



THE STORY OF A WOODLOT

In 1926 the late Arthur B. Rotch, then editor and publisher of the Milford Cabinet, purchased a woodlot just outside of Milford. It is now owned by his son, William B. Rotch, who wrote this description of a family woodlot.

It is reprinted here from the spring issue of Forest Notes, the publication of the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests -- April 1970

One of the nice things about a tree is that you can go away and leave it and when you do come back it looks just the same, perhaps even a little bigger.

This is the story of a family woodlot, seventy acres of trees. There have been times when we just went away and left it, but always when we have come back it has been there and waiting. The trees are always a little bigger, and it is more beautiful than ever.

It was in 1926 that we bought it. We? I was ten years old, and certainly felt no need for a woodlot. There were ample woods much nearer home. This woodlot was three miles south of Milford, sixty acres known as the old Fanny Merrill farm. The fact that it had been part of a farm was important. It meant that the roads which dissected it were relatively permanent, unlike more temporary logging roads, and they crossed occasional streams by means of moss-covered stone culverts.

There was variety, too; wooded knolls, blueberry swamps, brooks, and stonewalls. The lot surrounded a bog where peat moss and cranberries grew. Later we bought this piece of wetland, rounding out the area to its present seventy acres.

We always called it simply The Woodlot. For a time Mother referred to it as Bill-Artvald, but the name never caught on with the rest of the family. It had something to do with a Great Dane named King. When it came time to register him there was need for a more fancy title, and he became Koeing von Bill-Artvald. The papers were recorded, and we went back to calling the dog King and the land The Woodlot. I can still see him — King, I mean — an eight-foot log balanced in his jaws, running full tilt down a slope of newly-planted pine.

Just what inspired this investment in a family woodlot was never entirely clear. On summer week-ends Dad played tennis. Winter week-ends were spent with a newspaper in front of an open fire, or so my sister Helen and I remember it. Then came the woodlot, and suddenly it developed into a way of life. Each Saturday afternoon Dad and I and as many of our five dogs as could fit into one car would head for the woodlot.

Sunday morning the procedure was repeated, with Mother following later in a second car with Helen, the lunch, and the rest of the dogs. We had built a shanty complete with cast iron schoolhouse stove, which served as a warming house, tool shed and lunch room. Invariably lunch was egg salad sandwiches, Campbell's vegetable soup and cakes of chocolate known as Mr. Goodbar. Sunday after Sunday, winter after winter.

Perhaps I exaggerate the speed of this family transition. Certainly there was a period of education during which we all learned the rudiments of forestry. Ken Barraclough showed us how to thin and trim trees, and how to slash the sprouts which whipped the terminal shoots of young pine. I recall long conversations about trees between Dad and Charles S. Emerson, who later was to represent Milford in the legislature with the outspoken intent of promoting sensible woodland tax laws.

We learned a lot about winter clothing, too, and before long the whole family was equipped with those boots with leather uppers and rubber bottoms — woods boots, we called them. I was given a lightweight axe and a crosscut saw and taught to prune branches close to the trunk as we worked our way through thickets of young pine each struggling for its share of soil and sun.

Memory blurs when we try to recall the appearance of the woodlot in those early days. There were checkerberries, mayflowers, and a picnic spot

beside a brook marked by a huge bent tree. The family photograph album is not much help; Mother pointed her Kodak at her children, and seldom concerned herself with the background or any future demand for before-and-after scenes.

The lot had been lumbered some twenty years before. There was some scattered pine, hemlock which the early loggers had ignored, and acres of scrub hardwood and brush. Those were the days when Milford was noted for its quarries, and when the quarries shut down for the winter there were Finnish woodsmen, as handy with an axe as with a stone hammer, and eager to work. They cleared many acres of brush for us.

Over the next four or five years we burned brushpiles, trimmed pine trees, clipped thousands of sprouts and planted some 20,000 trees, most of them white pine with the exception of several hundred red pine and about as many spruce. This hobby carried on during school vacations and week-ends, brought me a gold medal in 1930 as the state's outstanding 4-H Club forester.

Actually, as a forestry project, the whole thing was unscientific. Trees were seldom cut if they were too big to be dragged to a brushpile. Only under risk of family displeasure could a pine tree be cut; this was the one real sin. The only valid excuse was when the pines were growing so closely together that it was obvious they could not all survive. Even today when I am about to cut a pine for no better reason than that it is in the way I am tempted to glance over my shoulder to see if any one is watching. And brush had to be piled, always. No matter that it would rot in a few years, or that piling the brush slowed down the whole land-clearing operation.

