

The Steep Rock VISTA

The Newsletter of the Steep Rock Association

Summer 1993

Steep Rock Preserved

(Editor's Note: Born in Paris in 1854, Ehrick Kensett Rossiter divided much of his life between Washington, Connecticut, and New York City. He was an architect who designed many notable local structures, including the Washington Club, the Mayflower Inn and Woodruff House. Mr. Rossiter died on October 15, 1941, at the age of 87.)

Conservation, preservation—these are bywords of today. Fortunately, for Washington, they were the bywords and the vision of Steep Rock's founder, Ehrick Rossiter. As a Gunnery student from 1866-1870, Ehrick was introduced to the natural wonders and beauty of Washington by Headmaster Frederick Gunn, who encouraged his students to explore the meadows and forests of the Shepaug River valley.

In 1882 Rossiter returned to Washington with his young family and soon purchased six acres of land near the Gunnery, known to this day as "The Rocks", and began to build a home. Construction was abruptly postponed when Mr. Rossiter learned that a lumber company intended to purchase land that included Steep Rock. Deeply troubled by the prospect of the commercial destruction of his beloved woodlands, he decided to use the family's nest egg to purchase and preserve Steep Rock. So, between 1887 and 1900, the Rossiters purchased more than 100 acres from Franklin Titus, Merrill and Evelyn Fenn, Henry Hickox, Samuel Brinsmade, and Joseph Black, beginning a tradition of stewardship that continues to this day.



View from the top of Steep Rock.

On October 15, 1925, Ehrick Rossiter, by deed of trust, donated "a certain tract (186 acres) of land know as 'Steep Rock'...securing its preservation, improvement and maintenance for the use and enjoyment of citizens and residents of Washington and Litchfield County and of their guests and friends and of the general public." Thus the stewardship of Steep Rock was entrusted to a board of trustees and was formally incorporated as the Steep Rock Association in 1961. Ehrick Rossiter's fine example has inspired many other generous benefactors, resulting in the preservation of over 1700 acres within the town of Washington.

Susan Payne

Mountain Bikes in Steep Rock

The number of mountain bikers in the Steep Rock preserves has increased dramatically in the last three years. The Trustees recognize the popularity of this outdoor activity, and hope to continue allowing mountain bikers in both Steep Rock and Hidden Valley. People riding mountain bikes should, however, be aware that the trails must be shared with hikers and equestrians and that hikers and horses have the right of way.

Mountain bikes are silent—hikers often don't hear them approaching, especially along the river's edge. Horses certainly don't hear the bikes, and can easily be startled when a bike suddenly appears. Be aware of this fact when approaching horses or hikers, especially from behind.

Mountain bikers should also be aware that their bike tire tracks cause erosion—muddy trails should be avoided and off trail riding should never occur. Several trails not suitable for mountain biking have been posted throughout the preserves. These trails are steep, narrow, and are already showing signs of erosion. The larger the group of riders, the more chance there is for creating the tracks that cause erosion.

Steep Rock's Trails Committee has created a list of Mountain Bike Rules. The Committee hopes that these rules will make "mountain bike etiquette" clear, so that everyone—hikers, equestrians, and mountain bikers can enjoy the privilege of exploring the trails of Steep Rock. Signs will be posted at the main trail entrances this summer.

Posting of the Mountain Bike Rules will begin a period of probation for mountain bikers. Adherence to the rules will avoid the necessity of placing a prohibition on all mountain bikes within Steep Rock.

MOUNTAIN BIKE RULES

1. Obey signs
2. Stay on trails
3. Do not speed! Speed limit 15 mph; slower speeds when conditions warrant
4. Dismount when approaching horses
5. Yield to walkers
6. Avoid muddy trails
7. No more than four riders in a group



Land Preservation Committee members take a break from monitoring Conservation Easements. Director Susan Branson and Trustees Bert Read, John Herrmann, and Penny Bardel hiked to the Pinnacle overlooking Lake Waramaug.

Shepaug River Flow

The Steep Rock Association, joined by other environmental organizations and the town of Washington, is sponsoring a hydrologic study proposed by the recently formed Shepaug River ad hoc Committee.

The Committee consists of a group of concerned citizens, and is chaired by Phil Farmer, a resident of Washington and member of the Shepaug/Bantam River Commission. The objective of the Committee is to increase the flow of water in the Shepaug during the dry summer season, to build and ensure a healthy ecosystem, to upgrade and maintain the aesthetic qualities of the river, and to provide recreational opportunities along the river.

Milone & MacBroom, from Cheshire, Connecticut, was chosen to conduct the study. They will determine how much additional water is needed and the Waterbury Water Company's capability to supply the additional water.

The city of Waterbury controls the headwaters of the Shepaug by means of reservoirs located on its property in Warren. The majority of the stored water is eventually piped and sold to the city and several other towns.

