

AN INFORMAL HISTORY OF CHENA RIDGE FRIENDS MEETING
RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS - FAIRBANKS, ALASKA

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Introduction

In 2006 Chena Ridge Friends Meeting (CRFM) is a thriving Quaker community in Fairbanks, Alaska, active in the Alaska Friends Conference and the wider world of Friends' activities and concerns. On a typical Sunday morning approximately 70 Friends of all ages are in attendance, and there is often at least one first-time visitor. The meeting owns Hidden Hill, a 3.8 acre property about four miles from the center of Fairbanks. Meeting for worship is held in the meetinghouse, and other activities take place in the Main Cabin. The meeting shares Hidden Hill with the tenants of four small cabins on the property and an apartment over the meetinghouse. The property is managed by the Hidden Hill Friends Center Board, a non-profit corporation with representation from the meeting, the residents, and the community.

This informal history was compiled from over a dozen interviews with current and former CRFM Friends as well as a review of some of the materials in the meeting's archives. Unfortunately the archives are incomplete, but they offer tantalizing samples of the meeting's correspondence and records over its nearly sixty year history. A further caveat is that the current and former members who were interviewed sometimes had divergent recollections or interpretations of events in the past. What follows is not a rigorous history, but a starting point for archivists and real historians!

Note: A general familiarity with Quaker terms and structures is assumed.

Background

Missionaries from the evangelical branch of Quakerism began coming to southeast Alaska around 1890. Later they focused their efforts in the northwest portion of Alaska around Kotzebue, and there is still a substantial community of "Eskimo Quakers" in that area. There are also scattered pastoral congregations in other parts of Alaska. There was an evangelical Friends Church in Fairbanks for a while, but it is not currently active.

The unprogrammed meetings and worship groups in Alaska have joined together as Alaska Friends Conference to distinguish themselves from the programmed Alaska Yearly Meeting. There are seven other meetings and worship groups listed in the Alaska Friends Conference directory, but CRFM is the only one with a meetinghouse and substantial attendance.

CRFM Pioneers

There were a few nonpastoral Friends in the Fairbanks area before Niilo and Joan Koponen arrived in February 1952, but it was the Koponens and a few

neighbors who initiated the gatherings in their home that eventually became Chena Ridge Friends Meeting. It was their homestead on Chena Ridge Road that gave the meeting the name it has carried through its peripatetic history to its present location on Goldhill Road, a few miles west of the city of Fairbanks. In 2005 several young adult members of CRFM recorded two interviews with Niilo on DVDs which are available in the meeting's archives.

Niilo Koponen was born into a Finnish family in New York City in March 1928 and grew up in an ethnically mixed neighborhood which included many secular Jews. Finnish was his first language. His second language was Yiddish, and he learned English primarily from the "funnies". He joined the Finnish Lutheran Church as a boy, but often visited other churches.

World War II broke out while Niilo was in high school; at first he wanted to be a bomber pilot, but during his high school years he was exposed to the civil rights and pacifist movements, becoming familiar with the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). He particularly remembers the "Negro March on Washington" that was planned for July 1941 (but never carried out) to protest the exclusion of African Americans from defense jobs. He joined the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and before he graduated from high school in 1945 he had decided to become a conscientious objector.

Following high school Niilo worked in various business settings and lived in the Bronx. His father was an electrician and Niilo acquired some skills in this area. He also became involved with several progressive and socialist Christian movements. In 1948 he joined an AFSC workcamp in Finland to assist refugees from Karelia (a Finnish province ceded to Russia at the end of the war) by building houses for them. His group was trained for their work at Pendle Hill, a Quaker study center in Media, Pennsylvania. At the workcamp he met two Women's Air Force veterans, Celia Hunter and Ginny Hill, who later played a major part in the early days of Chena Ridge Meeting. The experience of living in an intentional community focused on service made a profound impression on him and played a major role in his decision to homestead in Alaska a few years later.

