88 Main Street CROSSING the THE SOLD

Beth Hapgood

88 MAIN STREET

crossing the threshold

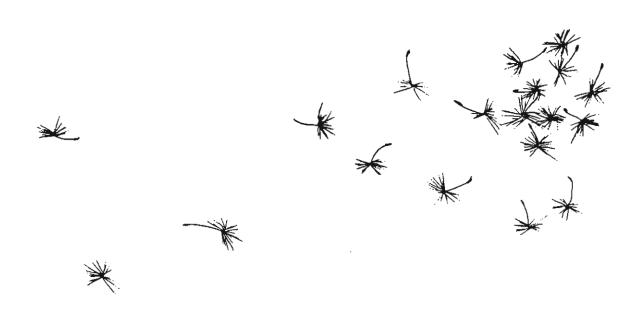
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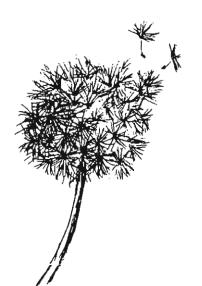
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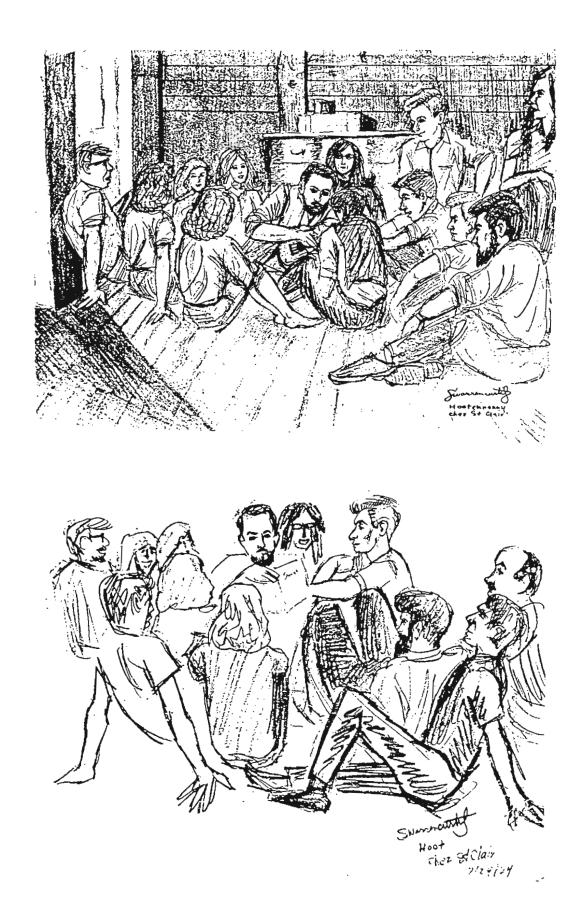
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The Closing Days of 88 Main Street

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Today there is an increasing realization of the importance of understanding more of what was happening in the sixties, of the ways in which the impact of historic events impacted on all of our lives, raising ever more questions about the underlying causes for much of the present increase in very serious problems in our culture. What was the meaning of 1968 to me? It is easy enough for me to recall and relate some of the events of that year. But that is not enough. In my own quest for answers to that tremendous turning point in all of our lives, I must go back to some of the roots of my own story that brought me to that shared experience at 88 Main Street.

Although I have always been one to ponder much in depth about life and the world around me, I was never one to merely think in a passive observer role. Already back in the thirtles, when I was in my teens in high school, I can remember marching in a parade for peace up Fifth Avenue in New York City, a mass meeting on the steps of Columbia University, and trying to get people to sign peace pledge cards. Concern over world strife, injustice, poverty and the dilemma of how to affect the actions of those in positions of power, has always been a primary concern since I can remember. Back in those days the seeds of destruction were sprouting and spreading. ultimately leading to World War II. My generation, coming into our teens and young adult years during the thirties, would be drafted, volunteer, or go to prison in protest. Two brothers we knew when in college were studying at Boston University, learned that their home town in Belgium, and everyone in it, had been completely leveled by tanks and guns, was no more. It was almost beyond our comprehension, living in relative comfort and at a distance, sharing this news with each other. We were profoundly moved, knowing these brothers. There was both deep compassionate concern for them and overwhelming feelings of helplessness as we listened to the advance of Hitler's forces throughout Europe.

