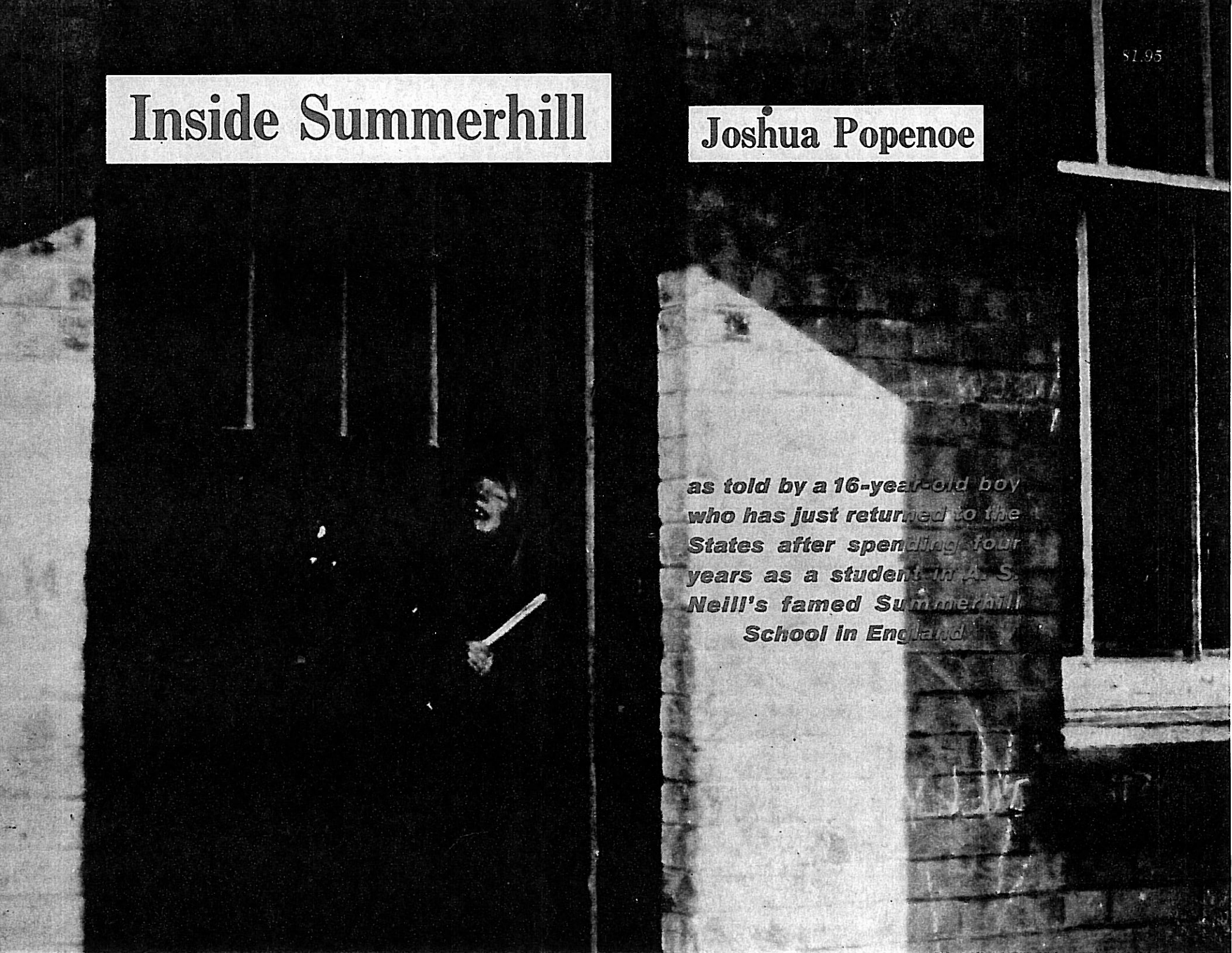


# Inside Summerhill

Joshua Popenoe

*as told by a 16-year-old boy  
who has just returned to the  
States after spending four  
years as a student in A. S.  
Neill's famed Summerhill  
School in England*



# Inside Summerhill

JOSHUA POPENOE

*with candid photographs by the author*

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*To Neill*

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Most kids weren't very careful about cleaning up properly after gorging themselves. Invariably, crumbs of cookies, etc. were found on the floor of the room of the guilty party, and he was exposed.

I only broke into the kitchen twice: once during my third year, and once during my fourth year. Not because I was a crook, but because I had a moral obligation to myself I had to fulfill. And when I had done it, my heart was at rest.

