes, one Black Dogger was always curiously absent. The group tried an indirect approach:

"There's certain people in this house who aren't doing their dishes." When that proved too subtle, all eight members sat down for an hour-long intensive planning session on the intricacies of getting the dishes done. To no avail — but the culprit, Kathy adds, drives the Land Rover that transports the eight to school each day. And the group has accepted that service as just as valid a contribution as time spent in the kitchen.

The newest of the communes, Rivendell, has yet to weather a similar crisis. But members reveal a similar attitude towards roles. Vanier student Debbie Hatch remarks, "We all learn from each other. Dennis wired the stove, and we all learned something about doing it."

Yet even more, Rivendeller David Spiers calls the cooperative "a total learning experience," in ways residence cannot be. Not only a lesson in such matters as house-hunting, shopping, and wiring stoves, the commune is an exercise in living, every day, with others. No one can remain uninvolved; unlike the dorms, where dons intercede in disputes and maids clean up any messes, communal success depends upon constant communication and cooperation between members. Dennis Long summarizes: "You have to depend on each other."

That kind of interaction, most members agree, does not exist in residence. "The people in residence are fine," Goldie says, "but there's just too many. And it's not a home — you're just boarding." Victor Hayes is more succinct: "I spent a few days in residence. It was like a prison."

In the very intimacy of their structure, communes circumvent the loneliness and boredom many members experienced in residence. Yet members deny that this closeness itself becomes confining. Rather, it precipitates a real sense of freedom.

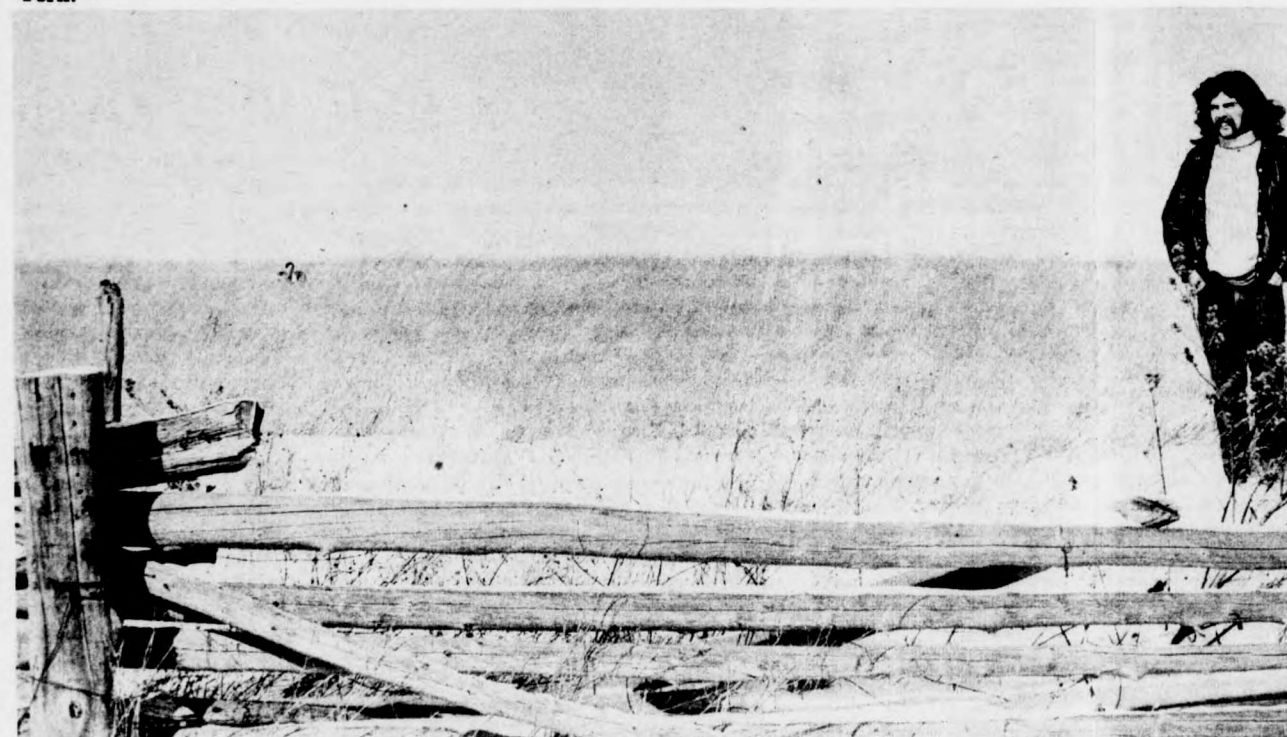
Spiers explains, "If the guy upstairs is playing a stereo too loud, you don't have to go to a don to complain. You can just say you're bugging me." Not only a more realistic and lifelike solution, members agree "it's a much more comfortable situation."

