Safeguards Letter

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Cabin Fever Day

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(This is the third chapter in the story of our community building efforts that began in December 1990. Other chapters were titled "Stone Soup" and "Stir It Up" and were included in earlier editions of The Safeguards Letter.)

Winter arrived in earnest and right on schedule this year, a few days before Christmas. Two weeks earlier than that we had hosted a luncheon in Shawnee to celebrate the end of our Phase I work. We had a buffet of wonderful homecooked foods, a nice crowd for lunch of about fifty people, a simple brochure noting some accomplishments and aspirations for the coming year, and a beautiful day for touring the rehabilitated buildings.

We acknowledged that we'd come up a bit short. Of the fifteen thousand dollars we'd known we'd have to raise through donations and contributions we'd received $6,500. There was a short list of unfinished work that was part of Phase I that remained to be done: some exterior painting, some interior trim in the library, and final plumbing connections in the library. We celebrated, relaxed with people who had helped, encouraged newcomers to consider becoming involved. We hoped that most of the unfinished projects would be completed before Christmas and that the spirit of gift giving might help solve our deficit problem.

Nearly all of our worst fears about the work did not come true. Three buildings in very bad shape were now stable, much improved in appearance, and at least partially occupied. No one had been injured on the job, we didn't have any labor disputes, the village government had cooperated with us patiently, tenants and cooperating groups were making payments on time, and people were pleased about the improvements in the Main Street district. All the new plate glass was intact, and materials and supplies had been safe during storage with minimal security effort on our part.

Our cash flow worries were real, but pretty closely held worries. The day before the celebration luncheon we had received notification of a modest grant to support a few months' work in 1994. We were ending the year with a few of the challenges unresolved but were grateful that we had enough to keep going for a little while anyway.

The Phase I celebration was followed, in about ten days, by the holidays and the first of the blizzards of 1993-94. As the snow fell and the temperatures dropped, I realized how tired I was, and I welcomed the respite and hoped that others would too.

In the two months that have passed since then we have experienced the most challenging winter in many years. It's the kind of winter that makes persons ask if they really do intend to grow old in this climate and, if so, why? We have "closed" the office for a couple of months, and we are working at home to complete all the paperwork tasks that accompany work that is funded by a variety of sources. We're trying to carefully spend our dollar resources on things other than heat and
power. We've conducted a few planning conversations and discussions, stopped in to pick up mail and messages and materials we need to work at home, checked for frozen water pipes, apologized to the library staff for the inconvenience to them of not getting the final plumbing connections in place before the freeze, but generally have been absent from Shawnee on a daily basis. This stretch of time, certainly not planned or even anticipated, has revealed some interesting things.

I admit to having been worried about a number of people. I thought about the fact that kids have been out of school for weeks. I wondered how a limited food budget gets stretched to cover all those extra meals that the kids might usually get at school. I wondered how mothers and dads could deal with the activity levels produced by having young children cooped up inside for so long. I kept thinking about the utility bills mounting up, and what it would take just to keep up with little things like washing dishes for a family of six when the pipes are frozen for days.

When I stopped in Shawnee, whether it was daylight or dark, someone always would appear, with news or ideas to share, questions or plans to discuss, requests for information or help, or just a "hi, stranger, where have you been?" I was both comforted and intrigued. People were obviously thinking and seemed hungry to talk. A solution for some of the distance was the phone, so we've loaned the key to the office to our neighbor so information can get back and forth, despite the weather. So, what's been happening in Shawnee during this time of winter "isolation"? One group of folks has been tending the roof of the old school building we're hoping to make into a recreation center. The roof is in bad shape and leaks onto the hardwood basketball court floor.

Tarps have been put in place and are checked regularly to keep any more damage from occurring. A couple of people have been lobbying village council to set up a payment plan system for water bills and have been helping a few families figure out how to keep services intact through the cold spell. The Preservation Committee had a potluck and planning get-together.

Another small group of people decided to organize and conduct a community "Cabin Fever Day." An agenda was set, posters made and distributed, and preparation began. Crafts and activities for kids were scheduled to begin at 9 a.m. in the living room and dining room of the Harrop House (our office). Kids started showing up at 8:30. Two basket making classes for adults were scheduled at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. These were postponed because the instructor was stranded in New Jersey. A work group was at the museum and rail exhibit laying track and planning the electrical system. A church group was hosting a soup and

sandwich lunch for adults at noon at the lodge. Kids were making pizzas as part of their activity and taking them to the lodge at noon, to have lunch with the grown-ups. Ernie Essex was at the lodge playing fiddle music.

After lunch the crowd of kids and adults who were helping took a walk. They walked around town, stopping at the business places that had contributed to the pizza making activity. There were about thirty-five voices saying, "Thanks; the pizzas were good!" Craft activities resumed, and most kids had three small projects by the time they were finished. At 3:30 the "Great Chili Tasting and Jam Session" started at the local volunteer fire department. For fifty cents, folks could taste all of the seven
pots of chili prepared and could listen to people play music, sing, and socialize throughout the early evening. Small cash prizes were awarded for the hottest and the best chili. I think that the big winner took home about $10 for his winning recipe.

During the past few years, we've used the story of stone soup to help keep ourselves focused. The story is also a way of explaining to others what we think community building is about--the idea of "joining in." I think about the story now. Cabin Fever Day didn't make all my worries go away. It didn't pay anybody's bills. Not everybody thought it was the greatest idea.
But it happened, and it helped nourish a good number of people. It appealed to quite a few folks. And the leadership came from families who had been challenged with ice, snow, financial pressures, unusual stresses and strange circumstances for many weeks.

We're going to make it through this fourth winter of Sunday Creek Associates' "pot of stone soup." We're beginning to develop a "sturdier stock" as our ingredients are blended together. I think some maturing has happened; things are beginning to change again. A number of folks are thriving and creating new roles for themselves. More people, including many children, are joining in, drawing on the encouragement and strength that come through active community membership.