
The Founding of the Catskill Center: A Personal Account of the Early Years*

by *Sherret S. Chase*

My active role in the formation of the Catskill Center dates back to 1967, the year in which the journal of the American Forestry Association published an article of mine entitled “The Catskills of New York: Past, Present, Potential.”

My personal interest in the Catskills, the basis of my active involvement later in the Catskill Center, dates back to the early 1920s. A few years ago a newspaper account referred to me as a ‘member of an old-time Catskill family.’ Quite the contrary, I am a member of a ‘summer family’ whose roots go back only as far as 1921. In that summer, my aunt Carmelita Hinton (her husband, Ted, was a lawyer, inventor of the JungleGym, and protégé of Ralph Whitehead of Woodstock and Byrdcliffe; she was later to be the founder of Putney

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School in Vermont) walked over the notch, Winchell Hollow, from the Woodstock Valley and 'discovered' the old Winchell farm. In an earlier time it was the Van Winchell and still earlier—believe it or not—the Van Winkle farm. Carmelita's parents, my father's parents, were looking for a country property, as my grandfather had been told by his Omaha doctor to find a quiet place in the country in which to live. They bought the farm and soon after also bought the neighboring, totally abandoned Cudney 'place.'

At that time, my parents were living in Wayne, Pennsylvania. My father was the resident engineer for the construction of the Philadelphia-Camden Suspension Bridge, now renamed the Ben Franklin. Each summer we made the long trip by Model T Ford from Wayne to Ashokan, 200 miles, and at the end of the summer, motored back. How I hated leaving the mountains! The summers were idyllic. Memories may mislead, but there were more strawberries and blueberries and raspberries in the old pastures then; there were more wildflowers in the woodlands; there were many wood turtles; the carpet of mosses, lichens, and boreal herbs under the spruce and fir forests of the high peaks was much thicker than now. There were surely more rattlesnakes in the old bluestone quarries on Overlook; more brook trout in the streams and deer and raccoons were a rarity.

In the early 1920s, an unskilled laborer, if employed, worked for a wage of one dollar per day; a skilled worker, such as a carpenter, might earn as much as four dollars per day. It was customary for many local men to work on improvement of the town roads in payment of their taxes, trading days for dollars. A man with a horse had a three-fold advantage over one without, if my memory is accurate.

The best of local friends of my father and my family was Alva Buley. He was a jack of all the local trades and master of many, from well-digging to carpentry to haying to quarrying to horse trading. My favorite pastime as a child was watching him work, listening to his stories, and learning all sorts of interesting and useful things from him. We drilled bluestone one day to set a blasting charge, I holding the drill and Alvy wielding the sledge. "Loosen your grip just before the sledge hits, then turn the drill a quarter turn," he'd say. He told me how he had been sent out to the bluestone quarries as a drill holder as a youngster and had come home the first evening with hands blistered and bloody.

After my father died in 1933, my mother made Ashokan her permanent home. Her house was an old—moved and rebuilt—wagon

shed, perhaps first of all used for hoop shaving by Isaac Winchell, that has expanded over the years into a fair-sized, attractive, year-round house. This was my legal residence also, through college years, graduate school, and the war years. During college and graduate school, my interest, and knowledge, of the Catskills deepened. I remember reading Haring's *Our Catskill Mountains* and John Burroughs, and Rich's *Glacial Geology of the Catskills*, and, with Woodstock friends, exploring the Catskills farther to the north and west.

Before the war, while at Cornell, I heard from my mother that Alvy wanted me to go fishing with him on the Ashokan Reservoir when I was next home. I did go fishing with him at first opportunity. But it was not fishing that Alvy had in mind. It was the giving of sound advice. "Sherry, you should find yourself a fine widow with two or three children and get yourself married" and "Don't let the government send you off to fight a foreign war." If the Germans had been coming over Winchel Hollow, Alvy would have been the first one there to stop them. "You know, Sherry, my father was sent off to fight a foreign war; it was a horrible thing; a bloody, senseless mess; he was lucky to come home." "Alvy, was your father in the Spanish American War; was he sent to Cuba?" I asked. "No," said Alvy, "He was sent to Virginia." (His name was Wesley Buley, a young recruit in the 120th Regiment of the Union Army.)

In 1947, with a new Ph.D. from Cornell, my young family and I (Helen had just been born; Cici was a year and a half old) moved to Iowa, and, in 1954, to Illinois. During that period, we came back to Ashokan when we could, and our children often spent parts of their summers here with their Grandmother Chase.

