

Land Lovers *continued*

sustain itself, it was cut free of its parent and allowed to grow independently.

Today's equipment and techniques are more sophisticated and scientific. There are endless varieties of plants with new adaptations being introduced regularly. For a horticulturist there is always an exciting element of discovery. The Farmington Valley Nursery has been granted patents for two new variations, a dwarf form of Mother's Day Azalea and a Variegated Forsythia.

Harry's family remembers him as practical and resourceful. When he needed a particular kind of tool or equipment, he checked books and catalogs. If he couldn't afford to buy what he needed, he found a way to make it or create a substitute, often making good use of his welding skill. One greenhouse device was such a helpful friend the girls named it "Oscar." It was designed to make straight, shallow furrows in the soil trays where tiny seedlings were placed for propagation. Oscar was a flat rectangular piece of high-quality stainless steel, 5"x12", with a handle on top. Drawn through the thin layer of soil, it made perfect furrows. Harry died in 1979, but Oscar still works in the greenhouse.

Harry constructed a huge wind-powered machine to scare away the crows. It probably weighed half a ton, and the noise of the blades was deafening. The crows soon adjusted to the noise and ignored it, but other creatures kept their distance.

One day Harry forgot to turn off the kitchen faucet. When Dolly discovered the flooded kitchen, she asked, "How are you going to clean up this mess?" Equal to any calamity, Harry got a hand drill, drilled some holes in the floor and left the water to drain into the sand of the dirt floor below.

Harry's children inherited his instincts for meeting challenges with ingenuity. They accept few problems as insurmountable. At one time or another Kevin has worked with his father, Howard, and his uncles, David, Sidney and Harry Jr. Motivated by a desire to help, he found that the value of

what he learned from them far exceeded the value of the help he gave. In much of their creative problem-solving he recognized the influence of his grandfather's innovative ideas. The 40-acre piece of land was developed by three of Harry's sons. Daniel, David and Sidney built eleven new homes and two new streets named Wilcox Lane and Knollwood Lane.

The cabin in the meadows was washed away by the flood of 1955. It was not rebuilt, but it still stands in childhood memories. For the family, one of the most devastating results of the flood was that the rushing water carried away two barrels of pickles they had stored in the rafters to cure.

Harry was as compassionate as he was creative. He often took in people who needed a place to stay for a week or two. Some of them stayed for months or even years.


Sylvia recalls that her father expressed his love "just by putting his hand on your elbow or shoulder and looking you straight in the eye with a look that said it all. If you had misbehaved, he could fill you with unbearable guilt by doing the same thing, but with a pained look that clearly showed how deeply you had hurt and disappointed him."

I asked the question, "Have you ever wished that all children could experience the kind of childhood you had?"

Sylvia said quietly, "I've often thought about that. The work, the play...we just did it and loved it. We had no idea how blessed we were."

Recent Acquisition *continued*

between two rocky ridges, was formed upon the withdrawal of the last remnants of our glacier about eleven thousand years ago. Debris from the melting glacier created a damming effect that formed the lake, which originally covered the entire width of the valley from ridge to ridge. As can be seen from Lovely Street, plant growth and soil particles from the slopes have gradually made the old lake progressively more shallow, enabling a succession of plant forms to alter the environment, making it more suitable for other species of plants to replace their predecessors. As time passed, aquatic plants were replaced with bog-type vegetation, and now we see the growth of swamp-loving woody plants. The western edge of the valley is now forested, and as one looks eastward, the bands of vegetation become readily apparent. Soon (in geologic terms) the valley will become dry land, eventually forested. In geologic terms, however, "soon" means after the thousands of years it will take to complete the transition from lake bed to forest.



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NEW MEMBERS WELCOME

As undeveloped areas become more scarce, we find growing interest in the preservation of open land in its natural state. Members are urged to encourage friends to join the Avon Land Trust in its dedicated efforts to preserve for the future some of Connecticut's great beauty.

WELCOME TO THE AVON LAND TRUST

President's Message

One of the more dramatic side effects of residential development witnessed in the last fifty years also happens to be the most paradoxical. Contrary to what we might think, when open land becomes "suburbia", wild animals that haven't been seen in hundreds of years begin moving back into the neighborhood. The explanation lies in the past and in the uses that the land has had. Industrial-age Connecticut (1820-1920) was comparatively treeless—most of its land was under production (i.e. for fodder, pasturage or cultivation). In natural terms, a working farm is essentially a sterile environment for animals. Cultivated or cropped-over ground will not support the types of plants or animals needed to provide food for wild species. Ironically, the same is true of dense forest. Over the past two centuries many farms have gone out of production and second growth forest and scrub have replaced the meadows of New England. With land values going through the roof, the return of wildlife has appeared just in time to coincide with the housing boom. Where game was once scarce, now we're treated to deer eating our rhododendrons, turkeys in the garden, bears in the bird feeder and coyotes hopping fences after our house cats. While this may be dismaying in some cases and distressing in others, it says a lot about the regenerative powers of the world we live in. It should also be a humbling experience for a species as self-important as Man.

