As a boy growing up in Simsbury in the early 1900s, John Ellsworth used to ride his horse from Roskear, the family farm on East Weatogue Street, up onto the mountain behind the farmhouse and barns, as his father, Harry, had done before him. The land was open then, with spectacular views to the west, and historic cart trails crisscrossing the meadows that had been deep forest before the charcoal burners arrived. So it was a long-term dream of his to someday own a piece of the mountain, bring his bride there, and raise a family in the home he would build.

On a day in May, 1939, John took Grace, his wife of mere weeks, and parked by an apple tree in full bloom on East Weatogue Street. He told her that he had just received word that the owners of the land there had agreed to sell to them. At that moment, a scarlet tanager flew into the apple tree, and perched above them. They both decided on the spot to call their new property Tanager Hill.

As they planned and built their home, the full scope of their mutual love of all things wild and natural was revealed. The driveway was laid out to minimally scar the hillside, and young trees were left standing too close to foundation work, to the bane of the builders. Huge windows gave the impression that there was no boundaries between outside and in. This made sense to John and Grace, as they came to know every inch of their hillside, as they wandered the land, taking note of geological features, rare plants like Trailing Arbutus and pink lady’s slipper, the stunning red sandstone gorge where Lucy’s Brook came down off the bench, the small ponds and sandy esker left over from the glaciers, and the charcoal rings where they told their children the fairies danced.
Over the years, John and Grace liked to spend Saturdays, when they could, happily clearing walking trails, usually with the live Met opera loudly playing on the radio, children and dogs horsing around, the at-that-time new red 1953 Jeep loaded with pruners and a revolutionary McCulloch chainsaw, a real back-breaker. Later, the husbandry of the land became more intentional, with a pond dug in the early 1960s at the swampy headwaters of one branch of Lucy’s Brook, fire roads graded, and old meadows, quick to grow over, kept clear for their beauty and as habitat for animals. Regular family events were weekend walks exploring what was new, what had come up overnight, where the tadpoles were, finding the secrets of the land, and always picking up sticks and keeping trails maintained. The legends grew over time, about the cave up on the mountain, or the time John, scrambling around in the gorge, fell and broke his ankle, but insisted on crawling back to the house and having tea before going off to the doctor. The land changed, the power line was built to the great disappointment of John and Grace, hemlocks got big and eventually diseased, and had to be removed. Always, no matter what, Tanager Hill was nurtured and cared for.

After John died in 1994, their son Tim took over the maintenance of the land, where he pastured his horses, rode, ran and cross country skied. Grace still walked to the pond and the power line, and more animals began to be seen — deer, moose, bears, coyotes, bobcats, and turkeys. The presence of so many wild things thrilled Grace and Tim and the family, proof of the validity and importance of open spaces to so many creatures, and the natural order of things. John and Grace quailed at the thought that Tanager Hill would ever be developed. They envisioned the land they loved enjoyed forever for its wildness by both animals, and humans, side by side. They were always happy to see people roaming respectfully on their property, interest stimulated by so many of its unique attributes. The Ellsworth family is thrilled that today, their long-term vision is complete.