One autumn, at the height of the Catskill foliage season, I flew with Hugh McCorkle, the pilot of the DeKalb Company, the hybrid seed company by which I was then employed as a corn breeder, in the company's AeroCommander from Port Royal, Virginia, to Albany Airport. I was en route to Max Shaul's farm in the Schoharie Valley where we had an experimental hybrid corn trial plot. I told Hugh where the old Winchell farm was on the south slope of Tice Ten Eyck's mountain and asked whether we could fly over it. We did, and more; we flew at low level through the Peekamoose Clove, over the northwestern tip of Ashokan Reservoir, over the Winchell farm—very low, through Winchell Hollow, over Bearsville, through Mink Hollow and on over the plateau to the north. Hugh looked at me,

and I looked at him. "That was fun!" How beautiful the autumnal forests were! So we circled to the west and south over Delaware County, and flew through the cloves of the Catskills once again.

In the 70 years of my own life, I have seen remarkable changes—more for the good than otherwise I think in terms of the economic well-being of individuals, more toward the bad in terms of weakening of rural communities through consolidation of schools and churches and the loss of viable farms. Ruth Reynolds remembers when there were 35 working farms in Halcott Valley, at an earlier date there were 55, today there is only one. In the 20 years of the Catskill Center, there have been remarkable changes also, some quite worrisome, some encouraging. Think of the environmental movement—it had hardly started 20 years ago—the Catskill Center has grown with and been part of that grand venture.

Recollections of the early years of the Catskill Center are, for me, very personal. In the mid-1960s, my sense of the need for a 'Catskill Center' and a regional authority prompted me to write an article of concern entitled "The Catskills of New York: Past, Present, Potential." The 'Center' I envisioned, quoting from my article, should be "a modest, non-profit, non-partisan, locally controlled organization for the Catskill region, charged with forwarding the wise use of the resources of the Catskills"—and the regional authority, quoting again, should be an agency "established by legislative action and charged with developing plans for insuring the long-term well-being of the region, its plant, animal and human population, vested with power to zone land for kind and intensity of use, with power to purchase easements and to trade, buy or sell state lands so as to maximize wilderness, aesthetic and recreational values, and with responsibility for control of the disposal of human wastes of all sorts, whether trash, garbage, old cars, sewerage, fumes, or industrial wastes." The article was published in *American Forests*, in the August 1967, issue.

Roswell Sanford, the publisher of the *Catskill Mountain News*, reprinted the *American Forests* article in his newspaper. Kingdon Gould, Jr., read the reprint, and with characteristic vigor, directed a letter to me, in care of the Margaretville newspaper. I reproduce below a letter written by Kingdon to Tom Miner in 1985, recalling our initial meeting and actions taken.

Kingdon wrote as follows:

Replying to yours of August 21st perhaps my comments could best be directed towards the events which led to the foundation of the Center.

It all began when I read an article in the *Catskill Mountain News* by Sherret Chase which, I believe, had originally appeared in *Forestry Magazine*. Sherry wrote of his acute concern over the destruction of the special beauty of the Catskills by haphazard unesthetic development. He felt that only through a regional approach could this trend be reversed and policies established for the best utilization of our great natural wonderland.

Sherry's paper articulated feelings I had held for many years. It was wonderful to learn of a kindred soul willing to go public in opposition to the destruction of the countryside's aesthetic qualities. Perhaps, I thought, a regional association could be established. The first step was to contact Sherry and this I did by writing him in care of the *Catskill Mountain News* for I had no idea where he lived.

My letter led to a January meeting at Furlow Lodge where Sherry and effervescent Kenny came to make our acquaintance. It was immediately evident that our families shared similar values and held identical objectives regarding the preservation of the environmental systems of the Catskills.

The next step was to elicit financial and moral support of others. At the top of my list was Armand Erpf, the well-known New York financier, who had deep commitments to his Arkville estate which he had constructed with painstaking care.

Armand quickly became an equally enthusiastic backer of Sherry's proposal for a regional association. Through the assistance of George Coughlin, the fine Binghamton lawyer and former chairman of the New York Bar Association, Articles of Association for the Catskill Center were formed.

From the onset we were in agreement that our organization should not focus solely on preservation issues; equally important was the need to foster harmonious economic development. We all recognized that while the Catskills supplied in an ideal way the recreation and vacation needs of many, they also furnished the residence and workplace for thousands of other citizens. An association to benefit the region which failed to address the necessity of improving its economic situation would be overlooking a fundamental need. In consequence it could not, indeed should not, attain that wide spread public support which is a *sine qua non* for implementing change.

That is why the dual objectives—Conservation and Development—were incorporated into our organization's name.