Tom Morganti
President ALT

ALT's Most Recent Acquisition
by Harry Spring

An outright gift of 4.52 acres of what once was the floor of Secret Lake has been granted to the Avon Land Trust by Mrs. Ethel K. Davis of West Hartford. This parcel is part of an important bird nesting area that is also home to raptors such as our winter resident bald eagles and a variety of summer hawks and falcons. Despite these birds of prey, the songbird population thrives as do the populations of amphibians and some reptiles and mammals. We wish to express our gratitude to Mrs. Davis for her desire to preserve this area and her generosity in conveying it to the Trust.

The geologic history of Avon is exceedingly varied. Each of our holdings illustrates some aspect of that history as well as current ecological progression. Secret Lake, confined

continued inside

Avon Land Lovers

by Ruth Maher

The Harry Daniel Wilcox Family

According to genealogical records, the name Wilcox, in various spellings, can be traced back to the 1300s in England and Wales. In the earliest emigration to America the name was represented by at least six totally unrelated families from different parts of England.

John Wilcox (originally Willcocks), his wife Mary, and their three children were the first ancestors of the Harry Daniel Wilcox family to come from England to Connecticut. They settled in Hartford in 1639. The land granted for their home was a 2-acre lot that is now part of Bushnell Park "between the Capitol and the Soldiers' Arch." John bought other land as it became available until he finally owned 96 acres. He was one of the founders of the Old Center Church, where his name can be seen on the Founders' Monument in the church burial ground.



Harry Daniel Wilcox was born in Farmington in 1895, first son of the first son of the first son back through several generations. As a boy, Harry told his mother he wanted to be a minister. Later he decided he'd like to be a doctor, but his mother warned that only rich people could go to college and become doctors. The story of his life, however, gives ample evidence that he probably would have been happy and successful in either profession. His actual "doctoring" was concerned with the care of plants and his domestic animals, but a great many people drew comfort from his patience and generosity.

Before 1917 Harry purchased the property that is now the Farmington Valley Nursery on Waterville Road. During late spring and summer it's a beautiful outdoor salesroom where hundreds of azaleas and rhododendrons show a spectacular range of color. Hundreds of other plants, trees and shrubs offer

changing scenery all through the growing season, and every plant is grown in Avon. The nursery is currently owned by Harry D. Wilcox Jr. and operated with the assistance of his nephew, Kevin Wilcox.

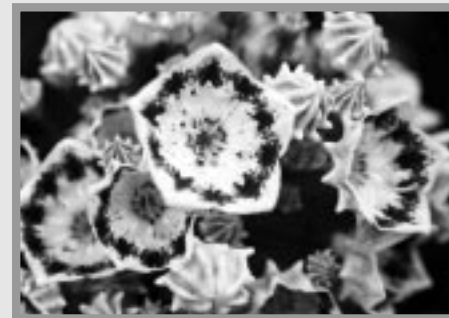
Despite his anti-war sentiments, Harry Sr. joined the army to serve in World War I. At heart he was a pacifist, not surprising since his mother was of German descent, and his father's heritage was English. He had no appetite for bearing arms against either side.

At 13 or 14, Harry had done some driving for one of the few local automobile owners. When the army sought truck drivers, Harry volunteered. Howard, Kevin's father, recounts a favorite war story.

One day Harry was driving a transport truck, loaded with soldiers, along a narrow road that ran between an embankment on one side and a sheer dropoff on the other. He had just started down a long, steep slope when his brakes failed. As the truck gained momentum, Harry struggled with all his strength to control its direction in spite of its increasing speed. Rounding a slight curve, he suddenly came upon an officer on horseback. He tried desperately to avoid a collision without dropping over the precipice, but something on the side of the truck snagged the officer's trousers, ripped them off and flew them, like a flag unfurled, all the way to the bottom of the hill. The officer hastened to catch up with the offending driver and his cargo of terrified soldiers. Still neatly attired in the upper half of his uniform, he was uninjured except for the damage to his dignity.

Before going overseas, Harry bought lumber for the house he intended to build at the present site of the nursery. In his absence his mother had a house built there. It was smaller than Harry had planned, and his grandparents moved into it. When they died, his parents moved in. Harry added another house to the first, making a duplex arrangement, and he finally moved into his own home almost forty years after buying the first lumber.

Harry was 39 when he married 19-year-old Melvina Griffin (Dolly). Within ten years Dolly had borne eight children including twins, Sylvia and Sidney. As his family grew, Harry needed to increase his income, and from 1942 to 1960 he worked full time as a welder. When he was not at his welding job, he was busy planting, pruning, digging and wrapping plants. All plants sold



were "balled and burlapped" until the 1980s, when containers came into use.

Although Dolly was small in stature, she had great strength and stamina. She took care of the house, the



children, nursery stock sales, summer vegetable gardens, and much more. Whenever the supply of firewood needed replenishing, Dolly placed a big log over two sawhorses. The two youngest children, Harry Jr. and Judy, sat on the ends of the log to balance it while their mother sawed it into pieces. After chopping the wood to fit the stove, Dolly helped carry it in and stack it.

