

RATTLESNAKE GUTTER TRUST

NEWSLETTER

MOUNTAIN DAY: A Hike to the Top of Leverett

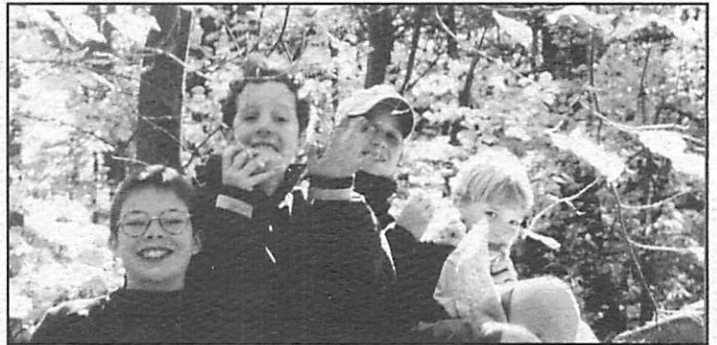
The Rattlesnake Gutter Trust, in our efforts to help preserve the town's natural beauty and to encourage people's enjoyment of it, has been exploring ways to get our children more involved with the local environment. We would appreciate ideas from membership and will report here and in subsequent issues of this Newsletter on projects we are planning or undertaking.

Clearly, how young people come to see and feel Leverett will determine what it is to become in the next generation. But more immediately, in providing opportunities for children to interact with Leverett's diverse habitats and species—swamps and streams, woods and hills, frogs and ferns, herons and geese—we run the risk of truly exciting them about what is in their backyards. And we further risk having their enthusiasm urge us to hike with them beyond the backyard, into the woods of Leverett. Viewing a recent aerial photo of the town it becomes apparent that most of us live and travel along linear corridors of partially cleared land. The rest is pure woods—literally miles of them—just begging to be enjoyed and understood.

With this in mind, several trustees approached Ted Hallstrom to inquire if the school might take a day off to climb the highest hill in Leverett. This, of course, is Brushy Mountain (elevation 1260 feet above sea level) which looms about 700 feet above the school's backyard and casts a shadow on its playground in the early morning. The water in a stream below the playground comes from run-off and veins of smaller streams on the mountain's west side. The mountain is one of Leverett's great reservoirs in the sky, charging the wells of the homes flanking its slopes.

Ted was enthusiastic about the "mountain day" idea. The next weekend he joined two trustees to scout trails from the school to Brushy's western elevation. It was a pleasant walk and provided a chance to talk about the Trust's ideas on environmental education as well as a time to get to know each other. Ted picked up occasional litter and pointed out interesting features along the way, leading us to sense that he is a person who thoroughly enjoys being with nature.

Guessing at the date when fall foliage would be at its peak and being blessed with a beautiful clear day, the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades, accompanied by their teachers, several trustees, a few parents, and a small black and white dog, assembled in the crisp October morning air. Yellow school buses blended with the bright colors of the countryside as if painted for the occasion. Spirits were high indeed. One of the trustees led the procession



Time out for lunch on the trail, Mountain Day, 1996.

and Ted brought up the rear—everyone else was to stay in between.

Off we went, the young explorers trying to crank up the leader's pace while the more contemplative ambled along, enjoying the scenery and each other's company. We crossed the old stone bridge over Doolittle Brook and watched red leaves floating underneath, grouping in quiet eddies. A yelloworange light filtered through tall maples and spread across the forest floor. It lit up red-capped moss (called British soldiers) growing on stone walls that were built over a century ago. Entering a narrow valley where lowland maples gave way to dark hemlocks, we could occasionally hear the gurgling sounds of a brook above the group's enthusiastic chatter.

From time to time the procession would come to a halt and questions would be posed to the group by one of the leaders. "What was this?" was asked as we approached a huge, gnarled old tree resting on the forest floor with saplings still sprouting from its roots. These saplings will grow for some years, but eventually they will be killed before reaching maturity by a girdling fungus. "What kind of tree could this be?" After guesses galore, the tree was identified as the famed American chestnut whose nuts once fed squirrels, deer, and wild turkeys. Chestnuts flourished, providing wildlife with an abundant supply of nuts, until a great blight began decimating the forests about 60 years ago. What a terrible loss! Chestnut Hill Road must have climbed through a grove of these trees. Chestnuts also yielded a strong, beautifully-grained wood that supports many of Leverett's older homes. Those old checked logs which refuse to rot—at least not very fast—reminded us that we cannot take nature's presence for granted.

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MOUNTAIN DAY (continued from page 1)

At another stop, we inquired about a small maple tree with leaves like a goose's foot and green bark striped like a lizard. "What could this one be?" we asked the group. One student who seemed familiar with the woods knew the answer immediately. He waited patiently as his classmates threw out some inventive suggestions. A blue maple? Well, no, but a goosefoot or striped maple would work. With a few exceptions, a good number of the students had little idea what kind of trees they were walking beneath beyond general categories such as oak, maple, and pine.

