



# Silent Sentinels

Winter reveals  
New England's signature  
stone walls

BY DUO DICKINSON

Until I read Robert M. Thorson's great books on New England's stone walls — *Stone By Stone*, and its successor, *Exploring Stone Walls* — I had no idea others feasted on my own personal obsession: the ribbons of rock silently racing through our countryside. Thorson cites a 1939 estimate by one Oliver Bowles that there were 240,000 miles of walls crisscrossing the New England landscape — longer than the entire coastline of the United States.

Those walls are an integral part of a landscape Michael Pollan describes in *Second Nature*, his classic tribute to the relationship between humanity and land, as "a patchwork of abandoned farms swiftly being overtaken by second-growth forest." Those land-engorging forests obscure these relentless lines of human toil until, magically, leaves fall, green turns to grey in late autumn and stark lines reassert their hard-edged presence.

This revelatory impact gains a dramatic edge when the first snow turns mottled stone slides into rending cuts in the temporary white blanket's smothering softness. It was also news to me that there is an active group of "stone wall tourists" who seek out these now-useless barriers and combine the disciplines of history, geology, topography and hiking to retrace the archeology of a bygone agricultural era. Deep River naturalist and author of the book *Living on an Acre: A Practical Guide to the Self-Reliant Life*, Christine Woodside acknowledges that "Something about signs of mankind in the woods always gets me."

Sometimes I nearly crash my car when I catch a glancing view of these revealed remnants. They represent to me at once the most noble and lamentable aspects of the human spirit. Whether they are (as Thorsen classifies them) "rectangular stack," "inward-slanted, battered" or "triangular-form fieldstone fences," stone walls were not merely products of farmers defining their fields; these walls are ultimately the product of a landscape defining the lives of those who live on and within it.

Crashing into a New World some three centuries ago, newly arrived European settlers and successive generations had to eat. Survival meant subsistence farming and that meant taming the land to the greatest extent possible — which was not very great. They farmed where they sat and that meant

making the most of a landscape that had been created by two huge ancient realities: the buckling of rolling hills and mountains, and then the crushing rock bulldozers of glaciers that chipped every ridge, peak and promontory off of those mountains. Those rock-doing glaciers rolled millions upon millions of rocks across thousands of miles of landscape, crushing them deep into the ground as they went along, finally dropping off their lightest till to create Long Island.

So 300 or 400 years ago European settlers encountered hillsides replete with rocks that needed to be removed (along with old-growth trees, of course) to create something that approximated farmland. The only option was for these desperate but dogged land-tamers was to remove the rocks, leave the soil and assemble the rocks into boundary lines either between properties or between sections of larger farms. The Beverly, Mass. group PrimaryResearch.Org recently completed a study of New England stone walls. In it, Corey Schweizer notes: "If a stone wall was deemed sound, then the owner was not liable for damage done to his crops by other farmer's animals." If the settler was fortunate, there might be an ox or two available to lend muscle to the effort, but mostly human backs were broken in an endless struggle to undo thousands of years of natural forces. And even when the job was completed, the property owner was left with a thin layer of arable soil and a climate defined by a short growing season and deadly winters.

In the 19th century new settlements to the west revealed that there was an expansive country that had once been under an enormous inland sea (called the prairie) where 20 or 30 inches of rock-free, beautiful, arable soil was available just by busting up the sod that covered it. But many New England farmers refused to budge, and crops were often replaced by pastures and livestock, but ultimately even that proved to be scarcely tenable and eventually the vast majority of farms that once denuded the forest land of New England gave up the ghost. People either moved to cities to work in

## STONEWALLS *Continued from 19*

factories or "real" farms out West, leaving those mute rock walls where they stood.

What remains today is the image of relatively young forests completely engulfing those stone walls. The inexorable explosion of natural growth is utterly ignorant of the millions of hours of backbreaking human labor needed to remove the stones, create walls, and farm the land. The poignancy is undeniable. A herculean effort has proven to be futile, and the bottomless reservoir of life-force that is our natural world swallowed what humankind had only temporarily tamed.

A 2007 USA Today article noted that the appeal of stone walls was so magnetic that the stones themselves were being purloined, wall by wall, and remounted in McMansion facades and new gated community walls. This pilfering, the paper reported, had caused a new preservation movement to spontaneously erupt — led by Robert Thorson himself. As Thorson noted in that article: "Areas have their signature land forms, and in New England it's the stone wall. They shout out, 'I'm here — I'm here and nowhere else.'"

What does that reality have to do with anything other than being a graphic example of the ultimate futility of human striving? Beyond their historic reality, this man-and-nature tableau is ripe for metaphoric interpretation. Metaphors are dangerous — forcing a connection between a state of being and a physical reality has more obvious downsides than upside potential. "Dumb as a post" works quite well for me, but I've never understood why any part of a witch's anatomy would be cold given their hell-bent status.

I find these walls to be a powerful silent metaphor for parenthood in its full cycle. In preparation to creating a nest we clear the raw forest of our childless lives of the many things that can't be there when we completely reorient the way we live to having children. We cultivate a fertile place where our children can grow and remove all obstacles to that growth. Parents do everything they can to protect their spawn from life's hazards — drugs, bad behavior, poor grades, strange haircuts, tattoos. But in creating a safe place

to grow and providing by walling off the dangers of a cruel world for our children, we have only temporarily held back the inevitable transition those nurturing acts facilitated. Our "crop" — our offspring — are bound by the walls that we have created only until their own life-force — their inexorable need to be who they are — overwhelms those walls and their careful cultivation. If we are good parents, our best efforts at control are supposed to fail. We never harvest their bounty — they simply outgrow our boundaries.

So as my children return from college for the holidays as (mostly) grown men, I realize that all the preparations that my wife and I undertook — the building of walls to keep them safe — are ultimately and inevitably overcome by the fact that the greater world takes over, our children become adults, and our ability to cultivate, fertilize, weed and define the edges upon which our children grow naturally ceases to exist.

I'm not so sure what that finally means, but as with many other things these days, these abandoned walls amid raging trees makes me a little weepy.

Continued on 42