

## **Colebrook's Autogiro Landing Field**

Prior to the 1930's, before the Algonquin Forest had acquired the size and extent that it does today, there were four farms along what we today call Chapin Road. After 1917, farming ceased, with the exception of a meager harvest of hay from the old fields. At the top of the hill, beyond where the present road comes to an end, there once was a ten-acre potato field, owned by Dennis Chapin, for whom the road is named. When the state acquired the northern segment of this portion of Algonquin Forest, the area had become filled with blueberry bushes, and folks came from miles around to gather in the abundant harvest of berries each summer.

Around 1940, the State of Connecticut purchased a small fleet of autogiros with which they intended to survey the entire state, and to do whatever else slow-flying aircraft with an extremely short take off and landing capability could do. These craft looked much like a small, single-engine fixed-wing aircraft, with one distinguishing feature: it sported four rotor blades identical to those now seen on helicopters. The addition of these rotors allowed the craft to require no more than one hundred yards for takeoff and landing. With the anticipated activity of these aircraft came the need for landing areas evenly distributed throughout the state capable of handling the requirements of these autogiros. The rugged topography of Colebrook did not lend itself to the requirements of conventional aircraft, but an emergency landing field could easily be constructed on a hilltop field such as the one on this Beech Hill upland. The search ended at Dennis Chapin's old potato field, now the property of the state. A 75 – 100 yard diameter circle was constructed, bisected by a north-south straight takeoff strip, the width of a single-lane road. Many of the old blueberry bushes survived around the periphery of this facility, providing additional picking for a few more years.

Along with WWII came many technological innovations, among them being the helicopter, which, because of its superior maneuverability, made autogiros obsolete almost before they got off the ground, so to speak. Before the war ended, the state planted the entire area once devoted to raising potatoes and providing security for short takeoff and landing aircraft with Tamarack and Red Pine. The circle remained, but all vestige of the landing strip has disappeared; even the Red Pine has been removed because of blight. Today there are three trails leading from this old taxiing strip. The one leading eastward was chosen by the CLC expedition last October 6<sup>th</sup> when we embarked on our Algonquin Forest walk. This is just one of many areas within Algonquin that are fascinating both in the realm of nature as well as history.