In a 1921 agreement with the town of Washington, the city of Waterbury agreed to release, every year, 1.5 million gallons of water a day into the Shepaug River between May 1 and November 1.

The study, which will be completed in the fall, will provide the necessary documentation for the town of Washington to renegotiate its agreement with Waterbury.

Allan Turner

Trustee News

At the Annual Meeting held in May, four Trustees retired from the board and five new Trustees were elected.

Stepping down from the board (but up to the council!) were Penny Bardel, Arthur Carter, Natalie Dyer and Arthur Potter.

New Trustees elected were Sheila Anson, Shirley Downs, Elaine Luckey, John Millington and Priscilla Manning Porter.

Sheila M. Anson is a life-long resident of Washington. She is a graduate of Shepaug Valley High School and Dean Junior College, and works in the Admissions Office at Rumsey Hall School. Sheila is the Chairperson of the Washington Parks and Recreation Commission. She enjoys jogging and walking in Steep Rock and has ready access to Hidden Valley from her work place!

Shirley Downs moved to Washington with her young family in 1968. She soon discovered that the house she bought bordered on Hidden Valley and says her four children were practically raised in the preserve. Shirley was Pre School Director at The (Eliot) Pratt Center for five years and also taught at the Judea Nursery school for 20 years. Two times each year, spring and fall, she brought her young students to Steep Rock for educational nature walks.

Elaine C. Luckey studied Environmental Law at Vermont Law School. She has worked at HVA on their groundwater project and as an Environmental Paralegal for a law firm in Hartford. She's the Chairperson of the Washington Inland Wetlands Commission. Elaine has done extensive backpacking and says that she's walked in Steep Rock ever since she was ambulatory and will continue until she no longer is!

John A. Millington has spent most of his life in publishing, including many years at Time, Inc. He is currently the Vice President for Planning and Development at the Council on Foreign Relations, and serves as Chairman of the Governor's Council on Environmental Quality. John is actively involved in community affairs, particularly those dealing with the environment, at both the local and state level.

Priscilla Manning Porter is one of the East's best known artists in fused glass. She has pieces in the permanent collection at the Corning Museum of American Art, and has had commissions from retailers Bonwit Teller and Tiffany's in New York. She has been designated Master Craftsman/Teacher by the Society of Connecticut Craftsmen. Priscilla has her studio on Plumb Hill Road here in Washington. When she was nominated and then elected to the board, Priscilla said: "Steep Rock is a most unusual and wonderful organization...I am very honored and pleased to be a part of it."

Fauna of Steep Rock

When one envisions Steep Rock, the mind's eye portrays the Shepaug River meandering through stately hemlocks, sometimes gently, sometimes with turbulence. A kingfisher may sweep through our field of vision, patrolling the river near the horse ring, or we may be startled by a pair of chipmunks engaged in a noisy territorial dispute. Fauna abounds in the preserve, ready to provide treasured memories if you move slowly and quietly enough.

Twenty years ago I saw my first mink in Hidden Valley. A dark, sinuous little creature, it busily worked its way upstream, following the far bank, slipping over rocks, diving to look for minnows and popping up a few feet beyond to repeat the process. Two years ago, while walking the railroad bed just below the confluence of the Shepaug and Bantam Rivers, my youngest son pointed out a cream-colored mink. Now that was a rare sight!

One of my most serendipitous encounters occurred two springs ago. Poking along, camera and tripod in hand, searching for trillium and saxifrage, I froze when I looked up to see a glorious red fox trotting straight towards me. At twenty feet or so she finally caught my scent, uttered one sharp bark, and vanished. As I gazed wistfully after her, my peripheral vision caught a movement up the slope—a cat?—way out in the woods? Wait! Was it...? Yes! a fox kit, clad in infant gray fuzz. Unable to contain my curiosity, I crept up the slope as the youngster disappeared down a hole. I set up my equipment to take a picture of the den entrance. A straggly little hemlock made focusing a challenge, and as I was fiddling with the lens, a little black nose poked cautiously out of the tunnel. I held my breath as the baby fox face emerged...and then I sneezed.

Since it is usually found in still water, I was surprised to see a muskrat swimming in the river. This mammal resembles a small beaver, but its ratlike tail is flattened vertically, providing a very efficient means of propulsion and maneuvering. The muskrat builds a small beaver-like lodge of cattail leaves, grasses and sedges on the edge of a pond or marsh.

I always hope to see a great blue heron when I walk around the Clamshell in Steep Rock or the Half Mile Gallop in Hidden Valley, but I wasn't prepared, one early spring morning, for an aerial spectacle. I was headed toward Judd's Bridge, passing under the power lines. Raindrops were causing the lines to crackle loudly, and I looked up in time to see, far above, eighteen herons migrating to the northwest. Ever since then, when I'm in the area, I can't resist looking up, just in case....

