

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

CAMP MIDVALE

In Northern New Jersey, nestled in the foothills of the Ramapo Mountains, lies a community of environmental activists that defies the stereotype of "environmentalists". This community is not a product of Earth Day and the 1960's, nor is it a refuge for affluent New Yorkers; in fact, this group redefines the history of the environmental movement in the United States.

Over sixty years ago a group of trade union members started "Camp Midvale" in Ringwood New Jersey; a cooperative land trust, where members could escape the city to hike, swim and camp. This community later became the hub for the national organization called the "Nature Friends". Its purpose in New Jersey, and later at other sites throughout the country, was to enable working people to enjoy and preserve the wild outdoors.

Initially founded by trade union members in Austria and Germany at the turn of the century, the Nature Friends expanded to hundreds of locals throughout Europe. In 1910, the first local was formed in the U.S. by a dozen immigrants while they were on a hike. The group laid the foundation for Camp Midvale with the purchase of forty acres in 1920. By the 1930's, the group had collectively bought close to 150 acres, built a large clubhouse, cleared miles of hiking trails, becoming a haven for hundreds of workers and their families in New Jersey and the metropolitan area. In the following decade, Nature Friends' camps sprung up in California, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Connecticut. Yet, throughout the history of the organization, the Ringwood, New Jersey camp remained the dynamic center.

In 1940, in the heart of the Rocky Mountain National Park, the Nature Friends of America held their first national convention. A few passages from the constitution which was drafted there illustrate how the Nature Friends stood apart from other environmental organizations of this era. The first amendment was an affirmation to "preserve and aid the protection of nature and its beauty; to conserve the national resources of this country and increase the number of National Parks, local parks, and bird and wildlife sanctuaries." Subsequent amendments had a specific political perspective: "Every Nature Friend Member a Trade Union Member," followed by a clause that "no person with fascist convictions shall be eligible for membership." In addition, the two hundred delegates passed resolutions in solidarity with European locals which were under attack by the Nazis. They also called for a short work week, and an end to "discrimination of any kind in industry, the community, or politics."

The strong stand against discrimination and the multi-racial, multi-ethnic composition of the Nature Friends, were the most significant characteristics of the organization. It was one of the few recreational groups open to all races and religions within the U.S., at this time. Indeed, the camp at Ringwood, New Jersey was perhaps one of the first integrated facilities in the state. In the 1930's, Germans, Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Poles, and Italians could hike, swim, and camp together under the auspices of the Nature Friends.

The Nature Friends were destroyed in Europe during World War II. The Nazis confiscated camps and imprisoned the leadership. Following the war, the camps began again and can be found throughout Europe. In America, a combination of greater social mobility of working people and the suppression during the McCarthy era, (the group was placed on the Attorney General's subversive list in 1947 and placed under surveillance by the F.B.I.), caused the group to formally disband in the late 1950's. However, as a community of activists concerned with social and environmental issues, the Ringwood community remains active today. These early environmental activists, who certainly were some of the first to combine an environmental outlook with a social commitment to trade union advocacy and intergration, are an unknown chapter in the history of the environmental movement in this country and in the state of New Jersey. Today, only a handful of the founders of Camp Midvale survive and within a few years it will be impossible to document, firsthand, this unique and unknown group of trade union environmentalists.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The project to document the Nature Friends is conceived in two stages:

1. To conduct oral histories of the individuals who were involved in Camp Midvale in Ringwood, New Jersey. These interviews will be added to the *Oral History of the American Left* collection at the Tamiment Institute Library, New York University. In addition, the Labor Studies Department at Rutgers University and the Newark Public Library will receive tape copies.
2. The project coordinators will seek funds to produce a public radio program using the oral history interviews as well as other resources.

Due to the fact that Camp Midvale was the hub for the national organization, and that a sizeable constituency still exists there and within the metropolitan area, the project coordinators will conduct interviews and research to fully document the camp. In consultation with Ethyl Kirschner and her husband, George Kirschner, the project coordinators has drawn up a list of thirty-five former members to interview. Included are people who built the camp and the organization and representatives of the various ethnic and racial groups that were members. In addition, several individuals who were active in the leadership both in New Jersey and nationally and who now reside in Florida, will be interviewed. The goal will be to fully document the camp's history in the context of the national organization and particularly within the State of New Jersey. A final product of this stage will be a broadcast quality tape to be distributed to various funding sources for the proposed program.

Draft Outline of the Radio Program

The radio program will utilize the body of interviews, various archival sounds of the period and narration that will guide the listeners through Camp Midvale's four distinct periods.

1. The first segment will cover the origins of the Nature Friends in Europe, the philosophy of the organization and the establishment of the first local in the United States; the early years at Ringwood.
2. The second segment will document the decades of growth (the 1930's to the 1940's), the aspects of building a national organization, the ramifications of the interracial character of the group and the organization's involvement with the social issues of the period. In addition the program will examine the second generation at Midvale after the war.
3. The third segment will focus on the decline of the group in the United States. The effects of the McCarthy era, F.B.I surveillance, as well as the numerous attacks on the Ringwood camp by right-wing groups will be documented. The destruction of the European locals will also be mentioned.
4. The final segment will highlight the new generations who currently enjoy the resources of the Ringwood community and will place the Nature Friends organization in a historical context of the environmental movement today.

PARTICIPANTS IN THE PROJECT

George Kirschner: Consultant

A member of the Nature Friends since 1939; a homeowner at the camp since the 1940's; treasurer and member of the governing Camp Committee from the mid-50's to 1962; married to Ethyl Kirschner, whose father was one of the original founders of the Camp and the national organization. George is well acquainted with the surviving old timers of the organization.

Graduate of Queen's College (B.A. 1969) with a Masters in U.S. History (1972). A high school teacher at the Walden School in New York City for twelve years where he often incorporated the use of oral histories in the classroom. George is currently working on a video about three longtime members of the Nature Friends titled: "Three Working Class Intellectuals".

Chris Idzik: Interviewer and Researcher

A graduate of Hampshire College in 1981 with a major in U.S. History; in particular, labor history. Chris has conducted extensive oral histories, as well as collecting folklore and folk music. During the summers of 1977 and 1978 he collected folk music in Washington County, Maine. In 1979, Chris produced *The Valley: The Depression Years*, a collection of 25 oral histories of Northhampton, Massachusetts experiences during the 1930's. In 1980, for material for his senior thesis, Chris conducted over 40 interviews of former students, teachers and administrators of the Jefferson School, an adult education center sponsored by the Communist Party in New York City in the 1950's. Chris has been a secondary school social studies teacher and received his M.A. from Columbia University Teachers College May, 1987.

Andy Lanset: Technician and Researcher

A freelance radio journalist and technician whose work can be heard over National Public Radio, Associated Press Radio, The Christian Science Monitor Radio, as well as Pacifica Radio. Andy has been steadily reporting on a full range of issues since 1981 and was previously a full-time reporter for WBAI-New York. His work includes a documentary on the 1984 Republican National Convention in Dallas; the emerging Worker Cooperative Movement; and an investigation of New York City services under the Koch Administration. In April, 1985, Andy provided full coverage of the United Nations Council for Namibia symposium held in Sofia, Bulgaria. He is a graduate of S.U.N.Y College at Purchase (B.A. 1980) in Sociology.