



Little Creek Nature Area: a brief history



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Jim Leighninger
May 2009

Photographs: Vern LeClaire, Jaime Scott, Jack Bowles, Jim Leighninger, various newspaper clippings, district newsletters and other unlabeled snapshots found in the Little Creek files.

This brief history was assembled with the assistance of many people who shared their files, their memories and their love for a the ninety-six acres that is Little Creek Nature Area. The following individuals made this work possible:

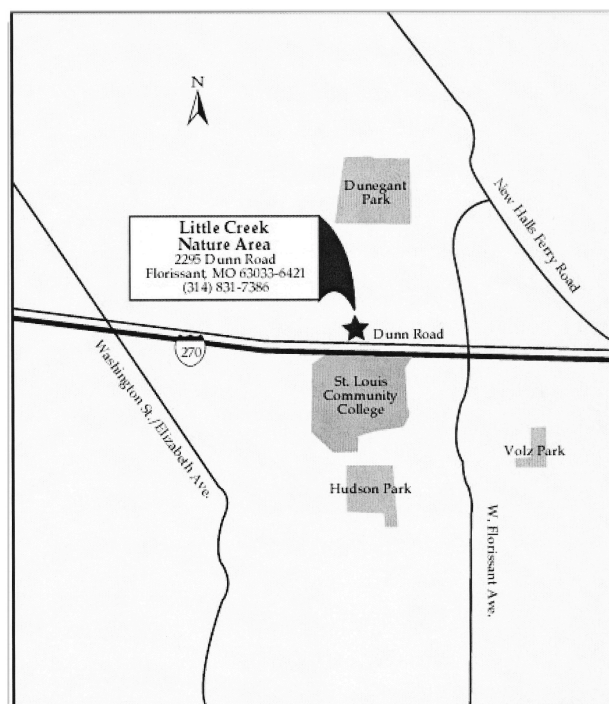
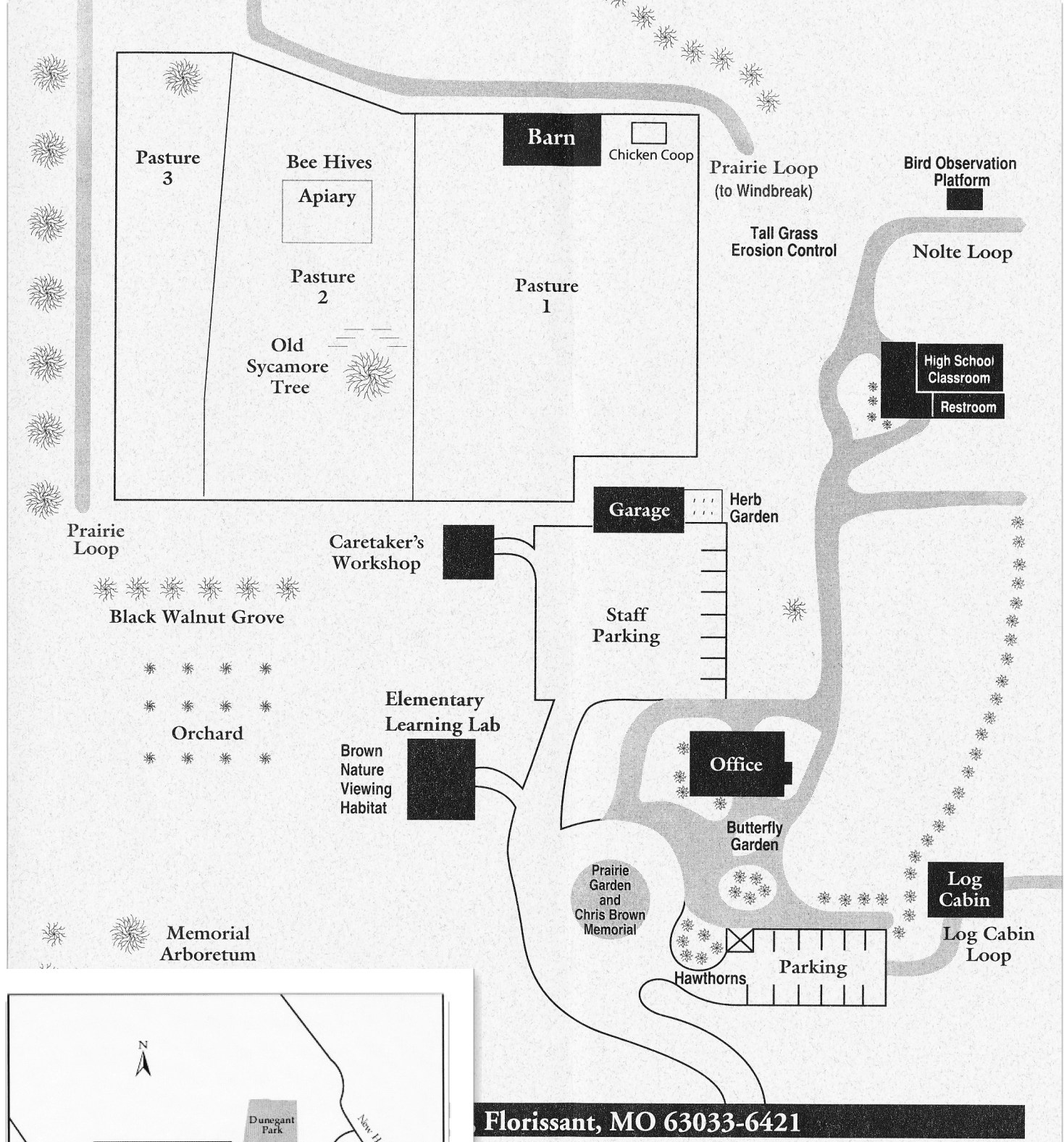
Jack Bowles, Doug Kraus, Vern LeClaire, Jo Ann Jasin, Susan Lark, Dan White, Scott Williams, Barbra Stephenson, Steve Harris, Jeanine Renaud, Larry Larrew, Jane Martin and Nancy Parsons (daughters of Ethel Nolte) ,Charlotte Glenn and Linda Stockman (earlier researchers), and the books of Louis Pondrom, Dr. John Wright, Fr. Gilbert J. Garraghan SJ, and Rosemary S. Davison.

Many others made Little Creek itself possible, including but certainly not limited to: Virgil McCluer, Warren Brown, Ethel Nolte, Bill Hampton, A.J. Sullivan, Perry Atkins, Paul Bueneman, Bill Brendel, Bob Borgstede, Bill Stinson, Evelyn Graves, Carol Barnes, Ruth Stengal, Dan Steffan, Mary Steffan, Louise Nichols, Mary Delaney, Judy Huck, Lee Margulis, Mr. and Mrs. Leo Seifert, Paul Roth, numerous Boy Scouts, and dozens of teachers and parents of the Ferguson-Florissant School District.

Thousands of people have walked its trails and taken much knowledge of the natural world or merely a few moments of peaceful beauty. Many have also given much of themselves to make this possible. This work is dedicated to them.

“We hope to start a chain of experiences for children that can lead them to the increased awareness and the special knowledge needed for intelligent action with respect to many of our environmental problems.” -Ethel Nolte







Little Creek Nature Area Ferguson-Florissant School District

Trails	Length	Walk
A. Log Cabin Loop	.3 Mile	12 Minutes
B. Nolte Loop	.4 Mile	25 Minutes
C. Prairie Loop	.4 Mile	20 Minutes
D. Woodland Trail	.8 Mile	45 Minutes
E. Northside Trail	1.0 Mile	60 Minutes

Bridges

1. Squirrel
2. Turkey
3. Skunk
4. Bug
5. Crawdad
6. Rabbit
7. Raccoon
8. Opossum
9. Crow
10. Coyote

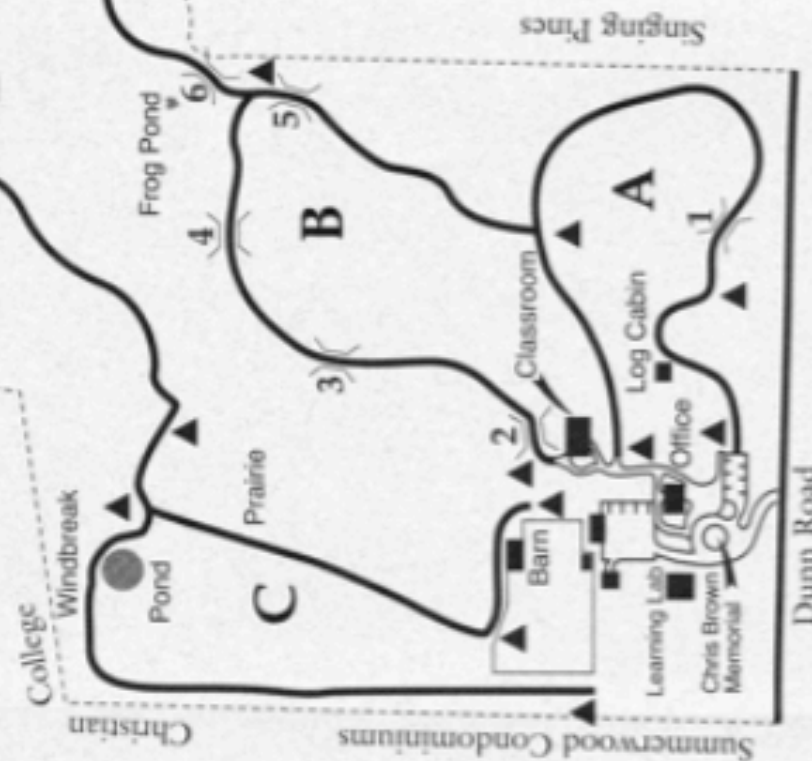
Dunegant Park

Big K

Map Key

- Trail
- Creek
- Bridge
- Post Marker

Trail Marker



It's spring in North County. A surprise snowfall at the end of March and another mid April failed to cause the budding trees and wild flowers anything more than a temporary chill. Missouri is back on its roller coaster ride of warm sunny days and cold showers, and the maples, plum trees and red buds are in full bloom. Hawthorns and elms are beginning to produce leaves the



size of mouse ears, and the oaks and sycamores are not far behind. Finding dry trails at the Ferguson-Florissant School District's Little Creek Nature Area is not an easy thing at this time of year. But the footing along the Nolte Trail, one of several trails that cross these ninety-six acres of wilderness in the middle of suburbia, is good enough for a morning visit.

