



The Steep Rock *VISTA*

The Newsletter of the Steep Rock Association

Spring 2001

Presidents' Trail Dedicated

On October 7, 2000, a group of Trustees, Council Members and their friends gathered together for the last of several events held throughout the year commemorating the 75th Anniversary of Steep Rock. This occasion was the dedication of the newly restored Presidents' Trail. Peter Jensen's Open Space Management team worked on the trail throughout the summer, using hand tools almost exclusively, and made the trail safe and easy to negotiate. It has become one of the most popular trails in Hidden Valley



Trustees, Council Members and friends gather at the Presidents' Trail dedication

What follows are the words of Bob deCourcy, featured speaker at the ceremony.

"As you walk this trail, please imagine with me two scenes. First go back to the beginning of the 20th century. Picture the parlor car from New York as the Shepaug Valley train chugs around the curves, the tracks directly over the water, no bushes to obscure the view. Imagine the scenes as the winding track opens the line of sight: upstream, downstream, or straight across.

This trail has a special history. You know it was the railroad bed. After the tracks were removed in 1947, it was a cinder path that could accommodate an automobile. But on the morning of August 19th, 1955, everything changed! The floodwaters, topped by the final surge as the road in Woodville gave way, ripped out sections, tore away boulders as big as a refrigerator. At the same time, the torrents of water sluicing down the hillside started landslides that covered other sections with mud, trees, and boulders. Try to image that scene. Overnight the trail became impassable!

Presidents' Trail, cont.

A decade passed before this area became part of Steep Rock. Meanwhile, even though cinders are an inhospitable growing medium, seedlings sprouted, and more years passed. Restoring the trail seemed impossible. A small dog could hardly find his way through.

What happened next was like what happens in the army where no one actually gives an order. The General just incidentally *remarks* to the Colonel that a certain spot would be a nice place for a tennis court. So the Colonel states to the Captain that the General would like a tennis court. Then the Captain calls the Lieutenants, etc. Later when the secretary of Defense investigates, there is nobody to blame.

In this case, someone told Vinnie Forese what a great trail this could be. So he, with the summer interns, and a little help from fishermen, gradually picked out a pathway, moved a rock here, cut a tree here, filled a hole there. He called it "The Presidents' Trail". (Probably so he could blame someone if the secretary of Defense questioned him). The trail became increasingly popular.

And now we've had Peter Jensen restore this splendid riverview trail, another example of the fine work our present trustees are doing. When I see the way they are going forward, with stewardship, land preservation, the River, trails, views, and much more, I am sure that all the past trustees can rest in peace.

As I proudly cut this ribbon, let us give thanks to all the wonderful people, beginning with Ehrick Rossiter and the original nine Trustees, and all the rest who have given their time, land, funds, and talents to bring us to this 75th diamond year, and for this new generation who will carry Steep Rock forward, far beyond our best dreams."



Woolly adelgid egg sacs, on a hemlock branch.. They are readily visible in early spring. If you see any call us! (see "Reminders", p.4)



Update

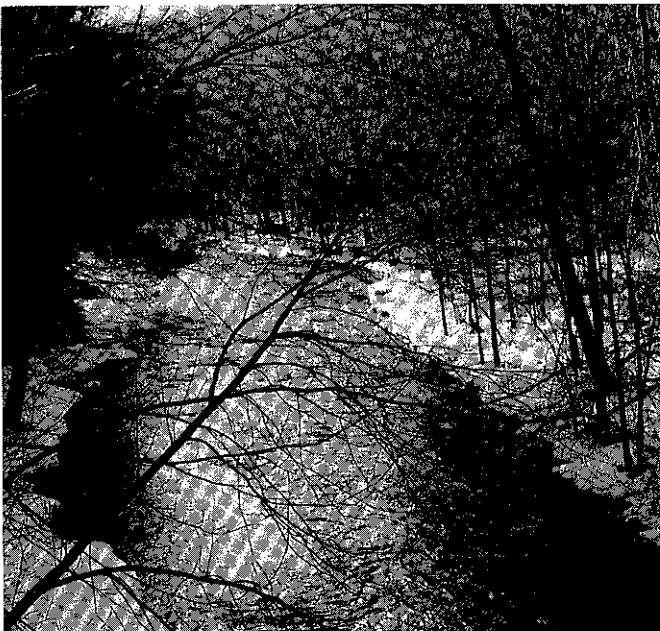
Shepaug River Lawsuit: In February 2000, the Connecticut Superior Court ruled in favor of the Shepaug River Association, Steep Rock, Roxbury Land Trust and the towns of Washington and Roxbury, and ordered the City of Waterbury to release substantially more water to the Shepaug in the future. As predicted, Waterbury appealed. However their appeal only postpones final relief for the river.

