

Farmstead to Community Project

The History of the Stan Yoder Memorial Preserve

by Mason Krausz Christensen, Pennsylvania State University, Department of History

In 1999, one of the most honorable individuals in the Boalsburg community died just before his retirement. That man, Stanley Yoder, had previously enriched everyone's lives through his kindness and generosity. Yoder had loved the outdoors and had spent much time on hunting and hiking trips. As a result, his many friends felt that preserving a bit of the outdoors would help uphold his legacy. The particular piece of land chosen to become the Stan Yoder Memorial Preserve lies next to where he lived and possesses a unique history that spans multiple centuries. It begins with the village of Boalsburg's founding.¹

In the year 1808, Andrew Stroup purchased land in the western part of Penns Valley to set up a village that he promoted as Springfield. Among the earliest purchasers of land from Stroup was a German settler named George Sheneberger, who obtained over 300 acres at a price of \$2,797.87. Of this acreage, most he used for farming, including land along today's West Main Street. Not content at being only a farmer, Sheneberger helped direct the Agricultural Society of Centre County as well as hold several township government positions. After Sheneberger died in 1864, his land was divided up. To the west of Boalsburg, a 100 acre farmland section of his former property eventually ended up in the hands of Samuel and John H. Stover.²

Unlike Sheneberger, these two men were not primarily known for their farming. Samuel managed a tavern and John went into politics. Samuel owned the Boalsburg Tavern which is today known as Duffy's. What stood out most with him was that he

¹ Julie Yoder, "Dad's Life," October 13, 2006.

² John B. Linn, *History of Centre and Clinton Counties, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, PA: L. H. Everts, 1883), 321; Myrtle Maragel, "History of Boalsburg," *Centre Daily Times*, October 1, 1938, installment 4; Deed, John H Stover (grantor) to William H Stover (grantee), January 29, 1872, Book 32, Page 559, Centre County Recorder of Deeds, Bellefonte, PA; *Old Boalsburg Day* (Boalsburg, PA: Harris Township Parent-Teachers Association, 1952), 9.

removed the bar at the tavern because he did not believe in selling liquor. John rose to prominence by becoming Colonel of the 184th Pennsylvania Infantry Regiment during the Civil War. After the war, he immigrated to Missouri. There, he was elected to Congress in 1870. Still, even with John in Missouri, the lands that became the Yoder Preserve remained with other Stovers until nearly the end of the nineteenth century.³

In the first half of the twentieth century, Theodore Davis Boal played a major role in shaping today's Boalsburg. Beyond what he accomplished in the village, he also ran a major farming operation across Centre County. Before the Great Depression, Boal had control of over a dozen farms, which he rented to local families. The land formerly owned by the Stovers became part of his operation in 1906 when he purchased it from Harry Shirk. These "100 acres more or less" were eventually labeled as Blue Spring Farm after a nearby geographic feature. Theodore Boal died in 1938 after previously transferring Blue Spring Farm to his son Pierre a decade earlier.

Leading a colorful life, Pierre managed to enlist in the French Cavalry during World War I before transferring to the Lafayette Flying Squadron. After the war, he entered the U.S. Foreign Service and eventually served as Ambassador to Bolivia. Both Pierre and Theodore before him were frequently out of town. As a result, Claude Aikens, a friend of the Boal family and bank president, managed much of their local affairs including land sales.⁴

³ ; Myrtle Maragel, "History of Boalsburg," *Centre Daily Times*, October 8, 1938, installment 9; Joseph Ward, *History of the One hundred and sixth regiment, Pennsylvania volunteers* (Philadelphia: F. McManus, Jr. & Co., 1906), 437-438.

