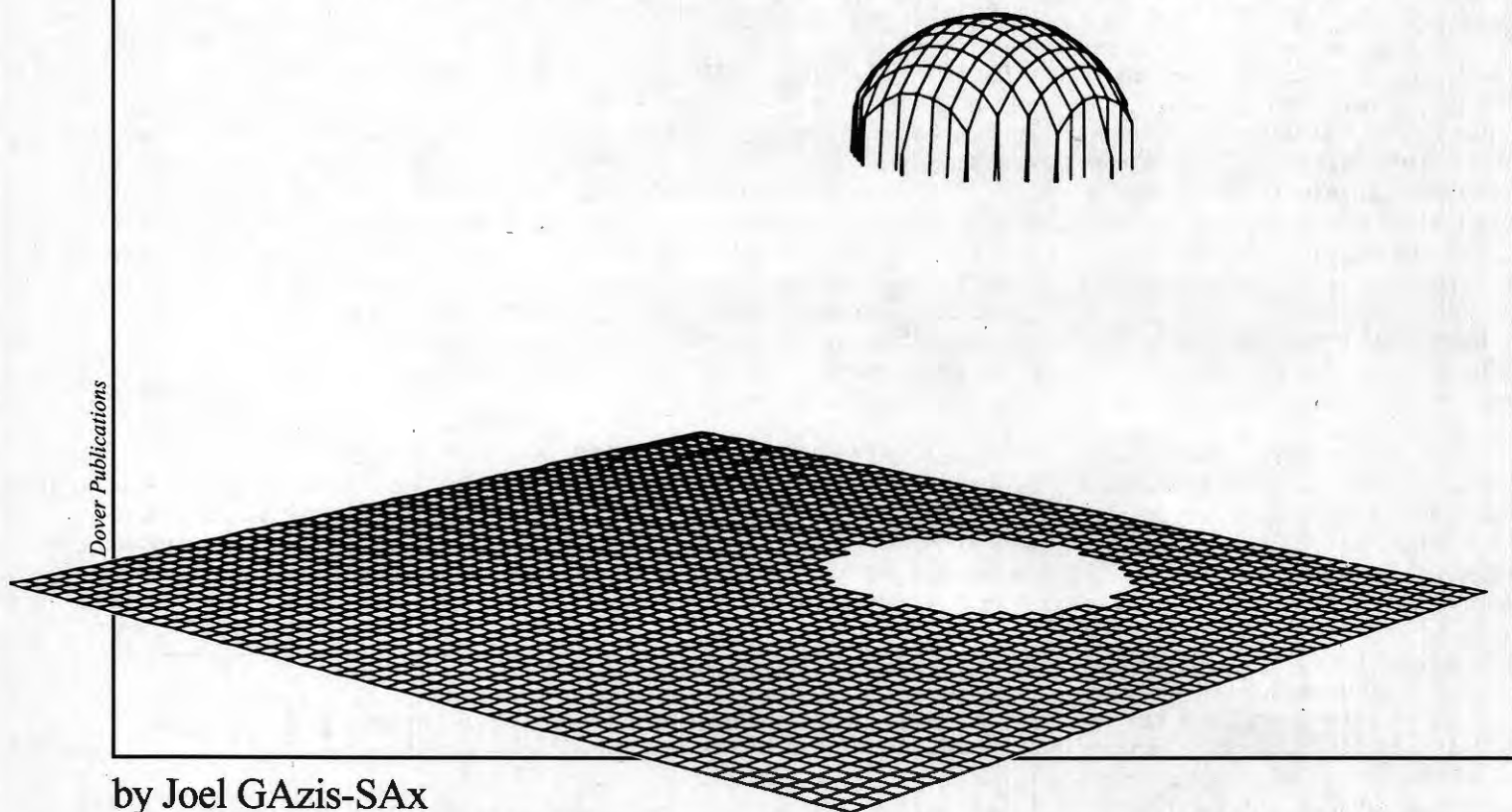


The Invisible Meetinghouse



Dover Publications

by Joel Gazis-Sax

I am the keeper of an invisible meetinghouse. Many Friends and others attend here, although I have never met most of them. They speak as the Spirit moves them, share their concerns, and just chat. They come from far places—in fact, they stay in their homes—but their words can reach other Friends and me in minutes. For almost three years, I have been working alongside Friends without meeting them, seeing them, or speaking to them. Together, we have been building a new kind of Quaker community: an electronic one using our personal computers and the APC electronic networks.