The appeal was initially delayed because the court needed time to prepare the voluminous transcript for the appeal of the six week trial. Then, in an attempt to delay matters further, Waterbury asked the Superior Court to clarify its February 2000 ruling and to grant the City more time to file its opening brief. On February 27, 2000 the court duly obliged by explaining, but not changing, its initial ruling and ordering Waterbury to file its opening brief by April 2, 2001. Our answering brief on behalf of the river will be filed soon thereafter, and a decision of the appeals court should come before the end of the year.

Following a decision on appeal, the Superior Court will then rule on the river advocates' petition to be reimbursed legal fees and costs for the litigation, which will bring the ten year campaign to save the Shepaug to a successful conclusion.

The fight to preserve our river would not have been conceivable without the generous help over the years, of many people in Washington and Roxbury. For this help, as well as for the existence of our precious river, we must all be thankful.

Thanks to Edwin Matthews, President of the Shepaug River Association for this Update.



Shepaug River, from Whittlesey Road, Winter 2001

Book Celebrates Steep Rock's 75th Anniversary



Authors Helen Wersebe and Bob deCourcy with a copy of Seventy Five Years of Steep Rock, available at the Steep Rock office, the Town Clerk's office, and the Gunn Library.

The Steep Rock Association recently announced the publication of Seventy Five Years of Steep Rock: A Celebration, a book that tells the story of the Washington's land trust, the Steep Rock Association, and chronicles the people and events which shaped the history of this regionally beloved place, on the 75th anniversary of its founding.

Thirty-four black and white photographs, some from the archives of The Gunnery and The Gunn Memorial Museum, and more modern ones taken by local folks, bring to life the anecdotes associated with the land and its management. Authors Robert L. deCourcy and Helen Wersebe, long-time Washington residents and active participants in the life of the town, researched the records of the Association, interviewed many people, and compiled dozens of stories which give a behind-the-scenes look at Steep Rock, Hidden Valley, and the Association.

The book describes the founding, early history, and growth of this organization from its simple beginnings in 1925 through its recent development as a sophisticated, conservation-oriented land trust. There are lively tales about the first picnic (the precursor to the now annual Steep Rock Picnic), misbehavior among visitors, the debates about the use and management of the property and its natural resources, and the Association's recent role in the lawsuit with the City of Waterbury. The narrative places the story of Steep Rock in the context of the growth of the regional and national environmental movement over the course of the 20th century, including a time line for reference. The 40 page, book contains maps of Steep Rock and Hidden Valley, drawn especially for this project by Cindy Brissett of Washington.



Update

Updates, cont.

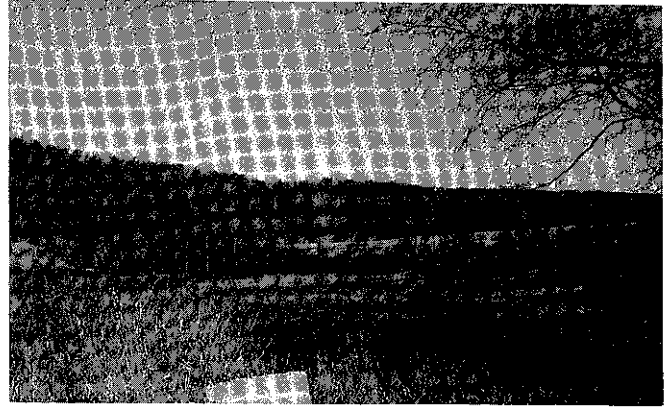
Meeker Swamp: Demolition of the buildings and cleanup of the area on Route 202 was completed last summer. The barns were structurally unsound and had long been in danger of falling down. The house was significantly damaged in a fire in February of last year. The cleared area now affords a stunning view of the Meeker Swamp land including the wetlands, the agricultural cropland and the forested ridgeline in the background.

