

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NATUREFRIENDS

On March 1, 1895, hiking through the Vienna Woods, elementary school teacher Schmidl and his hiking companion Katz recognized the need and value of healthful outdoor activity, such as hiking for the urban worker and his family.

The following week, they placed an ad in the "Viennese Working News Paper", inviting participation to the founding of a hiking and outdoor organization geared to the needs of the urban worker, to which three people replied and held a meeting.

When the first group hike was held, on April 14, 1895, to the Vienna Woods, there were 62 participants; ladies in long skirts and hats and some of the men in high celluloid collars. But even in this more formal attire, there was a spirit of brotherhood, companionship, and joviality that still prevails. Along with this spirit goes the recognition of ecology and human welfare.

It was obvious that there was a need for this type of organization, because it grew rapidly. The group felt it needed a means of communication. Therefore, in 1897, the periodical "Der Naturfreund" was created and published. It is replaced today by the "Naturfreunde International". A slogan, as inspired by the NF Branch Graz, in 1900, "Berg Frei", was accepted by the whole NF Organization. Berg Frei translates into mountain freedom with a dual concept, as man can experience freedom in the mountains and that the mountains are free for everyone's use and enjoyment. This early ecological concept is representative of the NF Organization to date. An organizational emblem was also adopted. One of the designers was Adolf Feil; later he became a Los Angeles member. The emblem encompassed the idea of a handshake, representing brotherhood, mountains and three red flowers, representing freedom in nature.

The NF Organization expanded out of Austria to Germany and Switzerland. The activities of the Organization also expanded to include wintersports, a ski school, and mountain climbing. One of the basic concepts of the NF was to make outdoor facilities available to its members by building and maintaining club houses. Such club houses, mountain huts and hiking and ski shelters were built and maintained cooperatively by the various international NF Groups.

The European NF immigrants brought their NF movement with them and in 1910, under the leadership of Alex Weidenauer, formed an NF group in New York. They built a beach house on Rockaway Beach, which, later, was destroyed by a storm. They built a second camp near Croton on the Hudson, N.Y., which was burnt down in 1918 by superpatriots. After World War I, there was a new immigrant movement and the NF had a strong growth impetus. At this time, there were already hundreds of members. By 1919, the New York NF group acquired a large piece of land in Midvale, NJ and started a large NF camp.

The American Naturefriends expanded to the West Coast and in 1912 formed the San Francisco Group. They built a lovely clubhouse in the Muir Woods. Los Angeles, also, formed a NF group, organized by John Sommers in 1920, and in 1921, Oakland, California, started their NF group. The Los Angeles Branch built a two story clubhouse in Sierra Madre in 1923. The members would take the Red Car, a Trolley to the town of Sierra Madre and with knapsacks hiked up the canyon to the clubhouse. In 1927, they added the dance hall on the third floor.

At this time, 1927, the three Western Branches, San Francisco, Oakland, and Los Angeles, incorporated and affiliated themselves with the NF International. These three groups built the first High Sierra House, in Norden, California.

In 1935, the Los Angeles Branch hunted around for a suitable location for a mountain cabin. Through the efforts of Fred Zahn, Hermann Beck, Walter Schneppe, John Sommers and John Presley, the site for the San Jacinto Cabin was chosen and between 1935 and 1937, the San Jacinto Cabin was built. The High Sierra House at Norden burnt to the ground in 1943. In 1947, the Norden House was replaced by the present Heidelmann Lodge.

The European Nature Friends were also expanding. In 1929, in Germany alone, there were 829 branches composed of 60,000 members owning 220 NF houses. Such a NF development was paralleled in the other European countries, such as Austria, Switzerland, Holland, England, France, Belgium, and Norway. There were many specialized groups, as skiing, mountain climbing, expeditionary, photography, folk dancing, music, canoeing, foldboating. Of special note was the rapid growth of children and youth groups.

In 1929, a new group was formed in Chicago, Ill., and a house was built by them.

By 1929, the New York branch had grown to such proportion that two separate groups were formed, one in Brooklyn and one in Manhattan.

Hitler fascism outlawed the Naturefriends in Germany. NF houses and camps were confiscated by the fascists in 1933. The Austrian Nature Friends were dissolved in 1934, following the takeover by the newly formed fascist Austrian Government. The NF International headquarters were moved from Vienna to Zürich, Switzerland.

While the NF in Europe collapsed, due to fascism, the NF in the USA grew and expanded. New York divided into two branches, Brooklyn and Manhattan. The NF in New Jersey had branches in Patterson, Passiac, Newark, and Midvale. These six groups together acquired the Catskill camps, Platte Clove (1923), the ski camp Eureka (1937), and the ski camp Pisgah (1938), which was donated by the Gambichlers. Camp Midvale acquired large expansion acreage and built a tremendous camp.

The Philadelphia NF was also a strong branch and had a lovely camp in Allentown, Pa. Syracuse and Rochester, N.Y. each had a lovely farm house converted to a NF house. Another group existed in Milwaukee, Wisc. and also had a nice lodge. The Chicago NF was started in 1929 and had a lovely clubhouse in the sand dunes. The Eastern and the Midwestern Nature Friends were incorporated; they had annual conventions and a quarterly publication called "The Nature Friend". They were active groups with special interest groups, such as hiking, rock climbing, camping, folk dancing, photography, music, youth groups, and NF scouts. In 1940, there was a national convention in the Rockies with 15 NF groups and 85 delegates. In 1947, there was a second national Conference in the Tetons.

In 1945, the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the International NF Organization coincided with the end of World War II. and the rebirth of the European Naturefriends. In 1946, an international conference was held in Zürich and an international multilingual NF publication was created. It was decided to support the rebuilding of the by the War destroyed NF houses. A guide book for NF houses in Europe was published. In 1955, the NF International Congress reported 200,155 members, again reaching the 1932 level of membership.

As the European Naturfriends rebuilt their Organization and their houses, the American Nature Friends began their decline and disorganization. The West Coast NFER's , San Francisco, Oakland, and Los Angeles, were not affected by the problems of the East Coast and Midwest Nature Friends, because they developed independently and were affiliated with the NF International of Zürich.

As the Eastern sector of the American Nature Friends faded out, the West Coast Nature Friends continued to grow. The new impressive Sierra House, The Heidelmann Lodge, was completed by 194 .

In 1950, the Los Angeles Branch went on its first pack trip to camp Fumpnickel. These High Sierra pack trips have been repeated every two years. In 1955 the new sleeping cabin in San Jacinto was built.

The external and internal political tensions caused the Eastern and Midwest Nature Friends to be dissolved in 1955. Consequently, in 1955, a handful of New York Nature Friends, living in Midvale, NJ, renamed themselves "The Metropolitan Hiking Club", and another "The Winfield Hiking Club". Camp Midvale was ~~sold~~ to the "Ethical Culture Society" and has been resold to the Weizmann Conservation Group, where Nature Friends can still meet old members. *given*

In 1953, Mount Pisgah Ski Camp burnt down. The property was returned to the Gambichlers. Camp Platte Clove was sold to Meyer Kukle, a New Jersey NF member, who maintains the place, to date, and makes it available to Nature Friends. Camp Eureka is owned by the Winfield Hiking Club, a group of old Nature Friends in Midvale and made available also to Nature Friends.

P.S. This is incomplete, we need to add many more details of the West Coast Nature Friends, since that is the most important part of the Organization to us. We, also, need updated and recent information on the various international branches and their houses. It has been suggested that this information be received from the NF International. Please, send any information and photographs contributing to the completion of this history to Solveig Leslie, 6825 Ethel Avenue, North Hollywood, Ca. 91605.