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A Place for Rest, and Unrest, At a 57-Acre Camp in Voluntown

By GAIL BRACCIDIFERRO

AFTER several days of shirt-sticking humidity, the August morning is chilly and water droplets cling to pines and oaks towering over the deck as a group of adolescent girls eating freshly baked banana bread discuss how to spend their final morning at camp.

Chris and Jackie Doucot said the girls are typical of the dozens of children they have brought this summer to the rustic retreat tucked in a Voluntown forest near the Rhode Island border. Most are from inner-city neighborhoods where the pop of gunfire is more familiar than the crackle of campfires. Many are being raised by their grandparents, know someone who is in jail and spend their days looking out for younger siblings, Mr. Doucot said.

On this day, however, their most pressing decision is whether to feed carrots to a neighbor's horses, head to the local swimming hole or toss a ball for the Doucots' German shepherd.

"They may not exactly be human rights, but every kid deserves to see the stars at night, have a hot fudge sundae and see the ocean," Mr. Doucot said. "This week, the kids can be kids."

As members of the Hartford Catholic Worker mission, the Doucots said they are dedicated to showing children a way of life far from violence, street gangs and crime. Besides overseeing the camp this summer, the Catholic Worker group also cemented a deal that will ensure they can bring inner-city children to this bucolic setting for many summers to come.

They brought several organizations and individuals dedicated to nonviolence and pacifism together to form a coalition called the Voluntown Peace Trust. In July, the trust bought the 57-acre camp property that encompasses fields, woods, a stream and several buildings, including a 1750 farmhouse that is one of the oldest in town and a log home that once was part of a Finnish camp. The trust plans to play host to retreats, conferences and seminars on the farm, as well as continuing the summer camps.

The groups raised nearly \$200,000 of the \$500,000 sales price over a six-month period. Mrs. Doucot said they will continue working to pay off the mortgage the trust took to cover the rest of the sales price.

Known as the Voluntown Peace Farm, the property has a nearly half-century link to nonviolent activism and social justice groups such as the War Resisters League and the Committee for Nonviolent Action. Through the years, farm visitors and residents have been involved in protesting nuclear weapons and submarines, militarism, wars and unrest. Many are also involved in anti-poverty programs, land preservation and ecological efforts.

The farm was in a state of decline and uncertainty for the past several years. A social investing group that provided loans to help low-income communities had owned the farm since 1990, and its leader had gotten seriously ill and ultimately died in 2002.

"Our product is world peace," Mrs. Doucot said about the peace trust that encompasses groups such as the Episcopal Peace Fellowship and Buddhist Peace Fellowship. "It can be difficult for people to get their arms around that. But it is also about getting kids out to camp and everyone can identify with that."

Stephen Kobasa, a member of the trust board who is from New Haven, said the summer camps are one of the first projects for the farm.

"We organized the peace trust as a way to save the farm and also to see that the work continues," he said. "We are modeling the type of world we would like to see. There are a number of projects we want to get going there."

A large-scale organic farm is among the plans for the site, he said. Many activities will focus on peaceful conflict resolution, according to the trust's vision statement.

Maureen and George Kehoe Osten-

sen, who are living in the Colonial farmhouse as caretakers, have begun scheduling conferences and retreats. The first large gathering, between 120 and 150 members of a network of peace and nonviolence organizations called the Atlantic Life Community, is scheduled to meet at the farm Labor Day weekend, she said.

The couple also planted tomatoes, beans, squash and other vegetables in the footprint of a barn torched by right-wing extremists in 1966, a time when the Vietnam War was dividing American sentiment. The arson was one of many incidents in which the farm's occupants were harassed and terrorized during the depths of the American philosophical divide over Vietnam.

The worst attack came in the early morning hours of Aug. 24, 1968, on a day when war protesters at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago were also making headlines. A

heavily armed group of extreme right-wing, anti-Communists who called themselves the Minutemen, broke into the farmhouse and began tying up its occupants when a gun battle erupted between them and state troopers.

Six Minutemen had sneaked past a line of more than 50 troopers who had been laying in wait after being tipped off about the impending raid. Four raiders, one trooper and one pacifist were wounded that night, including one raider who was left blinded.

A group of bullet holes in the woodwork of the farmhouse living room is a tangible reminder of that night 36 years ago. The farm's current residents and members of the trust emphasize, however, that their relationship with townspeople is now friendly.