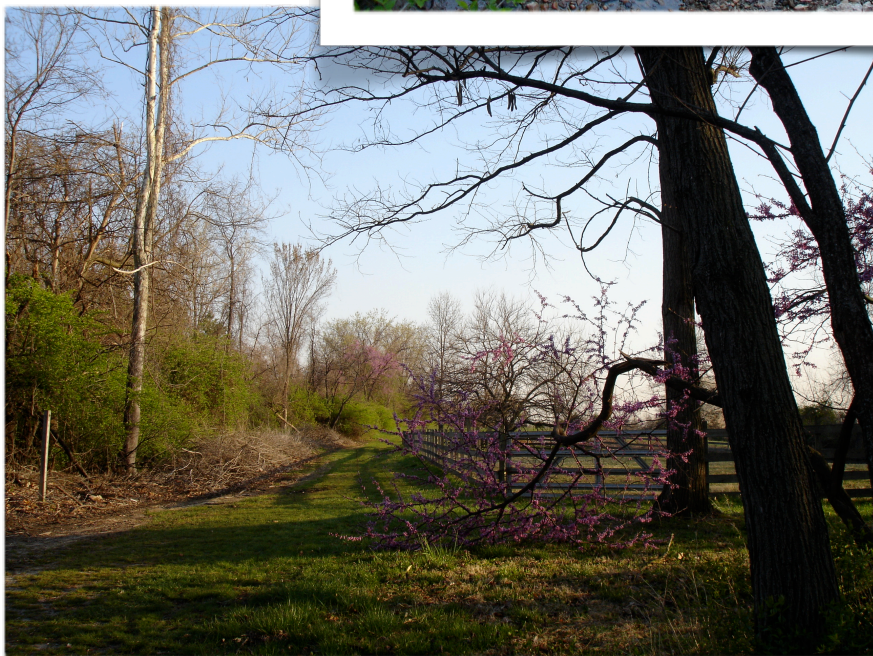
This day, the visitor is not alone. Fresh deer tracks cross the path and disappear under the blanket of last fall's leaves. The rustle one hears, however, is not deer this time. It might be a freshly awakened groundhog, still hungry after his long winter's nap, off in pursuit of a breakfast of bell wort or new grasses, maybe a bit of mint. More probably it's a grey

squirrel, too absorbed in digging up one of her caches of acorns to mind human company so close. Coyotes and their prey, the white footed mice are nowhere to be seen. Underground, the voles, moles and shrews are active, but also keeping out of sight because of the presence of their enemy, the red-tailed hawk.

Overhead a songbird celebrates the return of insect life in the trees while a red-bellied woodpecker lays down the rhythm section somewhere across the creek. Finches, both gold and purple, talk to each other and ignore the chattering black-capped chickadees. A blue jay calls a warning to the visitor at the turning of the path where bluets and dog-toothed violets poke up amidst the may apples that fill the moss covered path. By summer most of them will be trodden down and gone, but for now they stake their claims.

Cardinals are singing their mating songs as the frogs perform their own on warmer days. It's still too soon for eggs, but the ring-necked and garter snakes prefer slugs and other ground insects. Dragonflies have already emerged, as have the tent caterpillars. And up on the "prairie section" robins are poking through the grass and the purple henbit.

The many hues of green have returned to Little Creek, and an ancient cycle continues. It is a cycle older than human memory, older than the first living things to occupy this small spot on the continent. Changes in life forms and climates have failed to stop it's repetition as they have always failed. It is spring again.





Prehistory

Standing beneath the canopy of trees along the Nolte Trail , it is hard to picture Little Creek as anything different than what it is today. And yet a time traveler would find varied scenes, depending on when he appeared. More than 290 million years ago, parts of Missouri were under water. Fossils of sea creatures have been found along the banks of the creek, including a rare Scaphapod, a kind of mollusk which fed on one-celled organisms called foraminafera. The fossils of these one-celled creatures, resembling grains of rice, are also plentiful in the limestone layer beneath the soil.

Much later, during the Ice Age, a great glacier stretched from Canada down across the northern half of Missouri, pushing boulders along with it as it crept south. One such boulder of Bariboo quartzite came with the glacier all the way to Florissant; its journey from Wisconsin ended when the ice stopped and then receded, leaving it and others to be found eons afterwards along the creek beds. As the climate warmed and the ice retreated, the melt water lakes and swamps they left behind dried up and became prairies and forests. Large mammals took up residence. Bones from Pleistocene mastodons, giant beavers and land sloths have all been found in North County. And following these large mammals were smaller but more deadly mammals, Man.

Native American Inhabitants

There is enough archeological evidence in Missouri to see that the region was home to a variety of Native American societies, from the earliest Paleo-Indian Mastodon hunters (12,000-8000 BCE) to the first permanent habitation sites of the Middle Archaic family groups (5000-3000 BCE) and the subsequent Woodland periods that led into the great Mississippian culture of Cahokia. The different styles of arrowheads, including Dalton and Clovis points, stone tools and pottery shards testify to the area's long use as home and hunting ground.

As European explorers and the settlers who followed them pushed tribal groups west, many different Native Americans passed through the area. When Marquette and Joliet paddled down river from Canada, they found here the "Illini", a loose confederacy of related tribes. To the west lived the Niutachi, to whom the Illini had given the name "Missouri", which meant "the people with dugout canoes". They were allied to the Iowa, Otoe and Winnebago. The journals of Lewis and Clark describe contact with these people. Another group, related to the Sioux, were the Osage, some of whom remained into the 19th Century.

Europeans

In 1673, a French priest, Father Jacques Marquette, fur trapper Louis Joliet and a small party are believed to have explored the Mississippi River from the Great Lakes to Arkansas. Within ten years, La Salle, another French explorer, claimed the entire Mississippi River basin for France and trappers and hunters and Jesuit missionaries began visiting the region. Small French settlements were established across the river in Illinois at Cahokia and Kaskaskia as early as 1700, but the first permanent European settlement in Missouri, Ste. Genevieve, didn't appear until around 1750. By 1764, Pierre Laclede Liguist had established the "village" of St. Louis eighteen miles below the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, having found the area nearest the confluence too marshy. During this time one must assume that a few tents, lean-tos and semi-permanent cabins appeared in what we know as "North County" as more and more French dared to stake out their own land beyond the established boundaries of these villages.

A 1767 map of the "village" of St. Louis by Guy Dufosset shows the land to the north as a prairie, ideally situated for settlement. A quarry and a small detachment of soldiers assigned to protect it are also noted along the Missouri river at what is probably the northern end of Halls Ferry. Parties of hunters undoubtedly walked the area for the plentiful game there. Numerous early place names refer to Prairie de Biche, Forets de Biche and Riviere Le Biche (later known as L'eau Froide or Coldwater

Creek). “Biche” is the French word for “elk”, although it most probably refers to the abundance of White Tail deer that we still see at Little Creek, rather than true American Elk.

Florissant’s Birth

A controversy exists as to when exactly Florissant was established. Louis Blanchard and a handful of neighbors had established St. Charles in 1769, and there are those who believe that Florissant dates to this year also. There is mention in an 1825 deposition (by Laclede’s stepson, Auguste Choteau, before U.S. Land Commissioner Theodore Hunt) of Florissant being founded the same year as St. Charles. Certainly there were French settlers in the area, but the first official documentation for the founding of Florissant didn’t happen until nine years after France ceded the Louisiana Territory to Spain in 1762. A 1787 census document found in Havana, Cuba, refers to “Habitaciones del establecimiento de Florizan”. These “habitaciones “ or plantations of Florissant fell under the civil and military authority of a local Frenchman Francois Dunegant dit Beausier, who had been given the commission by Spain as Commandant of Florissant. (While there is no record of Spaniards in Florissant, the area was nominally under their flag until 1800 when Spain retroceded the entire Upper Louisiana Territory back to France in time for them to sell it to the fledgling United States government.) So 1786 or 87 is the generally accepted date for

Florissant's birth. Records from this point and later refer to the village as Fleurissant or St. Ferdinand (San Fernando).

