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A NEW CENTURY OF CONSERVATION AT GREAT MOUNTAIN FOREST

Paul K. Barten, Ph.D.
Executive Director, Great Mountain Forest
Professor of Forest Resources, University of Massachusetts Amherst

When Grant Mudge, Denise Buchanan, and Betsy Little invited me to speak in your centennial year series I faced the challenge of developing something that would add value to no fewer than five earlier presentations. These included:

- the talk about Senator Frederic Walcott that Chip Collins gave here a few years ago;
- my talk at the Centennial Celebration for Great Mountain Forest in September 2009;
- the narrated slide presentation in our Norfolk Historical Society exhibit;
- the talk Star Childs gave here in 2010 during the Centennial Year of GMF; and
- the outstanding film - "*Green Fire: Aldo Leopold and a Land Ethic for Our Time.*"

So, *all* I have to do tonight is present some compelling new ideas and information to the members of this audience who've heard all these antecedents while *also* providing a coherent narrative for other members of this audience who are learning about GMF for the first time.

Put another way, the three boundary conditions or design criteria I used were:

1. do not anesthetize the first group;
2. do not give the second group a drink from a fire hose; and
3. provide everyone with a clear sense of how the past can, and should, help to guide us.

Naturally, I was staring at blank screen until a brief conversation with Laura Byers broke the log jam. We were chatting before my Forest Lyceum presentation on July 14th when – after talking about the Shakers – she looked me in the eye and asked "Did you know Ted and Elisabeth Childs?" I said "Yes, I first met them in 1989. I got to know Ted, and Darrell Russ, quite well in connection with the field research I was doing at GMF that used their weather data. I got to know Elisabeth even better and we became good friends." Laura smiled approvingly and said "*She was a strong woman. She did so much for this community.*" In that testimonial of Elisabeth's dear friend, and in that one key word – community – I knew I had a starting point and central theme for this talk.

So *now*, I'm happy to have this opportunity to present some information and ideas about how GMF was established, how it evolved, and how these events and people inform a new century of management, research, education, and service centered on this unique community forest.

First, let's consider the land.

Long before first contact with Europeans in the 1600s, epidemic diseases, and the fur trade, Native Americans called the Canaan Mountain Plateau ...the *Great Mountain*. This may seem a little extravagant, but for Native Americans who lived and farmed in river valleys and along estuaries like Long Island Sound – the imposing landform and the long walk up to the rocky ridges – especially from the west – validated the name.

They hunted, and later trapped, on this high ground. Trade routes and war parties passed through this area. In the Algonkian language it would have been called *ashaway* [ASH away] meaning "...the place between" the *Mahicans* to the northwest, the *Pocumtucks* to the northeast, and the *Wappingers* to the south.ⁱ The Ojibway of the Great Lakes region called landforms like the Canaan Mountain Plateau *kawashaway* [kaw ASH away], meaning "no place between"—where they believed the earth and the spirit world were seamlessly connected.ⁱⁱ Like the gods on Mt. Olympus, it stands to reason that spirits resided in wild, secluded places with dramatic weather and awe-inspiring light, clouds, and wind.

In an ecological sense, this *Taconic*—this wildernessⁱⁱⁱ—was little affected by the actions or decisions of people. This is not to say that people aren't "natural" but to note the absence of Native American agriculture and the frequent use of fire which was common elsewhere. With the arrival of Europeans this would change, slowly at first, then in ways and at a rate that native people could not imagine, understand, or ever reconcile with their beliefs and way of life.

Until the late-1700s this region was part of what Professor Alden Vaughan aptly called the "*New England Frontier*."^{iv} Naturally, the prime agricultural land in the major river valleys was the first to be settled. In addition to having the deepest, most fertile soils, these lands were already connected to growing towns and cities like Springfield, Hartford and New Haven by networks of Native American trails – soon to be cart paths, then wagon roads, then turnpikes, now highways. They also were near the stream and river systems that powered mills and were used to transport goods to market.

