

Amy Calder: Skowhegan conservation effort a lesson in preserving lands and legacies

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By Amy Calder

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Ann Dorney digs recently before planting a red maple tree as she works to rewild the Wesserunsett Stream Preserve, which is adjacent to the Parsons Family Preserve in Skowhegan. *Rich Abrahamson/Morning Sentinel*

In summer and winter, the field, hill and woods were our playground.

We slogged through the deep snow, hauling sleds and toboggans up the hill to the top, resting between two large pines until we were ready to shove off.

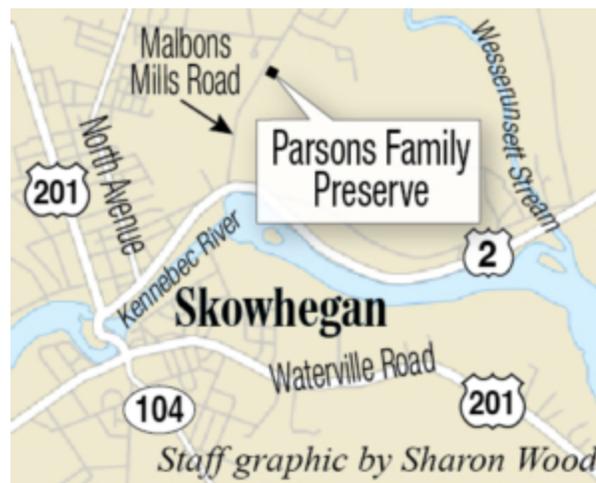
We sailed down the long, slow hill, gaining speed, sometimes racing with other toboggans at our side, until we slowed to a stop near the barbed wire fence that ran along the unpaved road leading to Turner Lumber yard. Once, when it was particularly icy, a sledder struck the wire, tearing his pants.

I've got good memories of that field off Malbons Mills Road in Skowhegan, where in summer we explored the quiet woods nearby, built tree houses, chewed on choke cherries and checkerberry leaves and sipped from cool, pristine springs.

More than 60 years later, my old stomping grounds still visit my dreams. It was where we lay in the tall grass and rested before heading home, sleepy eyes turned skyward, squinting at sun and clouds, inhaling the scent of hay.

It's the only place in my old neighborhood that hasn't changed since I was a child, when the homes were mostly farmhouses separated by large trees and tracts of land. When I drive through there now, I am both saddened by the changes and reminded of the reality that one can not turn back the clock.

But my sadness was assuaged when I read a [story published in the Morning Sentinel](#) on May 29 written by my colleague, Taylor Abbott, titled "Conservation group looks to rewild Skowhegan preserve."



It was about Somerset Woods Trustees and its efforts to preserve that 27-acre field, donated in 2016 by the Parsons family, whose roots in the area go back to the American Revolution. Formed in 1927, Somerset Woods is a nonprofit organization that acquires, maintains and preserves parcels that have natural or cultural resources and manages them in a sustainable way for the public to use.

Ann Dorney, a member of the Somerset Trustees all-volunteer board of directors, has been working to rewild the Parsons Family Preserve, which she took a particular interest in after retiring as a physician a year ago, according to Abbott's story:

"I realized that that was something we could do there," Dorney said, adding, "I would define (rewilding) as restoring an environment to its natural state to encourage native plants and animals."

Abbott wrote that Dorney learned of the "unusual native prairie plants on the property, including little bluestem grass and the flax-leaved stiff aster, a daisy-like flower. By the end of summer, the colors of plants like the flax-leaved stiff give off a bluish hue across the fields. The field is also home to vernal pools, which are seasonal pools of water that are home to distinctive plants and animals, including tadpoles."

Aside from the fact that I have a personal interest in, and am grateful for, the preservation of my old playground, I am amazed and humbled by those who work to ensure such natural green spaces will exist long after we all are gone.

The foresight and generosity of land donors, Somerset Woods Trustees and others should be lauded for their selfless efforts geared toward the greater good.

Marcus Parsons, whose family owned a large, lovely home in my neighborhood that we kids referred to as the Parsons house, is quoted on Somerset Woods' website saying he and his family visit the preserve to enjoy the natural surroundings and he hopes others will, too.

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I have often dreamed of going back, to sit on that hill overlooking my old neighborhood, grass swaying in summer, birds and butterflies flitting about.

Knowing it won't be developed, and will stay as it is for years to come, is balm to my soul.

Amy Calder has been a Morning Sentinel reporter 34 years. Her columns appear here Saturdays. She may be reached at . For previous Reporting Aside columns, go to centralmaine.com.

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