I had traveled across Germany the summer of 1938 on a bicycle alone, sleeping under a bush by the road one night, in a hayloft another, and in youth hostels where possible. Naive, friendly, and interested, I talked with all kinds of people more than willing to try to explain how they saw what was happening. At that time I had no realization of what a dangerous time it was, that I myself as a young girl traveling alone could be in danger. In Berlin I had been able to stay with Richard and Gisela Monnig, taken to them by a letter of introduction from Stephan Duggan, founder of the International Education Institute, and a good friend of my parents. Their little Terra Mara office was a small ploneering effort in intercultural international exchange. They were soon to be swept away by the Nazi firestorm sweeping Europe.

On this trip I visited folk schools, talked with many ordinary folks along the way, and finally made my way to Ommen, Holland, to Krishnamurti's camp and the International Liberal Religious Youth Conference. Everywhere those who saw the war storm gathering were slipping over borders, seeking haven wherever they could, walking away forever from their homes through political mine fields toward an unknown future. Today I still wonder whatever became of some of those friends made on this summer adventure.

I still have indelibly engraved in my memory the eyes and voices of those terrible years. My mother was a translator, helping those she could to get started on a new life here. Over those years I met many emigrants and refugees, all with the eyes that told of terrible loss and pain, for some the memory of terrible personal experiences. For those of us who share a profound concern for recognizing and dealing with the seeds of violence and war, the years following the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were never as peaceful and prosperous as they seemed. In 1946 Hermann Hagedorn wrote an epic poem entitled "The Bomb That Fell on America". He said he was inspired to write by "those spurs of God in the flanks of a torpid world." All through the years I was forever conscious of and haunted by the deep currents of what I came to call flawed seed, destined ultimately to break through into all manner of unrest and evidence of profound wounds in the human psyche. Married in 1941, by the time the sixties swept over this country, my six children were all in school, and I was beginning that chapter in my life that included college teaching, public speaking of all kinds, many programs and workshops, and a host of personal tasks and crises. The endless stream of young in need of encouragement, friendship, support, help, and challenge was at my office door or they were finding their way to my home. The tidal wave was lapping at my doorstep!

Looking back today after more than twenty years, I am less surprised than at the time, at the collapse of my health in late spring of 1968. Physically brought to a standstill, having to take a year and a half off without pay from my college teaching job, even more than ever before the world was coming to me. There was no real psychic rest in that intense and turbulent time. The need was too great, the questions too immense, and the sense of time running out was too overwhelming. If you have ever been caught in an undertow at high tide on the beach, you will understand the feelings of that time. Immense forces were sucking us downward, while the struggle to survive and reach the shore lent reserves of strength to overcome the sandfilled swirling waters that threatened to engulf us, as we sought desperately for footholds toward the distant beach. It was the vision of the possible, and the fellowship of others, that helped us to endure. Many dld not make it, caught in the undertow of despair and all manner of self-destruction. Many were permanently damaged in mind and spirit. A few broke through the immense challenge to expanded vision and service.

During the late sixties the fellowship of those young, who were struggling and rebellious, for some took the form of clustering into all manner of organizations, mass gatherings, and communal groups. A small band of high school students and drop-outs in our area, who had begun to coelesce around one of their peers they perceived as leader, began to find their way to 88 Maln Street in the late sixties. The winter of 1967-1968 they began to come often, needing to find a place where they could freely and safely express their fears and concerns, define themselves and the world, express and share their questions, articulate their quest for answers and for meaning. Meetings, conversations around our round table, reading together from the Wisdom Teachings of all the great religions, exploring how those universal teachings had any relevance to their daily lives -- these were central to their lives at that time. They learned, or began to learn, the vital importance of being inwardly still within the tumult, meditation in its true sense. They began to realize the inner quest, that each one of us must listen within our own spirit for the stirrings of vision, direction, and understanding. They were encouraged to work together, yet each responsible for their own inner unfoldment as their part in the shared fellowship.

