



**HONORING BILL McELWAIN
FIFTY YEARS OF GREEN POWER IN WESTON**

by Ned Rossiter

As we all celebrate the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day, and the 40th of Land's Sake, this year brings one more anniversary of another chapter in Weston's history. A great teacher and environmentalist, Bill McElwain, founded Green Power Farm in 1970, fifty years ago.

Those of us who knew Bill when he lived in town remember his youthful face and an up-country, Yankee demeanor. Bill was a visionary and a charmer, albeit with a practical side that gives him a capacity to bring people together and get things done. He came to town in 1968 - a time of political upheaval, generational conflict, and clashing values. Many young people in those days were alienated from society and being told not to trust anyone over 30.

To help address the youth problem the town hired Bill in 1971 as project director for the Weston Youth Commission (long since disbanded). He wanted to start a farm on town land worked by young people eager to learn about organic farming, well before this became a household word. Food would be shipped to the city to feed the needy, giving a sense of purpose to his young, idealistic workers. He called it Green Power Farm.

From that moment Bill never looked back. He quickly persuaded the school authorities to allow him to build a sugar shack next to the Middle School and soon had a vigorous maple syrup program underway staffed mainly by young people. He connected with community groups and farmers' markets in Boston. He was always surrounded by young people who loved him (and he was way over 30). In all seasons he was seen driving town trucks, or occasionally an old 1941 fire truck (for maple sap) filled with kids in the back – something completely impossible today.

Thus Bill began the practice of active stewardship of the conservation land that the Town and The Weston Forest and Trail Association had been buying for over a decade. In time Green Power started a number of young people (including my daughter) on careers in farming, forestry, land management, and the environmental movement and helped make Weston a much more environmentally conscious town. Hundreds of youth and adults learned something about organic farming and sustainable land management from him. He is one of the most important figures in Weston's recent history, and his legacy is huge. Thanks in part to Bill's work stirring up the issues and inspiring the youth Weston today has something of a national reputation for land conservation and stewardship.

When he won a distinguished service award from Brandeis University in 1971, Bill described himself to the *Middlesex News* as "a rabid conservative businessman, turned teacher turned radical philosopher-farmer." The photo of him for the article has a poster prominently in the background that says, "*The Arms Race is Insane.*" Bill's radicalism defies easy description. He was part communitarian and part libertarian. He didn't much like government, bureaucracy, big business, and authority generally. In a 1981 article he described himself, "as a latter day peasant with 20th century accessories, and possessed of the peasant's obstructive attitude towards change." Above all he was an environmentalist. He wrote about the influence on him of a 1973 book called *Small is Beautiful* by an English economist, E.F. Schumacher. The book was an elegant argument for what Schumacher called "Buddhist Economics" – building small scale, high impact development projects in the Third World which would not be too energy dependent or damage the environment. What Bill understood, as Thoreau did over 150 years ago, is that environmentalism is not just about soils and farming methods. A sensitivity to nature, and treading lightly upon the earth inevitably require a whole worldview.

Bill was a very good writer. Partly influenced by *Small is Beautiful*, he began to write an occasional column for *The Town Crier* called, *Thinking Small*. Looking back today it is clear he was really thinking big. Those columns ran for over 12 years and are amongst the liveliest writing the *Town Crier* has published. Bill took on every topic - education, the nature of community, waste treatment, the use of town buildings, and the importance of composting, to mention a few. "I try to say things that are kind of outrageous in sort of a joshing way," he wrote. He would identify a problem and suggest a radical solution in a light-hearted, humorous way. He became Weston's gadfly as his articles gently pushed a sometimes-reluctant Weston into becoming a more environmentally conscious town. Here are some excerpts from these articles.

Environmental issues were at the core of everything Bill said and did. In a 1975 article he tackled the issue head on.

