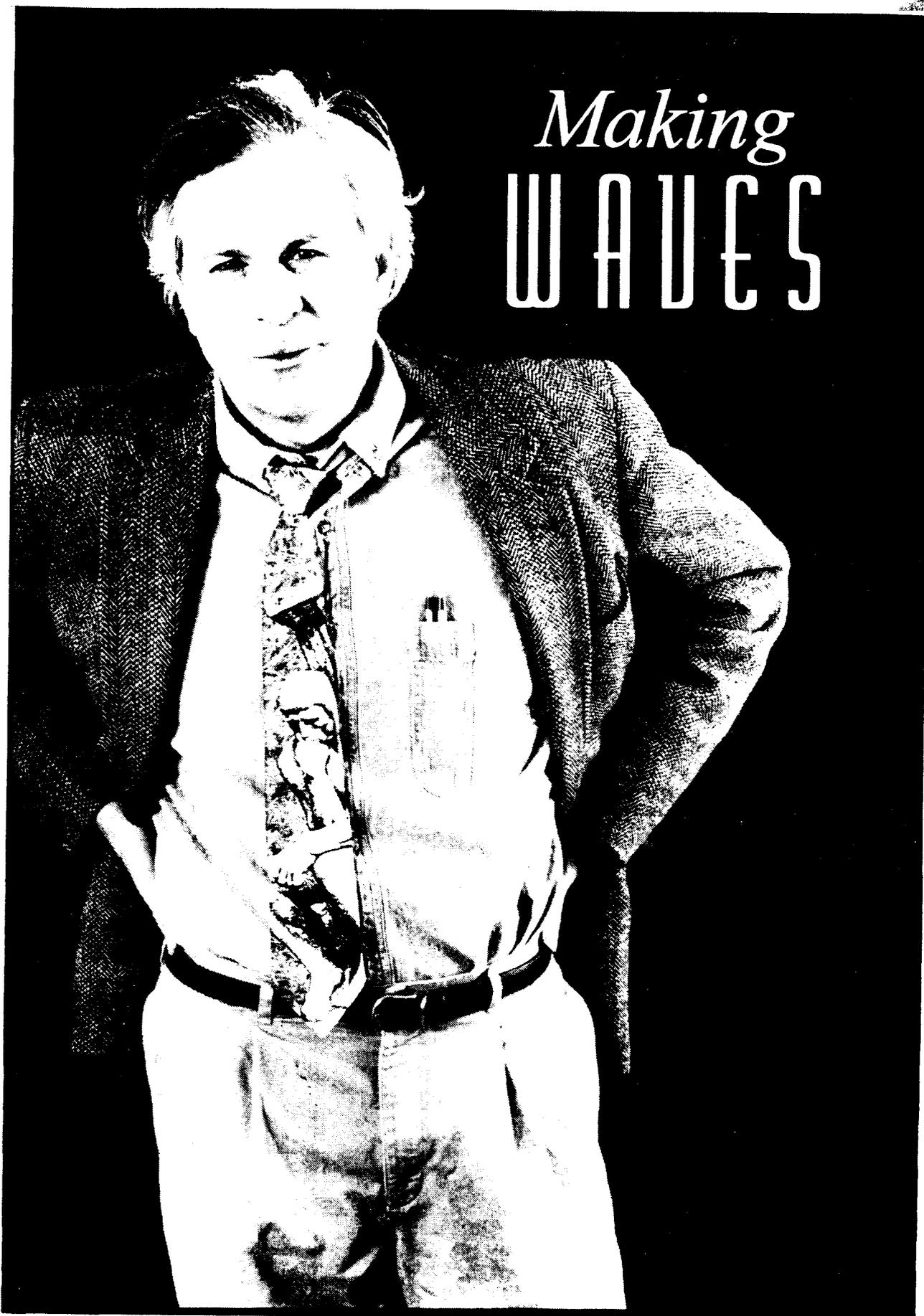


Making
WAVES



The author.

I eat possum an' I eat squirrel, but dint eat yer dog."

Dean was shaking my hand but he didn't seem to notice and he wouldn't let go. He had a funny way of breathing in that sounded like an air brake on an 18-wheeler. He was done speaking. There was only the sound of that breathing. My arm hurt. Until that moment it had not occurred to me that anyone or anything had eaten our dog. Did he want me to absolve him? I invited him in.

"You got any vo'ka?"

