

THE WALKERS

This series of articles on walking across land protected by the Woodstock Land Conservancy was published in the Woodstock Times during April and May, 2008.

Sloan Gorge Preserve

By Will Nixon

In one of my favorite John Cheever stories, "The Swimmer," Neddy Merrill, the boyish but no longer young protagonist, decides, after finishing his gin glass beside a friend's pool on a summer afternoon, to swim home via the backyard swimming pools strung across his suburban community. Inspired by this quixotic journey, I decided to mark the Woodstock Land Conservancy's twentieth anniversary this year by hiking across town on the Conservancy's lands. Though best known for the Zena cornfield, the group owns six properties and protects nine others with conservation easements. Though we'd cheat a bit with a car, my friend, Michael Perkins, a great walker and reader, was glad to join me.

I proposed that we start at the Sloan Gorge Preserve. "Never heard of it," said Michael, which didn't surprise me. This 88-acre forest parcel between West Saugerties Road and Stoll Road near the Woodstock/Saugerties town line has gone public rather gradually. On a sunny morning in mid-April, we pulled into its small parking lot covered with brown pine needles by Stoll Road. We had the place to ourselves.

The path led us through pines to the base of old bluestone quarry rubble pile, where a brass plaque honored Allan Edward Sloan, a Woodstock artist. "Never heard of him," said Michael, which did surprise me, since he's quite a local historian. Allan Edward Sloan, as I later learned from his son Allan King Sloan of Lexington, Massachusetts, discovered Woodstock in the late 1920s, while an art student at the National Academy of Design in New York City. After he married Charlotte King from Cleveland, his hometown, the couple spent the Depression moving their young family back-and-forth between Woodstock and Cleveland, then settled into a home on Chestnut Hill Road after World War II.

A portrait painter, Allan Edward Sloan worked the Christmas season at Saks Fifth Avenue, doing pastels of children. At home, though, his favorite subject was Overlook mountain. Charlotte King wrote a weekly "What's Cookin?" column for the *Woodstock Townsman*. After her sudden death in 1970, he bought the 88-acre parcel with the notion that a relative from Cleveland might build a house on it. That never happened. Nor did he use the property himself. Impressed by the Conservancy's protection of the Zena Cornfield and several other fields by his house on Chestnut Hill Road, Sloan left what he jokingly called "Snake Acres," his undeveloped land, to the group before dying in 1999. Both he and Charlotte King now lie among friends in the Woodstock Artist's Cemetery.

From 2004 to 2006, I served on the Conservancy board. By then, the group had decided to open this property to the public. (Step one was to rename "Snake Acres" as "Sloan Gorge.") During the spring and summer of 2006, I made several trips to the area as part of a trail crew that nailed up yellow trail markers, cleared out fallen branches, and

chainsawed through fallen tree trunks to prepare the mile-and-a-half loop that runs the length of the property. From the old quarry, an impressive rubble mound that sits below the cliff walls that were mined, the trail leads into the gorge, which is, I suppose, quite modest as gorges go. I might call it a hemlock ravine, but even ravine sounds too dramatic. The streambed, which alternates between shallow pools filled with leaves and damp silty ground, passes between bedrock outcroppings perhaps twenty feet high. The Grand Canyon this isn't. Yet, each time I've taken this trail, I've slipped into that magical childhood mindset that imagines things being larger than they are. I see the gorge as a miniature model of a towering canyon in Dinosaurland.

My favorite visit in 2006 came on the afternoon that Catskills geologist Bob Titus visited Sloan Gorge for the first time. A pony-tailed professor in a well worn green hat, he had a way of rushing up to cliffs and then standing back at different angles that made me think of an art critic responding to an exhibit he hadn't expected to be so good. In the gorge where I imagined fantasies, he saw clues to an epic geological history. Some 375 million years ago, I learned, the Catskills were the Ganges Delta to the Himalayas of the day, mountains now worn down to the Berkshires. The bluestone cliffs record the history of ancient river beds. Titus pointed to a smile-like curve on one cliff's otherwise flat striation lines. The smile's dip was, he said, the scouring left by a major flood. In an afternoon he turned my understanding of the Catskills upside down. What I thought were mountains are, in fact, mud flats packed rock hard and pushed up thousands of feet by 375 million years of plate tectonics. Unfortunately, this knowledge hasn't made them any easier to climb.