In our plastic world, detached from nature, where wood comes from the lumber yard and the lumber yard often gets wood from the other side of the country, tree names might be irrelevant information. Learning the name of a fern might be really absurd. But learning to identify that fern could lead to encountering it again in the forest, asking why it grows in certain places, what it needs to grow and spread, and, conversely, what conditions will make it disappear. In beginning this process of inquiry, all of a sudden one crosses the threshold between learning information and identifying with the fern as another living thing. Recognizing a fern as another living being could lead to protecting its habitat.

Eventually, as we approached the top of Brushy Mountain, the steep slope leveled off. Here we linked up with the M & M Trail, which, contrary to the belief of at least one student, is not named after a candy treat. The Trail links Mt. Metacomet in Connecticut to Mt. Monadnock in New Hampshire. Now the students were asked to think geology: "What in the world is a 'monadnock'?" Jumping over millennia in a matter of minutes, geological history gave way to Leverett's history.

We know some of the town's first English residents had lived somewhere on top of Brushy Mountain—a bit like mesa villages in the southwest. It was becoming clear to the students from the large, flanking trees and the stone walls that this part of the trail had been an old road—maybe a main street—which linked the farms which made up the Brushy Mountain settlement. "Cellar hole!" the cry went out and, sure enough, a sign on a tree indicated that Jonathan Glazier had lived in a house on this site in 1790. The house had been built in 1750 by Joseph Bartlett. Children, adults, and the black and white dog swarmed over the site. More cellar holes were discovered further down the road. A stepping stone from the road was clearly visible at one site, and a twenty foot well was discovered behind another.

Here we stopped and listened as Betsy Douglas of the Leverett Historical Commission related the history of these early settlers who came to live in such an improbable place. Why would they choose to live on top of the highest hill where good soil and water must have been a problem, where the winter winds must have howled through the cracks in their log cabins? As Betsy spoke, a number of us tried to imagine the people, the fields they cleared, the walls they built, their animals and crops, their wagons slowly moving up and down the road.

We were connecting with the past. Many of the students were learning of this settlement for the first time even though it once existed within earshot of the school below. If Jonathan Glazier and his neighbors lived on the mountain now, they might be able to hear the laughter and shouts of children playing at recess as the warming morning air lifts the sounds up slope. And we, in turn, might see cleared pastures and a wisp of smoke coming from the

chimney of one of their houses.

Upon crossing a small brook, we realized that just below the trail lay the remnants of an old dam. Closer inspection revealed a mill site and a small check dam upstream. Here, so close to the summit, there had been ample run-off, enough to support at least a seasonal sawmill or gristmill. The soil at the mill site was a sandy loam unlike the rocky ground we'd trudged over to reach the top. The more we talked and looked, the more questions arose about life on top of Leverett.

Curiosity, however, can only be sustained so long on empty stomachs, so we chose the best spot by the dam site and broke out lunch. People divided up into small groups forming clusters of brightly-colored sweaters and parkas on a sea of orange leaves.

The peak of fall foliage is always a special time—and it is simply unbelievable if colors affect your view of the world. Because the beauty is so pervasive and complex, we simply cannot remember the detail from one year to the next. And so, year after year, we are awed by this display. To beg the spectacular, the students were reminded that nowhere else on earth do the forests turn quite as brilliant as in New England, and, here they were, lucky souls, munching on PBJ's amidst it all. My obvious enthusiasm, however, was countered by an alternate world view, undoubtedly crafted for reaction.

"You having a good time?" I asked a student.

"Nah. Life sucks. I'd rather be playing videos," he replied.

Well, to each his own, but, if virtual reality can compete with the peak of fall foliage, both nature and people are in deep trouble. As Edward Abbey once said about getting close to a TV set (and he would probably extend this to computers as well): "They are just big vacuum tubes and when you get too close they suck your brains out." Well, anyway....

Lunch over, we headed downhill toward Rattlesnake Gutter. As we came over the crest of the Gutter, the red lips on the cliff smiled down at us, seeming to say, "Hope you had a great day, kids." The ravine dropped off sharply below. We were walking as if in the canopy of a painted forest. What a precious place this is, the Gutter—the jewel in the crown of Leverett. On the way down the road, we stopped where a glacier some 12,000 years ago had sanded the rock smooth. "So...how was the Gutter formed?" we asked. "Can you imagine a glacial lake covering the North Leverett valley, its waters roaring down this ravine, cutting deeply into the rock?" On a hot summer's day, the cool air flowing downhill is a reminder of those great forces that carved out our land.

At the bottom of the Gutter, the buses stood waiting. Children and teachers filed on, and we waved as they drove away. The black and white dog had come far on his little legs and seemed happy the day in the woods was coming to an end. It was great fun being with the children; their boundless energy and enthusiasm is a pleasure to be around.

Several weeks later, the Trust received a series of nice thank you notes from the three classes. One student suggested two Mountain Days next year, but I think five or ten would receive rousing applause.

The Trust, in turn, thanks the school for giving us this opportunity. We encourage you to join us next year for Mountain Day. In the meantime, take a friend and walk up Brushy Mountain. It's a trip into nature and history which ends at the top of the town.

