

## **ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS conducted by the 2006 Environmental Studies Senior Seminar**

### **Betty Daniels summary**

On November 1st 2006, students from the Environmental Studies Senior Seminar met with Betty Daniels, the Vassar College Historian, to add to our historic understanding of the Vassar Farm. Daniels offered a broad historical context for the Farm, in which she explained how certain parts of the Farm were acquired by Vassar College through benefactors including John Guy Vassar and Helen Kenyon. She explained that around 1910 the agricultural crop farm was moved from the current area of the South Parking Lot to across Hooker Avenue. Daniels indicated that the Vassar Farm supported campus consumption with cows, chickens, pigs, and crops through the 1950s. In the 1960s Sasaki Associates were hired by the college to report on campus efficiency, specifically the Farm. The original Sasaki Report can be found in the college's Special Collection Documents.

### **Margaret Wright summary**

Margaret Wright, a biology professor at Vassar until about 1980, was instrumental in the creation of the ecological preserve. In an interview with students from the Environmental Studies Senior Seminar on October 31, 2006, Ms. Wright told her personal story of the Farm's development from the 1950s to the 1980s. What was once a working farm became a site for ecological research and varied community use, through a sustained effort by Wright and a few others to negotiate with various college stakeholders about keeping the land accessible and well-used. What follows is her account.

The Farm once had pigs, vegetables, and a Guernsey herd of cows, among other things. The cows, Wright said, made such rich milk that the dining hall had to dilute it. These farm products were produced to offset the costs of buying food for the students. When the farm was shut down, presumably for its poor profit in the 1950s, the land lay fallow with occasional mowing. The city and town of Poughkeepsie started questioning Vassar about the tax-free status of the Farm. The town wanted to use the land to make a dump or a fire house. Some Vassar community members were pushing for housing for professors emeritus.

In 1968, then-president Alan Simpson sent out a memorandum asking for suggestions of how to use the land at the Vassar Farm. Wright enthusiastically sent in her proposal for an ecological preserve. She was imagining a site for ecological experiments without interference, a place where students could study succession and where Vassar could improve its community-college relations. Such a plan would also legitimize the usage to the town so Vassar could keep the land without tax. Simpson liked the proposal, so the Audubon society was asked to survey the property and give advice; they suggested that the barn become a museum, which was not part of Wright's vision and so was not followed. Alternately, a group called Sasaki came in to make a report about the land. This more suitable report was adopted to legitimize the ecological preserve plans for the approval of the Vassar community.

Simpson and Wright brought the plans to the faculty, trustees, and alumni. Many people saw the plans before they were adopted. Wright received enthusiastic letters from alumni. The trustees agreed to the ecological preserve, and so it became a reality in 1976.

To further its legitimacy, in 1978, an English professor named Barbara Swain donated a fund of \$3,000 a year to start up and maintain the science education program now operating out of the field station. The back part of the farm was hooked up to gas and water and a trailer was brought out to start this program with elementary school children from the area. This program not only teaches hands-on science to children, but helps strengthen Vassar's relations with local schools. Over time, the program switched over from the biology department to the education department. Barbara Swain put aside an additional \$500,000, which is to be used for geology monitoring and other academic programming on the preserve. In 1995, Priscilla Bullitt Collins gave the funds for the current field station at the farm.

When asked more specifically about the ecological preserve, Wright explained that the boundary was never marked and there was no original organization overseeing its usage. In 1991, biology professor Robert Fritz became the go-to person, but that has since changed. No document establishing the preserve parameters was ever written. Wright has seen many proposals over time for ways to improve the Farm, but they were not a focus for president Fergusson. However, she was very pleased to say that community use of the area has greatly increased in recent years. She was glad just to know that people are out there using the land in all of their diverse forms and she hopes more people continue to enjoy it.

It may be useful to note that Wright is in favor of mowing because it leads to higher bird biodiversity. She is also unsure whether the invasive species explosion should be controlled or simply studied. Such questions have come up repeatedly among all who are invested in the Farm.