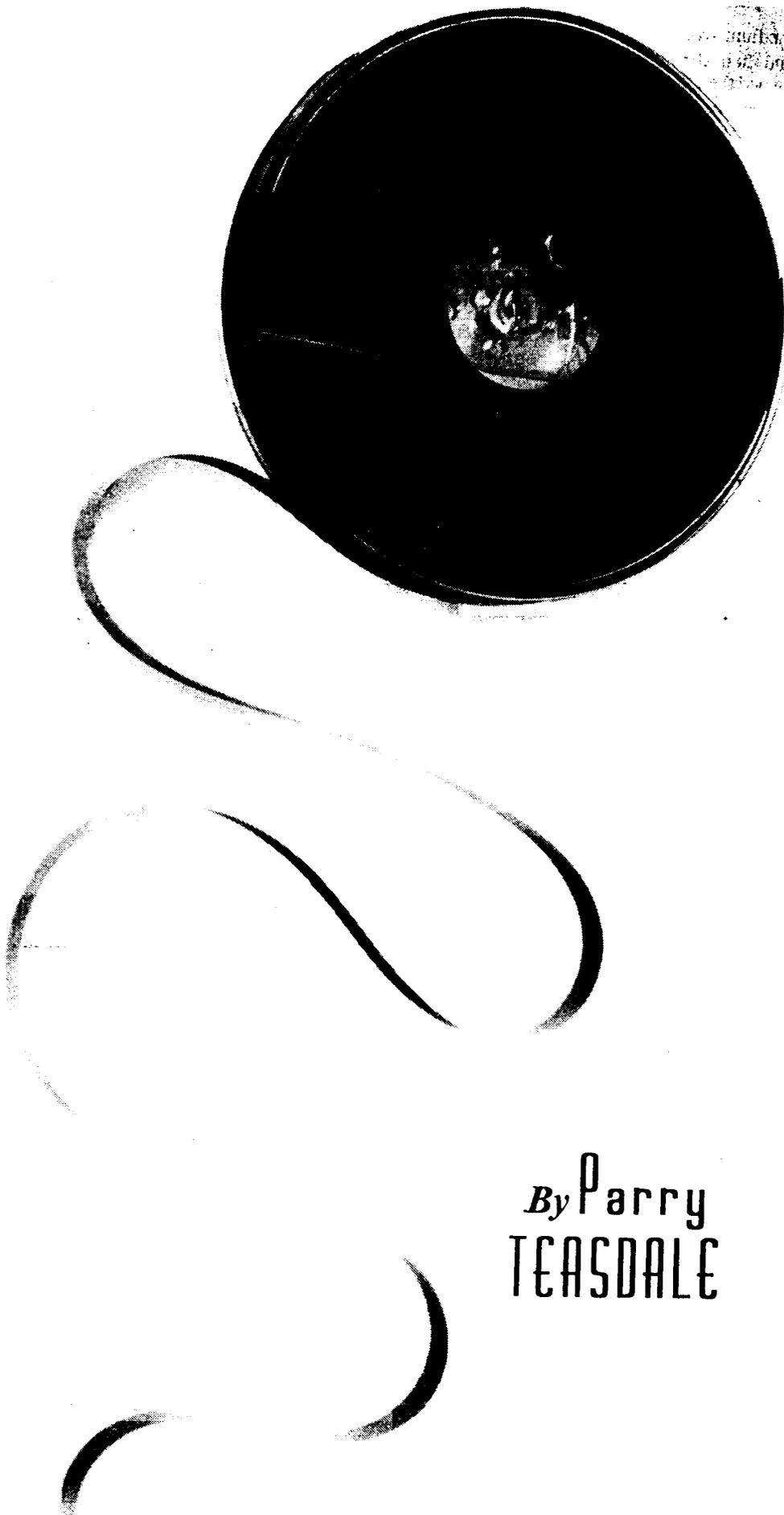
"Just beer," I said. The new owner at the Lanesville General Store called it "hippie beer," low-cost six-packs, which was all we could afford. It gave him a way of expressing his disapproval. But he had to do business with us. We comprised a significant portion of the population of Lanesville.

Dean, who was no hippie, did not disapprove of us that I knew of, only our taste in alcohol. He shook his head and turned off into the darkness. As an afterthought, he let go of my hand.

We met Dean the first day we moved to Lanesville. He and Maud drove across our front lawn in her garbage truck. They waved as they went. We figured it was a local custom, like not eating your neighbors' dog.

We called ourselves Videofreex. Officially, it was a corporation as well as our collective name. It had become a generic term as well, with the pejorative sense of freak undermined by the prevailing subculture, such that any enthusiast or aficionado, regardless of the subject — sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll, food, video — was non-judgmentally classified as a freak.

Low-cost videotape recorders, VTRs, the precursors of today's ubiquitous VCR, were introduced as educational tools in the mid-1960s. In 1968, Sony began marketing a relatively small, battery-operated VTR with a lightweight black-and-white camera. Other companies followed suit. Though cumbersome and technically unrefined by current standards, these small machines held revolutionary promise. The means to produce television programs had previously resided only with the networks, or, in some rare instances, with other large institutions. Use of the



By Parry
TEASDALE

medium was controlled by the networks and their affiliates not only because they owned the transmitters and the licenses to operate them but because only they had the resources—the money and the equipment and technical support—needed to produce programs.

Now, suddenly, here were the tools of television production in the hands of people who were not beholden to the networks in any way. This new technology fit neatly with the revolutionary ethic of the time in that it didn't matter so much what was being produced so long as it was not what *they* produced nor would it ever find its way under *their* control.

The origins of Videofreex were not quite so pure as that. David and I had met at, of all significant events, the Woodstock Festival, and had initially tried to peddle our tapes of what happened there to *60 Minutes*, which would have none of them. Then, by happenstance, we'd hooked up with an executive at CBS, and had produced an unsuccessful pilot for the network using our tools, not theirs. By that time, we'd grown to a group of about ten people, depending on when and whom you counted, under the collective name Videofreex. Our workspace was a loft in an industrial section of downtown Manhattan which a cop told me one day was called SoHo for "south of Houston Street."