Common Fields

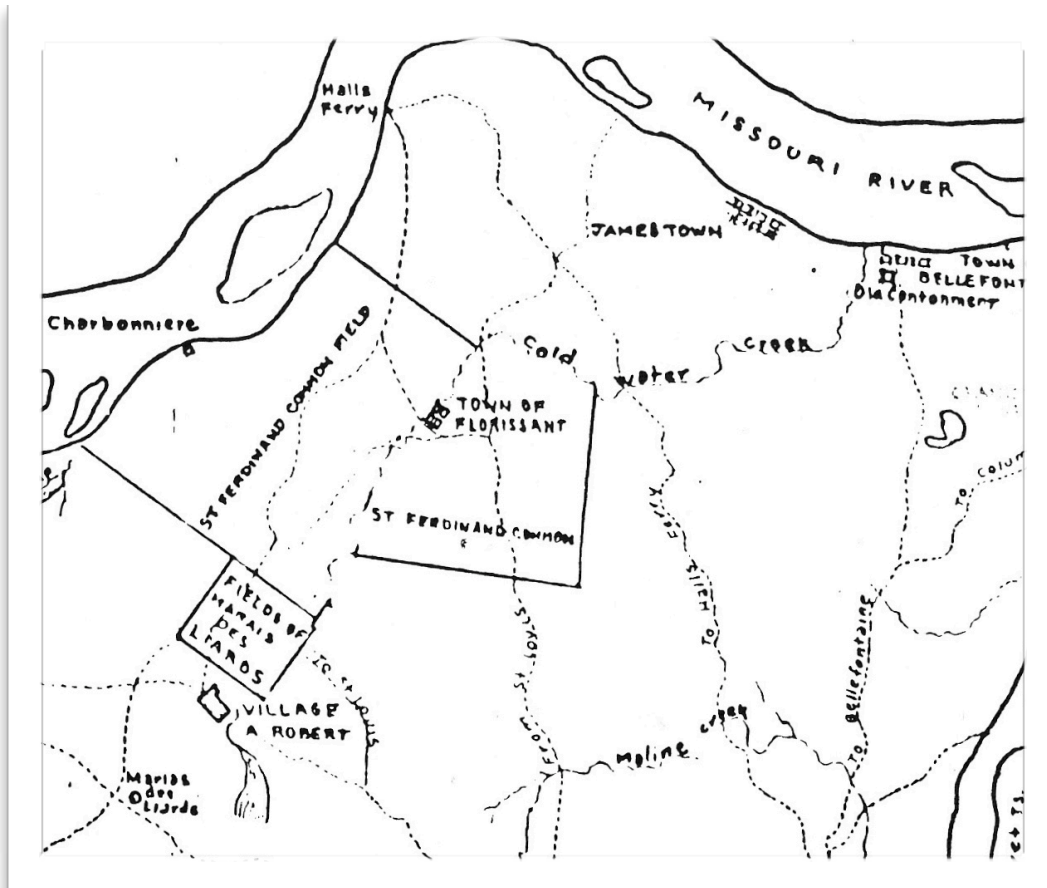
Two large parcels of land are confusingly designated "The Commons" and "Common Fields of St. Ferdinand". The Common Fields are long narrow strips of land running from the west bank of Coldwater Creek to the Missouri River. These strips, typical of French colonial settlements, provide those working the land to remain close to their neighbors, both for assistance in the field and for mutual protection. Indeed 1780 saw the attack on St. Louis by a mixed band of Indians , namely Winnebago, Santee Sioux, Ojibwa, Sauk and Fox, and some British irregulars. Then in 1793 a settler's wife and children and a young man visiting from St. Charles were attacked and killed by two Indians near what is now the corner of Rues St. Catherine and St. Pierre. As late as 1804, the area known today as Bridgeton was a Shawnee village known as Roger's Village, although the Florissant settlers' relations with them seem to have been friendlier at that point.

It is hard to now imagine the housing developments northwest of Lindbergh Boulevard as flourishing fields of crops, but once they were known for the "inky blackness" of rich heavy loam. A visitor to Florissant in 1836, a naturalist named Bradbury wrote,

"If the visit be on the eve of harvest time, a great

panoramic stretch of rural charms unfolds itself to the eye. Fields of ripened oats and timothy, more often of brightly golden wheat wave gently in the soft June air."

(from *St. Ferdinand de Florissant*, by Gilbert J Garraghan, S.J.)



Detail from Louis Pondrom's Map of Northern St. Louis County, showing Florissant, St. Ferdinand Common Fields and St. Ferdinand Commons (1837)

Another crop was tobacco. In John Wright's book, *Florissant*, he states that Florissant once "produced 8,030 pounds of tobacco, nearly as much as the combined output of all other settlements of Upper Louisiana."

The "Commons", (not to be confused with the "Common Fields") refers to seven square miles (4429 acres) of open land, to the southeast of Old Town, reserved for the grazing of the villagers' cattle and for gathering

of firewood. As late as 1879, Jane Mullanphy Chambers wrote of the Commons,

“...a fine range for horses, cows and hogs belonging to the inhabitants of the village. It was well wooded affording fine shade and every villager cut all the firewood or house logs he needed. Wild roses and a variety of flowers adorned those prairies and an abundance of strawberries and blackberries and many apples were to be gathered at will”.

(from *Florissant Missouri*, by Rosemary S. Davison)

So inviting was this land to outsiders that the French villagers of Florissant were compelled to fence off much of the land against the encroaching of the “Americans” from St. Louis and beyond. Their claim on the area wasn’t to last. A large party from the Carolinas, led by John Patterson, Sr., arrived in 1797 and began a settlement of their own in the area surrounding what is now Hazelwood Central High School. St. Louisans had already turned an old Indian portage path that avoided the Chain of Rocks rapids on the Mississippi into a road from their town to the ferry landing along the Missouri. This ferry, which would pass through numerous hands, was first created by a man named Hall. Halls Ferry Road now enabled more St. Louisans to head north. Soon the names of family members and others of the “Patterson Settlement” appeared on 19th Century property plot maps as owners of parcels of land that once were part of the “Commons of St. Ferdinand”

It is within the farthest corner of the old Commons, farthest from the village of St. Ferdinand (or Fleurissant, if you prefer) that Little Creek now sits, the last few acres of ancient undeveloped land, surrounded by the Twenty-first Century. Only the dream of a small group of people and the quick action of the Ferguson-Florissant School Board kept it that way.

The Twillmans and Pohlman

In 1838, an immigrant from Bielefeld, Germany, Friedrich Wilhelm Twellmann (1798-1853), arrived at the port of New Orleans and traveled up river to St. Louis. Finding this town already well settled and the land spoken for, he continued north and established his own town which he named "New Bielefeld", now Blackjack, in 1840. He built a succession of small farm houses and with increasing prosperity followed them in 1869 with a mansion on 190 acres. This house, currently being restored by the Spanish Lake Community Association, stands on Bellefontaine Road and was until recently known as the Homestead Restaurant. In time, the original German spelling of Twellmann evolved to a more English sounding "Twillman", and Twillman School (Hazelwood School District) is named for him.

As Twillman's wealth increased, so did his land holdings. He bought 18 acres in the "Commons of St. Ferdinand" from a Joseph Pilet (or Pillaise) in 1845 for \$45, and another 40 acres from James T. Holliday the following year for \$82. Henry Pohlman married Twillman's daughter Matilda in 1855

and the allied families bought additional Commons land in 1856 from Walter Carrico, of the Patterson Settlement. Ultimately, Henry and Matilda would own over 260 acres and their nine room house stood on what is now Dunegant Park. When Twillman died in 1853, he was buried near the home of his daughter and son-in-law in what would become the Pohlman Family Cemetery. Henry and Matilda, as well as several other Twellmans and Pohlmans would follow. This little burying ground, which lies today not far from the classrooms and office building at Little Creek, was almost lost entirely over the next century as the original Twillman/Pohlman estate was subdivided and passed through a succession of owners.

The Albins



Dr. Clarence Albin, a dentist in the Florissant area, and his wife Caroline bought one of the lots (18 1/2 acres) in 1930 and, in 1936, built the house that now serves as Little Creek's offices and Museum.

Their son John, writing later, described the property as bare of trees, except along the creek. He believed it had been farmed by previous occupants, but he said that his father was responsible for replanting most of the large maples and pines now on the premises.

As a boy, John remembers finding many arrowheads and other stone artifacts on the property. He also recalled that some old logs and the remains of two walls just east of the house marked the location of the original two-room cabin built by Henry and Matilda (Twillman) Pohlman. There was also a deep well in the backyard, also thought to date to the original cabin. Though on an adjacent lot, the Albins discovered the Pohlman cemetery and John recalls that the tombstones were still quite visible when he was young. He recalled one in the center with a large pointed spire.

Growing up there in the largely still rural area, John Albin rode farm horses into (Old Town) Florissant to the blacksmith during the summers and sledged on Dunn Road during the winters. Lightning struck the house in 1941, knocking off their chimney and setting their roof ablaze, but the Albins were able to put the fire out before the Blackjack Volunteer Fire Department arrived. Lightning rods were installed immediately afterwards.

Ferguson-Florissant School District Acquisition

Sometime in the 1960s, then Superintendent Virgil McCluer and others in the Ferguson-Florissant School District began looking around for additional land, where school buses and other district vehicles (or perhaps a new school building) could be located, and with an eye to space for the growing departments within the administration. In 1968 the 18 acre Albin property, with the house and a few existing buildings along Dunn Road became available for purchase, and the school board agreed to buy the property from the widow of Dr. Albin.

The purchase included the house, a barn, a garage and a smaller house that became the caretakers' residence when a district maintenance worker, Paul Roth, was hired to serve as caretaker. Dr. Doris Stumpe (later Doris Brown), then Superintendent of Elementary Instruction, and several secretaries moved into the Albin house which became Ferguson-Florissant's Curriculum Development Office. Workshops, writing sessions and meetings became regular events.

