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At Fellowship Farm near Pottstown (from left) Susan Terry, Betsy Wright, Michael Beer and Jerry Koch-Gonzalez singing freedom songs.

A REUNION OF RADICALS

Alumni of the Movement for a New Society, started 20 years ago in West Philadelphia, are gathering this weekend to talk of revolution — the peaceful kind.

By David O'Reilly
Inquirer Staff Writer

POTTSTOWN — The stone-gray sky grumbled again, and the mountain wind sent Sandra Boston de Sylvia's tent shuddering in the field beyond. But she didn't seem to mind.

Her "tribe" was gathering out in that hayfield, pitching their tents under the rain clouds, and the world felt right again.

With that tribe she had battled war, racism and nuclear reactors in the 1970s and '80s. Across two decades they had baked bread together, raised children together, and linked their arms and their lives in radical causes.

Known as the Movement for a New Society (MNS) and based in Philadelphia, they had used canoes to block U.S. ships leaving East Coast harbors with arms for the Vietnam War. They had organized the first "Take Back the Night" street vigils in West Philadelphia to protest crimes against women and had stormed the nuclear barricades at Limerick and Seabrook, N.H.

By the time MNS disbanded in 1988, it had trained more than 2,000 other radicals from around the world in the techniques of nonviolent conflict resolution. Its members filled 20 communal houses in West Philadelphia, ran a food co-op, published a hefty *Resource Manual for a Living Revolution*, and engineered a national network committed to nonviolent social change.

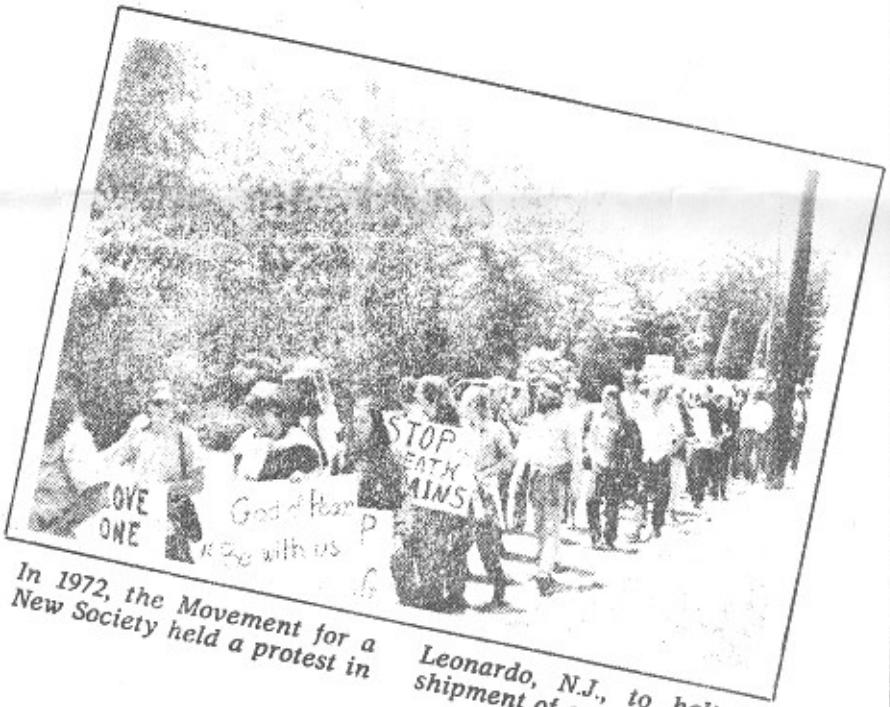
Now they were gathering again for a four-day reunion that will last through tomorrow, and no wind or rain was going to douse the joy of this, the 20th anniversary of their founding.

"These are my teachers and allies and family," said de Sylvia, 51, who ignored the dime-sized raindrops spattering her arm Wednesday afternoon. "I'd go to the end of the earth for them."

And *from* the ends of the earth — or so it seemed — the MNS alumni were congregating. MNS co-founders Lillian and George Willoughby, both 76 now, had just returned from three months in Sri Lanka teaching conflict resolution to Buddhist monks.

And by dinnertime Wednesday, 30 of them

(See REUNION on 5-D)



In 1972, the Movement for a New Society held a protest in Leonardo, N.J., to halt the shipment of arms to Vietnam.

A reunion of peaceful radicals

REUNION, from 1-D

from as far as San Francisco, Boston, Seattle, Ohio, Illinois and Arizona had made their way to Fellowship Farm, a rustic retreat center in the hills above Pottstown. Another 150 were expected by the weekend.

"We'll be reporting on the frontiers of social change today," said George Lakey, another MNS co-founder, who still lives in the West Philadelphia neighborhood where it all began in 1971.

This was not, however, a mini-Woodstock of aging hippies here to smoke funny weeds and recall old times. They looked like any middle Americans you might find at a PTA picnic. But they were here to talk revolution.

"By 'revolution' we don't mean a violent overthrow of institutions, but a fundamental change" in the capitalist value system, explained de Sylvia, now a feminist therapist living (communally) in Greenfield, Mass. She wore silver earrings, a lapis watchband and blue print dress.

Capitalism, she said, promotes greed, competition and the exploitation of natural and human resources. "In economic ethics, the question 'what is profitable?' is answered in capitalism as 'that which makes the most profit.' In eastern Buddhist thinking," she said, "that same question is answered, 'that which is in harmony with nature.'

"We're radicals — not liberals," she said, explaining that liberals attempt to cosmetize capitalism while radicals "call into question the very principles of how we live."