⁴ Christopher Lee. e-mail messages with author, September-November, 2009; David Ishler (nephew of Carl Ishler), in discussion with the author, October 2009; Deed, Harry Shirk (grantor) to Theodore Boal (grantee), March 31, 1906, Book 96, Page 327, Centre County Recorder of Deeds, Bellefonte, PA; Deed, Theodore Davis Boal (grantor) to Pierre de Lagarde Boal (grantee), September 19, 1928, Book 139, Page 564, Centre County Recorder of Deeds, Bellefonte, PA ; *Chapel of the Family of Christopher Columbus*

The 1950s are often cited in American history books as being an era of massive suburban development. Due to a need for money, Pierre sold large amounts of land including Blue Spring Farm beginning in that decade. At that location, Boal authorized a housing subdivision plan for “Home Lots on Blue Spring Farm” that imposed specific building restrictions upon those who purchased land. A deed from a 1955 sale states that land was for “residential purposes only.” Temporary structures like trailers could not be used as dwellings and “offensive enclosures” like hog pens were not to be built. Most interestingly, homes were supposed to compare in “size and value” to other existing ones in the development and cost to construct no less than \$10,000. These conditions only remained in effect until 1974. One of the earliest to move to the development, local resident Robert Moore was enamored with the setting. Living next door to what became the Yoder Preserve, he remembered open surroundings with trees marking fencerows. In the area were fields of corn and wheat as well as the occasional apple tree.⁵

The Stitzers and Ishlers and other families who rented Boal farmlands were charged low rents. Farmer Carl Ishler rented Blue Spring Farm from the late 1940s through the 1950s and his rent only cost him a small portion of his crop. Ishler primarily grew hay and corn on the site because the land was not of very good quality. With Blue Spring Farm decreasing in size as pieces were sold off, he left in the late 1950s and the remainder of the farm remained vacant for the next fifteen years. For a few years in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the land that became the preserve was farmed by Eugene

and the Boal Mansion: The Story of an American Heritage (Boalsburg, PA: The Columbus Chapel – Boalsburg Estate Society, Inc, 1956), 9-10.

⁵ Christopher Lee. e-mail messages with author, September-November, 2009; Deed, Pierre de Lagarde Boal (grantor) to Clinton L. Davis (grantee), April 16, 1955, Book 226, Page 448, Centre County Recorder of Deeds, Bellefonte, PA; Robert Moore (West Main Street Resident), in discussion with the author, October 2009.

Corl. Using a wide 6-row corn planter, Corl had to access the land from Blue Spring Lane to the west but this became difficult with the development of that street. Owners of property on that street cut off access in the early 1980s and the steepness of the land toward Main Street made that way impractical as an entry point. Thus, farming at the site came to an end.⁶

After Pierre Boal died, what became the Yoder Preserve was transferred to his daughter Mathilde Boal Lee in 1974. This remainder of Blue Spring Farm technically consisted of two parcels: one contained 2.166 acres of land while the other to the rear contained 12.55. After Eugene Corl stopped farming the land, it became wild and overgrown with at least one tree house being set up there. It would take decades for this condition to change.⁷

Before explaining how the Stan Yoder Preserve was created, it is important to know more about who was Yoder. Stanley Jonas Yoder was born in Belleville, Pennsylvania, on August 13, 1938, as the eldest of three children. Seeking the education to become an orthopedic surgeon, he graduated from Thomas Jefferson Medical School in Philadelphia in 1964 before getting an internship at Geisinger. After serving as a doctor in Alaska, Montana, and other places, Stan Yoder moved to Boalsburg in 1978. Moving to a barn converted into a residence at 404 West Main Street, Yoder brought his wife Lorna along with his children, Phillip and Julie. There, he had possession of a five-acre field he used to walk his dogs as well as grow his own fresh vegetables. As an

⁶ Ishler, discussion; Eugene Corl (farmer at Yoder Preserve site), in discussion with the author, September 2009.

