

NOTES ON THE WOMEN'S MEETING

For those of you who did not attend the last general meeting, a new topic was brought up by Valerie Summer concerning women in the organization. It was decided that a separate meeting should be held especially for women to discuss their views on homesteading and the status of women within the group itself. Several women took notes or later wrote up some aspect of the discussion that particularly struck them. Their notes on the March 29th meeting at Meadowsweet Farm follow.

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One of the areas of concern was that women did not speak up at the meetings. They expressed feeling intimidated by those who were aggressive, more vocal and louder. They often felt shouted down.

Some felt that if certain speakers were aggressive and louder, it meant that they knew more about the issues. This made others feel like they did not know enough about what was going on, or perhaps their feelings or opinions were wrong.

Others did not want to disrupt the meeting because they thought that they were the only ones who thought differently about the issue. It was felt that those with differing opinions should be encouraged to speak.

Another issue that came up at this meeting is what might be called ERA-country style. That is; money or salary was not the complaint, but rather equal recognition and/or appreciation for women for equal work done and abilities. There was a desire for the division of work to be based on abilities rather than tradition. They wanted to get away from the idea of the woman doing the house-keeping, cooking, etc. while the mechanical and outside work was done by the male. Some wanted to be able to do the kinds of jobs they liked to do, rather than being left the ones their mates did not want or could not find the time to do.

Resentment was expressed over some other issues:

Being referred to or treated as a possession in the same sense as a piece of machinery or equipment.

The man staying on the farm while the woman went out to work and not receiving credit for this "working out" as a real and tangible asset--too often the fact was not mentioned at all or just spoken of in an off-hand manner.

Improvements to the farm and which partner really benefited from the change, i.e. drilling a well and finally having running water in the house. If the man was the one who hauled the water it was really his job that was eliminated while her job was only made a little easier, but the emphasis was on how much this helped her.

Women also wanted to be respected for their abilities to operate, maintain and repair farm machinery and equipment by the outside world as well as at home.

-- Winnie De Gennaro

I learned alot about homesteading in the North Country from the women's gathering last March. Perhaps the household setting helped us overcome some shyness for almost everyone spoke up about their experience in dividing labor, making money, trying to live up to impossible standards, and the competition in downwardly mobile lifestyles. (The last one was a complete surprise to me.) I was very happy to get to make some new acquaintances and to appreciate the efforts of my old friends. I wouldn't mind getting together with other interested women to continue our informal talks or perhaps to turn our minds to a new topic (practical or philosophical) someone would like to suggest.

-- Jean Dawson

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Women were going to meet together. That was what I wanted--just the act of being there. Being in a group is a fun thing; communicating with people is what it's all about. Within the group, communicating with women is, for me, more special, more dynamic. It was for the adventure I wanted to do it.

On March 29, a Tuesday night, a group of women came to my house in response to a question I'd posed at the annual meeting: did any women want to discuss the sex roles and structure of the group, did anyone else thing about it? We were about fifteen people, and none too similar, really, in lifestyle, background, or politics. But we all shared some experience of living in the country, the transition of settling in here, and having had many personal changes result. We talked some about those things--the personal adjustments to living in the country. Someone felt that women often followed men to this lifestyle in the country, that we go along with and support his desire both emotionally and economically, often by working in town, while we never claim the life or the land for ourselves. This has been true for some women and they have bitterness about that.

We looked at the many different ways we have arranged our lives and roles. Women alone, working out or not; women with men working out while the man stayed home, women staying home while the man worked out; women living together. Of course, under analysis we found something to praise and criticize in each possible arrangement, and marvelled at our differences. Recognized that the crucial point is the ability to be free to choose what one wants, and to experiment.

We discussed the NFC/RLA and our roles or lack of them in it, and it was clear that there was a predominance of vagueness in many people's style of acting within the structure of the group. Many people, myself included, have come to meetings primarily for seeing other people and have a sense of confusion or vagueness about any other purposes or what structural dynamics were or should be. As we were admitting this it felt like one of those revelation that are made different by the knowledge that they're shared, and I got strength from finding out it wasn't just me.

