

Hermia Lechner

1912 – 1994

Founder of the South Branch Watershed Association (SBWA)



Hermia, often referred to as the “Grande Dame” of conservation, moved to Clinton Township with her husband, Robert in 1936. They bought a 74acre property along the South Branch where they ran a summer nature camp for children, including the future Congressman Leonard Lance and retired General Norman Schwarzkopf. The Lechners sold the camp, known as Echo Hill, to Hunterdon County in 1974. It became part of the Hunterdon County Park System and home to SBWA. In her capacity as founder and President of SBWA, Hermia taught environmental education in every school district in the watershed region from 1960 to 1970, working with more than 2,600 children each year.

Hermia joined the Clinton Township Committee in 1971 and served as Mayor from 1976 to 1982 and again from 1987 to 1990. As a member of Clinton Township’s Planning Board from 1987 to 1994, she was responsible for adopting important environmental regulations including stormwater management, soil erosion sediment control, and limestone ordinances. She took a leave from municipal government in 1982 when Governor Thomas Kean appointed her as Administrator of the New Jersey Green Acres Program. She was recognized as establishing a direction and plan for the department. Her understanding and passion for protecting water resources and watersheds changed the Green Acres Program’s focus from protecting recreational sites to preserving open space.

Hermia was responsible for establishing 15 environmental commissions throughout the region; the Hunterdon County Parks Commission, and numerous organizations including early regional land trusts. She promoted alternative wastewater treatment systems, stormwater management for highways and roads, the use of transfer of development rights, and permanent funding for open space preservation.

Hermia’s pioneering work to protect water supplies in the South Branch Watershed region was a model for all of New Jersey. Her “big picture” thinking made her a fearless force in the environmental movement for more than 50 years. It has been said of Hermia that “She strode through life; she never shuffled.”

Helen Swann Woodman

1904 – 1983

Founder of the Upper Raritan Watershed Association (URWA)



Helen Swann started her life in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, a bucolic town nestled in the heart of the Berkshire Mountains. Helen grew up loving her natural surroundings and may have inherited her passion for conservation from her family's legacy of land preservation in that part of New England.

In 1948, Helen and her husband, Dr. Charles Woodman moved into a historic home in Far Hills where they raised their three sons. Helen joined the Garden Club of Somerset Hills, serving as Conservation Chair, and Conservation Chair of the Garden Club of America, Zone IV. Her statewide involvement gave Helen her first view of the pace of development in New Jersey and raised her awareness of pending threats to our natural resources.

Helen saw changes in her own community and became impassioned about protecting the countryside. She talked about watersheds at the time when the term was almost absent in land use planning. In the late 1950s she began talking to anyone who would listen. Nicknamed "*The Sparkplug*" she gained her reputation as "that proverbial little woman in tennis sneakers who wouldn't take no for an answer!" Helen's commitment and tenacity brought about the founding of the Upper Raritan Watershed Association (URWA).

URWA took an early leadership role in preserving New Jersey's floodplains which ultimately contributed to the passage of the Flood Hazard Area Protection Act. In Far Hills, a 23-acre wooded floodplain was preserved and named the *Helen Woodman Natural Area* to honor Helen and her effectiveness as one of the state's foremost catalysts for floodplain protection. Another sterling accomplishment under Helen's watch took place in 1965, when URWA received a National Conservation Award.

Without Helen's passion and determination we might very well have lost the treasures and resources that make our countryside so unique today. She was a force in watershed protection and highly instrumental in preserving the environmental health of the Raritan Headwaters region and thereby our quality of life.