On another morning I surprised an osprey at breakfast. Although I was higher up on the other side of the Shepaug, it still flew down river, leaving a trout at least a foot long on the rock where it had perched. When I returned, the osprey wasn't there, but neither was the trout.

Early or late in May, you may be rewarded by the sight of a deer watching you from the shadows of the forest, or standing at the river's edge. As it bounds away, there is no



Scoutmaster Newell Hill, left, and Trustee Art Potter, right, with Scouts from Troop #487. The Scouts took part in Steep Rock's reforestation program this spring.

Reforestation Program

600 Trees Planted This Spring - For the third year in a row, Trustee Art Potter led a project designed to reforest areas in Steep Rock where hemlock trees have suffered severe damage from insect infestations.

Shirley Downs and George Ward joined Forester Vin Forese, Intern Ian Branson and Art one Saturday, and planted white pine and Norway spruce above the "Avenue of Pines" area. Then, in a fenced area near the riding ring, they planted 100 elms that are resistant to Dutch elm disease.

Another day, Ian and Washington Rotary Club member Victor Allan planted 50 dogwoods and fifty Norway spruce that will eventually be transplanted to other locations throughout the town.

Art also got help from Washington's Boy Scout Troop #487, led by Scoutmaster Newell Hill.

question about why that large, white, waving triangle of a tail is called a flag. Sometimes, out of sight, it will snort, a sound you can imitate by holding your upper teeth against your lower lip and blowing out with a "fffvuvv".

Far more numerous than the larger birds and mammals are the smaller song birds. Close observation requires binoculars to find those species that are busy in the treetops, singing their territorial songs or gobbling scores of caterpillars. As I walk briskly, I hear, but seldom see, the oriole, rose-breasted grosbeak, scarlet tanager, great flycatcher, yellowthroat, and many other warblers I couldn't begin to identify without a guidebook. Then there are the earthier types—the veery, the wood thrush, and the hermit thrush that serenade me from the top of the tunnel.

Whatever the season or the weather, Steep Rock and Hidden Valley have much to offer. So come on out—talk less, watch more, and your unobtrusiveness will enrich you someday.

Linda Potter

TRUSTEES

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George A. Murphy, Vice President
Bertram Read, Vice President
Carlos Canal, Treasurer
Fourgie W. Smith, Secretary

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|-----------------------|--------------------------|
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Harry Wright

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Helen Wersebe, Honorary Trustee
Susan Branson, Executive Director & Vista Editor
Vincent L. Forese, Forester

Annual Picnic – September 11

Saturday, September 11, beginning at noon, the best tasting hot dogs and hamburgers for miles around, Steep Rock's famous picnic soup, and delicious cakes—all served to you by Steep Rock trustees and council members. Horse drawn wagon rides, too. Look for your invitation—it will arrive at the end of summer.



Guests at last year's Steep Rock Annual Picnic were treated to horse drawn wagon rides provided by Rene Ancil from Frog Hollow Farm in Bethlehem.

Horse Show – August 1

Washington Horse Show - At the riding ring in Steep Rock on Sunday, August 1, 8 A.M., rain or shine. Come and watch this beautiful show. Have lunch at the Horse Show Cafe. All proceeds will be donated to the Steep Rock Association.

Annual Fund Drive

Steep Rock's Annual Fund drive is still underway. Our operating expenses come almost entirely from your annual contributions. This year's goal has not been met. All contributions, small or large, are needed and welcomed. They are tax exempt and may be sent to:

Steep Rock Association
P.O. Box 279
Washington Depot, CT 06794

• STEEP ROCK RULES & INFORMATION

1. MOUNTAIN BIKES - See separate article, p. 1.
2. MAPS - For sale (\$1.00 each) at several locations in town: the Steep Rock office in the grange building, Hickory Stick Bookstore, Town Hall, I.A.I.S.
3. CAMPING - Allowed by permit only. Contact the Steep Rock office for more information (868-9131).
4. MOTORIZED VEHICLES - Under the terms of the original Deed of Gift, no motorized vehicles of any type are allowed anywhere within Steep Rock.
5. ALCOHOL - Prohibited.
6. FIRES - Allowed only in grills or stone fireplaces. In times of extreme fire hazard, all fires will be prohibited.
7. NOISE - No loud music is permitted.
8. TRASH - Please do not litter. If you bring it in, carry it out!

Dear Steep Rock Assoc.,

My mom was riding up at Steep Rock since she was a little girl. And now my mom and I go riding all the time I love it, you are a great person and I'm glad you take such good care of it. I wish I would give you more than two dollars but I'm only ten years old.

(Steep Rock is so beautiful to me!)

Thank you!

PS my mom wants to Alison
send you ten dollars. @

A note that came with a contribution. We'd like to hear from you.

Steep Rock Association
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