



# HISTORY UNFOLDS

## Our Beginnings

It was the early 1970s when McHenry County Conservation District started along its humble beginnings. Concern over the environment had been growing for nearly a decade. Biologist Rachel Carson warned the unrestricted use of chemical pesticides was destroying the country's wildlife. Fish were suffocating on the shore of Lake Erie, and natural resources were being depleted by the truck load. Millions of acres across the country were being striped, mined, clear cut and paved. A nationwide environmental movement had begun gaining momentum. It was a time when seventy percent of Americans thought the environment was the nation's most pressing domestic problem. During the same decade, several environmental legislation acts were enacted and some 35 environmental laws including the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act, a ban on aerosols, and regulations on auto emissions. In addition, 100 million acres were set aside and National Parks were established.

McHenry County Conservation District was born during this groundswell of environmental awareness and optimism for the future. Conservation groups like the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society took the lead, but closer to home in rural northeastern Illinois in the county of McHenry, the outcry came from a group of thoughtful citizens that saw the rapidly growing suburbs of Chicago creeping north and west at an increasing alarming speed. Early visionaries wanted to preserve the character of their rural paradise of large rolling acres, agricultural fields, equestrian ranches, big red barns and beautiful views.

The wide open spaces of McHenry County was coveted by its residents as well as city folk who would venture to the country to escape. Families would "come out to the farm" where they could sit and sip lemonade under the cooling branches of giant oaks and hickories, where they could pick berries, gather for large picnics and barbecues, and where numerous summer homes were established along the Fox River.

To preserve this way of life, and avoid high-density developments, support from residents grew exponentially around the possibility of setting aside lands to make them available as a resource for all residents. Proponents for the creation of a Conservation District pledged to preserve large tracts of open space, wetlands, and native bird habitat.

On April 6, 1971, McHenry County Conservation District was formed by a successful county-wide referendum held in conjunction with the general election 1971 and formally organized in July 1971. In 1973, the newly established Conservation District purchased its first parcel—50 acres in Chemung. Beck's Woods became the second site opened to the public, following Harrison Benwell in Wonder Lake which opened a few months earlier, followed by numerous land acquisitions and the opening of 34 additional sites in the years that followed.

The distinctiveness of McHenry County's natural land was a driving force in the creation of the Conservation District. That desire for preservation has continued to inspire land

McHenry County Conservation District exists to preserve, restore, and manage natural areas and open spaces for their intrinsic value and for the benefits to present and future generations.

purchases. Throughout the 1970s the District added 2,167 acres, while the 1980s added 2,353 acres. The rapid growth the county experienced during the 1990s increased the value of land preservation and thus, the District acquired 7,144 acres.

Today, McHenry County Conservation District relies on 73 full-time employees to coordinate the management of over 25,600 acres of protected land; present hundreds of environmental education programs and special events, and maintain 35 sites that feature 106 miles of hiking trails, 45 miles of biking trails, 25 fishing areas, 6 campgrounds, 6 canoe launches, 36 miles of horse trails, and 18 sites with picnic areas & shelters, and a multitude of opportunities for wildlife viewing. The District also boasts 17 dedicated State Nature Preserves within its sites.

For five decades Conservation District leaders, staff and volunteers have fulfilled the vision set forth by our founders and keeping promises made to taxpayers to protect, preserve and enhance the properties owned by the Conservation District, for all county residents to enjoy, and held in perpetuity for decades and decades to come.

## Thank you for your support!



*McHenry County*  
**CONSERVATION DISTRICT**  
**CELEBRATING FIFTY YEARS**

### Help us Celebrate this Milestone—

We hope you are already celebrating your conservation areas with daily doses of fresh air and trail walks during this pandemic. Early on, conservation sites were deemed essential. Throughout 2020 we witnessed two to three times the amount of regular visitors. If you are new to McHenry County Conservation District sites and trails we say "Hello!" To our residents whose lives were once too hectic to visit but now have found us for weekly visits, we say "Welcome back!" And to our neighbors and regular site users, we say, "Thank you for making us a part of your way of life!"

Throughout our 50th year of service to McHenry County, we will offer new programs and activities to get you engaged and excited about the outdoors like *Hike for the Health of It* on page 27, *Trail Riders*-a 50 mile ride (broken down into segments) on page 28, *Webby Wednesdays* online course on page 24, and a collection of seasonal sighting articles and activities from over the years to download or pick up. There are new art exhibits planned, DIY "road rally" scavenger hunts, a commemorative geocache coin, fall special events and the release of our commemorative anniversary book.

We will feature our milestones, historic facts and little known trivia to get you better connected to the lands that are now protected within conservation areas. And coming soon, we will announce the long anticipated opening of the *Passport to Lost Valley Adventure* exhibit at Lost Valley Visitor Center in Glacial Park.

In the days and months to come, sign up to receive notices via our e-newsletter, follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, tune in to one of our series on YouTube, join one of our Facebook groups and let us help you Discover McHenry County Conservation District.  
**See you on the trails!**

