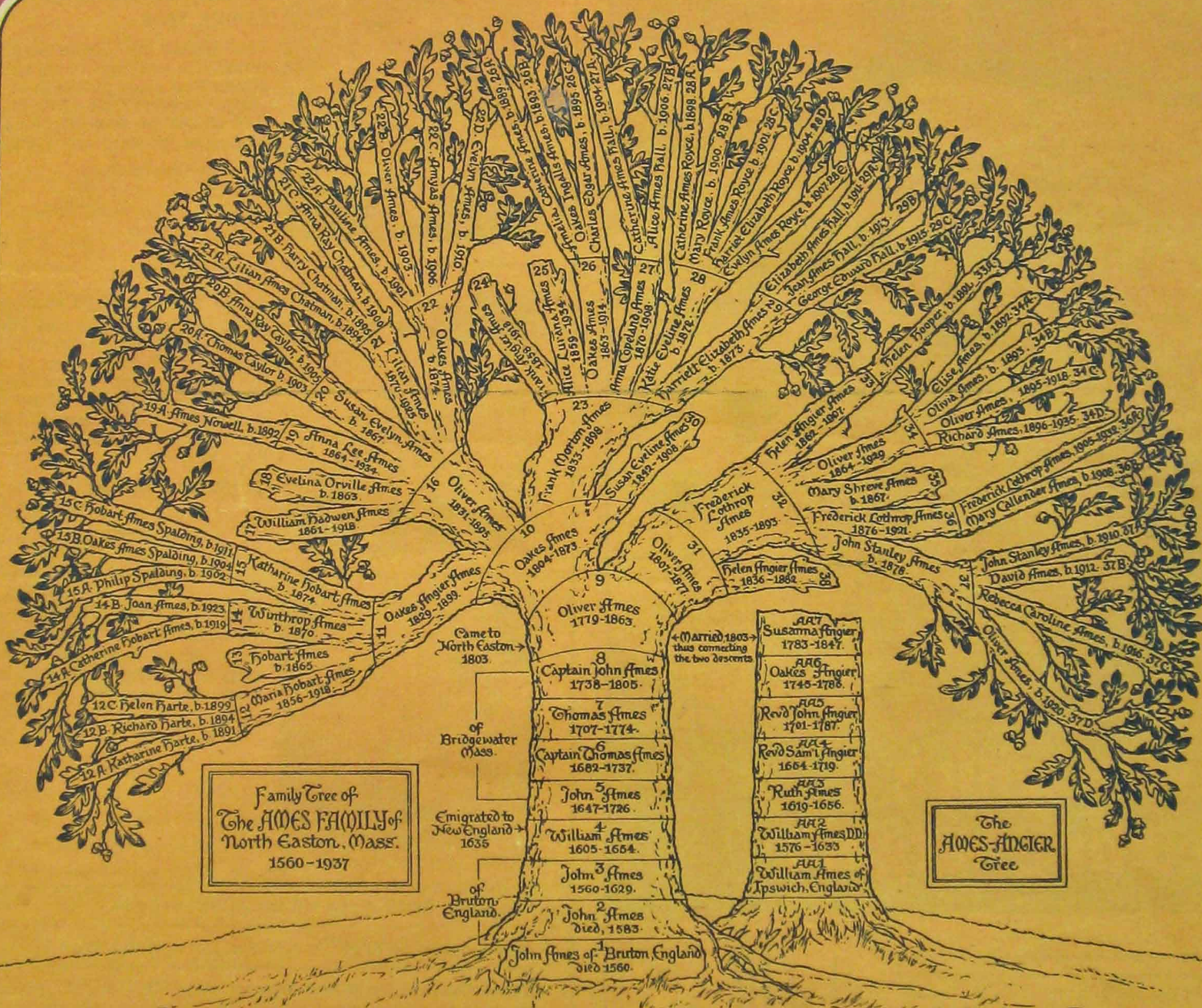


# GLOBE

SUNDAY, APRIL 13, 1975







*build up a herd enough to supplement the income from the maple syrup," says Clayton. He made \$1200 last year from selling syrup.*





# A Farmer Named Clayton

If Clayton Nowell ever took the time from the daily chores on his farm in Danbury, New Hampshire, to read the gloomy statistics mounting up against the farming industry he'd probably turn in his hoe; but he's not in it for the money

By DONALD GROPMAN

We first met Clayton Nowell a few years ago when we bought a summer place on the Hill in New Hampshire. He has a farm a mile and a half down the road.