Alice's Restaurant. Woodstock, too, seemed too pricey. Real-estate agents acted as if they weren't quite sure what we wanted or they were sure and had no intention of inflicting the likes of us on their clients, especially in light of our preposterous claims to need space for a TV studio.

And then we came to Lanesville. Hard-pressed to call itself a hamlet, Lanesville lies on the only flat stretch of Route 214 as it rushes up the Stony Clove Valley from Phoenicia to Tannersville and Hunter. The rump of Hunter Mountain, where it forms one side of Diamond Notch, dominates the geography. And like the Stony Clove Creek, which empties into the Esopus, the people who live along this valley tend to gravitate downhill to Phoenicia rather than through the precipitous notch above Devil's Tombstone and over to Hunter.

Although Lanesville lies within the boundaries of Hunter Township in Greene County, Hunter has a different area code; it can be unreachable in winter and services from the town were sparse, with longtime residents claiming they never saw town officials except at election time and then the reception on both sides wasn't particularly warm. But the jobs were in Hunter at the ski slope and all the spin-off businesses, and the school was there, too. And the tug between the areas gave Lanesville two of its many personalities.

*We met Dean the first day we moved to Lanesville.
He and Maud drove across our front lawn in her garbage truck.
They waved as they went.
We figured it was a local custom,
like not eating your neighbors' dog*

We were happy to blur our provenance and thus assume our rightful role among the elite if not the vanguard of the counterculture and anti-war movements. But it wasn't long after SoHo got its name that we realized it had become too expensive for us to maintain our space there. With the promise of a major grant from the New York State Council on the Arts in hand, we went house-hunting. No luck in Sullivan County. Stockbridge, Massachusetts, proved, even then, too upscale for us, though we were shown the original

Skiing was, indirectly, why we ended up at Maple Tree Farm. The place was owned by Sam and Miriam Ginsberg. They bought it in the 1950s and ran it as a boarding house during the summers, closing it up for the winter after Yom Kippur and returning to Brooklyn. But when Sam retired as a union carpenter, he and Miriam moved full-time to their three-story, 17-bedroom house with its two kitchens and derelict outbuildings. To make ends meet during the winter, they'd rented to a ski club from Long Island.

The money was good, but the debauchery they'd witnessed during ski weekends had soured them on the prospect of another year with the club. Sam, a short, voluble man with the demeanor of a gruff Santa, was excited by the prospect of a group of revolutionaries replacing the apolitical skiers. Miriam, skeptical, overcame her reservations with the thought that we would be paying rent year-round. So Sam and Miriam moved to a small house they owned nearby, and, at the end of June 1971 all ten of us moved in.

The FBI wasn't far behind. "There's a guy out in the driveway taking pictures," said Annie one summer afternoon. She was looking out the kitchen window at a tall, thin stranger in the business suit. He snapped photos of our license plates and hurried off before anyone could reach him. A short time later, a green van, the same color as those used by the phone company but absent any markings, pulled up next to the telephone pole across Route 214 from the house. Davidson grabbed his still camera and casually walked to a spot on the front lawn where he could shoot some photos of his own through a telephoto lens. Then he walked down the slope that led to the road and casually circled the truck. He came back to report a man was sitting inside with headphones on.

It was a beautiful summer that year. The mountainsides were as lush as I've ever seen them. We enjoyed the scenery when we could between runs to the city to keep up our contacts there, or when we were off the road from our travels around the state making videotapes and instructing people how to use this new technology with an almost evangelical zeal. We had little time nor much inclination to feel paranoid.

What we did feel as winter began to set in was isolated. Aside from our regular contact with Sam and Miriam, who themselves were outsiders, we had only the slightest interaction with what passed for the community. Maud and Dean came to pick up the garbage, seldom said much, and never again resorted to using the lawn as a highway. The logger down the road headed up the mountain each morning, pulled logs down in the afternoon, and never said a word to us. A few shy kids



The Videofreex in 1973. Front row, from left, Ann Woodward, David Cart, Gigliotti, Carol Vontobel, Nancy Cain, Davidson Gigliotti. Top, from left, Sarah Teasdale, Skip Blumberg, Bart Friedman, Chuck Kennedy.

hung around the back door on occasion, but they didn't say much and generally resisted offers of food or a tour of the small studio and the control room we'd set up on the first floor.

At that time, distribution was the missing piece of the communications puzzle for the alternative culture. More and more organizations, institutions and individuals owned their own VTRs, but cable TV was just beginning to provide limited-access channels for independently or locally produced programs, and the networks remained impenetrable and arrogant, sure that nothing would ever challenge their stranglehold over the American consciousness. Because of that attitude and because the Federal Communications Commission offered no alternative to the prohibitively expensive proposition of broadcasting over a regular TV frequency at high power (although the FCC had authorized an experimental, low-power educational TV system just over the mountain from us, something we did not learn until years later), there seemed

to be no way for us to show our neighbors what we were doing.