The higher, colder land with thin stony soils was the least adaptable to European crops, farming methods, and animal husbandry *and* the most distant from civilization. This also meant these lands were more readily available to people who were willing to – or were compelled to – endure the challenges and privations of a frontier life. It is worth noting that early settlers in remote areas encountered conditions that had not existed since about 1,000 BC in most of Europe.^v

As Eric Sloane's wonderful books^{vi} bring to life, the transformation from forest to homestead required two or three generations of back-breaking work. Clearing the forest for fields and pastures, building stone walls to enable plowing and to control the movements of livestock, building places to live, work, and shelter animals and store the harvest, and supplementing their diet by fishing, hunting (e.g., white-tailed deer, wild turkey, ruffed grouse, small game) and gathering (chestnuts, hickory nuts, fiddleheads, etc.) ...10 or 12 hours a day, six days a week, year after year.

The defining change in this land came with the transformation of the region from a largely agrarian to an increasingly industrial mode of life in the early-1800s. This was

accelerated by the War for Independence, the War of 1812, and western expansion ...and fueled by the restless energy and entrepreneurial spirit of the American people. As David Reynolds puts it "...The first two decades of the 19th century were the key transitional moment from the subsistence economy of the past to the capitalist economy of the future."^{vii}

The specific ingredients for change in the Litchfield Hills and southern Berkshires were:

- high quality iron ore,
- limestone (...which was needed to separate impurities from molten iron),
- extensive forests to produce charcoal,
- streams and rivers for water power,
- a sufficient supply of labor, and
- their proximity to the population centers and markets of the eastern seaboard.

The iron industry in the Litchfield Hills and the Berkshires was fully developed between 1780 and 1910. In the late-1800s the Bessemer process using anthracite coal and coke, and the shift in demand from iron to steel, finally overwhelmed the time-honored and sophisticated use of blast furnaces. Each ironmaster had their own mixtures and methods to make what might now be called "artisanal" iron.^{viii} Their products had the strength, toughness, and durability needed for cannons used by the army and navy through the Civil War era. In the mid- to late-1800s, the high quality railroad car wheels produced by Barnum Richardson fostered the western expansion, infrastructure development, and growth of their competitors in Pennsylvania and the Midwest that, ironically, led to the demise of the company.

I want to emphasize that the use forests for charcoal production was not the "cut and run" logging for sawtimber or railroad ties that afflicted other parts of the country. However, in local parlance it came to be known as "coaling" or "stripping" – a process by which every usable stick on a total of 10 to 15 square miles per year across the region was cut, stacked, and slowly burned to pure carbon. Clearly, this was *not* multiple-use/sustained yield management aimed at harmonizing the use of the land for wood production, water, wildlife, and other goods and services. By design, it was *single use*/sustained yield production of an industrial raw material. Since charcoal production, handling, and transportation accounted for about half of the total production cost of iron, companies like Hunts Lyman and Barnum Richardson amassed large landholdings in order to secure a reliable supply of fuel for the seven or eight blast furnaces in operation at any given time. Once a furnace was "in blast" it had to be tended continuously for weeks, sometimes a month or more, at a time.

Ironically – once again – the practical need to purchase, consolidate, and hold large areas of land for charcoal production kept 1,000s of acres that would become Great Mountain Forest and several Connecticut and Massachusetts State Forests intact with a one or two owners. However, the tree species mix and age structure of this now-industrial forest was changed drastically. In the course of more than a century of repeated cutting, a very diverse, uneven-aged forest was methodically converted to a patchwork of even-aged stands. This new forest was largely comprised of sprout clumps of fast-growing trees like grey birch, red maple, chestnut, and beech that supplied another crop in 20 to 30 years.

