

The ECOLOGICAL GIFTS PROGRAM

RUTH EDNA KERR NEVILLE

The three generations of Nevilles

Photo: © The Nature Conservancy of Canada



A Family Saves a Bog and a Fern Species



Photo: © The Nature Conservancy of Canada

The property donated (in yellow) by the Neville family, near Lake Champlain, is part of the Venise Ouest bog.

As a child, Ruth Edna Kerr used to spend her summers at Missisquoi Bay, on Lake Champlain, where her family had bought land and built a lakeside cottage, as had many Montrealers after the Great Depression. There, she met Vincent Neville, who lived nearby on his family's farm, in what is now Venise-en-Québec. Ruth Edna Kerr and Vincent Neville got married in 1947 and settled in Montréal, where the young man learned the upholstery trade and started a furniture business. In 1973, Vincent Neville and his sister inherited from their parents the farm originally acquired by their Irish ancestors in 1846. Mr. Neville later bought

his sister's share of the farm. Although pieces of the original farmland have been parcelled off over time, some 200 acres remained in family hands until recently, when the Nevilles decided to give away a large part of it.

The story of this gift goes back to 1962 and takes place in the woods and wetlands behind the farmhouse where one of the Nevilles' sons, Peter, spent most of his time hunting while visiting his grandparents. One day, the boy ran into a group of students from McGill University who were doing a plant survey. He learned with surprise that a rare plant species, the Bog Fern, grew there. When he got home,

young Peter shared this news with his family members, who were also surprised to learn that the homestead sheltered an unsuspected treasure. About twenty years later, another study group came onto the property to transplant some Bog Ferns in the hope of saving them from the environmental changes expected to result from a drainage and road-raising project. The works were intended to prevent flooding from the lake and provide better drainage conditions for the local farmers. "We didn't want our land to be affected by this project, so we suggested other ways of preventing the flooding and we tried in vain to stop the process. The works went ahead and wiped out the beaver dams and a flooded area where I used to hunt ducks, and I still miss them a lot today," Peter says.

Years later, in 1997, Peter was reminded of this rare fern species and the road project at a talk on conservation. He attended a Rotary meeting that featured a speaker from the Nature Conservancy of Canada who described the various ways to preserve the biological integrity of a piece of land, one being to donate it to a conservation group that will provide permanent protection. Peter liked this idea and discussed it with his family,

who found it interesting. Vincent Neville thought it was a good idea, but he passed away soon afterward, leaving the homestead to his wife Ruth Edna. After several months of discussion, three generations of Nevilles agreed to part with a large portion of their heritage in order to safeguard it. Several biological surveys were undertaken to evaluate the ecological value of the property, which was ultimately considered to be worthy of protection. In March 2003, Ruth Edna Kerr Neville, acting with the consent of her children and grandchildren, made an ecological donation of 148 acres (60 hectares) of the family's farmland to the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC)¹. This non-governmental organization will ensure that the biodiversity and environmental heritage of this property located

in the Venise Ouest bog are preserved in perpetuity. The donation was made through Environment Canada's Ecological Gifts Program, which provides donors of ecologically sensitive land or partial interests in land with special income tax benefits.



Photo: © Gillo Lavoie, MDDEP

The Bog Fern grows in the shady areas of treed bogs such as the Venise Ouest bog. This species, listed as threatened in Quebec, occurs only in the most southerly part of the province.

The Bog Fern has since been listed as a threatened species in Quebec. Only three small populations are known to grow in the province. Thanks to the Nevilles' generous gift, one of them is protected forever and so are the many other wildlife species living in what is now the Neville Nature Reserve. More than 20 years after the drainage project was carried out, Peter Neville is still upset about it: "I really wanted to see the area preserved. The donation ensures that the natural treasures of our land will be safeguarded and can be cherished by humanity for a long time. The cost of taxes, surveillance and upkeep is now in the hands of the NCC. As for us, we still enjoy the area, but we are assured that if some project threatens to affect the nature of things, the NCC will be in a better position to provide the necessary protection."



Photo: © The Nature Conservancy of Canada

The three generations of Nevilles who agreed to give away to nature a large portion of their ancestral land. (Ruth Edna Kerr Neville is in the front row, on the left, and her son Peter is in the second row, third from the left.)

For more information on ecological gifts, please contact:

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