



The Early Years

Fulfilling the Dream 1970s & 1980s

The Conservation District's physical beginnings started modestly: a desk, a single phone line, a cup of pens, and a circle of folding chairs in a basement office in downtown Woodstock, Illinois. But what those beginnings lacked in trappings, was far outweighed by the vision that had brought the agency into existence. Early leaders set to work to fulfill a promise made to the citizens of the county under the Illinois Conservation District Act (70 ILCS 410) to *..acquire land or water for the preservation of natural and scenic resources, and for the education, pleasure, and recreation of the public with such restrictions as will leave it unimpaired for the benefit of future generations...*

As steadily growing suburban sprawl threatened like a looming storm from the southeast, early land protection efforts secured natural lands to the north and west. The first parcel purchased of 50 acres near Chemung, known as Beck's Woods began the process of creating McHenry County's permanently public open space. Additional acquisitions soon followed in Wonder Lake (Harrison-Benwell), Harvard (Rush Creek), Marengo (Marengo Ridge) and Ringwood (Glacial Park).

These early years were also a time to establish a conservation presence in the county. The District adopted a conservation ethic encouraging residents to develop a greater awareness of our role in, and responsibility for, the total community of life. To bolster local conservation education efforts, the first District Interpretive Naturalist was hired in the late 1970's initially focusing on school groups and teacher workshops. Wildlife rehabilitation and environmental education programs also came into being and the Living Land Farm offered programs on rural living out of a century old farm house in Cary.

It was a time when modern conveniences allowed for more free time and leisure wasn't just for the rich; participation was influenced by the family, and there was a demand for recreation closer to home. The fast-paced lifestyle of the 1980s, in combination with a deep economic recession took a toll on people's psyche. Residents increasingly began to turn to the woods and wide open spaces to relieve stress, find mental healing, and to relax. There was an uptick in physical and mental exercise regimens to ensure a full life. During this time the District opened the regional, multiple-use Prairie Trail, the Hickory Grove and Thomas Woods campgrounds, the Nippersink Canoe Trail and multiple hiking trails and picnicking areas.



Pictured top to bottom: The District's first Executive Director Ken Fiske who served from 1971-1985; an early 1970s Board of Trustees meeting in the basement of the Woodstock office; the first Festival of the Sugar Maples is held at Coral Woods.



Pictured top to bottom: Harrison Benwell is the first site to open to the public; Glacial Park protects wide open spaces; public planting along a section of the regional Prairie Trail; Trail of History begins its 25 year run as a purposeful special event; Booshways Kim Compton and Dennis Beaver lead opening ceremony parade.

Site Openings

Conservation Areas Open to the Public

1973
Beck's Woods
Harrison Benwell

1974
Rush Creek
Marengo Ridge

1975
Glacial Park

1981
Nippersink Canoe Trail
Hickory Grove

1982
Thomas Woods
Campground

1986
Piscasaw North

1987
Prairie Trail South
The Hollows

1988
Coral Woods
Prairie Trail North

As the 1980's drew to a close, the District found itself once again advocating for a balance between development and natural resource preservation as plans for a regional highway reemerged that would slice directly through the delta kames for which Glacial Park is noted. Early efforts to educate and raise awareness for the significance of protecting our natural heritage evolved into an ongoing, strategic campaign, one that was repeated as new threats materialize through the coming years.

This time, the strategic thinking of staff breathed life into the creation of an event held directly at the site of where the highway would bisect Glacial Park. The Trail of History is born, a 25 year running event that is a full-emersion experience of understanding the intersection of our cultural and natural history.