Today, Sloan Gorge has geology trail markers along with an information flier by Titus that explains what he learned. The gorge wasn't carved by the piddling stream we see, but by white water currents roaring down from melting Ice Age glaciers. In the past Sloan Gorge offered high drama. But Michael and I were content with the quiet retreat it now provides. "Not even a chainsaw," he observed. For all of Woodstock's greenery, there are precious few places where one can walk for an hour in the woods without trespassing.

The gorge has several levels, though the ascents are so gentle that it's easy to miss the changes. In the middle section, the trail hugs the cliff to stay above swampy pools black with leaf muck and green with moss. (I've learned the hard way not to walk this path at the peak of mosquito season in June.) As we clambered up and down alongside the cliff, we peered into crevices and stood under overhangs. "Shelter from the storm," Michael said. Under one protected corner I rediscovered an unusual sight I'd forgotten, a bed of porcupine scat laid out like small chocolate Easter eggs, not that I would try one. I knelt to look into the tiny cave mouth at the bottom of the bluestone alcove where the creature must huddle in the winter. Standing again, I found right in front of my face a mossy bird's nest packed into a small cliff pocket like a woven throw.

By now, Michael was enchanted. "This would be a nice place to camp," he said, looking out among the hemlocks. He's of an older Woodstock generation that used to go skinny dipping in Cooper Lake, so who's to say he wouldn't sneak into Sloan Gorge for a night? But, like me, he'd noticed that the spring awakening we'd waited several weeks for hadn't quite arrived. The bare trees clawing toward the blue sky hadn't yet burst with tiny flowers at their tips. The few birds we'd heard in the hemlocks had gone silent. The brown

leaf mat on the forest floor unveiled no delightful wildflowers. The day was warm. But late winter still blanketed the land.

Then I heard a subtle but distinctive crackling noise. Ahead of me, Michael had walked right through it, so I called him back. On the leaf mat what I saw at first glance as black shadows weren't shadows at all, but swarms of tiny black insects like pencil lead shavings. Thousands upon thousands upon thousands. Crawling, springing into the air, massing like a living oil spill that stained leaves and rocks for several feet around. Never before had I seen anything like this. If the new life of spring was what I wanted, here it was like a microscopic locusts' plague.

"Have you seen *Them?*" Michael asked. It was, he explained, a 1950s science fiction film about giant ants created by radiation from atomic bomb tests in the New Mexico desert. The crackling noise we heard on the leaves sounded like those mutant ants, if we magnified the volume a thousand times.

"Is it any good?" I asked.

"One of the classics," Michael said: A cautionary tale of scientific hubris threatening to destroy us all.

Of course, the secret revealed in "The Swimmer" is that the enthusiastic hero, Neddy Merrill, has gone mad. He may think that he's passing through an enchanted land of brilliant sunshine, flowering apple trees, and welcoming poolside laughter, but we realize by the end of the story that he has lost his house and his family and has fallen into a terrible delusion. But Michael and I weren't going insane. We were having fun discovering the wonders of nature no matter what they might be. Plus, we were just getting started. We had the rest of Woodstock to cross.

Over-the-Hill Boy Scouts Climb Mount Guardian

By Michael Perkins

It was the week of the big Minnewaska fire, and although it was a cool sunny morning when Will Nixon and I climbed the westernmost hump of Mount Guardian, the smoke had cast a haze over the Hudson Valley.

It's an easy hike, much more so than the path up from Byrdcliffe I've climbed so many times. Just take MacDaniel Road to Mt. Guardian Road and keep climbing. You'll come to an old logging trail. Park on the shoulder, and walk right up to heaven—which in this case is owned by the Woodstock Land Conservancy. (They acquired a parcel of 18 acres at the ridgeline in 2000, 19 acres in 2003, and 12 more in 2005.)

Will led the way, the summit being one of his favorite Woodstock places. After a 45 minute stroll we arrived at a boulder he jumped on. Below us the valley shimmered in the gentle sunlight, the ribbon of the Hudson far off to our left, and beyond it what Will guessed was the Bard Performance Center at Bard designed by Frank Gehry. Its silvery roof signaled the words "Edifice Complex."

A fire ring by the boulder held a lone beer can. "There's a graffito up here," Will called. "1817." I tried to imagine what the view would have been like almost two centuries

ago. All I could do was think of Chief Joseph Brant, the great Iroquois leader, looking down on a much smaller Woodstock hamlet during the Revolutionary War. Brant's Iroquois sided with the British, and Brant's forces had roamed the Catskills.

