

The Saranac Experiment

THEY CONSIDERED THEMSELVES
PIONEERS, WANTING ONLY TO LIVE
COOPERATIVELY WITH THE EARTH, TO
PROTECT IT AND TO NEVER OWN IT.
THIS IS THEIR STORY

BY JOE CONNELLY
PHOTOGRAPHS AND PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS
BY BEN STECHSCHULTE



Almost 40 years ago 15 students paid \$1,000 each for 278 acres of northern Adirondack farmland. Above: New Land Trust "settlers" and friends at a Poobah, their annual summer celebration.

That July they held their first Poobah ... three days of music, art, food and prayer, a Burning Man festival for Saranac. There were other parties in the year, but none compared to the Poobah, the holy day of the tribe. "It was a beautiful time, we were all so free ... dancing in the moonlight, with long hair flying and skirts twirling."

The Trust put up three tepees on Strawberry Hill, in an open field that's now a forest. They cooked on an outdoor stove, taking water from a stream at the bottom of the hill. They dug coolers into the earth to keep their food and used an open toilet made out of tree limbs. The only livable structure on the property was the old Rasco barn, and they worked feverishly to prepare it to house them in winter. They didn't make it.

One of the settlers, Rick Sauer, remembers waking up with eight inches of snow on the pillow. Many nights they'd end up in the house down the road where the Rascos lived, the settlers and the seven Rasco children sitting around the warm stove. We were very different, Rick Sauer said, but we shared a lot of things too, about the land we were living in, and working, how hard it could be.

Only Hal Moore lasted that winter in the barn. The others left for warmer places. But in the spring they returned. They sealed the holes and patched the roof, and most important of all, Rick Sauer built the great masonry stove that could