Looking back – mounted on a high horse – it's easy to heap scorn on this single-minded use of the forest. Before we indulge in this pastime we need to recognize that some of the same criticism, albeit at a smaller scale, would be valid when we sell forest land knowing it will be

permanently converted to another use. In other words, I don't think ironmasters woke up in the morning and said ... "Let's finish breakfast then clearcut extensive areas of forest today ...*and*, in the process, let's cause soil erosion, flooding, water pollution, fish kills, more frequent forest fires, and the extirpation of wildlife." These outcomes were ruefully acknowledged and tacitly accepted as "the price of progress." Recall this was a time when the official seals of many cities featured black smoke billowing out of tall stacks and locomotives, with nary a tree in sight, as a prideful mark *of* progress.

The cut-over or "the slashings" as they were sometimes called, were something people wanted to ignore or forget. Now we wish we had more photographs, records, and maps to document the extent and timing of the transformation. In the mid- to late-1800s, when pioneers and promoters were extolling the productivity of the Great Plains with "*grass as high as a horse's eye*" ...the spindly saplings within 20 to 30 miles of the old blast furnaces weren't much taller.

So this was the character and condition of the landscape that the Hunts Lyman Company, in the throes of liquidation, sold to two city slickers: Frederic Walcott and Starling Childs. Both the seller and the buyers got what they wanted – Hunts Lyman received cash for land and cleared a major liability from their books, while Childs and Walcott secured a 3,000 acre country estate and a place to experiment with the new principles of conservation that came of age during the Progressive Era, all within a reasonable distance from New York City by train.

They knew what they were buying and seemed to relish the challenges and opportunities. Both men were avid bird and waterfowl hunters with the confidence, management skills, and wherewithal to undertake this investment in a new frontier, a new enterprise, of a very different sort. Had either of them, in 1909, been more interested in or devoted to sailing or horses or art or traveling or fly-fishing ...or whatever, I think it is fair to say that Norfolk and Falls Village would be quite different. Put another way, they would probably be very similar to the majority of towns in the region, not the distinctive communities and verdant landscape we know and love.

Ted

Edward C. ("Ted") Childs was a four year old boy in 1909. His curiosity, sensitivity, observational skills, and independent spirit would be encouraged by his parents and grandparents. By the time Ted graduated from Yale College, his world view would be strongly influenced by the conservation work and writings of Frederic Walcott, who by then was a US senator. After graduating from Yale College, it was as natural as falling off a log for Ted to enroll in the Yale Forest School.

Ted's graduate training came at the fleeting time (from 1930 to 1932, when Henry Graves was Dean of the Yale Forest School) when the idealism of the early-1900s still imbued young foresters with a strong sense of purpose. By the 1930s, this sense of purpose was bolstered by several decades of research and operational experience, the first editions of seminal textbooks, and the recent translation of important European books and journals; these resources combined to put the art, science, and practice of American forestry on an exponential growth curve. This idealism, scientific knowledge, and management acumen were soon to be demonstrated at a grand scale, with amazing results by the Civilian Conservation Corps.

After graduate school, Ted traveled extensively and worked in the western U.S., but his home place—his neck of the woods—never lost its appeal. Before and after World War II, he set about expanding the Childs-Walcott Game Preserve – by then renamed “Great Mountain Forest” – and hiring foresters and a forest crew to realize his ambitious and evolving vision. George Keifer, Sam Hawley, Darrell Russ – and more recently, Jody Bronson, Star Childs, and Russell Russ, literally and figuratively grew the Great Mountain Forest:

- the land base (from 3,000 to 6,300 acres),
- the diversity of trees and wildlife,
- the heavy equipment and forest infrastructure needed for active management of a working forest, and
- our collective local knowledge of this place—both the opportunities and the constraints.

While recognizing their many contributions to GMF, I think Star, Jody, Russell, and Chip would agree that Darrell Russ was the essential partner (for 40 years, beginning in 1950) in the work of restoring and managing the forest.