"Natural history's fine," I said. "But what humans have done on and to the landscape is equally important." I told him the story of Joseph Brant. We walked to another view, this time looking out over Cooper Lake and Ticetonyck. The low green Catskills rippled away from us.

"You can really see where the mountains begin in Woodstock," Will commented, as we leaned back on our elbows like emperors surveying the works of the flat landers below. Logging had changed the Catskills, we agreed, talking of the spots of first growth timber to be found here and there in inaccessible hiding places. The area's first families had cut everything that could be gotten to, stopping only when a mountaintop would cost more to cut than it could be sold for. Something like the peak oil crisis we're faced with today, I thought idly, wondering if in ten years a new wave of logging—this time cutting trees for fuel—would sweep over the landscape we loved.

One of the unsung glories of hiking, if you're with a like-minded companion, is that a little exercise and a change of perspective makes for expansiveness. Easy speculation leads to the kind of philosophizing that might seem entirely too airy indoors. We spoke of everything from poetry to presidential politics, with only a pileated woodpecker's hammering to remind us, as we walked on dry leaves, that it was quiet on the mountain. It's generally true that you have to climb above 2,000 feet—3,000 to be safe—before you can find genuine quiet in the Catskills, and even then the chain saw's diabolic whine rises to your ears.

It had not occurred to me before this hike, out of the hundreds I've gone on, that good talk *and* quiet might be inducements to get people out of their cars and away from their entertainment centers and onto the trail.

Which brought up a project Will and I have gotten involved in, along with ace map maker Dave Holden and wild man hiker Peter Koch: the Woodstock Trail Keepers. Desiring to share our lifelong love of hiking with our fellow citizens, we have formed a very casual organization which has its meetings mostly on woodland paths. The Trail Keepers' purpose is to encourage hiking in Woodstock. To this end, we have resolved to map the trails, to keep them clear (with the help of volunteers), and to attempt to create a hiking trail around Woodstock. With these goals in mind, we'd keep ourselves out of trouble, spend more time in the woods, and give something back to our beloved community. (Or, you never know, this being Woodstock, we might just flake out and get lost in the woods.)

Anyway, up on the mountain it seemed like a noble and fun undertaking for a group of over-the-hill Boy Scouts. And that's what has kept me hiking since always: the higher you climb, the more perspective you gain on your life, and the more perspective you gain, the less seriously you take yourself. The more fun you have, the more you have to give to others.

Or that's how it works with me—you see what I mean about the mountain air making one expansive, perhaps even light-headed? But Will is a patient interlocutor, with a benign mien, so I rambled on as we descended Mount Guardian's western shoulder. It had been a perfect morning, so we only smiled when we got to Will's car and were blasted with

rock music from a nearby house. Stifling the urge to run back up the mountain, we drove down into Woodstock, talking of our next adventure: Snake Rocks.

Snake Rocks, Home of Oscar

By Will Nixon

To give our little adventure literary pretensions, I'd chosen Neddy Merrill, the protagonist of John Cheever's short story "The Swimmer," to inspire our tour celebrating the Woodstock Land Conservancy's twentieth anniversary this year. Much as Neddy Merrill swam home by way of swimming pools strung across Westchester County, Michael Perkins and I would walk across Woodstock on Conservancy lands, though we'd cheat by car between sites and try not to go crazy, as did poor Neddy.

But when Michael and I climbed onto Snake Rocks, an old bluestone quarry off Yerry Hill Road, I could see that my clever analogy between life and literature was breaking down. Neddy Merrill rushed from pool to pool, "the Grahams, the Hammers, the Lears, the Howlands, and Crosscups." Then "the Bunkers," "the Levys," "the Hallorans, the Saches, the Biswangers, Shirley Adams, the Gilmartins, and the Clydes." Our guide swam through the social register. Yet all the pools sounded the same.

At Snake Rocks, our third stop in "The Walkers," I marveled at the differences between the Conservancy's properties. We'd started at Sloan Gorge Preserve, a hemlock ravine carved by waters roaring down from Ice Age glaciers, but now an intermittent stream, where we'd enjoyed a geology lesson and a serene escape from our morning chores.

Then we'd climbed the western hump of Mount Guardian to my favorite lookout rock with its panoramic view of Cooper Lake and the western Woodstock mountains. Seated on this kingly stone outcropping, Michael had told me about Chief Joseph Brant of the Iroquois, who'd shared leadership over this land with Woodstock villagers at the time of the American Revolution.

