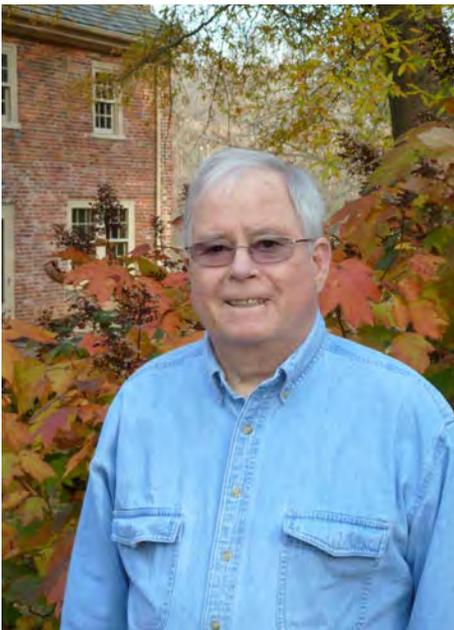


BY Jean Hocker

H. William “Bill” Sellers

Colleague, Mentor and Friend



COURTESY OF DEBBIE SELLERS

Bill Sellers

In 1979, when I was starting a land trust in Jackson, Wyoming,

I called Bill Sellers. In those pre-Land Trust Alliance days, I had somehow found his name and that of the Brandywine Conservancy, which he led, and hoped he might tell me something useful. It was my first encounter with a dynamic young man who was to become a colleague, mentor and friend.

At a time when few people had heard of land trusts, let alone using conservation easements, Bill was already a respected, passionate leader and practitioner. He was also deeply engaged in protecting easements as a workable conservation tool. When national organizations supported federal legislation to make the conservation easement tax deduction permanent, but failed to include open space and agricultural land as qualifying purposes,

Bill worked with lawyer Kingsbury Browne to convene other conservationists who were using easements and spearheaded their successful efforts to get the proposal revised.

It's no surprise, then, that Bill championed a national network of land trusts to coordinate such policy efforts. He also lamented that many land trusts didn't understand the long-term responsibilities of holding land and easements. Always witty and outspoken, Bill cautioned how important it was not to foster a network of “powder and marching societies.” He said there needed to be some common standards for land trusts, and land trusts should take their responsibility seriously.

But Bill was a doer, not a proposer. So it's also no surprise that the Brandywine Conservancy, in 1982, was one of the four founding land trust “sponsors” of the Land Trust Exchange (as the Alliance was then called) and that Bill served on the founding board. His influence remains evident today in some of the Alliance's most fundamental and far-reaching programs.

Bill's creativity and vision were at work in everything he did. Nowhere is that more apparent than in his home territory of Chester County, Pennsylvania. In the early 1980s, long before most land trusts were using easements on a large scale, Bill led a complex, risky and ultimately successful effort to attract 21 investors to a limited partnership that bought nearly 5,400 acres of the King Ranch property and protected it with conservation easements. Bill said, “At the time, it was the biggest privately funded land conservation deal in the U.S.”

Under his direction, the conservancy protected some 25,000 acres on 300 properties, including four major nature preserves. When Bill left in 1998 after 22 years, Peter

Hausmann, then chairman of the Chester County Planning Commission and later board chair of the Alliance, characterized him as “one of the most dedicated servants of conservation that I have ever known.”

Bill continued to advance conservation by helping land trusts in Pennsylvania and many other parts of the country become stronger organizations and undertake successful projects. His mentorship clearly bore fruit given that we know of at least seven people formerly with Brandywine Conservancy who became conservation leaders around the country: Chris Herrman, Trout Unlimited, Scott Boettger, Wood River Land Trust (ID), David Harper, Pee Dee Land Trust (SC), Kris Larson, Minnesota Land Trust, Jennifer Adkins, Partnership for the Delaware Estuary, Kristina Ely, E.L. Rose Conservancy (PA) and Tom Larson, New York Agricultural Land Trust.

When Bill died on November 9, 2012, I helped spread the sad news to some of his early colleagues. As they responded, I heard recurring, heartfelt words to describe him: mentor, inspirational, visionary, tenacious, witty, passionate, good friend. But perhaps no one sums it up better than Ben Emory, another of the four founding board members and past president of the Land Trust Exchange:

Bill was one of the land conservation standouts in an era when they were far fewer in number and when working for a land trust was not universally recognized as a real profession. We were very lucky to have his expertise and dedication available, and I was proud to join with him, Joan [Vilms] and Mark [Ackelson] as the four founding board members of the Land Trust Exchange.

Salut, Bill. We will miss you. 🍀