



A PATH OF ONE'S OWN

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In 1976 we bought a house in Somesville, a lovely modest base camp for access to Acadia National Park. We loved its mountains, trails, trees, lush vegetation and rock formations of the landscape that provided intimate spaces as well as voluminous vistas. All the walks on paths and trails had given us a feel for moving in beautiful terrain carefully carved out to provide visual and physical pleasure. Trails cut between rocks, curved around trees and through ground cover – the glorious residue of glacial history. Paths were equally enthralling whether imbedded in the woods or open to the ponds, lakes, bays and distant ocean.

For many years, the family was captivated by simply focusing on the beauty of Somes Pond, situated at one end of the driveway – the same driveway that led in the other direction to the Park and other wonders of the Island. One of the houses, built in 1952, was poised over the Pond. The second house was constructed in 1982; however, it was completely redesigned and renovated by 2005. An old path had been made from the original house around one of the coves as part of a trail that had led years before all the way to the village in Somesville. For almost twenty years, Somes Pond, with its views of the Western Mountains and ever changing sky, was totally fulfilling. Nonetheless, we started to work on little landscape projects with Dennis Bracale, a recent graduate of the College of the Atlantic, who was building a practice as a landscape architect.

Then, Dennis took to boldness and a vision. He set the challenge: Get into your woods! Let there be light! Open up! That was it. We were ready for the adventure, although hardly for the hard work that it would take over more than a decade. When my brother Jon and I started to explore the land that we owned, there was no sense that we were starting anything that might be of interest to others or of value to Mt. Desert Island. We were simply trying to find out what lay beyond the dense, visually impenetrable barricade of trees that lined the driveway and led to the two houses on the property.

We plunged into the woods adjacent to the driveway and attacked the unknown from several directions. We cut trees, probably thousands of

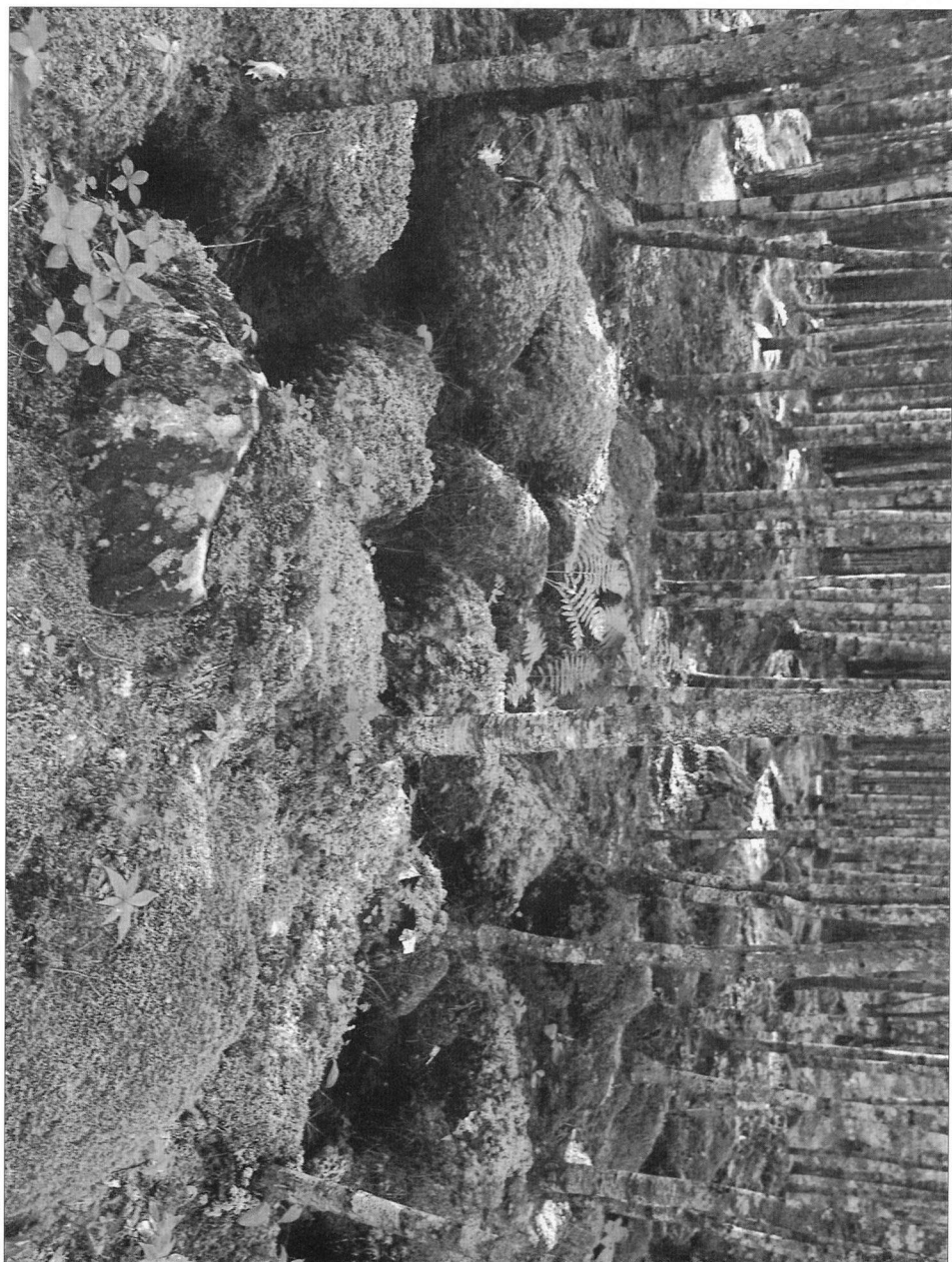
them big and small, and cleared brush and leaves. We made hundreds upon hundreds of piles of branches that were hauled away or burned. The work was arduous, exhausting and exhilarating. For me, it became a real, clinically recognizable obsession, an irresistible engagement with discovering and working with the landscape. Jon, in deliberate contrast, took a more relaxed and sane approach. We also had different “comfort zones” with the work. He had a marvelous instinct for – and derived his greatest pleasure from – making the trails. I dug in more deeply (and passionately/compulsively) and looked to reveal and to reshape what we found.

