



"NEVER DOUBT THAT A
SMALL GROUP OF
THOUGHTFUL, COMMITTED
PEOPLE CAN
CHANGE THE WORLD.
INDEED, IT IS THE ONLY
THING THAT EVER HAS."

--MARGARET MEAD

Founding of Tualatin Hills Nature Park

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Friends of Tualatin Hills Nature Park



FERTILE GROUND
Communications



A magical forest embedded in Beaverton, Oregon, the Tualatin Hills Nature Park provides a quiet haven to more than 200,000 visitors each year. Hikers, bikers, botanists, birders, and families traverse its five miles of trails. The wildlife preserve's 222 acres of wetlands, forests, and streams shelter insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals. But without the fierce dedication of a handful of people in the 1970s, the park might have been developed into housing or commercial use and its wildlife habitat lost forever.

Most visitors don't know how it was saved from development. Each time they walk down a trail and hear the birds or listen to the trees, they owe their thanks to a small grassroots group of thoughtful, committed people who followed through and did not give up. Overcoming many hurdles through the process, this group were determined to see it through. More than half were women, and many were educators, determined to preserve this treasure in a busy urban area. Fifty years later, we continue to be grateful for their gift to future generations.



BACK TO THE BEGINNING...

Before Europeans settled in Oregon, the nature park was the traditional territory of the Atfalati or Tualatin band of Kalapuya Indians. Their land was taken under Cession 352. Today the Kalapuya are members of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and the Confederated Tribes of the Siletz Indians. Evidence of their presence in the area dates back approximately 10,000 years.



In 1840, settlers began moving into the Tualatin Valley. The property now occupied by the Tualatin Hills Nature Park was originally the homestead of John and Lydia Elliott and their nine children who had traveled the Oregon Trail from Maine. When John Elliott died in 1854, the family sold the property to Portland shopkeepers T.B. and T.S. Trevett and nature began to take over. When they went into foreclosure, Catholic Archbishop Francis Norbert Blanchet purchased the property in 1861 for a church orphanage, which would become St. Mary's Home for Boys.

ST. MARY'S WOODS

The forested area behind St. Mary's Home for Boys became known as St. Mary's Woods. In October 1927, the space became part of a game preserve aimed at stopping careless hunting in the area. Over the years, the forest became a source of recreation for neighbors and an outdoor nature classroom for students.

As developers rapidly bought greenspaces in Washington County, Barbara Wilson had a vision for a nature park. She worked across the street from St. Mary's Woods, owned by the Catholic Archdiocese of Portland, and early in the morning she would see the deer come in. She imagined a place where the deer could browse and people could experience nature fully on their lunch hours.



A VISION BEYOND TENNIS COURTS AND BALL PARKS

In 1972, Barbara was elected to the Tualatin Hills Park and Recreation District Board of Directors. Determined to get the park district to think beyond their singular focus of tennis courts, swim centers, and ball parks, she wanted to bring another voice to the board. As a naturalist and wildlife advocate, she felt it was important for the park district to have natural areas, riparian zones, and greenways, and she thought a nature park would be an excellent gift for the taxpayers.

Around the same time, Larry Cole (who would later become Beaverton mayor) was leading a parallel group advocating for a regional park. The park would include recreational facilities, ball field, a gathering place for picnics and family reunions, and a large natural area. Vern Williams, a key member of the committee who died in 2014, worked for the Bonneville Power Administration for 40 years so was able to obtain aerial photos as they explored options for a regional park.

The park district presented a \$10 million bond measure to the voters in 1974. The \$10 million would fund several projects, including a recreation center, swimming pools, and neighborhood parks. Although greenspaces and the nature park plans were not specifically mentioned in the ballot measure, the park district appointed a Land Acquisition Committee to determine the best places to create new parks. Larry

"I hoped we would have a large piece of property in its natural state dedicated to Mother Nature, ecology, and wildlife. The property was wet because of the wetlands and creeks, and much of the land could not be developed. Why not donate it to the park district?" -Barbara Wilson



Cole served on that committee and found an opportunity to pitch the regional park idea to the Tualatin Hills Park and Recreation District.