After he returned from Finland Niilo applied to and was accepted by Antioch College, but he was unable to obtain the necessary student loans because of his conscientious objector status. Consequently he enrolled at Wilberforce, a black college about seven miles south of Yellow Springs, Ohio, where Antioch was located. Niilo was the first white graduate of Wilberforce. He visited Antioch frequently, working on student peacemaking projects, and it was here that he met Joan, a birthright member of Cambridge Meeting in Massachusetts who became his wife. They were cleared for marriage in Yellow Springs Meeting and were married in Cambridge Meeting in December 1951.

Niilo described his involvement with Quakerism at this time as focused on the workcamp approach: "Quakerism to me was not just talk, it was doing." He didn't want to stay in the East and "do the routine thing;" he wanted to "come north...take part in a new country."

Niilo and Joan chose to homestead in Fairbanks largely on the recommendation of Connie Griffith, a Quaker acquaintance from Antioch who was already in Fairbanks. There was also a substantial Finnish presence in the area. Niilo and Joan drove up to Fairbanks in a second-hand Dodge truck, arriving in February 1952. Joan gave birth to their first child four months later. They claimed their 160 acre homestead on Chena Ridge Road, which was then a dirt trail, that same year, although they did not move there until March 1953.

Under the terms of the Morrell Act of 1858 homesteaders could claim 160 acres of federal land if they agreed to develop it within seven years. This required clearing and cultivating one sixteenth of the land, building a habitable house, and living there at least seven months of the year. Niilo and Joan bought a cabin and moved it from the site of Felix Pedro's original mine to their land. The cabin was in poor condition, but Joan's brothers and others helped to rebuild it. Other structures and land purchases came added later. Niilo and Joan had five children, all born in Alaska: Karjala, Sanni, Chena, Heather, and Alex.

Among the Koponen's neighbors on Chena Ridge Road were Ted and Mary Ann Kegler. Ted was the child of a Protestant mother and a Catholic father who eventually separated over this and other differences. In 1942 his mother settled in Washington State with Ted and his brother. Ted became a certified welder but had trouble getting work after the war. He joined the Army Air Corps, which sent him to Biloxi for training in airplane maintenance in 1947 and then to Fort Wainwright in Fairbanks in 1948, where he worked on B-29s. He enrolled at the University of Alaska to study civil engineering on the GI Bill. He claimed 80 acres on Chena Ridge Road in 1952. His first homestead shelter was a 10 by 20 foot log cabin, half underground, with a sod floor.

Ted met Mary Ann Hunn Karstner, a fellow student from a Quaker family in the Philadelphia area. They were married in 1954 in the Westtown home of Mary Ann's parents, who were members of Central Philadelphia Monthly Meeting. By this time he was developing an interest in nonviolence; he remembers Mary Ann's father remarking that Ted seemed more Quaker than Mary Ann, a birthright friend.

Ted obtained his pilot's license in 1945, and he did not give it up until 60 years later when the cost of maintaining it became too great. Since 1954 he worked as a mechanic and inspector for Alaska Airlines. The land he and the Koponens homesteaded on Chena Ridge Road was originally slated to be a military airport, but it was released for homesteading when the war ended and plans changed.

Ted and Mary Ann had three children: Charlie, Edward, and Kitty. They moved to Anchorage in 1966 so that Ted could work as an inspector with Alaska Airlines. An earlier meeting in Anchorage had become inactive, and Ted and Mary Ann started a new one that met in attenders' homes. In 1983 Mary Ann died after a seven year struggle with cancer, and Ted returned to Fairbanks in 1987. In 1991 Ted met Ruiz Anne Alpuente at a contradance; they married in 1992.

Early Years (1954 to 1984)

The Keglars, the Koponens, and several acquaintances from the University began meeting as an informal worship group in the Koponens' home in 1954. Ted remembers that his wife Mary Ann was the principal convenor of the group in the early years. Joan Koponen also had a lengthy Quaker pedigree, but she has been less involved with the meeting from the beginning. "I just couldn't sit still that long", she said in a recent interview.