Our tapes had been played for small gatherings around the world, and artists and independent producers from all over were coming to use the technically advanced facilities at Maple Tree Farm. We frequently retained copies of their work, which caused our tape library to burgeon, though only we and our guests from the video world had occasion to use it. Otherwise, we were cut off at Maple Tree Farm from what was happening on conven-

sprouted like shrubs along Route 214 was no different than in so many Catskills communities — like watching ghosts in a snowstorm.

I can't remember exactly why Joseph Paul called me. Maybe he'd read about Videofreex or heard of us by word of mouth. He was sure I'd heard about him and his partner, both of whom had been busted by federal agents for operating unlicensed radio stations in Yonkers. I

*Sam, a short, valuable man
with the demeanor of a gruff Santa,
was excited by the prospect of a group of revolutionaries
replacing the apolitical skiers*

tional broadcast TV. Lanesville was too sparsely populated to attract a cable TV company. Yet the TV reception there in the decade before home-satellite dishes

hadn't learned of his exploits, but I was interested. Could he, I asked, possibly help us figure out how to broadcast from Maple Tree Farm? We had some of what



The author and Lanesville neighbor Joe "Kabbi" Keley.

we needed, but we lacked experience putting our signal out over the air. He giggled and said he'd come up that weekend.

By late winter Joseph Paul had built us our first antenna, and Chuck and I had figured out that a surplus cable-TV amplifier would work as a transmitter. On March 19, 1972, Channel 3, Lanesville TV, began broadcasting. After the initial tests, we drove along the highway and recorded reactions of some Lanesvillians to the prospect of having their own TV station. Jerry Doyle, owner of one of the two bars in town, had the test pattern on over the bar. He pronounced it "something new and something extounding." Bruce, one of Maud's kids, kicked the snowbank by the side of the road. "Okay," he said, laconically, "I guess."

Doyle told us our first broadcast reached as far away as friends of his in Kingston. Broadcast transmissions in the VHF band can play funny tricks, skipping off the atmosphere and ending up far from where you intend them to be seen. I find it hard to believe we went beyond the confines of

the Stony Clove Valley that night. And if it did happen that our signal escaped to a wider world, the feat was never repeated. More often, people as close as Sam and Miriam reported difficulties with reception, and a portion of each show was usually devoted to fine-tuning our jury-rigged, persnickety transmission system.

to watch *All in the Family* from the New Haven TV station she received through the antenna in her front yard. We were interfering with Archie Bunker, she said. No one called to request we continue that night, so we pulled the plug for the evening and had dinner. The wife of the owner of the largest business in town, the sawmill,

The FBI wasn't far behind.

"There's a guy out in the driveway taking pictures," said Annie one summer afternoon.

She was looking out the kitchen window at a tall, thin stranger in the business suit.

He snapped photos of our license plates and hurried off

We always kept an open phone line and flashed the number to call on the screen frequently during the show. We encouraged people to call, and on occasion, especially in the early days when our broadcasts were still a novelty, callers often phoned to discuss what we put on. One time Maud called to say she wanted

advised some people we knew not to let us into their homes for interviews because we only wanted to tape what we planned to steal later.

Despite her fears, we didn't have much contact with the law, such as it was in Lanesville. My first encounter with local police came the evening we signed the

lease for Maple Tree Farm. Carol and I had gone to Woodstock for dinner and a cop pulled us over on our way back from Phoenicia to spend our first night in Lanesville. My beat-up 1963 VW bus, the quintessential hippie vehicle, had attracted a number of unprovoked, and sometimes ugly encounters, with cops. My bus had no particularly outstanding markings, no psychedelic swirls or anti-war slogans, just the name "Luis" spray-painted in rather small letters by a tentative graffiti artist, a souvenir of the Lower East Side where I used to park when we worked out of David's loft there.

The Phoenicia cop was a compact man with a sunburned face who sounded more businesslike than hostile. He asked politely for my license and registration, checked the tires and the blinkers, the kind of a welcome-to-the-neighborhood routine I'd become accustomed to. Usually, when cops couldn't find something easy to nail you for, they turned surly and

as exotic as anyone could hope to be in Lanesville and still win acceptance. He was reportedly a good man with money, too. Scotty had become a regular viewer of Lanesville TV. He had good reception because he lived only a few houses down from us, one of the few dwellings with an unobstructed shot at our antenna. Scotty had alerted us to the upcoming trout-stocking ritual, and when I showed up to tape it, he had introduced me to the cop, Shandaken chief constable Jack Schlegel, who was in charge of the stocking operation.

The trout arrived from the hatchery in iron tanks on the back of a pickup. Trout need lots of air in order to survive, so the pickup also carried a pump which aerated the tanks and created a din that heightened the excitement of the occasion by forcing everyone to shout at each other to be heard. As the truck drove up Route 214 to predetermined locations, club members were handed plastic buckets full of froth

The networks remained impenetrable and arrogant, sure that nothing would ever challenge their stranglehold over the American consciousness

made up a reason to hassle you. This time it was different. He handed me my documents and walked away with a nod which I took as almost friendly.

