

# RATTLESNAKE GUTTER TRUST

# NEWSLETTER

The year 2000 was an excellent opportunity to reflect on the passage of time. Thirteen years ago, Rattlesnake Gutter Trust was created in response to the availability of a 40-acre piece of land at the heart of the Gutter, Leverett's phenomenal geological feature. Recognizing the natural value and fragility of this area, the group led the fundraising that was so important to the acquisition of this parcel by the Town. Contributions large and small comprised 33% of the purchase price of this property.

The land trust that was created in 1988 continues working to preserve Leverett's special places as change and transitions occur. By making land accessible, the Trust enables people of all ages to learn about their environment and encourages them to preserve it for the future.

The protection of Long Hill, East Leverett Meadow and Roaring Brook required extensive fundraising as well as the concerned and timely response of friends and neighbors. The Trust has accepted conservation restrictions or easements

on other lands in Leverett, enabling owners to protect those lands and reduce tax liability. Generous gifts of land, such as a 16-acre parcel on Shutesbury Road and a 26-acre piece between Ryans Hill and Old Whitney Road, have helped the Trust put more green space on the map of Leverett.

RGT is involved with the management of several of these areas, with trailblazing and bridge-building, with improving accessibility and providing educational opportunities. One of the more recent examples is the new entrance to East Leverett Meadow, literally bridging the community to the preserved meadow. Above all, the Trust is committed to preserving natural habitats and to providing a significant resource of experience and expertise when properties that are an important part of all of our lives are threatened by development.

In 1988, we began contacting owners of other land in the Gutter area to extend protection beyond the original 40 acres. Over the years, the Trust has periodically reviewed this area, reminding landowners of our preservation concerns and our interest in facilitating any efforts they might make toward this end.

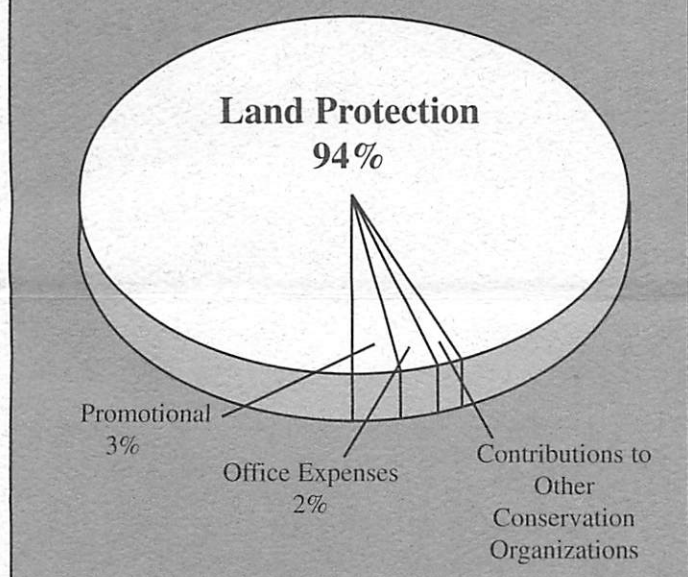
In November of last year, the Trust was able to purchase the 20-acre parcel owned by Pascal and Alberta Marvell (see

article on page 2). Generations to come will appreciate its beauty. RGT was able to make this purchase because of the continuing support of the community—through memberships, gifts, and the contribution of countless returnable cans and bottles—and because our operating expenses are slight. The many hours volunteered by Trustees and Trust members are a very significant gift indeed.

As time passes, land that is put in the care of Rattlesnake Gutter Trust will increase, and so will opportunities for the community. The year 2000 has been an auspicious one for the Trust. Thank you for your energetic support. We hope that you will continue to contribute to the future by working with us in preserving the precious land that surrounds us.

