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## Crow's Caws

by Crow Cohen



### HOWL

The radical feminist era (1970s and early 80s) started a few institutions that remain viable to this day - a battered women's shelter, a rape crisis service, a women's health center and HOWL. Huntington Open Women's Land is a resource that is not utilized as heavily as those other institutions, but it sits quietly in the gorgeous hills of Huntington Center on a dead-end dirt road perking along at its own country pace. It could be used for women's gatherings of all sorts - spiritual retreats; construction projects; gardening and other land use workshops; festivals; camping weekends, you name it. I often question why women in the local area don't think of HOWL when they're searching around for a place to escape to the country for a night or two.

HOWL was acquired in the early 80s when I left the country for a few years, so I wasn't one of the founding mothers. At that time our feminist newspaper, *Commonwoman*, was winding down after six years of publication; and the collective involved in producing the paper was looking around for land to stabilize the community. Several women's land projects had been cropping up all around the country envisioned as a safe haven for women as the world seemed to be going rapidly down the tubes. HOWL was unique because it wasn't owned by a particular woman who could kick out her sisters when the going got rough. Instead, HOWL was bought by one member of our community initially and after a few years of fundraising, was bought back by a collective of women and put in trust so no one could own it. It consisted of 50 acres of meadows and woods, a rundown farmhouse and a dilapidated barn.

Most of the women involved were not crazy about rules so the by-laws were never strictly enforced. During the Reagan years when the economy was changed to favor the rich and many social action programs disappeared, a lot of us had to stabilize ourselves financially since we were getting older. Few felt they could afford to live way out in the countryside and hold down a decent paying job or wanted to live in such a rundown place with questionable plumbing, unpotable water and unpredictable houseguests that would show up from who-knew-where and stay for who-knew-how-long. As a matter of fact, HOWL developed a questionable reputation that has been very difficult to live down over the years. The collectives who tried to keep it going often found themselves at odds with traveling women who wanted to crash there for months. There were ugly confrontations that made for an unstable atmosphere - perhaps one of the consequences of not committing to upholding agreed-upon standards. Anarchism can only work when people conscientiously work on taking responsibility for their behavior. On the other hand, HOWL's survival may also be attributed to its looseness. One thing is certain. Whoever lives up at HOWL has to be there with the intention of sharing the land.

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In the early 90s, a group attempted to pull the project together before they lost it for good for non-payment of taxes. The house was emptied out and closed to give it a thorough cleaning and to renovate it enough so it was livable again. Two apartments were built in the barn designated as "Crones Space" and are now occupied by two middle-aged residents. A pond was dug, the plumbing was improved (shower, hot-running water - such luxury!), an outdoor sauna was built, gardens were beautified and maintained, a water filter system was installed. Little by little the collective was stabilized, and women were willing to live up there as carekeepers for longer stretches of time. Over the years HOWL has featured several women's gatherings: a national Jewish lesbian festival, a women's 12 Step retreat, solstice celebrations, and an annual Native American Sundance ritual - their biggest project to date.

HOWL holds their collective meetings the second Sunday of the month - a potluck and business meeting open to anyone interested in what makes HOWL tick. Whenever I have an urge to pitch a tent under a wide open sky in a sweeping meadow ringed by mountains, or do some back country skiing on the Catamount Trail (which is easily accessible through HOWL's woods), or simply wake up in a cute country house with a cozy wood stove and company for breakfast, I drive the 25 miles over to Huntington Open Women's Land and am sure to be welcomed by an assortment of women. I'm never quite sure who will be up there, but I enjoy being surprised. Call (802) 434-DYKE and invite yourself over. They'll be happy to hear from you.

*Crow Cohen is a lesbian feminist living in Winooski.*

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