The next time I saw him he was out of uniform and in my viewfinder as I taped the crew from the Stony Clove Rod and Gun Club, which was stocking the stream in advance of the first day of fishing season. The club was the biggest organization — in fact, the only one — in the valley. Its fall turkey shoot was the social event of the year. Many local landowners had agreed to allow the club to post their land, restricting hunting and fishing to members only. Holding an office in the club was far more important than becoming a town official. For all intents and purposes, the club ruled the valley.

The president at the time we arrived was a native of Scotland named Scotty Stuart. If he had another first name, I never knew it and no one ever called him anything but Scotty. He had a thick burr and was about

and writhing trout looking like so much animated jewelry. The men trudged through long patches of snow that still covered much of the ground in Lanesville in late March and dumped the fish unceremoniously into the stream.

It was a long and tedious process, and during the course of it Jack got to talking. I've never met anyone more at ease in front of a camera. He liked to talk, and aware the camera was on expounded on a number of topics including some uncomplimentary observations on the fishermen who cast their lines in Phoenicia. Those lowlanders would, of course, reap a windfall of club-stocked fish which migrated downstream. There was something inherently unfair in that.

The stocking tape played a few nights later on Lanesville TV. Some club members called in, amazed at having seen themselves on their own TVs. Others stopped me at the general store to say what a good thing it was to have the club on TV. About time, too. It was our first major breakthrough in the community,

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and the only show many people in Lanesville would ever admit having seen.

The reception in Phoenicia was somewhat less enthusiastic. Jack Schlegel was roundly criticized for bad-mouthing lowland anglers. In an act of disloyalty, he had cast his lot with that clannish group in Lanesville, a place that wasn't even a part of Ulster County. Strangely enough, no

effort. His side of the family, unlike Willie's, never had much to say to us from that point on.

While many of our Lanesville neighbors knew us as hippies doing something with TV, though few could express precisely what even after Lanesville TV went on the air, our image in the wider world fared somewhat better. Video had become a hot

The wife of the owner of the largest business in town, the sawmill, advised some people we knew not to let us into their homes for interviews because we only wanted to tape what we planned to steal later

one questioned how he had come to be on TV. What they cared about was what he'd said.

Very few people ever asked us whether we had a license to broadcast, which we didn't. We never said we did. A subsequent FBI investigation reported that we were broadcasting on "a local TV station" and left it at that.

The tape of the trout-stocking and the subsequent controversy established Lanesville TV as a serious presence as well as an accepted fact in the community. And, for the first time, our neighbors got some inkling what it was we did.

The Benjamin and Neal families comprised the core of the valley's population at that time. Maple Tree Farm had once been a Neal family homestead and boarding house, and the two families were intertwined for generations. Willie Benjamin was the patriarch, accorded respect not only because he was an elder but because he owned both a tractor and a Cadillac. Elmer, one of Willie's two brothers, achieved some distinction by having fathered 17 children.

Shortly after Lanesville TV went on the air, Carol dropped by Elmer's house and asked him on camera to name all his kids. He looked befuddled. "Well," he said slowly and stopped for a long drag on his cigarette, "there's Elmer Jr. and Bobby and ..." He paused again, shook his head and grinned sheepishly.

"Charlotte!" came a loud, off-camera whisper.

"Yeah, Charlotte ...," and he rattled off a few more. With additional prompting, he got most of them, but it was a painful

topic in the press. The public perception of the new medium was limited, however, in that most writers and editors treated video exclusively as a new art form, refusing to acknowledge its relevance to the serious business of communications. Most reporting focused on individual artists, such as Korean-born Nam June Paik, a joyful, endlessly inventive and slightly loony man who refused to visit Lanesville because he worried he would be mistaken for Japanese and killed by American war veterans.

We had our fleeting share of publicity, as mainstream publications such as *Newsweek* discovered video art and just as quickly forgot about it. And as that excitement waned, there came another wave of reporters, claiming to want to look more deeply into what was happening and who were, in effect, on assignment as voyeurs of the counterculture. To them, people like Paik were a comprehensible phenomenon fitting neatly a traditional mold. But as a video collective — we never used the word "commune" to describe ourselves — Videofreex was at once titillating and more threatening. If we didn't fit some preconceived notion of how artists worked and were not part of the television industry, then by default it was only logical that we must be a cult.

It's hard for me to believe the way we lived lent much credence to the cult theory. We did have a few big parties, one of them by the banks of the Stony Clove Creek where Davidson roasted a deer he'd shot after it had been hit by a car. The drumming at that event did last late into the night, and the bikers from two doors over

pronounced themselves satisfied with the levels of noise and intoxication. But in the months between parties, the ethic was work no matter how stoned some folks were while doing it.

We encouraged visitors on weekends, most of whom were already involved in video. We fed them dinner and some hippie beer, showed them to a guest room, and generally left them to snoop for themselves. No one proselytized except on the virtues of technology. Conversations amounted to little more than shop talk, and when a reporter did show up there were as many versions of the party line as there were Videofreex.

If you want to see a cult, you have to find a leader, and there were times when it seemed David was unwilling to disabuse the press of the fantasy he played that role. It wasn't all his fault. With his theatrical bellowing, his wheezy laugh more a tic than an expression of humor, his parrot Oberon screaming as he spoke, and his Whitman beard and Afro hair, he was simply more colorful than the rest of us.

