

# Retiree provides hope, housing for rural poor

By Lee Strong  
Staff writer

HURON — Maudie Weeks has probably accomplished more since she retired than most people dream of doing during their working years.

After leaving her full-time job in 1968, she has overseen the construction of 40 units of housing for low-income people in this eastern Wayne County community.

Along the way, the parishioner of the Catholic Community of the Blessed Trinity has had to face the town board, pressure from hostile neighbors as well as changes in state and federal laws and funding in order to create and sustain Hope Village — the name given the housing community.

Weeks and her husband Ed — a retired Xerox engineer who has served as an advisor for the project — have also had to deal with illness, caring for a developmentally disabled son, and the death in 1990 of their daughter to cancer.

"We like to think of her as a modern-day Dorothy Day," declared Lauren Dates, a fellow member of the Blessed Trinity community.

Maudie Weeks first became involved with the migrant workers in Wayne County in the 1960s, when she was the director of the Auburn-based Cayuga County Community Council, an agency involved with providing basic education for migrants in a five-county area.

The agency's programs attempted to teach the migrants survival and leadership skills, Maudie Weeks recalled. But many of the migrants who subsequently decided to settle in Wayne and the neighboring counties ran into problems.

"The people learned a lot except that they were very frustrated because they had left the migrant stream, and there was just no one who would rent or sell to them," she said.

The council was asked to study the migrants' housing needs by both the federal Office of Economic Opportunity and the federal Department of Agriculture.

Around the time the studies were completed, Maudie and Ed Weeks moved to Wayne County. Even though she soon retired, Maudie continued to work with the housing project and eventually became a paid consultant.

A room in the couple's home has served as Hope Village's administrative office since 1969.

The group decided on a 25-unit project offering three- and four-bedroom houses. The project was to be paid off through



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

Maudie Weeks (foreground) has spent the past 23 years overseeing the construction of 40 housing units for low-income people in Huron, Wayne County. With the help of her husband, Edwin (left), and some of the original residents — Jane Miller (right to left), the Rev. Alex Brown, and Theresa Terry — Weeks has established a community that focuses on self-government and self-maintenance. Standing next to his father is Edwin Weeks Jr.

loans and grants from federal and state agencies, as well as private contributions.

The first problem for the project was finding a site. Pressure from neighbors caused two landowners to back out of deals to sell land to the housing group.

When the group finally found a venue, it had to endure a series of disputes with the town board over the project.

"The town board decided they could no longer support us because they found their constituents were not happy about migrants having homes here," Maudie Weeks said.

Finally, through legal assistance from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Washington D.C.-based Committee Against Discrimination in Housing, the housing group filed a civil-rights suit in 1975.

Two-and-a-half years later, the town set-

led out of court, agreeing to end all opposition to the project, and — in lieu of damages — to grade the site and put in roads.

The first houses were completed in October, 1978, and families began moving in immediately.

All of the village's officials are residents of the village, which is part of the idea behind the project, Maudie Weeks noted.

"It focuses on self-government and self-maintenance," Maudie Weeks said, noting that most of the people who first moved into the projects didn't even know how to balance a check book. The project, she said, provides them with training for self-management and working together.

The residents meet monthly to make decisions concerning the entire project — such as building a children's playground. In addition to monitoring how fellow residents are maintaining their property, they provide assistance when needed.

Since Hope Village's early days, the residents and town officials have reconciled their differences. In fact, town officials recommended that the project add 15

townhouses completed in 1985.

In recent years, Maudie Weeks has suffered periodic illnesses — including a recent attack of pneumonia. She now walks with the aid of a cane.

But she hasn't slowed down, keeping up with the latest changes in state and federal laws while watching over the project.

On July 13, the village will celebrate the opening of a new community center, which is in the final stages of construction. The center was built through grants, loans and donations from church and community groups.

Once the village's offices have moved from the Weeks' home to the center, Maudie Weeks said she will come to her office three days a week.

She acknowledged that the need exists for more projects to help the rural poor, noting that Hope Village has a waiting list of people hoping for a home someday. But she will not be involved in such a project.

"I feel I've made my contribution," she declared.

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