After one such planning session, a group of curricular consultants that included Ethel Nolte paused on their way to their cars. Nolte described the sudden inspiration that hit them at that moment as a "severe case of Spring Fever". Someone wondered aloud just what **The Albin House** was beyond the yard area and in the woods, and the following Saturday, Science Coordinator A.J. Sullivan (who began a district tradition of direct involvement of the Science Coordinator

in activities there), Elementary Consultant Ethel Nolte, and P.E. teacher Ruby Jordan carried out the district's first "reconnaissance mission" into the woods. Using corn knives as machetes, they cut their way through the weeds, tall grasses and vines and made a crude path. They had no clear idea of the boundaries of this small plot, for the woods seemed to go on quite some way. Nolte later recalled that

"...the spring flowers were beginning to emerge, birds were singing and the beauty of this beautiful land was amazing to all. The tracks along the stream indicated that raccoons, skunks, possums, and foxes were in near proximity. We came back tired, but excited by what we found."

Almost immediately, educational professionals throughout the district formed a committee to begin thinking of grander uses for the property, one of which was a proposal for an outdoor natural science lab. Visits to Camp Wyman and a nature area owned by University City School District were made, and Harland Bartholomew and Associates, an urban planning firm, was asked to prepare a detailed development proposal. HUD was approached for funding help.

The following year, with the help of a tree service and both student and adult volunteers, several hiking trails were created and wood chippings were spread. In May of 1969, Central Elementary teacher Evelyn Grave's Fourth Grade class arrived in a district bus and were met by Nolte, Jordan, Nurse Ivey Smith and a few other curriculum consultants for a day



Ethel Nolte

“consummate professional”, Ethel Nolte mentored many new elementary teachers and was a “guest instructor” in many classrooms. But her passion for the outdoors drew her and the teachers and classes she worked with outside and into the woods, where she shared that passion and encouraged it to grow within the children themselves.

And it didn’t stop there. She became a driving force in the district for developing the district’s new property into an outdoor “nature lab” and served on numerous committees as Little Creek evolved.

In a Post-Dispatch article in June of 1970, Mrs. Nolte eloquently voiced the district’s goal for its students, Kindergarten through 12th grade.

“This will be the place where they can study the soil and animal life,” she said. “Young children are curious by nature. They are especially intrigued by living things.

If they are given direct firsthand experiences with plants

of activities among the trees, the May apples and the geraniums. The property’s new life as an outdoor nature classroom had begun!

Described by colleagues as “classy”, “elegant” and the

and animals in the early grades, their curiosity will be nurtured and enhanced, and they will come to more advanced learning activities with a background of pleasant and instructive experiences.

We hope to start a chain of experiences for children that can lead them to the increased awareness and the special knowledge needed for intelligent action with respect to many of our environmental problems.”

Her daughters recalled her working long hours during the week and then going back Saturday to conduct workshops with elementary teachers. Nolte was probably the first staff member of Ferguson-Florissant to develop a deep respect and love for the property. She would not be the last.

Meanwhile, the district was investigating further land purchases with an eye to all 200 acres still available, and when the May Company looked to build a large Venture Store at the corner of Dunn Road and West Florissant, the district became aware of plans to rezone the whole area as commercial. The new Superintendent, Warren Brown, saw the value of this little plot of woods and the potential it held for the students of his district. He enthusiastically spearheaded the opposition to the May Company plan and drafted a letter dated May 18, 1970, to the St. Louis County Planning Commission opposing the rezoning which included a list of endorsements from the University of Missouri (Columbia) Outdoor Extension Division, St. Louis County Parks and Recreation, and the US Soil and Conservation Department. (It must be noted that not everyone shared Brown’s appreciation for the land’s potential. Opponents to the acquisition referred to it as “Brown’s Butterfly Garden”.) The next day Brown made the case in

person before the board. A compromise emerged which allowed the Venture store to be built, but prevented further rezoning behind it. Further, a buffer zone of undeveloped land between the Venture property and property available for housing was created. The May Company even agreed to allow the district to put a fence along their side of the easement strip if they wanted.

When a real estate developer showed serious interest in a 34.6 acre piece of the property that Ferguson Florissant was trying to buy, Dr. Brown returned to the County Planning Commission in 1972 to oppose their plan to build 80 single family houses and six apartment buildings. Brown cited the Missouri Conservation Commission who declared the area as “one of the most unique in the state with its gently slope, open fields, heavily wooded areas and small stream, all in a primitive, natural state.” An attorney for Community Savings Service Corporation, which owned the tract at the time said that the corporation had “unwittingly purchased the enchanted forest” and was unaware of the special interest in the land. Once again, Brown’s efforts prevailed and the acreage was acquired.

By 1974, the district had bought a total of 96 acres with the assistance of matching HUD funds secured through a grant application written by Bill Hampton. Teaching professionals of the district and interested parent groups had continued to work on various proposals, trail guides and curricular materials for use on site. A neighbor from the Singing Pines housing development by the name of Walsh even offered the pond on his property to the district so that students could study pond life. When Doris

Brown moved to an office in the Administration Building next to Ferguson Middle School, the Albin house became classrooms as elementary teachers from throughout the district were now visiting with their students, including Marian Wilson with her Early Childhood Program.



Dan Steffan and students

As early as 1972, McCluer North offered a two hour Field Biology class at the property. Dan Steffan was the first teacher, followed over the next few years by others. A district bus would deliver the

teacher and his class to the area where an 8' X 40' mobile home had been installed as a temporary high school classroom. Vern LeClaire, who took over the class in '73 -'74 recalls that the mobile home provided a small dressing area at each end (for changing into more suitable clothing) and a bathroom, with a small open area for testing and rainy day lessons.

Needing a tangible curriculum guide, Dan Steffan, Mary Steffan, Helen Lum, Paula Smith, Rosemary Westcott and Ethel Nolte wrote a handbook entitled "Caught in Nature's Web", which was used for a number of years. Dee Graves acted as typist and illustrator.

That same year a total of 58 district teachers participated in two training courses, and 91 First Graders piloted a five-day camp program. An

outbuilding on the property had even been converted by Dan Steffan to a small “petting zoo” that included rabbits, domestic mice and rats, chickens, geese and pheasants. There was even a peacock!

Security Issues

For years the undeveloped land that the district now owned had been wild and open to any who cared to enter. Many Florissant residents had freely enjoyed the peace and beauty of the area, and children had explored and played under the trees. Neighbors with horses rode on the property without too much harm being done, but with the increasing availability and popularity of all-terrain motorbikes, deep ruts and erosion trenches were being created where kids raced and acted out motocross fantasies. Furthermore, homeowners were digging up ferns and taking them home to replant in their own yards, leaving gaping holes behind. When vandals broke into the animal pens during the summer of 1974, stole most of the rabbits, rodents and poultry, and killed one goose and two chickens, action had to be taken. A *Globe Democrat* newspaper article about the vandalism elicited much community support.

With the help of the Florissant Police, the motorbikes were discouraged, horseback riders agreed to stay away, and district parent Bill Brendel, who worked for McDonnell Douglass, helped secure a \$10,000 donation from the McDonnell Douglass Charity Trust to fence the entire area. A dog was purchased for Caretaker Roth and his wife. And until the

fence could be erected, a neighbor by the name of Kreuzer even volunteered his two teenaged children as a mounted “horseback patrol” to ride the perimeter of the property!

Improvements continued. Billboards along Dunn Road were removed, and within the property itself, Eagle Scout candidates Norman Brendel, Kenneth Barnes, Dave Jendras and other Boy Scouts built small bridges on the trails and helped to make and post signs for the new fence that read,

“BEHIND THIS FENCE IS YOUR NATURE AREA. IT IS THE ONLY ONE IN THE REGION. COME SEE IT; ENTER AT 2295 DUNN RD.”

Though concerned with the threat of vandalism and other unauthorized activities, it was still felt that the facility should remain accessible to those of the public who would use it with respect and do no harm. These signs encouraged visitors to enter by way of the district office building and the caretaker, rather than across (or through) the fence.

Dan White, the district’s Coordinator of Physical Education, brought orienteering to the property at around this time. Armed only with rough maps and compasses, students explored the area and mapped its features. During one such activity, Dan and his students came upon an old trunk in a ditch out behind the barn. The trunk lid was pried open to



The Rediscovered Cemetery

reveal a number of papers and artifacts of the Albin family. But, according to White, this event also “opened up the area” to him in a new way. Seeking out an Albin descendent, White learned about the old Pohlman cemetery and began a

search for its location. Albin told White of a marker that featured a large pointed spire, (and possibly a full-sized horse and rider!) It was believed that an unnamed earlier owner of the land upon which the plot lay had found it a legal hindrance to selling the acreage and resorted to knocking down and burying the stones in order to find a buyer. And buried they remained,



until Dan’s searches paid off in 1976. With the help of local Boy Scouts, the cemetery was cleared and several headstones rescued. The headstones appeared to have been sledge hammered and scattered, but it was possible to identify the names of Henry and Matilda Pohlman on two of them.



The Pohlmann Cemetery



Other small artifacts were found, including iron toys, marbles and bottles, but to date, none of the more elaborate features suggested have been found.

A Name, a Plan, and a Director



**Vogt 5th Grader Karen Williams and
Board President Floyd Sweeney**

The spring of 1975 brought a proper name for the outdoor “lab” and a director to head it! A naming contest was held throughout the district and hundreds of names were suggested. Individual schools were asked to select one name

each from the submissions of their students for final selection by the Executive Committee, which consisted of Bill Stinson, Bill Brendel, Ethel Nolte and Mrs. Leo Seifert. Among those proposed were the following: Nature’s Sanctuary (Wedgwood), Wildlife Acres (DeSmet), Woody Trail (Cool Valley) and the first place winner, Little Creek Wildlife Area, proposed by Fifth Grader Karen Williams from Vogt Elementary.

