Wesselman Park and Nature Preserve
How Civic Appreciation Saved a Rare Downstate Property

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The cultural history of Wesselman Park and Nature Center, like that of other parts of Southwestern Indiana, goes back to the pattern of things as they were before 1800. This area, extending from the Wabash River on the west to the uplands of Perry County on the east, and from the Ohio River on the south to the valley of the White River on the north, has a varied geological development and a diverse terrain, from creek and river flood plains to hills and headlands of ancient origin.

Thus it would be most accurately described as valley country rather than upland or plateau. The extensive beds of coal, much of them rather near the surface, give strong indications of a long geological history of lowland conditions with heavy vegetation.

There are many evidences in the valleys, along the streams, on the bluffs and hills, and in the flat lands where borings have indicated a deep lacustrine soil. Scientists are in agreement that the area has had a long interesting development. The Merom sandstone outcroppings, the unmistakable line of glacial drift slightly to the north, and the series of bayous, elongated ponds, and old river channels have given to geologists and geographers a vast array of landmark material.

An equilibrium had existed for hundreds of years between animals and plants, between rainfall and stream levels, between climate and vegetation, between each species of living thing and its sources of sustenance. There seemed to be no appreciable change from year to year, and perhaps only slight changes from century to century. It was as though time stood still, while Nature seemed content to prevail peacefully with her children.

Wild life flourished in this wonderland of Nature. Turkeys and waterfowl were in great abundance. Fish of many kinds abounded in the streams. Passenger Pigeons were so numerous that they flew about in great flocks by the millions along Pigeon Creek and Cypress Creek. The deep forest with large high canopied trees were everywhere, with only the trails of animals to mark the lines of travel.

The French claimed most of the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys prior to the Treaty of Paris in 1763. But actually they had only a limited number of trading posts such as those at Detroit, Quiatanon, Vincennes, and Kaskaskia.

The Delaware, Piankashaw, Kickapoo, Shawnee, and Pottawatomi tribes were the principal groups at various times in Southwestern Indiana. For the most part they followed a Woodland culture which depended heavily upon hunting, trapping, and fishing. However, they also made great use of corn and beans, grown in extensive patches near the villages. Since these people moved about from one locality to another every few years, their houses were merely crudely constructed hogans. Their culture was generally that of the wanderer.

In an earlier period, from approximately 1,300 to 1,600 A.D., there existed a superior Indian culture along the Ohio River, with a large town just opposite the mouth of Green River. This area, to the East of present-day Evansville has become known as the Angel Mounds Site.

For an account and description of this important culture complex you might consult the work of Dr. Glenn A. Black, entitled Angel Mounds Site, published by the Indiana Historical Society .Or you can read several articles about Angel Mounds State Memorial in *Outdoor Indiana*: September, 1970; November, 1972; February, 1975.

After 1763 this great Northwest Territory belonged to the British who prepared to treat the entire area as a part of Canada as reflected in the passage of the Quebec Act in 1774. The difficult yet successful revolt by the 13 Colonies coupled with the remarkable capture of Kaskaskia and Vincennes in 1788-89 by George Rogers Clark and his intrepid men, brought to the territory north of the Ohio River a totally new perspective. As George Rogers Clark wrote in an historically significant letter in 1779, "great things have been done by a few men".

The settlement of the territory north of the Ohio proceeded rather slowly. Until 1800 there was no assurance or protection of land ownership and the "rights of the squatter" were dubious at the best. The establishment of Indiana Territory in 1800 was intended to provide for an orderly settlement through treaties and purchases. The appointment of William Henry Harrison to be the governor of Indiana Territory marked the beginning of orderly processes for settlement and land ownership in the southern part of the Territory. [See *Outdoor Indiana*, December, 1970; December, 1974; July, September, December, 1975.]