Sid Goodloe – the cattle rancher from New Mexico featured in “*Green Fire*” – was also talking about Ted and Darrell when he said...

“My conservation practices evolved. And the things that I’ve learned here is that a real steward knows the history of his ecosystem. He understands his ecosystem, he manages his ecosystem holistically, and he shares that knowledge with other people.”

We practice forestry at GMF in a way that is still faithful to early-20th century ideals – augmented with decades of local knowledge and operational experience, and supported with 21st century science and technology. Call it adaptive management or sustainable forest management if you think it needs a contemporary label. This philosophy and approach fits *this* land and *this* community while leaving room for cautious experimentation and continuous improvement.

Our history and conservation philosophy stands in green contrast to what Wendell Berry wrote about another world view in 1995.^{ix}

...the promoters of the so-called global economy ...believe that a farm or a forest is or ought to be the same as a factory; that care is only minimally necessary in the use of the land; that affection is not necessary at all; that for all practical purposes a machine is as good as a human; that industrial standards of production, efficiency, and profitability are the only standards that are necessary.

Ted and Darrell’s world view was founded on the principle described in 1949 by Aldo Leopold^x when he wrote...

It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for the land, and a high regard for its value. By value, I of course mean something far broader than mere economic value.

Their goals, decisions, and actions were clearly informed by Leopold’s timeless advice to...

Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and esthetically right, as well as economically expedient. A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.

Today, the trustees and staff – and the many Friends of Great Mountain Forest – hold these truths to be self-evident. However, there are many people, including licensed foresters, who still dismiss Aldo Leopold, Wendell Berry – even Sid Goodloe and Ted Childs – as impractical, sentimental, and holier-than-thou environmentalists. After all, they’re not “real” foresters or “real” farmers or “real” ranchers. Well, at least they’re not professors (with no common sense) pining away in Ivory Towers. It is especially important to tell these demagogues ...” *I don’t need no land ethic to do my job.*”

I say if you cling to that cynical belief why don’t you walk right up to Sid Goodloe, look him in the eye, and tell him he’s impractical and sentimental. Then go ahead and tell him he’s ...”*all hat and no cattle.*” (By the way, it would probably save you “*a lot of time and effort*”^{xi} to visit to the Carrizo Valley Ranch in an ambulance instead of a rental car.)

Commitment to conservation and community

Just why was a commitment to conservation, community, and a land ethic so important to Ted and Elisabeth Childs, Darrell Russ, and others of their generation? I’ve been thinking about this quite often in relation to our plans and programs at GMF. As I’ve gotten older, I’ve also wondered why my own commitment and sense of urgency is so strongly expressed. How much of it did I learn by example? A lot, I think, from many people whom I respect and admire. How much of it is derived from experience, continuing study, and reflection? Another large dose, I think.

My brothers and I automatically do chores when we spend time with our parents, Mom, 85, Dad, 89. I emptied the water from the dehumidifier into a bucket and carried it up from the basement to dump in the kitchen sink. Just as I was lifting the bucket to the edge of the sink, somewhere behind me my mother let out a blood-curdling scream ...”*Nooooo!*” For a split second thought I should drop the bucket, grab a kitchen knife, and wheel around to kill the five foot timber rattler that must have gotten into the kitchen. Then she said, with mild annoyance ...”*Don’t waste that.* Please put it on the holly by the front door.”

If the formative years of your life were shaped by the Great Depression and World War II there is nothing abstract about consequences of waste (...of anything, but especially food, water, and energy). There is nothing abstract about the consequences of rampant greed, reckless speculation, and megalomaniacs with absolute power. As an adult – especially as a parent – you are always on guard against them. You consciously renounce greed and waste every day by conserving energy and natural resources, by helping others, by doing what you can to build community, and by leaving a legacy to inspire, guide and sustain future generations.

