

The Stories Landscapes Tell
By Michael Perkins
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Following our plan of exploring Land Conservancy holdings, Will Nixon and I went to the Zena Cornfield, but the morning was overcast, the hay was knee high, and the ticks were thick. On a clear day, the 22 acre cornfield, acquired by the Conservancy in 1989, offers the best view of Woodstock's mother mountain range. The field has been cultivated for thousands of years. As Zena is the oldest part of Woodstock, this great open space is one of the symbolic centers of our town. It's not highly touted, it's not spectacularly grand; there are other sites in Ulster County with more scenic pizzazz. But if you don't feel something like awe as you drive past it, if instead you wonder why such a large parcel hasn't been developed, then you probably enjoyed seeing the large picture frame that was put there awhile back. The empty frame claimed the view, while announcing that Kilroy had been there.

Pressing on, we drove up Chestnut Hill Road to another Conservancy property, Ludins Field, a six acre hayfield with nothing remarkable about it—except that it is open land, and open land, without picture frames—is what makes the difference between country and suburbs. Once again, it didn't seem worth walking because of the minuscule blood-suckers lying in wait. So I suggested we take a look at Yankeetown Pond, which Will had not seen except from Snake Rocks.

I've been stopping on long bicycle rides and walks at Yankeetown Pond for over thirty years, but I knew very little about it, other than that it was a lovely pit stop. Just take the Wittenberg Road from Bearsville, make a left at the intersection with the Glenford-Wittenberg Road (the old Ulster & Delaware Turnpike) and a mile later make a left onto Pond Road and park.

Gaze out over the pond's expanse, as I did one summer long ago:

“July brings an armada
to Yankeetown Pond. Lilies set forth
on flat green boats.”

Will and I walked to the edge, looking for a path around the pond. A large snapping turtle sat on a rock, ignoring us. An owl hooted. Logs in the feeder stream indicated that beaver engineers had been hard at work. We walked into the woods, looking for a path around the pond, but found only a road marked private, so we emerged and walked up Pond Road to its cul-de-sac dead end, and walked back to the car feeling somewhat frustrated. Our only remaining strategy was serendipity.

I was sitting in Will's car with the door open, gazing out over the pond and wishing I knew more about its mysteries, when a friendly spirit materialized next to me. This *genius loci*, yclept, as I learned, Steve Morris, had a long white pony tail and leaned on a long, stout walking staff. Steve lives near the pond, and was a ready font of information. Will, who had been watering a bush, returned, and the three of us talked.

I asked about the geese I'd often come across at the pond, and Steve said there was still a family that came to visit, and feed on the bass and perch. Steve builds boats, and recalled the days when he'd launch them right where we stood. I remembered that there had been sawmills at Yankeetown, and from Steve and other sources I pieced together a history, from mills to kayaks.

Retreating ice sheets left boulders, gravel, and clay that formed natural dams making the pond possible. Zachary and Peter Short, Jr. were the area's first settlers. Other settlers gathered around the saw mill set up at the outlet of Yankeetown during the 1790s. Later, Daniel Lumberd and John Eldridge leased acreage on the Little Beaverkill just below the stream's source in Yankeetown Pound and built their sawmill, which stood on the new Ulster & Delaware Turnpike, enabling them to send lumber to Kingston and points west.

The history of sawmills at the pond reaches into the 1940's and 1950's, when Tom Shultis operated a mill there powered by a water turbine.

We asked Steve who owned Yankeetown Pond. A loosely formed neighborhood associations owns a piece of it, as does the Wittenberg Sportsman's Club. New York City owns 600 acres, and the best access to hiking around Yankeetown Pond is via their property up at Snake Rocks. Private landowners hold the rest. In the old days, squatters occupied the valley below Snake Rocks and were called "Vly (for valley) Yonders."

The pond has some romantically spooky aspects to it. Steve said that many of the grassy hummocks that look like islands in the middle of the pond are not: if you set foot on them you would sink into a bog.

Yankeetown Pond has a ghost named Sebastian Rhinehart, who came home from the Civil War and lived on an island in the pond in a dugout. His wife didn't want to live underground like a marsupial, so she left him for another man. The story has it that Sebastian Rhinehart murdered their daughter, although he was never charged with the crime, and his bones lie on one of those untrustworthy islands.

Steve strolled off down the Ulster & Delaware Turnpike, and I found myself thinking about the stories landscapes have to tell. For three decades I have been visiting the pond and had never heard its story. Then because of the adventitious arrival of a tutelary spirit in the form of Mr. Morris, the pond began to call out to me. Although we had not found a path, Will and I did not repine, for we had heard the pond.

Mount Hubris

By Will Nixon

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After visiting Woodstock's cell tower pine in California Quarry—either a monumental pillar of science or an artificial Christmas tree for poisonous gifts, depending on your attitude toward cell phones—Michael Perkins and I began our climb up California Quarry Road. Several years ago, when I served on the Woodstock Land Conservancy board, I became obsessed with this road. It fed my fantasies of saving a small but spectacular outlook on Overlook Mountain from the bulldozers. Then it broke my heart. Now, to complete our series of walks across Woodstock on Conservancy properties to celebrate the group's twentieth anniversary, I headed up the hill once again to see what we might find.