Between 1800 and 1810 the settlement of the area proceeded very slowly. Some of the early settlers came down the Ohio on Flatboats: others came through the Cumberland Gap into Kentucky and then on West and North by gradual stages into Indiana. (See *Outdoor Indiana*, September 1970; February, 1971; February, October, 1972; February, June, 1975.] George Linxweiler, one of the earliest settlers in the area, built a cabin in 1803 near the foot of what is now known as Reitz Hill in Evansville. Enos McCallister established a house and landing spot on the Indiana shore opposite the mouth of Green River and began operating a hand-powered ferry across the Ohio, obtaining a license for this in 1805.

John Sprinkle came to Indiana from Kentucky in 1803 and settled at the present location of Newburgh, on the Ohio River to the east of Evansville. In 1804 Bailey Anderson built a cabin and a rude fort near the mouth of Cypress Creek. Several families had settled at Henderson, then called Red Banks. Andrew McFaddin and his cousins formed a settlement downstream in 1805 at what is now Mount Vernon.

Isaac Knight was a prominent settler in the vicinity and had a harrowing escape from the Indians who captured him when he was a small boy. He was born in Washington County, Pennsylvania, shortly after his parents had left New Jersey en route to Henderson, Kentucky. When he attained the age of 24 he had become the owner of a large area of land about halfway between Evansville and Newburgh. The Knight homestead stood near what is now the intersection of Lincoln Avenue and Green River Road.

A family cemetery was established on that property and it was there that Isaac Knight was buried. A marker on the northeast comer of the intersection indicates the burial site. The bodies have since been removed to other cemeteries.

The eastern part of Pigeon Township, Vanderburgh County was set apart on September 9, 1840, and then was reorganized as Knight Township, being named for Isaac Knight and his family. This area remained as farm land and some of it as timberland for many years. There was very little urbanization until after 1900, and even then at a slow rate of growth until after 1920.

Knight Township was bounded on the east by Warrick County, on the south by the Ohio River, on the west by Pigeon Township, and on the north by the meandering line of Pigeon Creek and a small part of Warrick County.

Land records of 1870 show that there were many small farms and land holdings, with only a few families having large acreages. Among the owners of the larger farms were the Aiken family, Robert Barnes, John H. and Humphrey Fickas, Henry C. Fuquay, Ira and Samuel Grainger, the Knight family, and Angel family, the James family, and the Stockwell family. Most of the land was cleared and under cultivation by 1870 with substantial houses and barns dotting the landscape.

The roads in 1870 in Knight Township, for the most part, followed the early trails along the ridges and high ground. These were mainly the east-and-west routes of travel. With Pigeon Creek forming a barrier on the north there were only several short roads, running north and south. The winding nature of the road to Newburgh, the Lower Green River Road, and the old Boonville highway are modern evidences of those winding trails from which the earlier roads were formed. The roads for many years, were lacking in improvements. They were muddy to the point of impassability in the Winter and Spring months. In the Summer they were dusty and full of holes and ruts. The usual mode of travel was by horseback.

The transformation of a heavily wooded area into productive farmland was remarkable. Between 1805 and 1850 the transition from a forested country to an open agricultural expanse was the result of a great amount of hard work. The desire and ambition of the Indiana pioneer had to be very determined and unrelenting. His efforts were tremendous and his rewards were slow in arriving.

The clearing of the land was accomplished with the use of the most rudimentary hand tools - the crosscut saw, the axe, the grubbing hoe, and the simple but necessary wedges. There was an ever-present use of fire also. We say today that it was very destructive. Many of the finest Oaks, Maple, Tulip, and Pecan were cut down, rolled into windrows, covered with brush, and after a season of drying were burned to complete the clearing. But how else could agriculture be established? [See *Outdoor Indiana*, May, 1970; June, 1972; October, 1973; February, 1974; and April, 1975.]

The grubbing of the stumps was slowly accomplished, often with burning rather than digging. One man could keep 20 or thirty stumps burning in an area if the weather were dry and with a slight wind to fan the flames a bit. The fires often continued to burn through the night.

The clearing of the land was hard work. Moreover the owner of the land had to depend upon his own labor and such help as his wife and children could supply. It would have been far too expensive to hire other men to do the work. So long as the economy was altogether a matter of subsistence rather than production for the market, there was not a good reason to hurry things along or try to expedite a more extensive agriculture.

