

By LARRY ROHTER

When a work crew began chopping down three acres of trees at Corson's Brook Woods on Staten Island two months ago, the residents of The Woods, a nine-block cluster of homes just across the road, were stunned. The last they knew, the City of New York had designated Corson's Brook Woods, a tract of land in the Willow Brook section, a "protected area" and recommended its incorporation into the Staten Island Greenbelt, the city's largest park.

But, almost overnight, a prime stand of beeches, oaks, maples and sycamores had been transformed into a collection of stumps — and hundreds of other trees had been marked for felling, with red X's and yellow ribbons. The tree removal, it was soon discovered, had been ordered by the state-owned Staten Island Developmental Center, formerly known as the Willowbrook State School, as the first step in the construction of four group homes for 72 mentally retarded patients.

Corson's Brook Woods is part of the state's Willowbrook school tract, and the action came as the city and residents of the community were negotiating with the state over its future. So an environmentalist group, the Protectors of Pine Oak Woods, went to court and, last month, were granted a preliminary injunction by Judge Rose McBrien of State Supreme Court in Staten Island.

The state is appealing that decision. For the moment, though, the cutting has stopped at Corson's Brook Woods.

To Terence Benbow, the lawyer who argued and won the injunction that has at least temporarily halted the state's plans, the dispute is

just one more skirmish in the long struggle to preserve the sylvan character of much of Staten Island. "This year's battle," he calls it.

Mr. Benbow is a veteran of many such battles, dating to the mid-1950's, when he came to Staten Island from Michigan via Yale Law School.

Mr. Benbow had originally been attracted to Staten Island because, he said, he wanted

"something with a little green space around it" for his three young children. Over the years, that desire has sent him to court against Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller, Mayor Robert F. Wagner and the Secretary of the Army.

There was, for instance, a successful, decades-long effort beginning in the 1960's to prevent the city from imposing a grid pattern of streets that, he said, was fine for the other boroughs but ignored the ponds and wooded knolls that dot the Staten Island landscape.

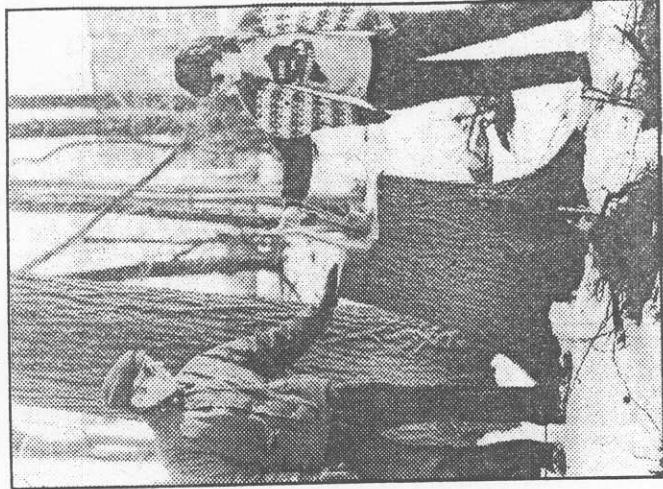
Later, Mr. Benbow took part in the successful drives to head off construction of Richmond Parkway and to establish the Gateway National Recreation Area.

"What we've had to do is make sure that those things which made Staten Island attractive to people in the first place are not lost in the fight over building and development," he said. "You don't want to destroy the very values to which you seek access in the process of developing them."

One lesson Mr. Benbow said he had learned from his experience is that no victory is permanent. Though the Richmond Parkway was, for all practical purposes, abandoned years ago, city maps continue to show the "proposed" highway cutting across Latourette and Willow Brook Parks.

If there is one rallying point for the residents of Staten Island, it is the sanctity of their Greenbelt. More than twice the size of Central Park, the Greenbelt is a small wilderness composed of several parks and wildlife preserves, stretching across the center of Staten Island and lending the borough much of its small-town flavor.

Before the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge opened in 1964 and brought traffic and new settlers, the rural flavor was provided by the dairy farms that operated throughout Staten



Judith Berger and her husband, Dr. Joel Berger, standing near tree stump in the woods across from their house.

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