The Hill is a few thousand acres of country land in Danbury, New Hampshire, about 25 miles northwest of Concord. It's made up of dips and ridges carved out by the glacier during the last Ice Age. The woods are beech, pine, various birch, aspen and poplar. Some of the oak trees get pretty big, but the best trees are the old sugar maples. From the top of the Hill you can see for 50 miles, but from most vantage points the eastern horizon is dominated by Ragged Mountain, six or seven miles away. A spring-fed stream winds down from the top and empties into Eagle Pond.

Before the Civil War, a lot of people lived on the Hill. The dirt road winding up used to be a coach road, and the cellar hole of the old coach house still sits beside the road, just at the point where the road has become overgrown. The people who used to live on the Hill in the old days were farmers. Some of their farm houses and barns are still standing. Some are in the slow process of decay, crumbling closer to the earth with each winter's load of snow. Others survive only as cellar holes.

The garnet mine halfway up the Hill has been silent since the hurricane of 1938. The one-room wooden schoolhouse, where grade school was taught 50 years ago, is also decaying slowly. The State Police posting stapled to the door has faded to a shadow, but time and the weather do not read anyway.

Apple orchards are grown over, almost hidden by brush and wild trees. Stone walls fence in acres and acres of woods, acres that used to graze cows and grow hay. And all the old farmers are gone. Except for Clayton, there's no farming on the Hill today.

Clayton had already spent two summers on the farm when his family left Franklin, New Hampshire, and moved up on a year-round basis in 1950. His father tried chicken farming, which was a new thing because he had never been a farmer before. Back in Franklin they'd had a garden, and Clayton had kept a few dozen chickens in the backyard, but they thought of themselves as city people. Clayton says he'd have to trace pretty far back to find an ancestor who was a farmer. There must have been one somewhere back there because, for Clayton, moving to the farm was coming home.

"When we first moved up," he says, "I bought a team of horses and went logging with Eric Faye, our neighbor. We didn't make much money, but we had a lot of fun doing it. I was 17.

"There was a pretty good living with chickens back then, but in '53-'54 the chicken business went bad. The egg business went kaput. The price of eggs dropped way down and the price of feed grain went up. Consequently my father went to work over at the factory."

Now, 25 years after coming to the farm, Clayton is still there. His four brothers have married and gone off on their own. Both his parents are dead. He's lived there alone since 1959. After marking time for a while, he's turned to farming.

Farming in New Hampshire was never lush, and for more than a century the number of operating farms has been on a steady decline. Those who didn't go west in search of easier and larger holdings, those who survived the Civil War and all the other wars since, those who didn't go off to war plants or follow the textile mills south, those few who still wanted to be farmers have been driven off the land. As if the very fact that a small farmer could live and produce would give the lie to agribusiness. Consider:

ITEM: "Although agriculture has been and will continue to be the economic and social base of rural America, our rural population is becoming largely a non-farm one. By 1980, only one rural resident in seven or eight may live on a farm. It is generally agreed that it is neither socially desirable nor economically feasible to try to arrest or even slow down this trend." (From a US Department of Agriculture study submitted to the Senate Committee on Appropriations, 1966.)

ITEM: Forty-seven percent of the farm families in this country have annual incomes below \$3000.

ITEM: More than half of the farms in this country have sales of less than \$5000 a year; together, this majority of farmers accounted for only 7.8 percent of farm sales.