We soon were made aware that another Catskill-based effort was underway, the Catskill Consortium. This was the creation of Dr. William Kunsela, then president of the State University College at Delhi, and his associate, Dr. Seldon Kruger. Its primary aim was to attract funds to the colleges of the region for support of regional studies. The Consortium organizers became interested in the Catskill Center effort, which, until incorporation, functioned (with Lewis Kolar as executive secretary) under the awkward defining name "A Group of Citizens" concerned with the Conservation of the Natural Resources and Environmental Enhancement of the Catskill Moun-

tain Region.' Dr. Kunsela's hope was that the Center would become a funding source for the Consortium. This hope was premature. For this and other reasons, the Catskill Consortium failed to take hold.

I believe that Dr. Kunsela's idea could take hold today. His objective, to establish, I quote, a "consortium of institutions of higher education for the purpose of encouraging and facilitating the economic and social development of the Catskill area" should be attempted again. A coordinated commitment by our academic institutions to the Region is past due.

The Catskill Center for Conservation and Development, Incorporated (the CCCD), became chartered on September 12, 1969, with Armand Erpf, Roswell Sanford, Lewis Kolar, Israel Slutsky, Philip Bresee, Seldon Kruger, and Sherret Chase as the seven incorporators. I was asked, and accepted, to be the founding president of the organization. During the first year or two I often thought we had no organization at all, that we were merely going through empty motions in our committee and public meetings. At the first annual meeting, held on May 23, 1970, at the State University College at Delhi, there were 11 members in attendance. Yet, some extremely important actions took place during that early period—actions that set the stage for the subsequent pattern and strong growth of the Center.

In the spring of 1969, the 'Group of Citizens' (specifically, Armand Erpf) commissioned Sheafe Satterthwaite of the Williams College Center for Environmental Studies to roam the Catskills for a summer, and—to use Armand's words—provide a 'vivid and concise report' to us of his findings and recommendations. In October 1969 Sheafe reported back to us in two truly brilliant, rambling essays; one entitled "The Catskills and the Future," the other, "The Catskill Center: Aims and Organization." A key point made by Sheafe in his personal report at that time was that "conservation of the Region will be best served by being most concerned with development." Our aim was to be supporters of sound development as well as opponents of poor development. Interestingly, among Sheafe's many recommendations was a strongly argued one that Arkville be chosen as the Center's home and that the Dean homestead in Arkville, Fairview, now the Erpf House, be the specific building of choice. I am sure Sheafe had in mind not only the centrality of Arkville to the Catskill Region but also the fact that Armand Erpf was the owner of the Dean homestead. It pleases me that the Center is now housed in that fine old building in Arkville.

I remember one of the many planning meetings—this one held at Hunter Mountain Lodge, probably in the spring of 1970—with Joseph Aronson and Benjamin Webster present. Joe urged strongly that the then-to-me-unknown Ruth Reynolds be asked to serve the Center as ‘clerk,’ and Ben drew on a paper napkin a three-line design that became the Center’s logo. I remember interviewing Ruth and discovering that this modest ‘rural housewife’ had been a service pilot during World War II, flying planes to Alaska, to be transferred there to Russian pilots. The Center owes a tremendous debt to Ruth for her long, loyal, and efficient service to the organization. She held us together.

On August 15, 1970, a ‘Charter Membership Meeting’ was held at Lake Mohonk. Before that meeting, I was uncertain the Catskill Center could become a viable organization. Attendance was gratifying—nearly 200 people participating. Individuals concerned for the future joined together there in support of organized action in defense of the Catskill Region. Most importantly, people who had felt isolated and impotent in their concerns discovered allies. Yet we also learned from that meeting that we needed to move from general concerns to specific issues. (Ruth Reynolds reminds me that she started working for the Center just three weeks before that Mohonk meeting and was kept very busy helping put that meeting together.)

The membership of the Center as of October 14, 1970, listed 126 people; the charter membership a year later totalled 174 plus a number of organizations. Many of these early members have made significant contributions through the Center, and in other ways, to the defense of the Catskills.

At a later meeting, at Kass Inn, I believe, with a skeptical Frank Cyr and Douglas McKenzie as first time forum participants (the subject was agriculture in the Catskills), we faced the charge of being outsiders. The meeting ended with both Frank and Doug among the strongest of Center participants. It was during this period that Bob Bishop, already a member, became a key Center activist. His unwavering support of the Center and enlistment of the support of the O’Conner Foundation have been of decisive importance to the success of the organization from that early time.