## RGT Expenditures 1996–2000

Land Protection	\$150,890.42
Contributions to Other Organizations	\$2,365.00
Office Expenses	\$3,515.16
Promotional (T shirts, sweatshirts, etc.)	\$4,606.32



## A Piece of the Past

Recent land sales have changed the names associated with the large tract of land between the western end of Cave Hill Road and Rattlesnake Gutter Road. But for over two hundred years, more than two hundred acres were owned by two families, the Woodburys and the Marvells.

Jeremiah Woodbury (1727–1820) moved to Leverett from Brookfield in 1773, when he received grants of land. He was one of twenty-two men who signed a petition in 1774, requesting the General Court to allow separation from Sunderland. In 1778, he built his house on what is now 44 Cave Hill Road, and for the next 66 years, it was the home of the Woodbury family. His son, John, a deacon in the Baptist Church, lived all his life on the farm. At one time, it was reported that four generations were seen getting in the hay crop.

The second owners of the land were the Marvell family, working the farm for 125 years, through five generations. Jesse (1797–1871) and his son Calvin were both active in town, holding all offices. Orman, Calvin's son, was road commissioner, selectman, and a member of both the Montague Masons and the Grange. He was a partner in the Beaman and Marvel Box Shop, now Leverett Crafts and Artists. Two more generations of Marvells, Ralph and Pascal, lived on the farm before it was sold.

The three roads involved in this property have also changed. The present Cave Hill Road now connects Montague Road with North Leverett. The former Cave Hill Road, now "Old Cave Hill Road", started at Montague Road, which explains why the former school-house, now 178 Montague Road, was called the "Cave Hill School". The old road crossed the present Cave Hill Road by the Woodbury/Marvell house, going behind what is now 49 Cave Hill and coming out on Long Plain.

"Old Whitney Road" meets Old Cave Hill near the Richmond/Shaw house, heading north to Moore's Corner. The Whitney cellar hole is on the western side of this road. It is a pleasant stretch, joining the Gutter Road just over the crest of the hill.

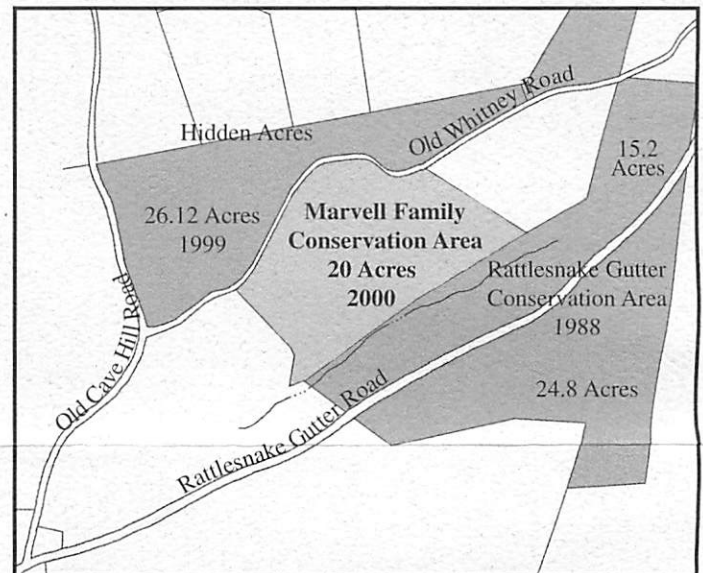
Rattlesnake Gutter Road was built in 1834 and so-named in the 1850's, when rattlesnakes were seen on the

cliffs and their rattles were prized trophies worn on belts. In the early days this road, providing the shortest way from Moore's Corner to Leverett Center, was frequently described as dark and fearsome. *Picturesque Franklin County* refers to it as wild and dismal. Authors, like H.P. Lovecraft, who favor weird and creepy atmospheres for their characters, used it for their somber settings. Archie Mayer included it in his book *Occam's Razor* and, most recently, Michael Hoberman's *Yankee Moderns* records local descriptions and legends.

