



One Family and the Making of Stowe's Sterling Gorge Natural Area

By ROBERT KIENER

Photographed by NATALIE STULTZ

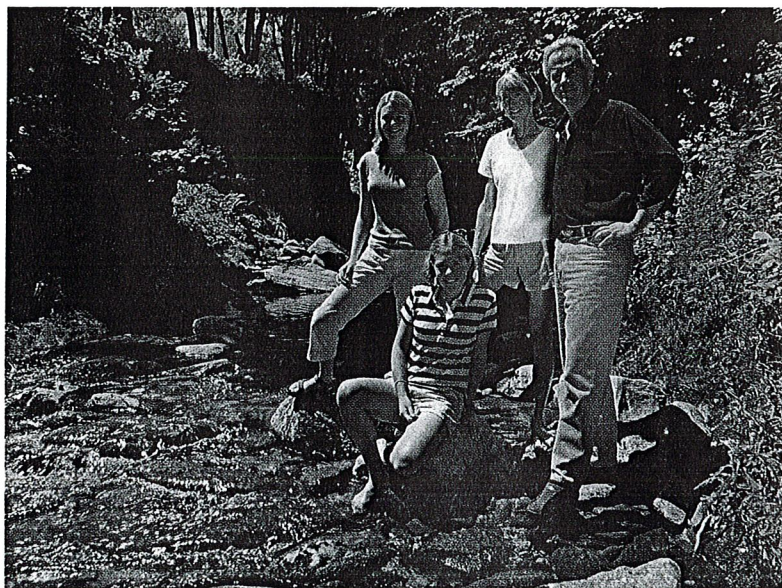
HE WAS NOT AN especially tall man, just 5 feet 10 inches, but he seemed taller, thanks to his ramrod-straight Connecticut Yankee spine. A crown of white hair topped his weather-beaten brow and his intense blue eyes seemed lit from within. His smile was magical, inviting; it made you want to pause and talk awhile.

"Hi," he said to me the first time I met him as I hiked past his property and saw him cleaning a walkway. "I'm Earle. And what's your name?"

That's all it took, and we were off and running; talking about the weather, stone walls, leaf peepers and who knows what else. Earle Anderson, 83, was one of those people who made you feel instantly welcome to his world.

His world was a tiny bit of paradise in the far northern reaches of Stowe that boasts one of the state's most stunning series of waterfalls and pools of swirling water. Visitors know it as the Sterling Falls Gorge Natural Area, but to those of us who live hereabouts, it's simply "the gorge." When I first met him, Earle was living next to the gorge with his son Gar, Gar's wife, Moira, and their two daughters.

I live a quarter-mile from the Andersons, just down Sterling Brook, a meandering slip of a waterway that cuts my property in two as it winds its way to Stowe's Little River. I regularly hike to



The Anderson family, Moira and Gar and daughters Metzi, left, and Robyn, on Sterling Brook.

the gorge. This is a ruggedly beautiful slice of Vermont, rich with hemlocks, maples, spruce, aspens, birch and beech, and home to whitetail deer, moose, otters, foxes, fishers and the shy black bear. Admittedly, I see few of these creatures on my twice-weekly hikes down my hill, across the brook and through the woods to the gorge, but I know they are there.

Usually, when I'd reached the gorge, I would see Earle spreading woodchips on the half-mile-long Sterling Falls Gorge Natural Area's pathways, replacing a signpost, clearing brush or leading a visitor to the best vantage point for photographing Sterling Falls. Clearly, he had fallen in love with this special place and had become its unofficial ambassador.

In time, I too fell under the area's spell. I'd hike to it, snowshoe and cross-country ski across it and bring friends to it whenever they visited me. We'd stand at the gorge's edge, mesmerized, watching the water tumble 105 feet down a

series of falls and cascades. Then one day, as I watched a white-tail buck chase a doe into a stand of birch near the gorge, I asked myself, "I wonder who saved this special bit of Vermont?"

The story of how one man protected a cherished bit of his adopted hometown began in the 1970s. After Gar Anderson, Earle's son, graduated from Johnson State College in the late 1960s, he settled in

nearby Stowe. Lured by its great skiing and hiking, the tall, rangy, Connecticut-born Anderson tried his hand at a variety of jobs: tavern owner, marketing director, builder and commercial developer. Beginning in the 1970s he built the first of five houses in the Sterling Valley region of Stowe, then a beautiful but isolated area with few residents and even fewer roads.