ITEM: Since 1940, 30 million people have left their rural homes for urban areas, and this migration continues at a rate of 800,000 a year.

ITEM: Since 1940, more than three million farms have folded, and farms continue to fold at the rate of 2000 a week.

ITEM: The Department of Agriculture expects one million farms to close in the decade of the 1970s.

And here comes Clayton, quietly defying it all, going about the work of becoming a farmer. His work is endless. The depressing national farm statistics are compounded by the stubborn nature of New Hampshire. The summer is short. The winter is long. The land is thin. "Up here it's pretty harsh soil, you know. The weeds grow fantastic. Just about the only thing that does."

Clayton has 102 acres, only 16 of which are cleared. He makes maple syrup and he's trying his hand at raising beef. He also drives a yogurt truck three days a week to support the farm until it can support itself.

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Donald Gropman is a free-lance writer from Brookline and New Hampshire.

Photographs by Gabrielle Gropman.

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"When I got out of the service in 1955 I tried doing a little egg farming but it wasn't any good. You had to be real big to make anything at it. Maybe 250,000 birds, something like that. The small chicken farmer is nonexistent.

"So I went to work at the mill over to the IPC factory, then I went down to Steven's Woolen Mill and I worked and worked and worked, gettin' nowhere actually, until I figured the thing to do was try and get something, some income on the farm that you could make a living at. I started trying the maple syrup. Of course, I was sugaring all along for our own use, seven or eight gallons of syrup made in a small boiling pan on a stone arch. About 10 years ago I started to make syrup to sell. I continued to work at the mill while trying the syrup. Eventually I could see there was a possible future in it if you could get big enough.

"The first year I think I did 43 gallons. I bought the equipment off my distant uncle over to New Hampton. It was his grandfather's evaporator, you can figure out how old it was. I brought the evaporator with 325 buckets, the holding tank and the gathering tank. I gathered the sap all by hand, lugged it all in by hand. I could only tap trees 500 to 600 feet from the evaporator. And that's when I began to sell.

Clayton doesn't lug the sap by hand anymore, about half of it arrives at the holding tank in the plastic tap lines he's strung through the woods. He has built a new sugar house. Last year he made 116 gallons of syrup, boiled down from over 4000 gallons of sap, and he sold them all except for the ones he gave away. His income from the syrup was about \$1200, but he

doesn't think syrup alone can ever provide a living. In his determination to become a self-sufficient farmer, he has diversified.

"About four years ago I started with two beef animals and I've got 10 now. I'm trying to build up a herd enough to supplement the income from the maple syrup so I can stop working on the outside altogether. I'd have to run 10 brood stock, 10 yearlings and 10 calves. Try to have it so I can sell about 10 a year."

The livestock need a place to live, so the barn has to be kept in shape. It was built around 1850, the same time as the farm house, and many of its beams were taken from older barns. The livestock also have to eat. That means grazing land, grain and hay.

"About three years ago I started trying to get the fields back to the original shape they were in. You use a chain saw, take the trees down as close to the ground as you can get. Usually they're pine, so you pile them up and burn them. Unless you split the pine and it doesn't dry out, and it's pretty near impossible to split because of all the knots.

"If you wanted to reclaim the land back into hay fields you'd have a bulldozer come in and grub the stumps out, but that costs more money than I've got. And there's no need, I'm using it as grazing land. So far I've cleared four or five acres."

Last year Clayton piled up more than a thousand bales of hay in the barn. He did it all alone. Since he needs much more hay than he can grow in his own hay fields, he also mows the fields of people who have no use for the hay.

"In the summertime, during the haying, it's quite a number of hours. And it lasted



*New Hampshire winters are long, the summers short and the land thin, but that doesn't stop Clayton.*



quite a while this year, over five weeks. I also went on shares and cut some hay for a guy down to Grafton. It wasn't the best of weather this year, either. You're really dependent on the weather to get your haying done in a short time. I cut hay about 12 hours a day and had to keep up with the other chores, too, like feeding the animals and taking care of the vegetable garden.