The development known as "Hidden Acres" included a strip of land which borders Old Cave Hill and Old Whitney roads. This strip, comprising over 26 acres, was donated to Rattlesnake Gutter Trust in 1999. RGT has recently purchased the remaining 20-acre Marvell lot, situated between Old Whitney Road and the town-owned Rattlesnake Gutter Conservation land, resulting in a continuous stretch of over 80 acres of protected land in the heart of Leverett.

Members of both the Marvell and Woodbury families have located elsewhere. But the history of this large tract of Leverett land which was once a farm is preserved in the creation of the protected area to be known as the "Marvell Family Conservation Area".

—Annette Gibavic, Leverett Historical Commission



### 2001 MEMBERSHIP DRIVE

**New members wanted! Longtime members—let us know you're still with us!**

**If you wish to become an RGT member, complete the application below, clip and send with your annual dues (\$10.00 for adults, \$1.00 for children) to:**  
**RATTLESNAKE GUTTER TRUST P.O. BOX 195 LEVERETT, MA 01054**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Address:** \_\_\_\_\_

**If you have a specific area of interest or concern, please let us know.**





## Old Chestnuts

A Walk in The Long Hill Woods  
with Llan Starkweather

In 1966, I built a house at the bottom of the north side of Long Hill at the back of the field east of Long Plain Road. In two of its rooms I placed false posts that had grown once as branches on an American Chestnut growing in a pasture on the north side of Long Hill. Since my teens, the convoluted and striated sculptural form of fallen chestnut trees has attracted me.

When I first started walking the land behind my newly acquired ten acres, the area between Route 63 and Leverett Elementary School (the kids' route north of the pond), and when my burgeoning family began to "claim" the area between us and Long Hill, reopening wood roads, forging connecting trails, and maintaining a tree look-out on the top, the lower north slope of Long Hill was all clearly a large pasture gone to brush. The older forest growth above, around the northwest ledges and "cave" of the Hill's north side, reached down to the elevation of the plane of Long Hill Road as it passes on the west. Below that level on the hillside, the dominant growth on the western two-thirds of the 22-acre hillside whose contour matches the descent of Long Hill Road down to the Long Plain was five to six foot high room-sized clumps of juniper with the protruding heads of white pine and birch peeking from their middles, surrounded by equally large patches of still unbroken grassland between them.

The southeastern quadrant of that slope was planted with eight-foot spaced mixed Christmas trees six to eight feet high. These were eventually strangled by a canopy of slender maples that fell like match sticks in that super heavy snow we had three Decembers ago. The damp rocky edge of the land that borders Long Hill Road itself was growing up with low maples, black and grey birch. The northeastern quadrant along my boundary had a spring and large out-flow marsh with small hardwoods—it may have never been pasture if cows would have sunk in as I did. But close to the edge of that swampy area was one fallen chestnut giant and, more to the north, back on the edge of what was now the back southern corner of my adjacent woods, was another. The bases of these toppled trees rose 10 to 12 feet in the

air as the trunks themselves resting on the ground were seven and eight feet in diameter at their base, rather quickly dividing off into only several large scale branches like giants themselves that were the major span for the perhaps 100–150 foot spread which lay nearby. Each enormous branch was a sculpture unto itself.

Carlyle Field, whose forebears had lived on this part of the Plain for many generations, confirmed the depiction of the lower north side of the Long Hill as a pasture, telling me of the earlier dairy days of our little valley, of unplowed Long Plain Road and of transporting milk by sleigh along it to the Depot. He told me that the only inhabitation on the land where I had built had been a sawmill which had existed for two years in 1909. The three-acre field had been stacked with lumber during that period. One of the many large trees felled by that December snowstorm three years ago unearthed a tiny bottle dump at the foot of the woods at the edge of the field with 14 all different and fascinating glass containers including a cold cream container patented in 1911, which confirms those dates. Carlyle neglected to tell me, however, of the dominant feature of the hillside that he had looked up on in his youth—one which he certainly would have remembered, but I could only imagine—of the four giant first-growth chestnut skeletons probably still standing 80 feet or so tall and spreading wide over the grazed pasture.