—Brooke Thomas

❧ 1997 Membership Drive ❧

When did you arrive in Leverett?

- Were you here when the *New York Times* ran an article on the Gutter cliffs?
- Had you arrived to share in the Gutter-preservation concerns in the 50's, when the seeds for the Trust were planted?
- Were you involved with our first fund drive in '88 that resulted in the purchase of 45 acres in the Gutter?
- Did you help retire the Long Hill Natural Area debt?
- Do you remember the ugly utility poles we "buried" along Putney Road?
- Did you attend our hilarious "Party at the Dump" last year?
- Have you walked the Outdoor Classroom trail at the Leverett Elementary School?
- Did you just find out there was a land trust in Leverett?

Here WE are again—but who are we?

We are Rattlesnake Gutter Trust, your local non-profit land trust. We are committed to protect, preserve, and promote interest and appreciation of our local resources. We promote awareness and preservation of these resources for present and future residents. We acquire rights to lands and develop measures to support those rights. We help landowners with easements.

We are not alone!

We are the local core group focusing our attention on Leverett, while sharing goals with other nearby trusts. As a group, we support, share in, and benefit from our association with Valley Land Fund, Kestrel Trust, Mt. Grace Land Trust, and the Hitchcock Center. Together we join the surge of energy directed toward ensuring the long term survival of landscapes and natural systems precious to our world.

We need you!

Much of the richness of life in Leverett is due to its diversity. We want that diversity reflected in our membership. We want to include those who were here before we came and those who moved to town yesterday, young people who are becoming aware of Leverett's surrounding beauty, seniors who have time to savor it, and all those in between. We want to include those with knowledge of flora and fauna and geologists who ponder the mysteries of the Gutter, hikers and bikers, walkers and talkers.

Regardless of when you "plugged in" to the charms of Leverett, we want you to join our efforts now and help make those charms endure.

Here YOU are again—Join us now!

Join or renew NOW!

Complete the application below, clip and send in the enclosed return envelope with annual dues (\$5.00 for adults, \$1.00 for children) to:

Friends of Rattlesnake Gutter, P.O. Box 195, Leverett, MA 01054

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Enclosed is \$ _____ for:

new membership

renewal

in memory of _____

STATE LEGISLATION ADDRESSES

LAND CONVERSATION ISSUES

During 1996, the General Assembly passed several important pieces of environmental and conservation legislation that are likely to have both immediate and long term impact on Leverett.

Open Space Bond Bill

Signed into law by Governor Weld in February, 1996, the Open Space Bond Bill authorizes nearly \$400 million for open space preservation, the acquisition of wildlife and rare species habitat, pollution prevention, and infrastructure improvements.

Within the overall funding, the new law makes available to cities and towns in Massachusetts approximately \$50 million for the purchase of open space, and encourages private organizations like RGT to work in partnership with municipalities to acquire, protect, and manage:

- natural habitats for native plants, animal species, or natural communities listed as rare, threatened, or endangered;
- land abutting rivers, streams, and lakes;
- significant natural areas or wildlife habitats which will be accessible to the public;
- open space with significant archaeological, scenic, recreational, or historical value; and
- open space with significant agricultural value or potential.

Environmental Trust Fund

One provision of the Open Space Bond Bill extended the provisions of the Massachusetts Environmental Trust Fund to western Massachusetts.

Originally created in 1988 to settle violations of the Clean Water Act in the Boston Harbor and later expanded to cover all watersheds that drain into the Harbor, the trust fund now includes twelve additional watersheds, most of them west of the Quabbin Reservoir.

Any organization or municipality in the area covered by those water sheds can apply to the Trust Fund for grants to support a

wide variety of environmental protection projects and activities.

Massachusetts Rivers Protection Act

The Rivers Protection Act, potentially one of the most far-reaching pieces of environmental legislation in state history, went into effect on August 7, 1996.

The Act established as state policy the protection of the natural integrity of the Commonwealth's waterways and the creation of open space along rivers and streams. The vehicle for implementing this policy is a new wetland resource area—the Riverfront Area—extending 200 feet from the mean annual high water line of all rivers and streams that flow throughout the year.

Within the Riverfront Area, the Act established eight environmental and conservation "interests": the protection of private or public water supply; the protection of groundwater; flood control; the prevention of pollution; the protection of land containing shellfish; the protection of wildlife habitat; and the protection of fisheries.

Under the new legislation, no building or other work can take place within the Riverfront Area unless the applicant can demonstrate, first, that there are no practicable and substantially equivalent economic alternatives with less adverse impact on the interests of the Act, and, second, that the building or work will have no significant environmental impact on the Riverfront Area.

In short, the River Protection Act means that from now on any new building, addition to existing buildings, roadwork, or other activity that might in any way alter land, vegetation, ground water, or wildlife habitat within 200 feet of a perennial river or stream must be reviewed and approved by the local Conservation Commission before that building or other activity can go forward.

While full regulations for implementing the Act are still being formulated by the Department of Environmental Protection, it already is clear that this legislation will have a decisive effect on future waterfront development along every river and stream in the state.

—Steve Weiss

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