Paintbrushes and Pruning Hooks: TEN YEARS OF THE GHOST RANCH SERVICE CORPS by Jean Vieten

Picture the noon hour on almost any day in the summer seminar season. A group of people approaches the dining hall from various parts of the Ranch. Some carry tools — paint scrapers or pruning hooks. Tired, warm and cheerful they stack the implements carefully by a table near the window and head for the food line. The Ghost Ranch Service Corps is reporting for lunch. It has been only a day or so since they came together for the first time, meeting after orientation in the coffee lounge to get acquainted and to find out what their time at the Ranch would hold. Already many of them are at home with each other and are beginning to feel connected to the ranch in a way that only those who are involved in tangible, physical ways can feel.

A special part of the seminar program for the last 10 summers now, the Service Corps is a group of volunteers who come, for one week or several, to assist ranch staff in whatever needs doing. Participants pay half the regular cost of room and board (no camping fee) and work about five hours a day. Most feel the benefits are enormous. They include the satisfaction of giving service to Ghost Ranch and becoming a very real part of its on-going life. The high rate of those returning for another year reflects this enthusiasm.

Begun in 1979, with June and Dean Lewis as the first coordinators, the Service Corps was advertised as "an experiment aimed at providing through a small group of creative persons some possible new dimensions to Ghost Ranch life." The language reflected the times — energy crisis and runaway inflation. One of the specific assignments given to the Service Corps was: "Identify and test new styles of community life that are energy conserving, environmentally sound, more dependent on local resources." These themes of simplified lifestyle, ecological stewardship and community interaction have marked the life of both the ranch and the Service Corps in the past decade. The 1979 Service Corps pioneers included such ranch regulars as Dick Hull, Jane Hanna, Paul and Nancy Stevenson, and John, Ruth and Laura Hazleton. True to their charge, they pushed carpooling, organized group tours, and forged farm to kitchen links by harvesting produce from the "appropriate technology" farm and preparing it for dining hall use. They also coordinated worship and inaugurated the paintbrush as the most enduring Service Corps emblem by giving the swimming pool fence its first coat since construction.

Service Corps annals record a great variety of projects. Members have hoed weeds, baked bread, built picnic tables, led hikes, catalogued books, created nature trails, assisted in the recreation program in Abiquiu, and pruned trees. They have worked closely with the Worship Coordinator, being on call to move chairs, usher, and assist in various ways in the daily services. At least once a summer they have made the trip to Kitchen Mesa carrying hammers and paint brushes to repair and refurbish the trail mark-
ers. But mostly, it seems to many of them, they have painted — painted benches, tables, window frames, fences, buildings, buildings, buildings. It is a rare Corps member who does not own at least one article of clothing streaked with Leather Brown (see "Leather Brown" on page 11 of the Spring 1987 issue of the G. R. Journal) or Santa Fe Adobe, the seemingly official colors of the Ghost Ranch maintenance department.

Although much of the work is of a fairly unskilled nature, people with special skills sometimes do have a chance to use them. The curtains in all the Mesa buildings, for instance, were sewn by a Service Corps volunteer one summer. Another was responsible for designing and overseeing the painting of the murals in the children's activity rooms at Pifion. However, the main Service Corps job description might be said to be that of being open and flexible as work needs change from day to day depending on the weather and the latest ranch crisis.

It is the Service Corps Coordinator's job to match the weekly talent pool to the ongoing and special needs of the ranch in consultation with staff in charge of the various ranch departments: housekeeping, library, kitchen, maintenance, Research Farm, ranchlands, etc. The job sometimes includes re-channeling the energies of incoming "efficiency experts" whose eagerness to help puts the ranch in danger of being re-created in the spirit of Pittsburgh, Detroit, or Los Angeles. The Coordinator also has responsibility for facilitating a sense of community in the Service Corps, usually a fairly easy goal to achieve. Past coordinators, in addition to the Lewises, have been Doug and Kathy Bartlett, Gary and Helen Hall, Ruth and Walt Mehl, Ruth and John Hazleton, Bob and Marilyn Davidson, and Jean Vieten.

The schedule of the Service Corps work day precludes members being concurrently enrolled in a seminar. However, special jobs sometimes lend themselves to special opportunities. When John Ehrlichman (of Watergate infamy) visited the ranch to address a seminar on Politics and the Media seated in the back of the room were a group from the Service corps busily hemming drapes for the new Headquarters Building. They were involved in a marathon sewing session to ready the drapes for hanging in time for the formal dedication of the building, to take place in two days time. Another group remembers crouching on the floor at Cottonwood pitting cherries into a huge bowl while listening to Rosemary Radford Ruether's seminar on Liberation Theology.