⁷ Deed, Boalsburg Village Conservancy (grantor) to Harris Township (grantee), October 15, 2001, Book. 1285, Page 568-569, Centre County Recorder of Deeds, Bellefonte, PA ; Patti Devecka (member of the Stan Yoder Memorial Preserve Committee), in discussion with the author, November 2009.

orthopedic surgeon, Yoder worked at Centre Community Hospital from 1978 to 1993 and at University Orthopedics from 1993 on.⁸

Several people who knew Yoder described him as having a common touch. This simply meant that he would be kind toward everyone he met, greeting everyone from doctors to janitors. Yoder was heavily involved with the Boalsburg community including serving as President of the Boalsburg Village Conservancy for multiple terms. He often presided at Boalsburg's annual Memorial Day service and was responsible for community benefit projects such as raising money to install streetlights in the village. When local organizations had problems, he was known for assisting them. In 1998, for example, after the Boal Mansion Museum had fallen \$15,000 into debt, he gave a special donation to help keep the museum open. For the Boalsburg Heritage Museum, he would hold fundraising dinners at his home where women would bring in their specialty dishes and he would supply a round of meat. The cost of admission would be an amount around \$50. One year, he was unable to hold the event and actually donated \$500 so it could be held elsewhere. In June 1999, Stan Yoder was just a few months away from retirement and was planning on moving to Montana. He passed away that month at the age of 60.⁹

Soon after his death, the idea for creating a park to honor Stanley Yoder came from his neighbors along West Main Street. At, about the same time, it was learned that the Lees were planning to sell the open parcel next to Yoder's former house. Their reason for this was to help plan for the estate of Mathilde Boal Lee. Soon afterward, a Stan Yoder Memorial Preserve Committee (a subcommittee of the Boalsburg Village

⁸ Julie Yoder, "Dad's Life," October 13, 2006.

⁹ Earl Kesler (Director of Boalsburg Heritage Museum), in discussion with the author, November 2009, Julie de Rouville (formerly Julie Yoder, daughter of Stan), in discussion with the author, November 2009; Christopher Lee. e-mail messages with author, September-November, 2009.

Conservancy), established to present a plan for opening a nature park at that site, held its first meeting on February 24, 2000. The envisioned elements of the park were to include walking trails, an informational kiosk, a “small pavilion for environmental education classes/field trips and a series of interpretive/educational signage.”¹⁰

At this point, members of the committee were not even sure if they would be able to purchase the parcel. Still, at the Memorial Day festival that year, a pledge drive began, but with no actual money collected. Later that year, the land was finally put up for sale. The Lee family made clear to the Preserve Committee that the land would only go to the highest bidder. The Preserve Committee continued fundraising activities, and in April 2001, they received an Acquisition Grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources for \$175,000, contingent upon raising matching funds.¹¹

In May, events came to a climax as the Lees sold their land. Development company GTW Associates run by Tom Songer acquired the property for \$610,000. Before a packed Harris Township Board of Supervisors meeting, it was revealed that his plan called for thirty to fifty single family homes to be constructed on site. Songer offered to donate an acre for a small parklet so that Committee funds could be used on the site. However, this was taken as a brush-off to the Preserve Committee.¹²

But after receiving intense criticism the previous week, Tom Songer agreed to sell the Lee parcel to the Stan Yoder Memorial Preserve Committee on May 21st. The deal reached required the committee to pay \$640,000 by a deadline of October 15th. At this

¹⁰ Michael Spearing, “Land Deal has Losing Party Crying Foul,” *Centre Daily Times*, May 15, 2001 ; Boalsburg Village Conservancy, “Yoder Info,” July 19, 2006; Boalsburg Village Conservancy, “Excerpts from Stan Yoder Preserve DCNR Acquisition Grant Application,” November 1, 2000.

¹¹ Devecka, discussion; Conservancy, “Yoder Info.”

