

Thurstonites Have Reason To Be Proud

By Doug Fulton

Last Tuesday night a most inspiring program and film were presented at Thurston School. They pointed up what can happen in just a short time when there is concerted neighborhood and community action to a specific and worthwhile goal.

The beginning of the story goes back almost two years.

On the Thurston School grounds, in the midst of Bromley and Orchard Hills subdivisions, a "waste area" existed. It was part of the school site purchased from the developer when the subdivision was laid out. Normally the school board would not have bought so much land (25 acres) for an elementary school, but the "waste" part was thrown in cheaply because it had a swamp on it which rendered it unsuitable for building.

The board thought that at some future time the swamp might be drained and filled, and used for a junior high.

But to the residents of the area, and to the conservation consultant staff of the schools, the swamp offered a different sort of opportunity. It offered a perfect spot to develop a nature center.

A PTO committee was formed to draw up a plan and, with the help of Dr. William Stapp, conservation consultant to the public schools, the area was surveyed, mapped, plotted, and designed.

In April of 1966 the residents of the area mounted a huge clean-up day on the site. They removed 15 truck loads of assorted debris. Perhaps some of you remember the pictures and story about it on this page.

Following the clean-up, a presentation of the nature center idea was made to area residents. Those opposing the plan (chiefly because of safety reasons) also spoke at the meeting. Then a vote was taken, and an overwhelming majority gave support to the nature center.

The idea was brought to the School Board for approval. Several points were made in this presentation—it would be expensive to drain the swamp sufficiently for building—the site was really not large enough for both an elementary and a junior high—and, most important of all, here was an imaginative and worthwhile educational opportunity. The board agreed.

But there were problems to be solved, primarily dealing with safety to young children and proper drainage of storm water into and out of the pond.

The PTO, area residents, Scout and youth groups, together with the school staff, fell to with a will and determination. The school board provided funds to build an asphalt walkway around the swamp, the city of Ann Arbor gave technical assistance on the storm drain problem, and one of the subdividers (Smokler Realty) offered the use of trucks and bulldozers.

Then, this past spring, just as hundreds of Thurston pupils were poised to mount a gigantic planting program, came a stroke of good fortune.

Mrs. Lyndon Johnson, who last year had sponsored a National Youth Conference on Beauty and Conservation, asked that a film be made showing what young people in various parts of the country were doing in this area. Thurston School's nature center was one of only seven projects in the country chosen to be depicted in the film.

The picture, "We're On Our Way," had its premiere in Washington, D.C., in September, and a special guest from Thurston, Julie Ann Weinhold, accompanied Dr. Stapp and Acting Supt. Scott Westerman to this first showing as guests of the First Lady.

And Tuesday night, with an overflow crowd of proud parents in attendance in the Thurston gym, Ann Arbor had its own premiere performance of the film.

Before the showing, students outlined the history of the project, and showed slides of some of the natural features and wildlife of the center.

The film showed the planting of more than 4,000 trees, shrubs, and plants on the site, the building of bridges and walkways, and the erection of bird houses and outdoor display cases and signs.

Work on the center is, of course, not complete. There is still much to do, and probably always will be, for an area such as this, given intensive use by both students and adults, will need maintenance and repair of facilities as long as it is in existence.

But the PTO, the principal and teachers of the school, and—most of all—the students, have done a remarkable job so far. Their enthusiasm shows every sign of growing.

This is the sort of effort which will pay off in future years, not just in teaching youth an appreciation of natural resources and the way of living things which will carry through in their everyday lives, but also in the value of working together on a project not only for themselves, but for others.

The example set by the PTO and the area residents is a fine one, too, and one which could be copied by other neighborhoods throughout Ann Arbor. Other schools in the system have equally good opportunities, and with the emphasis placed by the school board in recent years on site development and natural areas combined with school sites, there are dozens of other possibilities.

If all these schools had PTO's as imaginative and hard-working as Thurston's, Ann Arbor could have the finest set of nature centers in the country.

When the parents care, the kids will care, too, and when the kids care, we shall begin to see the end of vandalism, the appreciation of beauty, and an awakening of conservation consciousness throughout the land.

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