Each Service Corps season is memorable in its own way. 1981, for example, will be long thought of as "the year Staff House was painted." (Some Corps alumni ears still echo with the sound of the rock music popular among off-duty College Staffers that summer.) 1982 saw the painting of the fronts of most of the Mesa buildings. But at least one Service Corps group remembers it as "the year of the Pine Family" when national staff members Vic Jameson and Jack Purdy took a turn on the Corps and entertained while they painted with tales of the Pines and all their children (see sidebar). And the summer of 1988 will surely go down in the annals of ranch history as "the year of the killer mistletoe," as Corps members literally wrestled with ranch juniper trees in an attempt to save them from succumbing to that rapidly encroaching parasite.

What kind of people make up this group of volunteers? For one thing, they are of all ages. The typical Service Corps week includes someone from each decade from the teens through the sixties (and often the seventies and eighties). And they have a great variety of occupations: teachers, accountants, physicians, geologists, engi-
neers, a college president or two, pastors, students... Although most are Presbyterians, a significant number are not. And while the majority of persons enlisting for this work experience have been to the ranch in years past, it is always amazing to discover that most weeks of Service Corps include at least one person there for the first time. Often they have come with friends, or from local churches, wanting to explore the Ghost Ranch program so that they can return with good information for their congregation. Other common Service Corps "types" include former College Staffers, people burned out from meetings and seminars in everyday life who want a chance to work with their hands, and some who are eager to do whatever necessary to stay at the ranch for as long as possible. The common bond is almost always a desire to be helpful. And, although special abilities and experience are always appreciated and some-
times even used, the main qualification is a willing heart.

A sense of humor is another common bond that runs through most Service Corps groups, in combination with a refusal to take themselves or their work too seriously. This is perhaps best reflected in the slogans which have developed over the years, including “Slow but Sloppy,” “She/he also serves who only stands and waits,” and (perhaps the favorite) “We do windows, but we don’t do rattlesnakes!”

Service Corps participants usually feel that Ghost Ranch has given far more to them than they could ever give back in hours of work. Some have arrived full of anxiety, stressed and wounded by the world. Others come with griefs old and new. Some are in times of transition or looking for new purpose in their lives. Ghost Ranch and the Service Corps experience provide a time and a place to get in touch with the deep resources of the spirit, and be surrounded by people supportive in that process. For many there is at least a measure of healing or calming, a renewed sense of direction and energy as they return home. Long term friendships are often forged, and a deeply felt relationship with the ranch and its program is developed. A new common bond has emerged—a commitment to Ghost Ranch. The spirit of the “magic place” is having its way again!

If you could look into the future you would see many of these same people arriving again a summer or two hence. Practically before unpacking they are out wandering the place with a certain gleam in their eyes. “Looks like Aspen needs painting again. I remember the summer we did that . . .” “The swimming pool fence has held up real well through the winter” . . . “That sign is down on the road to the campground. Bet we’ll be getting on that right away . . .” Yes, their eyes do take in the glory of the mesas and awesome Pedernal. But their eyes also see, well, almost everything. And it is so good to be home—back at the ranch!

Jean Vieten lives in Redlands, California where she teaches elementary school. Three grown children and a grandchild live nearby. Jean has been a vital part of the Service Corps for eight years, four of which she was the Coordinator.

Excerpts from

The Pine Family Saga

The founder of the family was Al Pine. He was a fine, upstanding specimen whose roots were deep in the mountains of Northern New Mexico. Al married an Italian lady named Ponderosa. They had a number of children:

The first, who was a hermit, is remembered as Lonesome. Then there was the sweet daughter, Sugar, and the not-so-sweet daughter, Knotty.

The second son, Jack, was followed by the cowardly son, Yellow Pine. The next two sons migrated, one to China where he became known as Long Needle, an acupuncturer expert. The other went to Hawaii where he developed the pine-apple business.

Then, there was the fat son, Porky. Ponderosa died and Al married her sister, Lobolly. More offshoots sprouted from this union.

Bristlecone, their first, was born crabby and remained that way the rest of his life. A sticky daughter they named, Scotch, and a more flamboyant one, Torrey.

Sue-pine was either lazy or of ill repute.

Despite its size, the family doesn’t live there anymore. A lumber company moved in and cut them all down in their youth.

This can go on and on—
but you get the idea!

Drawing by Laurence P. Byers