It must be remembered that the farmer would clear his best ridge land first and create rectangular fields for cultivation. He often did the incredible and laborious task of building fences to enclose a part of his land for use as pasture and also to keep other animals from invading his corn or wheat fields.

These fences were made with rails, split from nice straight-grained logs, 10 feet in length. How many rails would you need to split in order to enclose a 40 acre field? With a fence that would be 10 rails high, it would require 6,600! Incredible, you say. Yes, but it was done, not just in a few instances, but many many times. The zig-zag rail fences were rather pretty when they were new but they were hard to keep clean. And mowing the fence rows with a brier scythe was quite a chore.

On June 13, 1814, Jesse McCallister purchased from the United States Government the Southeast quarter of Section 22 in Township 6, south of the Base Line of Range 10, west of the Second Principal Meridian. Ownership of this Quarter Section of land was confirmed by patent deed dated March 18, 1818. In the course of the next 17 years Jesse McCallister cleared parts of this area, which consisted of 160 acres. The McCallister family established a cemetery about 300 yards north of their home. There were buried the earlier members of the McCallister family and relatives. The precise location of this cemetery is defined in a recorded deed by which the McCallister family reserved one acre in perpetuity.

This gives us an important clue as to why much of the west one-half of Section 23, Township 6, Range 10, was never cleared of trees or put into cultivation. The untimely deaths of the men in the McCallister family and the lack of strong young men in subsequent families that owned this land seriously limited their capabilities of clearing additional acreage. So it continued on as a forested area, with only the processes of natural change affecting the ecology of the timberland.

All of the McCallister estate was sold to Marcus and Prudence Sherwood by warranty deed dated August 22, 1835. The Sherwoods had just settled themselves down in their remodeled homestead when they learned of the passage of the Internal Improvements Bill in February, 1836, by the Indiana General Assembly. This comprehensive law, among other things, provided for the building of a great canal the Wabash and Erie Canal which would connect Lake Erie at Toledo, Ohio, with the Ohio River at Evansville. [See *Outdoor Indiana*, April, 1971; February, 1972.]

The law provided that construction would begin as soon as the weather was favorable, since the surveying had already been completed. The cost of building the canal was to be borne largely by a large bond issue, in addition to taxation involving the entire State. The revenues from tolls on the canal were anticipated to be sufficient to eventually retire the bonds. These bonds were sold in New York, Philadelphia and Boston with comparative ease.

The Sherwood family did not learn until late in March, 1836, that the Canal was projected to cross its farm diagonally from west to east, cutting off a part of its property which lay to the north. The Sherwoods protested vehemently but to no avail. Then, as now, the State of Indiana was armed with the "right of eminent domain," which meant the State could take private property for a specified public purpose without any right of redress, complaint, or compensation for damages.

As far as damages were concerned it was reasoned that it was comparable to the building of a road, rationale that the property owner would benefit greatly by having the Canal since presumably the adjacent land would increase in value because of the proximity of good transportation. This rationale did not reckon with the problems of drainage, the inaccessibility of fields or lands beyond the canal, or the tramping of property in the process of clearing the right-of-way and the digging of the canal.

Marcus Sherwood was unhappy with what had happened, but finally decided to make the most of it. With much valuable work experience to back him, he was awarded several contracts for Canal construction in the Evansville area. For the next 10 years he was a construction man, hiring laborers to work for him and working at this gigantic task of building the Canal

The construction of the Canal progressed very well during the Summer of 1836 and was extended through the Marcus Sherwood land by late September. The excavation was accomplished by men using hand shovels to put the dirt into carts, each pulled by one mule. The dirt was dumped on either bank, which eventually became the towpath for the Canal.

Marcus Sherwood was a successful contractor, made considerable money, and accordingly gave little attention thereafter to his farm or its upkeep. He did not clear any more of the land and contented himself largely with raising good horses and mules.