There was no particular goal of this meeting. We touched here and there as we whimmed; it was never dull. Though there was much left unexplored, we didn't move to plan another meeting. But we did do one thing which is truly for the good of each other and all of us. We shared stories of times when, in various groups, we have reacted to sexist blunders made publicly, risking getting branded as the one who always pipes up. Or the times when we swallowed it, and held that offense, and wondered. And we promised to support each other in this small thing: to always make the choice to speak up and change habbits, to acknowledge those changes as important, and those offenses as dangerous. For me, that will help clear the air.

-- Valerie Summer

(Gina wished it to be made clear that these notes are on thoughts expressed by a variety of people and many of them are not her own.)

Discussion - Why is it that the women tend not to speak up or participate as much at NFC/RLA meetings? (Although this is getting better.)

- Problem of shy versus outgoing people or is it male/female expectations?
- The meetings are too formal and therefore some people are inhibited from talking.
- It would help to set up the chairs in a circle so everyone can see each other and so that everyone's voice will carry better.
- "There are some things about the way this group operates that inhibit me from being more active."
- "I feel like WHO AM I to say anything."

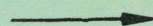
Discussion - In the homesteading "business," most of the credits fall on the man. At the meeting at Carena Farm last year, selected people--almost entirely men--talked about what they do. In most of these cases, the woman works out. Why weren't more women asked to be speakers? It was generally thought that women are not considered the "heavy-duty" homesteaders. But there are definitely some of us out here who have been successful at things, too. People don't hear about them as often.



- Quite a few people thought that in the NFC/RLA there are lots of undercurrents of competition and judgement going around. By its nature, homesteading requires one to be goal-oriented and aggressive at getting things done ("traditional" male qualities). Sometimes this seems to be overdone.
- Does someone else set your goals for you?
- Peer pressure?
- How many bales have you got in so far? Got your peas planted yet?
- The macho image put across by the idea, "can you make it in the North Country?"
- Rugged individualism.
- Self sufficiency.
- The idea of being tough. The homesteader who lives on a paved road near town isn't as "good" as one who lives more isolated in the boondocks. Finally getting running water and feeling you've "copped out." It's sort of a wimpy thing to have.
- Keeping "down" with the Joneses (not referring to any particular person here).

Discussion - Roles.

- Expectations.



- Often a couple enters homesteading with the male having more "physical" skills while the women have more abstract skills which produce things that are less concrete and less noticeable.
- Learning.
- Struggling.
- Feeling inadequate.
- Comparing yourself. You can't do it as well.
- Taking longer to learn the necessary skills due to less previous experience and to being on call 24 hours a day as a mother.
- Raising kids and role models for them.

-- Gina Willette

ANNOUNCEMENTS

The reading group meetings between now and the next newsletter are:

June 5	So Human an Animal	by Rene Dubos	at Montan's
July 3	Malabar Farm	by Louis Bromfield	TBA
Aug. 7	Woman at the Edge of Time	by Marge Piercy	TBA

Questions? Call Bill Sutkus (287-3759). He might have the answer. New people are always welcome.

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HOME BIRTH CLASSES. Jill Earl will be teaching another series of classes sponsored by the Association for Childbirth at Home International (ACHI). This is a general information course covering breathing and relaxation techniques, coaching, medical complications, emergency procedures, and care of the newborn. The charge is \$40 for an eight-week course and includes the cost of the handbook. The class will be sometime in mid-August. To register or for more information, call Jill at 769-7393. She'll be away in July, so call before or after.

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NUCLEAR FREEZE MEETING. The next general meeting of the North Country Weapons Freeze Campaign will be held on Sunday, June 12 at 2:30 P.M. in the Potsdam Presbyterian Center. The steering committee would like to encourage any interested people to come. Recognizing that many people feel intimidated by the complexity of the issues raised by the Freeze, part of the meeting will consist of an information-sharing/question & answer session. Literature will be available, as well. Committees will be set up to organize participation in numerous events this summer including: the Women's Peace Encampment at Seneca Army Depot starting July through Labor Day, the International Walk to Stop the Cruise and Pershing II (from Kingston, Ont. to Griffiss Air Force Base) July 19-27, the Martin Luther King Memorial Peace Rally in Washington, D.C. Aug. 27. The Steering Committee will hold workshops this summer and fall for anyone wishing to learn more about the Freeze and related issues.