

Common good



Staff photo by Shawn Rocco

Highland Woods, the first housing cooperative in Chapel Hill, was put together by UNC faculty.

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CHAPEL HILL — In the years following World War II, the University of North Carolina experienced an unprecedented population explosion. The "G.I. Bill of Rights" brought a surge of servicemen and their families that descended on the campus for government-funded education.

While on-campus construction was planned to coincide with the jump in admissions, the matter of finding accommodations for the staff to teach these students was a different matter. For new faculty members arriving in Chapel Hill in the early 1950s, there was little affordable housing available to meet the needs of their young families.

"Housing just wasn't available back then, since Chapel Hill was smaller, a tiny little burg," said Judson Van Wyk, an original inhabitant of Highland Woods who wrote a recent history of the development.

With this in mind, a collection of UNC faculty of varying backgrounds and academic disciplines banded together to search out land for housing. That effort resulted in Highland Woods, the first housing cooperative in Chapel Hill. Young faculty of varying backgrounds and academic disciplines banded together to establish a community that thrives today.

Bob Gladstone, a Chapel Hill resident with a degree in architecture from MIT and a master's degree in Regional Planning at UNC, proposed a cooperative housing group to work toward this goal.

"We had strong leaders who had the imagination to start this group," Van Wyk said. "This was a true cooperative. Everyone pitched in and contributed something."

Word of the plans spread quickly among neighbors and colleagues at the university. Those who had recently moved to Chapel Hill joined the cooperative in hopes of finding a solution to the housing problem.

"It was a most exciting time of working together for the common good," said Persis Van Wyk, who with her husband, Judson, was one of the original inhabitants of Highland Woods. "Our meetings were really like what you would envision old town hall meetings to be."

As attendance at the meetings steadily increased, volunteers were assigned to research legal status, articles of incorporation,

identification of suitable land and criteria for membership. Gladstone began to draw up requirements for the 20- to 30-family cooperative, including rates paid by members for land and development costs, and architectural and aesthetic standards.

The optimism of the cooperative's members quickly began to fade when the difficulty of obtaining parcels of land to meet these needs became apparent. Many volunteers dropped out of the project as they discovered other affordable solutions, while a dedicated few doggedly pursued every rumor of an opportunity to purchase land.

Bob Agger, a political science professor, joined Gladstone and Jim Ingram

(an economist who lived in Glen Lennox) and checked on a tract in what is now The Oaks and Meadowmont, but to no avail. Another possibility in what is now The Farm ended fruitlessly when the owner refused to sell. News of a 100-acre farm on Farrington Road with land for only \$100 an acre excited the men, but further exploration of this proposal was discontinued when a majority of the cooperative dismissed the property as too far away.

"We looked in lots and lots of places, but something inhibited us in each place, whether it was price or topography," said Judson Van Wyk. "We knew it would take an awful lot of drive to make something like this successful."

In 1955, a few members were alerted to a 26-acre tract owned by Coker College (a women's school in South Carolina) that could be for sale. The land was between Glenwood School and the Old Mason Farm Road, along UNC property used as a part of the Finley Golf Course.

This area was bequeathed to the endowment of Coker College after the death of UNC's first professor of botany, William Coker. Coker, who established the Coker Arboretum on UNC's campus, had purchased several tracts of land in Chapel Hill in order to enjoy and explore the richness of the trees and foliage there.

With Coker College looking to sell this land, the cooperative was ready to pounce on the chance to secure this highly desirable property. The location was perfect: within walking distance of nearby Glenwood Elementary School and also close to the university.



Photo by Jonathan Coleman

Judson Van Wyk with his dog Amy in his Highland Woods home. Van Wyk was one of the original inhabitants of Highland Woods. At top, dense stands of trees were left to grow between properties.

The cooperative presented a list of its objectives to H.R. Totten, the UNC professor of botany who served as Coker College's representative in negotiations to sell the land. While Totten was sympathetic to the faculty's needs and eager to assist them in establishing an area of beneficial cost and location, he had to obtain the best price for the college. And the cooperative was not alone in its interest in this land.

The Chapel Hill Country Club and its major benefactor, George Watts Hill (who provided initial donations for the UNC Alumni Center), wanted to upgrade its nine-hole golf course to an 18-hole course by expanding it to the east and across U.S. 15-501.