Now, atop the massive slope of loose rocks to explore the quarry pools tucked below the rear wall of cliffs, our imaginations ran in new directions. On the eastern wing of this extensive rubble heap we discovered a bluestone sculpture studio. Someone, or several people, had stacked rocks in cairns, benches, open circles like aboveground wells, and artistic mounds with lone slabs angled off the top like sundials.

After a dozen sculptures, Michael stopped counting. "Everywhere you look, you see another one," he said, impressed by both the work and the whimsy need to make these pieces. "As much as I believe in wilderness," he added. "It's the human that I look for in landscapes." At Snake Rocks we'd come to the right place

Under a misty overcast—Michael used his umbrella for a walking stick—spring was bursting. Small white birches rooted amid the rocks were tasseled with mustard green catkins. The cherry trees were leafing out but still held their last white flower petals. A oak shrub unfurling tiny leaves stained nutmeg purple stopped me in my tracks. Spring's colors, though subtle, delighted me as much as autumn's.

Add the pine trees, the moss, and the cattails in a pool, and Snake Rocks had the

atmosphere of a meditative garden. Then I heard my first black-throated green warbler of the year, *zee zee zee zoo zee*, a five syllable song I'd once used in a haiku. Art was in the air.

In the center of a natural amphitheater, Michael stood on a smooth slab for a stage and faced the rock rubble slope that would provide natural seating for the poetry reading he'd started planning. "We'll put ten people there," he said, then turned around to stare up at the smooth cliffs rising twenty feet to a rim of white pines: the balcony. Imagining myself reading to a cliff top audience, I had the same reaction Michael did. "This could be intimidating," he admitted. "You'd want to be on your best game."

Of course, no one had planned for Snake Rocks to be so enchanting. With his sense of history, Michael saw more here than sculpture mounds and future readings. "I think of all the poor bastards who carried the bluestone out," he said, referring to the quarrymen paid almost nothing for their labor. For years, the Woodstock Byrdcliffe Guild gift shop sold an old photo postcard of the Snake Rocks quarry active in the early 1900s. Surely, those men didn't foresee the day when their dangerous work site would become a nature sanctuary where a pair of poets could clamber about the waste rock piles satisfying their aesthetic spirits. But here we were. By now I'd decided Snake Rocks should be a Chinese Poetry Garden.

In 1960 or so, the town of Woodstock resurveyed all its lands and discovered that, in fact, no one owned the 36 acres of this old quarry on the ridgeline above the Wittenberg Sportsmen Club valley. J.C. Van Rijn, the founder of Rotron and a founder of the town planning board, learned about this unclaimed parcel and bought it for less than \$1,000. In 1962, he gave it to his daughter, Eva Van Rijn, who planned to build a house, until she and her husband discovered that they didn't have a right of way on the old quarry road. Rather than fighting the neighbor in court, they let the matter lay.

In 2004, more than a decade after her husband died, Van Rijn and her current partner gave the property to the Woodstock Land Conservancy. A longstanding supporter of the Nature Conservancy, as well, she viewed this donation as "the only thing I could do. If I was a multi-millionaire, I'd buy land for bike paths all around Woodstock." But she's not. She's a painter, particularly of Western landscapes, who still walks at Snake Rocks every week, except in winter. She appreciates the way Conservancy has left the place the way it was. "They've respected it very much."

Michael and I scrambled down from the sculpture wing of the expansive rubble pile to visit what, until this morning, had been my favorite hideaway in Snake Rocks, the quarry pool that does, in fact, look like a swimming pool because of its square end left by digging. I loved to stare into its dark waters until I spotted the first lazy flashes of the goldfish that add the perfect Chinese touch.

"That's my fault," Eva Van Rijn sheepishly admitted, when we later spoke by phone. She knows goldfish aren't native to Catskill quarry ponds. But years ago, when she had to remove goldfish from her yard pond, she couldn't bear to kill them herself. So she brought them up to Snake Rocks to "give them the rest of the summer." Little did she know they'd survive under the winter ice and breed for years to come.

But she's not the only one. She once met a couple releasing their beloved pet, Oscar, an orange and white fantail goldfish, into the pool. Moving from the area, they couldn't bring

Oscar, too, so they set him loose among friends at Snake Rocks. Van Rijn hasn't seen Oscar in a while, but who's to say his offspring aren't with us still?

Perhaps the classic Chinese poet Li Po had Oscar in mind when he wrote:

Why talk of cleansing elixirs of immortality?

Here, the world's dust rinsed from my face,

I'll stay close to what I've always loved,

content to leave that peopled world forever.