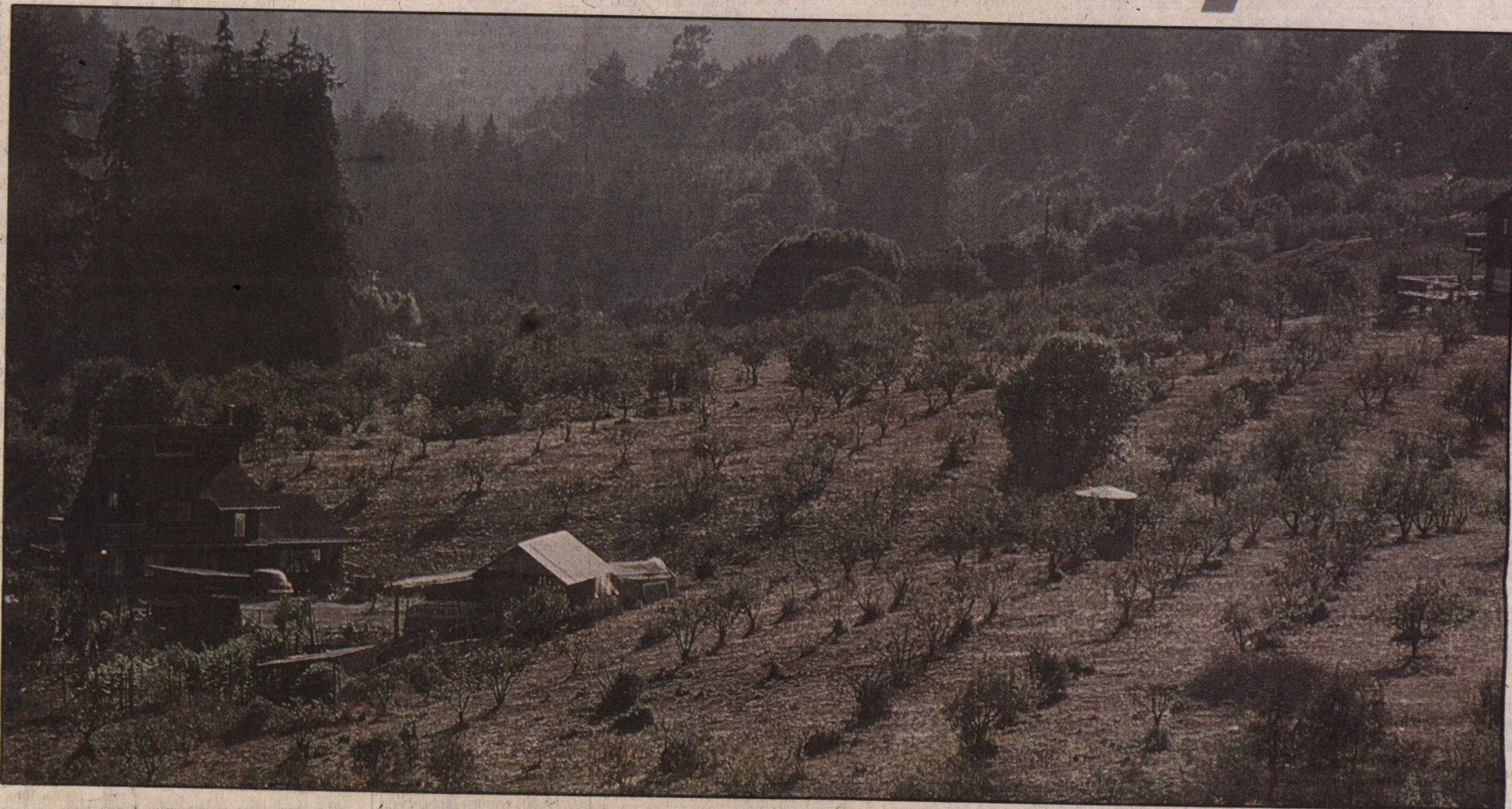




BAY LIVING

✓ Collective Living

From Commune to Community



Seventeen homes are scattered in the orchards and hills of the Agricultural Land Conservancy.

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

Group has
learned to
live, work,
survive
together

By PEGGY R. TOWNSEND
Sentinel staff writer

BERNADETTE Zavala's neighborhood looks like any in rural Santa Cruz County.

