

A Thumbnail Sketch of Bryn Gweled Homesteads

- **Origins:** After a half-year of meetings among families interested in homesteading near Philadelphia, 13 charter member families founded Bryn Gweled Homesteads in 1940 as a not-for-profit corporation and purchased a 240-acre farm in Upper Southampton Township, Bucks County, Pennsylvania, for \$18,000, pooling their financial resources to make the purchase.
- Influential **factors in bringing the families together** were their understanding of the economic philosophy of Henry George on land use, and, more immediately, the teachings of Ralph Borsodi and his School of Living in Suffern, New York, on homesteading.
- Almost all of the original 13 families were members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), but the founders were clear that the community should be **inclusive** and open to applicants regardless of race, religion, or nationality—which was very unusual for housing communities in the United States at the time. (About 10 percent of current members are Quakers.)
- The community comprises **240 acres**, with approximately two-acre lots for families and about 80 acres of common land (woods, streams, and a community center). There are 75 houses.
- BG retains ownership of the land and offers lots to families on a **99-year lease**. Families own the house and improvements to the land.
- The **occupations** of community members over the years have varied widely, with an overrepresentation of architects, builders, engineers, teachers, nurses, and social workers. (Three of the early member engineers were involved in the development of television at RCA's David Sarnoff Research Center near Princeton, New Jersey.)
- BG is an **open community** without gates and with no fences between properties (except for confining animals or excluding pests from gardens). People from the surrounding area have been welcomed to enjoy its natural beauty for walks and jogging.
- People in BG **know their neighbors**. We greet each other by first names. We join together for festivities. We have a Health and Welfare Committee that keeps track of and supports people who are ill or have special needs.
- Members are expected to **participate** in the community. We have about 25 committees, and each member is expected to serve on at least two of them. We have monthly work parties to take care of the physical needs of the community, and we enjoy monthly covered dish suppers.
- **Governance** of BG centers in a Homesteads meeting, usually on the first Saturday evening of the month, after the morning work party and the covered dish supper. We have a Board of seven members, elected for overlapping three-year terms. One Board member is elected to serve as president for a one-year term. There are a treasurer and a finance committee appointed by the Board, as well as a few other appointed positions.
- There are three **elected committees**: Membership, Housing, and Nominating.
- The list of 22 **volunteer committees** reveals much about community activities. They are: Bright Gems (monthly newsletter), Children's Activities, Community Activities, Community Center Maintenance, Community Planning (approves construction and renovation plans of members and community property), Environmental Stewardship, Garden (we have a community garden with a deer-proof fence), Grapevine (phone/email messaging), Grounds and Planting, Health and Welfare, 4-Poster (a system to treat deer for Lyme disease-carrying deer ticks), Swimming Pool, Swimming Pool Water Quality, Sports, and Tractor.

- **Amenities** include our swimming pool, tennis courts, a soccer field, our community garden, a network of wooded trails, and a pond.
- For **communications**, BGers rely on an email listserv called the BG List, on which BGers learn not only about BG events but also about the experience of others with plumbers, painters, and services in general; discussion of community issues; and not a small amount of joking. We have a monthly newsletter, *Bright Gems*. BG families set up special mailboxes for hard-copy BG mail that are alongside our postal mailboxes.
- BGers are involved in our **surrounding community**. Individuals have served on the Board of Supervisors of Upper Southampton Township and on various township authorities. In the past, BG members served on the School Board and were influential in improving the quality of public education in the Centennial School District.
- **Former members and offspring** of BG families live all over North America and a few around the world. Some even hold reunions far away. Many keep in touch by subscribing to *Bright Gems* and contributing their writing to it. (One well-known offspring is Mario Capecchi, winner of the 2007 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for his work in molecular genetics.)
- BG maintains its own roads. In order to pay for them, for Community Center maintenance, and for other amenities, member families pay an **assessment** to BG of around \$100 per month. Taxes are paid directly to the township, based on home appraisals and the value of the leased land.
- Most BG houses have their own **septic systems**. (Two decades ago, when the Township threatened to put in sewers, we struck a deal after a lengthy struggle that BG would take responsibility for the proper functioning of all of our septic systems, which would be pumped and inspected every two years. This saved a huge cost to the homeowners and is seen by some as a more environmentally friendly arrangement than sewers.)
- **Utilities** are all underground in order not to mar the beauty of the land. (The founders achieved this by persuading the phone and electric companies to put their wires underground. We explored the development of our own electric plant and phone system, which was an unwelcome prospect to the utilities, and a compromise was reached by which BG provided the ditches and the utilities laid the wire.)
- Many BGers have a strong interest in preventing the degradation of the **environment**. We have deeded part of our common land to the Heritage Conservancy. We have experimental “exclosures” in our woods to counter the effect of grazing by the overpopulation of deer in our surroundings. Many BGers are heavily involved in recycling.
- Bryn Gweled has a **membership procedure** whereby applicants meet with member families to test their fit with BG’s expectation of community participation. Applicants become approved after obtaining a positive vote of 80 percent, after which they are eligible to purchase a house. Home prices in BG are generally lower than in the surrounding community.
- **Contact information:** The BG public website is www.bryngweled.org. The postal address is 1805 Meadow Road, Southampton, PA 18966. The phone number for general information is 215-953-8884.

—Bob Dockhorn, 9/22/13