Meetings of the worship group were held on Sunday evenings, usually at the Koponens' home. They were followed by a potluck meal and then a sauna. Niilo called this part of the meeting "baptism by steam". A small group of Koponen family and friends continues the sauna tradition to this day. Niilo and Ted remembered some of the attenders in those early years: Douglas Marsh, Gordon and Marilyn Herreid, the Hawman family, Constance Griffith, Nancy Hidden, and Jennivieve and Orwen Westwick. The group was in contact with other Friends in Alaska—Kay and Jim Hitchcock in southcentral Alaska, the Hilds in Barrow, and Mahala Dickerson in Wasilla. These Friends met periodically and eventually formed Central Alaska Friends Conference (now Alaska Friends Conference, a yearly meeting affiliated with Friends General Conference).

The meeting also had occasional contacts with the "Eskimo Quakers", the yearly meeting that grew out of missionary work done among Native Alaskans by 19th century Evangelical Friends.

The first official "home" of Chena Ridge Meeting was the Brown cabin on the Koponen homestead on Chena Ridge Road. According to a note on the Hidden Hill Friends Center Handbook, the cabin was built in 1956 as a residence. When the Browns moved away in 1959 the cabin became the meetinghouse and library. Around 1961, when the group became larger and included Friends who had to drive up the sometimes impassable dirt road to get to meeting, they moved their meetings to Room 311 (the Home Economics Lounge) in the Eielson Building at the University. Friends continued to socialize afterwards in each others' homes. The Brown cabin is occupied today by Niilo's daughter Heather and her son.

The group that met in the Eielson Building at the University during the 1960's and 1970's was made up mostly of attenders with University connections with diverse spiritual backgrounds who preferred to spend the Sunday morning meeting time in meditation and study rather than active religious practice. At times there were one or two families with children, but there was no organized First Day School program. One Friend who attended as a youngster remembered that the Home Ec Lounge furniture was not very comfortable and she had a hard time sitting through meeting. However, she has good memories of the potluck meals!

Although the group was now calling itself "Chena Ridge Friends Meeting" it functioned more as a worship group. During the Vietnam War the meeting attracted many war protesters and a few enlisted men on Sunday mornings. A roster of CRFM attenders dated 1967 listed twenty seven local households, although not all attended regularly. From 1962 to 1966 Niilo Koponen and family were in Massachusetts while Niilo earned a Doctorate in Education at Harvard University; during this period Jennivieve Westwick generally clerked the meeting.

From time to time contacts were made with other Friends' groups, and in 1969 Pacific Yearly Meeting sent Hugh Campbell Brown and his wife to assess the meeting's readiness to affiliate. He reported that

The meeting appears to have a longstanding corporate reality despite lack of formal organization, probably centered about the personality of Niilo Koponen, acting clerk, a member of Yellow Springs [Ohio] Meeting, who is at present principal of a public school...Niilo Koponen appears to be the only one of the original Fairbanks group left in Fairbanks; most of the present group are more recent arrivals.

Brown noted that meeting for worship tended to be completely silent, and aside from fellowship after meeting there did not seem to be any other "corporate activity or social service." He felt the group was not ready for monthly meeting status, although they had already conducted several weddings and memorial services. He reported that 16 adults, a 14 year old, and an infant were present at the August 28, 1969 meeting for worship.

Around the same time Jennivieve Westwick, now the meeting's corresponding secretary, described in a letter

...the northwestern pioneer spirit and the independent souls who are suspicious of organization. Ours is a varied group, and we do not have formal business meetings or budget or seek group projects. Most of the people express their social concerns through their jobs or homes or other organizations. We are a group of people who value silent meeting for worship and share some common concerns for peace and simplicity.

The meeting archives include correspondence from this period indicating that the meeting occasionally took corporate action by sending letters of protest or support to local legislators, newspapers, and political action groups. These efforts often seem to have been initiated and carried out by a few other individuals.

Niilo Koponen's career as a public educator, and his increasing civic and political activism, began to take him away from much of the hands-on functioning of the meeting. From 1982 to 1992 Niilo served in the state legislature. In December 1991 Joan Koponen suffered serious injuries in a car accident, requiring lengthy hospitalization and care at home. Niilo then left the legislature so that he could spend more time with Joan. Niilo continues to be an important and much beloved part of the meeting community to this day.