When we first discovered a thin strip or concentration of lush mosses deep in the woods, I became subject to a controllable process that would lead to uncovering more and more; delineating rocks; putting in paths covered with pine needles; and limbing the trees to accentuate the verticality of the trees. The expansion of what became the moss garden took years. It certainly wasn't a garden in the beginning.

And what discoveries we made! Behind the dense curtain of summer green on the driveway, we found immense oaks, spruces and maples, erratics strewn all over the place, marshes, mosses and numerous openings to the Pond. A landscape of immense variety in its vegetation and scale. We moved up and down over low hills and rises, first on one side of the driveway and then, after many years, onto the other side. We made paths, and then closed some of them. We raked leaves to show the undergrowth, and then covered some of them over because they didn't look or feel right.

At every stage of discovery, we thought that we had done enough, gone far enough, since the landscape was simply beautiful. I would say, with utter conviction, that the job was done. No one believed me. They were right. There was some mystifying compulsive urge to keep editing the landscape.

From early on, we established the epicenter of discovery was in an area of profuse mosses, embellished by ferns, bunchberry, winterberry and a variety of marvelously shaped rocks. We labored over this enchanted place simply called “the moss garden”, extending its irregular contours. Without any deliberate goal, it grew little by little to the size, but hardly the form, of a football field. We used leaves to contrast the raked areas



and make abstract patterns on the ground. Dennis suggested we limb all the lower branches on the trees within the moss garden to enhance height when looking up to the sky and unencumbered views when looking down to the ground. Following a suggestion from Dennis, we put pine needles on the paths in the garden to create the impression of calligraphy on the ground and a special feel underfoot.

At first we regarded the landscape as a discrete series of places that were connected by narrow paths. Gradually, over many years, the areas were enlarged and better defined, making them more visually enticing and better related one to another. For example, we opened up a broad elevated spot to overlook the panoramic expanse of moss garden. We cleared another area to build a fire ring and surrounded it with logs split from a tree that had been hit by lightning.

We also felt the need to emphasize the fact of human intervention, although it was a matter of editing or clarifying the landscape. Thus, the desire to introduce some kind of minimal objects. Having long admired the sculpture of Isamu Noguchi, I wanted the first object to be in stone. After spending hours looking at strangely-cut granite pieces in a quarry in Town Hill, I found a 500-pound slab – this poor person's Noguchi – that had been cut for a front door step. Five men carried it into the forest, gave me three minutes to set the final-forever position amidst the mosses, poured the concrete in the hole and wondered what madness had overcome me. In some extraordinary way, the subtle colors of the granite take on the hues of the surrounding trees – hues that vary with the changing light and atmosphere that penetrate the woods. The risk has been worth it: the slab, lovingly called Noguchi, has remained the center of the moss garden at every stage of its growth. The next imported object was derived from another bit of fantasy. I found a massive rock with a stunning split in the middle. It called for a simple form with symbolic meaning. Thus, the sharp edged black metal circle, touching it, speaks of harmony. And, a final idea: a series of metal rods, to symbolize the days of creation and to contrast man-made thin, taut strips with the natural irregular forms of trunks of the voluminous trees that fill the Somes Pond forest.