He loved to hike and cross-country ski and there was no better place for both than in Sterling Valley, some seven miles north of the town's picturesque Main Street. On free winter afternoons and weekends he'd pile his snowshoes and cross-country skis into his Jeep and head off onto one of the valley's old logging roads. He'd drive as far as he could and would then spend hours gliding across old pastures and bushwhacking between stands of aspens and beech trees. At the Sterling Gorge he'd explore the ruins of a century-old lumber mill, foundations of

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farmhouses or a ruined boarding house and marvel at the way the falls had chiseled out potholes, or devil's kettles, in the schist. He hardly ever saw another person in this remote wonderland.

One of his few neighbors, photographer and artist Verner Z. Reed, saw how much this young flatlander loved the area and one day in 1978 surprised him with a telephone call. "You know that land of mine up by the gorge?" he asked.

"I sure do," said the 33-year-old Anderson.

"If you want to buy it, it's yours. Send me a check for \$2,000 and pay me the rest when you get it."

It was the chance of a lifetime. Soon, with his father's help, Anderson owned 64 acres of some of the choicest real estate in northern Vermont. The property was miles from the nearest roads, had no electric or telephone lines, but Anderson made himself a promise: "Someday, I will build a home there."

On his free afternoons he would explore his property, that special piece of the Sterling Valley that had literally fallen into his hands. He also combed history books and talked to old-timers, some of whom remembered the town of Sterling and the sawmill that was built by Paphro D. Pike in 1860.

Cellarholes, foundations, stone walls and long-abandoned apple orchards are all that remain of Sterling, chartered in February 1782. It was home to numerous families including Moses Vilas, his wife and their 10 children. One of them, William, helped settle Burlington and became president of the powerful Burlington Savings Bank; Samuel made millions and founded the Vilas National Bank; Levi served in the Vermont legislature. As the *Vermont Historical Gazetteer* noted, "There have been some of the smartest men in the country born in Sterling. It has proved this to be a good place to be born in."

Anderson married and had a child, then another. To help make his dream a reality, he spent countless hours wielding his chainsaw, restoring old pastures, clearing by himself thousands of trees on the land on which he hoped to one day build his home. The more time he spent near Sterling Gorge, the more he realized he had to somehow preserve its pristine beauty. As he remembers today, "I knew I had to do something."

Putting in a road and stringing telephone and electric lines to the site of his proposed house would cost Anderson tens of thousands of dollars. He realized he had to develop his 64-acre parcel, which included the Sterling Falls Gorge, if he ever hoped to build. But he knew the ecology of the gorge was fragile. "Building too close to the gorge could prove disastrous," he explains. "To preserve the stream channel, for example, you have to keep it shaded. You can't touch the trees."

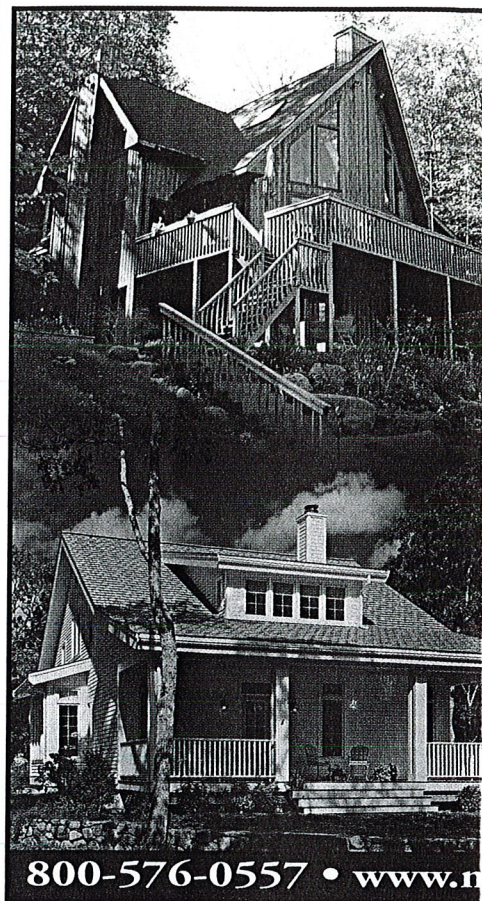
He also knew that he needed help. In the spring of 1988, Anderson, then a 45-year-old businessman, enrolled in a Land Management Course at the University of Vermont. A term later he emerged with an A+, a blueprint for the Sterling Falls Gorge Natural Area Trust and an adviser, his former teacher, UVM professor Richard Paradis. Later that year, after countless letters, reports, hearings, testimonies and legal bills, the trust was born.

