**Happy 30th Birthday to the Long Hill Natural Area**

Brooke Thomas

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Long Hill, Leverett’s iconic viewscape, rises majestically out of Leverett Pond, changing colors with the season, and serving as a reservoir of clear water for all who reside around its base. Taking a short walk to its summit one can view almost 360 degrees of the rolling hills and valleys below, sit on the bench in memoriam to Laurel Kahn, and gaze down at the Town Hall and Congregational Church’s steeple. Crossed by hiking trails giving access to differing biodiversity, depending on slope orientation and gradient, there is no place comparable in our picturesque town. And so it was on Memorial Day, **Thirty Years Ago**, that our beloved hill was released from private ownership and impending development to became a public treasure.

The story of how this came about is one of environmental heroism brought about by community solidarity among residents on Long Hill, Camp, and Cider Mill Roads, along with the assistance from many others in town and Franklin Co. The story’s drama centers on attempts by new owners in the late 1980s to build their trophy home on the summit overlooking the pond with the possibility of placing additional homes on the lower slopes. This was countered by the unrelenting resistance - over 4 years - by local residents to block this, first through appeals to town boards, and when these failed to the Franklin Superior Court. Objections included the possibility of polluting of down slope water sources, entering the property without permission from the private Camp Road, creating a driveway that exceeded the Fire Dept’s steepness code, and a violation of the aesthetics of such a visible hill. Most importantly, however, was a sense of injustice that the wealthy couple, working through their out-of-town lawyer, could intimidate and circumvent town’s by- laws and thereby create a precedent for others to develop backlots. On October 1990 the latter objection was upheld under Mass General Laws Chapter 4A, Section 10 by the Franklin Superior Court that concluded that the town’s Zoning Board of Appeals had exceeded their authority in granting the owners a variance that was “detrimental to the public good.”

Known as the Long View Alliance over 70 households contributed from $25 to $20,000 to meet the purchase price of $105,000. Also a family on Long Hill Rd put a non-development easement on their backlot which included part of the summit. When these donations came close but were not enough to meet the total amount the Valley Land Fund stepped in and provided a bridging loan contingent on the Rattlesnake Gutter Trust accepting ownership and raising the remaining funds. Thus, the Long Hill Natural Area was created, and is now owned and maintained by the Rattlesnake Gutter Trust. As such it rises into the sky above the shimmering pond serving as a lasting monument for everyone’s enjoyment, and stands for what can be accomplished when neighbors come together to protect that which is valuable in their lives.

Below is description of the purchase celebration written by Barbara Yngvesson\*

“On a warm May evening (*on Memorial Day, 1991*), some 30 residents of the town of Leverett ---gathered on (*Long Hill*) to celebrate the end of a 4-year conflict. Carrying champagne, sparking cider, and fresh strawberries, they arrived with their children and their dogs, greeting one another with embraces and congratulations. (Musicians) under one of the stately hemlocks the group had worked so hard to save played a festive English folk tune. As dusk set in and the sky turned from orange and pink to deep gray, these successful combatants toasted their victory of converting 38 acres of forest from private property to a conservation and recreation area available to all townspeople.”

\*Barbara Yngvesson Virtuous Citizens: Disruptive Subjects. Chapter 7. The sins of property. pp.99-118 (1993) Routledge, New York. Barbara is a Leverett resident who taught legal anthropology at Hampshire College.

Take care and enjoy our precious hill,

Brooke