

## *Deed for It!*

By Christine Loughlin, OP

Tucked in a file folder in our office, there's a letter typed on an old Olivetti. Over the years we've pulled out the yellowed pages to reread and remember the story of our being here. The micro story inspires us to recall the bigger narrative that brings us to this moment. The letter, dated May 1949, reads in part:

*We have just returned from visiting "my estate" and touring the grounds. I really mean touring. I can't do justice to it in writing about it, but I'll try. The property is all country but is directly off route 1, the road to Providence. The property is 542 feet above sea level on one side and 600 feet on the other side... Orchards are everywhere and they consist of apples, peaches, pears and crabapples, over 750 fruit trees. Plants and flowers of all descriptions are everywhere... The main house, cottage, garage, grotto base, rock garden and orchards are on one side of the road and the apple barn, silo, horse stables, sheds and huge truck farm are on the other. Some years the orchards (apples alone) have yielded over 6,000 bushels, hand picked and 200 bushels have fallen to the ground and been taken by anyone who wanted them.*

Sister Bernardine Sullivan wrote the letter one month prior to Mr. and Mrs. James Toner deeding their "estate" to the Dominican Sisters for whatever ministries the signs of the times dictated.

As I stand in the open meadow almost 60 years later, my eyes take in a different scene. The orchards and truck farm are long gone. Open fields and woodland mark the spot. The barns and sheds have disappeared, but the rock garden is in bloom. The Crystal Spring Farm flag no longer flies atop a flagpole. An Earth flag waves in the breeze. A convent and school built on the southwest corner of the property provide for a different need today ~ a retirement home for another congregation of Sisters. A portion of the gifted acreage no longer remains with the original deed but a 42 acre parcel that is Crystal Spring continues to meet the needs of the times and is critical to the recovery of land and spirit in southeastern Massachusetts.

The story of Crystal Spring Farm becoming A Center for Earth Learning lays bare the historical cultural and the spiritual ecological shifts commensurate with the industrial technological decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

When the gift of land was bestowed in 1949, the truck farm and sprawling orchards became secondary to our purpose. Dominican Academy was established to educate youth, instill values, pass on a living faith tradition. Little did we know that even while the mortar was being poured to build the school, cracks were already appearing in the foundation of the cultural concepts upon which our educational system was built. The work of Religious Orders founded to guide and protect, nurture and instruct immigrant populations pouring in from Europe seeking political and religious freedom were coming to their own end time. One-quarter century later, in 1976, Dominican Academy closed its door.

Even a cursory consideration of dates and decisions that mark our decades in Plainville demonstrates the emergence of a new moral agency afoot. A new ethic poured forth like waters gushing from a spring long hidden in the rock. Perhaps the synonymous, Silent Spring by Rachael Carson, heralded the breakthrough in which we grew to understand the intimate relationship between our human health and the well being of all creatures of the natural world. Momentum spread among grassroots and policy makers until 1970 witnessed the first Earth Day. New alignments surfaced. From a moral response that tended to human needs a new expression of service "to the least" took hold. Voices crying out that had not been heard drew

attention. It was as if each enactment in social policy was in tandem with an environmental strategy. The UN Charter for Nature was accompanied by The Wilderness Act, The Clean Waters Act, the Scenic Rivers Act, the Endangered Species Act. Reconciliation with the natural world devastated by the industrial revolution slowly took root.

Whether on the front page or in the science section of newspapers, on public television and in films, new learnings about our origin story appeared. Our home planet presents itself not as a homogeneous sameness but as exquisite differentiated regions bound together in the grand unity of the planet. While humans once understood their dependence on the natural community, our modern ways learned to alter the functioning and to use every form of life for our own advancement. The comprehensive unity faltered, the flourishing expression of the regions languished. The living system suffered.

Our education and law, healthcare and economics, our religious stories are embedded in the assumption that humans are separate from Earth and its evolving journey in the cosmos. A “school” of today ought to be a place which transforms that assumption. Reconciliation occurs when our human healing and learning, our governance and nourishment, our very fulfillment enhances the natural community of a bio-region. Our human celebrations must fold in local food movement, land conservation, habitat preservation, recovering rivers.

Over the past 150 years many Religious Orders received land as a gift or purchased land at a reduced price. Today those gifts of land are becoming the bases for our new mission and ministry. Across the state and throughout the country Congregations are forming new relationships with the lands we “hold in common.” We are partnering with land conservation groups, land trusts, to develop new ways to share our common and complementary values that benefit the whole community of which we are intimately a part. These partnerships are forming new communities for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, communities that are striving to live in harmony with Earth. They are communities creatively resisting the forces destroying the environment, not serving human needs alone but at the service of “the least” in all its expressions.

As Sister Bernardine gazed out over the orchards, she “*couldn't imagine the possibilities.*” We constructed the possible for half a century. As we approach our historical end time, we also look out and say—*I can't imagine what is becoming.* It is in the living faith tradition that we deed for it! Mr. and Mrs. Toner embraced both Earth and evangelical wisdom. Nothing takes more than it needs to survive. The parents of seven children with one special needs daughter, they understood *enough*. So too do we. We chose to deed for an ecological future. ■ CL