In the case of Great Mountain Forest – his life’s work – Ted Childs would ask “...*what good is having all this if you don’t share it?*” He didn’t ask this rhetorical question because he wanted or needed affirmation or because he was fishing for a compliment. I think he simply derived a great deal of satisfaction and contentment from knowing those

seedlings and saplings out in the “slashings” of 1909 were now mature trees in a vibrant and increasingly diverse forest. Even more to the point, he had confidence this restored forest would pass to a new generation who fully embraced his land ethic. Through his work with the New England Forestry Foundation and the Connecticut Forest and Park Association, Ted knew of many other places where good intentions and half-hearted promises were no match for powerful market forces and an indifferent land ethic, especially at that vulnerable time when a forest passes from one generation to the next.

Elisabeth Childs fully embraced this world view when she asked Star and Chip to explore options for protecting GMF in perpetuity. They successfully negotiated a conservation easement and the sale of development rights to the Connecticut Division of Forestry and the US Forest Service. As the sole owner, Elisabeth accepted their recommendation and received a small fraction of the fair market value she would have garnered from subdividing and selling 6,300 acres with: seven ponds, spectacular vistas, 13 miles of interior roads, and many miles of town road frontage—all within a reasonable drive from New York or Boston. In a bequest, she directed most of the proceeds of the sale to an endowment that is the chief cornerstone of our annual operating budget.



In closing, I invite you to explore and enjoy the Great Mountain Forest and to get involved—if you aren’t already—in our work and programs. When you do, think about Ted, Elisabeth, and Darrell, and remember something Aldo Leopold wrote in the 1939^{xii}

“The landscape of any farm [or forest] is the owner’s portrait of himself.”

I think it follows that the Great Mountain Forest should be a 21st century portrait of this community.

Let’s keep working together on this masterpiece.



200 Canaan Mountain Road, Falls Village, Connecticut, 06031
860.824.8188

pkbarten@eco.umass.edu
www.greatmountainforest.org



Great Mountain Forest from the Wapato Lookout, August 2010

ⁱ Wilbur, C. Keith., 1978. *The New England Indians*. The Globe-Pequot Press. Old Saybrook, Conn., 108 pp. (map, page 74)

ⁱⁱ Olson, Sigurd F., 1956. *The Singing Wilderness*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 245 pp. (Chapter 2, pages 22-30)

ⁱⁱⁱ Wilbur, C. Keith., 1978. *The New England Indians*. The Globe-Pequot Press. Old Saybrook, Conn., 108 pp. (reference pages 75-76)

^{iv} Vaughn, Alden T., 1995. *New England Frontier: Puritans and Indians 1620-1675*. Third Edition. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 430 pp.

^v Boorstin, Daniel J., 1993. *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson*. University of Chicago Press, 306 pp. (reference page 6)

^{vi} Sloane, Eric. 1986. *Sketches of America Past*. Promontory Press, New York, 337 pages (reprint anthology of "Diary of an Early American Boy: Noah Blake 1805 (1962), A Museum of Early American Tools (1964), A Reverence for Wood (1965).

^{vii} Reynolds, David S., 2005. *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights*. Vintage Books/Random House, New York, 578 pp. (quote from page 68)

^{viii} Gordon, Robert B., *American Iron: 1607-1900*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 334 pp.

^{ix} Berry, Wendell., 1995. *Another Turn of the Crank*. Counterpoint, Berkeley, California, 109 pages. (quote from page 13)

^x Leopold, Aldo., 1949. *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches from Here and There*. Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 228 pp. (all quotations herein from "The Land Ethic," pages 201-226)

^{xi} Sid Goodloe, speaking in "*Green Fire: Aldo Leopold and a Land Ethic for Our Time*"...in a different context

^{xii} Leopold, Aldo., 1939. *The Farmer as a Conservationist*. reprinted in *The Leopold Outlook* 2012:12(1):18-19 from *American Forests*, The Aldo Leopold Foundation, Baraboo, Wisconsin