

MERES A History

Ron Brown

President 1997-2009



The Muskegon Environmental Research & Education Society

The Society believes that the well being of our environment requires continuing environmental research and education of young people.

www.muskegonlakenaturepreserve.org

The Beginning

It was 1994 and a lot of discussion had taken place at the Muskegon Conservation Club about the problem of the need for constant dredging of the Clubs channel into Muskegon Lake. The result of two years discussion between the Club and Resource Management was a plan presented to the Club in 1994.

The plan called for breakwaters to be built with a boardwalk on the top. These breakwaters would be built between a group of small islands and the boardwalk would continue to the Causeway. According to an article in the Muskegon Chronicle on April 10, 1994, Tim Bureau of Resource Management stated, "We think we've got something that could turn out to be a jewel in West Michigan. What we see, potentially, is a gateway to the City of North Muskegon."

I was President of the Conservation Club in 1994 and we started work to accomplish the vision presented to us. First, Steve Erickson, who owned the land, had to be convinced, and it didn't take too much. He agreed to donate the land to the Club. But, then we encountered our first hurdle. The Club was not of the right tax code, and Steve Erickson could not get a tax deduction for the donation.

The only solution was to form a separate tax free corporation. The result was the Muskegon Environmental Research & Education Society, recognized by the State of Michigan and the Federal Government as a 501(C3) Corporation in 1997. Then on December 12, 1997 we signed the deed for the land that would become The Muskegon Lake Nature Preserve. The price was \$1.00.

That original Board of Trustees as was; Ron Brown, Fred Wilder, Bill Loxterman, Terry Langlois, Dave Walley, Mike Hayes, and Al Bell.

The first day that Fred and I walked onto the “island” we wondered what we had gotten for a \$1.00. (I don’t believe we ever paid Steve the \$1.00) There was broken concrete, large pieces, everywhere. Added to this, a two track road was completely filled with asphalt and there was a very



large ‘steel thing’ that had been put there. Then, after you had negotiated all of this, a job I assure you, you came to what had been an area dump. The land was primarily foundry fill from the hey days of the foundry business in Muskegon.

There I was, now President of MERES, and wondering if maybe we had not been just a little bit crazy. But, Fred saw the potential and soon convinced me and others that we could make something of it. Mike Hayes, who worked for Resource Management, (now J.F. New) began work on the plan for the “island” and to put the permit applications together.

The first thing we learned was that we could not get permits approved for the breakwaters, and we could not extend the boardwalk west. The original idea to save the Conservation Club money on its dredging costs was not going to work. But we were sure we could make a nature center happen, somehow.

Fred started working over there clearing away trash and I got over there and used the Clubs tractor to move some of the dump debris. If I only didn’t have to work, was retired like Fred, and could spend more time there. Finally, Fred said, “We have to get the concrete and asphalt cleaned up.” He arranged for Michigan’s Adventure to clean it up and haul it all away, even the steel thing. He also paid for it.



The Outdoor Classroom

The first project, after the clearing of the debris, was the construction of a Outdoor Classroom, basically a picnic pavilion. The Community Foundation for



Muskegon County, Herman Miller Foundation, The Ray & Alma Foundation and The Muskegon Conservation Club provided funds. Members of the Conservation Club volunteered many hours to get the Outdoor Classroom built. It was 2001.

The Fred Wilder Observation Deck

The next project was the building of the Fred Wilder Observation Deck. Funding was provided by the Dana Corporation and the Herman Miller Foundation. Once again the Muskegon Conservation Club provided the manpower.



The deck

took the spring, summer and into the fall to complete. I thought we were never going to get it done, but we prevailed and a dedication was held that October, 2003.

Fred being presented name plate by Ron Brown Naming the Observation Deck for Fred

Then the Muskegon Area Conservation District opened up a trail from the Fred Wilder Observation Deck to the Outdoor Classroom. Once it was opened a couple of years A.J. Wortelbore asked if he could place a Geocache along the trail, and it has been found by many people, some from outside Michigan. It is just another way the people discover the Preserve. Try looking for a lone pine tree to discover the treasure.

The Al Bell Trail

The next project was the Al Bell Wetlands Trail. The MACD received a grant from the MI DEQ to purchase the materials for a boardwalk through the wetlands in the NE corner of the Preserve. Volunteers, mostly from the Muskegon Conservation Club, set out once again to build the boardwalk. Jim



Tobleck and Jerry Buttleman worked to set the posts for the walkway. At one point during the construction, a portion of the pathway was under water.



Marge & Al Bell with Ron Brown

The board discussed the name for the trail, and it was felt that Al Bell had been involved in environmental issues for a long time and had been involved with MERES as a Board member since the beginning. It was decided that the trail would be known as the Al Bell Wetlands Trail. 2005

What's In A Name

The name for the Preserve came about as we saw it develop and we needed to call it something besides, "the island". It was an island, especially since we got the culverts replaced so that water could run through the "ditch" and completes the circuit around the island. We had several names, but we finally settled on The Muskegon Lake Nature Preserve.