#### WHAT KIND OF A SCHOOL IS SUMMERHILL?

SUMMERHILL, in case you haven't gathered by now, is a "free" school which has been going on in England for 46 years. It runs on a basis of self-government. Everybody from the youngest child right up to Neill has an equal vote. Neill, the founder of Summerhill, is 86. His basic philosophy is that if a child is given love and complete approval to do as he pleases—provided that what he does is neither dangerous to himself nor annoying to others—then he will grow up to be a happier, more mature adult.

All lessons are optional. The idea is that if a child is allowed to play as long as he likes, when he finally decides he wants to learn something, the motivation is entirely his own.

*INSIDE  
SUMMERHILL*



He will obviously learn more quickly and thoroughly this way than under force. There are no grades nor report cards.

At Summerhill, the emotions come before the intellect. Always! Helping a child to be happy in life is far more important than training him to be another Einstein.

#### FREEDOM—NOT LICENSE

SOME PEOPLE get the idea that because we are a free school, there are no rules, and that everyone does as he pleases. This is not so. When a person infringes in any way on someone else's rights, we don't consider that freedom. We have an incredibly long list of laws made by the community to protect the rights of others from inconsiderate people.

Moreover, there's a list of safety rules laid down by Neill and his wife, Ena. For example, one safety rule is that kids under a certain age may not possess matches or knives. These safety rules are arbitrary, and are not subject to change by the weekly General Meeting.



## THE GENERAL MEETING

THE GENERAL MEETING is held on Saturday evening. All the school business, both general and personal, is discussed. Kids and teachers can make proposals about the school rules, or can bring a charge against another individual. Or anything else can be brought up. A vote is taken to settle the issue. Each student and each member of the staff has one vote. Attendance at the meeting is not compulsory, but most kids attend because they don't want any new laws passed behind their backs.

There is a secretary and a chairman at each meeting. The secretary is a volunteer who writes down all that happens in the meetings for future reference in the case of conflicting memories over a certain law. The secretary keeps the job for as long as he or she wants to. As far as I'm concerned, the job is a royal pain up the ass, because you have to be able to write very fast, and then be able to read your writing later on. The chairman changes each week, being picked during the week by the chairman of the previous week.

The chairman has the difficult job of keeping the meeting in order. He calls on those persons whose hands are raised, and he can fine or throw out anyone who is making a disturbance. To be chairman is a most difficult task, because most of the small children soon lose patience. At first, they start to play with each

INSIDE  
SUMMERHILL





other and make noise. Then, they may decide to put on a performance for their convenient, built-in audience. And they are superbly stubborn about leaving. Being chairman is very frustrating. Several times, I seriously considered having those kids tied and locked up somewhere.

There is no strict seating order during the meeting; people are sprawled out in every imaginable position. Little children find loving arms wherever they sit. A nice scene.

#### THE BANK ROBBERIES AND HOW THEY WERE DEALT WITH

ONLY ONCE IN A great while *does* it stop being a nice scene. That happened only once in the entire four years I spent at Summerhill. Some of us became so angry we overstepped the rules and took the law into our own hands. It wasn't just a few kids who acted this way; the group included Neill's wife and some other members of the staff. Of course, it had been building up to this for the last couple of terms; the incredible scene was a showdown.

Eight-, nine-, and ten-year olds are the ones who usually disrupt things, and there are ways that the general meeting can handle them. One way is to reward the leader of the group, and

suggestions were virtually ignored. End-of-Term tradition is not easily broken. More's the pity!

Now that there is such a nice swimming pool, I thought it would be great to have an End-of-Term party for a whole day once a year at the end of the Summer Term. It could be held outdoors, and all the money that the End-of-Term Committee earned could go to buying food for a giant barbecue. People could just swim and have a good time. One drawback of the traditional End-of-Term party is that most of the ex-Summerhillians and parents who come to visit usually go down to the pub during the evening, coming back sloshed and unpleasant. Having the party during the day might hopefully narrow down that number, since many folks don't like to start drinking in the morning. I guess it's none of my business anymore, though, because I'm no longer a student at the school.

#### SCHOOL PLAYS

EOT IS NOT THE ONLY occasion for dramatic presentations. Plays are often put on. I remember once being in a gangster play written by Neill. After a couple of rehearsals, the rest of the cast and myself conferred. We then fired Neill as director for being too authoritarian. He had been demanding loud



speech and he had required certain precise movements. We then asked the English teacher to come and direct us. She did, and the play was a great success.