The immersion in the woods stimulated the desire to embellish the areas around the houses. Jon turned to Dennis, who then created a stunning garden. Inspired by the contour or boundaries of the pond,



he formed a courtyard and filled it with native plants and erratics found throughout the property.

As Stanley Hallet, architect, artist, photographer and author of many stunning books, including one on *Somes Pond*, has written:

Like a constellation of stars in the sky, the placement of rock connects in patterns that quietly guide the eye from one place to the next. With the clearing of a few trees between the water's edge and the garden, a powerful site line connects the shoreline on the opposite side of Somes Pond to the graveled terrace of the garden.

Dennis has described his process of invention:

By using mostly native plants, highlighted by others that were native looking but more embellished, the boundary between the natural environment and the garden proper became further blurred. The goal was to create a seamless garden in harmony with the natural landscape. A talented mason turned the rocks on edge, contrasting the cut stone to the larger rocks whose accidental erosion from eons of freeze-thaw and weathering gave them a primordial presence. The result was a vertical landscape of stone and plant, following the contours of the site, separating an edited found landscape from a choreographed invented one.

Stanley Hallet provided his impressions of the process of turning the woods into a forest garden:

The typical Maine woods is often an impenetrable tangle of underbrush, the result of criss-crossing dead branches from the fir and spruce trees. It appears that only the top of these deciduous evergreens are alive as they block out the sun in its attempt to penetrate the forest floor. The acidic needles that fall form a thick forest floor where little new growth stands a chance of surviving. The resulting thicket hides everything including sizable boulders called glacial erratics that haphazardly fell to the earth when thick glaciers retreated from the island.

Through a patient but strenuous act of editing, of careful removal, the once impenetrable forest became an ever-

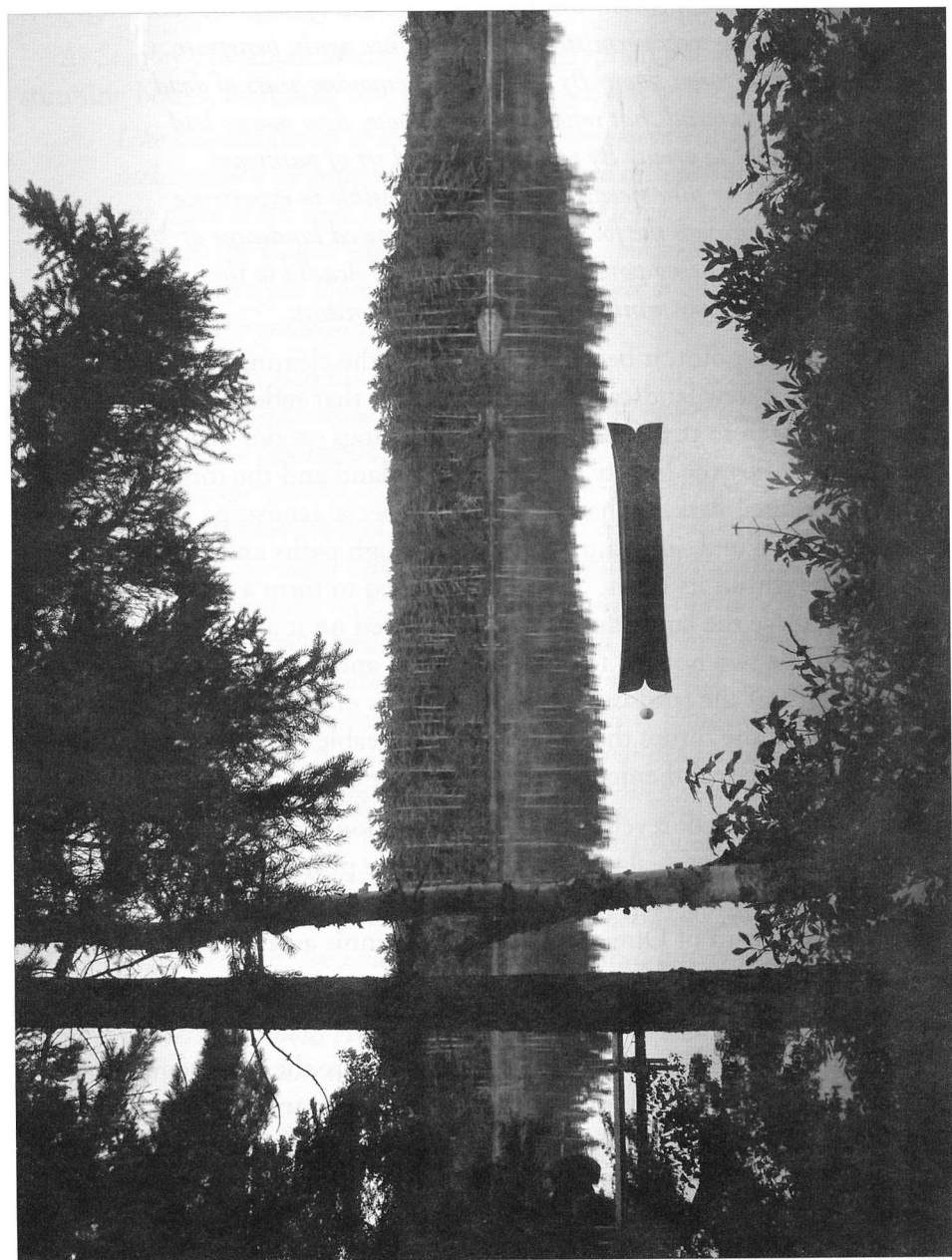
expanding refuge for plants as well as people. Like a good writer or film editor, the assiduous removal of dead branches and a few trees permitted the sun to once again penetrate onto the forest floor. By raking and removing years of dead plant material that refused to decompose, new mosses had a chance to grow. By tracing a careful set of pathways marked by pine needles, it was now possible to experience vistas through the forest, tying the borrowed landscape of the neighboring pond and mountains of Acadia to the extraordinary miniature gardens found within.

