Nuclear Summer

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Conclusion

There is certainly no way to judge how the encampment affected all the women in Seneca County. Gwen Henderson’s and Pam Flanigan’s stories are probably not typical, but they do show that within the county there were women curious about other types of community. For local feminists, women more actively involved than women like Gwen Henderson, the event of 1983 did not seem to provide any particular benefits. The post office always sent the mail for the Women’s Hall of Fame to the mail for the National Women’s Historic Park, and now it added the peace camp to the jumble of correspondence. Nor did local feminists welcome the visibility for feminist causes; they tended to do things quietly, behind the scenes, and politely. “Those women are libbers,” said one local feminist, comparing herself and her friends to the peace-camp women, “and we are for women’s rights.” One woman declared that the local women’s community was “not activist at all,” and consisted instead of separate groups who were not coordinating their efforts very well. “We’re not going to accomplish anything by being action-oriented,” one woman explained. “If we were in New York City or even Syracuse or Rochester, we might be able to get somewhere through active measures, but we won’t around here. In fact we’d be ostracized just like the encampment was.”

Some local feminists certainly were active with the encampment, but many echoed the words of the women who claimed that things were different in Seneca County. Even though it was the birthplace of women’s rights, one woman declared, the women here are no more aware or more active than in other places. Local women were not as “sensed” by Seneca Falls and its history as outsiders were, and one woman. “They take it all for granted and don’t really care.”

The encampment continued to hold regular regional meetings throughout upstate New York after the first summer, trying to keep the encampment going by encouraging the active participation of many women in
decision making. Some of the encampment organizers were also interested in evaluating the effects and processes of the encampment. They wanted to see what the camp had accomplished and what it meant to women after they left. I attended a series of these meetings from 1984 to 1987, and some considered my study a contribution to this overall evaluation.

The evaluations conducted by the encampment itself after the summer of 1983 indicated many triumphs but also several areas of concern, including the relationship between the camp and the local people, the internal structure of the encampment, and the lack of diversity among the women who attended. The women realized that they had provided much valuable information on what was happening at LEMD, but they admitted that they had not anticipated the reactions of the residents to the things they did and represented. Some women felt that the encampment had closed down lines of communication to the local people instead of working hard to keep them open. Some women had worked effectively with local contacts, the press, and their neighbors, but others had seemed to care about the effects of what they did on Seneca County residents.

The internal structure of the camp presented problems because the ideals of consensus and shared labor and responsibilities were not realized in practice. Whereas women thought it was exciting and valuable to try out these alternative arrangements, it seemed that responsibilities and decisions needed to be re-examined. Everyday tasks such as emptying garbage and cooking large-scale meals did not seem as politically important as talking and demonstrating about nuclear and patriarchal issues.

The encampment evaluators were also disturbed, according to one written evaluation, because they had to acknowledge that the encampment was “basically white/middle-class/feminist . . . egocentric, classist, racist, etc.” Some women thought the participants had been diverse, but others, contrasting each other, saw it as too oriented toward lesbians or straight women, feminists or nonfeminists, younger, radical women or older, more conservative ones, students of those who feared them. The self-evaluation seemed to suggest that whereas the encampment has been effective for women personally (many attested to their changed lives and new consciousness), it had not offered an alternative social space where differences were celebrated and new structures were successfully enacted.

It should be remembered, however, that many feminist groups, including the encampment, tend to emphasize or downgrade the positive accomplishments of the group if such opposing issues as race, class, and sexual preference still keep women from working harmoniously together.
In November 1984 a series of newspaper articles in the Syracuse Post-Standard (November 29-30, 1984) further polarized the women and the local communities, and the different types of women within the encampment. The articles, titled "Witches of Seneca," seemed to demonstrate that the encampment had truly fulfilled the representations the local people had developed about them in 1983. The stories were written by a reporter who, with the knowledge of the encampment women, spent several days in the camp. She wrote of the women that "all of them are lesbians, all are vegetarians, and many practice witchcraft as part of their everyday lives." The article described in detail the practice of witchcraft and feminist spirituality at the encampment and showed photographs of a fire-walking rite.

Letters to the editor from the local people continued the debate on the propriety and sanity of the women and their activities. The encampment women themselves disagreed about the way to evaluate these activities, some appreciating the publicity for their alternative lifestyles, and some declaring the attention taken away from the Encampment's mission as a failure for antinuclear protests. In 1985 two naked women who could be seen from the street were arrested for public nudity. Despite several warnings from the police and long discussions at the encampment about how they were disregarding long-established "respected policies" against public nudity, the women decided that they had the right to go nude anywhere they wanted.