In May the district presented a “Master Plan”, which had been created by Landscape Architects and Planning Consultants from Stuart M. Mertz and Associates, along with Reitz and Jens, Inc., Consulting Geologic

Engineers, and Dr. J. Emil Morhardt, Consulting Biologist and Ecologist. In it, the consultants recommended keeping the facility as natural and undeveloped as possible while allowing for the educational use envisioned by the district. They proposed using the open field at the western edge as “semi-natural prairie” by sowing and planting appropriate prairie grasses and bushes. Periodic controlled burning, to simulate what would naturally occur in nature would be conducted, and a variety of small animals and reptiles would be reintroduced. As for the core area, it would remain free of buildings or recreational structures and management would be limited to “minor selective thinning,” allowing normal deadfall and hollow trees to create habitat for native animals. The construction of ponds was discussed and proposed with the admonition of avoiding introduction of fish while encouraging reptiles and amphibians.

The plan went on to specify usage of existing buildings and propose a new interpretive center, as well as set guidelines for the necessary creation of parking and pathways. Fencing was given particular attention, recommending what form it should take and where it was and was not necessary! The original septic tank would be replaced by connecting to a sewer line, but the cistern and pump would be preserved as an “historic element.” The Master Plan also included mention of the recently rediscovered cemetery and recommended further research and restoration. (Two features of the original plan that have yet to be realized were a wild animal zoo and a Braille path.)

Finally, a detailed map was drawn and distinct areas marked. Recommendations were made for specific projects and programs within the interpretive areas, such as rock exhibits and stump demonstrations, sundials and feeders, a grove of sugar maples for sap collecting, weather stations, and beehives. The “wilderness “ area was to be limited to salt licks, squirrel houses and camera stations.

That same year, Bob Borgstede, former Principal of Ferguson Junior High, was appointed as project director for TELE, or “Total Environmental



L e a r n i n g
Experiences, “ an
e n v i r o n m e n t a l
education program
that would be funded
by the U.S. Office of
Education. This, in
effect, created Little
Creek’s first (and

Bob Borgstede at his desk at Little Creek

only) Director. Borgstede, however, was heard to express the opinion that he had been “put out to pasture” and was waiting for retirement. Nevertheless, he took his responsibility seriously and endeavored to use his time and talents productively. In a manuscript entitled “Little Creek Wildlife Area: My First Six Months” Borgstede relates how he and others

had begun preparing the prairie area, maintaining, repairing, and in some cases erecting new fencing, and creating ponds. He also describes his efforts to meet with and reeducate some of the teenagers who previously had vandalized or misused the property.

In one instance, five boys from McCluer and North County Technical School had been using a large metal cable as a swing from a tall old tree on the property. Not only was the tree being damaged, but the hillside beneath it was being worn and eroded. With Borgstede's assistance, the boys dismantled the swing and built a small suspension bridge across a runoff gully using spare lumber and the cable. Bob Borgstede was described by one who worked with him as "a supreme Boy Scout leader," a soft-spoken and loving man who was able to work with "at risk" kids and channel them onto constructive paths. And while he and Ethel Nolte often had "philosophic" disagreements about just what Little Creek should be, there is little doubt that they shared a love for the place and a desire to keep the focus on opportunities for the children of the district. When Nolte retired from the district, one of the main trails that had been developed and maintained was named in her honor.

Here, too, we find accounts of numerous classes, workshops and field trips that were now taking advantage of Little Creek even as work progressed to develop the facility. Besides science and nature related studies, children were participating in team-building exercises, creating fired ceramic art, and learning outdoor photography. And the greater community was still being welcomed as Girl Scout, Campfire Girls, and

private school groups took advantage of the area. Individuals and small family groups still came to walk in the woods. Even wildlife, in the form of small mammals, captured (and certified rabies-free) by various municipal rabies control departments, were “relocated” to new homes at Little Creek!

Borgstede credits much work to volunteers, such as the Scouts and others, and believed that many people were

“beginning to feel a sense of contribution to the area and to a preservation of natural resources in their community. After many days of seemingly small successes, it is gratifying to know that something major has been finished. The development of the area and its many varied uses...continues.”

Buildings

The Albin Farmhouse, which was being used for the director’s office and indoor classrooms, was given a much needed remodeling. When Dorothy Cunningham, longtime Secretary (and former President) of the School Board, died in November of 1977, a memorial fund was used to establish a small museum on the first floor in her honor. (Mrs. Cunningham, a former research biologist at Yale, had been a board member for 16 years, and was a staunch advocate of Little Creek.) Cabinets were built to house displays that were acquired from the St. Louis Museum of Science and Natural History, and the mini-museum would be dedicated in May of ‘79. Exhibits offer Native American artifacts and describe Missouri’s prehistory. Others display regional flora and fauna. Today they

are still part of class visits which include introductions to some of the full-time living residents, such as Terry the tarantula, Tripod the three-toed box turtle, Red Reva the corn snake and the three European Ringneck Doves Coco, Cream and Peace. The Albin's kitchen provides a staff lunch room and the occasional batch of cookies for visitors, while the rooms upstairs serve as offices and a library.

Meanwhile, Vern LeClaire was asked to come to Little Creek full time in 1978, although his dual citizenship there and at McCluer North would continue until his retirement. That meant returning as needed to North to teach an afternoon class, attend faculty meetings and parent conferences, but primarily teaching classes outdoors at Little Creek in fair weather and inside the trailer when it rained. Additional teaching spaces were needed.

In 1979, a replica of a Mississippian Era Council House, measuring 24'X30", was constructed at Little Creek under the direction of John White, a Native American

storyteller and lecturer and Educational Director for Ancient Lifeways Institute from Hardin County, Illinois. White placed the post holes with



the exact measurements of those found atop Monks' Mound at Cahokia. The hut itself was made from hand-hewn saplings, mud and clay and featured a thatched roof. It gave student groups a glimpse of how local

Native Americans lived during the time the Cahokia Mounds culture was flourishing. In fact, White believed that everyone, regardless of ethnic background, descended from ancestors who lived in mud walled, grass topped shelters of some kind, at some point in their distant past.

In the interests of fire safety, White broke with accuracy and left a large opening in the roof so that the cooking fire, located in the center of the



building, could be occasionally lit for living history demonstrations, such as the time he and his wife brought a fresh road-killed deer carcass and butchered it, using primitive tools. They made a venison chili with the meat and tanned the deer hide with the brains. It never happened, but there were hopes that it might also serve one day to display replica sleeping mats, pottery and baskets of the period to complete the picture.

The council house was made of actual natural materials, requiring constant maintenance and repair. This feature would ultimately serve as its undoing, but while it lasted, it helped teach hundreds of district students about the lives of America's first people.

One district student who was especially inspired to step beyond the field trip and workshop participation was Scott Williams. While still a

student at McCluer, Williams first volunteered his own time and labor to help construct the Council House, itself. Then he eagerly threw himself into any program or project he could. He recalled spending part of the summer at White's home in Michael, Illinois, south of Kamspsville where White taught him various skills including how to build a dugout canoe. The next school year, he and White led a workshop for district teachers in which Williams demonstrated the process.

He built a fire on top of a log, and demonstrated how Native Americans would scrape out the burned sections, putting coals back into the hollow and burning more, gradually scooping out the insides of the log. Not having the time to actually finish an entire dugout canoe, Williams adapted the project and ended up creating a wooden mortar and pestle used for grinding cornmeal. He also taught the teacher participants how to make cordage from tree bark and then form baskets. Later, for a personal project through PROBE, Williams constructed an authentic Plains Indian tipi in his backyard in Ferguson and spent much of the school year living inside!

During this time, a group of PROBE students, Williams included, participated in a small archaeological project. With the help of McCluer PROBE teacher Shirley King, students met with a Washington University professor named David Dye who examined some of the fossils and artifacts Williams had found at Little Creek. He suggested they dig test pits on the property, in hopes of finding evidence of some sort of Paleo-Indian settlement. However, except for some flint shards and flakes, which were

found at the edge of the prairie area, suggesting a possible flint tool workshop site, the digs failed to turn up anything definite. Williams admits that inhospitable weather conditions, mosquitoes and other insects



discouraged further digging. **Archaeological Test Dig, June 1979**

A New Decade at Little Creek

As new school years brought new committees and new curricular needs, so too did the 1980s bring changes to Little Creek. The '80-'81 school year would be Bob Borgstede's last year as director but would also see the construction of the Secondary Classroom and its attached Pavilion. The new building provided room for a full-sized secondary class, complete with chalkboards, shelving, lab sinks, and display cabinets, as well as two much welcomed public restrooms. Groups could also use the pavilion for activities or lunch, or as a shelter from the occasional surprise rain shower.



**Clayton Long
demonstrates Sheep Shearing**

For most of the 70's, the focus at Little Creek had been on Science only. With the construction of the Council House, a broader scope was evolving. Sheep shearing demonstrations were now becoming an annual event on the

premises and individuals were volunteering to demonstrate other pioneer crafts and activities. Under Title Seven, Doug Kraus was added to the staff as "Outdoor Adventure Human Relations Specialist" to develop new programs and activities for students outside of the Science Department. Bob Borgstede had arranged meetings between Kraus and teachers at each of the elementary schools in the district and soon Little Creek was holding such things as the Pioneer Indian Crafts Festival, where district students made soap and clay bowls, painted with watercolors, dipped candles and observed blacksmithing and basket weaving. After the festival, Joan Treis, a district parent, wrote the following in a letter to then Superintendent Keck: "The Ferguson-Florissant School District is extremely lucky to have this property and I would like to see more full time staff members available to plan more of these wonderful programs ... I was very impressed!"