In 1975 Arthur O. Roberts interviewed Niilo for a history of Quakers in Alaska and wrote:

Throughout change Niilo Koponen maintains a steady spiritual center...Finnish, quiet Quaker, Alaskan, he epitomizes a quest for authenticity that draws others to his quest, but only obliquely.

One longtime member who began attending in the late 1970's described the CRFM Friends she met as "a self-selected group, committed to peace, environmental concerns, and liberal politics—very different from the Fairbanks mainstream." Some additional names she recalled from this period included Marilyn and Gordon Herreid, Jennivieve and Orwen Westwick, Jim Cheydleur, Cindy Hardy and her young son Ira, Ron and Eleanor Chinn, Bob and Wendy Arundale, Dick and Judy Weeden, and Fred and Sue Dean. Another Friend who began attending CRFM around the same time recalled that he was surprised to find the meeting did not have business meetings or even a budget.

Representatives of CRFM often attended annual meetings of national Quaker organizations and sessions of Pacific and North Pacific Yearly Meetings, but the "pioneer spirit" of Alaskan Friends seems to have led them to decline affiliation with an "Outside" yearly meeting. Alaskan Friends had been meeting irregularly since 1956. In the early 1970's Central Alaska Friends Conference, primarily Friends from CRFM and Anchorage, began meeting every summer at Mahala Dickerson's homestead in Wasilla.

The earliest minutes from monthly meetings for business in the meeting's archives are handwritten, sketchy notes on looseleaf paper from the early 1980's. They reflect a growing movement towards more structure in the meeting (creation of committees, budgets, a nominating process, etc.) and an ongoing discussion of the advisability of moving the meeting to another location.

Move to Hidden Hill (1984)

Nancy Hidden, a member of the meeting since 1975, owned a five acre property on Goldhill Road, a few miles west of the University. She and her husband purchased the land in 1970 when they moved to Fairbanks from New England. The Hidden family built and moved into what is now the Main Cabin in the fall of 1970; they lived in tents on the property until the cabin was ready. In a poem written about the family's long awaited move in the fall, Nancy wrote of their first evening in the cabin:

...As we sit and enjoy our evening meal
Wood stove producing warmth
Special warmth appreciated,
Having known the cold of the arctic
No matter how cold
The night chose to get
We would be warm...

Her family and friends eventually built four small cabins and a garage on the land; an apartment was built over the garage for her sons. Electric service and water tanks were added in 1974, but there is no septic system to this day

Nancy had always envisioned that her land would be a home for family and friends as well as a community resource. A visit to Pendle Hill, a Quaker conference and retreat center in Pennsylvania, provided a model for the kind of uses she wanted for the property. In the late 1970's Friends in the Fairbanks area had become interested in starting a community school, and it seemed like a use that was consistent with Nancy's vision. Hidden Hill Friends School was incorporated in 1981, with Niilo Koponen, Ron Chinn, Paddy Lane, and Roland Wulbert listed as incorporators. The garage was renovated for the school and Elaine Ponchione became the unpaid teacher. The school was designed to be a Quaker version of the Summerhill educational model. Apparently the school struggled from the beginning—no more than six or eight children were enrolled, four of whom were the teacher's children—and it closed in 1983. Some Friends continued to hope that the school would be reborn, but finally in 1988 the meeting laid down the school corporation.

Although the school did not survive, Nancy Hidden and CRFM continued to dream about what could happen at Hidden Hill.

By the early 1980's it seemed apparent to many Friends that the University was no longer a good location for the meeting. As late as July 1983 the monthly meeting minutes stated that "We again discussed the possibility of moving, but decided to remain at the University for now. Ministry and Oversight were asked to review our options." However, the issue would not go away.

The Home Economics Lounge was needed for other uses, and some felt that the University wanted to move religious activities off its campus. Many Friends were also yearning for CRFM to be more like a typical monthly meeting, with more structure and greater connection with the wider world of Quakerism. At least one Friend remembered that a few members longed for a more traditional Christian approach as well.

