

Helen Evans: THE GREATEST LIFE UNDER THE SUN

Helen Evans remembers the visitors who used to turn up at the door of her old farmhouse. They all wanted the same thing. “I need some acreage,” they’d say, eyeing the fertile pasture and the expanse of oak-pine forest beyond.

For more than three decades people came knocking, interested in a piece of prime real estate on the Bedford-Manchester line. And for more than three decades Evans and her partner Frank Grogan ignored their advances.

Instead, they cultivated their 167 acres, improving the forest and establishing the award-winning Yankee Kingdom Tree Farm. Before Frank died, he signed a conservation easement on the property, ensuring that it would remain a working landscape. “It would have been a tragedy to have this land end up under houses,” says Evans, an octogenarian who still loves to walk through the woods every chance she gets.

Had it not been for the UNH Cooperative Extension, there might never have been a Tree Farm, according to Evans. It was an extension forester who first walked the land with them, assuring them that they had timber worth harvesting - about a million board feet of it. “I always tell people the extension foresters provide a way not to get off on the wrong foot,” says Evans. “They have been absolutely indispensable all along.”

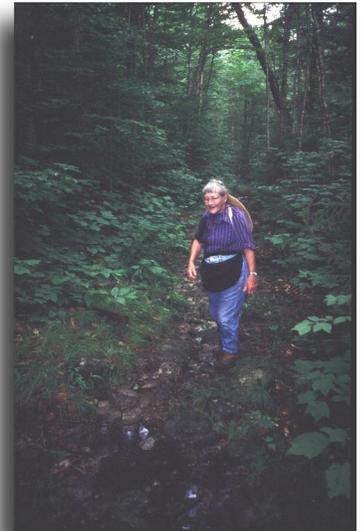
During the past 20 years, there have been five harvests at the farm. “There’s as much tree volume now as there was in 1979,” says John Nute, the Cooperative Extension forester Evans has been working with in recent years. “They’ve received all the economic benefits and there’s still as much timber left and it’s better quality.”

Evans points out the amber bark on a red oak, comparing it to the silvery sheen of its neighbor, a white oak. Acorns roll and crunch underfoot as she walks. She pauses again to admire a towering pine, proud of the pruning that will reduce knots and produce high-quality furniture lumber. She knows this road well. For years she ventured out each day with her tractor and cart to cut and haul firewood. “I loved it,” she says. “I love to be out working in the woods.”

She is walking along a stretch of road built with matching funds in 1988. “The funding made a great deal of difference,” she says. Woods roads have allowed the land to stay in productive use - in spite of pressures to convert it for development.



Helen Evans receives an award from the NH Timberland Owners Association, recognizing her commitment to forest stewardship.



Helen walks a stretch of woods road built with cost share funds. This part of New Hampshire will stay forest forever because of the steps she has taken.

“She could have made millions,” says Nute. “It’s a classic white pine site - it’s also a classic subdivision site. But all her life she’s been doing things for the benefit of society.”

Instead of selling off the “acreage,” Evans arranged to transfer the land into the hands of new owners who will continue the stewardship she began. “Being a Tree Farmer is the greatest life under the sun,” says Evans, noting that it’s also a very long-term commitment. “Most land is just too expensive these days for young people to afford. I wanted young people to have enough time to see the forest grow.”

Thanks to Evans, a new generation will be able to care for her trees, and countless visitors will continue to be able to walk the through the woods. One stretch of road, her favorite, has been named by the new owners in her honor: Helen’s Way. Which seems an apt description for just how this forest has been cared for all these years.



According to Helen, “Being a Tree Farmer is the greatest life under the sun.” Here she celebrates that life with other Tree Farmers.

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