



# Growing Years

## Making a Lasting Impression 1990s & 2000s

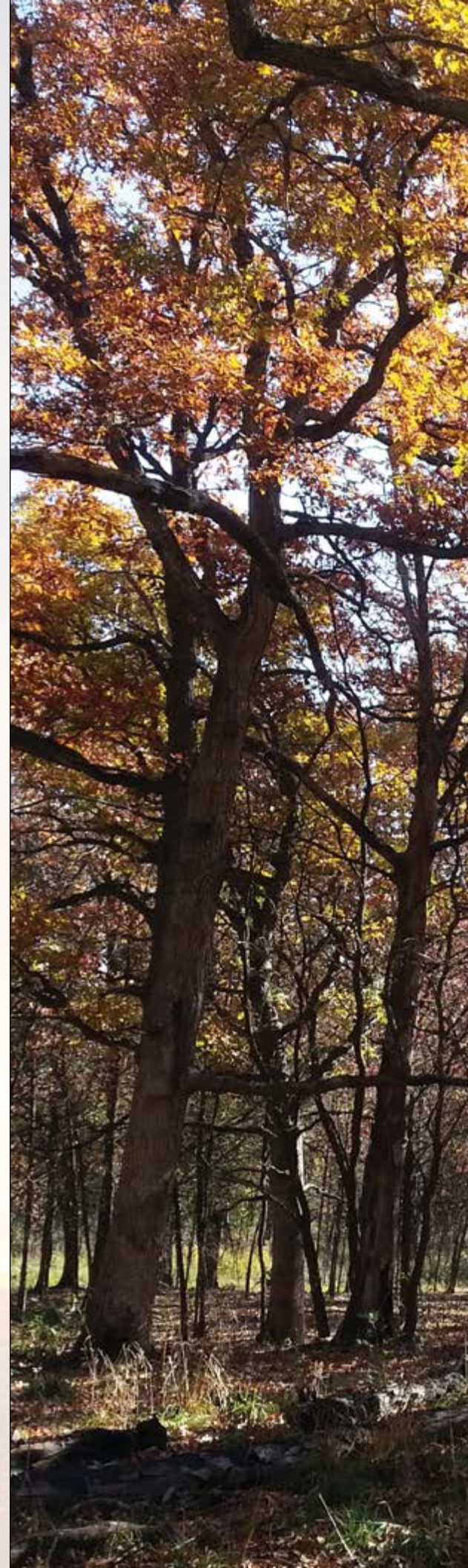
Mother Nature made people stand up and take notice in the 1990s; this time by way of hurricanes that pummeled the South, wildfires in the West, and rains in the Midwest that fell unceasingly for two months. While the world spun out of control around them, rural McHenry County wrestled with suburban sprawl and found itself grasping to protect open space. Voters approved two referenda which set the District on an upward trajectory for land and water protection efforts, defining and solidifying their role in shaping the future of McHenry County.

In 2007, the Conservation District published the Natural Areas Protection Guide to assist stakeholders in making well-informed land use decisions, taking into consideration the ecologically sensitive nature of some properties. Embedded in the Natural Areas Protection Plan was a call to preserve the county's oak ecosystems. The Oaks of McHenry County was then published as an addendum and served as a proactive planning tool to identify and protect the last remaining oak groves and savannas across the county, noting that they will not survive without intervention.

At the same time, there was a growing need for environmental education to engage with residents to raise awareness. The District's first environmental education center opened in the early 1990s in the renovated Wiedrich Barn, located in Glacial Park. The education department grew from one to six employees over that decade. To meet the growing need for education programs on the east side of the county, the former Rhoades' estate in Crystal Lake was transformed into Prairieview Education Center and opened in 1999. In the early 2000's the Living Land Farm was "retired". But by 2010, the District had acquired a privately owned inholding within Glacial Park, and a former hunt club was re purposed into the LEED Gold certified Lost Valley Visitor Center. Staff members relocated from the Wiedrich Education Center and that facility was mothballed.

The 1990's ushered in a renewal of family values and a shift to community concerns. A focus on organized sports catered to youth, but overall people were more health and environment conscious. Residents became caught in the time crunch of running errands and getting kids to practices and were feeling stressed and burned out.

It was time for a change.



The shift in behavior emphasized the need to slow down, get away from watching television, and pursue outdoor recreational activities like camping, fishing, trail running, bird watching and boating; which all saw significant increases.

With leisure time at a premium, parents looked for activities in which the whole family could participate. Hiking exploration, family biking outings, and weekend special events flourished. The Conservation District experienced an upward trend of casual site visitation and participation numbers doubled as more diverse programming was offered.

*Pictured below clockwise: Hiking at Glacial Park; Family campout at Marengo Ridge; Discovering a sense of place at a Weekend of Restoration program; a family bike outing along the Prairie Trail.*



*Pictured above: In 1999, the Conservation District returned 3.2 miles of Nippersink Creek to its original meandering course, after the stream had been channelized since 1951. The Nippersink project, envisioned by Director of Land Preservation and Natural Resources Ed Collins, involved one of the larger stretches of water restored in the Midwest, a monumental task and success story. Today, Nippersink Creek, the largest tributary to the Fox River, is home to game fish, silt intolerant mussels, ospreys, and bald eagles. After heavy rains, the restored wetlands hold tens of millions of gallons of water that would otherwise flood downstream communities.*

## Site Openings

### Conservation Areas Open to the Public

**1992**  
Wiedrich Education Center

**1993**  
Wildlife Resource Center

**1999**  
Prairieview Education Center  
Entire 26-mile Prairie Trail

**2000**  
Fel-Pro RRR  
Exner Marsh  
Stickney Run  
Brookdale

**2001**  
Silver Creek

**2003**  
Research Field Station  
Hebron Trail

**2004**  
Fox Bluff  
Marengo Ridge Campground  
Dufield Pond

**2005**  
Elizabeth Lake west side  
Pleasant Valley

**2006**  
H.U.M. Trail

**2007**  
County Line Road Access  
Elizabeth Lake east side

**2008**  
North Branch  
Boger Bog

**2009**  
Ridgefield Trace Phase I  
Stone Mill Trail