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## A FOREST FOR LEARNING

by VIRGINIA KLINE, 1971

Each day in spring and fall the yellow school buses gather up a hundred or so excited Madison school children and their teachers for a field trip to the Madison School Forest. It's a day long anticipated and many an anxious eye has checked the morning sky for recalcitrant clouds. At the edge of town a trained naturalist guide boards each bus to join the children for the twelve mile trip. With the aid of the bus loudspeaker system the naturalist points out interesting birds, plants, geologic and historic features along the way - helping to set the tone of observation and learning which will be the keynote along the Forest trails. Contrasts are noted: between man-managed fields with little diversity and natural areas with great diversity, between birds seen in open country and those in the forest, between layered angular rocks in a roadside quarry and rounded glacial cobbles used to build a retaining wall, between the glaciated landscape at Madison and the steep hills of the "driftless" area as the bus nears the Forest on a road whose roller coaster contours bring enthusiastic "oh's!" (The cooperative bus driver drives for the full effect.) Additional naturalists await the bus at the parking lot so that each class will have a guide as the children explore some of the seven mile trail system which winds through the Forest. Discoveries during the 1 1/2 - 2 1/2 hour hike will vary according to the age and interest of the children, the emphasis planned by the teacher, the season, and the unforeseen "happenings" typical of an outdoor exploration. A hawk soaring overhead, an active spider web, deer tracks in the trail, a grouse drumming - such current events take precedence over planned observations! Flexibility is a key to success, as is the naturalist's skill in relating such happenings to the ecology of the forest. Hopefully each child will benefit from the innate pleasurable human response to the natural environment; will increase awareness through use of his senses; and will gain new insight into the complex interrelationships between living things.

The pleasure of responding to a natural environment and the growing awareness and understanding fostered by teacher and naturalist are made available to thousands of Madison children each year through the School Forest program. Naturalists and buses provided by the Board

of Education are just one part of the program, which has been continually growing since its inception a decade ago. At that time a generous gift of land was made to the Madison Board of Education - 160 acres of virtually undisturbed oak woods. (Since that time an additional gift has increased the acreage to nearly 300.) From the beginning the Forest program has been guided with vision and expertise by its present director, Mr. Paul Olson, principal of a local elementary school and long-time active conservationist.

### Work-Learn Program

Committed to the idea that the best place to teach conservation is outdoors, Mr. Olson had already organized a summer "Work-Learn" program for ninth grade boys. These boys ("too old to play all summer but too young to get jobs" as Mr. Olson puts it) had been doing stream improvement work on area trout streams - fencing, stream structures to direct flow, bank stabilization, etc. This work involved cooperation with the farmer owners and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Mr. Olson wanted to add good forestry practice to the experience the boys were having. The new gift of land provided an excellent opportunity, and approximately 80 acres of the Forest were set aside for this purpose. Here, closely supervised by teachers recruited for summer work, the boys learn some basic forestry principles. More important perhaps, they learn the feel of saw and ax, the excitement of the shout of "timber!", and the sensation of aching muscles after a hard day's work. The lumber harvested is used by the boys to build structures needed for the other facets of the growing School Forest program. As each part of the program has developed, Mr. Olson has obtained support from the Board of Education, plus occasional additional funds from local businessmen.

### School Camping

In a hilltop area set aside for school camping the Work-Learn boys have built a shelter house, food preparation and utility building, four insulated and heated cabins to accommodate 15 to 20 cots each, and a large nature center. The buildings are located along the edge of a large mowed field suitable for active sports. Here in spring and fall two classes at a time, usually 5th or 6th grade, can spend one or two nights. Each camping group plans its own schedule - including learning expectations, recreational activities, campfire programs, food, individual chores, etc. Naturalists are provided for approximately three hours each afternoon, two per class, to lead exploratory hikes and special studies of such topics as mammals, birds, or geology. The camping experience has been very successful, and reservations fill the entire season well in advance.