Anderson sold off several of his lots to like-minded conservationists who agreed to pay 2.5 percent of their purchase price into the trust. Subsequent buyers will pay to the trust an amount equal to the Vermont property transfer tax due on the sale, to be used for the perpetual upkeep of Sterling Gorge. The Anderson family agreed to match those first donations out of their own pockets. Gar and his parents donated 7.3 acres that encompass and surround the gorge to the newly formed trust.

Now the gorge would be protected forever and open to anyone who wanted to explore its unique beauty. The Town of Stowe was so impressed with Anderson's plan that residents voted to buy a 3.8-acre lot that abuts the gorge. An August 1989 front-page headline in the *Stowe Reporter* trumpeted: "Gorge land preserved for posterity." It was the town's first conservation purchase.

Anderson did build his dream house, a massive six-bedroom stone villa within earshot of the waterfalls and cascades that make Sterling Falls Gorge one of Vermont's most-treasured spots. He included an apartment for his mother, Betty, and his father in the plans and coaxed them to move up from Connecticut.

As we walk across Gar Anderson's broad expanse of lawn, I notice a car of visitors driving into the gorge parking lot across from the house. Some people,



**Vermont weather
can be really harsh.
So, we replace dryness
with softness... no kidding**

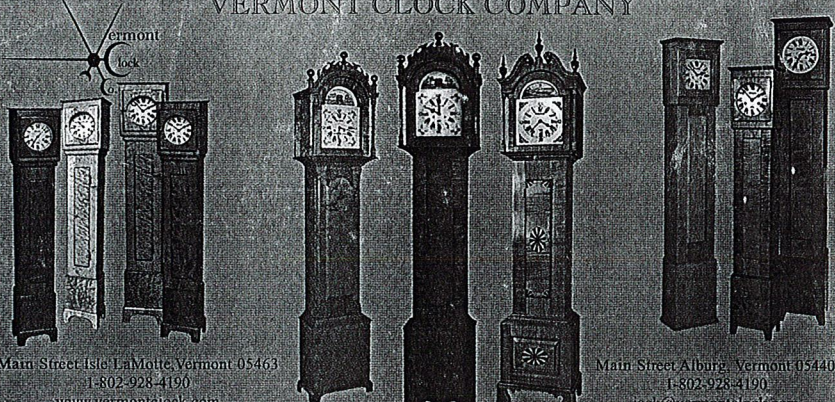
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I tell him, might consider this an intrusion on his family's privacy. He pauses a minute, then answers, "I like my privacy but I also enjoy people. And I love the looks on their faces when they experience the beauty of the gorge for themselves. There's no greater thrill."

As I leave and begin the hike to my home across Sterling Gorge and through the former farmsteads of the long-vanished town of Sterling, I am reminded that one man, one family, can make a difference. All it takes is a devotion to the land and the desire to protect it.

Look around Vermont; there are scores of unheralded Gar Andersons. And we are all the wealthier for having them in our midst.

Earle Anderson spent countless hours tending to the land around his son's home. As he grew older, he could do less and less, but he never failed to welcome visitors to his pride and joy, the Sterling Falls Gorge. "I think working on the land up here invigorated my dad," says Gar Anderson. "He was always a battler and had licked cancer and leukemia over the years."

Earle Anderson died last year, but his legacy lives on. In a way, he is still greeting visitors to the gorge. A huge white marble boulder marks his and his wife's graves, just a few feet from the entrance to the Sterling Falls Gorge. As neighbor and friend Margaret Hoeft says, "Earle is still here. Now he's part of the land that he grew to love so much."

Freelance writer Robert Kiener wrote about Stowe's mountain rescue team in our Winter 2001 issue. Natalie Stultz photographed the Branon family in our Spring 2003 issue.

How to Go

From the center of Stowe it's about seven miles to Sterling Gorge. Take the Mountain Road (Route 108) to Weeks Hill Road. Turn right on Weeks Hill Road and then right on Percy Hill Road. Go left onto West Hill Road for several miles until it ends and turn left onto Sterling Valley Road. The gorge parking lot is at the end of Sterling Valley Road. Cross the bridge and go down the steps to the left to begin the interpretive trail that details some of the gorge's interesting biological and geological features. There are numerous other trails nearby.

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