Our meeting on a hard disk began in February 1989. With the spiritual guidance and support of Wisconsin Friend Scott Crom and Pennsylvania Friend Robert Shaffer, I started the Quaker Elec-

Joel Gazis-Sax facilitates the Quaker Electronic Project and the ex-Yugoslavia conference on PeaceNet. During the Gulf War, he facilitated the Middle East conferences. He and his wife, Lynn, are members of Palo Alto (Calif.) Meeting.

tronic Project. QEP is an electronic conference based on PeaceNet and shared with EcoNet, ConflictNet, GreenNet, the Web, Pegasus, and NicaNet. The conference is a place on the PeaceNet hard disk that collects articles by Friends and Friends of Friends on Peace, justice, and environmental issues. There is also a lot of just plain talk.

When he describes the idea of a conference to Friends who are not computer literate, my fellow Palo Alto Friend, Don Harris (one of the few electronic Quakers whom I can pick out in a crowd), says something like this: Imagine some people seated in a circle. Each person has a typewriter. From time to time, someone types out a message and throws it in the circle for everybody to read. The new message goes into a folder. The other folks in the circle read what is in the folder. If the Spirit moves them, they can write their own responses and add them to the folder. Or they can write new articles and create new folders to go into the circle.

Every now and again, somebody from another group of Friends sitting somewhere else arrives with new articles and responses to bring to the other group. The circle where the folders get stacked is the PeaceNet hard disk. The Friends are actually sitting many miles away from one another at their personal computers. The other circle of Friends is another computer network, and the person who carries new articles between groups is a communications link between the networks.

Through these links, QEP can be shared by Friends in the United States, Europe, Australia, Sweden, New Zealand, Central and South America, and Canada. With the arrival of GlasNet and AdriaNet, we can reach Friends in the Soviet Union and Slovenia.

For those of us who use it, QEP is an ongoing yearly meeting that Friends around the world can join any time. It is, at once, a library, a meetinghouse, a social center, and a bulletin board. We have created both a community and a resource

center as exemplified by the Friends who use it:

Scott Crom of Beloit (Wis.) Meeting, the pioneer among Quaker electronic activists, posts the weekly FCNL Legislative Updates every Friday. "For some years," he writes, "we had been calling Washington to hear the tapes, sometimes attaching a recorder to the telephone so we could replay the tape and get the correct names, bill numbers, etc. Having the material available in 'written' form was a great convenience." It's a convenience now available to Friends not only on PeaceNet, but also the Inter-Net, UseNet, Genie, and Compuserve.

Alastair MacIntosh and other Friends from Edinburgh Meeting, Scotland, created a daily synthesis of news and information from GreenNet and the alternative press. Gulfwatch was distributed by mail to Scottish clergy and, through the APC Middle East conferences, activists all over the world.

Margaret Phillips, clerk of the American Friends Service Committee's St. Louis Program Committee, now facilitates a criminal justice conference on PeaceNet. "I'm not a Friend myself," she writes, "but I feel a bond to Quakers. QEP has welcomed Friends and non-Friends alike; no one is made to feel like an outsider. . . . I have found a marvelously supportive atmosphere. I have not been as brave as some participants who have poured their inner thoughts and pain onto the screen for all to read and pick over, but I have learned a bit of courage from those who have. It's as if I have gotten to know some people from the inside before ever knowing them from the outside first."

Pablo Stanfield of Salmon Bay (Wash.) Friends is another prison activist who attends QEP. He has been writing an inline Faith and Practice to supplement the on-line bibliography of Quakerism to which many QEP Friends contributed.