In the next several years, antipatriarchal and antinuclear graffiti on local signs and buildings became more common and one car was apparently vandalized by encampment women. Fewer women came to the encampment to protest, and arrests were reduced at the depot. The public information director of the depot cited the decline in the number of women committing civil disobedience each year as proof that the encampment had played out its game.

In the view of many of the women attending the regional meetings, the encampment was drifting away from its original goals. Passionate and tearful arguments at the meetings often turned to the same question of lifestyles and antisocial behavior that had occupied the local people for so long. Many of the meetings focused on problems with women who refused to abide by "respected policies" governing encampment behavior (issues of particular concern were vandalism, illegal actions, nudity, and the consumption of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco). Many of the women who had been involved with the encampment from the beginning expressed distress that lots of women had withdrawn their financial and spiritual
Conclusion

support because the encampment now appeared only to inhabit and those interested in "manliness."

As the encampment changed, much attention began to be focused on the issue of "zapping." The women believed that the army depot was directing microwaves at the peace camp, which, they believed, were making women nervous and making it hard for them to concentrate and be productive. Some women who spent a winter in the house supposedly being zapped said they had nightmares with common themes: men with guns and knives chasing them through the woods. All literature that went out from the encampment contained the warning that pregnant women and children should not come to the land.

In the summer of 1990, after several years in which only a handful of women occupied the land and many women nationwide lost touch with the peace camp, the organizers began a series of discussions about its future. In a message to the women on its mailing list they explained: "On July 4, 1989, Twilight [one of the early encampment participants and organizers] read the peace camp's astrological chart. One of the main themes of her reading was that the next few years will be a time when the encampment will either 'transform or die.'" At the "transform or die" meetings, the encampment came up with several possible scenarios for its future. One plan was for three to five women to reside on the land and maintain it as a safe haven for women who had nowhere else to go. If this plan were chosen, the women would have to open contacts with former supporters of the encampment who had drifted away because of changes in the camp. A second possible scenario was to open it only from the spring to the fall and possibly to sell part of the land or the house. The third possibility was to give away the entire peace camp, perhaps to women of color or native American women. Some expressed doubt that consensus on giving up the land could ever be reached, however, because some women were so attached to it.

Meanwhile, the town of Waterloo began making plans for the 125th anniversary of the first Memorial Day, which was celebrated in 1891 with a month of parades, museum displays, speeches, concerts, memorial services, and the issuance of a special commemorative American flag postage stamp. Waterloo, eager to celebrate itself as the home of the Good American, in many ways seemed unchanged.

Nevertheless, there were suggestions in the narratives of participants in these events that the powerful rhetoric bolstering all the communities involved was cracking. The encampment split between those who wanted to keep the image of 1983 and those who wanted to develop a
new encampment that was more friendly to lesbians, women with radical politics, women who desired freedom from all social constraints, and women with physical or emotional problems. The differences not barely discernible in 1983 grew into bitter battles over the definition of an encampment woman and who should have the right to dictate the policies for women living on the land.

In Seneca County the women of the peace encampment had served to remind residents of the “difference within,” thus generating fear and hatred in local communities. They were perceived as dangerous, but not simply because local people feared the loss of employment opportunities, as many have claimed. Nor was the only cost the temporary $195,000 debt the women left the county. The local representations of the encampment women as dangerous creatures (witch-women, pig-women, hysterical madwomen) was connected not so much to a possible elimination of jobs or to the more frightening possible elimination of the job of Man to serve as a stable category and reference point for the entire system of patriarchal representation and interpretation. The heavier cost was to the identity and patriarchal structure of the community.

The dangerous woman displays not her lack—lack of manners, proper sexual partners, stable identity or even clothing—but her lack of a lack, her failure to need and act and plot as the phallocentric system insists she should. Instead of needing the patriarchal system, the dangerous, feminist, bisexual woman chooses to act as women that are forbidden and monstrous. She is the unconscious of the patriarchal system, the one who brings up those things usually repressed and hidden. As the early encampment organizers perceived, placing her in a women-only peace camp was a powerful gesture. In Seneca County the dangerous women of the encampment undermined the local community’s certain discourses on man and woman, on nuclear war and weapons, on community loyalty, on political action and power, on the sexuality of adults and children, and on peace, safety, and security in a nuclear world. The women ruined the summer of 1983 for the people in and around Seneca County, and they also ruined, perhaps only for a moment, perhaps forever, patriarchal modes of representation and the easy, comfortable power structures that keep them in place.