### **Bob Suter summary**

Bob Suter—a member of the Vassar Biology Department faculty since around 1980—played a significant role in the establishment of the ecological preserve on the Vassar Farm. On November 7, 2006, the Environmental Studies Senior Seminar spoke with Suter to understand the early establishment of the ecological preserve on the Vassar Farm and the changes that have occurred on the land since that time. What follows is a summary of that interview.

Suter's time at Vassar overlapped with Margaret Wright, the Vassar biology professor principally behind the designation of the ecological preserve, for one year. The idea of an ecological preserve at the Vassar Farm was proposed by Wright to former President Alan Simpson in the 1960s. In the 1980s, Vassar English Professor Barbara Swain gave the college financial support for the maintenance and conservation of the ecological preserve land.

Suter explained how the Farm has changed since its establishment. He detailed how he originally created formal trails on the Farm with some of his students, and later hired people for trail maintenance with the money designated by Swain. In general Suter explained that Farm usage was much lower when the preserve was originally established than it is now. He detailed how general usage of the Farm has increased, including bike usage, occasional ATV and dirt bike usage, and individual walker, runner, and cross country usage. Suter reported that heightened usage was due in part to increasing population in the surrounding area, as well as amplified awareness of the open space and facilities of the Vassar Farm, for instance trails on the Vassar Farm are now listed on

local Dutchess County websites. Suter also explained that the Exploring Science at the Vassar Farm education program may increase awareness of the Farm; however there are limited spots for participants and typically it is the same group of schools and teachers that visit the Farm. There has been no assessment measuring how the program impacts the children and their awareness of the Vassar Farm.

Suter also indicated that two jurisdictions govern the ecological preserve body of land. Approximately half of the preserve land is within the legal limits of the Town of Poughkeepsie, while the other half of the preserve is within the City of Poughkeepsie. In the past, Suter explained, the local government has attempted or considered using the land on the Vassar Farm for a variety of projects, including a garbage disposal facility, a ground water test well site, and recently a Central Hudson power station. Since the establishment of the preserve, Vassar College has taken steps to prevent the government and other institutions from gaining access to the land.

When asked how he felt about the changes that have occurred on the Farm since its establishment, Suter answered with a considerate reflection on his original expectations for the preserve and his current perception of the land. Originally, Suter imagined the preserve as a “pure, undisturbed” area of land for ecological maintenance and research. While he still perceives the original “purity model” as valuable, he realizes it is too difficult to uphold and that there are important benefits to opening up the land to additional uses, such as the Exploring Science at the Vassar Farm environmental education program. He now sees the Vassar Farm as a good space for multiple uses, which also helps to relieve political pressure to open the land to government use. In order to facilitate multiple uses on the Farm, he suggests a basic set of regulations should be upheld. He believes more “multi-uses” should be limited to the northern area of the Farm, dogs should be cleaned up after and kept on leashes, and jack-lighting and motorized vehicle use should be banned.

Suter highlighted some of the biological changes that have occurred on the Farm. The land was originally farmland from hundreds of years ago. In the late 1950’s the land stopped being a working farm and began its regrowth into forests. Most of the currently forested land on the Farm is second or third growth forests. Today the areas of the Farm are periodically mowed as a means of providing multiple ecological biomes; for instance Suter explained the different ecosystems – forest, meadow, and so on – are habitat for around 60-80 bird species. As Suter explained the use of mowing to create certain ecosystems he brought up the question of where Vassar should foster the existence of certain ecosystems and species on the preserve land.

When asked about the possibility of using the land to increase campus sustainability, for instance producing biodiesel, Suter was not confident about the current possibility and sustainability of such projects. He explained it is not an easy decision, but ultimately he would not like to see the entire land area used for such projects. He additionally discussed that sustainable agriculture used for college consumption would be a difficult prospect because there are many issues with raising animals and crops for food on the Farm.

Suter also considered the benefits and drawbacks to more “structure” on the Farm. Suter explained that largely the extent of the damage done by human activity and biotic factors, such as a high deer population and invasive species, are unknown, therefore it is difficult to tell whether more structure on the Farm would be beneficial. More structure

also means increased spending, and Suter explained that there are always other important uses for the college's money, including faculty salaries and scholarships.