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The Movement for a New Society was a political agenda wedded to a social experiment, and it lasted 17 years.

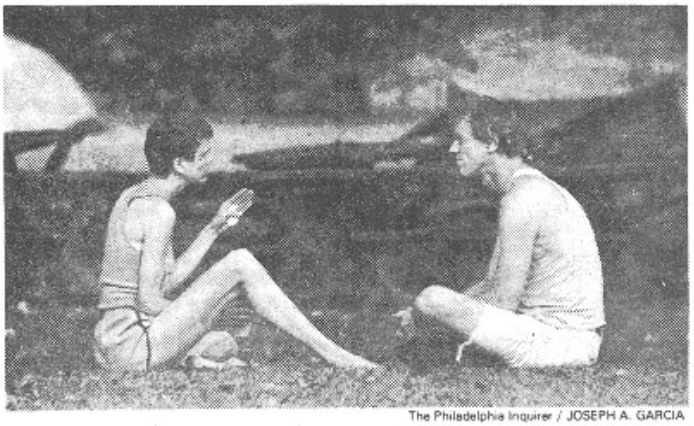
Not surprisingly, its roots go back to the anti-Vietnam War movement, when some radical Quakers from the Philadelphia area, impatient with what they perceived as too passive an anti-war posture by the Society of Friends, formed a cadre in 1966 called A Quaker Action Group, or AQAG.

For the next five years, AQAG engaged in a series of nonviolent confrontations at military bases. But its members — including the Willoughbys and Lakey and his former wife, Berit — soon came to believe that they were not living by the radical principles they espoused.

"It was a feeling that we lived *here*, each in our own homes," said Lynne Shivers, touching her palm to the right side of a dining hall table, "and we were doing our work *here*," she said, moving it a foot to the left. "Our lives were separated. And we felt we needed to bring them together."

After a year of consideration and exploration, six of them moved in August 1971 into a rambling three-story house at 48th Street and Springfield Avenue. They called it the Philadelphia Life Center.

"We saw communal living not as



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Erika Thorne and George Lakey, an MNS co-founder, at the reunion.

an end in itself, but as a means through which we could support ourselves through a simpler life style," said Shivers, now on the English faculty of the Community College of Philadelphia. "We learned lessons in communal living that we were able to extrapolate into our understanding and practice of nonviolent confrontation."

By the end of the year the Philadelphia Life Center had grown to include three houses. By 1975 their numbers had swelled to 120 members in 20 houses, most of them between 46th and 49th Streets and Baltimore and Springfield Avenues and sporting such names as Turning Point, Tree Beard, Sunflower and New Morning Star.

Some house names were whimsical, some were serious. Kool Rock Amazons took its name from the graffiti scrawled all over West Philly in the '70s. North Star had been the name of Frederick Douglass' abolitionist newspaper. And Youngest Daughter was arrived at by a toss of the ancient Chinese fortunetelling system *I Ching*.

The men had to share chores and power with women — a radical idea 20 years ago. Adults also shared in raising the children — an arrangement that often came in handy when mother and father were in jail for civil disobedience.

"Our motto was 'Living the revolution now' — living the new society," said de Sylvia, who raised her three boys (all of them now college-age) in the Rainbow Race house for 12 years before moving on to Massachusetts.

Rent and food were cheap — maybe $175 a month, combined — so that residents could support themselves with just part-time jobs. They then were expected to devote their energies to some of the dozen or so MNS "collectives" dedicated to specific political agendas, such as the anti-war effort, the food co-op, Central American policy, publishing, ecology, feminism, and gay and lesbian issues. There was even a Namibian liberation collective.

The Philadelphia Life Center quickly became a model for radical organizations in Boston, Tucson, Seattle, Minneapolis and other cities, many of whom affiliated into a national MNS. But it was to the Philadelphia center that they sent their members for training in the techniques of nonviolent "direct-action campaigns" such as sit-ins and blockades, as well as how to do their own fund-raising and publishing.

Shivers, who serves as MNS's unofficial historian, recalled Wednesday that of the 2,000 or so radicals who came to the Philadelphia MNS for training, one-quarter were from foreign countries, including Australia and India.

Among them, she said, were 14 West Germans who came in 1978, and then went on to lead the national Green Movement demonstrations against the placement of American cruise and Pershing missiles on West German soil. "One of our members was over there a few years ago," said Shivers. "She visited Green groups in several different cities, and every one of them told her they traced their history back through MNS."

But by the mid-1980s MNS was serving a less useful function, Lakey said yesterday. Most radicals in other cities didn't need training in Philadelphia anymore. The Philadelphia Life Center had dwindled to about 50 members in seven houses. And the membership had become so "anti-authoritarian and anti-patriarchal," he said, that they would allow no one to serve as a strong leader.

By 1988 its membership concluded that MNS had grown ineffective. "And so we decided to lay it down," said Lakey.

Those who returned for the reunion are still committed to causes, however. Several said they were involved in issues of housing, AIDS, homelessness and nuclear energy. A Yellow Springs, Ohio, man who paints homes for a living has been "organizing local farmers and yuppies" to fight a trash-burning concrete plant.

The decision to end MNS three years ago was not a sign of defeat, said George Willoughby, who wore a yellow T-shirt bearing a broken rifle and the words "War Resisters."

"We never went into it with a great blueprint. We had a commitment to living, working and studying together, and we stayed true to our principles."

The MNS legacy, said Lillian Willoughby, "is that we had a great impact on the broad peace and social movement in the United States. . . . I don't think we've had any real disappointments."