Nancy Hidden was already making Hidden Hill available for special meeting events, or when the Home Ec lounge was not available. In the early 1980's Nancy offered to donate the Hidden Hill property to the meeting. She wanted to make sure that Hidden Hill would always be used for Quaker activities. With the help of Marilyn Stowell, an attorney and the daughter of longtime meeting members Ron and Eleanor Chinn, she placed a condition on her gift. If the property ceased to be used for Quaker purposes, ownership will revert to Friends General Conference, which would decide on its disposition. In 1981, 1982, and 1983 Nancy donated $\frac{1}{4}$ of the property each year to CRFM, retaining $\frac{1}{4}$ for her own use.

When meeting members concluded that they needed a permanent home, discussion focused on Hidden Hill almost immediately. Some Friends were excited about joining the meeting with Nancy's longtime dream of a Quaker center at Hidden Hill; others were apprehensive about whether property concerns and increased corporate activity would crowd out the simplicity and quiet they had come to value in CRFM. A few longtime members left the meeting because of these concerns when the decision was reached at last to move to Hidden Hill.

The first meeting for worship in the new meetinghouse took place on September 16, 1984. A sign in sheet from that day showed twenty one names, including many who are still active attenders more than twenty years later:

The Hidden Hill Community

Hidden Hill Friends Center was incorporated in August 1984 by Jim Cheydleur, Wendy Arundale, and Robert Weeden. The stated purpose of the corporation was to "sustain and nurture the values of the Religious Society of Friends through education, service, and worship." Documents in the meeting archives indicate that the bylaws were modeled on those of Pendle Hill. One quarter of the Hidden Hill property remained with the Hidden family until Nancy moved away from Fairbanks in 1987.

Nancy Hidden's property on Goldhill Road was already functioning as a residential community when the meeting moved into the converted garage. In September 1984 the residents were Nancy herself and her friends Nancy Webb,

Pat Cole, and Ken Hill. The name of the Center was apparently taken from the two mailboxes where the driveway entered the road, "Hidden" and "Hill."

Over the years a diverse group of people have found a temporary home in the Hidden Hill community. Most residents have been in transition—between college and career, marriage and divorce, youth and adulthood, or other life stages. Many have been in their twenties and thirties, taking some time to explore options before making life commitments; others were older and making mid-life changes. While there have been some couples and families at Hidden Hill, the community often functions as a substitute family for single residents. William Walters was an experienced Friend recruited by Nancy Hidden at the 1986 FGC Gathering to come to Hidden Hill and serve as a resident caretaker. Nancy had functioned as a "mother hen" for the other residents in the early years; after she left the community to remarry in late 1985 the residential community went through a period of disorganization. Finances and the physical maintenance of the property were neglected, according to William. One Friend who lived at Hidden Hill in the mid-1980's said she felt like she had "moved into summer camp." She remembered Nancy Hidden's support for the residents and connected it with the longstanding Alaskan tradition of helping anyone in need; she also acknowledged that residents' rent payments were not always prompt!

William worked with the Hidden Hill Board to establish procedures and clean up the property, and the residential community has been financially stable on the whole since then. Two residents have usually served as caretaker and bookkeeper for minimal remuneration, although those roles have occasionally been filled by others.

Residents live in four cabins and an apartment above the meetinghouse. The cabins are simple structures without running water, heated by kerosene heaters and provided with electricity and phone lines. The Main Cabin provides communal space with a full kitchen, laundry, and shower facilities (with trucked in water). Communal dinners, with residents taking turns cooking, have always been a major focal point for the community—a setting for informal decision making and information sharing.

The relationship between the residential community and the meeting has been the subject of periodic discussion in the meeting virtually from the beginning, with few conclusions reached or actions taken. Hidden Hill residents have never been expected to be Quakers or to attend meeting. Even those who were Friends when they moved in often found that the two roles were difficult to combine and their involvement in the meeting declined. The relationship between these two communities frequently has been fruitful and enriching for all; occasionally it has created friction, particularly in recent years as the meeting's growth has brought intensified use of common facilities and encroachment on the privacy of residents.

