Acquisition of Canaras, as recounted by Dr. Foster Brown  **SLU President 1963 - 1969**

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It took the projection of the upper 90’s to motivate me to record some oral history about our Canaras Center in the Adirondacks. Our children, who are familiar with the place, have urged me to record some of the circumstances surrounding its acquisition and development.

In late August of 1965, our daughter, Ruth, was home for the week and she was interested in climbing a mountain; in this case, Whiteface Mountain. Celia and younger Foster, as he liked to be called, were at home and three of them, even though the weather was overcast, decided to head for the mountains. They have always loved the outdoors and had a special feeling for camping, mountain climbing and the rest. I asked the three of them if they could use someone to go with them and I would drop them off at the foot of the mountain and I would pick them up in the afternoon. Then I wondered what I should do as they were climbing the mountain, and I recalled I had a letter from a real estate agent in Saranac Lake indicating that expansive property on upper Saranac Lake was for sale, and I had put it in my “short time” file. My short time file had to do with letters that called for very short answers such as: thank you for your letter, may write you later, please to be informed about the matter and I remember that I kept the letter and it was in that file so I sent over to the office and the letter and I decided that I would look at the property when I was in Saranac while they were climbing the mountain.

After dropping the children off, I went and looked up the property and found that there were two couples staying there for the weekend. It had been owned at one time by Lawrence Rockefeller and he had given it to Sloan Kettering Memorial Cancer Institute for use of staff, and researches, but that arrangement did not work out and it was put up for sale. It just happened that Jim Farley, the Executive Vice President of Finance for the Foundation was there, and after calling him from the lake, we talked about the property in general. In fact, we had a few bourbons sitting around an outdoor fireplace, and as I looked at my watch, I realized it was late and I must get over to the mountain to pick up the children. So I thanked him for his chat and said that we could make use of such property, but we did not have enough funds to purchase it. He asked how we would use it, and so I went on to explain how such property is used and I did have a special interest in it because as a school superintendent for years, we took our Board to Lake George and stayed for a few days in a very fine cottage owned by the Chairman of the Board. I found that the close association of board members that knowing each other better made their professional work simpler. Each appreciated the others point of view and there seemed to be harmony and more achievement. So one of the purposes I had in mind having to do with the property was a center for trustees and alumni council and other groups. Well anyway, we had a very pleasant time and he said “I would like to see your university have this property and I think I know where I can find the money.” Well, I was blown over by this, of course, and from then on we corresponded and talked on the phone and Phil Young was helpful in this respect and sure enough, the money came available to buy the property. As I recall, the price was $80,000 or $85,000 for the Canaras part of the property.

Canaras means Saranac spelled backwards; in fact, Treb Bellows, a St. Lawrence graduate and a native to that area, was on campus at one time and I asked him how he got the name of Treb and he told me that when he grew up everyone was spelling words backwards, so his name was Bert, so he got the nickname of Treb.

I might add to that the first step, the funding would go through the Cancer Institute and the property would be made as a gift. But under the laws of the state, a gift from one tax-exempt corporation to another has to be of generally same purposes. In other words, if we had projects dealing in cancer research, then the property could have been given, but under these circumstances, it could not be.

After the money was available, we started proceeding to acquire the property, only to learn that whoever owned the old Saranac Inn site had a stipulation for selling. We learned that originally there was a large tract of land including the old Saranac Inn. The Saranac Inn owner sold off parcels and a stipulation was in the deeds giving the owner of the Saranac Inn the right to match any price offered for any of the properties so we were up against the wall in that a Mr. Vaasburg, a real estate developer had stepped in and acquired some property and he was waiting for an offer on this property so he could step in and exercise his rights. I was advised not to discuss the matter with Mr. Vaasburg, who was the Saranac Inn owner and matters dragged on until the middle of December.

So finally, I thought that I could tackle Mr. Vaasburg myself and see what we might work out. Mrs. Brown and I drove up, it was a beautiful day and his office was in a make-shift building next to what was left of the Inn. We smoked a couple of cigars and talked about Cortland, where he had lived and where I had been dean of the college. In fact, we talked about everything but his rights to acquire the property, so finally, I got to that and he said “Dr. Brown, I have nothing against the university and would like to help, but I make my living as a developer and I have been waiting a long time to acquire this because is a very natural one to divide and to sell.” In the meantime, I had learned that property at $15,000 had be relieved of its problem by paying Mr. Vaasburg $1,000, or a larger property across the lake had been sold, and had paid $3,000 or $4,000 for him to give up whatever rights he might have, like a quick claim deed. So in this case, we finally made an offer of $5,000 for him to give up whatever rights he might have. Of course, the local people up there were concerned and hoping that we would make a test case of this, but we were in the 1960’s and there was considerable unrest, and there was very little that administrators did, that was correct. I can just imagine us being sued or suing for recreation property of questionable use. So he flatly refused the $5,000 so we left in a pleasant tone, but I did tell him at the very end that it was too bad that we would both lose out, and I told him that the people wanted us to have this property so they will enter into a rental arrangement for 5 years, 10 years or however long it takes so we will have the use of the property, but we will not have the deed, and we would like the deed. So he said that we would talk about it some more, and we did and he agreed that he sign off all rights for $5,000.