"In the summertime, when you've got the light, a lot of time I'm working from the time I get up in the morning till dark, doing something. Have to take care of my equipment, too; it's getting pretty old. Between clearing land and fencing and haying and everything else, I probably work 60 to 70 hours a week, on top of the three days driving the yogurt truck."

Clayton provides his livestock with grazing land and hay by direct labor, but he buys the feed grain with cash. He says, "One time I tried growing ear corn for the cattle, but by the time you add up everything involved in it, it's just about cheaper to go out and buy it, even with the prices the way they are." Then he pauses, speculates a little wistfully, and says, "But if you had the machinery and the land and everything else, you could probably do it."

Clayton would like to be able to grow his own feed grain, it's part of being self-sufficient. But it can't be done, not now and probably not ever. He doesn't have the right kind of land or enough of it. He doesn't have the capital to clear more of his own or to buy new land. He can't afford the equipment. And even if he could grow his own feed, he still couldn't go it completely alone. "You just can't return completely to the land," he tells you with a touch of regret in his voice, "unless you want to give up everything . . . your electricity, oil heat, automobile . . . everything is dependent now on your modern society. You just can't turn your back on it. You'd like to sometimes, but you just can't do it."

So Clayton's dream doesn't float in the clouds, it's planted firmly on his piece of New Hampshire. "If you get big enough in maple syrup and beef cattle and stuff like that, you can make ends meet but you're not gonna get rich. No matter how you look at it, it's a tough row to hoe as far as trying to make a living. You can make an existence, that's about it really. But you're gonna have the satisfaction of being your own boss, more or less. That's quite important. To me, anyway, it's the most important thing."

"Of course when I give up working outside completely, I'm just gonna have to get along with what I can do. I'm not looking to get rich. There's no money actually involved. If you get right down to it, it's a living. And you can do pretty much as you want. If you get up in the morning and you don't feel like working, you go fishing or something. But you don't have too many mornings like that. Actually it's the option of being able to do what you want. All I'm interested in is keeping the land up and having enough money to ski. In the winter-time it comes down to a choice between housekeeping and going skiing. Skiing is the more enjoyable."

Clayton did some skiing as a kid, but he didn't get hooked until about 10 years ago. "In the wintertime I ski about every free moment that I can spare, which comes down to an average of 75 to 80 days. Aside from the land, it's my other love. I've been called a ski bum, but actually I'm just your ski fanatic. It's one of my enjoyments out of life."



A long view of Clayton's farm.

He's an excellent skier, and could get work as an instructor, but he says that instructing doesn't interest him a bit, even though it would have been less laborious than mill work and even now could supplement his salary from truck driving.

In an upstairs room of his farmhouse Clayton has an old pool table. Sometimes we knock the balls around while we're talking. On the wall beside the table there's a small, handmade citation:

#### TO CLAYTON

Jr. Program Ski Instructor

For five years of dedicated volunteer service to the school children of the surrounding towns of Ragged Mountain.

WE SALUTE YOU!!!!

He sees no contradiction between disdaining the role of paid ski instructor while volunteering the same services to school kids. "The junior program was what got me really interested in skiing. I was trying to help the children, to give of myself, to give them some of my knowledge." Some things are not done for money. In fact, some things are devalued by it. Maple sugaring, for instance.

"If you figured the amount of time put into the maple syrup, well, if you went out and did physical labor for someone else you'd make probably three or four times as much money. There's a lot of easier lives, but to me it's more rewarding to make a gallon of syrup than it is to work 10 hours in a factory, even though you'd make more. It's hard to explain. Every year is different. No two days are the same. Last year when the sap was running good I was completely straight out, working till four o'clock in the morning and going in to sleep until 6 or so, then getting right back. The sap is highly perishable, you can't store it. Actually it should be boiled the same day that it runs. It means working around the clock."