"For me," FWCC Right Sharing Program Secretary Johan Maurer writes, "written communication is almost effortless through QEP. It has much of the convenience of calling on the telephone, but with the added dimension of preserving both sides of the conversation. I've exchanged information via PeaceNet with other Friends who needed addresses of meetings and churches in other parts of the world, news about Friends United Meeting and issues of realignment, bibli-

ographies of Quaker materials for newcomers, and spiritual encouragement of many kinds.

"There are several Friends on PeaceNet," Johan continues, "whom I feel free to contact for advice on aspects of my work with FWCC and especially Right Sharing. (Two of them, for example, have helped me stay in contact with FWCC Right Sharing work in Africa.) These electronic resources help me feel well connected with the wider world of Quakers and Quaker concerns from my home office in small-town Ohio."

While I was writing this article, I especially valued the notes that Robert Shaffer of East London (Pa.) Meeting shared with me. Robert numbered for me the ways in which QEP strengthens the expression of Friends' concerns. For example, he found that QEP enhanced our testimony to equality by putting "the emphasis on the written communication and eliminat[ing] those initial prejudices and biases of sexism, ageism, racism, physical appearance, etc., which we bring to face-to-face encounters." Simplicity was another concern which his use of QEP enhanced. "QEP is a much simpler, more efficient, more expedient, and less costly way for Friends/friends dispersed over the globe to communicate and collaborate on timely and urgent issues. . . . [It is] certainly not a substitute for all meetings but it is a viable option in many cases."

QEP and its associated Quaker networks, Quaker-L, Quaker-P, and UseNet's soc. religion. quaker, help Friends in many ways. For me, it helped me share the needs of the people of former Yugoslavia through my electronic newsletter MIRacles. During the Gulf War, I

and many other Friends were frustrated by the lack of firsthand accounts from the war zones. We knew we were not getting the whole story. When I traveled to Croatia, I shared my notes of interviews and lists of needs with Friends back in the United States. Electronic communication enabled me to get reports to Friends throughout the APC network in a matter of hours. MIRacles helped Friends see how the war divided families and neighbors. It also revealed the source for hope in the large and active Serbian peace movement. Patty Lyman of University Friends, Seattle, Wash., Steve Harris of Humboldt Friends, Arcata, Cal., and David Finke of Chicago, Ill., were some of the many Friends who downloaded and reprinted my reports.

Other Friends use QEP and the other Quaker networks for speaking to their concerns. For Germantown, Pa., Mennonite Art Rosenblum, it provides a receptive audience for his campaign to abolish all military systems, which he calls "satanism." "Free-style Quaker" Cathy Flick of Richmond, Ind., shares her concerns for human rights and tax protest. Arlin Adams, a Methodist who became a Friend after reading QEP, uses it to express his own deeply-held spirituality.

QEP is, then, for the activist who wants to reach beyond her or his local meeting. It is for the shy Friend who finds it easier to interact through the computer than face to face. It is for the Friend who lives where there are no Friends near. It is for anyone who, amid the confusion of our post-Gulf War world, needs to reach out to find the Light. We live far away, but we all come to meet in our invisible meetinghouse, suspended by telephone wire and by satellite. □

To Access PeaceNet

You will need a computer, a modem, communications software, and a telephone line. Your local computer dealer can sell you the hardware and software you need for your computer. Joel GAZIS-SAX recommends that you get at least a 1200 baud modem (2400 is faster).

To get started, write Inter-Global Communications at 18 DeBoom St., San Francisco, CA 94107, or call (415) 442-0220. Or, with a credit card, you can sign up online (a) from home by

having your computer dial (415) 322-0284 (N-8-1), or (b) from an Internet machine by typing "telnet igc.org". Then type "new" at the login prompt and password = (carriage return). Fill out the information as requested. Be sure to include "Quakers" and "Friends" among your organizations. Canadian Friends can contact The Web, 401 Richmond St. West, Suite 104, Toronto, Ont. M5V 3A8 or call (416) 596-0212.