Several groups were working separately toward the same goal: the League of Women Voters, the Beaverton Optimists, and the Beaverton Planning Commission were all interested in developing a nature park. Eventually the groups came together to turn their shared vision into a reality.

In 1975, the City of Beaverton listed a regional park in its land use planning and capital improvement program and earmarked \$400,000 to 500,000 as matching funds for a regional park. The Nature Conservancy also began cataloging natural areas of significance in St. Mary's Woods, concluding the site was unique because of its many different habitats in a compressed area and underlying hydrologic conditions. The park's habitat mosaic can rarely be found elsewhere.

In the meantime, Barbara was imagining trails and a nature center where people could meet, with a parking lot so they could park their cars. She knew they had to buy the land before it was too late. She felt an urgency because developers were moving in and she worried they'd be left behind. She knew once the land was sold, it would be too late to save the wild space.

"IF THE GOAL IS WORTH THE FIGHT, BRING IT ON"



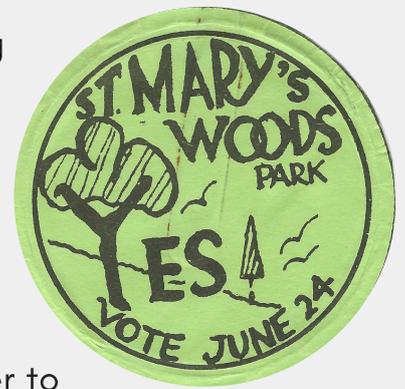
Barbara's passion to create a nature park, though, led to controversy on the board. In 1976, the park district's Land Acquisition Committee recommended purchasing 40 acres of the St. Mary's Woods site, but the archdiocese responded it was not for sale. At the same time, Barbara became impatient and felt like she was being outfoxed and misled. With five people on the board, she believed she only one ally on the board to create natural areas for the public to enjoy.

The conflict came to a head when Barbara felt the park district director never intended to develop a nature park. She watched the bond money being spent on a new Olympic diving platform and viewed it as an inequitable use of money for the public. "He did not grasp the importance of natural areas, riparian zones, green spaces, biking trails, and hiking trails," said Barbara. "And so that made everything very difficult to proceed."

Barbara decided to take the matter into her own hands,



announcing at one of the board meetings she was forming the St. Mary's Woods Committee to explore options for purchasing the land before it was gobbled up by developers. The committee drew regular community members who shared a passion: teachers, botanists, hikers, ecologists, and birders.



One of those people was Kevin Harding, who wrote a letter to the editor of a local newspaper, concerned about the bond issue. "It seemed to me they were using most of the money for the regional sports complex, pools, and ball fields...and I thought we needed to use some of that money to lock up some land that was disappearing quickly," said Kevin. "This must have struck a chord with Barbara Wilson, because she tracked me down and invited me to a meeting at her house. That meeting turned out to be one of the first meetings of the St. Mary's Woods State Park Committee.

PITCHING A STATE PARK

Washington County did not have a state park of any significance, so in 1977 the community members created another committee to explore the possibility of acquiring the land for a state park. At this point, Larry Cole's regional park efforts, Barbara's St. Mary's Woods Committee, and the League of Women Voters came together to support the plan.

After a long and involved process, Charlene Snow and others from the League of Women Voters began lobbying the Oregon State Parks Advisory Committee with other volunteers. Governor Bob Straub visited the site and agreed that St. Mary's Woods would be an excellent site for a state park. The state approved funding for St. Mary's Forest State Park. Unfortunately, Bob Straub lost his 1979 election to Vic Atiyeh. One of the first things Governor Atiyeh did in office was to delete the funding from the budget...yet one more discouraging development for the committee.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS, GENERATING SUPPORT

Kevin Harding thought they could create a park similar to Tryon Creek State Park. As a photographer and birdwatcher, Kevin would visit the park nearly every day and take photos of the wildlife, trees, and flowers. Committee member Mike

When Kevin Harding attended his first meeting, he met another birdwatcher. "He took me down a trail back here to the pond," said Kevin. "And once I saw the property, then I was sold. Then I was all in for the project."

Snow remembers visiting countless community groups, showing the photos Kevin Harding had taken of the property. "We explained what we were about, why it was important, and what needed to be done," Mike remembers. "These meetings were important to ultimately generate local political support."

