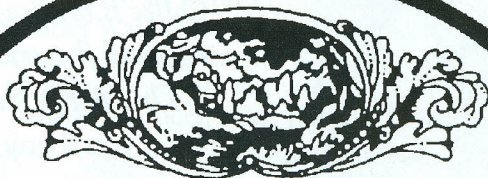


WITHOUT CHARGE



February 2002

Bath Country Journal

Magazine



What's Wild at Bath?

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Bath Elementary Honored with Wildlife Award

Steiner Woods Set Aside as Nature Preserve

by E. Brothers; photos by Julie Avant

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources' Division of Wildlife recently recognized Bath Elementary School as a Wild School Site. Meriting the award was the school's Land Lab, a three-acre site on school property used as a teaching aid for a variety of subjects and for increasing students' awareness of the natural environment.

Representatives of the Ohio Division of Wildlife presented the school with a framed certificate noting the honor during an all-school assembly on January 4. Only 59 Ohio schools have received this distinction.

Accepting the award on behalf of the school and Principal Fred Tomei were teachers Michelle Fling and Michelle George, who both use the Land Lab extensively. They are enthusiastic about the site's benefits as a teaching tool and nominated the school for the Wild School Site award.

Mike Moutoux, Ohio Division of Wildlife Education Officer, explained that Bath Elementary deserved the award for "giving students a world to explore." The certificate noted that the nature area on school grounds "benefits people, wildlife and the environment."

Moutoux said the exposure to wildlife at school is more empowering to students than contributing to a cause in some faraway place. "They can make a difference where they live," he said, "and see the results immediately."

Also representing the Ohio Department of Natural Resources at the ceremony was Jason Parr, Wildlife Officer for Summit County. He told the young members of the audience about his job enforcing state guidelines to protect wildlife and the environment.

Dr. Peter Niewiarowski, Associate Professor of Biology at the University of Akron, also spoke. He and his college students have been conducting field studies of the wetlands in the Bath Nature Preserve. Bath Elementary students listened attentively as he described one ongoing project: the capture, marking and release of amphibians, including thousands of yellow-



Bath Elementary teachers Michelle Fling (left) and Michelle George (right) pose with the Ohio Division of Wildlife Wild School Site Award and Rosalie Steiner, who spearheaded creation of the school's three-acre land lab.

spotted salamanders.

During the award presentation, Montoux confessed to the students who gathered in the multi-purpose room that, "I'm in love with nature, and have been since I was a kid." He told them that he cherished his connection to wild things and open spaces and said, "I hope you can fall in love with nature as I did."

During two days of classroom sessions accompanying the award ceremony, Moutoux used wildlife themes to illustrate topics relating to the students' current studies.

"Wildlife captures kids' attention," says Moutoux, "and heightens their imagination."

In addition to offering a first-hand glimpse of wildlife in a natural environment, the Bath Land Lab also serves an important function as an auxiliary classroom.

The two Michelles team-teach by taking their fourth-grade classes out to the Land Lab together each Friday, no matter the season.

"The students love it," said Michelle George, who is only in her second year teaching at Bath Elementary.

"I like it because it is more than just four walls of a classroom," she said in a recent interview. George thinks that the students "enjoy learning more and get more out of it" with their regular outdoor excursions. They also have

taken an active role in the lab's development, most recently participating in painting nature scenes on paving stones leading to the Bath Land Lab.

Lessons in the lab are not limited to biology and the other sciences. For example, an educational packet on trees features a variety of activities in several disciplines. In addition to identifying and characterizing trees, students use their math skills to measure the height and circumference of a tree and exercise their language skills by writing a poem and a story involving trees. A similar learning packet focuses on birds, appropriate since students spend the winter months filling bird feeders in the Land Lab.

Michelle Fling, a teacher at Bath School for 14 years now, calls the Bath Land Lab "a wonderful extension of the classroom." She said the teaching possibilities are endless, and she enthusiastically recounted numerous activities her students had participated in over the years.

"The bat house was a success," she said, adding to her list various art projects "from drawing to making rubbings," and story-telling sessions held around a fire circle made of gathered logs.

Fling knows the Land Lab is a valuable teaching tool. "As soon as you get the kids outside, their eyes light up," she said. "They're ready to go" – and they are better learners, she claims.

Other teachers have started to ask about ways to use the lab, and Fling is happy to share her lesson plans.

Bath Elementary School Principal Fred Tomei is supportive of the teachers. "He knows we are out there for the science and is happy for the school to receive the award," said Fling.

Moutoux was impressed that the lab is used regularly to teach and is not what he calls "just a place where students go to stand around a tree on Arbor Day."

According to Montoux, the stories he heard about the students' involvement with the Land Lab and the range of activities in the lesson plans were decisive in selecting Bath School for the award. He was convinced when he came

out to meet the two teachers and see the lab for himself.

Applying for the award was a long-standing dream of Michelle Fling, who started using the Bath Land Lab regularly 10 years ago for a sixth grade teaching project. However, it was not until Michelle George expressed her enthusiasm with the lab last year that, together, the pair decided to pursue the award recognition in earnest.

It was one way, they thought, to repay the hard work of one individual who has been most responsible for the Bath Land Lab. And that person is Rosalie Steiner.

She was present, too, as an "honored guest" at the event. Steiner helped to establish the Land Lab and has been a tireless promoter of its teaching potential ever since.

"The award was an important milestone for Rosalie," Fling said in an interview recently.

"She has been eager to have it [the Land Lab] recognized as a classroom."

For anyone who does not know it already, Fling explained: "Rosalie's goal is conservation. It's her issue. She wants everyone to be aware of the environment and protect it." The Wild School Site award is one measure of her success.

"Rosalie is just great," said Fling. "She's always giving encouragement, always saying, 'Let's try this,' and would give me ideas about ways to use the lab."