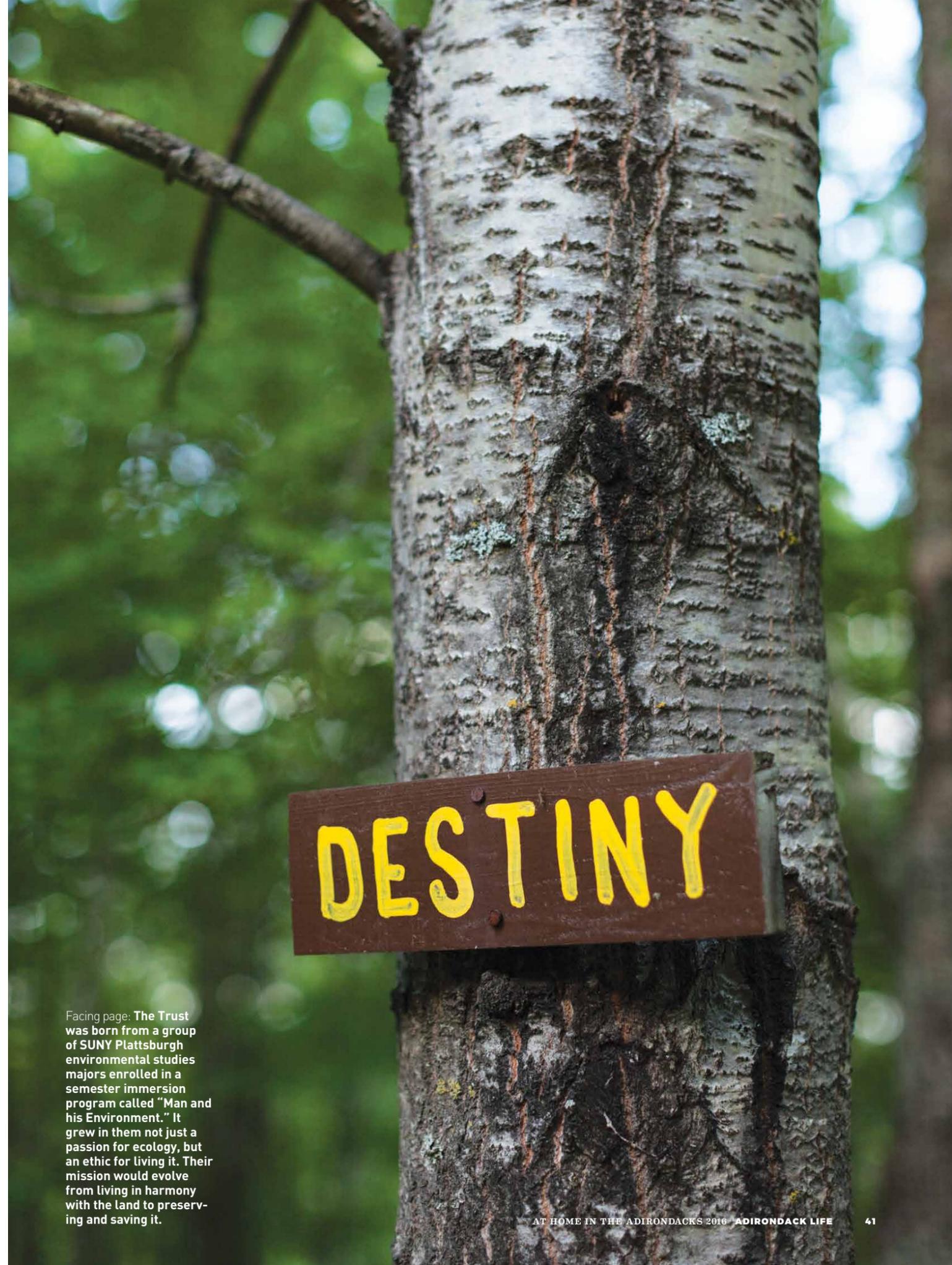


burn 36-inch logs. They started a business called Beatnik Construction, driving into town in a 1960 International pick-up. "We were a bunch of hippies working with the locals," Hal said. "They didn't know what to make of us." Joe Licari and his wife, Wendy, moved out of their yurt and into a house they built just off the road. Michael Bender started a house. Damian Gormley married another settlor, Kathleen Pease, known just as "Pease," and had a son named Bryn.

That July they held their first Poobah, the great summer celebration originally begun in the Old Stone House. Three days of music, art, food and prayer, a Burning Man Festival for Saranac. There were other parties in the year, the Noobah on New Year's Eve, Earth Day Party, and Pioneer Weekend in October, to harvest the wood and vegetables, but none compared to the Poobah, a holy day of the tribe, where some of the best musicians in the area would play late into the night. Pease said, "It was a beautiful time, we were all so free ... dancing in the moonlight, with long hair flying and skirts twirling."

They cleared and planted the old fields around the barn that hadn't been cultivated in 10 years, sowing vegetables and fruit trees, detailing the cost of every seed. They built a sugar shack and started milking the maples. The plan was to grow enough to eat, and sell the rest to pay for taxes. But like the farmers who struggled before them, they needed outside work to do anything more than survive. In the town of Saranac, that work was getting harder to find.

One by one they moved away—Joe and Wendy to his family's construction business in Long Island. Damian and Pease to Massachusetts, Hal Moore to study furniture-making, Rick and Cori to California. They always returned for Poobahs and Noobahs, and to help out when they could. The 1987 Poobah was perhaps the greatest of all, when Mohawk chief Jake Swamp planted a Peace Tree in the meadow, but



Facing page: The Trust was born from a group of SUNY Plattsburgh environmental studies majors enrolled in a semester immersion program called "Man and his Environment." It grew in them not just a passion for ecology, but an ethic for living it. Their mission would evolve from living in harmony with the land to preserving and saving it.



He hated the word hippie and considered himself an eco-radical. He worried that the members had traded their ecological mission for a spiritual one. The land was empty, unprotected, while the forces against it were only getting stronger. Their sacred Trust, he feared, had become a "ghost community."

there was still no running water in the barn, the gardens had shrunk, the sugaring was done, and the last of the homesteaders, Paul Ferrari and Lynne Schneider, moved out to go to graduate school. After that, people came and went from the barn—"the barnacles," as they were called by the settlers—but they weren't paying rent or keeping the farm. The land lay empty. The dream of cooperative living seemed to be ending.

IN THE YEARS SINCE LEAVING the Trust, Damian Gormley had split with Pease and started a welding business in Northampton, Massachusetts, but he continued to put out the Trust's newsletter, *The New Land Ethic Review*. It was a forum for members to send out letters and announcements, to put forth new ideas, or reminisce about the last reunion. For Damian the *Review* was first of all a call to action. He hated the word hippie and considered himself an eco-radical. He worried that the members had traded their ecological mission for a spiritual one. The land was empty, unprotected, while the forces against it were only getting stronger, the polluters and profiteers. Their sacred Trust, he feared, had become a "ghost community."

In the fall of 1992 Damian moved into the Barnhouse and became the land's caretaker. He believed the Trust needed to change to move forward, with a new form of Agreement, less about living in harmony with the land, and more about

showing how to save it. In 1994 the New Land Trust was incorporated as a nonprofit, with Damian Gormley as executive director. The new bylaws stressed new responsibilities, "to advance, enhance, protect and maintain the quality of the natural and human environment and to promote the ecologically sound use of land and natural resources for the long-term health and safety of the community."

