

# COME WITH ME

Come with me to explore a patch of Avon land that I will always hold dear. Those three acres were the setting for so much life and love and learning, where I became acquainted with many living things that shared the same space, where so many ideas about life and death fell into proper perspective.

Over there is the spot where my 80-year-old father buried his beloved little dog, Peter, and cried enough tears to keep the ground forever moist.

Here's where I fed the baby skunk. He had been coming to the front door, eating the stray cat's food, so I set up a separate cafeteria for him. He came every evening until he was mature enough to fend for himself. Not once did he emit any trademark scent.

Under those bushes I met a courageous opossum one night. Our big adopted sheep dog was barking furiously and refused to come when I called. I took a leash and a flashlight to investigate. Terrified, but defiantly facing the big dog and the beam of bright light was a mother opossum with a baby clinging to her back. I hooked the leash to the dog's collar, and she willingly followed me, confident that she had done her duty by warning me of this strange threat she'd never seen before. She'd grown up in the city.

This great tree was once the small "feeding tree" where my baby bluejay taught me so much. It was here too that my baby squirrel began to learn what he was supposed to do with those sharp little claws.

And there, on the top step in the pool, a big green frog used to be sitting every summer morning. I'd never thought of frogs as friendly, but this one seemed quite chummy. Before turning on the filter I'd capture him in a skimmer and place him in a shady spot outside the fence. I didn't want him to be drawn into the skimmer-box and drowned by the force of the filter pump. Next morning he'd be right back on the top step.

Among the shrubs at the front of the house I had my first encounter with an ant lion. In a sandy area this small insect kept the sand very fine and loose. He'd dig a funnel-shaped trap and wait at the bottom, hidden by sand. When an unwary ant stepped over the top edge of the funnel, the ant lion would keep digging at the bottom. That kept the grains of sand sliding down the sides, and the harder a victim tried to crawl up, the faster he and the sand slid down until he finally met his predator. Ingenious nature!

Right there on the front lawn the doe and her fawn appeared now and then. They came to pick up fruit that had fallen from an ancient apple tree beside the driveway. In the back yard one day seven deer were nibbling their way through the woods. How sad that they must come so close because we've taken over so much of their habitat!

To be continued...



## THE *Avon* LAND TRUST membership form

*please check one:*

- \$100 Life Membership  
 \$15 Family Membership  
 \$10 Individual Membership  
 \$\_\_\_\_\_ Additional donation

Name \_\_\_\_\_

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*Please make checks payable to The Avon Land Trust.*

All contributions and memberships are tax deductible.

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*Please mail to:*

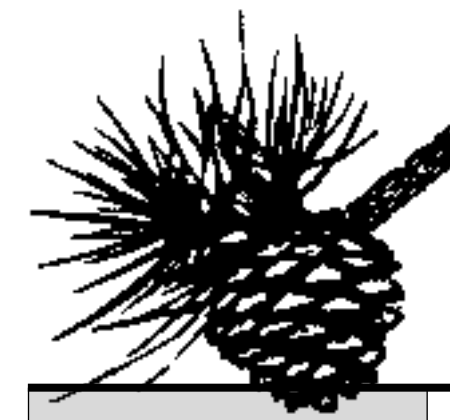
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# THE *Avon* LAND TRUST

A NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION

May 1998

## WELCOME TO THE AVON LAND TRUST

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> > > > > > > > > > > >

We would like to welcome

Bill Yocom as our newest  
 board member.

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There will be a hike scheduled  
 for the fall. Watch for the date  
 in the next newsletter.



### *President's Message*

Rep. Jessie Stratton, Chairperson of the Environment Committee, in association with the DEP, Governor Rowland and his Blue Ribbon Task Force, is currently working out the details of HB 5034, The Open Space and Watershed Acquisition Act. This bill, if passed, would provide funds for a two-pronged approach to purchasing land across the state for preservation. The first part, outright acquisition by the state, is dependent on a bond issue that is being proposed by Rep. Stratton. The second part, supported by the Governor, will set up a matching grants program from which money may be given to the DEP for equitable distribution to towns, land trusts and water companies working on a local level.

While the mechanics of these proposals have yet to be worked out, such a plan would aid grassroots organizations in conserving land that might otherwise be lost to development. In practical terms, a land trust could sell off pieces that have little conservation value (i.e. building lots) and, via a partnership grant, purchase land at risk (i.e. riparian or woodland environment).

A linear park along the Farmington River has been a dream of the Avon Land Trust since its inception in 1972. The passage of HB 5034 (\$166 million over five years) could bring such a dream into focus and make it a possibility in the foreseeable future.

I'll keep you informed.