For me, the funniest and most entertaining plays are those performed by the youngest kids. Sometimes they are only four years old. Their plays have no structure and no rehearsed dialogue; the only continuity is in the general idea of the theme. They just get up on the stage, and virtually all they do is play, completely forgetting about the audience.

Every Sunday, Neill conducts a class in spontaneous acting. He thinks up a hypothetical situation; and without the use of any props, kids will volunteer to act it out. For example, he once suggested that someone pretend to be cracking open a safe in someone's store when Neill, acting as the owner, walks in and catches the thief red-handed. What would the thief do or say?

There have been some extremely clever answers to some of these situations. Unfortunately, in recent months, this activity has not been too successful due primarily to the great preponderance of very young kids at the school.

Sometimes on Sunday evenings, instead of a session of spontaneous acting, a discussion is held. This discussion is



different from the general meeting because, as a rule, only the older kids are allowed to take part. The topics usually cover general rather than specific problems. There is much active participation in these discussions, partly because of Neill's habit of making some outrageous statement in order to get the participants to react heatedly.

#### THE SCHOOL POPULATION

THE SCHOOL IS GOING through a rather bad patch at the moment, as it does every five or six years when there are not enough older kids to keep the younger ones in check. In a school like Summerhill there has to be some sort of balance between the age groups, or disaster occurs. The concept of freedom without license is very hard to instil in very young kids; but if they come in contact with older people living that way, they are quick to follow the good example. That is why Neill tries not to accept anyone over eleven, because by that age, a person is usually pretty set in his ways. If he comes from a restrictive home, he may have a hard time adjusting to freedom, and he may make it hard for the school to function smoothly.

Neill has no way of screening kids who come from overseas. The parents write that their kid is sweet, bright, and the paragon of everything Summerhill would like to have. Quite

## CLASSES

THE SUMMERHILL workshop is fantastically equipped; it is used by both sexes. Anything from basket-weaving to enameling and even guitar-making are among the activities. It is, by far, the most popular class at Summerhill.

The rest of the classes are not as well equipped, but little by little they, too, are being improved as funds develop.

The teachers are happy to teach you anything they know, even though what you request to be taught is not in the regular curriculum. During my last term, I was taught karate by a Welsh girl who happened to be my regular English teacher. I learned a bit of archery from my biology teacher.

## GROUP ACTIVITIES

ONE OF THE THINGS that's so nice about Summerhill is the mass participation in most activities. For instance, I remember a snowball fight a couple of years ago joined in by almost the entire school. Just the feeling of playing with everyone else was wonderful.

*INSIDE  
SUMMERHILL*

We are fortunate to have a swimming pool. It was built only two years ago, and is now both life and soul on a hot summer afternoon. The kids practically live in that pool. On a hot day the typical agenda is swimming before breakfast, after lunch, after tea-time, after supper, or at any other time when the pool is open. Most kids swim in the nude; there are no moral feelings about nudity, but a majority of the older boys don't go naked because of a physiological reaction beyond their control.