In November, 1847, Marcus Sherwood and his wife, Prudence, sold their land to William H. Stockwell. The Sherwoods moved to Evansville and built a nice hotel, known as the Sherwood House, which stood at the corner of First and Locust, where the Elks Home stood until recent years. With a successful business in the hotel and many profitable land transactions, Marcus Sherwood became a wealthy man.

Although William H. Stockwell retained ownership of the McCallister- Sherwood farm for only 18 years, his name was implanted on the property in a very real way. The forested area became known as the Stockwell Woods and the road which divides Section 23, from north to south, became known as Stockwell Road. The Stockwells added somewhat to their holdings by purchases of additional land, making the total holdings 594 acres.

On September 10, 1855, the Stockwells sold their entire farm to Isaac I. Silliman. But because of Silliman's inability to make his payments the property was transferred back to the Stockwell Family. In September, 1861, a warranty deed conveyed 594 acres of land from Isaac I. Silliman and his wife, Tabitha, to Mary Strange Stockwell.

In the Civil War period following 1861 the farm lay fallow much of the time. No additional land was cleared, the Canal was abandoned by the State, and the drainage problems were unattended. From time to time Mary S. Stockwell experienced difficulties in regard to her property.

The Lake Erie, Evansville, & Southwestern Railway Company was organized Apri1 23, 1871 for the purpose of constructing a railroad "to commence at Evansville, in the County of Vanderburgh, in the State of Indiana, and run from thence through the counties of Vanderburgh, Warrick, Pike, Dubois, Orange, Washington, Jackson, Jennings, Bartholomew, Decatur, Ripley, Franklin, and Union and terminate at the line dividing the States of Ohio and Indiana, at a point on said State Line at or near the town of College Corners".

This railroad was built from Evansville, a distance of 17.5 miles, to Boonville in Warrick County, Indiana, and opened for operation to that place on August 4, 1873. In Vanderburgh County and as far as Chandler in Warrick County this railroad was built on the towpath and on the right-of-way of the old abandoned Wabash-Erie Canal.

The property owners, including Mary S. Stockwell, believed that the Canal property should have reverted to the original owners when the Canal was abandoned. The courts were petitioned for an injunction and abatement of the construction of the railroad, which by that time was being called the Airline Railroad. The suit was finally taken to the Indiana Supreme Court, where it was settled in favor of the railroad. The railroad was extended and reorganized and eventually became a part of the Southern Railway System. The tracks have remained in that location on the towpath of the Canal.

In a few years another problem arose with railroads. With the organization of the Evansville, Suburban & Newburgh Railway, plans were made in 1888, with the voting of $60,000 to promote the building of the tracks, to establish a suburban railroad to Newburgh. The right-of-way was projected to cross the Stockwell farm and the Stockwell Woods for a distance of slightly more than a mile. Mary S. Stockwell was unwilling to grant a right-of-way for the compensation that was offered her and the company countered with a lawsuit and condemnation proceedings to compel the Stockwell family to cooperate.

Appraisers were appointed by the Vanderburgh Circuit Court. On March 5, 1889, after the report of the appraisers was made, Mrs. Mary S. Stockwell was paid $500, plus the costs of litigation, for the right-of-way for the interurban line to Newburgh which became known in the years that followed as "The Dummy Line".

Mrs. Mary S. Stockwell also was experiencing another source of anxiety. Across the road from her property and about 300 yards from her house the State of Indiana in 1886 erected and established a large hospital for the insane. Located on the Howard Farm, which had earlier been owned by Robert Barnes, the hospital property occupied the NW IA of Section 26. Mrs. Stockwell had a constant fear that an escapee from the hospital would come to her house, as it was the nearest place. She considered also that it probably lowered the value of her property because of that proximity. She did little to improve the place, cleared no more of the land, and tried to close the entrance road to the cemetery because of the uncertainties of the activities of those who drove their carriages back along that road.

To make matters even worse, the frequent trips of the trains to and from Newburgh was a source of danger from fire in dry weather. A steam locomotive often gave out sparks that could set fire to the grass fields or the woods. Passengers on the trains were very careless in that they threw lighted cigars out the windows of the cars, or cleaned out their pipes of hot ashes.

