

Great Oak Farm Records A&M 4357

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1961-1996



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Author: Jane LaBarbara, Linda Blake

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wvrhcref@westvirginia.libanswers.com

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Creator

Great Oak Farm

Extent

7.8 Linear Feet 7 ft. 10 in. (6 record cartons, 15 in. each); (1 document case, 2.5 in.); (1 flat storage box, 1.5 in.)

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Repository

West Virginia and Regional History Center

Administrative Information

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Biographical / Historical

Great Oak Farm was a 240-acre farm in Lincoln County, West Virginia, with 25 acres designated for a non-profit camp for low income Appalachian youth.

Dr. Robert (Bob) Weiss left his job as Community Education Coordinator for Sissonville Schools to found the camp in 1976 with his wife, Christine Weiss. Bob, who was originally from Philadelphia and had a PhD in American History, envisioned the camp as "A place where young people achieve personal growth and educational opportunity with the guidance of caring adults." Bob had a long history of attendance at summer camp in Philadelphia as a teen and then worked as a counselor for several years.

When Christine and Bob moved to Lincoln County in 1972 after directing a work camp for the American Friends Service Committee in Mason County, Bob had a teaching job at West Virginia State and Christine built a kiln and pottery business on the farm. Their commitment was to create a non-profit opportunity for local students to learn more than was offered by the local school system. At the time, Lincoln County's economy resembled that of much of southern WV which was run by the coal companies and lacked much of a local economy. The concept of non-profits run by local citizens was a new one for those living in Lincoln County. The first of these was the Community Health Clinic and the second was Great Oak Farm.

Bob and Christine initially directed the camp with the assistance of a Board of Directors and Articles of Incorporation in 1979. Later, camp directors were hired. Financial support came from local and national organizations such as the West Virginia Arts and Humanities Council and the Commission on Religion in Appalachia. Religious organizations figured heavily in donations and as a source for volunteers. Volunteers also included work-study students and internships for college students. The camp originally consisted of a recreation/dining hall, craft center, two dormitory shelters, and an outdoor performing stage. Later additions included a pool, hiking trails, a shower house, and updated dormitories. It was built by CETA workers (Comprehensive Employment Training Alliance) headed by resident John Salstrom.

The camp sessions offered educational and recreational activities with a strong emphasis on the arts. The camp's first year of operation was in the summer of 1978 and included seven weekend workshops in arts and crafts. A sample of offerings over the years includes making music and musical instruments, storytelling, weaving and other crafts, pottery, photography and videography, and field trips. In addition to the arts, young people could learn more about the environment, computer skills, swimming, cabin building, and more. Examples of specialized camp sessions include drama, baseball, and poetry writing. Perhaps a typical example of summer camp offerings and attendance comes from a 1987 summer report. These camp sessions were offered: five 4-day camps with 83 children, two 3-day camps with 19 children, and three arts workshops with 48 children and 3 parents. The cost during this time period was \$10 per week and \$5 per workshop. During the 1990s, however, there was a statement on applications reading "If you cannot pay, please call. No one turned away!" The children attending were aged 8-12 with the majority in the 10-12 age range. Examples of other groups using the camp include the Lincoln County 4-H, the West Virginia Association of Lay Midwives, and programming for people with intellectual disabilities. Volunteers from across the nation often lived in the Weiss home with Robert, Christine, and their children.

Financial issues and concerns were always in the fore at Great Oak Farm. Its administrators sought numerous funding streams, had a wide variety of fundraising events and activities, and were able to grow the camp and move forward with new projects and ideas to enhance the lives of hundreds of youth. Bob Weiss died on June 26, 1991 and Chris continued her work with the camp, serving as ex officio member of the Board of Directors and later as secretary. The last minutes from the Board of Directors are from 1996.

Scope and Contents

Records of Great Oak Farm, a camp for disadvantaged youth (1977-ca. 1996), in Lincoln County, West Virginia. The collection includes 1. organizational records, 2. administrative records, 3. operational records, 4. correspondence of Robert Weiss, the camp founder, and 5. material from comparable youth camp organizations.

This collection is minimally processed. It essentially remains arranged in its original order except for the relocation of oversized materials, including a poster, outgoing correspondence, a newspaper for children, and camper forms.

1. Organizational records include by-laws; mission and statements of purpose; and goals and objectives.
2. Administrative records include minutes, financial records, employee records, publicity and promotional material, and fundraising material.

