

THE ESTATE OF WILLIAM OLIVER

The ECOLOGICAL GIFTS PROGRAM

Barbara and
William Oliver
at their Sainte-
Agathe property
in 1996

Photo: © Mary Gibson

Ecological Gift in the Laurentians: A Legacy to Nature

In 1892, the “petit train du nord” stopped for the first time at the new station in Sainte-Agathe-des-Monts, a Laurentian village north of Montréal. The region had been more or less forest and agricultural land up until then, but from that moment on it became much easier to get to for resort vacationers. James R. Walker, a Montrealer on the lookout for a fishing site, arrived in Sainte-Agathe five years later on board this very same train. He bought land there, on the shore of Lac Brûlé, where he built a country house. Every summer he stayed there along with his wife and his children, who eventually bought some land around the lake for themselves.

So it was that Barbara Walker Oliver, James R. Walker’s granddaughter, grew up between the neighbourhood



Photo: © Christiane Foley

Barbara Walker Oliver on the plateau overlooking Lac Brûlé

of Westmount, in Montréal, and Lac Brûlé. She was a nature lover, fond of the forest, and got a great deal of pleasure from accompanying her grandfather as he forever opened up new paths inside the forest. This rather quiet rhythm of life was interrupted by the Second World War. Having reached adulthood, she married a soldier, who lost his life in active service in Italy a few months after their wedding. Following this personal tragedy, the young woman joined the Red Cross and served with them in Europe until the end of the conflict. She shortly after worked for the Canadian Red Cross in Calgary. On her return to Quebec, in search of tranquility, she acquired some wooded land on a rocky plateau overlooking Lac Brûlé. It offered a peaceful view of the undulating contours of the Laurentians and on to Mount Tremblant in the distance. William Oliver, whom she married ten years later in 1955, also preferred the peace and quiet of the mountains to the more intense activity of the lake. The newlyweds wasted no time in building their residence on the plateau. Later on they acquired a portion of the family land and a neighbouring piece of land. Their property then covered a whole mountainside right down to the Rivière Noire Valley in the south.



Photo: © Canadian Wildlife Service

The Rivière Noire and its valley, Mrs. Oliver’s favourite place

Fifty years later the Olivers’ property is a natural area consisting of forests and uncultivated farm lands. All around them, however, there have been developments. Roads, houses and tourist areas have increasingly encroached on the forest. Being over 80 years old and childless, deeply concerned over the fate of their beloved land, the Olivers decided to protect it in perpetuity. At the suggestion of a friend, they talked to the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC)¹, a private non-profit organization dedicated to preserving natural habitats, that visited their property and then helped them to make their project a reality. The Olivers thus discovered that their little corner of nature had an ecological value that was even more significant than they had imagined.



The huge property is made up of four distinct habitats. It is partly covered with a Sugar Maple–American Beech forest and also a Balsam Fir–White Birch forest. These forests represent a potential habitat for Bobcat, Canada Lynx and Eastern Wolf, three species whose status is vulnerable in Canada or in Quebec. The property also includes uncultivated farm lands used as feeding area for birds of prey. The Rivière Noire, bordered by spruces, alders, and Eastern Larch, meanders through the valley and offers a staging area for waterfowl. These last two habitats are also home to various animals such as beaver, Mink, hare, Black Bear and Moose. To ensure their survival, some of these species need extensive wooded

territories and such spaces are becoming more and more rare or isolated in this area of the Laurentians.

Satisfied with their decision, the couple then agreed to bequeath



Photo: © Luc Farrell

The Olivers' ecological donation protects forests that are potential habitats for species such as the Canada Lynx (picture), the Bobcat and the Eastern Wolf.

most of their property to the Nature Conservancy of Canada. Mr. Oliver passed away in 2002, a short while after drawing up his will, and the ecological gift of their property was made according to his wishes as part of Environment Canada's Ecological Gifts Program. This land is henceforth a protected area with limited public access. Although the specific tax benefits of the Program certainly helped the Olivers to make this important gesture, their decision was much more motivated by a wish to give back to nature a land that had been their haven of peace for so many years. Through their generous donation, they have left the wildlife of the Laurentians with a legacy of natural habitat that it sorely needs.

For more information on ecological gifts, please contact:

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