

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

October 10, 1996

Laughing Brook

I first visited Hampden's Laughing Brook in the 1970s, but I first heard about it many years earlier, before the animal sanctuary even existed. As a Kansas schoolchild, I was a devotee of the Mother West Wind stories of Thornton Burgess, written in his Hampden cottage on the Laughing Brook. The sanctuary and memorial to Burgess is facing a crisis this year, a crisis that comes from actions of the Massachusetts Audubon Society.

At the Hampden fall fair last weekend, friends of Laughing Brook were in evidence throughout the day, mounting a grass-roots campaign against that Boston-based organization. Visitors lined up to sign a petition to retain the animal sanctuary, and many of us pledged financial support to provide funds for the animals that are a part of the facility.

Laughing Brook was formed after Burgess' death, with a bequest of his cottage and a few surrounding acres. Townspeople selected Audubon as the appropriate overseer and custodian of legacy. The document that transferred ownership specified that local supporters organized as Friends of Laughing Brook should be consulted in management decisions. The sanctuary has grown to including more than 800 acres.

How did this battle between the partners in operation come about? The Audubon Society and Laughing Brook are both synonymous with environmentalism. It all started when the administrators at Massachusetts Audubon Society announced that the expense of upgrading the exhibits and budget deficits from the operation of the facility required that animal exhibits be discontinued.

Local supporters then went into action to offer alternative means of funding the animal care operations. They pointed out that all regulations had been met with a prior capital improvement program., and they devised a method of funding animal upkeep with auxiliary donations. It seemed like a sensible solution for the working partnership. But the problem was not so easily addressed. Audubon responded with a new objection. Money was no longer the issue. "Captive animals" were the issue, and the Society would no longer exhibit them. The animals would have to go. Local volunteers and corporate sponsors have met with the executive director of the state organization; visitors have sent letters and petitions of support. But the Audubon Society is intransigent.

I have worked with many of the Friends of Laughing Brook on other policy issues over the years. They are good citizens and reasonable people. They would have been receptive to discussions about the phasing out of animal displays as the existing animals die. They are not receptive to what they perceive as deception on the part of Mass Audubon.

At this point it looks like continued pressure is the best hope for retention of the animals at Laughing Brook. I have pledged my support for the retention of local direction at the sanctuary. You can join me by contacting Dalton Philpott at 566-8624, or writing to Mass Audubon in care of Dalton, 2 Scantic Road, Hampden, Mass. 01036.