His willingness to accept the mantle of leadership rather than discourage the perception he spoke for the rest of us left us seething whenever those misconceptions appeared in print. We became wary of leaving him alone with reporters so much so that at times it may have seemed as if there was a form of group censorship. This behavior peaked with the arrival of the first set of Germans.

Franceska and her crew arrived the day after our first Thanksgiving at Maple Tree Farm, just in time for an early and extraordinarily heavy snowstorm. She was a thin, dour woman with short brown hair and a way of asking questions that sounded more like giving orders. "Just go about what you do, yes? We film you as you are." Her crew consisted of a sound man and a cameraman. The sound man constantly shook his head. I never learned whether he was having technical difficulties or he could not believe what he was hearing. The cameraman was young, blond and athletic, almost a dancer. He clearly enjoyed peeking over our shoulders with his lens.

At that time, film enjoyed a far higher standing than video as a medium for aesthetic and commercial projects, espe

cially when compared to the type of video equipment available to us. Film images were clearer. Film was color. We could only shoot in black and white. The sound was more distinct and there were markets for film that did not exist for videotapes. We had no respect for film. As a matter of principle, we saw the medium as constricting and elitist. Film was extremely expensive to process. A canister of 16 mm film only lasted eight minutes as compared to the 30 minutes we could record on our VTRs, and there was no way film could be shown immediately. Film was the past, video the future, and we let the German film crew know it right away.

The first sign of trouble came when we pelted the cameraman with snowballs. He seemed to enjoy it, but Franceska was not amused. "No, please! You are not to acknowledge our presence here, yes?" Somebody hit her with a snowball. She ordered the crew inside. The sound man shook his head.

Usually someone worked in the editing room at least once a day, but because this was Thanksgiving weekend and we had no pressing deadlines we could torment our visitors full time. It was one of the few times in all the years at Maple Tree Farm we experienced such unity of purpose. We agreed later it had something to do with Franceska's insistence on using the word "Achtung!" to begin each scene.

The technological and cost differences between film and video produced radically different styles working. We would turn on our cameras and enter a scene, sometimes observers and sometimes participants — usually some combination of the two — but always with the idea of allowing events to unfold at their own pace. Film, however, was ruled by a formality which required structured scenes of roughly predetermined length. "Achtung!"

I don't recall that we let her have a private interview with David. Perhaps that's why she decided on a collective scene, herding us all in the first-floor room we used as a videotape library and viewing room. With the exception of parties, all the members of Videofreex seldom collected in the same room at the same time, even at dinner. Franceska hadn't picked up on this aspect of our relationship. She forged ahead, ordering us to sit in what she determined was a



Elmer Benjamin attempting to name his 17 children.

relaxed and natural fashion.

"Now you will all please say one sentence about what you think is most important, yes? One at a time, please, beginning with Nancy Achtung!" There was silence for a moment before we all burst out in uncontrollable laughter. Franceska began shouting in German. The soundman threw off his headset. Somewhere in the archives of a German TV network is a film record of the Videofreex. We never received a copy and couldn't have played it if we had. Somewhere in the Videofreex archives is a tape of Franceska and her crew as they packed their bags, leaving earlier than expected despite the snow. We may have watched our tape of them that weekend. No one has viewed it since.

Not all our neighbors were locals. When we first arrived, there was an elderly couple and some of their relatives living in the house immediately next door to Maple Tree Farm. They had already had their house up for rent, but when they saw us they put it on the market for a very attractive price. The next summer the Morgans (not their real name) moved in. There were Ma and Pa Morgan and three of their sons. Most of Pa Morgan's huge red face was occupied by a prizefighter's nose. The boys looked remarkably simi-

lar though less ruddy. They were all sandhogs in the city. Sandhogs are workers who build tunnels.

As soon as they bought the house, they arrived with shovels and an immense quantity of high-priced beer and proceeded to excavate their basement. They would spend all weekend underground, while a tinny speaker in the window blasted rock music they could hear as they wheeled out barrows full of dirt. I never saw the basement when it was finished, but I had an uncomfortable feeling they'd extended it under the yard between us, and that any weekend they might spill out into our basement. It wasn't long before we began to resent the Morgans as loud weekenders and outsiders. That was before the O'Malleys arrived.

Two houses shared the small bluff above Route 214 with Maple Tree Farm. The Morgan house lay about 20 yards from the north side of ours. On the other side of the Morgans' was a small frame house that was empty when we moved in. During our second winter at Maple Tree farm, a family moved into this abandoned house. Not long afterward, Carol decided to take our daughter Sarah, then just an infant, for a sleigh ride. Seeing our new neighbor, she asked whether she could sled down his driveway. He agreed and they got to talking. She mentioned that the Morgans drank

a lot. "I shoot heroin in my eye," replied Roy O'Malley.

Roy kept his chopped Harley in his living room and was adorned with enough tattoos to qualify for a sideshow. He claimed to have friends among the Hell's Angels chapter in Manhattan, though he was not officially a member of the club. He was probably a little too rough around

Angels when we were still in the city.

