

HOLDING THE STATUS QUO

By Morgan Bulkeley

Mount Washington

HOLDING A WILD piece of land in trust for the public entails a never-ending fight. Commercial interests and population expansion everywhere increasingly press in upon places long deemed inviolate. At the north of the county we see the battle joined over Greylock in court and legislature because close to 1000 far-sighted citizens have chosen to stand up against the immediate self-interest of a few small pressure groups.

In contrast, at the south of the county in the much smaller reservation at Bartholomew's Cobble, the battle is of a more pleasant nature. Rather than threatened encroachment of a tramway and attendant impertinences there is the threat of the expanding woods and the trampling of an occasional escaped cow.

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THE PROBLEM then becomes a struggle to hold things as they are, to keep some climax forest, some transition woods, some sproutland, some scrubby pasture, some goldenrod and some mowed fields in order to insure the maximum variety of flora and fauna in the 44 acres.

Voltaire once said that nothing is so permanent as change. One who attempts to hold back forest progression can fully savor that saying. The march of any forest is like Birnam wood overrunning Dunsinane. From raised arms the woodland army fires explosive bullets of seeds, nuts, berries, samaras and catkins in all directions as it advances.

When some visitor, recalling a youthful picnic, asks: "Why don't you keep the Cobble as it always was?" we are tempted to counterquery: "When do you mean? Back in the Cambrian when it lay for eons deep beneath the ocean? Or in the Taconic or the Appalachian Revolutions when it was heaved among the world's loftiest peaks? Or in the Pleistocene when it was repeatedly overridden by thousands of feet of ice? Or in Pre-Colonial times when it was needle-carpeted and shaded by a climax forest of towering hemlocks?"

Since it is impossible in any lifetime to resist such slow forces or to duplicate them, the problem then becomes one of preserving things as they are, not as they were or will be.

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ACCORDINGLY our little group of four, including two nationally-known naturalist-ecologists, patrolled the Cobble paths with the purpose of maintaining the status quo. It was like Canute attempting to hold back the sea. We could mark some trees to be cut, some lusty, wild grape vines to be removed and some sproutlings that threatened to undo the work of other years; but we could not stop growth or decay. Here it was a problem of keeping a vista of Bear Mountain, Race or the Dome, blue in the west; there it was holding a view of burnished Housatonic oxbows reflecting wine-glass elms on the east.

Everywhere it meant making compromises between a wild jungle tangle and a park-like overneatness. Windfalls would be removed only where they interfered with trails. Dead trees would be left standing for fungus, beetle and woodpecker to demolish. Rampant grapevines furnishing plentiful bird food, but strangling desirable old, red cedars, would be cut back like vineyard grapes to a single stem.

Many of the ancient cedars were themselves loaded with bird food, a crop of blue-gray berries, the heaviest we had ever seen, that whitened the dark forms like hoar frost. This plethora of seed on the shallow soil of the north cobble probably resulted from four drought years. Distressed plants often bear seed in a frenzy.

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THE HARDEST LINE we had to hold was the transition woods circling Craggy Knoll. The heavy forest of hemlock, pine, oak and other trees was prisoned by the moat of the Housatonic on the east and by cliffs and ledges on the south. Consequently it seemed to double efforts to expand north and west. Young seedling trees of many sizes and kinds vied for sunshine against an imaginary lean-to roof that sloped from the mother forest down to the meadow grasses.

One example of the carnage and mayhem taking place among the graduated offspring in this no-man's land was the contest between a ^{Goliath} _{of a} pine 6 inches through and a hemlock half that in diameter. In its effort to escape the shade of the slower-growing hemlock, the pine had twice sacrificed its central, terminal shoot, and each time a lateral branch, away from the hemlock, had taken over growth. The trunk, as long as it survived, would always bear those two staggered steps toward sunshine. Nevertheless the patient hemlock had already killed five tiers of pine branches with shade and some day would surmount the whole tree.

Here and there we marked a tree for cutting, in our man-sized attempt to hold and slow that transition forest, but plainly we were dealing with a timeless force as irresistible as oceans, upheavals and glaciers.