A.J. Sullivan, who had been present for that first “reconnaissance hike” the first year was currently assigned full time to Little Creek and conducted many of the classes and workshops for the elementary visits. Kraus, who

A.J. Sullivan Works with a Writing Class

had helped build the “High Ropes” Initiative course at Greensfelder Park, now began a team challenge course and helped reintroduce an orienteering course, first begun by Dan White, at Little Creek. With Leslie Mattingly, a teacher’s aide also hired for Little Creek, he helped develop the district’s Summer Transition Program. He also helped Judy Huck, a teacher from Duchesne School, write a handbook for elementary teachers using Little Creek.

During this time, Kraus attended a five day workshop at the Koster archeological site in Kampsville with John White, where he learned how the Mississippians built their homes, made pottery and did flint knapping, which he incorporated into his lessons. He was also in time to help finish the hut’s thatched roof! When federal funding ended, Kraus left Little Creek for Walnut Grove Elementary but kept a strong working relationship with the area he’d come to love and respect. Despite funding issues in the district, teachers at the elementary and secondary schools continued to

assist LeClaire and Sullivan in keeping the educational program going, and for the next several years Kraus, too, would return with his own classes, or conduct workshops for others, while helping district teachers incorporate Little Creek's assets into their own curricula. Full time staff also Elementary teacher Alberta Meyers, Secretary Cathy Wedler and Bus Driver Lee Margulis, who often shared her own skills with pioneer crafts with students.

A visit from the Fire Marshall initiated some needed fire safety upgrades, and faculty survey responses brought about a reevaluation of the facility and its programs. Safety conditions of bridges and paths on the property (like the Indian hut also built with non-permanent natural materials) cried out for serious trail maintenance. The first recognition of the encroachment of honeysuckle also occurred and new budget requirements and concerns naturally followed. Yet the staff of Little Creek and teachers across the district continued to develop educational opportunities, including a program with the Missouri Department of Conservation called "Learning with Otis".



Vern LeClaire and students

By the middle of the 1980s, Little Creek was hosting visits from Elementary schools and Vern LeClaire was teaching High School Field Biology classes in the Secondary Classroom. Staff were trying to reintroduce a population of Quail and the Raptor Rehabilitation and Propagation Project helped with a resident Barn Owl. Kraus led students on hikes from Dunegant Park through Little Creek to the Indian hut to teach lessons on Native American life and lore that he hoped would tie to the land itself. He even conducted at least one lesson entirely in sign language and gestures, later noting that it made the students focus more closely on him and really concentrate on the lesson!

Outside the district, garden clubs, the Audubon Society, the Missouri Dept. of Conservation, various regional geology clubs and hiking clubs, adult education classes, a community theater organization and senior citizen groups, as well as all levels of Scouting organizations were now making use of Little Creek. District children and members of the general public enjoyed special events that included hay rides, apple butter demonstrations and corn husk doll making. Kindergartners made Christmas ornaments out of natural materials, built birdhouses, and hunted Easter eggs. In addition to the sheep shearing, wool dying, spinning and weaving could now be demonstrated by talented artists and craftspeople. One event even featured wild foods that might have been enjoyed at the first Thanksgiving!

The Trampe Cabin



In 1986, Doug Kraus returned to Little Creek full time. Since his time with White and the Indian hut, Kraus had been thinking that Little Creek needed another living history addition: an authentic log cabin. Remembering John White's influence, Kraus said, "He put an ember inside me for living history that I'll never lose." A tip, from Carol Sneed of the Spanish Lake Historical Society, led him to Mr. and Mrs. Leon Boevingloh, who had an old pioneer cabin on their property along New Jamestown Road. They were interested in getting rid of it and offered it to Little Creek as a most unusual gift, on the condition that the district came and got it.

The Trampe Cabin, as it was known, had been constructed in the 1840s or 50s by A.H. Trampe, around the same time as the original Pohlman cabin which had predated the Albin farmhouse at Little Creek. The earliest land records for the Trampe property are from 1823, and refer to a French family named Janis who were granted the land by the Spanish government. While there is no record of the transfer from Janis to Trampe, the name Trampe does appear among the early settlers of North County. Basically a one room cabin, it did feature interior wainscoting and a stairs leading up to a "half story". (In an age when homes were taxed according

to how many floors it had, one and a half story buildings avoided the two story tax increase!)

Kraus made contact with a local landscaper, Jim Meiners Jr., Prestige Landscaping, who lived in his own log cabin and shared an interest in preserving existing cabins in the area. Together they visited the Trampe cabin on the Boeingloh property. Sided with boards, at first glance it didn't appear to be of log construction at all, but Meiners took one look at the depth of the window sills and peeled back some old carpeting and found that under its siding and carpet were hand hewed logs! Local historian Rosemary Davison explained that the lap siding and wainscoting were indeed appropriate for the period and displayed their owners' status in the Florissant Valley settlement.

The paperwork was completed and submitted to the Board of Education, and after several months of meetings and discussion, the go ahead was given to a small, but eager group back at Little Creek. Kraus, Meiners, LeClaire and Martin Schriewer, a Spanish teacher from Cross Keys were ready to begin. In the summer of 1987, and under Meiners' direction, the asphalt shingles and other twentieth century additions were removed and hauled away, and the 19th century logs and siding boards were painstakingly numbered and recorded for reassembly.

As the cabin was taken down to its foundation, the group discovered a limestone foundation three feet deep. Each stone was then removed and washed before being used to rebuild the foundation back at Little



Paul Roth, Caretaker and Master Plasterer

Creek. Expertise was soon offered by others. Jack Cook brought the district's back hoe and started digging in an area just east of the Albin house (Little Creek Office), not

far from where it was believed that the original Pohlman cabin once stood.

Caretaker Paul Roth, who had been a master plasterer for the district before coming to Little Creek, showed the men how to mix mortar for the foundation and the chinking between the logs. When some of the original logs needed replacing during the reconstruction, Terry Long, a construction worker, brought his knowledge of pioneer building techniques and showed them (and Summer Transition students brought to watch the process) how to "hew" the logs, brought from Warrenton, Missouri, in the old manner and piece them together. Some of the leftover new logs were used in restoring the Old Town Florissant cabins!



The Summer Transition students even got into the act when Long demonstrated how to use the "drawing horse", an 18th C. bench with an



Top: The Trampe Cabin before moving and reconstructing

Center: Terry Long

Bottom: High School students help out





**Left: Doug Kraus
demonstrates making shingles**



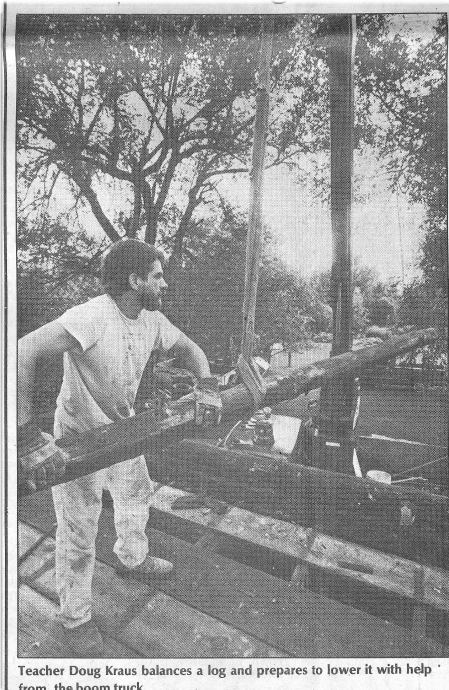
**Upper Right: Jim Quillman
directs reconstruction**



**Lower Right: Martin
Schweiwer and Jim Quillman
lay foundations**

attached heavy wooden lever operated clamp device that acted as a vise. With hand tools like the froe or riving ax and the drawknife, shingles were cut (or “rived”) by hand, Catalpa wood for the cabin roof, Cypress for the porch. Each student was given the opportunity to cut his own shingle. Long also demonstrated blacksmithing and had the students cut and hammer out wrought iron keys and chain links. Heating their keys in the forge, they then burned their initials into the bottom side of their shingle before it became part of the new cabin roof! (Alas, the shingles have since been replaced!)

A fire at a high school in Alton allowed Kraus to scrounge enough tongue and groove floor boards to re-floor the cabin and its porch. The



Teacher Doug Kraus balances a log and prepares to lower it with help from the boom truck.

brick chimney flue that had been built over a potbellied stove was restored to its place and the Trampe Cabin was done.

Visitors could now see the building techniques, from the scoring cuts on the hand-hewn logs to the cedar lap siding and imagine what cabin life was like over a century and a half ago. Living history events at Little Creek now had a unique venue in which to demonstrate early pioneer life and farming.

That winter, a small retirement party was given for the Roths who celebrated twenty years of caretaking at Little Creek. Jerry Pemberton took

over as interim caretaker (part-time), and repairs and upgrades to the caretaker's residence were begun the following year.

The Nineties

Another new decade brought another reevaluation of the facility and programs. The position of Director of the Elementary Program was created and Judy Huck came aboard from Duchesne School. Staff now included Kraus, Huck, Pemberton and Louise Nichols as secretary. A part-time bus driver would soon be assigned. Beekeeper Sharon Gibbons was also now maintaining an apiary



Judy Huck

on the grounds and neighbors from the Summerwood apartments to the west were complaining about the bees. Science Coordinator Chris Brown, who was now de-facto director of Little Creek, fielded complaints and recommended reducing the number of hives and relocating them farther away from Summer Run.