Water Everywhere, But..

One thing that we did not have was water, despite the Preserve being surrounded by water. Mike Hayes arranged for a well to be drilled at cost. Jim and Alex Tobleck built a substantial pump house, got a gas powered pump and we had water, non-portable, for cleaning various tools.

Contributors Kisok

Along the way we felt that we should have a way to recognize the various contributors to MERES. Terry Langlois and Bruce Price built us a kiosk and we placed it near the front of the Preserve.



The Wilder River Walk

The final big project was the river walk. It had been part of Mike Hayes's vision from the beginning, and we felt we were ready now to tackle it. Hooker DeJong was hired earlier to design it, and they put the final plans together. It was around 2004 or 5. We knew that it had to involve an outside contractor, for at least the frame. Since it was going to cost a lot of money and we weren't sure that we could raise it all, we had a contingency plan to lay the decking ourselves. Fortunately, we did not need it.



We first asked the Fishery Trust through the MACD to fund it. They turned down the request, but made some suggestions for the next year. We rewrote the proposal and submitted it. After a few meetings in Lansing, the proposal was accepted as a matching fund project. The Great Lakes Fishery Trust gave us \$192,000 matching fund grant, and we had to raise the rest.

Jeff Auch took on the job as Chairman of the fund raising committee that saw nearly a total of \$400,000 raised from foundations, corporations, and many, many individuals. The result was "A Gift From The Community..To The Community". Quantum construction was hired to build the river walk.



The fund raising effort was so successful that we felt there was enough money to get the paved portion the pathway complete. We hired Osborne Excavating to clear land, put down an under layer of crushed concrete and asphalt paving.



of

The completion of the Wilder River Walk has opened up the Preserve. People can now enter it from two sides. Many people travel through the Preserve and continue along the Lakeshore Trail. Others stroll the trails enjoying nature and fishing. And, thousands of school children are using the Preserve as their own environmental laboratory each year.

Picnic Tables

In 2008 Nathan Walley was looking for a project to complete his Eagle badge for the Boy Scouts. He found it in the putting together and painting 10 pic-



nic tables. They were placed in various areas around the Preserve.



Amazing

I am amazed when I walk the Preserve and think back to the first time I entered the “island”. I am very proud of all the people that came together and worked extremely hard to make the Muskegon Lake Nature Preserve what we have today. But, why is there always a but, keeping the Preserve as it is will take just as much work and dedication as has been given so far. Without regular cutting back of the trails, replacing boards as needed, and general maintenance, the Preserve will very quickly return to nature. With the people in place now, I'm sure it will continue to be one of the jewels in the Muskegon area.

Some Special People

Jim and Alex Tobleck

There is not much that can be said about these two but that much of the Preserve can be directly traced back to them. Jim's carpentering ability can be seen throughout, from the entry bridge, the bridge on the Al Bell Trail, the water sampling platform, the Fred Wilder Observation Deck, the pump house, and the shed he donated. He insisted that everything he built had to be of the highest quality. We often had to remind him, “this isn't a piano”. This was done with Alex at his side. Alex is his son and he worked on the Preserve since he was about 8. He helped clear trails, cut the grass, (the tractor was donated by Jim), and was an instrumental player in all of the construction. I wish to say a big thank you to Jim and Alex.



Paul Grabinski

Paul Grabinski was involved with Herman Miller's environmental group as well as the Conservation Club. He arranged for Herman Miller's group to have its volunteers come to the "island" and begin clearing trails. He put us in touch with The Herman Miller Foundation and they provided us with the funds for several of our projects. The environmental group continues to volunteer, as does Paul.



Mike Hayes

Mike Hayes developed the permits for the "island" and in so doing he developed a vision that would take 10 years to bear fruit, with most of the vision having now been completed. It was not easy and much of his work took place away from the Preserve, although he also did much work there as well. There were several meetings with the DEQ/DNR and the Corp of Engineers. We did not always get everything,



but we got a lot of it. Then there was the time Mike had a sophisticated GPS system in a backpack and was walking the "island". It was very cold and Mike managed to step in several holes, which were filled with water. But, he managed to get the place mapped. He was one of the original Board members.

Arn Boesaart

During this time a close relationship was developing between Arn Boesaart of the Community Foundation and MERES and myself. Arn became one of MERES good friends and provided advice that was as important as the funds.