Everyone in Woodstock knows California Quarry Road, whether they know it or not. Whenever you look up at the handful of houses perched high on Overlook's steep slopes like alien invaders from the canyonlands of L.A., you're admiring, or more likely resenting homes served by this road. In the Catskills, which has a remarkable history of protecting scenic mountainsides, these houses stand out as the garish exception. The white one by itself in the middle could be Woodstock's unofficial lighthouse it's so bold in the sunshine.

Yet how many people have hiked up this road? Not Michael. Though an inveterate walker,

he'd always taken the pretty route, Mead's Mountain Road, when he ascended from the village to the Overlook summit. Leaving the quarry, Michael and I came to our first seep curve which banks up and around like a roller coaster ride. "This is a hell of a hill," said Michael, leaning into his walking stick. I concurred. Never have I walked this road without vowing—and panting—to get more exercise.

At the next curve, widened like a cul-du-sac in the hemlocks, the town road ends and the private road starts, an obvious changeover to old pavement that's pitted and cracked. We paced ourselves up this long straightaway, passing a side road called Rock Ledge and leaving behind the settled, historic village of Woodstock that has discretely spread up into the valleys. Finally, this relentless pitch finished at a sharp bend over a culvert pipe hiding a mountainside gully. Here the crumbling pavement ends. The true drama begins.

An impressive dirt road has plowed, blasted, and filled its way over ridgelines and up a mountainside bowl. There's nothing settled or historic about this road. Water rivulets keep eroding the dirt. Dump trucks occasionally inch upwards to pour fresh layers of soil. The blond phone poles near the top still don't have wires. Michael and I had reached the brash outpost of high elevation houses that have conquered their way up the mountain.

In 1952, Eleanor Cannon, a wealthy Woodstocker originally from Chicago, who'd already deeded the quarry itself to the town, sold some 300 acres to her neighbor, William E. West, whose family gradually developed the California Quarry Road we have today. Back then, the pavement ended several hundred feet past the turnoff to Chimney Road, now near the bottom, where an old haul road continued up to the quarry. From 1968 to 1976 the Wests built the road to the top, as Don West, one of William E. West's sons along with William R. West, later told me by phone. Some 25 houses now use the road, many of them hidden off in the woods on the lower reaches. The handful up high, those visible from town, went up in the 1980's and 1990's.

On my first climb some years ago, I met a dog walker coming down who told me the road continued all the way up to the bulldozer parked at the top. I didn't find the bulldozer, but at the final zig zag ramp blasted from the slope, I did find the rock rubble of a roadbed under construction. The destruction was awful. Yet the view was spectacular, a panorama of the Catskills I'd expect to discover an hour up a trail, not in somebody's future driveway. Thus began my love/hate relationship with California Quarry Road. I deeply disliked the sight of these mountainside houses and their road scars. Yet if I had more money and less scruples, I would have bought one in a minute.

On a misty day a few years ago, churning with such thoughts as I returned down the road, I happened to look back up at a plywood house under construction on a prominent outcropping. For weeks, I'd seen this house from the valley, a blond billboard as tacky as the Hollywood Hills. But up close in the mist it looked like a plywood castle. If Woodstock had a Great Gatsby, I decided, he'd live on California Quarry Road. On my next walk, I'd entered the unfinished living room to take in the picture window view of Ashokan High Point and other mountains I knew. What would it be like to live with such grandeur all the time, rather than having to march up to a summit for a twenty minute fix every week or two?

At the top of the next steep curve, Michael and I found ourselves by this house, now

finished. Happily, it's painted forest green and has a screened-in porch giving it the feeling of a camp cottage rather than a nouveau riche trophy home. I told Michael my Gatsby tale anyway. He took to it immediately.

“Old Money would never do this,” he said. “They would think it vulgar to live up here.” Indeed, the great divide between the rich and the rest of society is starkly displayed on the upper reaches of this road in a way not seen elsewhere in Woodstock where the celebrated and the well-to-do live privately removed. Up here, the houses lord over the valley. Everyone can see them. But few people reach them. A masseuse once told me that when her car tires began spinning out on the dirt incline she parked and wheeled her massage table the rest of the way up to her client's house. What better image of servants and masters do we need?

The final curve seemed like the steepest yet. Looking back across the mountainside bowl we saw a fresh brown gouge in the forested hillside and the yellow arm of a Caterpillar claw digging to prepare a new house platform. The grinding and scraping that echoed across the valley provided the appropriate soundtrack for the end of our climb. From the guardrail we could now see Hudson Highlands along the southern horizon. Michael sat on the guardrail for a water break. He'd lost his enthusiasm. ““I've climbed lots of mountains,” he said. “This is the worst.” Plodding up the rough dirt had reminded him of watching Erich von Stroheim's silent film, *Greed*, which has many scenes of a man walking across Death Valley. “It's a classic,” Michael said of the movie. “But it's boring. And it's endless.”

