BY Megan Taaffe



e have forgotten how to give in this country, and we need to learn how to give again, and how to give back to the land," says Bob French, who with his wife, Shirley, began their unprecedented journey in land conservation 40 years ago. Their legacy is 21 conservation easements spread across New England and Virginia, and a story that now spans generations—as they have instilled in their 10 grandchildren a deep commitment to the land and appreciation of conservation.

Bob French's first conservation easement on his family farm in 1975 was only the third easement in New Hampshire at the time, and was done before any form of state or federal tax incentives. Bob felt that putting this land under easement "was just the right thing to do because I inherited a love for the land from my grandparents." Bob's first connection to land was through his grandfather's hardwood lumber business, which supplied ash from Tennessee for use in Model T's for Ford Motor Company. After serving in the navy during World War II as a lookout on the USS Wandank, Bob chose to follow in his grandfather's footsteps in both passion and profession.

He graduated from Harvard in 1950 and later attended the National Hardwood Association School in Memphis, Tennessee. He joined the Atlantic Lumber Company, and then started to buy land, later founding Meadowsend Timberlands Limited in 1991. His conservation easements are now a source of renewable energy in Vermont since the addition of wind turbines on one of the properties, and Bob is looking forward to the future possibilities of using protected lands for the common good—for educational and advanced technological purposes.

Bob and Shirley have donated nine conservation easements in New Hampshire, nine in Vermont, one in Maine, one in New York and one in Virginia, totaling over 20,000 acres. Sixty percent of these easements are contiguous. Bob says, "More people should be given the idea to use family property for the greater good. In Hopkinton, New Hampshire, I spent 40 years putting together 40 pieces of property. And my son Jameson put together the last piece to complete the 2,400 acres. We are all proud of that accomplishment." An easement on the bulk of this land was given to the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests during its Centennial Campaign in 2001.

"The Frenches have long understood two key tenets of our work," says Jane Difley, president of SPNHF. "First, in New Hampshire, sustainable harvesting promotes conservation by allowing landowners to keep forests as forests. Second, the conservation of large blocks of forestland is critical to maintaining a local forest products industry.

The Frenches helped promote this conservation ethic and put it to use in their family business as well as personally. New Hampshire is a better place because of their early vision and their actions to make that vision a reality."

"Bob and his son Jamey were both members of the Forest Society's board of trustees," adds Difley. "Between the two of them, I think they have been members for over 80 years!"

Shirley French's family has conserved land for decades in Rensselaerville, a small town tucked away in the mountains of Albany County, New York. Shirley's great-aunt Jessie Van Antwerp Huyck founded the Edmund Niles Huyck Preserve in 1931 in honor of her late husband, Ted, in the hope of protecting their land for the benefit of generations to come. Since then, Huyck Preserve has grown from its 500 original acres to more than 2,000 acres today, with three full-time staff members and a 10-mile trail system for public use.

In addition to conserving the town's natural beauty in perpetuity, Jessie wanted the preserve to "increase the general knowledge and love of nature" through education and outreach. Ted's father owned a felt mill near Rensselaerville Falls, an area now protected by the preserve. The Huycks invited the mill workers to enjoy the natural beauty of their land: to study the habitat, and to swim and fish in the ponds and lake. During a time of great rigidity and conflict in American social structure, the Huycks believed in the power of





connecting people to the world around them and of bridging the gaps between classes through the enjoyment of nature.

Since 1938, the Preserve has served as one of the oldest biological research stations in the United States. Today, educational programs for people of all ages include art workshops, bird walks, GIS training courses, swimming lessons, children's summer nature studies and day camps and outreach programs at local high schools.

Shirley continues to honor her heritage through her work and advocacy as a board member of Huyck Preserve, a job she's been doing since 2003. She feels that "the land is special. I work hardest at community involvement for the Preserve, as this idea was so important to my family."

"Shirley inspires us to never lose sight of the vision and intentions of our founders, allowing the Huyck Preserve to remain a place of extraordinary beauty and importance to our community," says Susan Kessler, board president of Huyck Preserve. "Under Shirley's leadership and guidance, we have been able to thrive and grow in these otherwise difficult times. She is an invaluable friend to us all."

Shirley sees renewable energy and public engagement, getting kids and their parents out on the land, as ways to generate income and further the work of land trusts across the country. She says, "Collaboration is vital to the future of conservation. We need to work with the people who will give life to this land by building trails and offering opportunities to learn from what we've done."

Bob and Shirley believe in the responsibility of giving back to the land, and to people. They are proud of their three children and 10 grandchildren, who all share this passion for conservation. As a family, the Frenches are working to keep their land protected for all time and are most concerned about perpetuity and maintaining the value of protecting land through state and federal tax incentives for landowners.

Difley describes the family thus: "The Frenches are innovators, philanthropists, participants, volunteers, advisors, outdoors people and doers!" •

Ear to the Ground

After 31 years in various positions, Executive Director Jim Brown is retiring from the Tennessee River Gorge Trust and will be replaced by Rick Huffines. Edward "Ted" Clement has left Aquidneck Land Trust in Rhode Island to become the new executive director of Hawaiian Islands Land Trust. Jamison Watts is the new executive director of the Marin Agricultural Land Trust in California. Mike Boyle, a board member of Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, has been inducted into the Venango County Conservation Hall of Fame.