

Dan's Papers

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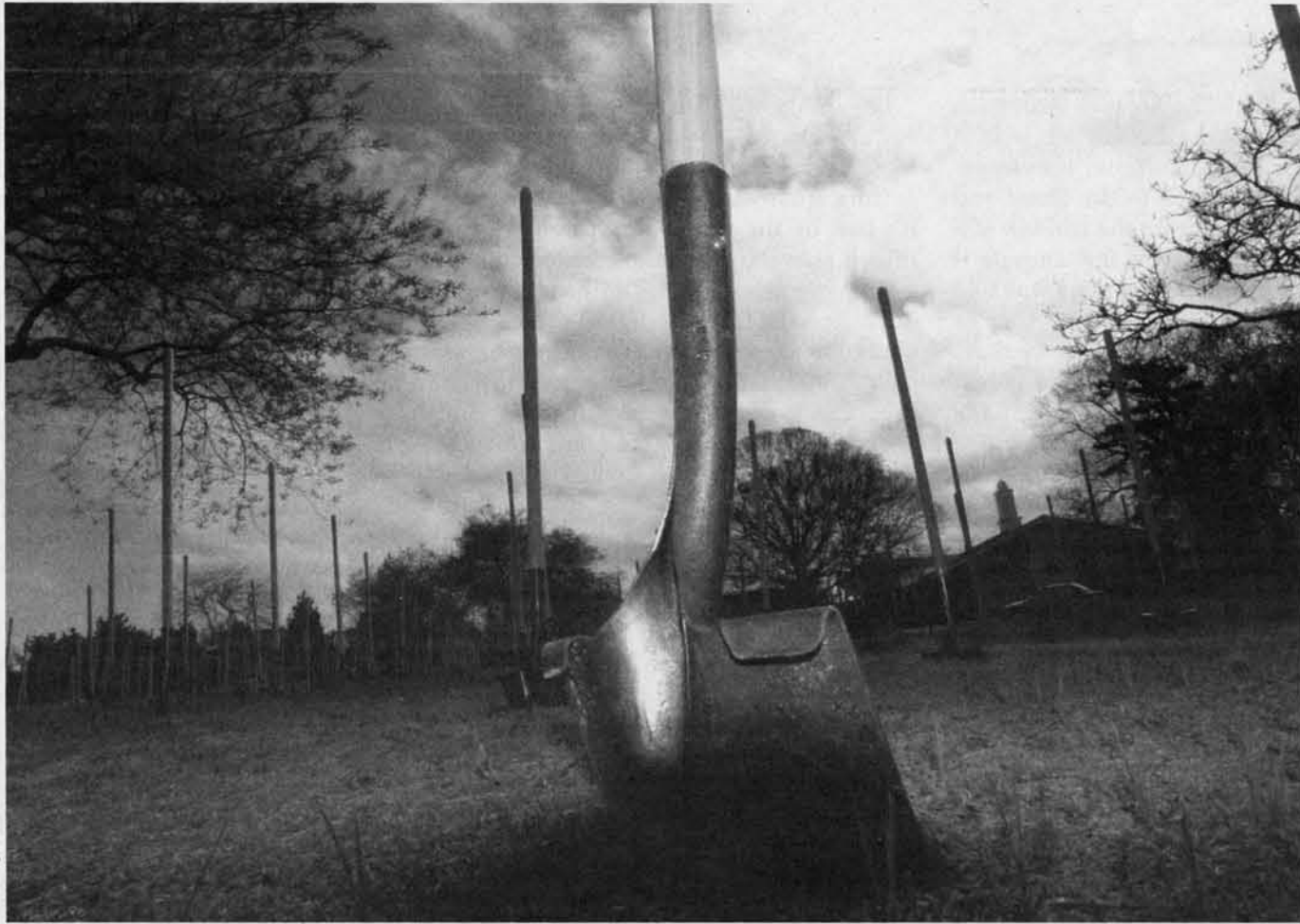


Photo by Christian McLean

At Southampton College

Shovel This

A Flock of Shovels Tries to Make Its Way to the Land of Milk & Honey

By Christian McLean

"Grove" a site-specific installation by California-based sculptor John Hillis Sanders, has been on display on the grounds of Southampton College since April 25th and will remain until June 6th. The rows of shovels protruding from the earth have been interpreted as a spiritual work symbolizing growth, change, and rebirth. The writer of this article has another interpretation.