Adjacent to the campground a picturesque rocky area is available for family picnicking, with picnic tables provided by the Work-Learn boys. The camping, picnicking, and forestry areas are areas modified by man's use; for the rest of the Forest man's role is limited to that of preserver and observer. For this large area Mr. Olson envisioned an interpretive program for all ages of Madison children.

### Interpretive Program

To launch such a program he was fortunate to meet and enlist the aid of Dr. James Zimmerman, outstanding naturalist and teacher. Dr. Zimmerman has been the key person in training the necessary naturalists and increasing the environmental awareness of the teachers. Specifically, Dr. Zimmerman has given each year:

1. An evening course in ecology entitled "Reading the Landscape" held once a week for twelve weeks plus field trips. Made available to the public through the Madison Area Technical College, this course has reached hundreds of people in the area. To encourage teachers to participate, salary advancement credits are given to those completing the course. The course has also provided an opportunity to recruit potential naturalist guides from the ranks of homemakers with a variety of educational backgrounds. (Graduate students at the University of Wisconsin also serve as naturalists, and more recently high school biology honor students have worked with the camping groups.)

2. A week long School Forest Institute in June which is a concentrated outdoor learning experience for teachers. The enrollment in this course has increased so much that several experienced guides now assist with the instruction. The course is sponsored by the Board of Education. Fees charged pay for the instructors' salaries. Advancement credits are given.

3. Training for naturalist guides. Originally accomplished on an informal on-the-trail basis, the need for guides for various outdoor programs in the Madison area has increased so tremendously that a cooperative training program has been set up with the University of Wisconsin Arboretum. (The School Forest presently employs twelve part-time guides.) The once weekly morning sessions include lectures and lab-type activities conducted by Dr. Zimmerman, occasional guest speakers from the University faculty, seminar studies prepared and presented by the guides themselves, outdoor study of various natural communities, and field trips to places of special ecological interest. Mrs. Rosemary Fleming, Dane County Naturalist, has assisted in coordinating this training.

### Instructional Materials

High quality materials have been developed to aid the classroom teacher. Examples of these include:

1. A comprehensive 150 page book on the School Forest written by Mr. Olson and Dr. Zimmerman. Printed by the Madison Board of Education, this is an excellent text for adults on the ecology of the oak forests of southern Wisconsin.
2. An illustrated eight page booklet "What Is a Tour through the Madison School Forest?" which summarizes briefly some of the learning experiences possible on the trail.
3. Two instructional sets which include filmstrips and guidebooks for classroom use: "Three Layers of Green in the Madison School Forest" for upper elementary and "Madison School Forest: Clues to the Past and Signs of the Future" for middle school. These sets were developed as part of a Local Materials project directed by Mrs. Mary Lou Peterson and funded under ESEA Title III.

### Looking Toward the Future

A program maintains its vitality through continual growth and improvement. Future plans for the School Forest include beginning a summer camping program, and developing guidelines and materials for individual grade level experiences at the Forest. Coordination with programs developing at other sites in the area will be important. Recently the Madison Parks Department acquired 800 acres in a wetland known as Cherokee Marsh. Through a cooperative arrangement between the Parks Department and the Board of Education an outdoor education program has been started there. In addition, efforts will be made to identify an area within walking distance of each school suitable for outdoor education. Having such areas available would encourage more frequent and impromptu investigations of particular topics and would provide a valuable supplement to the School Forest program. The Parks Department is interested in cooperating in this effort.

### What Makes it Work?

The educational opportunities for teachers and guides and the materials developed have been mentioned in detail because it is through this approach that the children traveling in the yellow school buses experience more than an isolated "nature walk" or a tree identification exercise.

The beautiful undisturbed site, while a unique asset, is not essential for a meaningful program. Any reasonably natural area with diversity in plant and animal life can be suitable. Essential factors in making best use of the site selected include an able director with conservation sense and innovative ideas, a naturalist-ecologist to train and teach guides and teachers, a supportive community and Board of Education, and a full measure of enthusiasm and commitment on the part of all those involved.