

Safeguards Letter

#18, Summer, 1001

Another Poet of Stone Soup Sandra Landis

Last winter a small pot of simmering water sat on our wood stove. We usually have a steamer on the stove in winter, but this one was different. It served as a symbol of some work we have begun, our latest batch of stone soup. You may know the story about stone soup. I hope that my short retelling here sketches the real thing. I suggest that you treat yourself and read the whole story aloud to someone you like.

It seems that some soldiers found themselves in a place where they were not known well, without food but very hungry. They set about starting a fire, finding a pot, filling it with water, adding a few pebbles for something to stir, and talking about soup. They continued to talk about soup, stir the pot, sniff the air for aromas, and talk with passers-by about the soup they were making. What they were doing appeared to be inviting to others. They talked with most who came by. Soon enough, some people began to think about the soup. Many brought something to add to it. As ingredients were added, and simmered, and stirred, the anticipation grew. When it was time, the people shared a meal of nourishing soup.

This is one of the ways we've come to visualize our work here at home. We've decided to "begin to make soup," to nourish ourselves and others. We are painfully aware that we start with meager ingredients that by themselves will not nourish anyone very well. We see our work as engaging others by inviting them to help make, tend, and enjoy the soup. How good the soup is doesn't depend very much on any one particular ingredient. Usually it's the variety of ingredients in small amounts simmered and tended for a long time that makes the best soup.

My friends John and Stephen, and I, have begun a small organization. Its name describes the area in our community where we live--Sunday Creek (Associates). We're starting out with some ideas, some hope, some energy, and some time. Our aspiration is to be a part of revitalizing our little part of the world. We think that working over time with our neighbors to both do and stimulate interesting work and business enterprise, to maintain and improve our homes and the housing stock in our area, and to participate in social activities that add to the variety and quality of our public life will influence the kind of community we'll spend our lives in.

Each of us has come to realize that we want to work at home, in the midst of the collection of people and places that make up Southern Perry County, Ohio. Together we came to realize that now was as likely a time to begin as any. If we waited until there was some

security in the work, either financial or social, it is likely that we would live many more years thinking about the work but not doing it.

We have spent some time learning about organizing, managing, and sustaining useful work. For a while we looked at this information mostly as stuff to share with other people, so they'd get organized. Slowly we've figured out that it's not necessarily other people getting organized that is the place to begin. Our first step was to understand that we are a few of the soup-starters!

Being "of" the soup-starters is different from being "observers", or even "consultants to" the soup-starters. It seems to us that many successful soup-starters adopt, singly and collectively, a policy of "living in the world as if it could be" as much as possible, where they are. And so, we've begun to live in our future a bit, now! We've begun to tell people about our interest in working at home and figuring out how that might happen in conjunction with things other people want to be a part of community life here. We're beginning to talk with other people about how our communities might be more interesting and self-reliant. We are practicing asking for and welcoming help others can contribute.

Already our stone soup has the benefit of others' ingredients. People have developed ideas and brought them into the conversations. Small organizations and groups of people have added ideas and energy. Some have pledged small amounts of money. Bigger organizations are considering our requests for help. A small group of people has committed some time to help us as Board members. Our little pot of soup has several small but especially savory ingredients in it, even at this early stage. I celebrated when they were added and celebrate again every time the pot bubbles these interesting aromas. I feel hopeful again. There is one such ingredient I particularly like.

We have a friend who's very talented in several ways. Dik's a map-maker, a model builder, a train enthusiast, and a history student. We've talked about what life was like here a hundred years ago and what life is like now. We've talked about ways of preserving in people's minds some important stories, scenes, and lessons of life here during the early part of this century. From these talks the idea of a Southern Perry County Museum got dropped into the soup pot. Dik is really intrigued and interested in taking on this project. So is the Shawnee Historic Preservation and Business Development Committee, the Tecumseh Theater Corporation, and Sunday Creek Associates. The museum will include models of four of our little communities at the turn of the century, complete with railroads, brick factory, coal mine, and Main Street shops. There will also be displays of collections of photos, products produced, and other items. Lots of people have ideas, items, and stories to contribute. One group has undertaken sponsorship of the museum as its project for the next few years. The museum isn't a reality yet, but it is the focus of some people's energy now. There's a clear image of what can be. We hope to have the Museum doors open by the end of this year. We hope that even a "museum in process" will engage more people in this effort.

Even with this interesting ingredient, our soup is far from being very nourishing to very many now. We're trying to be faithful tenders of the watery stuff. Already we wonder what will keep us tending the pot for a long time. Most of the answer will come from people who join us as soup-makers themselves. Meanwhile, we stay at our task today, and expect to be at it tomorrow. I think we already know that what will keep us here is nothing abstract or mystical. In large part it is our hunger for community life to be more "as it could be," one day at a time, starting with what we have now.