Damian lived year-round on the Trust, and though the stove kept him warm, the Barnhouse was still without a bathroom or shower. Through the long winters he kept a journal, notes on the temperatures and snowfalls, wildlife and the struggles to keep the International going. He wrote constant letters to members asking for money and labor. He wanted to build a greenhouse and a sugar shack, renovate the old bunkhouse as a rental. And there were always plans for the barn, to make it a community center, an ironworks shop, a bed-and-breakfast. Other members proposed starting a medicine wheel garden and building a meditation labyrinth. One suggested raising money to construct a temple atop the meadow. "How can we have a temple," Damian shouted in letters, "when we don't even have a bathroom?"

While the Trust was often caught between a spiritual mission and an ecological one, it could also find itself divided between two definitions of itself: a traditional land trust, dedicated to conservation and preservation, and a community land trust, whose purpose is to provide a model of affordable housing and community development. The members spent endless hours debating the best ways to preserve the land, while at the same time serving the community in it. Many of these meetings were held in the director's executive office, the sauna they'd built next to the beaver pond. When the meetings grew too hot they'd jump in the frozen pond.

Damian worked with Jeff Cochran, a local activist and artist, to bring Plattsburgh students to the Trust. He led groups of juvenile offenders to live and learn there. Workshops were held in the barn. Interns began to appear. In 1996 Joe Licari moved back to the land and rebuilt the gardens, the largest they'd ever been. He started a CSA, one of the first in the Adirondacks, delivering to more than 20 families. Damian, the bus driver's son from the Bronx, learned forest management and animal husbandry, raising goats and pigs. It seemed the Trust had found its mission, conserving the land while staying connected to the community. The barn even got its bathroom.

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But the renovations brought higher taxes and insurance, some years more difficult to pay than others. The original journals from the barn—the Barnbooks—show many pages of the annual calculations made, monies members pledged, and their ability to pay. The bulk of the tax bill came not from the land itself, but from the major structures on it: the Barnhouse, Joe Licari’s house and the house built by Michael Bender. Because of this, the two men usually paid a higher portion of the bill than the others, but not always. In 2000 the board of directors proposed a lease agreement for the two private houses. Each lease would last 100 years, providing the two men paid their share of the bill, a number fixed by the board.

Joe Licari signed his lease, but Michael Bender refused, beginning a two-year battle. The issue divided the Trust like nothing before. Every member agreed the land could never be owned, but the houses the men had built had always been considered private space. Michael Bender didn’t like the restrictions the lease would put on him; he believed it was his right to sell his house, or rent it if he wished. He wrote changes to the lease, asking for extensions to the deadlines the board set. When the final deadline passed, July 27, 2002, the board sent him a letter ordering him to remove his personal effects.

The eviction left a hole in the tribe, a rift in the oneness. It left an economic hole as well. Without Michael Bender’s contributions, the Trust slowly fell behind. Joe Licari was still paying his taxes, but he’d closed the CSA and was living on a boat in the Bahamas. Once again Damian Gormley was alone in the barn, his letters and calls to action growing less frequent.

Six years later and the Trust was in arrears, in danger of going the way of all the farms before it. But one night, at a board meeting in 2008, a man came in with a plan. He wasn’t an original member, not a hippie nor an eco-radical, but a guy who lived across the road, and worked for the human resource

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company Automatic Data Processing in Plattsburgh. Steve Jenks moved to the area in 2004, and for many years he’d been cross-country skiing there, on the handful of trails the members used. He’d helped establish a bike-trail system in Vermont, and he proposed a similar plan for the Trust: build a series of trails and promote the Trust as a center for skiing and hiking. The old Bender house would become the center’s clubhouse. The skiers would become donors.

That year Damian Gormley resigned as executive director, and asked that Steve Jenks take his place. Steve and another volunteer, Bernie Canning, gave themselves over to the work, clearing trails and making signs and maps. They built outhouses and benches. New members joined the project, new donors, enough to pay the taxes and roof the new Clubhouse. Soon the narrow road near the Clubhouse was lined with cars; a parking lot had to be expanded. The board of directors grew as well, some of whom had never heard of a Poobah. The Trust now has a Facebook page and a website. They put out a modern looking newsletter too, announcing new sponsors and coming events. They hold a Fall Fest every October, and a Chili Fest in February, but the Noobahs and Poobahs are no more.

Hal Moore is still on the board. He was the only original member to make it through that first winter in the barn, and he’s also the only “settlor” who settled in the area. He lives down the hill in the hamlet now, where he owns and operates Saranac Hollow Woodworking. For almost 40 years he’s been walking the land here, watching the changes to it, the fields grown over with trees, poplars and apples first, then the beech and birch, the maples coming in. Every time he goes out to the New Land he sees what they saved, and always, too, he finds something new.

Joe Connelly, author of *Bringing Out the Dead*, wrote “Tiny Houses Go Big Time” in the 2015 *At Home in the Adirondacks* issue. He lives in North Creek.

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