There are so many people—Alf Evers, Art Flick, Sybil Golden, Israel Slutsky, Bill Hall, Hugh Kelly, Lewis Kolar, Max Shaul, Harris Gordon, John New, Art Rasmussen, Maurice Postley, Dan Smiley,

Madeleine Coutant, the Dowlings, the Emersons, Catherine Harwood, Michael Kudish, David Loeks, John Adams, the Gardiners, Ken Sibal, the Van Zandts and Kenny Chase—to name only a few—who served importantly during those early years, each making a contribution to the success of Center activities.

A great loss to the Center was the death, in 1971, of Armand Grover Erpf, our most loyal and effective founding incorporator and director. Armand was an extraordinary, humane person—a very practical one—who based his financial decisions very much on his assessment of the people involved. One day at Arkville, at a luncheon at his house, there was another guest, a fellow named Clay Felker. Clay Felker had come to Armand for financial support for a new publishing venture, one that was to become the *New York Magazine*. Armand's first question on first meeting and assessing Felker was "What do you need right now?" What Felker needed "right now" was an office, phone, and typewriter. Armand arranged for those necessities that day out of his own pocket saying, "Get going, we can arrange the financial support after you get started on the first issue." Another time Armand flew to England to purchase a company. When he arrived at the meeting, he found a large delegation waiting to negotiate with him. Armand said, "I know what I am willing to pay for your company; you must know what price you will accept. Let's each write down on a piece of paper our figures. I think they will not be too far apart." The figures were close, the average was accepted, and Armand headed back for home that afternoon. One day Armand and I drove over to Binghamton to meet with the then-president of the New York Gas & Electric Company. The president had heard stories and was just like a little kid in his excitement at meeting Armand. Sad to say though, we failed to get the annual commitment of \$5000 from NYG&E that we sought. Perhaps that was just as well.

It was at a Kass Inn meeting that Calvin Crary urged that Governor Nelson Rockefeller be petitioned to fund a study commission for the Catskill Region, in the model of the Adirondack Commission. This commission came into being, though by legislative action sponsored by Senator Warren Anderson and Assemblyman H. Clark Bell rather than by administrative fiat. The Catskill Center assumed the role of being 'best friend and severest critic' of the commission during its productive but ultimately unsuccessful tenure. The failure of the Commission to evolve into a locally controlled, environ-

mentally sensitive regional authority, a failure of leadership by the commissioners, has been a tragedy.

One thing we—the Center officers, directors, and membership—painfully learned somewhat early-on, was the need to avoid naming to office members who had a single-purpose interest and would use the Center to advance only that narrow concern. Generally the Center has been a consensus group. To develop consensus requires open-mindedness and a willingness to listen to and consider carefully the arguments of each participant in discussions.

If the Catskill Commission had been initiated five years earlier, during the peak period of the Rockefeller administration, we would today have a strong state sponsorship and commitment to the Catskill Region. It is our fate, one that can be changed, to be a second thought after some Adirondack initiative has been taken.

Before the Center could afford to hire a professional executive director, we were forced to operate quite differently than we do today. To simplify somewhat, today the Center officers and staff lead a supportive membership; in the early years the members were the active organization. Forum meetings, functioning very much like historic New England town meetings, discussed issues, voted, and made recommendations to the executive committee and board of directors for action. Not infrequently, issues not on the meeting agenda were brought to the attention of forum attendees. The question of a Catskill Commission, and the urgent need for action, was one such issue.

In 1970 four key working committees were set up: organization, general objectives, finance, and liaison. These first reported to the membership at the annual meeting of May 22, 1971. That same spring the Center received its certificate from the Internal Revenue Service granting tax exempt status. Officers that year were Sherret Chase, president; Joseph Aronson, vice president; Seldon Kruger, secretary; Lewis Kolar, treasurer; and Ruth Reynolds, clerk.

For that same meeting individual members had prepared reports: Israel Slutsky, the skiing industry; William Harter, church organizations; Art Flick, game fishing; John New, wildlife; Lowell Peckham, higher education; Ruth Reynolds, population trends, Ros Sanford, press media; Ken Sibal, planning and zoning; Harold Combs, dairy farming; and Bill Hall, forestry. These, for the better part, were solid, competent reports, part of our organizational self-education.

I remember this annual meeting and the forums as dynamic, exciting occasions. They provided opportunities for members, and non-

members, to exchange ideas, to develop counter arguments, and to arrive at consensus. They provided means for people formerly unacquainted but sharing a general concern for the Catskill Region to assess each other and to gain the confidence in each other requisite to effective cooperation.

In January 1971, under the editorship of Joseph and Eugenie Dowling, the newsletter, "The Catskill Center Mountaineer," came into being, to continue through four or five issues.

The weakness of organization of that time was one of continuity of action. The efforts of the volunteer, member-centered organization were sporadic, uneven, frequently unable to follow through on objectives undertaken.