The Meeker Swamp Advisory Committee, an ad hoc committee consisting of representatives from Steep Rock and the town of Washington, has met several times over the fall and winter. The most immediate issue confronting the committee is to make sure the agricultural land on the Meeker property continues to be farmed in an environmentally sensitive way. The committee held an educational session with Kathy Johnson of the USDA and Margaret MacCauley of Nature Conservancy's Sunny Valley Preserve to discuss appropriate farming techniques. The committee solicited requests for proposals from anyone interested in farming all or part of the agricultural areas of the property. Local farmers were contacted and ads were placed in local newspapers requesting the proposals. Eleven written proposals were received, and of the eleven, four have made a "short list". During the months of March and April, the applicants will be interviewed and a farmer will be selected.

A myriad of other issues face the Meeker Advisory Committee, such as:

- public access to the property
- parking for public access
- whether and where to establish trails
- how to best use the buildings on Christian Street
- how to protect the wetlands, Bee Brook and the large aquifer on the property
- how to integrate the several uses that may exist on the property.

Working together with the Advisory Committee, Steep Rock's Stewardship Committee has asked Peter Jensen of Open Space Management, to walk the Meeker Swamp property and submit a proposal for the best location for trail(s) on the property.



Meeker Swamp Property—A View from Christian Street

75th Anniversary Picnic

Roger Cannavero's band Hot Acoustics, pictured below, "rocked the house" at the Steep Rock's 75th Anniversary picnic, held on last Labor Day weekend. More than 450 people attended.



Become a Member of Steep Rock. We Need Your Support!

A contribution of any size entitles you to membership for one year.
The funds raised help us to maintain the reservations. Please use this form to send in your donation.

Name _____

PO Box /Street _____

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Send To:
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PO Box 279, Washington Depot, CT 06794



Reminders

- The reservations will most likely be closed to mountain biking, horseback riding and camping during the spring thaw.

WE'RE CLOSED!
As of March 16

It's late coming this year, so our usual March 1 date for closure passed with no sign of mud season yet. Watch for the CLOSED signs at the entrances as soon as the spring thaw begins. How long the reservations remain closed to these high impact uses depends on how quickly the frost leaves the ground and the trails dry out.

- Hidden Valley's resident Goshawks become active in early spring, sometimes as early as February or March. Remember that these birds are extremely aggressive, particularly when there are goslings in the nest. Watch for our "trail closed" signs". We post them for your protection and safety. They will go up as soon as we get the first reports that the birds are active again.

THEY'RE ACTIVE!
First reported March 9



- The Hemlock woolly adelgid egg sacs are readily visible in early spring. (see photo, p.1) We'd appreciate any reports of sitings. Mark MacClure will visit the reservations again this spring for his annual assessment. Last year we had good news on two fronts. First, the beetles introduced had wintered over—that is, they survived, were reproducing and were slowly spreading throughout the reservations. Second, the adelgid suffered a setback when the sudden very cold weather hit in January after an unseasonably mild early winter. This year's serious winter, with significant snowfall and low temperatures, may slow the adelgid's spread, and give the beetles more time to disperse throughout the Reservations, ultimately, benefiting our hemlocks. We hope that's what Dr. McClure will report.

Reminders, cont.

- We reported on the White Pines Project in the summer 2000 issue of VISTA. Trees selected by our forester, Star Childs of EECOS (who wrote our CT Forest Stewardship Plan) have been marked, and Steep Rock is in the process of selecting a logger to undertake the project, under the guidance of Mr. Childs and Steep Rock's Stewardship Committee. To quote from the project plan: "If one looks closely, it should be reasonably apparent that the best and biggest diameter trees are the ones that have not been marked! The overall goal is to give these trees enough space between their crowns that they can recover from the overcrowding that now exists."



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