The environmental movement in this country is the most fundamental challenge to the established order that that has confronted any society since the church-dominated order of the middle ages was challenged by the men of science. "What I'm after in the development of a community within the Weston political community is predicated on the existence of a shared outlook, a unifying commitment to a whole value system and way of life that would in many respects be the antithesis of what prevails here...Participants would pool labor, skills and money to cooperatively build the buildings, and community government would stress full participation in debate and implementation by all members"

This was his most radical proposal which, indeed, came at a time when radical ideas for transforming American society and politics seemed to be coming from everywhere.

Pollution and the way we handled waste and trash back then appalled him. He proposed a regional waste treatment center for the Mass Broken Stone site, then up for sale, which would include composting and recycling facilities and an incinerator.

The percentage of combustible material in (the incinerator) would determine its value as a source of energy, but in any case the incineration stage could be counted on to supply steam for power generators ... as well as heat and power to its associated parts in conjunction with rooftop solar collectors. Or an extension of this function could make the project the power source for an electrified commuter rail line using the nearby tracks to and from Boston.

Bill advocated voluntary regional cooperation involving Wayland Weston, Sudbury and other nearby towns to solve common problems of waste and pollution and to protect the earth.

...what we need now is to institute small public farms to produce food no longer produced by small private farmers. ... we three towns should set up a Composting District, compost all that jointly-produced septage which is in reality only processed food, and return it to use on our jointly-worked foodlands, to enrich the soil in a way that wiser civilization have been doing for thousands of years. Another way to regionalize new activities at the local level would be through establishment of a central sawmill to which the town could send waste wood for conversion into lumber, firewood and chipwood."

He had a major role in the design and development of the present transfer station on Church Street, and his detailed, thoughtful articles educated the town on proper

composting and recycling methods. He saw clearly that saving the environment means changing people's lifestyles.

Bill advocated a close, active, vibrant, community life for Weston. He wanted public gathering places for community farming, cultural events, workshops, political debate, and for hanging out. When the town considered building a new fire station, Bill had an idea for the old one in the town center, which was a true flight-of-fancy:

I've always harbored a vision of the fire station as a Community Center. Can you picture it in your mind's eye? In summer a terrace out front where now the engines take the sun on Friday morning: gaily-striped umbrellas over round tables where citizens loll and sip their morning coffee, and later stop in for a brew after work; attractive, attentive and polite young high school waiters and waitresses bring food and refreshments."

He had a similar idea in 1980 for the Field School when it was empty and the town had begun to plan for a community center.

So, let's begin in the basement... There's a lot of underutilized space there to accommodate some of my longtime pet projects, to wit: a bike shop, a free garage, a machine shop with forge and welding equipment, a woodworking shop, a storage for root crops from the farm, a processing and freezing kitchen, bakery and walk-in food co-op.

Bill badly wanted a pub in town. He knew that pubs build community.

If the library and fire station stay put and enough people agree...then we ought to have a pub at the Jones House. The place is natural for that and for a restaurant as well. To those who object that a pub would bring the wrong element to Weston, I can only reply, 'Not to worry, we are already here.'

This idea, by the way, is still very much alive.

Bill obviously enjoyed writing these articles. They are funny, irreverent and, yes, outrageous in places. But they are never flippant or frivolous, and never threatening. He was deadly serious about the problems he addressed, and his radical thinking made him very much part of his time. He presented alternative solutions to the problems of his day as a way of provoking discussion and thought.

In the late 1980's budget constraints in Weston led Bill to turn over Green Power to a younger man while he moved on to a family farm project in New Hampshire. In February 1991, the Conservation Commission cut the Green Power staff position and began contracting out the Greenpower projects to Land's Sake which carries on the vision and the work to this day.

Thirty-five years later we note progress in the local environment. Indeed much of what Bill proposed has come to pass. Many more small farms are thriving. We recycle now and compost wastes and are wary of pesticides. We still ship food to Boston's soup kitchens, and use his sugar shack. Above all, he leaves us with this wonderful notion - Green Power.

Ned Rossiter was a Board President of Land's Sake 2000-2011

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