On January 16, 1989 (Martin Luther King Day) William Walters' cabin caught fire from a faulty stove and burned to the ground. Since William had been picked up by a friend earlier that day, leaving his car in the parking lot, the other residents feared he was in the burning cabin. One fellow resident remembers their tremendous relief when he arrived home unhurt!

In the early 2000's a group of Hidden Hill residents purchased and began developing a neighboring property as a co-housing community named Tamarack Knoll, moving in during the spring of 2004. Tamarack Knoll founders were inspired by their experience of communal living at Hidden Hill; they were also ready to own and control their own property, without the complicating presence of a religious community. The move left Hidden Hill temporarily at a low point regarding residents and leadership, but as of the summer of 2006 the community has recovered and is flourishing.

Maturing as a Quaker Meeting (1984 to 1993)

The meeting that moved into Hidden Hill in September 1984 was small and quiet, mostly consisting of individuals who were active in the Fairbanks community and not much inclined to corporate functioning. The meeting's total budget that year was \$2091. Although some basic committees like Ministry and Oversight, Education, Finance, and Nominating existed, they did not seem to meet often or do much together.

Several Friends recalled that once the meeting was in a permanent home and had stewardship responsibilities it began to develop structures as a monthly meeting and to reach out to the wider world of Friends. Jim Cheydleur was perhaps the first CRFM Friend to attend the Friends General Conference (FGC) Gathering in 1988. He brought back resources and ideas for the meeting, and eventually connected with Friends all over North America through his service on the FGC Central Committee. Subsequently other CRFM Friends became regular Gathering attenders. Most agree that this experience has not only enriched their own understanding of Quakerism but also benefited the meeting as a whole. Central Alaska Friends Conference became affiliated with FGC in the early 1980's, and the meeting has continued to send an unusually large proportion of its members to the annual Gathering.

CRFM began to develop administrative and financial structures, particularly during the clerkship of William Walters, who was an experienced Friend and an attorney, in the late 1980's and early 1990's. Jim Cheydleur and others who were active with FGC and other Friends organizations brought resources into the meeting. A growing professional class in Fairbanks was generally more interested in socially and politically liberal Quakerism, and many of them found CRFM a congenial religious community. Among the newcomers to Fairbanks were a number of Friends from the Midwest and the East who brought their own

experiences and approaches to Quakerism. Friends recognized a need to plan and obtain curricula for First Day School programs. All of these factors helped to change the quiet worship group into an active Friends meeting.

CRFM Friends were also developing an appreciation for formal membership, marriage under the care of the meeting, and formal education programs for children and adults. Speakers and visitors were brought in from national Quaker groups, programs like Alternatives to Violence and Quakerism 101 were offered. The meeting discussed and published minutes on a variety of local and national political issues, reflecting a growing interest in corporate activism.

In 1992 the monthly meeting minutes began to reflect a concern about “space needs,” as some First Day School classes were being held in residents’ cabins and the social area in the Main Cabin was felt to be inadequate. For several months the meeting discussed priorities and plans for an addition to the Main Cabin, and in the spring of 1993 the meeting appointed a fundraising committee and hired a “builder/designer” to incorporate their conclusions into a design. Friends committed to providing their financial support and their volunteer labor to build the addition.

Physical and Spiritual Growth (1993 to Present)

By the fall of 1993 the addition to the main cabin was framed. However, fundraising and recruitment of volunteer labor lagged. The Hidden Hill Board voluntarily gave a substantial amount towards the project and assumed all the costs of maintaining Hidden Hill, and a very generous member of the meeting gave a \$40,000 loan which she eventually forgave. Several Friends remembered that building began with a plan that was not much more than a footprint, and there were ongoing discussion and disagreements among the principal builders about the design of the addition, how the rooms would be used, how the building would be heated, etc. The project moved slowly, but by April 1995 the Building Committee reported that the addition was basically completed except for details and furnishings. At the same time CRFM began to explore the possibility of expanding the parking lot by purchasing adjacent land, but at the time of this writing neighboring property owners have not been inclined to sell.

