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## Going 'natural'

### Walking Weekends kick off with history, nudity

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WOODSTOCK, Conn. — If the hikers were embarrassed to see the naked man reading a newspaper at the pool, they did not make their feelings known. After all, they knew what they were in for: a nearly three-hour walking tour of wooded trails that just happened to be on the property of a nudist camp.

The tour, "Historical Woodland Walk," was one of more than 90 walks scheduled over two weekends as part of the Quinebaug-Shetucket Heritage Corridor's 14th annual Walking Weekends. Nearly 60 people yesterday trekked through a few miles of beautiful trails on the property of Solair Recreation League, off Brickyard Road.

It was a tour that few of the hikers would ever be able to take again, as the property is normally closed to the public. Located in northeastern Connecticut since 1935, Solair is one of the oldest nudist camps in the country.

So, while visitors learned much about the history of the area, they also had the opportunity to learn about a way of life that is often hidden from the public eye. Solair has 450 acres of land, and 160 cabins for year-round residents. Many of Solair's 250 members choose not to use their full names, for privacy purposes. One member, Linda, explained that many fear their employers would not understand nudism, which she called relaxing.

"It's a closed community for obvious reasons," said Tish Ross, general manager of Laurel Ridge Inc., which operates Solair. The Southbridge resident explained that the area's many trails are generally reserved for nude hiking.

"[The trails] are really a big focal point for all our visitors," she said.

Jack S., another Solair member, led a tour group through a few miles of woods. Only about a fifth of the walkers, he said, were nudists.

Full clothing was required for the hike.

Jack led the attentive group into the woods. About a half mile in, he stopped to point out Lebanon Brook, which feeds into Lebanon Hill Reservoir in Southbridge. This area, he explained, is rich with wildlife.

Jack, who has a cabin on Solair property, said he was having coffee one morning when he saw some deer grazing.

"I thought, even the deer here are nudists; they're so relaxed," Jack said, smiling. Farther into the woods, the group stopped next to a large, stone foundation of what used to be a barn.

The Gates, the family who owned the barn, were loyalists during the American Revolutionary War. Revolutionaries, Jack explained, forced the Gates to run off to Nova Scotia, and burned down their house.

Their fireplace, which dates back to the 1700s, was still intact.

"I'm amazed that after all these years, it's still in the shape that it's in," Jack said. Another story that came out of yesterday's tour involved an 18th century family



*Brennan Cipro photo*

**Hikers at the "Historical Woodland Walk," in Woodstock, Conn., took in the sights of "the Last Green Valley" -- a beautiful canopy of trees and, at one point, a nudist camp.**

and a few Indians. The foundation of the family's home, like the Gates', is still visible.

In the winter of 1756, Jack explained, the man of the house left his wife and three children during a storm to go into town and sell cornmeal. The night after he left, his wife heard a knock at the door. When she opened it, there were three Indian braves.

The woman let the Indians in, and made them a "Johnny cake," or, pancake. The next morning, the Indians made her children moccasins.

Finally, the storm broke. The husband was still not home. Over the next two mornings, the Indians left the family various gifts, including deer and corn.

When the husband returned to his family, he became friends with the Indians.

Legend has it, Jack said, that when the Indian chief died, they were the only ones who knew the location of his grave.

Randy and Kerrie Hoover, of Woodstock, found the stories fascinating. They stood outside Solair's clubhouse after the hike was over.

The couple, which moved here from Missouri three years ago, brought their border collie, T.J., along for the hike.

"It's nice to get out and meet some people here in the neighborhood," Kerrie said.

"We never would have come here otherwise," her husband added.

*For a complete listing of next weekend's walking tours, go to [www.thelastgreenvalley.org](http://www.thelastgreenvalley.org).*

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