Moreover, privacy is possible. "Anywhere, especially in the winter, you can get cabin fever until you feel like taking a header off the third floor," Hayes remarks. But members have their own rooms — and immediate access to "the outside world," country or city. The real point, Angel says, is that if you want it, "there is always someone to make you smile when you're sad."

Despite one woman's rather disconcerting habit of referring to the group at Black Dog as "that lot up the hill", reaction to the communes

has been matter-of-fact. But members hesitate to define themselves as part of a trend, or to speculate on whether the increased interest in communal living indicates some sort of movement. Angel remarks, "It's spread in the last five years. But for me, it's just an alternative that's more meaningful than residence or living by myself."

"For a successful commune, you have to learn to accept people for what they are. The same way, you can say 'society sucks' all you want, but you have to learn to relate to other people in a way that's meaningful for you. And learning that has meant more to me than anything else at York."



The farm offers tranquility more fulfilling than any residence could hope to do.

Photos by Marilyn Smith and Lerrick Starr

Residence life is so bad that some students are willing to travel over 109 miles a day just to avoid it



Is this an example of all future residence life?

Reality is overtaking the residence myth

By MARILYN SMITH

Residence life is by myth a close association of students in an academic atmosphere with a ready-made social life thrown in for good measure. Yet the reality is one of climbing vacancy rates and students seeking off-campus living quarters.

Cost is the standard reason given for the off-campus drift. Fees, \$1,285 for the 21-meal plan have climbed beyond the means of the average student.

The secondary reasons, noise, lack of privacy, loneliness and environmental monotony, in short, the ennui of highrise living, are voiced by many. Students attending York, sometimes fondly called Boondock U do not have a wide choice of living alternatives. Residence life at York is life in a highrise.

Off campus, the immediate vicinities to the south and areas beyond, offer more of the same. There are townhouses southwest of the campus and limited rental possibilities in basements of single dwelling units. But overall, the urban sprawl surrounding York is only a jump from the living conditions of the frying pan to those of the fire.

Daniel Cappon, psychiatrist with the environmental studies faculty at York, says the only solution to the sterility of housing conditions will come if York becomes a midtown university with a resulting community life. But, he adds, expansion of Toronto to that degree would ruin the city.

Currently, any variety in living accommodation brings with it the headache of commuting. Some, like the students living on the Calumet and Vanier farms, are willing to commute from Stouffville and Lake Simcoe every day.

As one Vanier farm dweller defensively put it, "we've clocked it and it's only 54.6 miles." Double that and it's 109.2 commuting miles each day. That's the price for being environmentally sensitive.

Students living in the highrise residence towers have all the problems of apartment living in a compounded form. Those who have left the residence, said they did so because of the sterility of life in the residence towers. Each room is a stark brick-walled cubicle with standard-issue period furniture.

Possibilities for individualizing each room are limited by the floor space and rules like no paint or nails for the walls and no pets. And although the bathrooms and common rooms are shared, there is no sharing of duties, of cooking meals, or other arrangements that would make the situation truly communal. Ultimately, each individual closes his door and shuts himself away in his little cubicle.

The struggle for identity is compounded by the physical surroundings, but there are other factors, too. There is only the sameness, the dullness, of knowing that everyone in the residence is a student too, with the same problems, the same hang-ups and the same background. Efforts to vitalize the residences, to make the residence councils energetic is in-

variably unsuccessful. The residences remain a collection of bedrooms.

Calumet students are establishing a variety of living accommodations. They've already established a communal farm at Stouffville and are in the process of negotiating for an abandoned Chinese temple in downtown Toronto. Their on-campus quarters will be townhouses, not the highrise tower dictated by the campus master plan.

Bob Howard of campus planning says the Calumet innovations are bound to have a great influence on subsequent residences built at York. The original York development plan, drawn up in 1960 by University Planners and Consultant Engineers, allocated 25 percent of each college space for accommodation.

The planners adopted the traditional hostel type accommodation with single rooms and communal bathrooms and common rooms. Now, the demand is for self-contained units. The three graduate residences are built on this plan. While demand for the college residences decreases, the waiting list for the grad residences gathers more and more names.

Utilizing the concept of self-contained units, adaptations are being made in the College G tower. Two thirds of the space will be hostel-type living and the rest will be apartments.

Howard says the master plan was never meant to be a rigid thing, but only a guideline. As reality sets in, he says, adaptations are made. The one constraining factor is land space. The Calumet plan for townhouses will fit into the college's designated land space, but at the sacrifice of less green space and a more concentrated building ratio.

However, the advantages of easy access to the ground level, some backyard space and the self-sufficiency of each unit will be compensation for the loss. The move away from the tower residences, the upright coffins, as Cappon calls them, is a healthy development for York.

Unspectacular terrain, inaccessibility and cement block architecture has already put three counts against York. Yet Cappon maintains York is, on the whole, a psychologically "happy" place. Perhaps the Vanier and Calumet experiments can make it "happier" still.



Sandie Goldie is one of the York students who enjoys Calumet's Toronto communal on Avenue Road.