In 1900 the Evansville, Suburban & Newburgh Railway proposed to build an interurban line to Boonville and the company asked to obtain a right-of-way through the Stockwell Woods. The plan was to follow the Newburgh Line to the point in the Stockwell property where the track runs southeastward. At that point a switch would be installed and the Boonville Line would turn north-eastward with a new right-of-way through the forest.

In view of the fact that E. S. & N. already traversed the entire farm, Mrs. Mary S. Stockwell was willing to accept the arrangement upon the payment of satisfactory compensation. The amount of money that she received was not a matter of record. The line to Boonville was built in 1906 with a significant change in the technology. This line was electrified and was operated with electrically-driven traction cars. At the same time the line to Newburgh was electrified, and the historical lore of "The Dummy Line" became just a memory.

The E. S. & N continued to use steam locomotives on these lines for freight cars, especially cars loaded with coal. The passenger service was on the electric trolley cars. In the Summer months for many years the company would arrange picnic or excursion trains with steam locomotives and open cars that would bring back memories of "The Dummy Line".
Her health failing and being in declining years, Mrs. Mary S. Stockwell wrote and signed her will, with characteristic brevity and clarity. After the usual preliminaries it stated: " All other property and assets that I die possessed of, I give and bequeath to my daughter, Frances T. Stockwell". The will was signed on February 18, 1908. Mrs. Mary S. Stockwell died July 19, 1914.

Changes in the administration of insane hospitals with greater emphasis on agricultural work as a form of therapy, caused the State of Indiana to seek additional land to be added to the Woodmere Hospital. In 1919 the Stockwell Holdings (559 acres) became State property. The one-acre McCallister Cemetery was reserved in perpetuity.

From 1919 until 1954 the area that had been purchased from the Stockwell estate was basically unchanged. The forest remained untouched. It was posted to prevent hunting, trespassing, or encroachment. The cleared land that was under cultivation was used for pasture, hayfields, corn, and vegetable gardens. A substantial wooden bridge was built across Division Street so that the cattle and workers with farm equipment could cross in safety .The wooden bridge has since been replaced with a concrete bridge at the same location.

In 1954, under the great leadership of Mayor H. O. Roberts, the City of Evansville purchased 56.83 acres at the corner of Boeke and Division from the State of Indiana for $88,086.50 with the express purpose of building a sports arena. This fine building was designed by Architect Ralph Legeman. The structure was completed in 1956 and was named the Roberts Municipal stadium. A large recreational swimming pool was built on this tract of land in 1958 and was named Hartke Pool in honor of the Mayor at that time, R. Vance Hartke, who later became a United States Senator.

A sweeping change came in 1963. State Senator Albert Wesselman, with untiring efforts, persuaded the State of Indiana to make a gift of the remaining area of what had been the Stockwell estate to the City of Evansville. This was done with the stipulation that it could be used only for park and recreational purposes. Governor Matthew E. Welsh signed this deed on August 5, 1963. It provided for three small areas to be reserved for other needs, namely: five acres on Division Street for an Armory; 10 acres at the corner of Stockwell Road and Division to be used by the State Hospital; five acres on Boeke Road to be used for the Good Samaritan Nursing Home. Stockwell Woods thereafter became known as Wesselman Park.

Thus 200 acres of natural primeval forest had the potential to become a real tangible heritage of the citizens of Evansville. One of the primary aims of Senator Wesselman and others was the preservation of this truly unusual forest.

No other City in the United States with a population exceeding 100,000 has within its corporate limit, a timber stand of such acreage and sylvan qualities. Reputedly no other forest land in the State of Indiana has such high density (125 trees/acre) or basal area (187 sq. ft./acre) figures. There are many trees 100 feet tall. Some of the trees are estimated to be nearly 300 years old.

