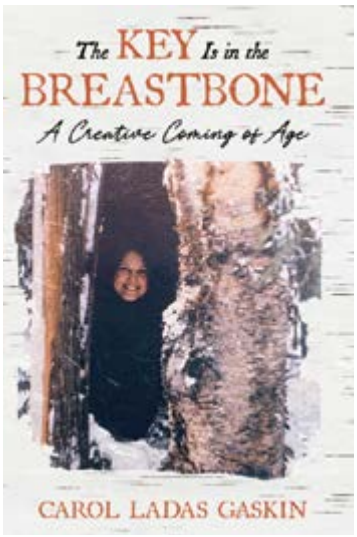
Review by Chris Roth



THE KEY IS IN THE BREASTBONE: A Creative Coming of Age

Carol Ladas Gaskin

Stone Lizard Press, Shoreline, WA, 2026, 411 pages, carolladasgaskin.com

This is one of the most beautifully written, evocative, engaging records I've ever encountered of a back-to-the-land communal group. It's also a work of art and psychological insight that will have appeal far beyond current or ex-communitarians, communal studies scholars, or those sharing its author's eventual vocation of working in clay. Anyone looking for a "good read" could enjoy it.

From the outset, it's grounded in a deep dive into intentional community living. The entirety of Part One,"The Experiment" (pages 7-171), traces the journey of Carol Ladas Gaskin, her daughter Dana, and a group of close friends who departed Northern California in 1968 to live communally, off-grid, in the forests of British Columbia. That story continues into the 1980s, interwoven in portions of Part Two, "My Family" (which uncovers Carol's backstory, pre-commune), and Part Three, "The Crucible" (which describes her further self-discovery through travel, and subsequent creative evolution). She lived on the communal homestead for 18 years until the group dispersed; surviving members still return to it in summer, though it's now stewarded year-round by others.

The author paints an intimate portrait of a group of close friends deciding to commit to one another and to the grand adventure of living self-reliantly in a remote setting without utilities or many other distractions/conveniences of modern life. "We bought two hundred acres of land, built A-frames just in time for winter, encountered bears in the woods, survived bitter cold, trudged up and down our snowbound road, struggled with frozen water lines, grew our own food, raised animals, and forged deep friendships...we were transformed as we discovered inner strengths we were unaware of" (p. 1).

Starting as "five friends wanting to live a simple life on the land and raise our children in a loving community" (p. 2), the group developed a shared vision and set of principles and, once arrived, discovered that "our lives without radio, television, or electricity slowed us down to the pace of the natural world. Nights were warmed by the wood stove and stories and music in the glow of kerosene lamps; we all sang or played guitar or banjo. Our days were filled with work we did in common…[and] the daily complexities and joys of preparing food and caring for the children" (p. 4).

Carol's prose, precise and poetic, evokes life lived not only in direct relationship with the natural world, the weather, the seasons, and all their demands and gifts, but also in intimate, interdependent relationship with others. In her memoir, those relationships evolve, deepen, become more complex, and present challenges nearly as pressing as facing a winter in uninsulated A-frames without enough firewood prepared (as happened their first year).

Living in a remote, off-grid community increases interdependence and intensifies experiences of closeness, estrangement, love, and loss. Especially in small, tight-knit

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groups, key members' departures often produce profound emotional as well as practical impacts. Here, in the course of less than a year, five out of nine adults, plus six children, leave for various reasons; the four remaining adults eventually become just three. Facing what resembles the dissolution of a close nuclear family, those who remain find succor not only in their continuing strong bonds with one another, but also in their intimate daily connection with the land.

Countless other issues confronted widely in community find their place in this story too: choices about how to bring in new members, set proper boundaries, become economically viable, and navigate disagreement, conflict, interpersonal tension. In nearly every case of the latter here, conversation works wonders. In fact, the interlocutors in this memoir tend to be so eloquent that I wondered at times whether the verbally gifted narrator herself may have been enhancing her characters' eloquence a bit in the retelling. Regardless, there's no doubt that Carol and her fellow pioneers were keenly sensitive, intelligent, outside-the-box participants in their organically evolving experiment, usually embracing it fearlessly.