There was also Artie, who more than offset Roy's reticence. Artie was Roy's brother-in-law. Artie's wife was the sister of the woman Roy had recently married, and Artie and Laurie had rented the cabin behind the main house at Maple Tree

Farm shortly after Roy, his wife and their three kids moved in on the other side of the Morgans.

Artie was Roy's Boswell. He could barely constrain himself from telling and retelling the legend of Roy O'Malley. How, for instance, the Angels in the city had loosed their German shepherds on Roy during one visit, just as a joke, and how Roy had knocked each of the dogs cold with one punch and not sustained as much as a scratch. "You shoulda fuckin' seen it, man. The way he fuckin' knocked the fuckin' dogs fuckin' out!"

Not long after he and his family moved in, Roy disappeared for a while, having been arrested at gunpoint just up the road by local and state police and extradited to New Jersey. "He stomped a coupla troopers down there before they was gonna stomp him," said Artie. "He broke one of their fuckin' legs and smashed the other one's nose off, but they don't wanna fuckin' admit he coulda done that much damage to 'em, them being troopers an' all. So he'll be out soon." That was true, but it wasn't good news for Artie, who'd had a fistfight with Laurie on the lawn of Maple Tree Farm in the interim.

Artie was no Roy when it came to fighting, and I scored the bout in Laurie's favor. But she went to her sister with the result that Roy explained to Artie the



Channel 3 was sure to cover the circus when it came to town.

the edges to qualify.

Not that we ever said much to or heard much from Roy. The only conversation I ever had with him was when he had parked his bike in our driveway and was polishing it in anticipation of leaving for a biker rally somewhere in the unspecified "north." The Grateful Dead might show up there, he said. Man, did he dig their music. I said I didn't care much for it. There was a long silence. Then, slowly, he stopped polishing his ape-hanger handlebars and looked up at me, glowering. Our conversation had ended.

That incident aside, he and his biker friends considered Videofreex to be enough of an outlaw organization to meet the threshold criteria for acceptance. We had long hair, liked rock music — except when the Morgans played it to accompany their subterranean activities — and shared a mistrust of authority. We also had some acquaintances in common because we had made several tapes with the



Carol Vontobel hosting an early Lanesville TV show.



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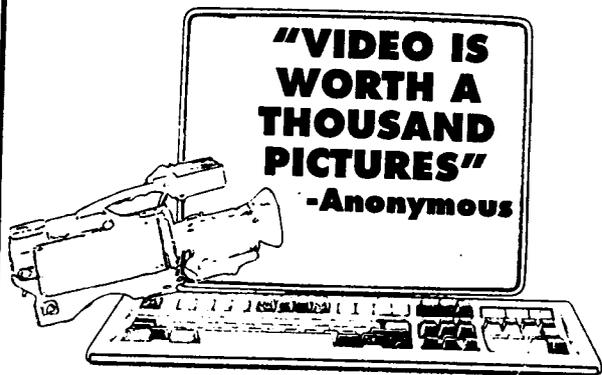
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consequences of ever touching his sister-in-law again. Shortly thereafter, Artie and Laurie moved out.

Through all of this Lanesville TV continued. We had begun it as a tentative experiment fed with high hopes and great ambition. Our first broadcasts began promptly at 7 p.m. on Sunday night and ran for as long as we felt we had something to show. A few weeks after we first went on the air, Bart came up with the idea for "The Buckaroo Bart Show," a Saturday morning children's program. The show starred Bart in the title role and included a particularly outgoing local youngster named John Benjamin, who was about ten, as Sheriff John. And as no TV show, especially one that purports to be about cowboys, would be complete without a comic villain, Bart drafted Howard Raab, a carpenter and stained-glass artist who happened at that time to live in the cabin out back. He was given the name Horrible Howard.

The first Buckaroo Bart Show was a short, improvisational morality play called "Don't Throw Yer Cans in the Road," in which Horrible Howard tosses his soft drink can by the side of the road and Sheriff John and Buckaroo Bart lecture him about the evils of littering. Both the medium and the message were new to John, who nonetheless handled them with the aplomb and self-assurance of a pro.

The show quickly developed into an elaborate production involving science-fiction plots and complicated location shooting. We measured its success by the amusement value we derived from it, but there was no way to sustain it. Lanesville TV brought in no revenues. Each year we had to plead with the state, which kept reducing our funding. We tried, with some success, to develop outside sources of income. But with no money earmarked for the Buckaroo Bart Show, it went from a regular event to an occasional program and then disappeared altogether.

The once-a-week evening broadcasts survived primarily because we did them almost as an afterthought. By the spring of 1972 we had polled our viewers on the air, and decided, based on the half-dozen or so responses, that we should switch to Saturday night. That seemed to boost our audience, especially in the winter when the skiers were around. In the summer, when it was still light outside at 7 p.m., we used the front porch as our studio, although we



The first Buckaroo Bart Show.

learned, as the networks had years before, that fewer people watch TV in warm weather.

