

A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Forty-Five

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Twelfth Month, 1984

Dear Friend,

As usual, there is both bad news and good news. First the bad news, then some more bad news: The results of our Quaker poll are not ready for this issue as promised; the holiday rush of orders from our Simple Gifts catalog has absorbed all our energy in the past month. But fear not: we will have a summary of the results (now well over 400 responses) as soon as possible, and they will go first to *you*, our patient subscribers.

The other bad news is confirmation by *The Washington Post* of our forecast in Issue #43 of Reagan administration hostility to the new U.S. Institute of Peace. The *Post* reported that the administration is weighing several options: trying to abolish the Institute; to defer its funding in hopes of starving it to death; or to delay appointing its first Board of Directors, to keep it paralyzed. The article also reported that rightwing attacks on the Institute have already begun. Sources close to the National Peace Academy Campaign (now renamed the National Peace Institute Foundation, at the same address: 110 Maryland Ave. NE, Washington DC 20002) told me they think they can head off efforts to kill the Institute outright, but they still fear the administration will ultimately try to control it by packing the Board with hard-liners and hawks. If the Peace Institute has been a concern of yours or your meeting's, it still needs all the public support it can get.

Fortunately, there's some good news too: One item is the development of a new Friends center in an Indian community in Alabama, which I visited recently and which is the focus of this month's report. Another comes from California, where the newest of Berkeley's two unprogrammed meetings, Strawberry Creek, has been seeking new quarters and has now found them in the programmed precincts of Berkeley Friends Church. The two groups, representing the quite liberal Pacific Yearly Meeting and the strongly evangelical California YM respectively, plan joint First Day School activities, using curriculum materials developed cooperatively by FUM, FGC and several other denominations. This is an exciting encounter, one which I hope will bear much new and good fruit.

Another item also comes from a Berkeley Quaker, Susan Riggs, who with her husband and a group of physicists has invented the "Pocket Bomb Shelter," a hilarious spoof of the double absurdities of seeking security in nuclear arms races, while pretending there is any meaningful protection against such weapons. The "Pocket Shelter" is described more fully in the enclosed flyer; it may provide you the most fun you ever had reading about such grim instruments of destruction.

Finally, another enclosed brochure describes the Quaker Benevolent Society, a project of Northwest YM open to all Friends. This is the third such notice for a Quaker project or group which has been distributed in *A Friendly Letter* without charge to the sponsoring group, as a service to them and to Friends.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

A NEW FRONTIER FOR FRIENDS IN ALABAMA

When news came to Sanktown, Alabama in late 1983 that Quakers were planning to build a center there, one of the local holiness preachers held a meeting. Amid the usual shouting and waving of arms, he warned the people against the invaders, prophesying, while pointing to the site of the center, that within a year a "Church of Satan" would be erected there.

It is thus no wonder that when Phil Herr and his wife Lee arrived shortly thereafter to begin work as directors of the Choctaw Friends Center, some Sanktowners seemed a little wary at first, as if wondering when these newcomers would start offering animal sacrifices and holding black masses. But rather than functioning as a temple to Old Nick, the Choctaw Friends Center appears well on the way to becoming both an important service center for Sanktown and a crossroads of renewal among eastern and midwestern Friends.

The Herrs' initially cautious reception is also understandable because Alabama is not, after all, a Quaker stronghold; the current *Friends Directory* lists but three meetings in the state, only one of which has its own meetinghouse. That is Fairhope Meeting, southeast of Mobile, the legacy of a colony of Conservative Iowa and Ohio Friends who settled there at the turn of the century; now unaffiliated, Fairhope has stayed true to its Quietist heritage.

Choctaw Friends Center is located north of Mobile, in a region of sandy soil and decimated forests. The economy there is mainly centered on woodcutting, pulp paper processing and a cluster of chemical plants which broadcast a variety of unpleasant and possibly unhealthy odors across the surrounding countryside. There is much poverty in the region, and among the poorest of the people are many among the Mowa Band of Choctaw Indians, around Sanktown.

The Long Trail of Tears, And After

The Choctaw were one of what were called the Five Civilized Tribes of the southeast, so named because of how hard they worked at living peaceably alongside the white settlers who poured into their territories in the early nineteenth century. For their trouble, however, the tribes were forcibly evicted from their lands by the federal government in the 1830s, and most were forced to march hundreds of miles to what is now Oklahoma. This ordeal has been memorialized among them as The Trail of Tears, and it makes up one of the saddest, most disgraceful episodes in American history. (A very fine book, *Disinherited*, by Dale Van Every, tells this story in detail.)

A few Choctaw stayed behind, either hiding in the trackless forests or just so isolated that the federal dragnet passed them by. There they stayed hidden for years, intermarrying furtively with other stray Indians, and occasional blacks and whites. When the authorities did find them, they were told they could stay on the land, provided they claimed no rights as Indians, and abandoned their tribal language, religion and other customs. This they did, even though it produced no acceptance by the whites; thus they spent the next several generations mostly sinking further into cultural and personal degradation. Today still, illiteracy, unemployment, malnourishment and disease are common in these Indian communities.

How Change Came, and Is Still Coming

The Mowa Band was formally organized in 1979, as a response to such slow-moving forces of change as public school education, and more dynamic forces like the black civil rights movement. The band has been recognized by the state of Alabama, and is seeking federal recognition as well. Federal recognition would mean access to many educational and other assistance programs, but gaining it is a long and uncertain process. In the meantime the tribal organization has begun to grapple with the persistent problems among its membership, and has begun efforts to recover its long-lost cultural identity.