¹² Spearing, “Land Deal has Losing Party Crying Foul.”

point, \$350,000 in cash and another \$135,000 in pledges had been raised for the preserve. Still, further fundraising was needed to cover the remaining money needed.¹³

After Memorial Day 2001, the pledge drive continued along with an eclectic set of fundraising events. For example, t-shirt sales were held and food was sold at the People's Choice Festival in July. Other notable fundraising events included a "Blue Jeans for Stan Day," a fine art auction held on September 26th, a night at the theater, and a bike-walk-run event on October 7th. Even with all of the money raised, an interest free loan of \$175,000 by local resident Joe Banks and several smaller grants were needed to pay GTW Associates by October 15th. With the money paid, the land was transferred to the ownership of the Boalsburg Village Conservancy, who then donated it to Harris Township for use as a public park.

Fundraising continued after the land was purchased because the Banks loan still needed to be paid back. Events included holiday ornament sales, quilt raffles, a haunted walk, and even fajita sales. The loan was finally paid off in November 2003 and a formal dedication ceremony was held for the preserve in October 2006.¹⁴

Before the village of Boalsburg was settled, the Penns Valley area was sparsely settled and largely still in the hands of nature. The Stan Yoder Preserve exists today as an attempt to recreate a piece of that natural state that existed before the days of Stroup, Stover, and Boal.

¹³ Chance Conner, "Group Changes Course, Sells Boalsburg Land to Park Committee," *Centre Daily Times*, May 22, 2001.

¹⁴ Conservancy, "Yoder Info."

Bibliography

Boalsburg Village Conservancy. "Excerpts from Stan Yoder Preserve DCNR Acquisition Grant Application." November 1, 2000.

Boalsburg Village Conservancy. "Yoder Info." July 19, 2006.

Chapel of the Family of Christopher Columbus and the Boal Mansion: The Story of an American Heritage. Boalsburg, PA: The Columbus Chapel – Boalsburg Estate Society, Inc. 1956.

Conner, Chance. "Group Changes Course, Sells Boalsburg Land to Park Committee." *Centre Daily Times*. May 22, 2001.

Corl, Eugene. In discussion with the author. September 2009.

De Rouville, Jule. In discussion with the author. November 2009.

Deed, Boalsburg Village Conservancy (grantor) to Harris Township (grantee), October 15, 2001, Book 1285, Page 568-569, Centre County Recorder of Deeds, Bellefonte, PA

Deed, Harry Shirk (grantor) to Theodore Boal (grantee), March 31, 1906, Book 96, Page 327, Centre County Recorder of Deeds, Bellefonte, PA

Deed, John H. Stover (grantor) to William H. Stover (grantee), January 29, 1872, Book 32, Page 559, Centre County Recorder of Deeds, Bellefonte, PA

Deed, Pierre de Lagarde Boal (grantor) to Clinton L. Davis (grantee), April 16, 1955, Book 226, Page 448, Centre County Recorder of Deeds, Bellefonte, PA.

Deed, Theodore Davis Boal (grantor) to Pierre de Lagarde Boal (grantee), September 19, 1928, Book 139, Page 564, Centre County Recorder of Deeds, Bellefonte, PA

Devecka, Patricia. In discussion with the author. November, 2009.

Ishler, David. In discussion with the author. October, 2009.

Kesler, Earl. In discussion with the author. November, 2009.

Lee, Christopher. e-mail messages with author. September-November, 2009.

Linn, John Blair. *History of Centre and Clinton Counties*. Philadelphia : L.H. Everts. 1883.

Magargel, Myrtle. "The History of Boalsburg." *Centre Daily Times*, 1938-1939.

Moore, Robert. In discussion with the author. October, 2009.

Old Boalsburg Day. Boalsburg, PA: Harris Township Parent-Teachers Association. 1952.

Spearing, Michael. "Land Deal has Losing Party Crying Foul." *Centre Daily Times*. May 15, 2001.

Ward, Joseph. *History of the One Hundred and Sixth Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers*. Philadelphia: F. McManus, Jr. & Co. 1906.

Yoder, Julie. "Dad's Life." October 13, 2006.