Arn was Vice President of The Community Foundation for Muskegon County. He was helpful in setting up a fund for the river walk and directed us in several fund raising efforts. His believe in what we wanted to do provided encouragement to continue when it looked we had hit a dead end. Although Arn is no longer with the Foundation (their

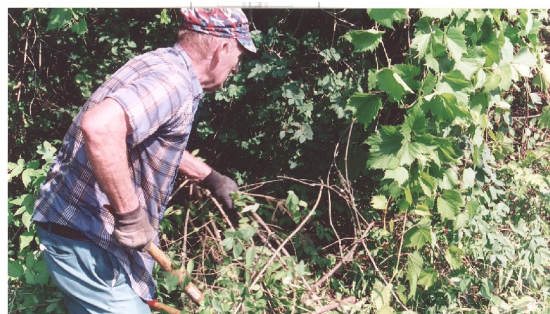


loss) he continues to be a good friend. L-R, Arn, Jeff Auch MASD, Gary Nobes Muskegon Watershed Assembly

Fred Wilder

The Wilder River Walk was dedicated in October 2007. Although many, many people gave money, one person stands out. Not only did he give approximately \$200,000 for the River Walk but has continued to support the Nature Preserve from the beginning with his tireless energy and close to \$50,000 in additional donations. Without Fred the Preserve would be a long way from being completed today. In addition he established the Ray and Alma Foundation that provides funds each year for maintenance of the Preserve.

I cannot say enough about Fred. When he said that we had to get the concrete and asphalt cleaned up, I had no idea that he meant to get it done and pay for it. His work on the Preserve was tireless. "Chainsaw Fred" became his nickname,



although he used a chainsaw infrequently. What he did was clear trails, dig out roots and endured himself to all that know him. He did all this while committing his other energy to the Muskegon Heritage Society, the Muskegon Conservation Club, and lord knows what else. Fred is the kind of person that does not seek out publicity and we may never know everything Fred has done, but Muskegon is a better place because he is here.

Fred is a veteran of the U.S. Navy where he served 20 years and retired as a Commander. While serving as highway clean up chairperson for the Conservation Club he was seriously injured when cleaning up a section of U.S. 31, alone, by a hit and run driver. Fortunately he crawled up to the side of the road where a passing Deputy Sheriff from Muskegon County spotted him. But he recovered and he also survived a battle with cancer. He wears a colorful welders cap as a way of saying he met cancer and won.



Fred receiving award from Jeff Auch Executive Dir. MASD, Ron Brown looks on

Fred never married but came back from the Navy and was a devoted son. He took care of his mother until she passed away at 102. Lets hope the longevity continues, and we have Fred for many more years.



Fred & Al Bell

Jerry Buttleman



Jerry Buttleman! Jerry was the person that kept our projects straight, literally.

When we built our first project, the Outdoor Classroom, Jerry laid out where each post should go. The result, the Outdoor Classroom is one eighth of an inch out of square. He then continued to help and build the Classroom, leading the members of the Muskegon Conservation Club, many who did not know what exactly they were doing.

He was there when we replaced the culverts, the observation deck that we designed as we went along. He was also there when we dug the holes and placed the pillars for the Al Bell trail. Jerry was the person we went to whenever we needed help with building anything.

Muskegon Conservation Club

This is not an individual, but the collective members of the Club were there whenever we were going to build something. They not only brought themselves, but their tools and expertise. The Muskegon Lake Nature Preserve could not have been developed without them.

The Original Board of Directors

Ron Brown President
Manager of Communications (primarily TV production) at Amway, then retired.

Bill Loxterman
City Council for N. Muskegon and staff at Muskegon County Community College

Dave Walley Secretary/ Treasurer
Self employed court reporter

Terry Langlois Vice President
Grand Rapids schoolteacher

Al Bell
Retired

Fred Wilder
Retired Naval Commander

Mike Hayes
Environmental Management

The current number of Board of Directors was changed to 10 in the year 2001.

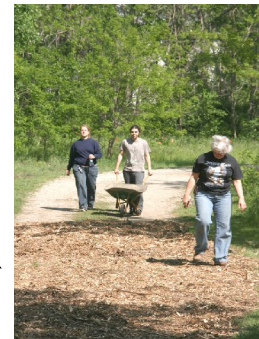
Thanks to my wife, Joan Brown, who continues to put up with me!



A Picture is worth a thousand words

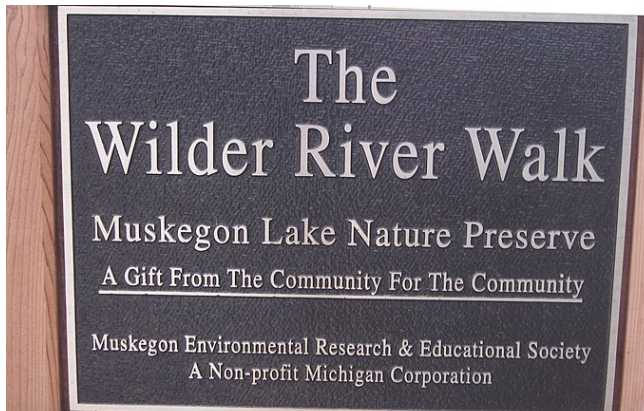
The last work bee, 3 of the nearly 20

The first work bee



Joan & Ron Brown with grandson Ethan





Steve Coverly
President

Ron Brown
Past President