It was in this process that, by chance or providence, the Quakers came on the scene. One afternoon several years ago a Friend named Paul Franklin, of Birmingham Meeting, happened to get to talking with some Mowas at a craft fair. Franklin had read much about Indians, and had also read about Friends' long history of work among them. He became interested in the Choctaws, and they in him. He visited the tribal communities, and helped out with various

projects on which his experience as a federal employee was relevant.

Paul Franklin soon developed a strong sense of leading about this relationship, and the conviction that more Friends should be involved in it. The Mowas said they would welcome more people like him, so he wrote to the Associated Committee of Friends on Indian Affairs, or ACFIA, asking for help.

The ACFIA is in many ways a remarkable group; it is, for instance, one of the oldest successfully functioning ecumenical Quaker bodies. Perhaps its successful tenure has to do with its grounding in one of the original concerns of the Society in America. It has supported schools and centers in Indian communities, primarily Oklahoma, for over a hundred years, drawing staff and support from both programmed and unprogrammed meetings. But perhaps just because of its long traditional focus on Oklahoma, the ACFIA did not exactly jump at the opportunity presented by Paul Franklin's call for help in working with the Choctaws. In fact, the request laid on the table at ACFIA for a number of years.

From Council House to Sanktown--By Way of the Spirit

Yet at least two people associated with ACFIA, Phil and Lee Herr, were intrigued by the possibilities. They were ACFIA staff at the Council House Friends Center in Wyandotte, Oklahoma, but felt they wanted to know more about the Indians of south Alabama. In 1983, while traveling to North Carolina YM, Phill Herr visited Sanktown. After a return visit a few months later, he and Lee decided they had a call to that work, and arrived there last First Month, to face the manifold problems of the area--including the rumors about Satanism.

To say they had to start from scratch is almost an understatement. Yet in barely a year, they have built a combination meetinghouse and living quarters practically from the ground up, and are at work on another building in which they plan to begin pottery and weaving enterprises to provide employment. Their weekly worship meetings, held on First Day afternoons to avoid direct conflict with the holiness preachers, are drawing upwards of 20 attendees, a good crowd in those parts. Some of their appeal seems to be related to the fact that they do not spend a large part of the meetings making emotionally coercive appeals for money, as is the case in many other meetings in the area.

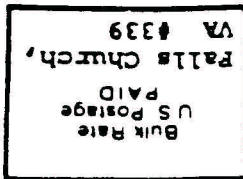
Coping With a New Procession of Friends

They have not managed all of this alone, however. Since shortly after their arrival there has been a steady caravan of Friends from up and down the East Coast and through the midwest, and from almost all the varieties of meetings to be found there, making the trek to Sanktown to roll up their sleeves and pitch in. Once back home, the visitors have spread enthusiasm and donated materials and money to get the center launched. Somewhat belatedly, at its 1984 annual meeting, ACFIA overcame its hesitations and endorsed the project as well. There is now talk of sending more staff to join the Herrs, and of organizing work camps for young Friends there.

By now, passing their first anniversary there, the Herrs and the Center appear settled and well accepted by the Mowa. They have more than enough useful work to do, but seem game for it, particularly if they can continue to count on the support of other Friends. And one unanticipated benefit of the center's existence is that it seems to be becoming an ecumenical magnet and crossroads among eastern Friends. Not only have groups of almost all varieties come to visit and help; more than once groups from different traditions have been there at the same time. It is too early to say for sure, but it begins to look as if physical labor on a common concern may provide a salutary basis for constructive reconsideration of the differences in theology and practice among the Friends who are doing the work.

Indeed, all indications now are that the Choctaw Friends Center is in a position to do as much or more good for the Quakers supporting it as for the Mowa. It is my suspicion that this is characteristic of most faithful Quaker service and witness; but it takes living examples to remind us of this truth. (The Herrs' address is: P.O. Box 449, McIntosh AL 36553; for information about ACFIA, write: Sterrett Nash, 612 Plum St., Box 161, Frankton IN 46044.)

INSIDE: A NEW FRIENDS OUTPOST
IN THE DEEP SOUTH



From: Chuck Fager, A Friendly Letter
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THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

Twelfth Month has been a time of great beginnings for Friends: in 1668, for instance, Christmas was marked by a national gathering of ministers in London. This session laid the groundwork for major support efforts for publications and overseas missionaries. The ministers also wrote in their minutes that "we did conclude among ourselves to settle a meeting, to see one another's faces and open our hearts to one another in the truth of God, once a year, as formerly it used to be."

This became the beginning of London YM, which has gathered annually ever since, for 316 years. "This meeting," wrote Quaker historian Henry Cadbury, "...became the parent body of Quakerism throughout the world and the model of other Yearly Meetings" (It was, however, a parent that was younger by seven years than one of its offspring, for New England YM, the eldest of them all, had been gathering in Rhode Island since 1661.)

Two other great beginnings in this month came later: in 1807, on 12/17, the great Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier was born near Haverhill, Massachusetts. Twenty-six years thereafter, on 12/4/1833, Lucretia Mott was among four women who caused a great stir by daring to appear in public at an (all-male) antislavery meeting in Philadelphia.

QUAKER CHUCKLES

Overheard After Meeting

"Didn't thee promise me thee'd be good in First Day School today?"

"Yes, father."

"And didn't I promise thee a thrashing if thee wasn't?"

"Yes, father. But as I've broken my promise, thee needn't keep thine."

Somewhat Later

"Child, thee must not fight. Hasn't thee been taught to love thy enemies?"

"But father--he's not my enemy, he's my brother!"
