

SMITH

Alumnae Quarterly

**Land.
Family.
Environment.
Community.**



To Lila Wilde Berle '58,
these are the things
worth fighting for.
Her beloved
Berkshires are the
better for her efforts.



By Elise Gibson
Photographs by Jessica Scranton

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Passion

Lila Wilde Berle '58 fearlessly protects what she loves about the Berkshires, standing up for cultural institutions, the land and a way of life she holds dear. At heart, she's a sheep farmer.

Atop a grassy, rock-strewn hill, Lila Wilde Berle '58 settles into a rocking chair and gazes west across a wide valley to the hills beyond, cast in gray on this breezy August morning. "So, from here you can look at three states," she says, declaring it the finest view in the Berkshires. At her side are her standard poodle, Butter, and her mild-mannered guard dog, Koji, a white sheepdog with fur as thick as the animals he's charged with protecting.

Berle begins talking about the glaciers that carved this valley, until her eyes land on two large houses that interrupt her view. "Monsters," she calls them, built right on the fields she used to hay. "Unless people are very careful, we're going to lose the Berkshires to development," she says. "That's why I'm pretty passionate about preserving whatever can be preserved."

In Berle's hands, that passion has power, translating into hundreds of acres of farm and forest in western Massachusetts that she has made sure are protected from development. She's credited with twice saving The Mount, author Edith Wharton's summer estate in Stockbridge, first after developers began cutting up the property and later from foreclosure. Nearby, she led an effort to build a world-class museum for the works of her friend Norman Rockwell, at one point standing up to renowned architect Robert A.M. Stern to insist that his design incorporate local fieldstone, not granite trucked in from Connecticut. Berle also made certain that a magnificent view of Monument Mountain from sculptor Daniel Chester French's studio at Chesterwood would remain unobstructed. As a farmer whose sheep are grass-fed and hormone-free, she was an early leader in the farm-to-table movement. In 2015, her preservation work brought her the Berkshire Award from the Berkshire Museum. "When you spend as much time riding around on a tractor as I do, you tend to develop big ideas," she told the *Berkshire Eagle* at the time.

That's just a short list of Berle's influential work in the corner of the world that she has always called home. "She's worked across all facets of community

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Smith ID

MAJORS: Zoology and botany

HOUSE: Baldwin

FAVORITE SMITH CONNECTION: "I love that campus. It was so beautiful. [College horticulturist] Bill Campbell was so proud of it. He was so kind, and he stayed in touch for years. A sequoia tree that thrived so incredibly on campus actually has a lot of children in the Berkshires because my mother took cuttings every year I was there."



life here," says Laurie Moffatt, who has been director of the Norman Rockwell Museum since Berle hired her 30 years ago. "She's an extraordinary leader. She'll challenge and step into any situation that she feels she can make better. In the face of doubters and the more timid, she'll power through. Her confidence is infectious."

On this morning—as on most mornings—Berle's attire is as no-nonsense as her approach to life. Barn vest, T-shirt, work jeans and clogs still muddy from her barn chores. "I haven't been to a hairdresser in 40 years," she says, laughing as she pantomimes trimming her own short white hair. She climbs into her GMC Yukon and drives across her fields for a quick look at some of her



With her children grown, Lila Berle '58 found a new purpose when she transformed an old dairy farm into a sheep farm, where she puts her ideas for sustainable agriculture to work.



pasturing sheep—400 to 800 of them, depending on the season—and 16 Highland cattle. As we drive, she explains that she put together this acreage, now informally known as Lila's Farm, from a patchwork of declining or moribund farms. She tends her sheep in the 19th-century barns of a former dairy farm.

As Berle talks about haying and her favorite Ford tractor and how proud she is of her 15 grandchildren, there is a key aspect of her life that she doesn't bring up: She was born into one of America's most prominent old families and is descended from Emily Vanderbilt Sloane. What she does say is that she chose a different life's path than what she was groomed for. In part, she credits Smith—where she met power-

ful women like athletic leader Dorothy Ainsworth 1916—with giving her the courage to defy expectations and to find her own way to live. But what first set Berle’s independent spirit in motion at age 11 was a horse, a gift from her mother. “I was supposed to be a fine young lady who behaved and did what I was supposed to. Instead, I got on my horse and I ran,” she says. “I was everywhere on that horse.”

The freedom she found on the back of a horse has translated into a life of leadership, whether it was watching over her children’s education as a school board member, being a lay leader at her church, St. Paul’s Episcopal in Stockbridge, or running a farm. “People are somewhat afraid, I think, in our world to show their passions and to act on them,” she says. “I’ve been a risk-taker from day one, and I jump in when I really care about something.”

She believes, for instance, in the role that nonprofits play in their communities and is willing to fight for them even when the odds are daunting. “You’ve just got to dig in. You can’t quit,” she says. When it seemed The Mount, a National Historic Landmark, was going to be subdivided, Berle led a group to ask for help from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, eventually securing long-term protection of its land. In 2008, when The Mount faced imminent foreclosure, Berle rejoined the board, negotiating with the bank and other creditors to fight for what she calls a cultural oasis. A few years ago, she secured pledges from The Mount’s entire board of directors to raise \$4.1 million. “Under her leadership, the debt was eliminated completely. She’s a wise soul when it comes to understanding what makes a nonprofit run effectively,” says Susan Wissler, executive director of The Mount. “Her passion is contagious, and she’s very good at inspiring both the staff and the board. ... Every encounter with Lila is an inspiration.”

