

The Capitol Hill Babysitting Coop

Celebrating its 50th Year of Community Childcare

BY MONICA CAVANAUGH

You have been invited to a grown-ups-only party and your spine is tingling in the face of an excuse to leave the little ones behind for a night. But what to do for a sitter? Perhaps you've been dreaming of the day you could get out of paying your neighbor's brace-faced teen to do the job. Or maybe you just wish there were some responsible adults out there crazy enough to sit around with your offspring for a few hours ... for free. If that sounds like you, surprise! You're in luck.

The Capitol Hill Babysitting Coop, started in either 1958 or 1959 (a debate on the subject is still in play,) was intended to give young Hill parents a network of responsible, experienced adults to take on babysitting duties on a sit-for-sit basis. No money would be exchanged, only time.

"It's sometimes formidable to think you have to pay \$10 an hour to have an evening out," says Rudi Schreiber, current president of the coop. "The idea of exchanging time rather than money is a plus."

"We joined because responsible adults with children of their own would be caring for our kids," says Lis Wackman, a member from years past. "It wasn't some teenager on the phone with her boyfriend all night."

That's the most common theme among parents involved in the CHBC – passing up the young trainees for experienced parents. And if doing a little babysitting yourself doesn't sound so hot, just think about the stories you get to come away with.

"We had two kids, one was about 3, and the other was 1," recalls Sarah Hill. "We had a portable crib with a foam rubber mattress. When we got home, the guy who babysat said 'Oh, they were so quiet!' When we got upstairs, both babies were in the crib and there were bite-sized pieces of the foam all over the floor. They had chewed up the whole mattress, then fell asleep on the hardwood

board at the bottom of the crib!"

Yeah, it's a little nightmarish but a good laugh in hindsight. And besides, not all the stories are so dramatic.

"My husband went to babysit for a family with a little boy and a little girl," says Wackman. "The boy insisted that it was very important that he go to bed in his rain gear – Wellingtons and slicker. Hal couldn't think of a reason why not, so he said okay."

So everyone trades babysitting time for babysitting time, but how does everyone keep track? In a word, scrip.

"Oh my God, you would kill for scrip," says former member Sue Sprenke. "You'd sell your children for scrip."

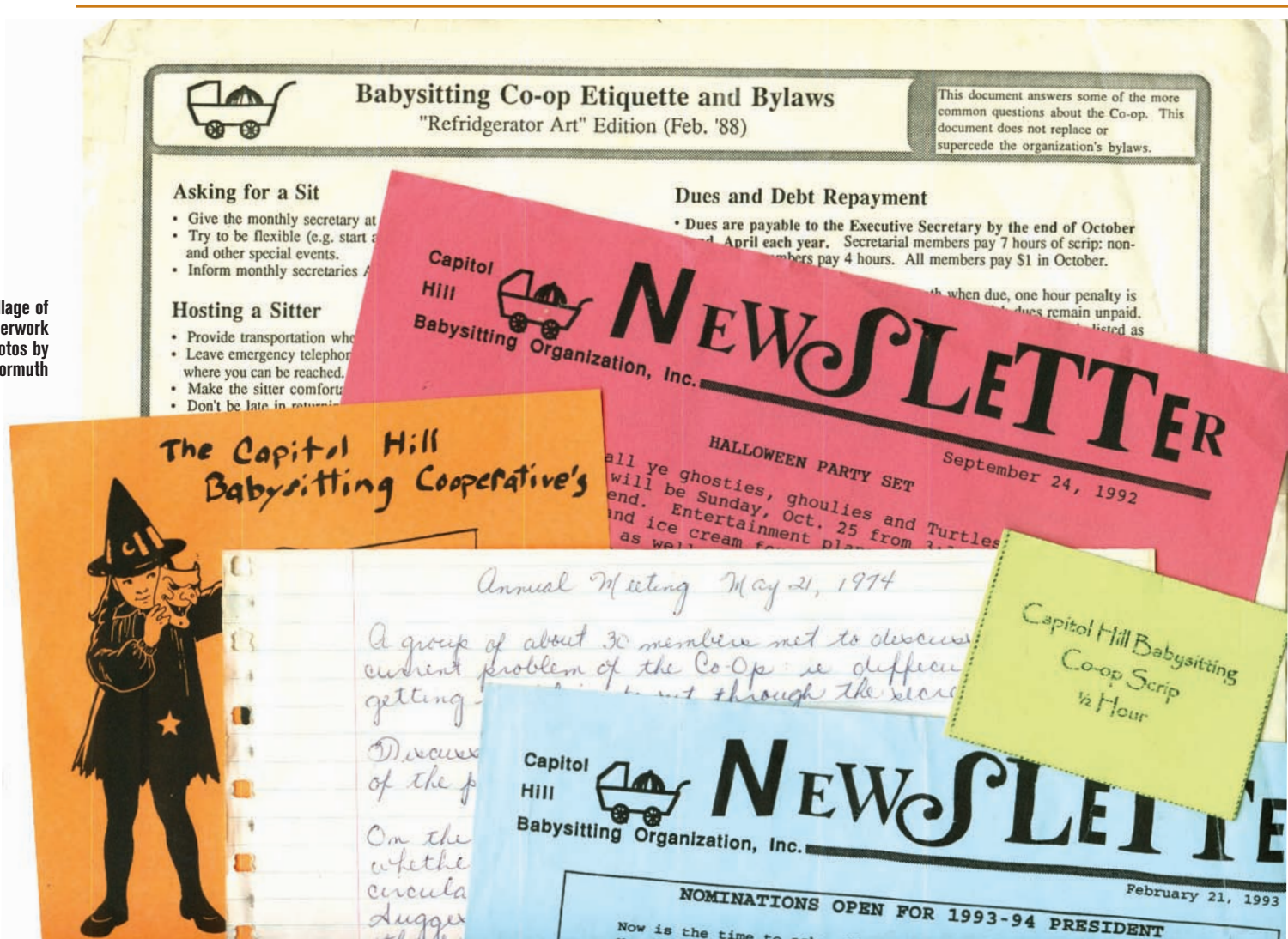
Each member family is given an allotment of scrip – pieces of paper worth one half-hour of sitting time. That allowance is to be paid back within a year, in order to keep everyone