In addition to 40 acres in the Pine Hill Road area, Harry owned 10 acres in the meadows near the Farmington River. This land was used for nursery production and family vegetable gardens. He built a cabin where the family could stay during the summer. At first it had only a floor, four walls and a canvas roof. Later it was expanded to include a second floor and a roof, and electricity was installed.

Everyone worked hard, and the gardens provided a bountiful harvest all through the season. Dolly did the canning right there,

with only a kerosene stove in the beginning. For the children summer meant lots of fun as well as work. They swam in their favorite spot in the river, where three big rocks marked their boundaries. Beginning swimmers could go only as far as the first rock. The second was the limit for those who were competent but not yet expert. Only experts were permitted to swim all the way to the third rock. And Dolly was there to enforce the rules.

Their daily diet included plenty of fresh vegetables, fruits and berries. They looked forward to the ripening of the corn, when they could have corn on the cob every night for supper. Daytime snacks were everywhere...pick a tomato, pull up a carrot, grab a handful of berries. But Judy remembers a frustrating cherry tree. Its trunk was wrapped in a layer of poison ivy that left the tempting fruit tantalizingly close, yet out of reach. There was always an abundance of food, and weekends brought an abundance of relatives to share the bounty.

The kids never had occasion to complain that there was "nothing to do" or "nobody to play with." Dolly would have responded to such a complaint by immediately assigning another task. One of their favorite excursions was a roller-coaster ride in an old 1932 Plymouth truck that had no cab and "not much to hang onto." Harry Jr. and Judy straddled the fenders behind the big round headlights. One of the older boys drove, and the others hung on wherever they could as the truck bounced over the bumps and ruts of the old logging roads between the river and Route 10. They kept their guardian angels busy.

When the summer gardening season ended, everybody moved back to the duplex at the nursery. With a family of ten, there was never a shortage of work, and each had to do his share. One of the least popular jobs was that of bringing up the potatoes for supper. Judy dreaded the days when it was her turn to take the big basin down through the cold root cellar to the dark place where potatoes were stored in big bins. She was terrified of the cobwebs and spiders and all the other creatures she imagined were hiding there. As the winter wore on, the potatoes

began to sprout, and their skins began to wrinkle. Every time she reached into the bin she could feel the sprouts, like ghostly white fingers, reaching out to crawl along her arm. The basin had to be filled with about ten pounds of potatoes before she could escape. She wasted no time.



Dolly was an excellent cook who needed no measuring cups or spoons. While she was baking breads, pies, cakes or cookies, the

irresistible aromas that filled the house and yard clearly called, "Come and get it!" If Harry Sr. came in and found freshly baked cookies, he stored some in his pocket. If he found a newly frosted cake, he cut a sample for himself, even if the cake had been made for a special occasion. Dolly took it in stride. Presenting the cake to its intended recipient, she would simply say that the missing portion was proof that Harry had tested it and found it good.

In 1976 the "Farmington Valley Herald" published an article by Lyn Brakeman that described Dolly's skill as a douser. Using a divining rod, usually a freshly-cut forked twig of willow or hazel, she was able to walk over an area and locate any underground source of water. She was often consulted by local developers after they had tried unsuccessfully to find water. She could point out a good place to drill a well and tell how deep the drill would have to go, whether the water

would be fit to drink, and how many gallons per minute the well would produce. She said the pull of the divining rod exerted great pressure and left her exhausted. To some extent she blamed that pressure for her later loss of vision. She was quoted as saying that "dousers are people who also have ESP. I wish I didn't have it, because I sometimes know what I don't want to know." Although Dolly was legally blind for many years, she is remembered as still a wonderful cook, still able to prepare their favorite foods.

According to Kevin, his grandfather had worked briefly in a seedling nursery in northern Massachusetts and at an orchard in Wallingford. "During those periods he gained a bare-bones education in horticulture, but for the most part he was self-taught. He always had a notebook in his pocket. He read volumes, underlined important passages and took notes. He knew more than most people about how to grow plants and keep them thriving."

It was around 1959 when I first visited Harry's nursery to buy one of those bushes that turn fiery red in the fall. I learned that its name is "euonymus." He invited me into his basement to see how he propagated these shrubs. One section of the basement floor was covered with folded newspapers, all kept uniformly moist. He unfolded one after another, each revealing a euonymus twig with clusters of tiny roots developing. Some had a few new leaves, colorless because they were deprived of light. Once transplanted outdoors, they would grow quickly.

Caroline (spelled with second "a") recalls grafting and other methods of propagation. Sometimes a low branch of a young tree was bent to the ground, weighted in place and covered with soil. After roots had grown and the new plant could

Photos: Harry & Dolly Wilcox, Mt. Laurel, Forsythia Fiesta, Royal Star Magnolia, Farmington Valley Nursery