It was the arrival of Sarah that subtly but irrevocably led me away from Videofreex. During Carol's pregnancy, nothing seemed different. Just a day or so before she went into labor, she had been shooting tape at Whiz Bang Quick City, a gathering in Woodland Valley near Phoenicia of architects and dreamers with ideas for new types of structures. There were domes, inflatables, tents, gauze-like mazes in fantastic shapes, even a rope bridge. And then, all of a sudden, here was this new member of the group, who needed nearly all of my attention. For me, it meant getting up early, something I was loathe to do, and passing up the opportunity to go out on extended-location shoots or get involved in late-night sessions working collectively on some bizarre video concept.

I remember feeding Sarah breakfast in the long, cool kitchen at Maple Tree Farm, and looking out the window at the bleak fall landscape. The mountainsides had turned purple, and there was frost on the lawn. On the first day of hunting season, I watched as Dean dragged a deer out of the woods just as dawn broke over the mountaintop. The next morning I watched the same scene unfold. And the next, I thought of mentioning Dean's skill to Davidson, the only one in the house who hunted. I didn't. It was my secret with Dean. I knew he would eat the deer. I also knew this was not where I wanted Sarah to grow up.

Dean probably didn't eat our dog. Why should he when there was so much more tasty game available? The dog's name

was Mushroom. We had brought him with us when we moved to Lanesville from the city. Carol and Nancy had taken him at the request of a veterinarian they knew who said otherwise he'd be put to sleep. Mushroom had lost control of his bowels after a bout with distemper as a puppy. He was a sweet animal but a drag to keep in the house. He loved living in the country and stayed close to the house except when I hiked in the woods.

Once, during our first winter, he had bolted from me on one of our walks up the logging trails that crisscrossed the mountainside behind the house. I looked upslope and saw what I thought at first must be a bear. It was huge, four feet high, gray and lumbering, almost swaying as it moved. I shouted at Mushroom to come back, but he wouldn't listen.

He attacked the animal with a fury I'd never seen, only to back off suddenly, squealing in pain. When I reached him, I saw his face was covered with quills. The porcupine had disappeared and I had neither time nor inclination to look for it.

I was frightened for Mushroom. My heart was beating fast and I was breathing heavily. He could walk, although he had a number of quills in his leg. I ran down the mountain, encouraging him to keep up with me. He was frothing at the mouth and every so often stopped, trying unsuccessfully to remove the quills with his paws.

The vet anesthetized him and pulled out the quills. He let me help there were so many. It was as bad a case as he'd seen, he said. Sometimes dogs learned. Sometimes they didn't. Mushroom didn't. Several more times he returned to the house that winter with his face looking like a tray of hors d'oeuvres. The vet worried he'd become addicted to the anesthetic.

Even before we'd set up Lanesville TV, we'd tried our hand at our own cable TV system. We'd raised a mast high on the side of the mountain, mounted a large antenna on top and used outdated cable TV equipment donated or bought at a bargain to run the cable down the side of the mountain to Maple Tree Farm, the Morgans and to Sam and Miriam. For a while, we could receive signals from New York City. It was a great triumph. But occasionally the signal would end abruptly. Inspecting the line, we found where the cable had actually been gnawed through.

You could tell as the porcupines chewed the cable because the signal would weaken

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with each bite until it was finally gone. They ate through half-inch-thick aluminum shielded cable. They ate the antenna and the small building covered with steel mesh that housed the amplifiers. Mushroom had protected our equipment, and we'd never realized it. Without him, the whole system was vulnerable to the porcupines, who fancied the cable, not what it carried. When Mushroom disappeared, our cable signal went off for good.

Lanesville TV broadcasts continued until 1977. By that time, the group had dwindled to five regular members, and only three people lived at Maple Tree Farm. Both the bars in town had burned down. The general store and gas station had closed, leaving the post office as the sole testament that a settlement of larger proportions had once thrived there. The people who live in Lanesville today get their TV from 24,000 miles in space, receiving the same news and entertainment as everyone else in the country, geographically remote, electronically connected. There is no physical evidence that Channel 3 ever existed there. But if you ask some of the folks who lived in Lanesville back then,

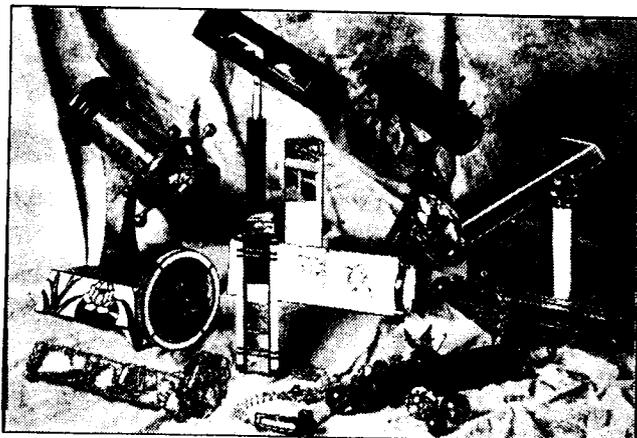


A Lanesville TV show with Nancy Cain on the phone, Harriet Benjamin and Russell Conner of the New York State Council on the Arts.

*We had our fleeting share of publicity,
as mainstream publications such as Newsweek
discovered video art
and just as quickly forgot about it*

they might tell you they remember the stocking of the trout stream. Or they might say they don't recall.

Parry D. Teasdale, now a resident of Phoenicia, is editor of the Woodstock Times.



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