sitting and everyone going out. A scheduling system is in place to organize sittings each month, as well as a payment plan that includes time and a half for things like later hours.

Over the years, members have been instructed to keep the flow of scrip going – to stimulate the coop economy, if you will. Hoarding those papers could cripple the whole system. That concept probably sounds irritatingly familiar these days, but a Google search for the CHBC will prove it's a valid point.

In the mid 1970s, the coop experienced something of a recession. There was a shortage of scrip, which led people to panic and hoard their share. Because there was no regular circulation, the system was falling apart. When a rule requiring that couples go out at least once every six months ended up falling flat, the powers that be decided to create more scrip to alleviate the problem and

A collage of Coop paperwork
Photos by Susan Hormuth





Members representing at the Fourth of July parade

encourage people to spend. Things got pretty muddled for a while, but the coop pulled through.

In 1977, former member Richard Sweeney, who was then the deputy director in the Office of International Monetary Research for the US Treasury, and his wife, Joan, submitted an article to the Journal of Money, Credit and Banking. The piece argued that the coop and its system of scrip is a perfect scale model for the US economy. They then used the recession that the coop faced as a tool for teaching how best to deal with the same crisis on a national level. If that isn't Washington enough for you, I don't know what is.

The CHBC is approaching its 50th anniversary, and while its little economy is back on solid ground, it's lacking the impressive numbers of the past. In its heyday there were up to 250 families actively involved – now they're down to 20.

"We've wondered [why there are so few families now,]" says Schreiber. "I don't think I can pin it on one thing."

The general consensus among members is that it's a cyclical thing. Children grow old enough to care for themselves, and there's a wait before the new wave of little ones comes along.

Laura Hogan is part of that new wave, having joined this month with an infant. The sweetest part? She's a second generation coop-er. Lis and Hal Wackman are her parents.

"I knew about the coop because of my parents, of course," says Hogan. "But I didn't know that it was still around. I posted online to see if there were any coops around, and Rudi responded."

She was only officially inducted this past month, but she's already getting sits set up – and realizing just how small the world can be.

"The first people I'll be sitting for are my parents' neighbors from when I was young," she says. "He used to watch me, and now I get to watch his kids."

Many members have said that joining wasn't just a matter of convenience; it was a way to get connected to the community.

"It was a social thing," says Mary Donovan, who moved to the Hill with two kids in 1979. She and her husband had just put down \$150,000 for their house ("a fortune!"), had no money for sitters and didn't know a soul. "It wasn't just the free babysitting. It was the chance to meet other people and find other kids the same age as ours."

Hogan echoes that goal. "I'm actually excited – it'll be fun to meet these other people and their kids, and start recognizing faces at the park."

Despite stories of screaming babies and bizarre behavior, the overall experience has been positive for the majority of members.

"It's a brilliant and wonderful thing," says Peter Kranz. "I hope people read this and join, because it's a wonderful organization."

The Coop's 50th anniversary will be celebrated on May 3 from 4-6 p.m. with a potluck dinner in Garfield park. Current, former and prospective members are all welcome. RSVP with Rudi Schreiber at rudi_schreiber@hotmail.com. The coop will provide drinks, utensils and paper products. Anyone attending should bring an appetizer, main course or dessert to share. ■



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