A UNIQUE HABITAT MOSAIC

As a biology professor, Mike Snow brought his students to the site and held classes there. "I would point out to my students the areas that were part of this habitat mosaic...in the western portion of this park, a stand of western red cedar transitions quickly into a community dominated by Oregon ash," ponders Mike. "It's like night and day moving through a space of less than 30 yards, and it's amazing to see from a biological standpoint."

The site's hydrology is important because two primary streams run through the land and form a confluence. "Cedar Mill Creek and Beaverton Creek enter into this wetland area where the plants are able to absorb some of those nutrients and significantly lower the nutrient level as it flows out," said Mike. "I had one of my students working here one summer measuring water quality in the input creeks and output creeks. You can see that nutrient uptake effect going on."

Beaver Acres Elementary teachers brought students to the park in the late 1970s, preparing them for outdoor school. "We came over with sixth grade classes and practiced building fires and shelters and identifying plants," said Margaret Armstrong, long-time nature park volunteer. "That was my introduction to the nature park."

Later Margaret brought her high school students to do community service in the park, building some of the initial trails, doing cleanup, and removing invasive species. "The forest is a hundred years old, a mosaic of incredibly diverse communities that don't normally live right next to each other," said Margaret. "The oaks and the ash grow near the alders and western cedars. The ponderosa pines, which we think of as being in eastern Oregon, are a Willamette Valley subspecies adapted to our wet winters. They can be found growing amongst the Oregon white oak. The biodiversity is really amazing and unique."

"The mosaic of plant communities is so unusual that it makes it a really rich place to do any kind of biology teaching or plant identification."

—Margaret Armstrong

BUOYED FORWARD BY THE VOTERS

Over the next few years, the same group of people (an expanded St. Mary's Woods Committee) worked with the park district to forecast the amount of land needed for the nature park. In 1980, the park district board voted to acquire the site. They agreed to take a chance on proposing a bond measure to voters for \$5.5 million, which could be bundled with money from federal grants and the state. They hoped to have \$7 million to buy the land. Committee members made calls, distributed lawn signs, passed out flyers, set up a display at Washington Square Mall, and wore buttons to promote the park everywhere they went. The measure won with 58 percent approval, showing widespread community support for a nature park.



AN UNCOOPERATIVE SELLER

Unfortunately, the archdiocese didn't want to sell the whole property. They knew the park district's budget, leaving little room for negotiation. Ultimately, they agreed to sell the least-developable 180 acres at a fixed cost per acre, regardless of whether the acreage held a floodplain or developable upland. The committee's victory was tinged with disappointment because the rest of the land was just sitting there. They were thrilled when the bond measure passed because it proved the public was interested in natural areas. However, Barbara Wilson still regrets they couldn't give future generations the full 450 acres. The park district received the deed for 180 acres in January 1981.

As a botanist, Mike Snow finds it hugely rewarding that that the land did not slip away into development, which he believes would have been devastating.

SEVENTEEN YEARS UNTIL OPENING

Between purchasing the land and opening the park, 17 long years passed. From 1980 to 1982, the same core group of community members who had been involved from the beginning began working on the master planning. The park district chose a consultant in 1983 to begin the master plan. The process of

"This park exists because of dedicated efforts of people to make a commitment to preserve a resource that will be shared with their children, grandchildren, and the larger community."

--Mike Snow

developing the master plan was important because that's when they decided how to configure the property. The master plan created a space that was accessible to the public but also managed to protect the park's unique natural features and wildlife habitat. "This process is a legacy of my life and my family's life," said Mike Snow. "I'm most proud of the little bit of a part I played in helping to acquire the property and having a say in ultimate development. Both my wife and I sat on the committee that did the master planning."

In 1984, St. Mary's Woods officially became the Tualatin Hills Nature Park. For many years, the park received a minimum of maintenance. Neighbors walked through the park on social trails, kids created paths for their BMX bikes, and paint ballers used the park. In the early 1990s, the park district hired the first natural resources technician, Ralph Cook, who created a hand-drawn map of the park. In 1993, Margaret Armstrong and other teachers from Merlo Station High School began to use the park as an extended outdoor classroom. The students cleared pathways to build trails, identified plants, and found inspiration for writing and art activities.

