

Duel Ownership

Several years ago I received a phone call from Joyce Nelson, Colebrook's Town Clerk. She wanted to pick my memory about the ownership of a plot of land on the eastern end of Beech Hill Road, the section owned entirely by the Metropolitan Water District. It seemed that she had received an inquiry from a family in Arizona about a parcel of land that had been in their family for years that was located in Colebrook, Connecticut. They had inherited the land, which they had never seen, and wished to put it on the market; could she tell them where this land was located, and give them a description.

The very fact that they claimed that it was on Beech Hill Road, and that their grandparents had purchased it from someone named Nugent raised a red flag of sorts, as the Metropolitan Water District had purchased every scrap of land east of my folk's farm all the way to the Hartland border in the mid 1940s. There was no private property anywhere along that stretch of Beech Hill Road.

I received the call because I had grown up on "The Hill"; not only that, I had had a milk and dairy route and knew all twelve or so families who were summer residents on "the back hill".

I mulled over the information Joyce had given me, and slowly began to remember some of the long-forgotten bits of information concerning the cabins that once stood down there.

The information Joyce had received from Arizona was this: A man and his wife from central Connecticut had purchased a plot of land from Nugent sometime prior to the second World War, but having done so, never visited it, as apparently their plans had changed. Instead of building a summer cabin in Colebrook, they moved to Arizona, where they lived out their lives. In their will, they left the land to their children, who continued to pay the annual taxes. (In those days this would have only been a few dollars, I'm sure this scenario couldn't be repeated nowadays.) Years went by, and in the mid-90s this generation also passed on, leaving the land to their children, who had never set foot in Connecticut, let alone Colebrook. It was then that the phone call was placed stating that they were placing it on the market (if they could find it).

I recalled that at one time Nugent had owned all the land from our property down to Colebrook River. One of the first parcels that he sold was the one adjacent to our farm. This had at one time during the first half of the nineteenth century been a farm, one of only two that had existed on that road. As such, there were fields surrounding the old cellar hole. One weekend, after they had erected their cottage, they arrived to find someone digging a cellar hole along their east line. It turned out that they were told that their property line began several feet west of a stone wall. This very wall was identified as being the east line of the adjacent property. It was patched up as being a "mistake", and the wall became the common boundary. Any of you who traverse Beech Hill Road knows the rugged nature of the land, and with no additional stone walls, no one knew exactly where their boundary lines were.

And so it was that a quarter of a mile east of our neighbor's field the small increments of overlapping land finally resulted with two plots exactly superimposed on each other. As luck would have it (if you happened to be the seller), one of the owners was the couple we have already talked about; the other was a Norwegian man I always

knew as “Stoffer”. He came up from the city every year until being forced to sell to the water board.

In the meantime, the land was sold, and almost immediately replaced on the market. This was the period of time when cell towers were beginning to be erected around these parts, most of which faced stiff resistance from local residents. This plot of land was being considered by one of the phone companies. When asked how they intended to supply electricity to the site, they replied that it would have to come down Beech Hill Road from the west, meaning that a wide swath of trees would have to be cut for the power lines.

If the property was to be purchased by a private party, then there would not only be a lot of tree cutting; the road would have to be widened and paved as well; in other words, the town was faced with some potentially costly outlays if this property was to be developed.

George Wilber, then the first selectman, arose to the occasion and after securing an agreement from the MDC, purchased the three-acre plot, putting to rest all threats of future costs and headaches. It is for this reason that smack in the middle of the vast area of town owned by the water board appears a small rectangular plot of land with a different designation.

I mentioned that there used to be two farms on the eastern portion of Beech Hill. The westernmost, adjacent to our family’s land, was known as the Chappell place, and the name persists today as the name of the small brook that traversed a portion of their farm and continued down through the deep gorge alongside Beech Hill Road until it joins the West Branch of the Farmington River. The Chappells had harnessed this stream in a small way, probably for use in a cider mill. A few hundred yards downstream can be found the remains of a concrete dam, no more than five or six feet high that was built by one of the summer residents of the 30s and 40s solely as a recreational facility to supply water for a swimming hole. His name was Thonet, but we always referred to him as the goat man, because he had three or four those animals, and their odor had transferred to his clothing. You always knew when he was near!

The other farm, a quarter of a mile downhill, was located at the site now owned by the town, and its last use, strangely, was in the form of a town poor farm; in other words, the town had taken the land for non-payment of taxes (not so rare during the nineteenth century), and had placed an indigent family in the house. Eventually both of these places fell into disrepair and tumbled into their cellar holes, leaving behind the cellar holes themselves and a few bits and pieces of stone wall, now all overwhelmed by mature forest. Sometimes when researching old documents, and reading how the people who cleared these hills of their primeval forest rejoiced at having tamed Mother Nature, I am reminded of Shelley’s *Ozymandias*, in which a traveler comes upon a shattered monument of gigantic proportions lying in the desert. The poem closes with “And on the pedestal these words appear: ‘My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings: Look upon my works, ye mighty, and despair!’ Nothing beside remains. Round the decay of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare the lone and level sands stretch far away.”