Tom Morganti  
*President ALT*

## Now Is The Time

In his foreword to The Nature of America: Images by North America's Premier Nature Photographers, Charles Kuralt wrote about a childhood love of nature he shared with his brother. He described their discoveries, adventures, and their love of learning about the world of nature.

"...It was easy to imagine that we were the first... to visit a rock outcropping above the creek that we called 'the secret place.' We scouted out the rabbits and

*Continued inside*

# Avon Land Lovers

by Ruth Maher

## Ray and Nancy Hanelius

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If you enjoy a warm friendly welcome, if you want to see how one family has tamed some of Avon's lovely woodland and still preserved its wildness, visit Ray and Nancy Hanelius at their beautiful farm known as Applegate of Avon, 84 Huckleberry Hill Road. It's an experience you'll want to renew again and again.

Ray is an Avon native whose paternal grandparents, Gustave and Hilja Hanelius, immigrated from Finland around the



Signs are hand carved and painted by Ray.

turn of the century. With other newcomers, they formed a large Finnish community in the School Street area of Huckleberry Hill. Like other immigrant ethnic groups, they settled in a neighborhood where they could share their history, culture and traditions. Many worked for the Collins Company. They brought with them strong moral values, a serious work ethic, and remarkable skills in carpentry, wood-working and agriculture. All quickly became self-supporting.

Gustave built several homes on School Street. He also built a typical Finnish sauna that preserved a cultural tradition for the "Finns." At the base of the sauna was the firebox, which was covered by rocks. After the rocks were thoroughly heated, small amounts of water were poured over them to create clouds of steam. Along one inner wall of the building were tiers of benches where bathers relaxed to absorb the benefits of the steam while gently flogging their bare skin with birch whisks to stimulate circulation. The sauna was fired up on Wednesdays and Saturdays with separate times set aside for men and women. The charge was 25 cents per person, and the facility was enjoyed by family, friends and neighbors. After each session Hilja served coffee and sweet breads.

Sometimes when the sauna was unoccupied and Hilja saw children standing around, obviously in need of a bath, she invited them in to "get cleaned up" and then served sweet breads and juice. The kids loved it, and some really worked at getting dirty enough to be noticed before they went to linger outside the sauna, awaiting Hilja's invitation. The sauna that was a vital part of community life is no longer used, but the structure still stands on School Street.

Ray's parents were Otto and Helen Hanelius. Like his father, Otto was a builder, but he also worked at American Research in Farmington. Ray recalls that his father "could do anything, fix anything." He was carpenter, electrician, plumber, welder and gardener all in one. Helen's family had immigrated from Sweden. She and Otto instilled in their children the high standards that were an integral part of their own background. Years later Ray and Nancy saw farming as a wonderful lifetime expression of the heritage that had been passed to them.

From early childhood Ray felt an affinity for nature. He recalls that "the woods, fields and streams around Huckleberry Hill were the center of learning for me." The traditional attitudes and values of his forebears were ingrained in him. Hard work was both a challenge and a satisfaction.

As a teenager Ray developed a serious interest in running. He made a daily 6-mile run from School Street, across woodland that has since become his Applegate of Avon, to Route 44 in Canton. Almost every day he passed the owner, Henry Jacoby, who was cutting wood with a handsaw. Inevitably the two, who shared a love of the land, became



The salesroom at Applegate of Avon.

good friends. Ray's childhood dream of one day owning a family farm grew stronger and more compelling.

He began his college career by riding his bicycle daily to The University of Hartford. In due time he graduated with B.A. and M.A. degrees and earned his M.S. from The University of Notre Dame. His major focus was consistently on biology, chemistry and earth science. He is presently a seventh-grade teacher at Avon Middle School where he has served for 33 years.

In addition to teaching, Ray has served for 23 years as Track and X-Country Coach. In 1983 he was named Connecticut's X-Country Coach of the Year, and in competition for the national title he placed second. He initiated the Wrestling Program at Avon High School. He was a very early member of Canton Ski Club at Sweetheart Mountain and later served 20 years on the Sundown Ski Patrol. For 10 years he was Director of Deerfoot Lodge, a Christian camp for boys in the Adirondack Mountains. Ray and Nancy are current members of the Connecticut Farm Bureau and the Connecticut Department of Agriculture.

When Nancy Henson's family came to Avon, she joined Ray's fifth-grade class at Huckleberry Hill School. In 1960 they were members of the last Avon class to graduate from Canton High School. Ray says that Nancy was and still is "the love of my life." After college they renewed a deep friendship that became a lasting love, and they were married in 1966. Their first home was a house on School Street purchased from Ray's great-aunt

Nancy had become a Special Education teacher, but she shared Ray's vision of developing a self-supporting farm that would serve the community and allow their family to live and work on the land they loved. Their four children, Jayson, Whitney, Martha and Gretchen, grew up with their parents' ideals and their respect for the dedication and perseverance demanded by farm life.

