



A stand of trees grows in Arlington which has remained untouched since the time European settlers first set foot on American soil.

# Canfield Fisher Pines

by Brooke Norman  
photography by  
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**T**wo hundred years ago, a field two miles north of Arlington caught fire and burned, leaving the earth charred and killing the trees and plants that lived there. At the time, the town of Arlington didn't exist. The fire was probably started by lightning or by settlers trying to clear trees from prospective farm land.

When the flames died out, nature stepped in immediately to fill the ecological blank slate that was left behind. A puff of wind carried seeds from some nearby white pine trees to the empty field where they



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## Pines

scattered and began to grow close together and tall. Soon, their branches formed a shady canopy above the forest floor, blocking sunlight from the other young trees and plants vying for space to grow. All of the shorter trees, starved of light, eventually died off and the pine trees continued to grow. Nothing disturbed them and they grew to be over a hundred feet tall.

About a hundred years after the fire, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, a Vermont novelist and naturalist entered the picture. She bought the land on which the remarkable pine trees were growing and decided that they needed to be preserved in their natural state. Since that time the trees have born her name—the “Canfield Fisher Pines”—and they have been protected according to the specifications that she and her family laid out for them. In fact, they have remained undisturbed for nearly another century, except for removal of dead or fallen trees. Only once, during World War II, were some of the trees harvested to meet the wood shortage caused by the war.

Two centuries of constant care and protection have produced something truly special—a rare, living example of an old growth forest that has been left virtually untouched since the time that settlers arrived on this continent.

The story of the Canfield Fisher pines is also the story of the making of a National Natural Landmark, the National Park Service's highest distinction for areas that best embody our country's natural history. It's a story that Bennington County Forester Jim White tells with feeling as we step over the embankment and through the brush that separates the Canfield Fisher pines from a winding dirt road.

“This is one of my favorite places

to come,” he says, gazing up towards the branches that shade us from 120 feet up in the air.

“This stand of pine trees is one of only two old growth stands in the state of Vermont and one of very few in the entire nation.”

Most of the country's forests have been harvested for wood or cleared to make space, according to White, and most of the trees that we see now are young, having been preceded by several generations of trees. The Canfield Fisher pines, on the other hand, have been allowed free reign over their small forest of 15 acres outside Arlington. They were designated a National Natural Landmark in 1979 when a group of botanists from the University of Ver-

mont submitted a proposal to the federal government to have them so designated. It shares this distinction as “an important natural element of our national heritage to be protected” with other National Landmarks like Joshua Tree in Utah, Diamond Head in Hawaii and Rancho La Brea in California.

It's an impressive title: National Natural Landmark, one which is displayed on a little metal plaque near the road, but actually the Canfield Fisher pines

speak for themselves. Stepping into their midst is like entering a cathedral. Around sixty trees cover the area like tall, slim pillars rising to a uniform ceiling of 120 feet that casts the whole area in a kind of ethereal shade. The air is still and cool with the smell of pine, and a visitor can hear the sound of a clear mountain stream flowing nearby.

The pines stand far apart, perfectly straight and completely branchless high up into the air. The biggest tree is only forty one inches in circumference. White explains that this is because, “they have grown so close together since the time they were seedlings.”

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The tall, thin shape of the Canfield Fisher pines makes them rather delicate and especially susceptible to breakage from storms. In the late 1960's, a tornado ruined three to four acres of the trees. Lightning has marked some of them with long spiraling gashes, while others have been split completely apart.

The trees will probably outlive all of us, but eventually, the huge old white pines will die off, letting sunlight in to the forest floor and allowing beech, hemlock, maple and other trees to take root. In fact, nature's process of regeneration is already alarmingly apparent around the base of some of the dead pines. Hemlock and beech trees have taken root beneath the thick duff of pine needles and begun to grow. These trees, which are common throughout Vermont, have a shorter life span and can grow in a wide range of settings. White pines, on the other hand, require special circumstances and lots of time to grow to the stately size they have reached in the Canfield Fisher stand.

"It makes me sad to see them go bit by bit," says White, "white pines are a symbol of Vermont's history." In fact, the original Vermont state seal pictured a large white pine very much like one of the Canfield Fisher pines. The actual tree that served as a model for the state seal grew not far from the Canfield Fisher stand until 1978, when it was blown over in a storm. Not only has the actual state seal tree died, but, according to White, as the state seal has been redesigned, "the tree pictured on the seal has gradually come to look more like a spruce or a fir tree. I guess people feel those trees have more design appeal."

Clearly White doesn't agree with that assessment. As we stand talking in the cool shade of the Canfield Fisher pines, he grows a bit wistful. "Each one of these pines is unique and kind of precious," he says. "It will be a long time before the conditions are right for a stand like this to grow again." ♦

Brooke Norman is an intern at  
STRATTON MAGAZINE.

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