In its fallen state, chestnut wood against the weather is or was our longest lasting species. The 1909 blight killed them, but the soil's microbial and fungal forces acting below the weather toppled these two from standing before my time here. The supposed 99-year durability clock is running down for all such fallen ancients, wherever they are. Many years ago I decided to split some rail fences and scoured my land for white oak, the supposed next most durable wood rated 70 years against the weather. I had trouble splitting them until Walter Jones (who had sold me the land for what seemed then an outrageous \$5,600!) told me to split rails from the top of the tree and, sure enough, it went much better. Unfortunately, airborne fungal forces



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decayed most of those eight sections of nice white oak fences in about eight years.

The characteristic of chestnut that gives it its veined appearance still gracing the woods is the fact that its heartwood (the middle) takes up most of the trunk, with the sapwood only a very narrow band under the bark. The bark and sapwood decayed early on, of course, and what we see revealed is the growth pattern of the heartwood. I would describe it as "ropy"—books call it "coarse". Its artful accentuation of the typical and quirky branch growth pattern of the chestnut is sculpturally luscious. The wood is described as medium hard. When we were trying to put fasteners into the 10x10's of the chestnut frame of the Box Shop rebuilding it following Joe Barnes' vision into Leverett Craftsmen and Artists in the late '60's, chestnut seemed very hard.

In addition to the two giant trees already located, there was a graceful carcass of another which was more in the middle of the pasture. This would have been the most clearly visible of all to the earlier Field family at the bottom of the hill. No trace of any of the trees showed above the juniper of my time. That one in the middle of the pasture rotted very quickly, as did the biggest of the four near my back line which is now just a low mound of humus.

From Walter, I learned about wolf trees and boundary trees. To maintain boundaries, large trees at the edge of property are still not cut by logging operations. As well, trees that go to branch instead of trunk are rejected for lumber. The big trees in the forest today are often wolf and boundary. All along the line between the pasture and the woods above, a row of these trees can be seen. Two of the four giants were close to boundaries and all of them, from what remained, seem to have been spreading wolves.

I don't know who owned the 22-acre slope at the beginning—my family and I seemed to be the only ones walking that land and trying to sense its history. We would try to catch a deer at the spring. The wood roads, we knew, had been used since 1909. Climbing the hill, we would pass

along the still discernible roadway (now a private driveway) which traversed the field from Long Hill Road through to Leverett Pond and beyond. The only sign of any habitation I ever found between me and the mill site near the dam at Leverett Pond was a clearing halfway across with only some foundation blocks north of that old roadway (which back in '66 Walter Jones still tried to drive once a year in his Checker). The Robert Frost Trail now joins two-thirds of a mile of this old road circling the north edge of the Pond. On our way to the top of the Hill, our path would join some of the many logging roads, which almost connected with one that descends on the northeast side from the top. That road still goes through a small patch of fallen "pole" chestnuts—second growth of four to six inch diameter slender chestnuts that grew close together on the eastern face.

I've gotten out into the woods again these last couple of years, after an angina bout demanded I walk about. For a decade or so I was so mad at the way logging had left the old roads too difficult to walk (Walter would never have allowed them to leave it that way) that I separated myself emotionally from the "outback". Now enough of that slash has rotted away to renegotiate the trails again. In these newer woods wanderings, I have revisited the fourth and other giant chestnut remainder in the area. I only discovered this one about 20 years ago, downed in the woods near the top of the pasture I have been describing on what might be the flattened northwest corner of the Long Hill Conservation Area. The old wood roads in that area, once distinct and easily traversible through mature trees, are now almost indiscernible through accumulated deadfall. I had to take this remaining giant tree's portrait and record it for you. I needed to find some way to issue a remembrance of these plant gurus that speak to me about the aging I notice that I am also doing as I observe this place on the edge of the delta of old Lake Hitchcock.

—Llan Starkweather