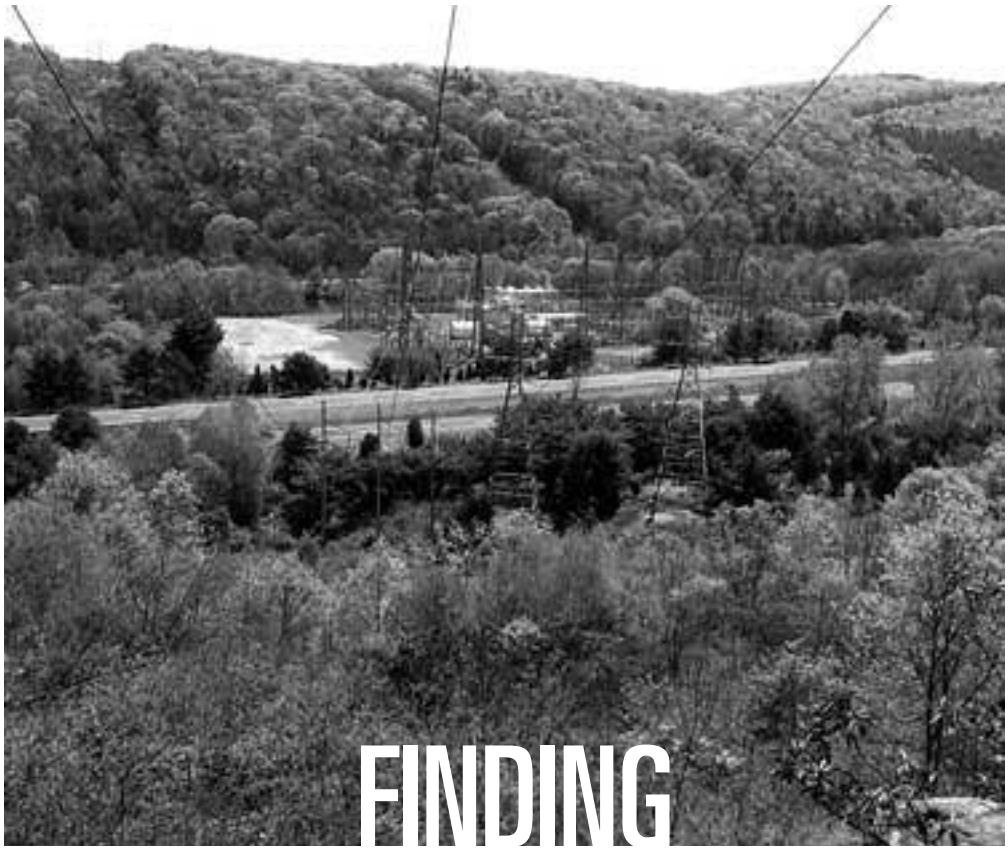

FINDING MATTATUCK STATE FOREST

OLD-TIMERS AND OTHERS MAP THE NOT-SO-HIDDEN PAST OF 4,510 ACRES

BY GWENDOLYN CRAIG

Route 8 bisects a section of the Mattatuck State Forest.

H. Morrow Long/Wikimedia Commons

The tip of a quartz knife, charcoal mounds, pine trees planted in rows, an empty factory building on the Naugatuck River—these faint signs of past times hide in the Mattatuck State Forest. They give a glimpse of fading histories of forest, farm, wood lot, and home. The forest's 4,510 acres that spread through parts of Harwinton, Thomaston, Plymouth, Watertown, Litchfield, and Waterbury are ground on which the American Indian, farmer, industrialist, classics scholar, jobless, and forester all flourished during certain moments in history.

The Mattatuck, like all of the land in Connecticut, was once composed of woodlands untouched by human or machine. Then we made our mark hunting, tilling, planting, burning, and building. Human ties to this land have morphed and expanded and evolved until they have let the land reach almost full circle. Almost. It will never be the virgin forest it was in the beginning. We cannot erase the work done by the eras of settlement, agriculture, and industrialization, but we are moving into an era of conservation. We have conserved the Mattatuck for our love of nature, to decrease our carbon footprint, to preserve native species, to have a place outside where we can hike or camp or picnic or just get away from the bustle of life. We conserved places like the Mattatuck to protect the forests we may have taken for granted and were once at risk of losing.

The story of Mattatuck's preservation goes back to 1925, but the story of the forest starts long before that.

Nicholas Bellantoni, Connecticut state archaeologist, found a few records of American Indian archaeological sites in the Mattatuck State Forest, but not many. The few places were probably hunting grounds or camps. He could tell this based on the location of the sites—the confluence of a stream into the Naugatuck River— and the items that were found there: knife tips made of quartz as well as some pieces of flint. Nothing is certain, however, not even what tribe was there.

"You get a biased picture because what survives in the ground is

basically stone," Mr. Bellantoni said. Not to mention the fact that most of the sites were not discovered until the 1970s. Watertown was founded in 1684 and Thomaston in 1875, the two towns the majority of the state forest spans.

