

Robert Miller: A ‘magic place’ to listen to birds and learn

Robert Miller
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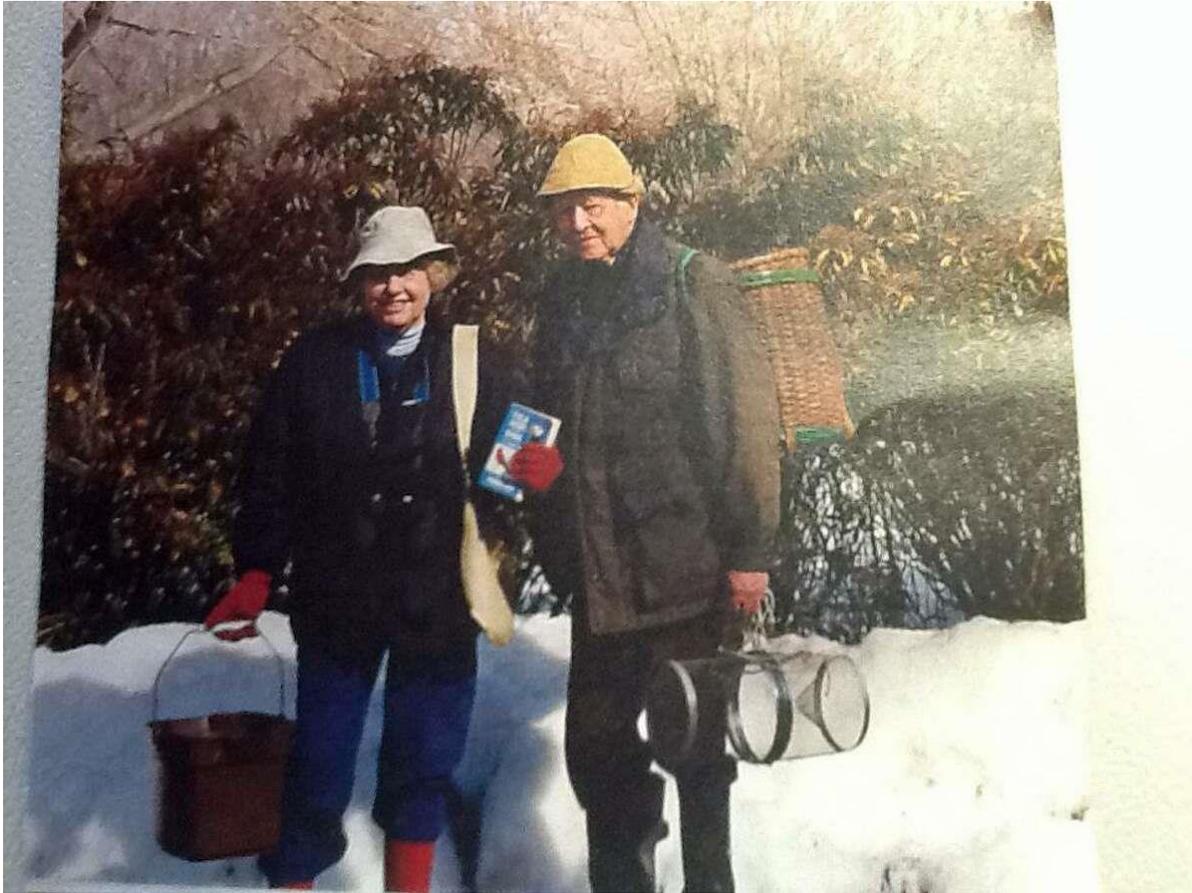
Monique and Philip Wiedel enjoy the view on their land on Long Ridge Road in Danbury./

When she was growing up in New York City, Suzanne Wiedel-Pace would bring friends to her family’s weekend farm retreat on Long Ridge Road in Danbury, north of the Danbury-Redding town line.

Once there, her father, Dr. Philip Wiedel, would equip Suzanne and her friends with billhooks — a billhook is a cross between a hand sickle and a machete — and send them out to clear brush. They would return to the city dead tired.

“Most of my friends would not show up for school on Monday,” she said last week.

But there were also long wildflower expeditions to find marsh marigolds and hepatica in the spring, fringed gentians in the fall. And there were times when Suzanne simply sat for hours on a rock outcropping in the meadow and listened to the world.



“It was a magic, magic place,” she said.

That magic place — 65 acres of fields and woods — is now public land. The city of Danbury bought it this month for \$700,000, adding it to the block of open space that already exists along Long Ridge Road — largely because of the Wiedel family’s efforts to preserve it.

Bill Montgomery, the former president of the Land Trust of Danbury — which merged with New Fairfield’s land trust to become the Candlewood Valley Regional Land Trust — said the Wiedels had already given 108 acres of land to the trust.

Add to that 40 acres the Aquarion water company preserved as open space, and the 65 acres the city now owns, and there are more than 200 acres on Long Ridge Road preserved and connected.

“There are consistent ideas we have in land preservation,” Montgomery said. “One is the size of the lot. In Montana, 65 acres isn’t that big a piece of land. In Danbury, it is.”

“You also want to have the land contiguous with other open space,” Montgomery said. “Here it is.”

Jack Kozuchowski, the city’s former environmental director, is now a volunteer on the Ives Trail Greenway, the 20-mile hiking trail that connects Danbury, Bethel, Redding and Ridgefield.

People who start the trail in Redding now must walk along Long Ridge Road for about a half-mile before rejoining the trail. Kozuchowski said acquisition of the new land means the trail can be relocated off the road onto open space.

“More importantly, it’s a meadow,” he said. “Meadows are a disappearing part of the landscape.”

There are also two old wells on the land. Suzanne’s mother, Monique Wiedel, wonders whether they were part of Redding’s Revolutionary War encampment.

“We could look across the way to Gallows Hill,” she said, referring to the Redding hillside where Gen. Israel Putnam hanged two Tory sympathizers in 1779.

Three generations of the Wiedel family have spent time on Long Ridge Road.

Monique’s parents, Dr. Benjamin Watson, then head of obstetrics and gynecology at Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital in New York City, and Angelè Watson, an artist, were the first to buy a summer place there.

Monique, a sculptor, and Philip, a cardiac surgeon who died in 2009, came next, followed by their children.

“We spent weekends and all our summers there,” Suzanne Wiedel-Pace said.

Monique Wiedel, who will turn 100 in July, now lives at the Meadow Ridge senior community in Redding. One of the sculptures in her apartment is a sleeping calf carved out of a piece of white marble she found on the Long Ridge Road property. (The land is in the Marble Valley, the geological formation that runs along western Connecticut up to Massachusetts.)

Her memory is billhook-sharp. She and local historian Diane Hassan are now working on a history of Long Ridge Road and of the interactions of the local farmers and carpenters with the colony of artists and writers who once lived there.

“I’ve been meeting with Monique regularly and trying to pull in all together,” Hassan said.

The finished product — whether book or lecture — will be called “When Two Worlds Met.”

Monique’s hope for the 65 acres the city now owns is that it will be a true nature center, not just fields and woods.

“There should be nature paths there,” she said. “People should go there to listen to birds, to learn.”