It was an exciting time for these young people, a winter of discovery and inspiration, an exuberant surging toward hope and away from the things about society and the world they only had perceived as threatening and unacceptable, without having any clear focus or understanding. Quick to respond to any encouragement and source of inspiration, they were also children of the mass culture of that period, gullible and undiscriminating in their response to all manner of easy explanations. The glamors of the high tide of gurus and chemical shortcuts was at its peak. My own interest in these young people was their sincerity and innocence, and the fact that they were, for the most part, not so much angry as confused, seeking answers and not merely seeking to destroy. They were the seed group of those who over the following year would come to call themselves the Brotherhood of the Spirit.

Letting go of 88 Main Street

88 Main Street was one of the oldest houses in Northfield. It was rooted in a time now long passed, when houses were quite literally homemade. It was part of the closely bonded community of those who created It, flowed through its rooms, loved and cared for it over many years. It was part of the family of homes along Main Street, with a wealth of memories in the community consciousness and its many human stories. It was not just another house, as so many of today's mass produced houses and apartment dwellings.

Looking back almost forty years to that period when we first came to Northfield, a few more strands of meaning begin to come into focus. The houses of my childhood experience, whether in the country of city or Europe, had all been true homes. They had been built, cared for, lived in, and loved as respected parts of the lives of people and communitles. They had character, individuality, and beauty. As a child, they seemed to me to embody something special, that sense of home so lost today. Even the simplest peasant's cottage in Europe, the farmer's little house where we went for whole fresh milk, or the large wealthy homes where sometimes we were invited for pink lemonade and croquet -- all had the aura of something whole and inviting, the warm feeling of a home lived in and loved and to which we, even if for a moment, belonged. Life in a very real sense was homemade.

I think back again, seeking to understand the changing times and how they have affected each of our lives. I think of 88 Main Street and what it meant to so very many over the years, what it meant to us as a young family during the fifties and sixties. Looking back I begin to see the pattern. Even in 1952 and our first years at 88 Main Street, there seemed a growing loss of those qualities that had been part of the earlier years, of the youthful hosteling years just a decade earlier. The young hostelers coming through during our first years there were often, though of course not always, part of a growing youth culture uninterested in the adventure of seeing the world and doing everything for oneself. Many were from the new urban culture, marking time between summer camp and college, used to the easy life of the urban and suburban life of that time.

Today it is possible to look back and see the early seeds of destruction beginning to manifest, seeds of what today is everywhere evident. Rootlessness, the breakdown of family and community, degenerative diseases of mind and body, obsessions with material gain and status, and much more — all so very related to the fratricidal patterns of violence and allenation everywhere. The young, nourished in those crumbling times, expressed their confusion, frustration, and loss of belonging, in many of the immature ways which we understand in early childhood, but which become dangerous in adulthood. As one young angry nomad of the

sixtles expressed It, they just wanted to tear down the "system", the "establishment", after which they would figure out what to do!

My life during those years seemed always full of children and young adults. As my own children began to move outward into their own lives, more and more students, drop-outs, and many many others appeared at my office or home door. I was working fulltime, nights, and in the summer. I was active in the community. Above all, I was deeply involved in many ways with the problems of the times, especially as they were touching those who were seeking me out for counsel, encouragement, and guidance. I was becoming desperately tired, and had a recurrence of old spinal problems that brought me to a standstill in the late spring of 1968 for well over a year.