"By the time Europeans were in the area, most of the Native Americans had dispersed or left. For the most part, to the Europeans, they were basically invisible," Mr. Bellantoni said.

Industry Takes Over

With the arrival of European pioneers came the arrival of farming. That meant clear-cutting huge sections of land, cutting down trees that had never before felt an ax or a saw. In the 1880s, when the farming boom subsided, industries took charge. Thomaston became the home to a prominent lamp manufacturing company, Plume & Atwood. The company maintained a wood lot on a large section of what is now Mattatuck State Forest. Other industrial companies had similar parcels of land up and down the Naugatuck River.

"The furnaces were so hungry for wood, they were tearing through acres. It was pretty much a clean sweep," said Alan Levere, a spokesman for the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. Factories were not just cutting down trees. They were making charcoal. To do this, workers would clear-cut a section of land and slowly smolder the timber by covering the burning stack with dirt or sod. This prevented the wood from burning completely. It also decimated forests.

By the time Harley F. Roberts had the idea to conserve some of his local area for a state forest, the land was in rough shape. In the 1950s, S. E. Parker, a district forester, and W. F. Schreeder, state forester, wrote in a report: "The growth of the forest is generally of mediocre character, having been cut frequently for cordwood for the Brass Mills in Waterbury. This, together with the frequent fires, has resulted in poorer growth than on many of the other forests." On December 19, 1925, Parker and Schreeder reported, the Latin master of the private Taft School in Watertown, "appeared before the Commission on Forests and Wild Life and stated that some interested conservationists in his community were anxious to acquire a tract of land between Thomaston and Watertown on the Thomaston Road, of over 600 acres with a view of presenting it to the state for a state forest."

Suddenly the state forest began to take shape. In just three months, Mr. Roberts, along with the Black Rock Association, a local community group interested in conservation, raised $13,000 for the purchase of the land, which is equivalent to about $170,400 today. Alain White, the legendary conservationist for whom the White Memorial Foundation in Litchfield is named, agreed to give one dollar per privately purchased acre.

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After two years of combined state and private purchases and fundraising, 2,453 acres formed the new Mattatuck State Forest. Mr. Roberts was a member of the League to Enforce Peace, an organization that led to the League of Nations. He was a trustee of the Connecticut Junior Republic, an institution aimed at helping troubled young men become good citizens. Despite his active involvement in the community, Mr. Roberts' idea for Mattatuck State Forest upset many people in the region. He was buying thousands of acres to give away for a purpose many people did not understand.

Going Against the Grain

Edwin Ives Jr., 93, grew up in the Thomaston and Watertown area on the Tibbals and Ives dairy farm, run by his father and father's good friend, George Tibbals. Their farm covered approximately 75 acres and a nearby wood lot. With 30 milking cows, chickens for laying, horses, an apple orchard, and a regular potato crop, every inch of the land was put to use—including the house.

"My mother got the bright idea of taking tourists because we had room," Mr. Ives said. "There were five bedrooms upstairs. In the summertime we used to sleep downstairs and take the tourists in so we made some extra money. We got three dollars a night for people staying over night. It was a good life, really. You worked, but you didn't really think of it," he said.

Mr. Ives remembers men from the state coming to his house when he was just a boy in the late 1920s. They wanted to buy some of his father's farmland to be incorporated into the state forest.

"I had to be maybe 10 years old," he said. "They came to bicker the price to buy the land. And, they had, I don't know, quite a time over it. Of course, some of the people, the surrounding people, didn't want the state, the park, to buy Black Rock Pond. My father and Mr. Tibbals didn't like the price. One time I know they had to get appraisers, and they came up with a little higher price, but by the time they got through paying the appraisers, they ended up with the same price the state offered."

Mr. Ives said that the state may have threatened to take some of the farms by eminent domain if a price agreement was not reached. "Most people didn't want to sell their land," he said.

"The state did take land when they felt they needed it for the public good," Mr. Levere said. "That was not a rare thing. What you could get away with then, you certainly wouldn't do now."

After purchasing or taking acres and acres of clear-cut land for the public good, the problem left facing the state was the fact that there were no trees.

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Mattatuck, like nearly all forests in New England, is a secondary forest, which means that the land has been cleared and replanted. This is important because no matter how you try to bring back the forest, you cannot replicate the original.

One tree species affected, perhaps fatally, by the clear-cutting has been the slow-growing hemlock. David Foster, an ecologist and professor at Harvard University, said Connecticut has lost nearly 50 percent of its hemlocks. This tree species grows best in shade, and with most forests wiped out by the 1920s, they had a difficult time coming back. To add to the hemlocks' problems was (and still is) the invasive insect, the wooly adelgid, which showed up on the East Coast in the 1950s. The bug destroys hemlocks by sucking up its vital nutrients. These bugs could mark the final blow to the few hemlocks in Mattatuck and New England.