Throughout the nineties, The Ferguson-Florissant School District continued to seek grants and other funding sources, and new programs



Chris Brown and teacher Jan Wilson

and workshops continued to be offered at the facility. Partnerships with Ralston Purina and Steve Fair's wild game bird breeding program had brought more and larger animals to the facility. Children from all over the district continued to come to Little Creek and especially enjoyed interacting with the

animals. Eggs from the various resident fowl were now being offered to classrooms across the district for on site incubation, thus extending that interaction back to their home schools. One of the site's favorite resident goats, Zeus, even made a guest appearance in a religious play at a church in St. Charles!

But at the core of Little Creek's existence, the outdoor science lab classes continued to provide a unique experience for the district's children of the suburbs. As the metropolitan area evolved and became more covered with cement and steel, it's importance also increased. As Vern LeClaire put it,

"Most children today, especially those in the St. Louis area, are completely separate from the natural environment. They have no idea what Missouri was like 50 years ago. This gives them a sense of what forests

and what lives there....We want to help children realize the importance of preserving what's left and sense how important an area such as this is for us, and for the wild things."

Chris Brown passed away unexpectedly in the fall of '96, and his successor, Terry Henderson took over Brown's district responsibilities, including overseeing operations at Little Creek. Henderson pursued an EPA grant that Brown had initiated, maintained the egg incubation program with the participation of the University of Missouri and Lincoln University's Outreach and Extension systems, and helped Little Creek begin the Barnyard Buddies Program, through which district kids and their classroom teachers could "adopt" one of Little Creek's animals.

On the second anniversary of Brown's passing, a memorial sundial was dedicated just outside the office at Little Creek. Custodian Steve Harris built the stone pediment and installed the sundial, (which, according to Harris, is accurate within thirty minutes), while Brown's Cub Scout Pack assisted in laying out a small butterfly garden around it. A short cement



Chris Brown Memorial Sundial

walkway is set with the imprints of deer hooves, raccoon paw prints and other small creatures known to visit the area.

Besides Caretaker Harris, staff now included Nature Area Assistant Mary Williams. Field Biology teacher Vern LeClaire began working with Ellis Balling of the U.S. Department of Agriculture 's Natural Resource Conservation Service on the replacement of the pond, and the Fish America Foundation was approached to stock it once it was ready. The Lewis and Clark Sawmill near Alton provided cut timbers for repairs to the Trampe Cabin, and the district began planning a new classroom building for the Elementary programs. An EPA grant funded "The Environmental Rangers", eight high school students working with LeClaire in partnership with the St. Louis Science Center.

The Twenty-first Century at Little Creek

Academics may debate whether the new century, (and Millennium) begins in '00 or '01, but January of 2001 opened a new chapter of challenges at Little Creek. Surveys, professional recommendations and bids had been collected in the fall of '99 and the new year kicked off with the start of construction on a new pond. By Mid February, the water was already filling in. Student volunteers seeded, mulched and fertilized the area surrounding the pond and classes were beginning to inventory the pond's ecosystem before the school year ended.

That summer, however, the pond started spontaneously draining, which required a remediation attempt the next school year. Once again, high school students pitched in that fall, helping to spread 250 pounds of bentonite in an attempt to prevent draining. The idea was for the clay particles to swell and form a watertight seal. More was added in the spring of '01 and the pond was allowed to fill again. That July, there was more testing including the building of a model test pond, and a more thorough soil analysis done, but the pond never was able to retain water, except in seasons of excessive rainfall. Subsequent and more detailed analyses into the problem have discovered the flaws in the plan. As a result, Little Creek will be better prepared for the next attempt at creating a pond on the property at another location. In the meantime, students have used this unsuccessful project and it's mistakes as an object lesson.

Other issues during that time included spraying the encroaching kudzu, the clearance of more honeysuckle, and the discovery of a sewage leak into the creek. MSD investigated and found and fixed the problem which was due to a break in the sewer line coming down from North County Technical School. And complaints from Summerwood about the bees resurfaced. But through it all, Little Creek continued to be a place that attracted visitors. The 2000 National Science Teachers Association's National Convention was held in St. Louis that year and honored the nature area by including in their informational literature a three-page packet on hiking at Little Creek.

2002 found the district's elementary visitors meeting Little Creek teachers in their own new 2800 square foot classroom building. In May,



The Elementary Classroom Building

Ferguson-Florissant students took First Place at the St. Louis Regional Envirothon. Vern LeClaire and his field biology team were praised in a Post Dispatch article. LeClaire spoke of the hard work

his team put in, but the students claimed that they mostly wanted to do well for him. "He's a great teacher," senior Joe Goldkamp said.

Despite increasing budget cuts and belt tightening efforts, the staff of Little Creek continued to provide opportunities for district students to study nature outside the wall of their classrooms. In 2003, Jack Bowles, a science teacher and assistant principal in the district, took over for the retiring LeClaire. Bowles and Huck were officially "Co-Teachers-in-Charge", with Bowles teaching Field Biology and A.P. Environmental Science. That year, Bowles's team won the Regionals at Envirothon, then won State and went on to the Nationals. Huck continued to teach visiting elementary classes and schedule bus runs.

Both now reported to Jim Bartlett, Assistant Superintendent for Secondary schools, although they were directly under the district Science

Coordinator. The following year, when Judy Huck left, the district chose not to replace the full-time position, opting instead to bring in teachers part-time to cover the elementary programs, under Bowles's direction.

Staff now included Mary Williams, bus driver Carolyn Rodgers, Barbra Stephenson doubling as part-time teacher and full time secretary, and Phyllis McLafferty, with Steve Harris continuing as Caretaker. New programs aligned with the Show-Me Frameworks and Objectives had to be developed for both elementary and secondary levels. As an article in the North County Journal described it, Little Creek was now a "living lab" for the entire area and as if to underscore that assessment, Ferguson-Florissant students took the 2004 Silver Medals at both Regional and State Envirothon. Even the much maligned bees were recognized when Caretaker Steve Harris was named Beekeeper of the Year by the Eastern Missouri Beekeepers Association.

Threats Old and New

Once more, the encroachment of honeysuckle was an issue. While attractive in small bunches on a residential back fence, in the massive numbers that now permeated the woods of Little Creek, it was a real problem. A nonnative species in Missouri, bush honeysuckle tends to choke out all other plants and seedlings while providing fewer nutrients to wildlife than native plant species. Eradication would involve many man

hours of cutting and chipping. Erosion, too, continued to be a problem on the trails and along the creek itself. Trails could be managed by relocating and reinforcement, but the watershed system along the creek would require expert help.

Beyond the fences, a new threat loomed. As “green space” increasingly vanished beneath the developers’ bulldozers and subdivisions took their place, Little Creek’s importance as the last undeveloped area in North County ironically threatened its very existence. Farmers and nursery operators had mostly all seen the financial rewards of replacing their cornfields and apple trees with large homes on tiny lots, and the current Florissant government had increased its retail businesses at the cost of long term tax abatement deals. Funding for schools had failed to keep up with the rising expenses and there were now some who favored the school district also divesting itself of what had become very valuable property.

Teacher-in-Charge Jack Bowles believed that the threats to Little



Jack Bowles

Creek’s future, both physically and fiscally, required serious and immediate attention. Jaime Scott, an art teacher at McCluer North with a background

in accounting in the corporate world, offered her experience, expertise and energies to meet these threats. Together, Bowles and Scott reshaped Little Creek's "Mission". The primary mission continued to be Education, focusing on bringing "urban students into an understanding of the importance of Nature". As greenspaces in North County disappeared beneath concrete and asphalt, the district's children, though technically suburban, were becoming increasingly less familiar with the outdoors and shared more in the way of attitudes and experiences with urban kids.

To this mission was added the survival of Little Creek itself. While Superintendent Jeff Spiegel and the school board continued to support Little Creek, Bowles felt that the outdoor facility needed to be more valuable to the district and less attractive as a salable asset during district budget cutting time. District teachers, facing another salary crisis and further staffing cuts, were given an opportunity to suggest their own cuts and changes, and it was clear that Little Creek was not as much a priority to secondary teachers as it was to those at the elementary level. While the majority of elementary teachers had spent many hours with their classes at Little Creek, few of the teachers at Middle School or Senior High had more than a rudimentary knowledge of the facility, much less any personal experience there. Public relations, both beyond and within the walls of the district were now more crucial than ever before.

Diane Grubbs guided the Little Creek staff through the process of realigning its programs with Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) testing guidelines so that the Little Creek experience could more directly

supplement or reinforce the elementary schools' MAP oriented curricula. Every Ferguson-Florissant student, from pre-K through Sixth Grade would come to Little Creek at least once and every lesson taught at Little Creek would be MAP related. But this alone was not enough. Jaime Scott suggested a twofold approach: Little Creek needed to change from a financial drain on the school board to an entity that actually added money



Ornithologist Brandt Ryder explains Bird Banding

to the district coffers, and it needed a public relations kick-start.

Students from Bowles's 2003 Envirothon Team had already done their part for the PR campaign. As Missouri's State Champions, they had earned more points

in international competition than any previous state team. The 2004 BioBlitz event added to that when thirty-two scientists from regional colleges, universities, and state and federal conservation agencies came to Little Creek for a 24 hour inventory of every plant, insect, bird and animal within its boundaries. Many of these individuals were here for the first time.

The following morning, over 500 members of the community were welcomed onto the facility. Scientists reported and interpreted the results of

the inventory as hourly data was released. Tables or booths from twenty-three organizations such as the St. Louis Zoo, the Audubon Society, the Wildflower Association and others were set up to feature their own work or projects, while district staff engaged visiting children in some of the “hands on” programs available at Little Creek. The City of Florissant (who it was rumored was investigating the possibility of absorbing Little Creek) was represented by its mayor who made a speech. The city produced a video of the event (and the speech) as did a group of McCluer North students. If the goal had been merely to introduce Little Creek to a wider audience, then it was a success. But it also produced an inventory of over 430 living species as well as a list of assorted creatures sadly absent from Little Creek!

