

# An Old Lyme conservationist's legacy endures

The John Lohmann Connecticut River Preserve in Old Lyme extends to the shore of Lord's Cove. Steve Fagin

1

Published October 22, 2020 3:24PM

By **Steve Fagin**

After tramping up a steep trail closed in by red cedars, and then scrambling over a knocked-down, ankle-twisting section of stone wall, our small group of hikers deserved a reward.

The payoff came when the rutted, rocky path widened to a smooth corridor at the entrance to an airy plateau accentuated by wooded fields and expansive views of a serene cove.

Sunlight filtered through a stately canopy of oak, beech and hickory, glowing in autumnal splendor. Blue jays foraged for acorns, cedar waxwings feasted on juniper berries and bluebirds serenaded us with their mellifluous chorus. We had arrived at the heart of the John Lohmann Connecticut River Preserve in Old Lyme.

“A hidden gem!” declared Maggie Jones, director emeritus of the Denison Pequotsepos Nature Center in Mystic.

This is where Lohmann, a pioneering conservationist, spent nearly half a century single-handedly hacking away at vines, brambles, and brush, as well as thinning out a crowded forest, in hopes of creating a landscape reminiscent of the gracious English countryside he found so enchanting during World War II.

A New Haven native, Lohmann returned to the states after the war to work as an architect in New York before moving to Old Lyme in the 1960s with his artist wife, Mary.

As a cofounder of the Old Lyme Conservation Trust — now called the Old Lyme Land Trust, which owns more than 70 properties covering 1,100 acres — Lohmann helped purchase and protect from development some of the town's most treasured open spaces.

After Lohmann died at age 86 in 2005, his estate bequeathed to the land trust the 42-acre parcel off Coult Lane that he toiled over for so many years. Though Lohman initially intended to build a home there, he could not bring himself to intrude on his parkland and instead settled along the nearby Lieutenant River.

In addition to protecting the Lord's Cove parcel, Lohmann was instrumental in establishing the 46-acre Lohmann, Buck, Twining Preserve bordering the west bank of the Lieutenant River, and the 25-acre Elizabeth B. Karter Watch Rock Preserve along the Duck River.

One virtue unifies all three preserves: direct access to waterways that connect to the Connecticut River. Members of our hiking group, which included trust members Mary Devins, Anne Gallier and Edie Twining, explored them on foot one day last week; we could

have ventured there just as easily by kayak or canoe and likewise maintain social distancing during the pandemic.

After descending the John Lohmann Connecticut River Preserve's upper field, we reached the shore of Lord's Cove, a Connecticut River inlet partially enclosed by Goose Island and a mainland maze of marshes that includes a wildlife sanctuary managed by the state and The Nature Conservancy.

We then strolled south toward a peninsula known as Whaleback Point, where flat boulders provided perfect perches — but not for long. It was time to move on to the Lohmann, Buck, Twining Preserve.

Eddie Twining, whose family joined with Lohmann and the Buck Family in donating this property to the land trust in 2004, frequently kayaks to the preserve from her home across the Lieutenant River.

“I remember building a tree house here as a kid,” she recalled. Her old stomping ground was a great place to grow up, and is just as wonderful now that it's open to the public as a nature preserve, Eddie said.

Maggie, who never travels far without hiking shoes and field glasses, offered a naturalist's perspective.

“The trailhead begins near a vernal pool, bone dry at the time of our early autumn visit, marked by mossy water marks on boulders and clumps of cinnamon and royal ferns,” she noted.

Maggie added, “Moss-covered rocks and fallen tree trunks, like miniature works of art, support interesting and unusual fungi, including wolf milk slime.”

Maggie demonstrated why this growth is also known as toothpaste fungus by squeezing orange globules that instantly oozed into a gooey mess. We onlookers cringed — it didn't look like anything used to promote dental hygiene.

Next up: The Elizabeth B. Karter Watch Rock Preserve, one of the land trust's most popular properties because of its easy access, flat trails and stunning vistas of Great Island at the mouth of the Connecticut River.

The parcel is named for Elizabeth “Bunt” Karter, a civic leader and philanthropist who lived in Old Lyme from 1969 until her death in 2004.

As Maggie noted, the trails to Watch Rock pass through a damp thicket of sweet pepper bush, pepperidge, sassafras, black cherry, and red maple.

“This is a hot spot for migrating songbirds in autumn,” she said, ticking off a rainbow of species that flitted by, including yellow-rumped warblers, ruby-crowned kinglets and blue-headed vireos.

In 1970, the site had been considered for the corporate headquarters of Loctite Corp., a global sealant manufacturer founded by Vernon K. Kriebel and his son, Robert, who lived in Old Lyme.

When that plan fell through, the property eventually was put up for sale, and in 1986, the land trust borrowed \$500,000 to buy it. The organization spent the next year holding fundraisers to pay off the loan.

“Donations poured in,” the land trust reports on its website. “All in all, 1,000 donors, both local and from as far away as Alaska, contributed money to help save Watch Rock.”

As Maggie and I were preparing to drive our cars from the parking lot, we encountered Sandra Downing, a land trust steward equipped with gloves, plastic bucket and trash-picking device.

“You wouldn’t believe the stuff that people dump,” she said, “Beer cans, candy wrappers, beach chairs, dirty diapers ...”

Sandra, who goes on trash patrol every week, said that while it’s depressing that litter never seems to abate, the preserve’s stunning views always lift her spirits.

“It’s a beautiful place,” she said.

The world needs more Sandra Downings.

The Old Lyme Land Trust, and other volunteer organizations dedicated to preserving open space for future generations, also could use a few more people like her, Mary Devins, Anne Gallier and Edie Twining.

For more information about how to join the trust, and for directions to its preserves, visit the website [oldlymelandtrust.org](http://oldlymelandtrust.org).