

The Catholic Workers of Silk Hope

By Michael Pollock

In 1998, Steve Woolford and Lenore Yarger established a Catholic Worker House on an old farm in Silk Hope. As Yarger explains it, "the Catholic Worker is a movement, not an organization," or it could be called an "organism." The movement began in New York in 1933 when recent convert Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin founded The Catholic Worker newspaper, and sold it for a penny, which is still the price.

Woolford says their movement was about "performing the Works of Mercy" and personalism, a focus on individual freedom and dignity, through sheltering the homeless, a soup line, and social justice advocacy, especially around poverty, labor, and peace. Today there are roughly 150 Catholic Worker houses, and, while most members are Catholics, Yarger says they are "all different," ranging from very Catholic to atheist. Woolford and Yarger are members of the St. Julia Catholic Church.

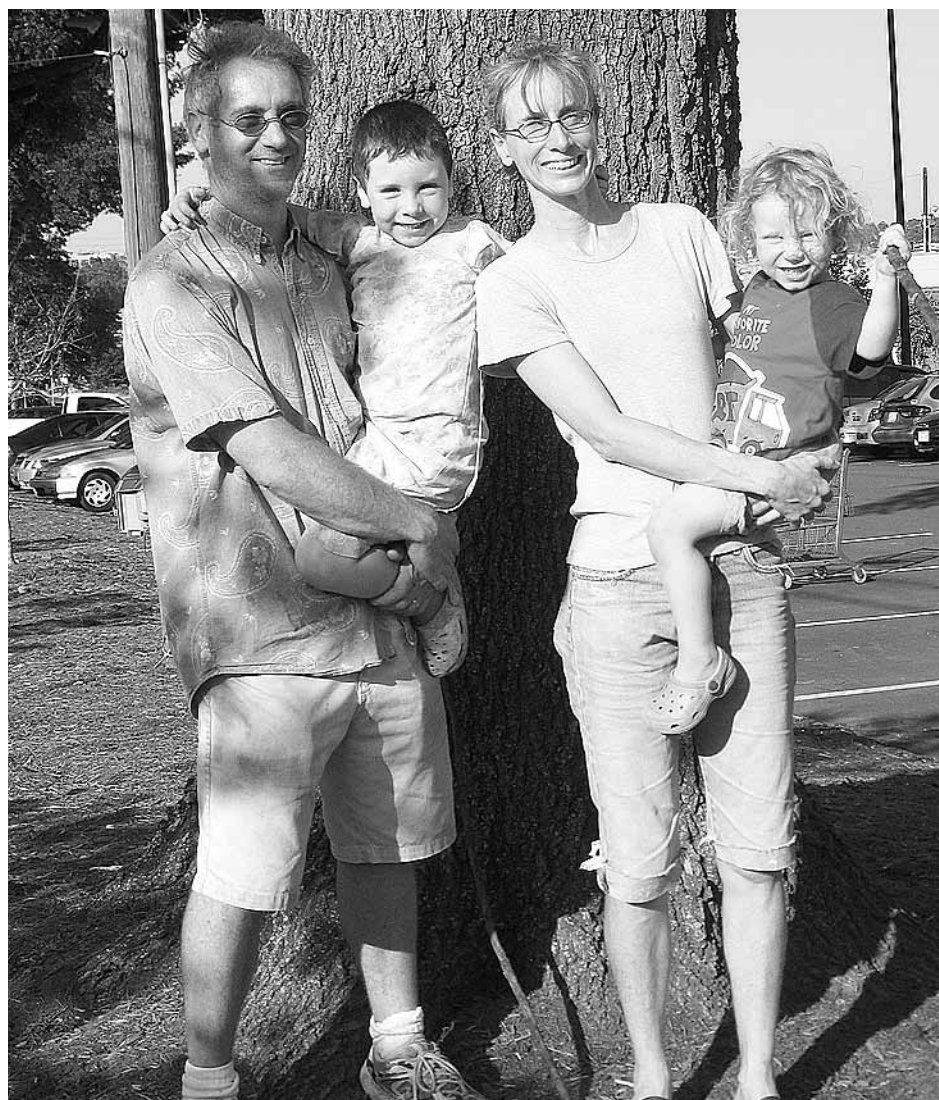
Yarger says the Silk Hope Catholic Worker concentrates on providing temporary housing for homeless women and families, organic and sustainable agriculture and permaculture, and "non-violent resistance to war and militarism." Using an Underwood manual typewriter, they produce the new southern catholic radical newspaper, but it has been on hiatus for a few years. Woolford and Yarger help staff the GI Rights Hotline (www.giright-shotline.org), providing soldiers free counseling on topics such as conscientious objector status, medical issues, and discrimination. It is a national organization, but Yarger and Woolford are paid by the Quaker House in Fayetteville. The number of calls varies widely — there were about 197 in May. There are many Quakers in North Carolina, and legend says that Silk Hope got its name because Quakers hoped to raise silkworms there, but

planted the wrong type of mulberry.

The SHCW itself is in a farm house about a century old with guest cabins and three acres of gardens and natural areas. In June, the kale and parsnips were finishing up, potatoes, comfrey, squash, and the occasional pink hollyhock were luxuriant, and the silver queen corn was still short. They have chickens for eggs and keep bees, though Woolford says bumblebees do most of the pollination. They also have two cats and until recently Scratch, a beagle mix who had an extensive protest history. There are few problems with wildlife, other than rat snakes occasionally stealing eggs. The coop is half hidden by a tangle of muscadines. The rooster joins a whip-poorwill and owls in calling early on summer mornings. A massive sugar maple about four feet across covers a grove of bamboo. Woolford and others in the community built a wattle-and-daub guest house using bamboo, straw, and soil, and they are buying a neighboring earthen wall house with conventional wooden siding.

Woolford and Yarger are well-known faces at social justice and anti-war protests. They are part of a weekly vigil against the sanctions on Iraq that started around Christmas 1998, prior to Operation Desert Fox. The vigil was moved from Durham to Chapel Hill a decade ago and continues every Friday evening at Village Plaza. Between 9/11 and December 2001, there were vigils four days a week at the Chapel Hill Post Office, and just on Mondays for a few years. Woolford has been arrested five or six times outside the Pentagon, twice for throwing blood on an entrance, and at a December 30, 2002 demonstration of about 80 people, mostly people of faith, and he was one of three arrested and jailed. He was sentenced to six months in prison, during which time the Iraq War started.

Most of the time they are not trying to do civil disobedience, but



Steve Woolford and Lenore Yeager and their children, Geneva, 6, and Quinn, 3.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL POLLOCK

Woolford has also been arrested at places like John Edwards' campaign office and Aero Contractors in Smithfield, and Yarger has been arrested at Rep. Price's office and bases. Woolford has attended the March for Life in DC, but argues that pro-life should mean anti-death penalty and anti-war, not just anti-abortion. In January 2003 Yarger was part of a Voices in the Wilderness and September Eleventh Families for Peaceful Tomorrows delegation to Iraq. Lately they have been busier, because they have

children, 6-year-old Geneva Yarger Woolford and 3-year-old Quinn.

There are other Catholic Worker communities in the Triangle: Isaiah House in Durham, the Father Charlie Mulholland House in Garner, and Nazereth House in Raleigh.

The Silk Hope Catholic Worker can be reached at (919) 663-4334.

Michael Pollock is a freelance writer, living in southern Durham, who founded Northeast Creek Stream Watch. He studied biology and anthropology at UNC and has an interest in Fortean phenomena.

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