Once the cooperative commenced with the formal duties of electing trustees and securing financial commitments for the purpose of making a formal offer, a bid to purchase the land for \$51,000 was made to Coker College. This bid was enhanced to \$55,000 at the meeting where they and the country club presented

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their cases.

This amount proved to be just enough, and a last-ditch effort by the country club to secure the land failed as Totten informed them that since it was a final auction, no revisions to their bid would be allowed.

Legend has it that Totten was in collusion with the cooperative, and with a wink or nod of his head, signaled Agger and Gladstone (the cooperative's representatives) during the meeting to raise their bid. Another story has it that Hill, sympathetic to the housing needs of young faculty but not ready to "give" the property up without a fight, left his briefcase open and then exited the room during a meeting with the men in the hopes that they would see what he was prepared to bid and adjust their offer.

"Watts Hill was a great friend of young faculty for years, and I think he was on our side," said Van Wyk. "I think he counted on our curiosity to look in the briefcase, but we'll never know."

The early days of construction at Highland Woods were marked by delays and near-disaster. The contractor hired to work on the project had never cut a road before, and he was chosen primarily because he was inexpensive. After a grader ruptured a gas line that was not buried according to code, a disastrous explosion was averted only by swift action to cut off the gas main.

Despite these minor setbacks, development in Highland Woods was aided by the university's decision to install water mains and electric lines at no cost to the community. Officials moved forward with the allocation of lots, which was determined by the order in which the remaining members made down payments on the land (choices on the first 13 lots were

given to the longest-serving members of the cooperative).

Before construction on houses could begin, however, Highland Woods had to seek out Chapel Hill for annexation into the town. The town agreed to pay for sewers and road paving, as long as residents paid for the curb and gutters.

As building of the houses commenced, there were some conflicts. Some residents bickered over the designs of houses that appeared "too cheap" or strayed from accepted aesthetic standards. A hilariously memorable fracas even ensued over whether to allow certain animals, including horses, chickens, goats and guinea pigs within the community. (Ultimately, dogs, cats and other small pets were voted in.)

The houses built in Highland Woods were spread across lots stretching for a half or three-quarters of an acre. This type of construction would be difficult to accomplish today.

"We tend to cluster houses together now when building," said Giles Blunden, an architect in Carrboro. "With the land, building and permit costs, the size of those lots would not make it possible to provide affordable housing."

While the cooperative began as a practical way of obtaining affordable housing for transplanted faculty new to the area, it also realized more idealistic goals. Concentrating such a number of young intellectuals, each equipped with degrees of expertise in their disparate fields, set the stage for a unique environment of living and learning experiences. The fact that everyone in the cooperative would be of similar ages while beginning families also contributed to the special sense of community that would be fostered therein.

"It was an idyllic childhood indeed when you could walk less than a half mile through the woods to school and back without seeing a car or a bus," said Richard Bierck, whose fam-

ily was one of the original 24 in Highland Woods.

Van Wyk attributes the community's success to the visionaries whose strong leadership helped the group persist through tough times. That, along with the necessity they faced in obtaining housing, convinced them to persevere.

"It was a wonderful opportunity, although we didn't think we had enough money to go anywhere else," said Van Wyk. "We all had tight budgets, because the university wasn't paying us much."

Some doubt that such a group could succeed today.

"I think it could be done today, if you could get the land," said Doug Eyre, a Chapel Hill historian and former chair of the UNC geography department. "But with the cost of property now, it might be prohibitive."

And finding affordable housing for faculty is still a major concern.

"Young faculty simply cannot buy homes close to campus," said Eyre. "They typically are relegated to the suburbs, and some farther out of Chapel Hill."

Those associated with the real estate market today still marvel at the work of the cooperative.

"There was a community aspect to what they were doing, and they were way ahead of their time," said Blunden. "There was an academic and intellectual approach to architecture as opposed to just being driven by the market at the time."

As for Highland Woods today, Van Wyk says that this "splendid" little community has been an ideal home. Six of the original families still live there today.

"So either they like living here, or they just couldn't find other jobs," said Van Wyk, laughing. "There has been a strong loyalty to the group here."