Hemlocks are important because they are nature's relief in winter. As do all evergreens, they have dense foliage. The snow becomes stuck in between the needles and branches, protecting the ground underneath. These nearly snowless patches provide shelter or easier scavenging for all kinds of creatures in the woods. These patches also provide a kind of thermal cover, insulating the area under it with its snow-packed branches, explained Christopher Craig, a Connecticut certified forester.

To bring back some of the trees, especially to the many fairly new state forests in the country, President Franklin D. Roosevelt organized what some historians call Roosevelt's Tree Army, or the Civilian Conservation Corps. The country was in the midst of the Great Depression. Thousands were unemployed, and many families struggled to make do. The CCC set up camps across the country and gave jobs to nearly 600,000 men between the ages of 18 and 25 nationwide. They tended the timber and soil, while earning some money to send back home.

"In general, the places where the Civilian Conservation Corps planted trees were places that were fields," said Dr. Foster, who has written several books on the changing New England landscape. The CCC workers planted conifer trees, mostly because of their lightness and strength.

On March 5, 1933, the CCC set up Camp Roberts, named after Harley F. Roberts, near Route 6 and Black Rock Lake. The camp started with 212 men. There were three barracks and a mess hall. To learn what life must have been like for the CCC workers, I interviewed Harold Mattern, 96, of Storrs. (*Mr. Mattern died in June. His obituary appears on page 22,*) He worked in eight of Connecticut's CCC camps and delivered milk to Camp Roberts. "Those were some of the best years of my life," he said. "It gave us something to do and some money to spend. It helped the economy, too." He sent $25 of his monthly $30 salary home to his family, which ran a chicken farm.

The CCC job sites were all over Connecticut, and the work varied. Sometimes it was thinning out forest; other times it was planting trees. CCC workers built picnic tables and toilets for recreation areas, cut cordwood for fuel, built fire roads, and shoveled snow in the winter. Some camps had additional idiosyncratic jobs as well, such as dealing with invasive species.

The schedule was similar in every camp. "They woke you up at about 6 o'clock and you'd get up, clean up, and shave," he said. "Then about 7 o'clock you'd go over to the mess hall and have a good, full breakfast, a variety of food, healthy food. After you'd finish breakfast, around 8 o'clock, you'd get called to work. You'd climb on the backs of trucks, even in the cold weather, and you'd go out to the job site. At noontime they'd bring you out a hot lunch in big army containers. You'd have hot coffee, beef stew, things like that. Then you'd come back about 4 o'clock, back to the barracks, and you'd have time to get cleaned up for supper at about 5 o'clock. Then you'd have the evening to yourself to play cards,

The Blue-Blazed Jericho Trail leads to this serene view at Crane's Lookout.

H. Morrow Long/Wikimedia Commons

games, listen to the radio. There were night watchmen to keep the fires going and make sure nothing caught fire."

An invasive species several Connecticut camps faced was the gypsy moth, which was introduced first in Massachusetts in the 1860s. The insects devastated oak and aspen trees. Mr. Mattern remembered having to find egg clusters in the trees and paint them with creosote, a wood treatment made from the distillation of wood or tar, to kill them.

Mr. Mattern, who served in World War II after the CCC ended in 1942, and who became a forest ranger in northeastern Connecticut, built a CCC museum in Shenipsit State Forest in Stafford. He donated dozens of items of corps memorabilia from pictures to handsaws to axes. The only relics from the Mattatuck State Forest's Camp Roberts are two black and white photographs and two worn-out hats on faceless busts. Mr. Levere, who helps manage the museum, searched for more information about the camp, but could find very little.

There is nothing left of Camp Roberts, which some have said was between Route 6 and Black Rock Lake. Mr. Ives, who lives just down the road from where he grew up, goes out driving with his son sometimes, trying to find where it used to be, where he sold his milk to Roosevelt's Tree Army as a young boy.

Today the forest, at least, is protected, and protects the history it holds. It is a sanctuary for nature lovers and the Blue-Blazed Hiking Trails (established and maintained by the Connecticut Forest & Park Association, publishers of this magazine). The forest is not just rows of trees. There are cliffs to climb, lookout points unfolding panoramic views of Thomaston and Watertown's slight hills and valleys, caves and ledges covered with folios of green-blue lichen, and hidden hints of times past—a crumbling stone wall, a charcoal mound, streams that unfurl into the Naugatuck River. There are deer, owls, woodpeckers, wood thrushes, white pine, a few hemlocks, black birch, white oak, sugar maple, witch hazel, beech, and mountain laurel, just to name a few things that thrive in these woods.

Conservation is no longer just the dream of Roberts and a few other individuals. It has become a movement, part of law, part of our recreation, and part of our history. Local land trusts, CFPA, the Connecticut DEEP, and other organizations are working now to preserve the land. Whether it will continue to be so important to us, only the future will tell.

We all need space.

What the Mattatuck State Forest will be for somebody else tomorrow is another story. For now, its conservation will continue to mean something to us, and for now, that is all that matters.