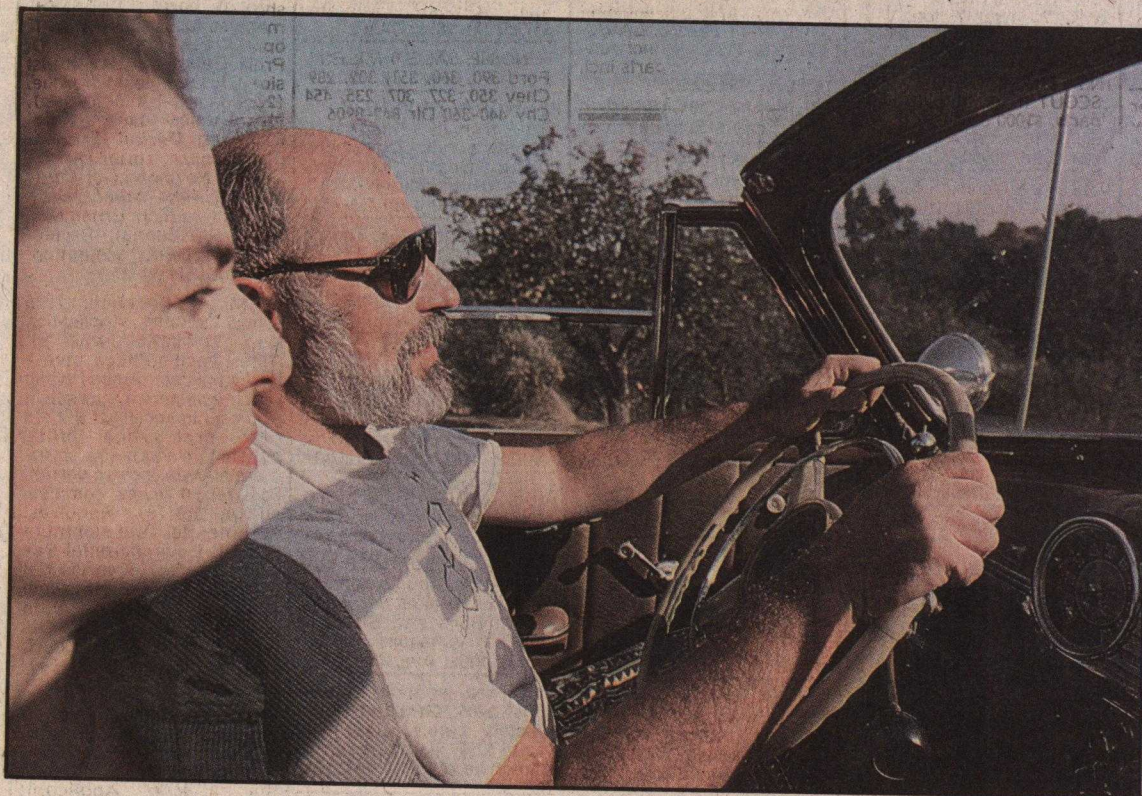
Houses are scattered on the hills. Dogs bark in the distance. A mother walks down the road with her baby in a blue pack.

But this is no regular neighborhood.

This is an experiment in community living — a place where 20 partners live in separate houses on 230 acres of communally held land.

It is a place where decisions are made by the group, where organic pears and apples are grown, and where a team manages the whole thing.

It is kind of a commune grown up for the '90s.



Jack Jacobson and Rosemary Alexander tour community in his '48 Chevrolet.

And while living there is not always easy, it is idyllic.

"The whole thing started back in 1974 when Gary Bascou, who owns the Staff of Life Bakery, and Ken Marks found this place," said attorney Jack Jacobson as he sat in his lawn-covered backyard that overlooks an orchard and the green hills surrounding Branciforte Creek.

The pair bought the land from an old Italian family for \$360,000 — a price that included 120 acres of orchard, a derrick from a failed search for oil on the land, and an old man named "Cowboy" who lived in a shed and took care of the place.

Bascou and Marks gathered 20 partners for the property and the Agricultural Land Conservancy was born.

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Original partner Gary Bascou, red shirt, makes hard apple cider at his house along with other members of the community.



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Five or six families moved into the big wooden farmhouse, living, eating, sleeping and working together.

"We were pretty much all vegetarians. We were really living the Santa Cruz lifestyle," said Jacobson.

There were community gardens, communal saunas, horses, goats and wonderful communal meals prepared by people who would later start the Staff of Life Bakery and Deli.

They had big parties with bands like the Doobie Brothers and Hot Tuna. At one party, a hang glider sailed off the top of the nearest hill. He swooped over the party and people cheered. Unfortunately, he landed in the ranch's organic garden and caused quite a mess, said Jacobson.

"At first, it was more of a communal, counter-culture thing," said Bill Denevan, a member of the early group.

He remembered how people worked together on the ranch, harvesting pears and apples and trying to learn how to run the place.

"Cowboy" helped out around the ranch all week, teaching Denevan how to prune the trees, disc the land and care for the orchard. People remember him roaming the orchards, calling for his dog "Boy"



Shannon Alexander, 8, works her family's garden.

and laughing at the way the neophytes worked the land.

Once a week, though, "Cowboy" would head into town and have a few belts at a local bar, then drive his Corvair up the twisting road to the farm, drunk as a skunk.

"We'd all say a prayer for him every week," said Denevan. Cowboy died on the ranch at the age of 77.

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It was a contented time, but even then, the ragged edges of life were creating friction.

"There were problems. Not only were we all living together — physically close — we were actually running a business that we didn't know much about," said Jacobson.

Tons of pears and apples were coming out of the orchard and "we were making decisions trying to be democratic and right and fair with each other.

"It was very hard," he said.