As much as Berle admires the cultural and literary programming at The Mount, saving the land itself was paramount to her. She grew up right next door to The Mount, which at the time housed a girls boarding school known

THEY CALL IT LILA’S FARM

At midlife and with her children grown, Lila Wilde Berle ’58 decided it was time to nurture her own interests. So, at age 50, she began assembling parcels of land into a farm spread across the Berkshire hills of far western Massachusetts. Then she bought a new Ford tractor. “I remember it so vividly when it arrived. Boy, did I make things happen,” Berle says. She transformed herself into a full-fledged sheep farmer, handling all the tasks of breeding, veterinary care, shearing and feeding a flock that swells to 800 in the spring, before she starts selling the lambs.

“My husband was all for it,” she says of her decision to start farming at a time when her late husband, Peter Berle, was an environmental lawyer in New York City. “But I didn’t let him come in on it because this was my oasis and he was traveling the world. This was my deal.”

To call her hands-on is an understatement. Until very recently, she hayed the fields herself and managed the baling. Her only assistance comes from a longtime farmhand and various grandchildren. She also markets her lambs herself, selling to ethnic groups around the holidays and to nearby farm-to-table restaurant owners, who are as committed to the environment and the tenets of sustainable agriculture as she is.

In 2014, Lila’s Farm was included in a public television documentary, *A Long Row in Fertile Ground*, that profiles the agricultural traditions of the Connecticut River Valley and those farmers who have chosen to protect their land from development. (John Brady, Mary Elizabeth Moses Professor of Geosciences, also appears in the film.)

As Berle drives through the fields, she talks about the sheep, the rhythm of the land and weather, and her role as steward, especially as she begins to step back from active farming. “Here I have an ecological oasis,” she says of her farm. “When I die, we’re going to put all this into conservation.”

ONLINE: wgby.org/fertileground





as Foxhollow School, and she explored every inch of it on horseback. She and her five siblings were raised on High Lawn Farm, a genteel dairy farm that is now owned by her brother. Her father, Col. H. George Wilde, was a stern disciplinarian with a low view of women's capabilities, she says. "My father thought women had no sense of anything," Berle says. "When I was riding, I had no one breathing down my neck telling me I didn't know anything." His attitude steeled her resolve to make a difference in this world. A more positive influence came from her mother, Vanderbilt descendant Marjorie Lila Field Wilde. She was an accomplished cattle breeder, Berle says, though she gave her husband credit for her success. That world of domineering men and the social strictures of high society held no

appeal for Lila. She received a rigorous education at Foxhollow School. Then she headed to Smith College.

"I had been isolated to the extreme. And Smith just opened up the world for me," she says. "Especially the world in which women could be somebody, and could have ideas."

At Smith, her leadership abilities became apparent on the athletic fields—she played basketball, softball and field hockey—and in Baldwin House, where she was president. "I became very adept at group leadership," she says. "To this day, if I can get a bunch of people in one place, I tend to be able to bring them out and connect them with each other." In her senior year, she was awarded the coveted "S" pin, given to five students each year to recognize their leadership. "It was a huge thing for me to be

acknowledged as somebody who could make things happen and who was contributing," she says. "I think Smith still is affirming that women can be more than they thought they could be."

Two years after graduating, Lila Wilde married New Yorker Peter Berle, an environmental lawyer whose family spent summers in the Berkshires. "We courted in the hayfield," Lila says. "We had big ideas and big thoughts about the bigger world. We were never parochial." They moved to New York City, but built a house on the side of Monument Mountain in the Berkshires, where they returned each summer with their four children. In New York, the Berles traveled in influential circles, meeting the likes of Arthur Schlesinger, Ted Sorensen and a personal hero, former President Jimmy Carter, who, Berle recalls, once advised her not to rail against corporations but to work with them. "That transformed how I looked at the world," she says.

Now, at 80, and 10 years a widow, she feels a responsibility to slow down just a little, to leave the tractor to others. At the top of her hill, she built a "folly," an open-air structure made of rough marble blocks that serves as a shelter for picnics or just a place to contemplate life. The stone, she points out, came from an old outbuilding at Elm Court, her Vanderbilt great-grandparents' legendary Lenox estate, which Berle inherited and later sold to her son. This rustic hilltop structure seems a more fitting inheritance for a woman with little interest in fancy trappings and who keeps her eye on the big picture, like the land, the environment, her family and traditions worth saving.

Berle says she's satisfied with the foundation she's laid and with the younger people she has mentored and influenced. "And so, I'm not so discouraged about the way the world's going," she says, again taking in the sweep of her beloved landscape. "There are wonderful people out there, if they're willing to take the risk when opportunities present themselves. I think people need to know the world can be different."

Elise Gibson is editor of the SAQ.