

Ropes and Challenges Education Program

History

The Ropes and Challenges Program began in 1995, but this land has been used for many years prior. This historical sketch written by Forest Johnson (retired MPS) will provide the reader with a sense of this lands history and importance.

Potter's Forest has recently been rediscovered by many Milwaukee Public Schools Staff and students as they participate in the new Ropes and Challenges Course at the Site. Located on the north end of the the locally famous Whitnall Park and Boerner Botanical Gardens, Potter's Forest has quietly existed for many years as a school forest. First developed for the study of conservation education, Potter's Forest programs evolved an environmental education focus in later years. Students from Milwaukee Public Schools were planting trees and studying nature at Potter's Forest long before other nature centers and programs were developed in the area.

Many question how MPS acquired this natural jewel of old growth forest and open grassland. As early as 1943 individuals from local conservation groups and the Milwaukee Public Schools were attempting to acquire property for a school forest in order to develop a conservation education program. Wilhelmine La Dudde of the Women's conservation League of America and Walter Nichols, Assistant Superintendent of MPS led the search for and acquisition of the land for the new school forest.

The fifty acres of land that was to become Potter's Forest was acquired in 1947 and dedicated on June 5th, 1949 for Milton C. Potter, former MPS Superintendent and promoter of the project. The early years saw a great deal of student activity with planting hardwood and conifer trees and other conservation work to restore the land to a more natural condition. Ken Beers and Roy Swenson were two MPS naturalists who led many of the early nature and conservation activities at the forest. Students continued to visit Potter's Forest for more than forty years for nature and environmental education field trips.

In 1994 a collaborative effort involving, MPS staff from the Departments of Curriculum and Instruction, Special Education and Supportive Services, School to Work, Community Recreation, Facilities and Maintenance, and Insurance and Risk Management was organized to develop a new Ropes and Challenge Education Program for MPS students and staff. After a tour of the site, the selection committee immediately chose Potter's Forest as the prime location for the Ropes and Challenge Course. In the spring of 1995 the first elements of the course were installed and staff began training. Program implementation with students began in the fall of 1995. An environmental awareness segment was included as part of the initial programming effort.

The present use of the land now called Potter's Forest follows an interesting and colorful past. Photographs of the early years at Potter's Forest show students planting trees on barren, flat farm land adjacent to Forest Home avenue. This area and the area just east of the present cabin were farmed beginning in the mid-1800's. Jacob Wagner built a brick farmhouse in 1869 which is now a barbershop at 9855 West Forest Home Avenue. Wally Jablonski, the present owner and barber, remembers finding many old farm implements on his property. Adam Roder was the last farmer on the land in the 1930's and early 1940's. The farm was subdivided and in 1947 MPS purchased 35.98 acres from Alma and Emma Toelle and 14.57 acres from Elizabeth Schwab to create the 50.55 acre Potter's Forest.

The mature hard wood forest which occupies 35 acres is undoubtedly the most striking feature of the property. The tall old growth provided the ambience and insulation that is the personality of Potter's forest. An arborist from the Milwaukee Department of Forestry stated that it was the best stand of hardwoods he had seen in an urban area. Many have thought that the hardwoods at Potter's Forest were part of a virgin forest that once occupied this part of the state. Discussions with Wes Eisenhauer former Gardener at Boerner Botanical Gardens and Milwaukee County Parks Supervisor, dispels this belief. Apparently, Potawatomi people in the area prior to the 1830's started fires on a regular basis to keep the area open for wildlife. Most large stands of trees in Milwaukee County date back only to about the late 1830's. Older individual or small groups of trees are possible, but the trees at Potter's Forest probably date back to the 1830-50 era... still making them at least 150 years old.

Potter's Forest is a living laboratory of man's tremendous effect on the environment. From open grassland during Potawatomi management, barren farmland with wood lot during the agricultural period, and the present mature, mesic forest with open grassland. The land can only reflect the management of the occupiers. The Ropes and Challenge Education Program stresses environmental awareness and is committed to keeping Potter's Forest a natural jewel in a urban setting.

Forrest E. Johnson edited source materials provided by Ruth Johnson of the Hales Corners Historical Society and those individuals mentioned above.