It's a slow spring for shovels on the East End. "The work just isn't there," said Peter Scoops, President of SOLO (Shovel Operation Labor Organization). "But we've unionized and I think the summer will be better," he added.

For right now, the outlook doesn't seem so bright. Since April 25th, hundreds of long-handled shovels have gathered at Southampton College in an attempt to sort out a solution to the labor shortage and claim to be holding assembly until June 6th when they will be forced to disband from the college.

Clearly there was confusion for some as to why the shovels, which have migrated from the timber forests of California and steel factories in Pennsylvania, have made their home here in the Hamptons, but the truth is, it happens year after year. "Shovels are out here every summer, but by this time of year they're usually working. They're on construction sites, they're on landscaping trucks," a local Southampton resi-

dent told reporters.

Many blame the seeming prevalence of shovels on a slower-than-usual real estate season. With fewer people building houses and renting, there is less work in construction and landscaping. "It's a trickle down system, and at the bottom are all the shovels. I wish there was something we could do about it, but there isn't," said Betty Housale of Housale Realty. And that's just it, there doesn't seem to be anything anyone can do about it and it is tearing the Hamptons in half.

Not everyone is behind the shovels, some even calling them and their attempt to organize a blight on the community. In a recent event

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at Seven-Eleven, where the shovels gather on weekday mornings looking for anyone with a need to dig a hole, slurs like "mud harvester" and comments like "Go back to the forest you came from," were shouted from the window of a passing truck. When I asked a few shovels if they were offended by the comments, I was told that it happened all the time, that they've grown used to it. "We're here to work, we don't want to upset the applecart, but we're gonna dig ourselves in and stay," said Woody Handel.

And dig in they have. Through heavy rains and stormy weather, the shovels have stood tall in Southampton; not verbally voicing their opinions, but through a somber show of solidarity, these tools have made their voices heard.

Talking to a vacationing snow shovel, I was told, "the winter was great, there was steady work, with overtime." The snow shovel had heard about the rally and thought she would stop by and show her support adding, "There are women shovels too, shovels with children. Shovels that need food and shelter."

The influx of shovels has resulted in a shortage of housing. Tool sheds are filled to the brim in some locations, and angered neighbors are getting frustrated. "First it's one shovel, then it's two, by the end of May there are twelve or fifteen shovels, plus rakes, hedge clippers, and g-d knows what else! The door barely closes anymore and by midnight, there's ten hoes packed in there as well. It's infuriating. Did you hear that crash? That was my property value dropping," a Noyac man commented. But those shovels are the fortunate ones. Naive shovels have arrived under the promise of a bed, only to discover it is nothing more than a flower bed and spend their nights in the cold and rain.

Some shovels have been lucky; they've found cushy jobs as window models in hardware stores. But even then, it's not easy street. "For one thing, they're calling me a scab, and for another, keeping the same pose for twelve hours a day isn't exactly a walk in the park. I mean, it's not ditch digging, but it's not exactly the good life."

Sadly, there are thousands of stories about

shovels that have come out to the Hamptons with a strong handle, a hard head and a do-anything mindset, only to find themselves without work. Peter Scoops seems to think SOLO is a step in the right direction, that an organized labor union will lead to jobs, jobs which the shovel community desperately needs to survive.

It seems that whether the Hamptons wants the shovels or not, they're here for the season. "We're not about to give up," said Mr. Scoops, "and by golly, we're not going to bury our heads in the sand and pretend that we don't know what's going on in the community. We deserve proper representation, and I feel that through hard work and keeping a stiff upper lip, we'll come out on top."

So if you pass by Southampton College and see strong, hard working shovels standing in rows of brotherhood and solidarity, think about planting a tree, or visiting your local hardware store to adopt a shovel of your own. Think about what it's going to take to help rectify the situation in your own backyard.