Through the years the pines grew, and Helen and I grew also. We went away to college, got married, raised children of our own, and woodlot week-ends became few and far between. There were other winter distractions, too, of which skiing was perhaps the chief offender. Then came the war years.

I don't remember Dad ever showing the slightest interest in the woodlot during the black fly and mosquito seasons, but during fall, winter and spring he lavished attention on it. Even during the war, when he had double responsibility of a newspaper and an insurance business while I was in the far Pacific he would leave the office early, take a saw, a pair of brush clippers, and his dog and spend an hour or so in his woodlot. It was therapy and relaxation.

During most of his adult life Dad wrote a column in his weekly newspaper called The Observer. I scanned some of those columns recently. They are a running commentary on a man and his hobby: advice on tools needed for cutting sprouts, stories of rabbits that found safety in brushpiles, anecdotes describing the occasional glimpse of a deer, the satisfaction at the end of a day in looking back at a grove of trimmed pine, the joy of poking in the leaves for mayflowers, or watching the dog flush a grouse. Frequently the column was simply a description of the friendly peace of the winter woods.

I don't think Dad had the desire to cut a mature pine. He talked about harvesting the timber someday, but I don't think he meant it, and perhaps I feel the same way. When my forester friends point to trees which "ought" to be cut, I can agree with them, but at the same time I want my grandchildren to know what it is to listen to the wind in the tops of tall pines, to lie at the base of some huge trunk and see in mind's eye the mast on one of His Majesty's ships.

There are big trees on the woodlot, although many of the pines which would be substantial trees today were torn down by the hurricane of 1938.

Dad died in 1955. He had requested that his ashes be scattered in The Woodlot. Mother died a few years later; she made the same request. We picked an area where the pines are tall and straight, where the sun shines on banks of laurel, and where in winter the snow sifts through the branches of hemlocks. Sometimes Helen and I refer to it as the Sacred Grove. We are not being entirely facetious.

It is now 1970. The old Fanny Merrill farm has been a family woodlot for more than forty years. Those pines planted in the mid-twenties are tall now, and their needles form a thick and quiet blanket where once hardwood sprouts grew. A new generation of children walk the roads and paths and sometimes picnic beside the brooks. Dad did not live to see it, but last winter we introduced his great granddaughter to the woodlot, showing it to her as she peeked over the rim of a pack on her mother's back.

The woodlot is, it is only fair to say, a frustrating place. There is so much to do and so little time in which to do it.

Recently we have widened the roads by cutting back the overhanging branches, for more ease of access and for looks rather than for reasons of forestry.

Occasionally we have turned someone loose with a chain saw to thin the pines, this time leaving the branches to rot on the forest floor in violation of the family tradition calling for neat brushpiles.

Two years ago, after consulting Bob Breck, the county forester, we took advantage of the Agricultural Conservation Program to have thirty acres of pines pruned and the weed trees slashed or girdled. The benefits of this should become increasingly apparent in the years ahead.

Last summer we completed a trail just inside the perimeter of the lot, through pines planted forty years ago, under oaks and maples, through a grove of massive hemlocks and along the brook where cardinal flowers bloom in the late summer. It is marked with red blazes with the hope that it will be used increasingly as a nature trail for Girl Scouts and other interested groups.

The big trucks roar along Route 13 but in the woodlot itself it is still. In the spring the cowslips that we transplanted so long ago still bloom along the brook near the shanty. The big shadbush still leans over a pool above an old stone culvert. In June come the lady slippers, and later the laurel. The spruce are too tall now to be cut for Christmas trees, but each year we gather hemlock and laurel for Christmas decorations. In the far corner of the lot the red pine have covered what once were sandy barrens with a soft layer of needles.

One day this winter on skis I went along the woods road leading to the "sacred grove" and stood there a few moments watching the late afternoon sun which filtered through the branches reflect from the drifted snow. It did not take much imagination to hear Dad's clippers in the distance, to hear him whistle for his dog. It would have pleased him, I think, to know that his children, his grandchildren, and now his great grandchildren were enjoying the woodlot where he spent so many pleasant hours. And it occurred to me that maybe he planned it that way all along.