

Victory in Lost Clove Valley

A local family and the Nature Conservancy join forces
to save a precious piece of Catskills forest

By Randy Burgess ■ Photograph by Jennifer May

Just before a stand of mountain trees is logged, the loggers mark those trees to be felled with strips of blue paint around their trunks. These trees are always the very best: loveliest to look at, and capable of producing the finest veneers when run through a sawmill. This is a story about hundreds of such trees crowding a remote Catskills mountainside. The trees were carefully shepherded by the owners of that mountainside for more than a century, up until just a year or so ago — only to be finally marked with blue paint.

That should have been the end, yet it wasn't. Thanks to a highly unusual agreement between an old Catskills clan and an enterprising conservation program, the loggers have had to look elsewhere. The trees will stand tall on that mountainside for hundreds of years to come — in human terms, forever.

Let's start the story at the beginning. Sometime in the late 1800s, a Scotsman named James Cruickshank emigrated to New





Landowner Bob Cruickshank, 84, stands in front of Balsam Mountain in Big Indian. Part of the Cruickshank family's acreage, the mountain is one of the 35 Catskill High Peaks; before the sale of the land to the Nature Conservancy, it was one of just three of the peaks still privately owned



The land in question, known locally as the Lost Clove Valley, hadn't been logged for at least 150 years, and on it stood what in the Catskills are relative giants: sugar maple and hemlock and black cherry and red oak, straight and tall and many on the order of three feet in diameter

York City and began inventing various gadgets, among them improved safety devices for elevators. The Cruickshank Safety System ensured a runaway elevator could be braked to a gentle rather than bone-jarring halt, a nicety that proved popular with customers. Cruickshank sold his patents to the Otis Elevator Company and retired wealthy. Then he began buying land. He chose to buy it in the Catskills, in the area of Big Indian Valley; and he chose to buy a lot of it: at one point, the Cruickshank clan owned something like 6,500 acres of farms, meadows, and mountains.

Who knows all this history? For one, James's grandson, Robert F. Cruickshank Jr., better known as Bob. At age 84, Bob lives with his wife Linda near the terminus of Cruickshank Road — a dead-end lane penetrating a narrow valley, once farmland and now pasture, nestled between the ridges of Panther and Balsam Mountains. This is the general area to which James Cruickshank brought himself and his family each summer, far from the bustle of New York City.

"He liked it here," Bob will say of his grandfather, recalling the stories his father told him of the man who died before he was born. "It reminded him of Scotland." And then, having talked for a while about his family's long relationship with the land, Bob may sigh and shake his head — or at least he did when I visited him back in July. Most of the family's vast acreage was sold off long ago, but what hurt was the most recent sale: in December of 2007, in the wake of a controversial, tax-hiking revaluation by the town of Shandaken, the family was forced to halve its remaining holdings by selling the most beautiful part — 590 steep and isolated acres running up the side of Balsam and Belleayre mountains. "We just couldn't pay the taxes," Bob said in a tone of rasping regret. "We had to sell the land fast — we couldn't hang onto it."

It was the sale that threatened the trees — trees of exceptional age and beauty. The land in question, known locally as the Lost Clove Valley, hadn't been logged for at least 150 years, and on it stood what in the Catskills are relative giants: sugar maple and hemlock and black cherry and red oak, straight and tall and many on the order of three feet in diameter. In the wake of the town reval in 2005, the Cruickshanks had been forced to consider their options. They knew they could get top dollar from local logging companies thirsty for high-quality wood to export. At the family's invitation, loggers came to prospect, and the trees acquired their bands of blue paint. The sequence of events seemed inevitable.

But then Alan White of the Eastern New York chapter of the Nature Conservancy appeared on the scene, having learned of the possible sale through sources he has worked hard to develop. White is head of the Catskill Mountains program for the Conservancy — a vigorous man with the measured yet swift stride of a farmer (which he is), or a hunter (ditto), or perhaps simply a very experienced hiker (ditto also).

White wanted to buy that land on behalf of the Conservancy, he told Bob. Wanted it badly. And not just the land but the big trees, every one of them. Could the Cruickshanks hold off selling to a timber company, while White scrambled to put together what would be a first for him — an offer comparable in price to that of the timber companies? Bob thought about it. Well, he said, yes — they could hold off selling, for a little while at least. But not forever.

Taxes are never kind, but it seemed an appropriate irony that they might force the transfer of the Cruickshanks' land to the Nature Conservancy — for it was taxes that begat the Catskill Park in the first place. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Ulster County couldn't afford to pay the state delinquent property taxes owed for lands around Slide Mountain which had been abandoned by loggers. The solution? Turn the damaged land into a state park. Since then, enough new trees have grown up to make Slide Mountain and other areas look more like a proper forest. Young forest, yes, but still forest.

The Lost Clove Valley parcel was appealing to the Conservancy for

Take a hike

several reasons. First, it was older than nearly anything else around. Biologically this was valuable, because the older a forest gets, the more diversity it creates: big trees fall down, clearing space for younger trees and creating vernal pools for amphibians where their root balls had been. And some species of birds prefer mature trees to nest in, such as red-shouldered hawks (once common but now in decline).