At a certain point, it became clear that all the clearing and trail blazing was creating a new landscape of exposure, one that reflected a new or different approach to that found in private holdings on the island. Inspired and informed by the beauty of Mt. Desert Island and the formation of Acadia National Park, we had uncovered a special landscape that belonged to the Pond, joined to the Pond through paths and forms and the mountains within its views. Jon and I decided to form a foundation that would preserve the landscape as we had worked on it and provide a setting, with the two houses, for contemplation and study by scholars, artists and students of the landscape, history and arts of Mt. Desert Island. We hoped that in the future the public, in manageable numbers, would enjoy walking the paths and enjoy the intimate scale of the property.

In 2006 Jon died, reveling in the mountainous landscape, in a helicopter crash in New Zealand. His estate, as he promised, directed his share of the property to the Somes Pond Center. With the guidance of an outstanding Board of Directors, including Dennis as the Executive Director, the Somes Pond Center is now functioning as a vital, imaginative protector of the property and Pond.

We share Somes Pond with people who explore the many coves and inlets and watch the loons and ducks that populate and propagate on the Pond. For decades Somesville residents have gone swimming, canoeing, fishing and kayaking on the Pond. The landing, commonly used by people in the neighborhood, is privately owned, edged in between our property and that belonging to the Somes-Meynell Wildlife Sanctuary.

Although paths have both tangible and metaphorical meanings, this short narrative of the landscape on Somes Pond gives scant refer-



ence, except for mention of obsessions, to the psychological or emotional aspects that also propelled the endeavor. They may be hard to identify, but are certainly important. I think the process was infused with a growing willingness to experiment, take risks, look for clarity, accept failures, enjoy successes and live with uncertainty in terms of what the landscape would ultimately look like. One learned to look – and looked to learn – through creating each new path, uncovering rocks, shaping forms through plants and leaves and forming vistas that connect a part to the whole. “Nothing is more the child of art than a garden,” Sir Walter Scott once wrote. On Mt. Desert Island, gardens and the landscape partake of the heritage of artists, landscape architects, horticulturists, path makers, historians and conservationists. Stanley Hallet calls Some Pond Center, “A Forest Garden”. * And yet, I still don’t know how to use that word. Does all the work on the property in all the areas now constitute a particular and special kind of garden or series of gardens? Let me leave nomenclature for the future. I am only certain that a path of one’s own partakes of – and takes inspiration from – the physical and conceptual work of those who have protected and loved this Island in the past as well as now.

* *A Forest Garden on Somes Pond*, by Stanley Ira Hallet, with accompanying text by Judith S. Goldstein.



Judith Goldstein is founder and executive director of Humanity in Action, an international educational organization that engages, inspires, and continuously develops a network of students, young professionals, and established leaders committed to protecting minorities and promoting human rights – in their own communities and around the world. Her article “Making America Work: A Look at Christians and Jews on Mount Desert Island” appeared in the 2000 edition of The History Journal of Mount Desert Island Historical Society.

All photographs were taken by **Stanley Ira Hallet**. These and many other photographs appear in **full color** in *A Forest Garden on Somes Pond*. Copies may be obtained from www.blurb.com/books/741748.