On the financial front, a series of grant applications were written by small groups of dedicated individuals, both district staff members and volunteers. These grant authors included, at one time or another, volunteer Jaime Scott, Little Creek Secretary Barbra Stephenson, Judy Huck, Science Coordinator Diane Grubbs, Assistant Superintendent Larry Larrew, and Teacher-in-Charge Jack Bowles. Almost immediately these efforts began to pay off, starting in 2003 with a modest \$750 Missouri Department of Conservation Lewis and Clark Grant. In 2004, a “Trim Grant” of \$8,800 began the job of trimming branches and limbs that overhung the trails and created a hazard for those beneath. It also cleared the way for the Honeysuckle Removal grant of \$10,000 that came in 2005 from the MDC. The 2005 BioBlitz brought more attention and donations of over \$16,500

from area corporations such as Emerson Electric, Walmart, and Aramark Foods as well as the Missouri Department of Conservation and UMSL.

In 2006, Little Creek secured the first in a series of grants (totaling nearly \$17,000) from Forest Releaf for the replanting of trees. Missouri Department of Natural Resources and Ameren UE provided \$20,000 and community donors added another \$2500 for the installation of a solar panel on the property. Little Creek's budget provided a second smaller panel to power the animal enclosure, and a solar weather station on top of the garage nearby which will



The Solar Panel

transmit data directly into the classrooms and allow computers in the Secondary Classroom to download and process that data for students.

In 2007 a Missouri Stewardship Grant from the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) permitted the further removal of between 15 and 18 acres of honeysuckle. Groups of volunteers and private citizens also contributed, such as Joseph Stiens, whose gift will help restore and expand the “prairie” area (located in the highest section of the property) from one

acre to four. It is hoped that the prairie grasses and plants will help slow water runoff down the hill towards the creek beds.

Along with Forest Releaf's new trees, 2008 also saw the winning of a \$99,970 grant for a Nature Trail especially constructed for students and other visitors with disabilities.

The Watershed Restoration Project

Having recognized the need for erosion control efforts along the



creek bed back in '03, Bowles began asking various "experts" in the conservation community if such a thing was possible. The collective answer was "yes", but nobody had answers to his second question of "How?" So a new committee of "heavy hitters" was formed. This Watershed Restoration Committee included representatives from Metropolitan Sewer District, Missouri Department of

Conservation, the St. Louis County Soil and Water Conservation District, the East-West Gateway Council of Governments, Great River Greenways District, the Open Space Council, and others. Within a year, it was determined that the best course was to seek something called a 319 EPA Watershed Restoration Grant from the Department of Natural Resources. Writing the grant itself took another year and after a long wait for the wheels of bureaucracy to turn, Little Creek was given the go ahead in July of 2008 to begin the \$806,000 three-year project.

This is a major grant for a major project. Little Creek itself is the source of its own watershed. Beginning with a spring (exact location unknown) that was covered over during the construction of North County Technical School in the 1960s, Little Creek becomes New Halls Ferry Creek and then Black Jack Creek. This in turn becomes Maline Creek which empties directly into the Mississippi River. Erosion at any point along the watershed causes storm sewer issues locally and eventually contributes to major silt clogs at the locks and dams along the river. The need for extensive cleanup after heavy storms and flooding may be lessened or prevented, and efforts for the general enhancement of the community will benefit. As water gathers and water flow increases down the line, it is also hoped that knowledge and interest in watershed restoration will increase. Groups already involved in their own local projects such as the River Des Peres Watershed Coalition as well as those planning such projects will be able to come to Little Creek to observe and study the efforts underway and take information and ideas home with them.

In addition, as streams are concreted over and turned into underground water ways, neighborhood children, who once played and explored in and along creeks and streams are denied the opportunities that their parents and grandparents had to learn about stream life. Turning this trend around and restoring the natural watershed system will help further outdoor education and, over time, the environmental community itself. The MDC believes that if young people learn to fish and enjoy the natural environment, they are more apt to become involved or at least sympathetic to conservation efforts. A case in point is Trish Riley, the Department of Natural Resources Project Manager who will be directing the efforts at Little Creek. Ms Riley is, herself, a Ferguson-Florissant alumna who first saw the nature area as one of its students!

Little Creek will continue to do its part to help. Another \$15,000 Community Stewardship Grant from the MDC will allow Bowles to begin the construction of a pond and wetlands area on the property, both contributing to the goals of the watershed project as well as fulfilling the desires of his predecessors whose efforts were met with less than desirable results. The successful creation of a pond at Little Creek will provide students with an opportunity to bait their lines and learn about fishing and will also serve as another venue for studying wildlife in and around ponds!

Classes of students will continue to study at the facility during the three year project, keeping track of the progress and learning about the conservation and control of water resources. Three annual "Watershed Festivals" will bring members of the community in to learn about the

importance of watersheds and observe the results, while the MDC will be using the project for demonstrations of its own to other communities. Efforts to control or eradicate the Honeysuckle will also continue.



The Future of Little Creek

Thanks to budget support from the school board and all the grant work done at Little Creek, improvements are being made. Yet there is much still to be done and much that would be beneficial to the programs if funds could be secured. On the wish list in 2009 is an additional roofed pavilion for rainy day study. There is a desire for more participation from secondary schools. Perhaps a “Low Ropes” confidence course would once more allow

secondary teams or classes and faculty groups to come to Little Creek to work on team building skills. Extending the solar power facility might one day power the entire complex, and there is also the issue of staffing. The caretaker is responsible for not only ninety-six acres of land and the maintenance of the network of trails on it, but also for three separate buildings at Little Creek. Teaching responsibilities are shared by one full time instructor, one full-time teacher aide, one secretary/teacher, one bus driver, and a few volunteers, some with their own jobs elsewhere and some who have already retired but are willing to return to work with visiting students both from Elementary and Secondary. Reinforcements would be very useful and very much appreciated.

For the future, at least, Little Creek is secure. Clauses in the original HUD assisted purchase agreements proscribed that any future sale be for educational use only. Provisos in several of the recent project grants which stipulate usage of at least twenty-five years, and the financial benefit of the grants themselves and their positive effect on the district's budget all help secure the future existence of Little Creek. With the continuing support of the district's teachers and the community around it, this "island" of peace and natural beauty will continue to fascinate and teach new generations of students about the natural world and their place in it, even as St. Louis County grows and evolves around it



Today, as the visitor hikes one of the many trails that wind their way through the woods or along the creek, the sounds of the traffic from Highway 270 or the shouts of children playing in Dunegant Park are swallowed by the trees, leaving only the sound of birds overhead or the occasional squirrel rustling hidden among fallen leaves. The hiker is free to focus on the land's own rhythms or seek sanctuary within his own thoughts. He may be there to learn something from the environment around him or to teach someone how to preserve it. He may be there to study some single element of Little Creek's flora or fauna or just to let the glory of her quiet, natural beauty swirl around him as he walks. He may be looking at a leaf or an insect from a distance of a few feet, or an animal or hunter from a distance of thousands of years. Little Creek provides whatever he seeks.



*"Young children are curious by nature. They
are especially intrigued by living things."
Ethel Nolte*

Little Creek Folks



Bob Borgstede, baby goat and students



Ethel Nolte shares a wildflower

Left to Right: A. J. Sullivan,
Paul Bueneman, Mary
Steffan w. Susan Lark





Clockwise: Pam Ridling at her loom, Mary Delaney at Pioneer Days, Lee Margulis checking livestock, and Louise Nichols shucks corn



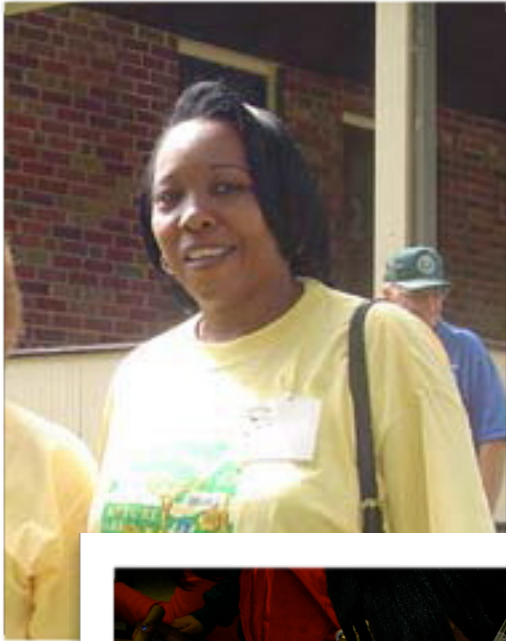


Clockwise from top: Jack Bowles, Vern LeClaire and First Graders, Judy Horton, Jeanine Renaud, Barbra Stephenson





Clockwise from top: the solar array, Kindergarten birdwatchers, Caretaker Steve Harris and new lamb, students trying their hands at Flintknapping, Caroline Rodgers.





Aerial View 1953

The Little Creek Watershed is very obvious here, marked by tree cover along the banks of the creek. Dunn Road crosses horizontally across the bottom of the photo and New Halls Ferry can be seen at the right, angling north through farmed fields.



Aerial View early 1970's

Even then, the Little Creek Nature Area was an island surrounded by housing developments and highways. The West Florissant Road extension to New Halls Ferry can be seen under construction, just past the 270 Drive-in (now Clocktower Plaza) and the Venture store construction.



Contemporary Aerial View