Development of this natural resource, or at least of the open areas generally followed the recommendations of the Allen Report of 1964, a professionally prepared master plan for the City's park and recreational needs. Fully lighted tennis courts, ball diamonds, and a Par 3 golf course were installed on the cleared portions, where 40 years ago there were hayfields, pastures, and corn. A rustic split rail fence encloses the cemetery. These improvements were financed by Park District Bonds of 1965 and 1967.

The ultimate fate of the wooded portion of Wesselman Park was a question for a few years after city acquisition. Some fear was aroused when a site plan map, as conceived by the Allen Organization Land Planners, was publicized. This map displayed a potential 18-hole golf course, the back nine holes of which would have felled a third of the forest stand. However, the central wooded area was designated on this plan as "a Nature Center," although no further mention of this use was made in the text.

Various persons in the Park and Recreation Departments as well as concerned citizens saw the need to promote the development of a Nature Center and smothered the golf course notion. Various organizations were contacted and made aware of the exceptional forest resource in Wesselman Park and its potential as an ideal outdoor educational area.

The Junior League, an organization of young women who like to do constructive work for a community, in 1964 financed a survey by the Nature Centers Division of the National Audubon Society .The final report was a working manual, outlining the capital improvements financing, staffing and programming of a successful Nature Center. To implement various details of the project by counsel to and in cooperation with the Evansville Park Board, the Junior League, in 1968, initiated formation of the Wesselman Park Nature Center Advisory Committee.

An important step was taken in 1969 with the hiring of a full time Naturalist for the Nature Center in Wesselman Park under the auspices of the City Public Recreation Commission. The duties included guiding school group tours, making trails, patrolling the sanctuary, and generally promoting continued interest in the further development of the Nature Center.

With tightened City budgets and the Park District Bonds exhausted, the financing of additional aspects of the Nature Center project seemed doubtful. Responding, the Junior League began a full-scale community fund drive in 1970. The goal was $160,000 for construction of the last major and most important capital improvement in the area - a Visitors Interpretive Center. The Junior League donated $30,000 to kick off the campaign and generous local support followed.

A year later, after much money had been amassed, the Park Department was able to get a matching grant from the Land and Water Conservation Fund through the Federal Bureau of Outdoor Recreation. This funding apparatus is administered by the Indiana Department of Natural Resources. With funds finally available and building plans prepared, ground breaking for the Visitors Interpretive Building in Wesselman Park Nature Center took place in January of 1972. The site preparation specified the removal of only one large tree!

With construction under way and the culmination of the Nature Center idea in the offing, the Advisory Committee disbanded. Although completion of the Interpretive Center would mark the end of one prolonged project it would simultaneously mark the beginning of an even larger more important process.

No history, whether natural or cultural, is relevant to people unless there is some sort of communicative process. To facilitate the informational and educational task of helping people understand what Wesselman Park Nature Center represents, a non-profit supportive organization was incorporated in the Spring of 1972. The Nature Center Interpretive Building was dedicated and officially opened in January of 1973. Although the City of Evansville Parks and Recreation Department provides a small permanent staff and physical upkeep of the facility, the membership dues and volunteer assistance of the Wesselman Park Nature Center Society enables the fullest presentation of the natural features and cultural history of this area.

This is the story of Wesselman Park and Nature Center to this date. It is a vignette of the timeless drama of Man's relationship with Nature and the alternative approaches to problems connected with resources. Indiana history is still in the making. But the people of Evansville and the surrounding Southwestern Indiana environs are mindful and aware that they possess something to truly appreciate - a great park and natural wooded area that is growing in significance year by year.

Dr. James E. Morlock

Epilogue

In 1981 in the midst of budget cuts the city of Evansville almost cut the Nature Preserve entirely from its budget leaving no staff or operating funds. From this point the Nature Preserve Society began to provide more of the operational budget and some salary support through a contract with the City of Evansville which now funds three salaries and almost all capital irnprovements. In 1989 the Wesselman Park Nature Center Society voted to change the name to Wesselman Woods Nature Preserve to more accurately describe what it is we do and who we are. In the 90's the Lucille Pitt Endowment Fund was established. The endowment's purpose is to some day provide for all operating funds of the Nature Preserve.