The matter was then in the hands of the lawyers and in the early part of the year, I learned that everything had stalled and Mr. Vaasburg had reneged on his handshake pledge on the deal. So I said to Mr. Kitay, our attorney, that “it was just too bad that two men cannot shake hands on a deal and have it carried out by the attorneys.” He said “Well, let me talk with Mr. Vaasburg’s attorney and see what we can come up with.” He did this and apparently in such a way that he learned that the attorney had advised Mr. Vaasburg that he should not give up his rights for so little, but Mr. Kitay reminded him that was an arrangement agreed upon by Mr. Vaasburg and by me. So Mr. Vaasburg’s attorney said that he and Mr. Vaasburg would discuss it and let us know.

Soon thereafter, we got word that the original agreement was being honored, and deeds were being drawn.

I cannot vouch for the exact times and dates of events but as I recall, we took possession in the spring and the first summer we had much to do because the property had been unoccupied for about 7 years, and small trees had bad 7 years growth. The buildings, in general, were in good condition, but there was some patching that needed to be done but the big struggle was cutting down the trees. No one wanted to make the decision to cut the 8 year old, 10 year old trees that were beautiful but you could not see the lake from the building and it was damp and there was very little sunshine around the buildings, which was not good. So the family stayed at Jackson Lodge for that summer. That is the reason why there is interest on the part of my children in that property. Also, we would not have it had it not been for daughter Ruth’s interest to climb Whiteface Mountain and that is why one building is named Jackson Lodge in her memory, because without her general interest there would be no Saranac Conference Center. Jackson is her middle name and hence this is where the name of the lodge originated.

Mr. George Bowling and his wife lived in the caretaker’s cottage and Mrs. Bowling’s parents had been caretakers there when the Rockefellers occupied the property. Matter of fact, there is a tree near Nepahwin that Lawrence Rockefeller repaired with cement and can be seen there today.

Getting back to finance, our gift was enough to cover the cost and we negotiated a reasonable amount for the real estate agent, and we had about $400 left over.

We wanted to be good neighbors, so we planned to call on our neighbors, on each side, and I remember one day my daughter Sue and I were canoeing and we came ashore at the Bedford property. The caretaker there was not happy to have us there but when he learned that I had given his son his diploma when I was president at Oswego, he said that Mrs. Bedford was there resting, however, that she has had enough rest and I know she would like to meet you. So, Sue and I went up and had a nice chat with Mrs. Bedford. Then later, Mrs. Brown and I called on Mrs. Bedford and learned that she had offered $15,000 for Green Island which is opposite the university property and her property, but Mr. Vaasburg also owned that property and he wanted $25,000. But Mrs. Bedford was only willing to put up $15,000 as part of the cost if I could raise the rest of it. It seemed logical that I could raise $5,000 of that and Colgate University could do the same, but before that was accomplished, the state acquired it from Mr. Vaasburg for $30,000 or more. It was not essential that we have it but it showed the general interest of the neighbors. We also called on Mrs. Du Brun to the east, and we visited with her. I guess it was my last year on the job so she called and wanted to see me. So Mrs. Brown and I went up and chatted a while and she indicated that she was interested to let St. Lawrence have her property. So we worked out an agreement where she would convey her two properties and kept part on one for life use. The idea was that we would allow her use of boathouses and we would put up a fence with latches and locks on her side because she felt it important that she have her complete privacy. We saw to it that she have reasonable privacy at her place even though there might be 70 or 80 people next door.

With property like this, it is important, of course, that we have income to equal or surpass the cost, and one of the ways was to have conferences there. Trustees and Faculty would not be adequate for the full summer. At that time, I was a member of the New York State advisory board of employment and unemployment insurance and we had summer meetings of about 30 or 40 people and they were happy to meet there. Then, later, as a member of the St. Lawrence Seaway Board, we met there for 2 or 3 years. The chairman of the former group, George M. Minzer, loved this place so he asked one time “what do you need here” and at the time we really needed more sanitary facilities, baths, etc. So he said “put one in and I will pay for it.” So we put one in and we used shower curtains and so the next year when they came up to the place, Mrs. Minzer was so disappointed we had not put glass and sliding doors. So that year we talked about the needs here, and he wondered what he might be able to do. I mentioned what one small cottage would cost and he wanted to know what would be bigger than that and I told him “two small cottages” but he said “no, something that could serve the whole group” and we, at that time, had a small area for a dining room and kitchen. I said “what we really need is a dining room” and he said “let’s get to work on it” and he wanted to know how much it would cost so we found out what the cost would be and he felt that he and others could raise $20,000 in funds. I think the cost was about $20,000 but it was more in the end but at any rate, George and his friends and other groups raised money and the school trustees voted to match it so that we had a pool over $20,000 to do the dining hall. At the same time, we were interested in tennis and there was a tennis fund, and we need boats and there a boat fund. People gave property to be used and all in all, it certainly was a university family project.

I might mention to that we were interested in acquiring some land from Mrs. Bedford. She had some acreage across the road, and we wanted to develop a nature trail and really needed more space. Kay and I met with Mrs. Bedford in Florida one year, and I had with me a proposal that John Green had made up, but there did not seem to be enough interest at the time.

I wanted to mention that Milt Loyson, a St. Lawrence graduate, worked with the State Labor Department and was a close friend of George Minzer. It was George’s original proposal was for the dining hall to be named for him and many of Milt’s friends contributed to the dining hall for him. As we all know, the major contribution, after the original gift, had to do with the De Brun interest and contribution and we can all be grateful to her for her interest and her support.

In closing, these remarks in and assessing the whole situation, it seems to me that achievement and contribution of the center have met our expectations and have exceeded them.