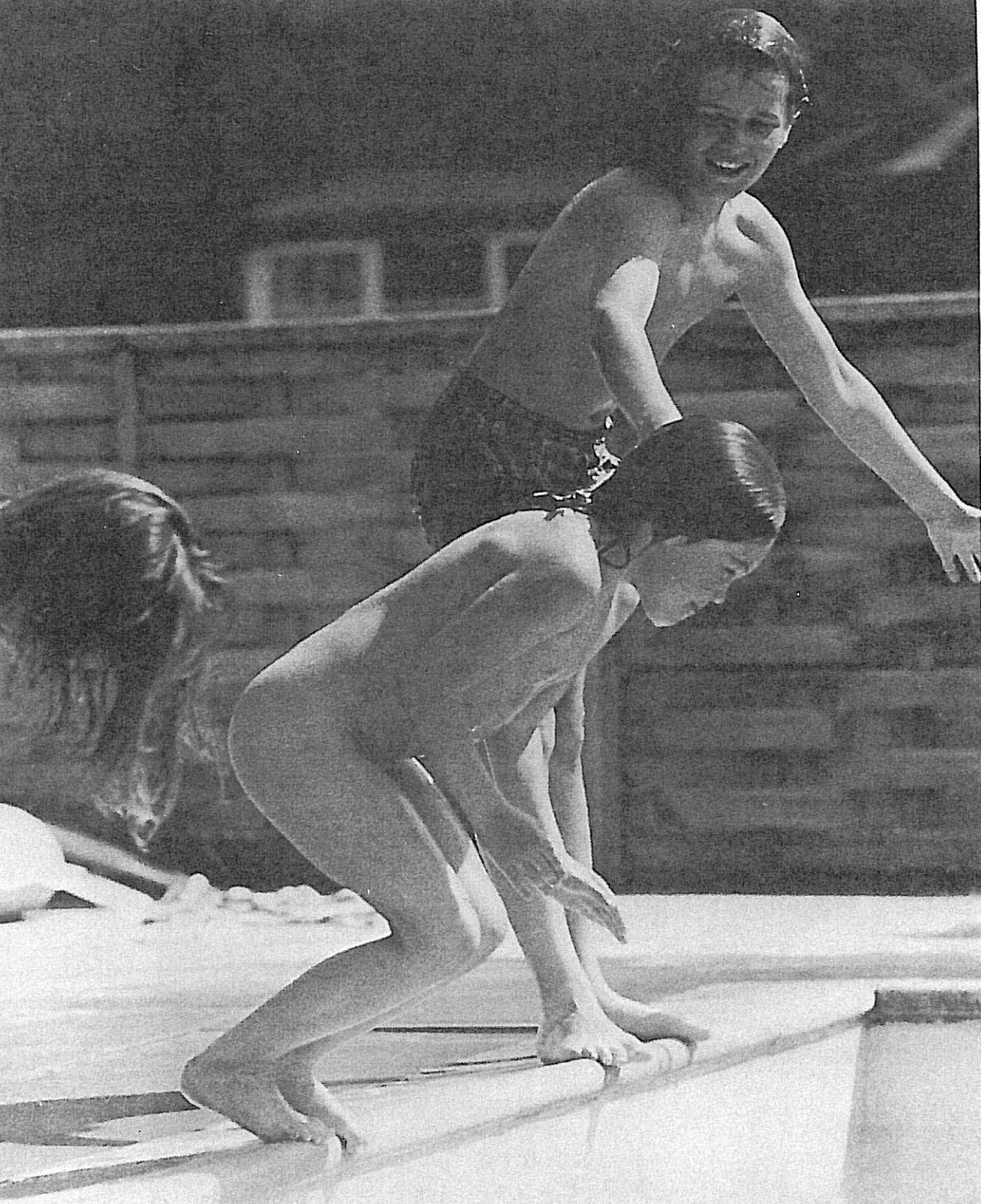
#### NEILL

WHEN I FIRST CAME to the school, Neill taught classes in English. But he gave that up because he felt too old to carry on, and he received numerous complaints from kids who seriously wanted to learn that subject. Neill was always inclined to spend time in English class joking and playing word games.

Today, he spends most of his time replying to the overwhelming numbers of people who write to him. They want information, request applications for admission, want permission to visit, and often send him requests to go on lecture tours. Every week he gets several letters from kids in America who, after stating their complaints about their schools and about their families, beg to be admitted. He gets very upset at having to turn down most of these kids, but he is determined

*INSIDE  
SUMMERHILL*





*INSIDE  
SUMMERHILL*



If a kid is feeling miserable or having a problem, he goes and talks to Neill. For that matter, anybody in Summerhill will spend hours comforting or talking with someone who needs conversation or comfort.

Every year, before Ena's or Neill's birthday, a meeting is called at which we try to think of a suitable gift. We usually end up getting some liquor for Neill, and some plants for Ena.

On Ena's last birthday, we gave her something with a lot of feeling that I think she really appreciated. It was a photograph of all the kids in the school. She has seen so many kids come and go, but this was the first time she had all her charges in one picture. It was hardly the conventional school portrait of formal poses one normally sees in a school picture. Some kids held two fingers pointed up, palm inwards. This means something a lot coarser than peace. Unfortunately, I wasn't in the picture since I was taking it.

Neill is an extraordinarily gentle soul, and during my last couple of terms I used to chat with him quite a bit in his office. I was the oldest pupil at the school at that time, and we would discuss some of the school's problems and what could possibly be done to remedy them.

He loves to sit and talk for a spell. Once, a friend and I went over to his cottage at about nine-thirty one evening and we

started talking. We were still there at eleven-thirty, having become so absorbed that we missed our bedtime altogether. However, if we had been fined our breakfasts, Neill would have had to miss his as well, being an accessory to the crime. But luckily, we weren't fined.

Once, when I was looking at a collection of photographs of Neill taken over 30 years ago, he told me that if he hadn't started Summerhill or entered the field of education, he would have liked to have been an archeologist. There must be a connection there somewhere. Despite his age, he is extremely strong; his bear hug could practically kill you. In Neill, there is a golden flame that makes you feel warm when you're near him.

