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It's Time to Step Up

By Karen Shank

Note: Gentry Ridge is the name of a subdivision proposed to be built on 160 plus acres of land that borders the Fox River in Cary. Through the years this land has had many names and uses. It has been living quarters for various Native American tribes for decades if not centuries. It was called the Lowe farm after the Lowe family that obtained an 1840 land grant; the Wincrest estate a century later; the Fox Trails ski resort and swim club in the 1960s-70s, and in the '70s a nightclub named Harry Hope's which featured top name entertainment.

About 1970 Shirley Beene and her family moved to a home in Trout Valley in Cary, which borders some of the woods of Gentry Ridge. The land is a gently rolling, wooded home to many animals and rare plants. There are waterfalls, wetlands and fens on the property. Since Harry Hope's closed in about 1978, several projects have been planned for Gentry Ridge. Beene calls the property a "white elephant because nothing ever turned out with their plans. It always fell through." Meanwhile, she walked the land, learning its form and content. Eventually, nature preservationists got wind of how special Gentry Ridge is, and Shirley joined their ranks in an effort to preserve it.

She's not ready to party yet because the sale isn't final, but Shirley Beene is nonetheless elated. It looks as though her dream and hard work have paid off. A settlement was approved on Thursday, May 3, in the McHenry County Conservation District's condemnation suit against United Homes Gentry Ridge Land Development. Under its terms MCCD will buy the Gentry Ridge property for \$6.6 million.

The irony is that Shirley Beene hated the flatlands of Illinois the first ten years she lived here. She grew up on a dairy farm amid the hills of northwestern New Jersey, and it

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was there her love of land took root. Although she picked Trout Valley with its gently rolling hills for their home when her husband's job first brought them to Illinois, she still found Illinois too flat.

Shirley Beene is now 66, grandmother of nine, tall, energetic, and sturdy with a ready smile. Her black hair is flecked with gray, which she wears in a mid-length bob. It suits her, as she seems more comfortable in motion than static.

She wears blue denim each time I meet her. Denim slacks, denim jacket and even a denim shirt. Denim for the farm of her youth, I think. But she wears scarlet red dress flats with the denim. I can't help but wonder if the red is for her spunk.

Shirley is the youngest of six children born to her father, a dairy farmer, and her mother, a school teacher. "I'm always proud to say I was a farmer's daughter. ... My parents were very intelligent and active in the community," said Shirley. "During the Depression years we didn't want for anything because we had it all on the farm," she said.

Shirley's mother was also an amateur archeologist. When the farm fields were newly plowed, Shirley accompanied her mother to search for arrowheads. Her mother would lecture at local schools about Indian tools. Some days Shirley would skip school. Her mother wrote beautiful notes to school excusing her absences, explaining that Shirley learned so much more at home that day than she would have in school. "That's the type

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of mother I had,” Shirley grins.

That spunk may have passed to Shirley. Once out of high school, she joined the Marines as a way to avoid attending the nursing school her parents had chosen for her. She went to boot camp at Parris Island in South Carolina, then was based in El Toro, California, and became a corporal. Her job was to fly with different pilots wherever they were going. Once at the destination, she was the one to get the wrapped packages the plane carried to the right people. She loved being in the Marines and would do it again in a minute, she said.

She married a fellow Marine, Donald Beene, who was from Oklahoma. They lived in New Jersey and then returned to California, where her husband was in college. Their children began arriving—there would be five in all—but Shirley attended San Pablo Junior College at night on the G.I. Bill, earning her Associates in Arts degree.

They lived for a stint in the Syracuse, New York, area, before landing in Trout Valley, near Cary, in 1970. While Shirley raised her family, she also at times ran antique shops, did antique shows, held estate sales, and conducted appraisals. She is an expert appraiser of antique glass. She still collects antiques and is researching material for a book about old farms in the Cary area.

She also continued to seek sanctuary in the woods near her Trout Valley home.

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She feeds the animals, including raccoon and deer. Of the raccoons she says, "They're so relaxed they nurse their young on my deck. ... Coyotes lay down in my backyard and sun themselves."

The woods are where she feels most comfortable, most peaceful. During the '70s it was a little scary because the hippies would camp out on the Gentry Ridge property, she said. But now she carries pepper spray with her on her walks, after being chased on two occasions by bucks.

One day, following in her mother's footsteps, Beene spotted something special. It was a 2" by 3 ½" pottery piece, ridged in a muted clay color. Shiny mica bits were flecked throughout. The piece was authenticated by Dr. Robert Selzer from Beloit College as Marion Thick pottery, dating from about 300 A.D., the largest piece found in McHenry County.

Its significance is its thickness: ¼ to ½" thick. The thickness means that the piece came from a large vessel, one that would not be easily transported. That means that the Native Americans who made it lived on Gentry Ridge year-round and were not just summer hunter-gatherers.

About 1995, word began spreading throughout Trout Valley that developers were eyeing the Gentry Ridge property again. This time houses were proposed, meaning that the entire property would be bulldozed and subdivided. The woods, artifacts and animals

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Shirley Beene Profile

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would be lost.

Shirley decided she had to step up. By now she felt differently about Gentry Ridge than she did 25 years earlier. "I feel like it is mine," she says with a laugh. "So it [was] time to put aside my shyness and come forward and do everything in my power to save the land I love. I know every little nook and cranny in there."

Cary Citizens for Conservation was organized for the purpose of saving the property from development. Village government meetings were held, and protests were conducted on streets near Gentry Ridge to help sway the public, always with Shirley there. She led hundreds of tours of the land, gave speeches and plotted with preservationists for strategies to establish that the land was worth saving in its natural state.

McHenry County Conservation District offered to buy the land. The developer's response was to begin bulldozing some of the old buildings on the site.

In mid July 1997, matters bubbled to a boil. Even while the district was in court seeking a temporary restraining order to bar it, the bulldozing roared again. Shirley heard it from her house. She quickly called an ally. Hoping, but not knowing, that legal help was on the way, Shirley nevertheless ran towards the sound of the bulldozer. It was headed for the woods.

She squatted in front of the bulldozer, adrenaline running high. Two other

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women soon joined her. The operators swore at them, yelled at them to get out of the way, but they held firm. Shirley was afraid. They knew who she was. She'd already endured more than the usual number of flat tires on her car. Her rubber hiking boots had been slashed while out on her back porch. If they moved, the bulldozers would head for the woods, destroying what Shirley hoped to preserve.

Help arrived in the form of McHenry County Conservation District Police and officials rushing from the courtroom with temporary restraining order in hand. The bulldozing was ordered halted. The halt order subsequently became a permanent injunction for the duration of the district's condemnation proceedings.

Nearly four years later the fight for Gentry Ridge is close to victory. Last week's settlement came just before jury trial was to begin this week. Shirley has monitored each legal step. "It paid off ... all that concern and meetings was all worthwhile. ... Every time I drove by I prayed ... to save my land. It's not mine, but I like to call it that," she said.

Shirley's positive attitude extends to her opponents. "I don't think I'm hated by anybody. I think they understand that I do what I believe in, and I think they have to admire that."

Shirley's husband wants to move. So far she has refused. Once the victory party has been celebrated, perhaps Shirley will let her husband start packing. But not until then.