Additionally, Suter explained that in the future, if Vassar College needs to indicate why the land should not be taxed or developed further, documenting student usage would be very important. He also stated that the Exploring Science at the Vassar Farm program and Greenway's composting facility are also great indicators that the Farm land is being used positively by the college and the community.

### **Jinny Banks summary**

We spoke on the telephone with Jinny Banks on Tuesday, October 10, 2006. At the time of the interview, Banks had been managing the "Vassar Gardens" for between 3 and 4 years (she used the term "Vassar Gardens" as if it was the original name, though other community members and Vassar students refer to them as the "Community Gardens."). We began by talking about the history of the gardens, which began to take their current shape during WWII as Victory Gardens. At that time the gardens extended onto the land that is now the Poughkeepsie Farm Project and included many more plots. Only people affiliated with Vassar were allowed plots and the space became an important social space for faculty members who met for weekly picnics and parties in the gardens. About ten years ago, because of a drop in faculty and staff interest, the gardens were opened up to members of the larger community.

Today, there are 120 plots with 1-2 plots per gardener. When Banks began, one of the first things she did was to add paths to the garden layout, which were not included in the area of the individual plots. In the past, paths had not been separate and some gardeners had not ceded a foot on each side of their plot for walking space, leading to border disputes when certain gardeners could not easily access water because of neighbors' fences.

There is a long waiting list that has been around at least since Banks started managing the project. The gardens were in the newspaper once a few years ago (included in an article on the Poughkeepsie Farm Project), but they are otherwise officially unadvertised. People find out about the gardens through word-of-mouth. Banks said a lot of the community members who contact her are dog walkers or heard about the gardens through their friends who walk their dogs on the Vassar Farm. Fortunately, there are also community gardens in Stonykill, so gardeners who cannot get a plot on the Vassar Farm (and have a car) have another option. Gardeners include families, singles and large numbers of people of foreign descent (who cannot find their traditional foods in the grocery store). Banks says that there are a lot of children who spend time in the gardens with their families or neighbors.

Around February 15 of each year, the 60-100 people who rented garden plots the year before receive phone calls from Banks asking if they would like to rent their same plots again. Whenever possible, requests to maintain the same plot are honored. A 20' x 20' plot costs \$25 for the year and the money (in the form of a check written to Vassar College) is due by April 15. This charge includes water for the season (from a water line running down the central path between the gardens). Gardeners receive their "Welcome to the Vassar Gardens" letter around March 1. People begin gardening around the time of the last freezing date (between April 15 and May 15). There are always a few plots that

are paid for but never claimed and these are given (free of charge) to individuals (or families) on the waiting list who cannot afford to pay.

Gardeners are required to follow three simple rules: garden organically, bring your own hose (but unhook it when you leave) and build your own fence (to delineate the gardens and to protect your plants from the deer). Banks mentioned that she knows that gardeners continue to use chemical pesticides even though they are prohibited. People will leave containers of pesticides in their cars when they are not in use so as not to be caught by Banks if she stops in. As for the fences, Banks suggests that fences be at least 7 feet tall to keep deer out and that gardeners use fence materials that can be re-used year after year in order to save money.

Now that Greenway (the composting company of the Vassar Farm) is private and compost must be purchased (rather than being delivered for free from the Town of Poughkeepsie's yard waste reserves), there is no soil remediation being done by the college. Individuals are welcome to add nutrients to the soil on their own, at their own cost. This is one of the reasons why Banks tries her best to give gardeners the same plot year after year (so they are reaping the benefits of their own fertilization from the prior year).

Each year, the gardens close on the second Sunday of November. By this date, gardeners are required to have taken down their fences and completely cleaned out their plots. The gardens are closed and cleaned out for the winter because the college wants to be sure that the space stays relatively neat. Banks admitted that it is difficult to get everyone cleaned out that there are always tools and trellises that are abandoned. Banks collects anything that is left (and might be of use to future gardeners), stores the materials at her house, and offers them (free of charge) to anyone who needs them the following year. The plots are left empty until the early spring, when the Poughkeepsie Farm Project plows the area and the cycle begins again.