#### HOW THE KIDS SPEND THEIR DAYS

ALTHOUGH THE WHOLE philosophy and lack of structure in Summerhill make for anything but dull repetition, certain patterns of behavior manifest themselves throughout the usual day.

The breakfast bell is rung at 8:30 every morning, and most of the kids get out of bed and drag themselves to the serving hatch of the kitchen from which all the meals are served. It is an old tradition at Summerhill to grumble about the food;

*INSIDE  
SUMMERHILL*

## THE GROUNDS

THE GROUNDS OF SUMMERHILL cover approximately eleven acres—lots of room to escape for anyone who wants to be alone. The younger boys love rolling around on the floor with each other, play fighting, and making one hell of a noise. So it is fortunate the grounds are big. There used to be a great hiding place in a little room under the ground. This room was reached by climbing down a little hole in the floor of the laundry room. Although this hiding place was off limits, it was constantly used until two clever jerks shat in some empty jam jars which were down there. The entrance was then boarded up.

Trees and tree huts have an immense popularity at Summerhill. One tree is called the “Big Beech,” and has become an inseparable part of school life. A long rope hangs from one of its branches. After a boy has climbed about twenty feet up on the tree to a board nailed on two high branches, someone throws the rope up. It is a fantastic swing. After doing it once, you never want to quit. My mother always wished she had the guts to try it, but she never did.

*INSIDE  
SUMMERHILL*

93



Aside from soccer, our relationship with the “townies” was not what it should have been. Several times we were ignorantly referred to as the “free-fuck” school, which however unjust, did little to enhance Summerhill’s reputation.

#### THE KIDS AND THE STAFF

ONE OF THE MOST beautiful aspects of Summerhill is the relationship between pupils and adults, a way of life that epitomizes all that Neill has been striving for. The kids and the staff have a casual manner toward each other, but in most cases, there is mutual respect. Anyone who puts on a more-superior-than-thou act doesn’t last very long. When a teacher is accepted by Summerhill, he agrees to become an active participant in the community. Some of the teachers who have been fired in the past were those who felt no obligation to be with the kids, or to help them outside of class time. Being a teacher at Summerhill is a twenty-four hour job.

The Summerhill environment fosters creativity and self-expression. Almost all modern amenities that turn the average kid into a vegetable are missing at Summerhill. Kids have to rely on their own resourcefulness to keep busy. A kid absorbed in making a costume out of an old box is learning a lot more than a kid who is watching television for hours on end.

## CREATIVITY

SUMMERHILLIANS are wildly enthusiastic and creative about writing. Here there are no limits. Writing at Summerhill is total self-expression. In a more conventional environment, a child is forced to consider style, structure, length, punctuation, plot formation and grammar. These restrictions can retard creativity, and the child probably distorts what he wanted to say in the first place. Such structured writing is intellectual rather than emotional. By contrast, I present some worthy examples of Summerhill verse.

*Blue cherries and  
cinnamon colored lilacs  
engraved on an ivory  
forest occur only  
in the minds of happy people.  
Great ladies in gowns  
with cherry blossoms in their hair  
can only be seen when  
you look very closely.  
Dark walls and daggers  
are far more easily  
found, and awakening to life  
can be very gray.*

MICHELLE DUHRSEN (14)

INSIDE  
SUMMERHILL



*I swung on the lightbulb  
And crashed into the wall  
And clobbered a man  
Twenty feet tall.*

RUTH HYDE (11)

*Gallows, garage, garbage, garment, gas,  
Still there is time to wipe my ass.  
Gold, goblin, golf, and gone,  
Don't you think it's lots of fun.  
Oblige me, do, and you will see  
It's time for a cup of tea.  
February is not good—  
It is time for Yorks pud.  
Nina is one of the staff;  
she is green;  
she must eat grass.*

CATHY HYDE (13)

# Inside Summerhill

Joshua Popenoe

This book is written by a 16-year-old boy who has just returned to the States after spending four years as a pupil in Neill's famed Summerhill School in Leiston, England. Unlike other critics of Neill who evaluate the Summerhill philosophy from a theoretical point of view, young Popenoe tells his story without any need to either cover up, or accuse, or praise. He reports things just as he experienced them — both the good and the bad.

The book is written with great charm and wit, and with a naivete that is completely engaging. In some 50 pictures which he himself took at Summerhill, the young author reinforces his portrait of what Summerhill really is like.

This book will appeal to all serious students of Neill's methods of education. It will also beguile youngsters who wish they were at Summerhill.

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