The many dimensional effect of the late slxties on my life and health untimately led me to the realization that I could no longer hold onto that wonderful place. It was too big, too much in need of someone to maintain it, and too expensive for my level of income, and certainly beyond my physical strength. There was no one in my life at that time ready, willing, or able to share this with me. So, reluctantly, I began the process of trying to sell 88 Main Street. I made up a lovely flyer to give and send out, advertized all over the country including the Wall Street Journal, for a number of months. There were a few inquiries, but not a single live offer. It was not a time when big houses were being sought. That would come along at least a decade later. For the person with imagination and appreciation of such a house, It would have lent itself to any number of possible purposes. It had, after all, been expanded to its imposing size by the hotel man Lindsey at a time when room was needed for servant quarters as well as larger familles. It had been owned by people of wealth and community interest. It had been turned into the national headquarters of the just beginning youth hostel movement in this country. It had been divided into three apartments, not to mention the conversion of the barns and stables into rooms and dormitories. I could imagine all kinds of possibilities. A school, a home for the aging, a community center, a ski resort... oh, so many possibilities!

When we had first come to Northfield in 1952, we had assumed the mortgage for 88 Main Street, and only paid the Smiths a minimal sum for some of the contents of the house and hostel. The place needed a great deal of work. The furnace needed to be replaced as well as some of the plumbing. The house needed storm windows and insulation. We spent the first year or so making it comfortable. I remember how very cold it was inside the house in midwinter of that first year, especially where we slept on the second floor. The third floor had to be closed off completely during those months. But we bundled up, kept our longjohns on even in the house, slept between flannel sheets, and made plans to work on these problems the following summer.

In the spring of 1968, when my health collapsed, I had to completely depend on others to manage the household and all that went with maintaining a busy and peopled place. It was during that recovery period, that the small band of young folks calling themselves the Brotherhood of the Spirit, had begun to come together into a somewhat turbulent and loosely organized commune, living in several places made available to them by those who loved and understood them. In May of 1970 they bought their first home in Warwick. The wandering flood of the young had reached full-tide, and was inundating the commune. They were too young, too inexperienced, too nalve. They lacked any adult guldance or leadership, nor was it sought. There were so many coming, they simply squeezed into every nook and cranny, sleeping wherever they could find shelter.

As the cold weather of another winter began, 88 Main Street still had no takers. Many of the young commune folk were sleeping outside. So, after much soul searching, I decided that I really should turn the place over to the Brotherhood of the Spirit. The house had eighteen rooms, and there was a great deal of room in the old hostel buildings. Much in the same way as 88 Main Street had come to us, the mortgage was paid off, and a new septic system was installed. I turned title in late November of 1970. Unfortunately, we only had a verbal agreement about the transfer and transition process. This would have allowed for those of us still living in the house to plan our various next steps smoothly. Today I can see what I did not perceive then. This was the fact that this great mass of enthusiastic and well-meaning young people, were in essence a mass of searching individuals, with no sense at all of the whole, even of their own group, clustering together with many other inexperienced and confused peers. So apparently this agreement was never shared with the group as a whole, and it was not honored. They did not have any sense of the house itself beyond a structure they could use: just a big house. It has only been in recent years, in talking with some of those who had been there, that I have come to understand more clearly what happened at that time.

Coming of the Commune

They came like a swarm of locusts, invading heedlessly every nook and cranny, taking over and overriding everything and everyone, with no consciousness of or concern for the pain and destruction they wrought. Late November 1970 -- the scene is burned into my memory, and it still fills me with shock, pain, and distress. And yes, regret. The regret, I suppose, is for the violation of our lives and our trust, and the desecration of beauty. This, after all, had been the birthplace, the much loved and nurturing place of first tentative coming of young questing spirits. It was here that they began to find direction, encouragement, answers, the rebirth of their confused spirits.

What was this impulse to deface, distort, and destroy? It was far more than the childish behavior of ignorance. There was a strange kind of exuberant glee with which all of this massed youthful energy directed itself against everything and everyone. It was almost as though some inner floodgate had burst open and allowed a torrent of repressed rage and hurt to gush forth. The colors that were carelessly and thoughtlessly, even ruthlessly chosen to cover the walls, were the colors of darkness and all of the lower chakra energies.