Over the years, Steiner has sought corporate donations to finance improvements to the wooded facility and has actively participated in making it a more useful learning center. She has been involved in the creation of paths through the area, overseen the installation of bleachers, bird houses and feeders and has spearheaded other improvements with the help of students, private enterprise and local civic groups.

Steiner spoke for 20 minutes on the 20-year history of the Land Lab. "The electricity from the students was very exciting," she said afterward. At the conclusion of her talk, students presented Steiner with flowers and framed color photos of their favorite amphibians. She was genuinely pleased.

Rosalie Steiner has not limited her involvement in natural resource education to the tract at Bath Elementary. Recently, she and her husband, Homer, completed the process of ensuring that their 23 acres of Bath Township property will be preserved as a wildlife habitat and study center.

With the help of the not-for-profit conservation organization, the Trust for Public Land and in partnership with the University of Akron, the wetlands and ponds of Steiner Woods have become one of Ohio's Water Resource Restoration Sponsorship Projects. In this program, the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency oversees land purchases to protect a variety of water resources.

The process that allows this is "win-win" for all the parties involved. It works like this: the Ohio Water Pollution Control Loan Fund makes money available to municipalities to improve water resource management. The rate charged for the low-interest loans is decreased still further for municipalities that agree to sponsor supplementary projects to preserve or restore water resources. Overall, the total cost works out the same despite the increased initial spending.

The Ohio EPA-designated projects are intended to counter the loss of ecological function and biological diversity and may be miles away from the qualifying sponsor. In this case, when the City of Massillon agreed to participate in the program to upgrade its water treatment plant, it also agreed to benefit six other water resource projects around the state.

One of these projects purchased the Steiner property to preserve and protect it from development. The lower interest rate Massillon will pay on its \$32 million loan will offset the cost of including the additional projects.

Total cost of sponsorship of the Steiner Woods project is \$725,000. The Steiners are even returning \$175,000 to Massillon for improvement of a park there.

An official Ohio EPA notice of the project states that the sponsorship will "benefit the citizens in Ohio by preserving a high quality natural area that can be studied and maintained by the University of Akron."

Under the terms of the agreement, the University of Akron will be responsible for managing the property under the Ohio EPA Plan, to see it henceforth preserved for research and education. No new roads may be cut, no excavations of minerals or topsoil is permitted, and the water resources may not be altered. Among other restrictions, no commercial or industrial development is allowed; no livestock may be kept and no motorized recreation vehicles may be used on the protected property. The Steiners may continue to occupy their residence on the

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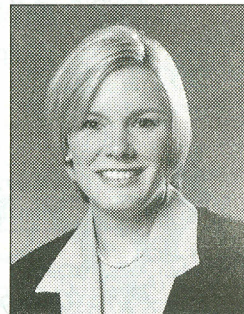
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Bath Elementary Honored with Wildlife Award *continued ...*

property under a lease agreement with the University of Akron.

"It's unique for the university and not too common," said Professor Niewiarowski of the stewardship program. Already, the University has an agreement to use the existing 404-acre Bath Nature Preserve, and the fact that sixty percent of the Steiner property shares a contiguous border with that land is an added bonus.

Niewiarowski has taught and done research at both Bath locations and welcomes the additional opportunities the new water resource preservation plan provides.

The professor and his students already have conducted amphibian studies around the Steiner ponds, with permission, so they are well acquainted with its ecology.

Niewiarowski says the Steiner Woods, ponds and wetlands are a good habitat for amphibians, which are especially sensitive to pollution. The presence of 13 amphibian species on the property, including a large population of spotted salamanders, is an indication that the surface water resources are of high quality.

"We have marked and released 6,000 spotted salamanders over the past three years," said Niewiarowski. He estimates there are about 5,000 to 10,000 salamanders present within a 500-yard buffer zone around the two-acre pond.

The two Michelles also look forward to visiting the site with their students, which



Dr. Peter Niewiarowski, Associate Professor of Biology at the University of Akron, answers Bath Elementary students' questions as Ohio Division of Wildlife Education Officer Mike Moutoux and teacher Michelle George listen.

is only a 10-minute walk from Bath Elementary. They hope there are opportunities to share information from the university with their students about the research being done in the Steiner wetlands.

Thanks to Homer and Rosalie Steiners' foresight and awareness of the Ohio EPA program – and their willingness to participate in it – a portion of Bath's natural environment will be preserved in its natural state and its use dedicated to education. It is a fitting and lasting tribute to lives devoted to protecting our area's natural heritage. ∞

Steiner Property Transferred to University of Akron

To make a long story short, the University of Akron now has title to Rosalie and Homer Steiner's 23 acres of unique wetlands and forests, which will be protected in perpetuity. The deal was orchestrated by the Trust for Public lands and involves funding coming from the Ohio EPA (ultimately the federal government) and payment to the Steiners of \$700,000 (which was the appraised market value of the property). The Steiners have a lease with the University to remain in their home.

Rosalie and Homer have lovingly cared for this special property for 50 years. It abuts the Bath Nature Preserve to the north. This is the "site of the world's foremost amphibian studies being conducted by the University of Akron," according to the Trust for Public Land. Every year 5,000 spotted salamanders migrate across the property to their breeding grounds. The property has ponds and bogs and may be a potential site for a University of Akron field research station.

The salamanders are only one of the many unique features found on the property.

The University is already hard at work tagging the salamanders at the Steiners.

The biology department is also doing field work on the adjacent Bath Nature Preserve.

The funding is a result of redirected interest payments from the City of Massillon on their \$32 million sewer infrastructure loan from the Ohio EPA. Chris Knopf, director of the Ohio Trust for Public Land structured the funding and negotiated and signed the purchase agreement. ∞

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