The water revived him. “This is Mount Hubris,” he announced with his sly smile.

Above the topmost house, we came to a side drive that hooks around the ridgeline away from Woodstock to an overlook for Saugerties and the Hudson. This was where I'd fantasized about saving one magical spot from the bulldozers. This was where I'd gotten my heart broken over land conservation.

When I joined the Conservancy board, the group had its sights on this property. After hearing about it at meetings, I hiked up California Quarry Road for the first time, and fell in love instantly. It has the best view of them all—not of Woodstock, but of the Hudson River and the Kingston Rhinecliffe Bridge and the Taconic hills of Connecticut. When the oaks are bare it looks across the upper slopes of Lewis Hollow at the summit fire tower. But this amazing vista is also the problem. A house here would be the most visible yet on the road, the first seen from the fire tower. The small clearing with this view has a raised gravel bed that struck me as the ideal platform for a lean-to, not somebody's Shangri-la house.

As part of the Overlook Campaign, the Open Space institute had a plan to buy this property. Though just a bystander, I eagerly followed developments at meetings. Every time I stood on the clearing for the views, I renewed my enthusiasm for serving on the Conservancy board. One day I'd be able to say I helped save this place. Once, noticing the real estate sign fallen in the weeds by the drive entrance, I considered sneaking it home under my jacket as a souvenir.

Then somebody else bought the property. The Conservancy was caught by surprise. But I was stunned. How could someone spoil my dream? Yet what had I done, really, except sit

through meetings, hike up for views, and fantasize that I was saving this place through the force of my good intentions? The property belonged to the man who paid for it, not to my vanities as a land conservationist.

Yet I couldn't let go. I daydreamed about striking it rich by writing a screenplay to buy the property myself. (That happy delusion carried me up the road one blissful afternoon.) Or I'd meet a gazillionaire conservationist. (Instead, I met the lower-bidder who'd driven up to visit the parcel on a winter afternoon, perhaps feeling wistful, though he was happy with his new house on Goat Hill Road.) Not until last summer did fate intervene long after I'd left the Conservancy board. I directed a visiting land-use planner from the Adirondack Mountain Club up to the site. He drove us in his small station wagon and admired the views, but I suspect that he wondered what I expected him to do about the situation. Descending, he shifted into low gear, but near the bottom pulled off the road, as black smoke wafted up from his hood. He'd burned out his brakes. I finally accepted that I wasn't going to save my three sacred acres on Overlook Mountain.

"You can see forever, all right," said Michael, as we reached the raised gravel platform. But he seemed more impressed by the fact, which I shared with him, that this platform was a septic system installed years ago to attract a future home builder. "The perfect metaphor," he announced. "You climb Mount Hubris to stand on a pile of shit."

I had to smile. His Mount Hubris was the dirt road gashing its way up to houses perched where houses didn't belong. Mine had been my fantasy of stopping it simply by sitting through meetings and climbing up for the views. I was glad I'd brought Michael to make me chuckle at my foolishness.

We started down the steep road. Michael planted his walking stick to avoid slipping on the loose dirt. He told me of Gatsby-like characters who'd moved to Woodstock in the past. "They wanted to buy their way into Woodstock Society, as if there is such a thing," he said. I listened attentively, for Michael tells wonderful stories about this town where he's lived for decades. But I knew there was a different story behind us, farther up the mountain than we'd climbed.

One spring day several ago, I didn't stop at the top of California Quarry Road, but kept scrambling up through the bare forest on dry leaves and wobbly rocks, often barging through mountain laurels. In twenty minutes I reached the top, the rounded pyramid peak above all the houses seen from the village. I sat on a boulder and anointed myself king. Here my castle here would truly rule over Woodstock. Yet, even better, I knew such a thing would never happen, for I sat in the middle of a 75-acre property that OSI had acquired from KTD in 2005.

Years earlier, a couple had bought this land from Don West with the intention of building their dream house, but they'd later given it to KTD with the suggestion that the monastery construct retreat cabins on this wild ridge top. "We didn't feel that was appropriate," Patrick Cliett, the KTD building manager, recently told me by phone. KTD wanted the land to be preserved. The Overlook Campaign gave KTD the buyer it wanted. In fact, it turned down a \$500,000 offer from builders to sell the property to OSI for \$387,000.

At the time KTD was embroiled in controversy over its expansion plans, so it didn't receive the credit it deserved for insuring that the forest will remain King of the Mountain. So let me now thank KTD. And OSI. And the Woodstock Land Conservancy for enabling Michael and I to spend a season exploring its marvelous properties spread about town. We look forward to discovering the natural gems the Conservancy protects in its next 20 years.

Will Nixon's new poetry book, My Late Mother as a Ruffed Grouse, is available at Golden Notebook.