Despite having little past practical preparation for that experiment, and despite some locals' predictions that they'd abandon it once snows became heavy their first winter, they succeeded beyond all expectations. On top of learning to live on the land and raise children together, Carol and others navigated shifting, often open romantic relationships and evolving understandings of their own and one another's callings and gifts. Like some other successful back-to-the-land communities, they benefited greatly through mentorship and mutual aid from a pacifist, religiously-based subculture equally out of step with mainstream consumer society.[1] In their case, the Doukhobors, members of a Russian sect that had fled religious and state persecution in their homeland, not only proved the best of neighbors but also "understood us far better than our friends had back home" (p. 47).

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A glance at the author's name hints at another reason those interested in contemporary communalism will find this memoir of keen interest: Carol was the second wife of Stephen Gaskin, teacher of Monday Night Class in late-'60s San Francisco and then founder of The Farm in Tennessee in 1970.

Carol and Stephen married in 1960, long before Stephen became the mythical figure who attracted 1500 class attendees at a time, then inspired followers to trek cross-country in a 60-vehicle caravan to establish a commune, serving as its spiritual leader. This earlier Stephen has charisma as well, enough to attract Carol into marriage, but also reveals many qualities likely to be glossed over in later mythologizing. The couple moved 12 times during their four years of marriage, with Stephen working at a pizza place off and on, trying to write the Great American Novel, studying at the local university, cultivating a serious addiction to cigarettes (while evicting a roommate for smoking marijuana, which he later championed), and, more concerning, proving to be a person who could not keep his word. Stephen was regularly dishonest and hypocritical, breaking commitments, hiding a long-term affair (revealed to Carol years later by the friend involved), and reinforcing the adage, "Never meet your generation's future heroes."

Out of all this, however, came a daughter, Dana, who proves central to the story and, from Carol's perspective, must have been the ultimate reason for the relationship. That's not to say that coparenting was easy; Stephen made agreements with Carol and then violated them, at one point virtually kidnapping Dana (taking her away from British Columbia back to The Farm well before the agreed-upon time), alternating between a laissez-faire attitude and severely-applied double-standards around her upbringing. Dana's childhood and teenagerhood ended up split between Carol's remote commune in BC and the bustle of The Farm in Tennessee, and she seemed to find strong belonging in both places, while also suffering the effects of this split life and its inconsistencies. As the years proceed, negotiations related to their child continue to reinforce the impression that Stephen was better appreciated at a distance than by having a marriage or child with him, but this should come as no surprise to those who've studied charismatic leaders. Ultimately the author comes to peace with the difficulties involved—again, on account of Dana, who today is her backyard-neighbor in Washington State.[2]

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Finally, one of the great pleasures of this book is how beautifully crafted it is. Each of its 67 chapters could stand on its own as a separate story, given adequate context (in fact, two appeared, prior to the book's publication, as articles in Communities[3]). Most are four to six pages long, making the 411 pages of this memoir seem much less imposing. Each also opens with a quoted piece of wisdom or poetry, bringing broader perspectives to this personal story. A helpful introduction traces the arc of the book and its most salient points, and an epilogue draws larger lessons from the spiritual journey the book has traced—through community, through family trauma, through discovering freedom, healing, and self-expression in the arts. Years as a pioneering communitarian helped Carol find her ultimate path as a clayworker, therapist, teacher—and, fortunately for readers, a writer.

Chris Roth edits Communities.

1. Among similar examples I've experienced personally, Sandhill Farm (1974) established itself amongst a high proportion of Mennonite neighbors in Rutledge, Missouri, and the Possibility Alliance (2007) deliberately located itself adjacent to the Amish in La Plata, Missouri.
2. See Dana Gaskin Wenig's own reflections on her communal childhood in "The Kids Are Talking: Pay Attention. Remembering a Communal Childhood," Communities #199, pages 42-46.
3. See Carol Ladas Gaskin's "Water: Life in the Wilderness," Communities #194, pages 8-9, and "A-Frames," Communities #198, pages 10-12.