Like a sand castle on the beach, our little family group was swirled around, scattered and thrust up on a lonely shore. All that we had stood for, the love and support we had offered, the very fabric of the lives we had shared with these young people -- seemed to be violated and destroyed in that moment in our lives. It was a profound wound to our hearts and spirits that has never been fully healed.

It is over twenty years since the winter of 1967-1968 when the first clustering of what would become the Brotherhood of the Spirit was finding its way to that special haven for seeking and confused spirits. They were part of the collective convulsion of the times. They were the children of those chaotic times, when the shattering of basic trust and order went way beyond the smashing of the atom to the basic fission of our collective togetherness. They were so young, so inexperienced, so lacking in understanding and coherence. Today I wonder how they remember that period in their lives and that special place. At that time they, too, were experiencing in their young lives the crumbling of the foundations of our culture and all of its basic institutions. Each one of them and all of them together were a microcosm of that period in the saga of the whole. Some of the voices of that time have been included in this saga of 88 Main Street. There were a great many more who were a part of this period who have long gone on their life paths and whose voices are not heard here.

In setting out to tell the story of 88 Main Street, as far back and as meaningfully as I could, it has been necessary to continually find the strand linking lives and events in historical as well as the inner perspective of individuals. So I came to realize how once again 88 Main Street was the setting for the frontier changes, the passing of the old, and the tentative probing emergence of new beginnings. The healing of the memories, for me and perhaps for all of us, must surely lie in seeing the greater purpose, the pattern of order and meaning within the chaos and destruction, the lessons of Life Itself -- and the release of the revered and cherished forms that had served so well to foster and nourish the very seeds of both death and rebirth.

Soon after the scattering of the group of family and friends who had been living at 88 Main Street, I wrote this letter and sent it to the "invaders", the new wave of young people who had poured into that place. The letter was never acknowledged or answered at the time. They were quite unaware of what had happened to us, nor indeed of what was happening to them. They also were being swept along by the times, by the problems and lack of clarity about themselves and each other. Through the years I have kept in touch with these young people, and will tell that story as seen through my eyes, and also through their eyes twenty years later.

Thanksgiving Night 11:30 p.m. November 26, 1970

To my brethren in the Spirit,

Many strange things are being thought, spoken, and done at this time by you and by others. I feel that I must express to you the feelings, thoughts, and concern that I have. Because it is still so difficult for you to hear my spoken or unspoken thoughts, at this late hour I have been driven to try to reach you through the written word. My thoughts are to all of you, though perhaps only a few will truly listen and seek to hear and understand.

A few of you will remember some of the beginnings from which the Brotherhood of the Spirit grew, a short three years ago. And only a few of these few will perhaps truly recall the many times we sat together in my room, individually, in small groups, sometimes alone — talking, listening to the first tapes, reading from the Bible or other Wisdom Teachings, meditating (or rather learning to meditate in those days), pondering many things together. It was a "heavy" moment in your young lives, the opening of a whole new way, the glimmering of spiritual vistas, of awesome disciplines and opportunities.

Do you remember one of the recurring themes of our many shared moments: that on the Path one must seek total obedience at all times to the highest we know. Perhaps all of us need once more to ponder

the full implication of this commitment! None of us is perfect. We are all learning. Let us remember this at all times. If we are truly committed to positive thinking, then let us have the courage, the patience, and the humility to honestly observe ourselves all through the day. We must learn to be aware of our own, not merely others', negativities, even the subtlest and most trivial. We must catch them and transmute them into the positive, over and over until the positive becomes the habitual. There is not one among us who has arrived at this. We must beware of pride and judgement. If we are truly committed to the democratic idea, that still revolutionary and relatively untried idea of fulfilled individuality, working together under strong shared group guidance, then there can be no place for either submissiveness or domination, of intrusion on or exploitation of any individual by another. It is far easier to slip back into the temptations of self-assertion or rejection, of pride and judgement, of impattence and laziness. There is not one us of who has attained mastery here, either!