In the mid-1990’s the meeting began to invite Quaker speakers and facilitators to visit, to help them explore Quaker spiritual issues and discernment processes. “Traveling ministers” such as Marty Grundy, Virginia Wood, and Connie McPeak sparked the creation of spiritual nurture groups, contemplative retreats, and presentations on theological subjects. The meeting continues to make valuable and frequent use of clearness and support committees for personal discernment.

In 1997 Connie McPeak of Cleveland Meeting initiated a special kind of visitation by serving as Friend in Residence for a year. Subsequent Friends in Residence

have been Brad Sheeks of Central Philadelphia Monthly Meeting (2000-2001) and Jacob and Gretta Stone of Doylestown (PA) Monthly Meeting (2005-2006.) Each has brought fresh viewpoints and their own individual gifts to the meeting, and each has taken away wonderful memories of the unique Chena Ridge Friends Meeting community.

CRFM and the Fairbanks Community

One CRFM attender recently said “Chena Ridge Friends Meeting is the best kept secret in Fairbanks.” In earlier years, particularly under the influence of Niilo Koponen, Ron Chinn, and others, the meeting often made public statements about political and social issues on the local and national levels, but most informants report that this has happened infrequently in the last decade. Many Friends have been active in local government, human services, and social change groups as individuals, with the meeting providing symbolic support.

The fairly primitive physical environment seems to limit opportunities to invite the general public to events at Hidden Hill, although there are three community groups that currently use the facility on a regular basis: a twice-weekly yoga class, a monthly men’s group, and a weekly shape-note singing group. The men’s group, the Goldhill Circle of Men, has been meeting at Hidden Hill for about ten years. It has about 15 members who take turns leading the group in exercises, discussions, and rituals.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq led many CRFM Friends to become active protesters, joining with other local peace groups including the Fairbanks Coalition for Peace and Justice and No Nukes North. In November 2004 the meeting sponsored a presentation by Chuck Fager, a Quaker peace activist. Within weeks a small group began planning a Peace Center to be housed in an existing community center; the Peace Center became a reality in early spring 2005.

CRFM Friends have been a major force in the founding and continued operations of the Alaska Peace Center, and the meeting contributes funds on a regular basis (current Board members are almost all CRFM members and attenders.) However, the Center is incorporated as a non-partisan, non-sectarian, community-based organization. Members of many religious denominations, as well as exclusively secular activists, participate in the Center’s programs. Perhaps as a result of their involvement in the Alaska Peace Center, Friends have indicated an interest in becoming more active in environmental concerns; the meeting recently sent a letter to local legislators in opposition to oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

The Future

On June 1, 2006, 23 CRFM Friends gathered at the home of Jim, Chris, and Isaac Hall for their annual discussion of the state of the meeting. The group identified several concerns to address in the near future:

- The need for more space for meeting activities
- The impact of growing numbers of attenders on the life of the meeting
- How to communicate Quakerism and the CRFM “culture” to the community, visitors, and all members and attenders
- Safety, especially for children
- Sharing and appreciating diverse spiritual paths
- The meeting’s relationship to the Hidden Hill residential community

It is interesting to note that corporate activism on the local and state level did not surface as a concern to be addressed in the coming years. Perhaps this is a continuation of CRFM’s traditional pattern of supporting individual action rather than taking a corporate approach to social, political, or environmental issues.

The story of Chena Ridge Meeting, spanning over 50 years, is entwined with Alaskan history and with the longer story of unprogrammed Friends in North America. The meeting has grown from a few friends gathering informally in each others’ homes to a large, active religious community with a sizeable budget and strong connections with the wider world of Quakers. CRFM Friends face some large questions about their meeting’s future as the twenty first century unfolds. Friends will need to rely on the patient, quiet, and joyful openness to the spirit within themselves and each other that has always been at the center of CRFM and strong Quaker communities everywhere.