Second, one of the goals of the Conservancy is to preserve the seven kingdom-sized chunks of unbroken forest in the Catskills known as “forest matrix blocks.” These blocks can resist even such calamitous pressures as climate change — but only if kept intact. Most of the land involved is either publicly owned or protected by conservation easements. The Cruickshanks’ 590 acres, however, were still private. They occupied a key chink on the eastern fringe of the 136,000-acre Beaverkill block. From Alan White’s perspective, it was crucial to close up this chink: immediately to the north lay 1,200 wooded acres that developer Dean Gitter had his eye on for the first version of his proposed Belleayre Resort. The Cruickshank land could serve as a buffer between the resort and the deep forest — but only if it was saved.

The financial pressures on the Cruickshanks were stiff. The reval had pushed their property tax to \$42 per acre, White told me. That meant the 590 acres would generate an annual tax bill of nearly \$25,000. Besides that, the bank had to be paid — Bob had been forced to take out a mortgage on the land after buying out the interests of his two sisters in 2004. He could end his financial woes any time he chose: one timber company had already offered \$1.8 million, and Bob knew he could get even more than that. Still, he was fond of the woods as they stood. He knew them well: when he was a kid, he and his cousins had camped and ridden horses and built lean-tos not just on this land, but on the other ridges of Panther and Balsam and Eagle and Slide beyond. But it was up to the Nature Conservancy. Could they make a real offer, or not?

Normally the answer would have been “not.” The environmental agencies of both the state and New York City (which also wanted to see the acreage saved) were constrained by appraisal procedures that could only take into account the land, not the timber. Usually the Nature Conservancy obeys a similar rule — but this time around, Alan White convinced his higher-ups, as well as the private donors who support the funds he manages, that the timber should be appraised as well. Legal delays with title insurance and rights of way took more than a year, but in December 2007 the Conservancy closed on the Lost Clove Valley piece for \$1.9 million — more than the Conservancy has spent on any Catskills project for at least two decades. The deal included the 3,600-foot summit of Balsam Mountain itself, one of the last three of the 35 High Peaks in the Catskills still in private hands. (The remaining two are Graham and Doubletop mountains, both owned by another old Catskills family, the Goulds.)

Everyone I spoke to agrees that the Cruickshanks got less than full price for their land, a forbearance White admires. “They didn’t get as much money as they would have if they’d been ruthless,” he told me. “I give them a lot of credit.”

Credit or not, Bob’s bad back will keep him from getting up into the woods any time soon. He continues to enjoy life — he and Linda took me for a bouncing, wild ride in a four-wheel-drive pickup into the “back farm” on Cruickshank Road — but of the big trees he has helped save, he can only dream. “There’s some beautiful trees in there,” he told me. “Maple, hemlock. They’re gigantic.”

Go up into the woods and you’ll see that the gigantic trees are still ringed with blue paint. The paint is a reminder. Had it not been for Bob Cruickshank and the Nature Conservancy getting together, you’d be walking among stumps and not under towering green shade. The big trees would be long gone — nothing more than the veneer on the fancy new furniture bought by people like you and me. ♦

There are two hiking routes you can take to visit Lost Clove Valley. The first is up Balsam Mountain itself. The summit represents the very tip of the parcel, and is of interest for its characteristic ecology. Alan White of the Nature Conservancy describes it as a “spruce-fir mix,” or more fondly, “a little piece of Adirondack forest.”

In *Catskill Trails: A Ranger’s Guide to the High Peaks*

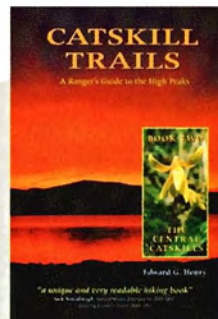
(Black Dome Press), Edward G. Henry displays a similar fondness in praising Balsam as “unspoiled wilderness.”

The hiking path up the mountain, he writes, is “a small dirt ribbon rarely reaching a foot in width. Ferns and flowers meander into the little-used path, and wildlife is never far away.”

If the mere thought of a summit leaves you breathless, there’s a second route: a few hours’ hike up the Lost Clove Trail, at the end of Lost Clove Road in Big Indian. It’s still a stiff climb; during breaks, check out the depressions on the high side of the trail. These pits were dug more than 100 years ago to make charcoal — just one of many industries the woods once supported.

After you’ve been hiking for maybe 20 minutes, you’ll enter the heart of the 590 acres. You’ll start seeing the 150-year-old red oaks, black cherries, and other species that make this parcel so appealing, aesthetically and ecologically. Many will have bands of blue paint around their trunks, indicating they were scheduled to be logged. If no one’s looking, wrap your arms around one or two and give them a squeeze. Or just get dizzy staring up into their canopies, trying to see how tall they are.

There’s no hurry, of course. Thanks to the Nature Conservancy, these trees will be here for a long while, growing to their mature ages of 400 years or so. As White says, “It’s just going to get better and better.”



Excerpted from *Catskill Trails*:

Hike:

Balsam Mountain

Round-trip Hiking

Distance: 5.0 miles

County and Towns:

Ulster, Shandaken and Hardenburgh

Parking:

At the end of Rider Hollow Road (accessible via Ulster County Route 49A).

Difficulty:

Moderate-difficult

Bushwhack: No

Elevation Gain:

1,600 feet

Mile:

0.0: Trail starts along Rider Hollow Road (red markers).

0.3: Pass lean-to.

1.6: Reach notch and junction with Pine Hill-West Branch Trail (blue markers). Turn north.

2.3: Summit of Balsam Mountain.

3.6: Junction with Mine Hollow Trail (yellow markers). Turn west.

4.6: Rejoin Oliveria-Mapledale Trail. Turn west.

5.0: Return to Rider Hollow Road.