In 1979, with lots of hope and ambition but little money, Ray and Nancy bought 33-plus acres from Henry Jacoby, the woodsman who had watched Ray day after day as he ran across that very acreage. Mr. Jacoby was delighted that the property



Nancy and Ray Hanelius.

would be preserved as a family farm. It was only because of Henry's generous financial terms that Ray was able to buy the land at that time.

Ray and 11-year-old Jayson cleared the trees from

10 acres of woodland that would eventually be cultivated as an orchard. A great demand for firewood enabled Ray to pay the mortgage by selling the wood he and Jayson had cut. Scientific studies of the soil indicated that it was well suited for producing apples and peaches. The first trees were planted in 1980. The orchard at Applegate of Avon now contains 1600 trees that include 10 varieties of peaches and 15 kinds of apples.

It was Whitney who inspired the name they chose. As part of a school project she had written about a fictitious farm she called "Applegate." When it was time to name their very real farm, family members liked the sound of Whitney's choice, and their name became Applegate of Avon Farm. In the early days Martha and Gretchen were successful young salesladies. Every Saturday they took bags of books and games, along with a supply of shining apples, and set up a picnic table at the end of their driveway. Before the day ended, passing motorists had bought all the apples, and the girls had gained a little more experience in meeting customers.

As a first-generation farmer, Ray lacked the advantages of one who has grown up with farm experience and then inherited an already established enterprise with advice and help from his predecessors. He literally "started from scratch." He makes an emphatic point of crediting Oliver and Doug Thompson for their invaluable counsel and guidance in helping him understand and comply with local zoning, land-use and building requirements. He also names Max Smith as "another wonderful friend who has generously shared his extensive knowledge of growing fruit." Both Oliver and Max cautioned Ray that if he wanted to attempt farming, he would need a separate job with a steady income to provide for his family.

The exquisite Hanelius home was built by Ray with the help of family members, neighbors, and former students. Both the house and hot water are heated by wood. Nancy makes all the family's breads, desserts, preserves and such delicacies as dried-apple snacks and butternut squash/apple soup. She has even learned ways of decorating with apples.

The popular unpasteurized cider sold by Applegate of Avon contains only the juice of apples picked from the trees, none that have ever touched the ground. The apples are pressed by the Olsons of Hickory Ledges Farm, and the result is cider with a decidedly superior flavor. "Drops" (apples that have fallen to the ground) are used in compost or as winter food for the deer.

The big barn, built by Ray and Jayson, provides ample storage and an attractive salesroom with a make-yourself-at-home atmosphere and inviting "country" decor. The salesroom is open Monday through Saturday from mid-August to the end of December. Once or twice a season they feature a very special day when lucky customers can purchase Nancy's delicious home-made breads, cakes, pies and preserves. I came home from Applegate of Avon with a jar of Nancy's peach jam, a treat that rivals the legendary ambrosia, "food fit for the gods."

Ray and Nancy Hanelius are two people in tune with nature, in love with each other, grateful to God for all their blessings, and deeply appreciative of family, friends and customers, without whom their Applegate dream could never have come to fruition. They are worthy stewards of the precious bit of earth for which they consider themselves privileged caretakers.



Ray among the May blossoms.

## Now Is The Time (continued from page 1)

squirrels along the way. We knew the brushpile where the muskrat lived and the pool where the polliwogs swam and the open field where the low-flying hawk stalked the meadow mice... Songbirds sang to us on our way down to the creek in the mornings, and owls hooted us home in the half-light of evening. Had a good photographer walked with us, we might have made a picture worthy of inclusion in this book...

"But that picture was never made.

Now it cannot be made. The creek

is buried forever in a culvert;

the rabbits and squirrels, the

muskrat, the hawk,

the mice, the

thrushes and owls

have died out or

moved on; the

'secret place' is a

landscaped rock

garden beside a

house on a paved

street with curbs and fire

hydrants. To the newcomers

who live there, no doubt, it's a land that has been nicely developed. To me, it's a sweet remembered world that is gone for good."

To borrow a thought from this great American journalist, let's gather pictures of our own favorite places of beauty and happy memories. Before it's too late, let's take new pictures of the natural scenes that still exist in Avon. Once gone, they're gone forever.

If such pictures are carefully labeled, dated and donated to Avon Land Trust, they can help create a permanent visual record of Avon's land as it is or has been. Perhaps they'll also encourage landowners to help ALT fulfill its goal of preserving as much as possible of our town's natural beauty. Now is the time.