Some people left, and new people bought their partnerships — only eight of the original 20 remain now. Gradually, people started to move into their own spaces.

Part of moving into their own space involved dealing with the county Planning Department.

Back then, the idea of a commu-

nally held farm with the possibility of 20 separate houses was mind-boggling for the Planning Department.

"We didn't fit in really well," said founder Bascou from the deck of his home that looks down a forested valley into Santa Cruz.

"They tried to get us to put in curbs and gutters and sidewalks, and all we wanted was a farm."

"They didn't like us," said Jacobson. "They didn't understand us. Our hair was too long."

Planners turned them down, but eventually the Board of Supervisors OK'd the permit.

"What we did had never been done before," said Jacobson.

Once legalized, the partners identified homesites and people began picking their place to live.

The decisions on where to live were made on a first-come, first-served basis. It was kind of like

King of the Hill, said Jacobson.

But homes didn't spring up right away.

Because the ranch is held communally, banks wouldn't loan money for construction, and partnership rules prohibit using the land as collateral.

"All the houses were built with sweat equity," said Jacobson. "It took a long time to build some of the homes." Seventeen homes now stand on the rolling hills of the ranch.

With the homes came a complex partnership agreement which set up the management team, rules for living on the ranch, and regulations for selling partnerships. That document, which was revised recently, still runs the farm.

Zavala is part of the management team, whose members are elected each year. This year, four of the five team members are women.

"We're not a family, but kind of," said Zavala, of the partnership now.

"We're not a neighborhood, but kind of. We're not a business, but kind of. We're not a government, but kind of.

"We're all of those things, but we're like nothing else."

Indeed, there is little precedence here for people living together on such a large piece of communal land.

"If you asked the 20 partners why it works, they would have 20

different answers," said Zavala, cradling her baby, Theadora, in her arms. "Someone said the reason it works is that we're all a bunch of masochists.

"I think it's true that everybody loves this place, but it's also true we are somewhat masochistic."

Group decisions can be long and painful. Everyone is welcome to the management team meetings, held once a month, and people show up to voice their opinions.

If you want a horse, for example, the group has to see a plan for the stable. Fences have to be debated, driveways have to be plotted exactly, speed limits have to be negotiated.

Sometimes, things can get petty, said Devevan.

There are disagreements and partners who won't talk to one another.

"I can't think of an issue where everyone has agreed, where we didn't have to work through some decision-making process to get to a point," said Zavala, who came to the ranch about three years ago.

But the benefit is getting a voice in what happens to a neighborhood. In a more traditional place, homeowners have no say over their neighbor's plans and no connection with them.

At the land conservancy, neighbors can comment on other's plans, say those who live there. They also have a common bond, a financial and emotional stake that

binds them as a community — something that often is missing in modern American life, says Zavala.

"Living in a partnership arrangement is a lot harder in reality than it is in the ideal," said Zavala, sitting in the living room of her open-beamed home.

"Generally," said Zavala "we get along enough of the time to stay together."

The group that exists now is a diverse one. There are attorneys, a landscaper, a plumber, counselors and a musician. Some are private people; some are outspoken. They range in age from 30 to 70.

Their homes reflect their diversity. There are modest homes and sprawling houses. Some are on the tops of hills, others are nestled in the woods. All are spaced far apart.

There is a community-built recreation trail that allows hiking or biking all around the property, a communal volleyball area and a big barn where get-togethers are held.

There also is a spirit of cooperation in the teams that take care of the roads, the water and the farm equipment. They form work parties to do things like building hiking and riding trails, clearing the brush around a pond on the property and cleaning the swimming hole.

They also grow food for the

whole community — figs, walnuts and plums.

And, there is the orchard — still a central part of the ranch.

Devevan cares for the orchard now. Last year, 200,000 pounds of organic apples and 100,000 pounds of organic pears came out of the orchard. Not only are pesticides outlawed, but the orchard is not watered, making the fruit extra sweet.

The fruit is sold across the country, but there is little profit, according to Zavala. The emphasis is on keeping the land in agriculture.

Buying into the property isn't a financial boon either, said Zavala.

When she and her husband were looking to purchase a home on the site, "our family, our lawyer, our accountant — everybody said don't do it. They said it was a beautiful spot but a bad investment."

So, said Zavala, she and her husband "made a good life decision and a bad financial decision" and moved to the ranch.

Despite the disagreements, somehow, after 17 years it still works.

There is a real connection to the land by the partners, a real love for their little bit of paradise. They have paid off their mortgage on the land and learned how to work together, say those who live there.

"It's kind of like a getting married because you can get out of it, but you might take some losses, like in a divorce," said Zavala.

Living here "is that kind of leap of faith."

List your holiday project

A readers' guide to Holiday charities is scheduled for the Dec. 8 issue of the Sentinel's Bay Living section.

Community organizations, churches and individuals are encouraged to submit listings for

this special section.

Please send the details, along with your name and telephone number to: Holiday Helpers, Santa Cruz Sentinel, 207 Church St., Santa Cruz, Calif. 95060.