These are but a few of the core challenges and pitfalls. Down in the valley of our yesterdays, lifetimes ago, we could meander around making many errors out of ignorance or foolishness, and sooner or later would have to make our amends and learn our lessons. But today in the vanguard of a new age, we are up on the lofty crags, climbing narrow paths where few have gone before. Here our missteps, whether in blindness or in awareness and conscious, carry a far greater and more immediate punishment. The price of climbing high is the danger of a greater fall, if we are not at all times alert, responsible and wise. There are no exceptions, no compromises, no evasions possible at this time. Each of us must face with honesty and integrity our own judgement. Let us at no moment forget the responsibility that we carry for the thoughts and feelings we radiate, consciously and unconsciously.

There are those who love, who care, and who understand more than you yet realize. There is so very much to do. The great awakening is indeed happening all over the earth. Let us become much more aware and appreciative of the good that is being done and lived and shared. Let us waste no energy whatsoever in thought, word or deed, that detracts in any way from our shared vision.

God bless and guide and protect and sustain each and every one of us as we grow in strength alone and as we move in harmony together.

Some twenty years later it is more possible to gain a glimpse into life at 88 Main Street during that period and to have a clearer understanding of some of those earlier events. Just as throughout its long history, once again it was a place where lives were changed, where inner thresholds of personal transformation were crossed. Caught in the tides and cross currents of the sixties and

seventies, very young and inexperienced, disillusioned with and rebelling against much of society at that time, those who had joined the commune were clustering together in a quest for answers and some basis for faith and hope. In talking with many of them today, I have asked them to reminisce about that chapter in their lives and where it has taken them. These voices will be put together in the coming year as part of the testimony of the extraordinary story of that time in our collective experience in this area.

The first young people who would become the Brotherhood of the Spirit had found their way to 88 Main Street beginning in 1965. By the time the house was turned over to them in November 1970 their numbers had expanded enormously, as well as being host for many more young folks flowing through their lives for a while wherever they happened to be. Completely oblivious at of the lives of the rest of us, typical of adolescence and early youth, they were completely immersed in their shared adventure of discovery and rebellion. Over and over I heard them say about their first impression on arriving in this area and to the commune: "This was it! This was what I was looking for, where I wanted to be." They found love and fellowship, a cheerful acceptance, an instant recognition that is hard to define. For many it was what they called the home they never had.

There was no search for mature advice or guidance. For the most part they were distancing themselves from family, school, religious background, and all that seemed to them hollow or meaningless. They were an exuberant tidal wave of energetic individuals, willing to commit themselves together to a dream of community and a vision of a better way. This despite all manner of discomfort and confusion, and the extreme pressures of such an intense massing of others into their spontaneous and only loosely organized lives. They lived in the moment, with little perspective or experience, learning as they went all manner of basic skills and understanding.

88 Main Street, as other places where they lived, was simply seen as a place to use for the time being. It served their physical needs as a place to live and to engage in whatever activities were their focus of the moment. Their music and art, the garish colors they used everywhere, their living patterns, all were the spontaneous expression of their troubled and tumultuous generation. Walls were built and taken down as they were learning carpentry on their own. Every nook and cranny in that old house became a sleeping place, including the large closets, cellar rooms, and the hostel space. They fanned out into all kinds of jobs throughout the area, learning skills they little realized would lead them into business ventures, professions, and education. Those who did not go out to work took care of the collective needs at home base: a nursery and care for the children, raising and preserving food, and the like. Through this process they were beginning to learn some of the basic skills and necessitles of life anywhere.

Today a number of those who spent a significant part of their younger years in the commune are seeking to tell their own very personal experiences of that period. These experiences, as well as the earlier backgrounds of these individuals, differed widely. In seeking to get a sense of the overall collective picture one finds an extraordinary story emerges, a story which I am now undertaking. This story that has touched many of all of our lives and communities here in this area over the past twenty-five years is one which must be told. Many are helping me with their voices, their records and writings, pictures and songs, and much more. It is a challenging undertaking!

