

VIEWPOINTS

Memories of a true pioneer for nature

Legacy is an often used word in land conservation.

After all, a core value of preserved open space and farmland is its benefit for future generations.

With the recent passing of conservation pioneer Helen Fenske, it's not exaggerating to say that New Jersey would look vastly different today if not for her legacy.

It was 1959 when the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey proposed building a new international airport in the heart of New Jersey's Great Swamp. Sprawl had not yet come to this unique and massive freshwater wetland area. Helen and a small group of local citizens decided to stop the airport.

These days, we expect grassroots citizens groups to fight and often win. Not so in 1959; the Port Authority drew on vast governmental and financial resources. In fact, they had never lost a fight.

Enter Helen Fenske and her friends and the newly formed Great Swamp Committee of the North American Wildlife Foundation, which eventually evolved into New Jersey Conservation Foundation, who began the work of saving the swamp.

"When I think of Helen, the first word which comes to mind is 'energy,'" recalls Sandy Millspaugh, the foundation's president when Helen served as executive director. "She was a woman of enormous energy. She was always friendly and amiable in manner, but when she set her mind on a goal, she was a veritable cyclone. She would not take 'no' for an answer. She was smart, articulate and good natured, never threatening or hostile when I was in her presence.

"She had that unusual gift of persistence to the point of exasperation, but just stopping short of becoming antagonistic. As a result, she pushed and prodded people through her force of personality to accomplish results that turned the tide in stopping the destruction of the Great Swamp."

Fenske and the Great Swamp Committee beat back the Port Authority and preserved the Great Swamp. In early 1964, the committee turned over 1,400 acres of land to the federal government, that later became the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge — New Jersey's first national refuge, and the first federally designated wilderness area east of the Mississippi. And today, the region still retains much of the rural character it had back then.

The fight convinced Fenske of the need for ongoing vigilance if New Jersey was going to retain any of its natural resources for the future. "The Great Swamp Committee was conceived at Helen's kitchen table," recalls Millspaugh. "She went from there to a position of leadership in a broader effort to preserve New Jersey's natural resources."

Fenske had a hand in creating Patriot's Path and the Hudson River Walkway, and in saving Sunfish Pond near the Delaware Water Gap. She was a tireless advocate for the protection of the entire Farny Highlands region. She worked to win passage of New Jersey's first wetlands protections and the Green Acres program. For many years, if there was an environmental issue in New Jersey, you would find Helen unapologetically in the middle of it!

From 1960 to 1969, Fenske served as executive director of our foundation, which evolved from the Great Swamp Committee. She was instrumental in the creation of the N.J. Department of Environmental Protection, where she later served as a special assistant to the first commissioner, then as assistant commissioner for natural resources, and briefly, as acting commissioner.

"It's hard to quantify in numbers Helen's overall impact on the conservation community in New Jersey," said Millspaugh. "Clearly it was significant, and a springboard for the environmental leaders who worked with her and who followed her."

As one of the many who followed in her footsteps, I can say with confidence that Fenske's legacy will last for centuries, and may even outlast the few developments she wasn't able to stop. She'd like that.

If you have questions about conserving New Jersey's precious land and natural resources, contact me at info@njconservation.org, or visit our Web site at www.njconservation.org.



The State We're In

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