

Albert Appel  
By Lorelei Sontag

As the crow flies, Albert Appel's farm in Elmer, New Jersey is a scant 30 miles from Philadelphia, his urban birthplace. He began as a city boy, but for almost seven decades now he's been chief cook and bottle washer of his own promised land.

He's a man who respects and identifies with children, especially the rabble rousers. "They should have the experience of doing it wrong and it didn't kill you. It keeps you from being really angry at everybody." So many children, including his own, have gone off from this farm to play music, make art, grow and cook good food, craft things with their hands, and try out life for themselves. He's is so proud of the children, and the music.

Albert Appel was born between the world wars, when everything was changing, especially for the Jews. His parents gave their son violin lessons, and sent him to a fine academic high school (where, he says, he mostly slept). While other high-achieving sons of immigrants were flocking into business and the professions, young Albert was moved, instead, by a spirit of practical idealism.

So, when it was time for him to set out into the world, Albert Appel left home with a dream in his pocket and a violin. His dream was to become a farmer, and become a farmer he did. But it was the violin that changed everything.

While World War II was raging, Albert studied and worked other people's land until, at the age of 22, he was able to buy his own farm. He and his first wife, a young refugee pianist, started a family. Friends brought their children to the farm to play music and taste the freedom of the countryside. In 1960 the idea came to him: Start a summer music and arts camp for children. So Albert Appel took a chicken farm and a violin and built a world.

Now, Albert is in his 10th decade of life. The summer camp has grown into a year-round music, arts, and farm center. He lives with his wife across the country road. He reads, listens to music, plays with kittens, remembers stories, forgets names. "I know I'm privileged," he says. "I've gotten to do what I like."

He says other people do all the work now. As for him, he plays his violin every day in a big, sunny room. He's not practicing. He's living. He says the music has another kind of feeling when you've heard it so many times before. The violin is his old friend, the music a pentimento of sounds, more beautiful for all the memories it carries.

Albert Appel is a man who knows how to grow a dream. You work hard, you make it as beautiful as you can, and you invite everyone. And you have a really good time. Appel Farm: Albert Appel built it, and the people came.