The six years the Brotherhood of the Spirit lived in 88 Main Street was a time when seeds of the future were being formed. They renamed themselves several times, starting a number of small businesses, buying or being given other houses in the area, always with a primary focus on the philosophy they were forging and the message they sought to impart. They eventually took the name Renaissance, meaning rebirth, for their community and some of their businesses. In the beginning years they were the "invaders", in diaspora from a culture to which they no longer felt they could belong, coming from the cities in the area and from far away, on a quest they could for the most part not define. In time they have scattered like the dandellon seeds to be the new settlers and build their adult lives. Their children are the new natives, with the unique experience of the commune years of their childhood, attending the public schools, and now moving into their adolescent and youth years. The patterns repeat, forever changing yet in some ways the same.

Death by Burning

In talking with a number of those who had lived at 88 Main Street during those communal years late 1970 to early 1978, I find that it was somewhat of a transition point in their lives. The house, as it had been from the beginning, was just a house, a great place with many rooms into which they could squeeze, and where they could all individually do something together, with little sense of the whole. They used every nook and cranny, even the cellar rooms. It was a time of finding that they must get out into the community and find work of many kinds. They were learning finally some of the material realities and responsibilities, though with little sense of applying the wisdom teachings which had drawn them together a short time before.

I would visit from time to time, because of my ongoing interest in and concern for this group of young people. Of course there were many of them who were hardly aware of me in any real sense. They were too self absorbed, too oblivious to anything beyond their own immediate interests and needs. They still, and for years thereafter, considered themselves apart from the wider community and the world. And, as I have had to constantly remind myself, they were the young of that turbulent period in our collective history, microcosms of the culture into which they had been born.

Always at the very forefront of the new changes, 88 Main Street itself in a sense truly was a microcosm of the spirit of the times. Within its walls flowed not only the spirit of adventure and exploration, but also the seeds of the flawed consciousness and distorted values of the society of today. For all the richness of inspiration and renewed vision, it ultimately was the victim of the overwhelming darkness of the human spirit. So 88 Main Street, as were Four Columns and the Trinitarian Church, was destroyed by fire, by the disturbed young carrying the seeds of self-destruction outward into their own troubled lives. Carelessness, impulsiveness, disorder, lack of any sense of stewardship, lack of clarity of values and identity of self and the group, were all characteristics of this mass of young folks struggling to find their way on their own, and caught in many of the illusions of the times.

The following account appeared in the local daily paper:

Greenfield Recorder March 2, 1978 By Andi Gates, Recorder Staff

NORTHFIELD - "A fire, reportedly caused by an electric heater in an attic bedroom, heavily damaged the Renaissance Church Community at 88 Main Street Wednesday night. More than 40 residents were driven from the historic two-storey wood structure which had gained distinction as America's first youth hostel, Northfield's first post

office, and home of 18th-century Yankee musician Timothy Swan, considered one of America's finest early composers.

"At least 80 firefighters from 11 communities in three States fought the stubborn blaze which broke out about 8 p.m. and rekindled again this morning around 6:30 a.m. Their efforts were hampered by lack of water pressure and volume from the Northfield Water District hydrants, by thick smoke and by the structure of the house itself.

"Hinsdale Fire Chief James Stanclift was treated at the scene for smoke inhalation by Winchester, N.H. rescue expert Robert Muray. There were no other injuries reported. Most commune members had fled the burning building by the time fire trucks arrived at the scene, according to Northfield Fire Chief Floyd M. Dunnell III.

"Dunnell said the cause of the blaze has not been officially determined and investigation into the incident will continue. This morning Dunnell had not decided whether or not to request assistance from the State Fire Marshal's office. He said he doubted arson was involved. Observers believe the blaze was started when a polyurethane pillow too close to an electric heater in an upstairs bedroom ignited. But Renaissance Church Community spokesman John Pollard, at the scene for several hours Wednesday, repeatedly refused to answer any questions. Pollard could not be reached for comment this morning.

"It is the second major fire the Renalssance Community has suffered in the past three months. A large barn at the Community's Gill residence burned in November. It was Northfield's third major fire in one month and, for many of the fire companies that aided Northfield, it was the second fire of the day. "According to Dunnell, when fire trucks arrived at 88 Main Street, the attic was blazing and the fire had burned through the roof of the main house.