The park received a \$5,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife for community service and work projects. In 1994 a bond levy passed to fund an updated master plan for an interpretive center, accessible trails, bridges, boardwalks, trail improvements, and interpretive signs. The park continued to grow as Portland General Electric donated an additional 15 acres in 1995.

Finally, on April 18, 1998, the Tualatin Hills Nature Park opened on Earth Day.

Jerome Magill, who began organizing annual plant sales to benefit the park, recalls the grand opening: "When the park finally opened for everyone and the trails were open, I was really exhilarated. I thought was the greatest thing since sliced bread." Jerome said, "There's got to be some relief from the hectic life that we're all leading, and nature helps us to do that. I'm proud of the people in this community who voted for and are supporting a large piece of land that is left natural for everybody to enjoy...especially the young people."



LEAVING A LEGACY FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

"Without the passion and endless efforts of a group of everyday concerned people, this park would not exist," said Rod Coles, chair of the Friends of

Tualatin Hills Nature Park Steering Committee. "This would most likely be a stream corridor through a housing development with some light industry. Because of the vision of those community members 50 years ago, we have 220 acres where we can hear the birds. We can watch the deer. We can see the beaver activity. I am grateful for their passion and willingness to get involved."

Margaret Armstrong believes we should never take this park for granted. "This park is here because community members fought for years through many layers of bureaucracy, through funding hurdles, and through trying to get a seller, to agree to the land boundaries that would make a natural area that was worth saving," said Margaret. "This park makes me most proud when I see how well the habitat is now maintained. Enjoyed by over 200,000 people every year, it's a treasured part of the Tualatin Hills Park & Recreation District and the community."

Kevin Harding describes one of his favorite experiences in the park: "I hadn't been here for quite a while, but I came over here and went for a walk. Down here on one of the boardwalks was a classroom full of kindergartners sitting on that curb eating their lunch. That's when I knew we did a good thing. When I'm out here surrounded by nature, I relax. I can set all the cares and news of the day aside." Kevin continued, "If you have something you have a passion about, find a place to be involved with it and to do something about it. This is one of the milestones of my life. This is a big one."

"When I come to the nature park, I'm really glad that it's here for everyone," said Jerome Magill. "It's free, come on out."

"The park is home to reptiles, birds, mammals and insects that are native to Oregon, and along its nearly five miles of trails, you might see deer, rabbits, woodpeckers, hawks, and the occasional bald eagle...It has grown in popularity...and today is a favorite destination for runners from the nearby Nike campus."

-Grant Butler, *The Oregonian*, celebrating 20 years since the grand opening

Now the Tualatin Hills Nature Center offers environmental education classes, camps, and activities for adults, children, and school groups, led by an outstanding group of environmental educators. Margaret Armstrong shared that it's not just science teachers who bring their students to the park. Elementary and English teachers bring their students to inspire their writing.

"When you walk into the cedar grove in the west woods, it's like walking into an ancient cathedral," said Margaret. "I want the trees to tell me their stories. Tell me, what have you seen here? What's happened here?"



Barbara Wilson shares her advice for anyone who has a vision like hers: "If you have a dream that requires participation from a government agency, don't give up. Present your plan and hang in there, and you will proceed. You might not get everything you want, but you will get further than if you ignore the situation." She found that her perseverance worked when she showed up at the board meetings over and over and over again. "And reminding people that were wandering off into other areas that it was important to have a nature park in this location. The power of nature is life. Having a nature park reminds people of the beauty that Mother Nature provides."



The Tualatin Hills Nature Park represents the culmination of hours and hours of work. "The committee met constantly and encouraged each other," recalled Barbara. "It was really a hard battle. We could have given up on many days. The park reminds people what's possible."

Margaret Armstrong commented, "It just proves that a group of people with enough passion can do almost anything."

"I felt that the proposed accomplishment was worth everything I could give it. It was a love of the land and a love of the ecosystem," said Barbara Wilson. "If the goal is worth the fight, then bring it on."



The park didn't stop growing after the grand opening, and the community members didn't stop advocating for nature. The Make Our Park Whole movement in 1999 ensured additional acreage being sold by the archdiocese was kept out the hands of developers.