Clayton's passion is not only for what he does, it's also for his place. "To live around here you've got to have something special. I mean you've got to have feelings toward who you are and what the land means to you and other people. There's just something about the land around here . . . I know I could never part with mine."

Recently a few folks have moved onto the Hill full-time. So far none of them are farming, and it's not likely that any of them ever will, but Clayton is pleased that the new people are maintaining the land.

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*Raising livestock means feeding livestock, and that means grazing land, grain and hay.*



stuck in the mud a few times or get snowed in. It's 32 below zero and the wind is blowing. They wonder what they got themselves into. And I hate to mention the black fly season, I kind of forget that. But through these trials you develop a passion for the place.

"I feel that I'm a part of the land. To me it would be as if the place would die if I left. It probably will when I do go. You feel you would betray a trust that you have for the land if you left.

"I think that's the way a lot of people have felt, and a lot of people have been forced to leave. There were times when I felt that way. Quite a few times. You figure you're not making much headway, things are going wrong. But all you do is come back with a stronger conviction that you're gonna stay. It's sort of a fight with the land. You're not gonna give in to the elements. The trouble is the more the land fights with you, the more you love it."

Clayton is right. It is hard for a city person to comprehend his choice of lifestyle. He takes stock of his achievements from a different point of view. He thinks the city is isolating, that it prevents people from knowing themselves or each other. He sees no reason to doubt what his father used to tell him: "The city is a rat race and the rats are all winning."

Clayton is not in a race. For him time is not a judgment. It's an empty vessel waiting to be filled. In addition to hard work, which gives him much pleasure, he fills his time in ways that do not increase his tangible output.

Ways such as watching the red-shouldered hawk scanning the fields for prey. "I have great admiration for the hawks. They've had a tough time of it. People used to go completely out of their way to shoot them. I'm very pleased that there are still hawks left."

Or building bird houses. "The houses were built originally for the tree swallows. It's beautiful to watch them fly. Then the bluebirds came back three or four years ago and I've been having a running struggle to build enough houses."

He works 90 hours a week or more for most of the year, yet he makes time to make bird houses.

Clayton lives alone, but he's in touch with everyone who lives on the Hill. "You lose some of the solitude, but you need neighbors, too. The conditions are harsh. When there's mud or snow you can't just keep going down the road when you see someone is stuck. You've got to depend on each other." But since Clayton has the tractor to tow cars out of mud or snow, and since he's the one who usually knows how to get things done on the Hill, the dependence is mostly one-sided.

He concedes that he gives more help than he receives. He says of his own disinclination to accept help from others: "Too proud I guess, too independent. But I don't mind a bit. I like being able to help somebody out. It's somewhat of a burden, but you've got to have a burden, some kind of burden. You get too independent, it's not good for you."

One of the people who has moved onto the Hill is Mrs. Locke. Now widowed and retired, and after more than 25 years of coming up for summers and weekends, she's made the move. Clayton eats most of his meals at Mrs. Locke's, and she cans or freezes vegetables from his garden and hers. Clayton sees to it that she doesn't

get stuck, takes her shopping, and generally helps out.

Clayton is going on 42 and has never been married. He says he hasn't met the right woman yet. "I'm not going out of my way looking right now, but if I found her probably I'd get married. I don't know, actually I've lived alone for so long . . . you get kind of set in your ways. I'd have to be pretty sure that she's gonna want to live in the country. I stand to lose too much."

We were standing in the snow beside the sugar house talking about supper. Clay-

ton was coming up to eat with us. He knocked some snow off a bale of hay and lifted it aside. There was another bale underneath and he moved that, too. Beneath it the earth was open, very black and full of earth-aroma that rose up incongruously in the cold winter air. Clayton reached down and pulled out about 20 carrots to have with supper. We wiped some in the snow and ate them. They were the best carrots we ever ate. Clayton smiled. Then we went up the Hill. ■