"Dunnell said he went upstairs where there were still several people. They were evacuated. Dunnell estimated 20 people were living in the building, but a young woman who said she lived there reported more than 40. Other reports indicate the building had been used during the day to care for the group's children.

"Firefighters attacked the blaze, but were forced back out, then used larger lines and ladders and pumped water into the attic area. Dunnell said the blggest problem firefighters faced was getting to the blaze. 'There were double ceilings, dead air spaces and nooks and crannies we had to work to get at,' he said. 'That was the worst part. Once we got the manpower, then we had it contained.' It took slightly more than one hour to get the blaze under control, Dunnell said. Fire was largely contained on the second floor and in the attic of the main structure, where there was damage to ceilings and the roof. Flames spread to the second-floor ceiling of the ell but did not touch a large rear addition. There was extensive smoke and water damage to the first and second floors. Firefighters continued to pump water into the structure throughout the night and all day today. Because the hydrant system was inadequate, Dunnell

said, water had to be hauled in by tankers to augment the supply."

It was interesting to me to learn that the fire had started in the tiny little room at the far end of the third floor, which we called the eagle's nest. Of course I was not present at the time, so have listened to the varied stories of the fire. The young folks had no insurance to cover the damage or to put into the extensive repairs that would have been needed to restore the building. Interesting also was the fact that only a few weeks earlier the Trinitarian Church had burned, also the result of youthful carelessness, the church that still sang the songs written so many years before at 88 Main Street. There seemed little consciousness of responsibility for either fires on the part of the young responsible. I gave this much thought over the years, seeking to understand the relationship of these young folks to the places where they lived and the communities around them. They seemed so careless and thoughtless where material things were concerned, exercizing little forethought to what they did, quite oblivious to the long range affect of what they did, or the impact on the lives of others. These may seem harsh words, but I felt that though this was not conscious murder, it was the unwitting desecration of beauty and order, the fouling of the very nest that gave life and which nurtured, the rejection of heritage in every sense. This is once again the story of the Prodigal Son, lost in the seas of self-Indulgence and excess, lost to the whisperings of the soul and the God center to which lip service was being given new words. It was certainly a period in history when there seemed a great increase in all of those self-serving motivations that were increasingly unraveling our society in every aspect. There is much to still question and understand about this period and those who were coming to maturity during those years.

Was this also ultimately to prove to be part of the necessary fires of purification needed for the rebirth of the spirit, the renewed life of the phoenix bird, the deepest healing of the human spirit, individually and collectively? Was it necessary to allow the free acting out of darkness and distortion for it to be seen, paying the price of cherished forms, but also of cherished illusions? With the passage of time, has the lesson been learned? Has the rebirth of the spirit risen above the ashes to a new purity of vision and commitment? I have asked myself these questions many times while witnessing so many forms of disintegration, disorientation, and distortion in the world and here close to home.

Perhaps it is still too soon to say. What seeds of life or death have been carried out into the world by the lives who shared a moment in time and space at 88 Main Street before scattering and taking root somewhere to fulfill their own destinies? One may hope that, like the fireweed that pioneers into the very midst of destroyed life and puts down its roots deeply enough to recreate the

soil and come to its own flowering — the lives who were part of the burning ground experience of 88 Main Street have seeded the scorched earth of the spirit of these times with the deepest roots of love and faith to bring them up through the very fabric of humanity, expressing itself through its created forms here on earth. It is my ongoing quest to talk, all of these years later, with as many of these young folk as I can. My mind forever returns to these questions, seeking out the deeper meanings and purpose behind our individual and collective experience. To seek these hidden strands of meaning, is to view with deeper compassion and understanding even the most difficult experience and puzzling event. What may seem to some mere abstractions, for me become a bit of light shed on the underlying causes that help us not to repeat past errors and lilusions.



After the fire - spring 1978





Beth Hapgood at her work table 1987



Steve Curtis working on the cover painting