Minutes include Board of Directors minutes (boxes 6 and 2), Advisory Council minutes, and lists of Board members.

Financial records include budgets, tax exempt status forms, and insurance coverage.

Employee records for the Great Oak Farm reflect personnel management for paid employees and volunteers, as well as individual volunteers from a wide variety of organizations. These records include employee contracts; payroll notices; time sheets; job descriptions and guidelines; workers compensation; projects for volunteers; lists of volunteers; and employment applications and resumes. The camp director was a paid employee while many counselors, artisans, instructors, and laborers were volunteers as was the Board of Directors.

Publicity and promotional records include brochures, letters to parents, newspaper clippings and facsimiles of these, and overviews of the Farm. Outreach materials include mailing lists; lists of resource people and news outlets; how to do promote your organization; and lists of congressmen, project directors, board members.

Fundraising material makes up a large portion of the records, with a particular focus on funding agencies and grant seeking. The files include grant applications, guidelines from funding agencies, grant reports, budgets, and follow up to grants. Also documented are fundraising activities such as letters to potential donors, requests for items for a craft sale, fruit tree and berry sale, and promotion of a concert to benefit the Farm.

3. Operational records include health department guidelines and inspection reports; meals and meal planning; guidelines for summer food programs; food inventories; equipment owner's manuals; schematics for buildings and utilities; and maintenance of the septic system, pool, shower house, and water supply. Additional operational records for the camp include lists of registrants and campers with entrance forms with contact information, medical issues, and family income to identify campers qualifying for free lunch programs. Other operational records include guidelines for campers; camp follow up reports; calendars and schedules; history of the Camp; campers' narratives of camp experiences; and menus and meal planning. Materials for campers include a trail guide, a song brochure, and daily schedules. Curricula, projects for campers, and lesson plans cover these topics in part: geology; green houses and alternative energy; music and musical instruments; art and composition; theater and drama; nonviolence; and science.

4. Correspondence of Robert Weiss, camp founder, makes up a significant part of the collection, and is both

personal and business and mostly to and from Weiss. The personal correspondence includes letters from previous campers about their experiences; from volunteers who stayed with the Weiss family; and letters about Robert Weiss's inheritance from Elizabeth Roth. Business correspondence includes letters to board members, potential campers, parents of campers, churches and other non-profits, artists and craftsmen, grant agencies, and donors. Subjects include letters of support; letters of complaint; donations and fundraising including grants; requests for camp and employment information; Board of Directors' communications; and other administrative matters. Some examples of other agencies participating in the correspondence are: Governor's Summer Youth Program, Cabell County Child Protection Services, Campaign for Human Development, Greater Kanawha County Foundation, The Sunflower Foundation, and the Gannett Foundation via the Herald Dispatch (Huntington).

5. Material pertaining to comparable youth camp organizations, and particularly Appalachian youth, cover the topics of child abuse, services to children, programming ideas, militarism in schools, drop outs and drop-out rates, and youth employment. Collected materials also include pamphlets, brochures, and booklets pertaining to many charitable and youth organizations. Many college and university internships are represented, with Berea College and Antioch College as examples. Other collected materials are from religious outreach organizations; American Camping Association (including standards and WV regulations); and arts organizations. Also includes Great Oak Farm's publication ACORN: A Newspaper for Children In addition to non-profits and their governance, other topics of interest to Robert Weiss reflected by collected materials are youth in Appalachia; protest against military recruitment in schools; strip mining; and mining unions.

A partial list of organizations whose materials are present in this collection include: Hindman Settlement, Junior Achievement, Lilly Endowment, Lincoln County 4-H, Mountain Association for Community Development and Economic Development (KY), Mennonites, Methodist National Youth Ministry Organization, Youth Service Fund, Mountain Management Institute, New Games Foundation, National Employment Law Project, Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers Association Tutoring Program, Salvation Army, Camp Happy Valley, New York Community Trust, Outward Bound, Catholic Committee on Appalachia, the Commission on Religion in Appalachia (CORA), New York Community Trust, and the Appalachian Youth Service Organization.

The few photographs and a few negatives in the collection are mostly of the grounds and the facility.

Keywords

Camps -- West Virginia

Nonprofit organizations

Great Oak Farm

Weiss, Robert M., d. 1991