Kenny remembers the first time she met John Adams, at a forum meeting, in 1972, at the Onteora Club near Tannersville. She was sitting in the back of the meeting room (the Onteora Playhouse), when a late arriver sat down next to her. After a moment he whispered to her, "Do you know very much about this fellow, Sherret Chase? I've come to check him out." That meeting with John Adams, from Roscoe, then as now the dynamic executive director of the Natural Resources Defense Council (the NRDC), led to other important events. Kenny recalls working with John to drum up financial support for the Catskill Center. And her luck in opening the door to the Kaplan Foundation led to continuing support for both the Center and, not incidentally—though this might have happened anyway—to support for the NRDC. I quote her recollection:

In 1972, Sherry had flown down to New York from Boston to meet with John. When Sherry came back to Cambridge he told me that he and John wanted me to fly down to New York to set up a series of appointments for Sherry with foundation directors, to stir up interest and financial backing for the Center.

I first met with Mark Messeng, then the NRDC staff person responsible for fund raising. He gave me a list of foundations to phone to try to set up appointments for Sherry for the following two Wednesdays. I was given the name of the Astor Foundation executive and the name of the Kaplan Foundation executive, Ray Rubinow, I remember, and several others. I was told that two, or at most three meetings a day were the limit. I had never done anything like this, but—I was game to try.

I remember that I phoned the Astor Foundation first and was immediately put through to the director. I introduced myself as Mrs. Sherret Chase, that I was being his secretary, trying to set up appointments for my husband to come in to discuss the newly formed Catskill Center for Conservation and Development. John stood right beside me trying to orches-

trate everything I said, and it was absolutely awful! Of course, I got nowhere with the Astor Foundation. I asked John to please leave before I made the next call, that what I said would either work or it wouldn't, but I couldn't have him there directing me. He was wonderful and immediately understood and left me alone.

I phoned the next foundation on my list and set up a meeting for Sherry, and then next and the next and was successful. Then I phoned the Kaplan Foundation, and that was the incredible one. I asked for Mr. Rubinow, that "this is Mrs. Sherret Chase calling." I immediately had Ray Rubinow on the line and began introducing myself, giving a brief summary of what I wanted to speak to him about. "That's very interesting" said Mr. Rubinow, "at our board meeting just this week, we were discussing broadening our concerns beyond New York City. Do you have time to talk?" he asked me!

He asked if by any chance my husband or I had attended an environmental conservation meeting recently held in Vermont at Johnson State College. I said that we had not but that we had long known William Craig, the president. Mr. Rubinow immediately reacted, asking where I had known Bill Craig. I said that Bill had been executive assistant to my father at Washington State University. There was a hesitation, and then Mr. Rubinow asked if I was the daughter of Dr. Wilson M. Compton. I said, "Yes, I am." Well, that really opened things up.

He wanted to know all about our family, to which I said that probably the most interesting at that time was our youngest daughter, Alice who had just returned from a year in the Peoples' Republic of China, 1971-72. (She had been in China for a number of months at the time of Nixon's historic visit. Alice had gone to China with her great-aunt Carmelita Hinton.) I asked if Mr. Rubinow knew anything about Carmelita Hinton and the Putney School. It turned out that Mr. Kaplan, founder of the Kaplan Fund, had been one of the early supporters of Mrs. Hinton when she founded Putney School in 1935!

Well, as if that wasn't enough, Mr. Rubinow asked if I had black hair or did as a youngster. It turned out that when he was in graduate school at Columbia he had had a good friend named Ataloo. Ataloo was a Chickasaw Indian and consultant to the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C. She was a close friend of my parents who then lived in Washington. It seems that Ray Rubinow met me when I was about ten years old when he had brought Ataloo to our house for a visit with my parents!

I set up all the appointments John had said Sherry could handle in his two days, went into John's office to leave him a note saying that the mission was accomplished, that I was exhausted, that I was flying back to Boston that evening.

The Rubinow encounter led to Kaplan funding of our successful summer intern program with the Yale School of Forestry, and to support of other Center projects. It also, incidentally, led to strong Kaplan support over the years of the NRDC—though that would probably have come about in any case.

In early 1973, during the winter, David Loeks, then executive director of Mid-Hudson Pattern for Progress and a Center director, invited Kenny and me for dinner at his home near New Paltz to meet Sue and Bill Ginsberg. Dave figured that Bill would be a useful recruit to the Center.

It was also during 1973 that the decision was taken to seek a professional executive director. A tentative choice had already been made when John Adams asked that we delay until we could interview a new candidate; that candidate was Peter Borrelli.