



**MERAMEC GREENWAY**  
 MERAMEC RIVER RECREATION ASSOCIATION  
 Newsletter 18    Fall, 2000

# 25TH ANNIVERSARY REPORT

*Above:* Lincoln Beach on the Meramec on a summer weekend in the 1930's.

## *In The Beginning ...*

On September 8, 1975, Missouri Governor Christopher Bond, meeting with area officials, formally designated the lower 108 miles of the Meramec River as the Meramec River Recreation Area. This designation was the result of a study authorized and funded by Congress the previous year. The Department of Interior coordinated the effort, with active participation from the State of Missouri, local governments and interested citizens. At the time of the designation, a report entitled "The Meramec Concept" was issued, which provided guidance for the future of this natural resource.

Originally a beautiful Ozark stream, the lower Meramec became a favorite playground for St. Louis area residents in the early 20th century. They came in ever increasing numbers to camp, fish, swim, canoe and hike. Hotels, dance pavilions, indeed entire resort towns blossomed to serve the vacationers, and later hundreds of seasonal cottages were built elbow to elbow along the river bank. Gradually the natural beauty of the river declined, accelerated by such additional intrusions as uncontrolled urbanization of the flood plain and deterioration of water quality. Thus the Department of Interior's study concluded that "...parts of the Meramec have been severely abused and misused. Each year the deterioration of the river scape becomes more acute, and indications are that without proper action this process will result in even more serious impacts on the river environment".

In establishing the Meramec Greenway in 1975, the Governor called for a Coordinating Committee to guide the renaissance of the river. It consisted of involved governments including the State of Missouri, three counties and initially nine cities with jurisdictions along the river. In addition, citizens representing various interests and aspects of the private sector were included. Duties of the committee included master planning, fund raising, publications and overall promotion of the recovery of the river.

## Part I

The Coordinating Committee was indeed established, and quickly set about to address the seemingly overwhelming task of rescuing a very troubled river.

## *Public Lands ...*

In 1975 there were 13 individual lands in public ownership in the Meramec Greenway, and several of these had only recently been acquired and were not yet open to public use. Today there are 45 lands that total over 28,000 acres. These include parks and conservation areas as well as special lands such as the Missouri Arboretum. Within them there is a wide spectrum of features, from the active recreational facilities at Arnold and Fenton City Parks to Meramec State Park's Copper Hollow Natural Area, a high quality wilderness accessible only by trail.

"The Meramec Concept" report called for all governments with jurisdictions along the Meramec River to participate.

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*Above:* Auto bodies dumped onto eroding river bank.

Properties acquired for public use would remain in those governments' individual ownership rather than under a single ownership. Thus teamwork within the Greenway is essential, with the Coordinating Committee designated to seek uniformity and coordination in management.

Planning efforts by the Coordinating Committee have, through the years, identified properties for public acquisition. Reasons for these additions include protection of outstanding natural and historical features, protection of the river bank and scenic vistas, land needed for active recreational opportunities such as athletic fields, fishing and boating access and restoration of degraded areas. The vast majority of lands in the valley, however, will remain in private ownership. Privately operated recreational activities have increased in recent years, and these compliment the overall Greenway.



**Governor Bond establishing the Meramec River Recreation Area in 1975. With him on the left is Kirkwood Mayor Philip Hallof and on the right Arnold Mayor Max Washburn.**

### MINNIE HA HA BEACH

In 1999, the City of Sunset Hills completed a Comprehensive City Plan, and, in the Parks & Recreation component, identified lands in the Meramec Greenway for proposed parks. One of the sites identified was the 25 acre property located just south of Highway 30, fronting on the Meramec River. This was the site of Minnie Ha Ha Beach, one of the popular resort beaches on the river in the early twentieth century. The property is located directly across the river from the Fenton Olde Towne area.

Shortly after approval of the comprehensive plan, the Minnie Ha Ha property was put up for sale. The City of Sunset Hills reacted quickly, entered into negotiations, and is now completing the purchase of the land.

This is the newest addition to the Meramec Greenway, and we congratulate the City of Sunset Hills for this exciting accomplishment.



**Minnie Ha Ha Property in Sunset Hills**

### Trails ...

Public surveys continue to verify the high public demand for trails, which serve a variety of recreational interests including hiking, horseback riding, biking, jogging and inline skating. Consequently, the development of trails is a high priority among the land managing agencies in the Meramec Greenway.

The Greenway currently offers 77 miles of trails within its parks and conservation areas. These vary from asphalt surfaces on level terrain to earth surfaced trails traversing rugged Ozark hills. Within this trail network all of the use types mentioned above are accommodated.

An excellent example of a popular trail in the Greenway is the three mile Fenton Meramec Greenway Trail. A visit to it at almost anytime will verify its popularity for people of all ages. Much of this asphalt surfaced trail passes through a parkway between the Meramec River and Larkin Williams Road, providing vistas of the river and periodic benches and picnic sites. Approaching Fenton City Park the trail passes the ever popular sand volleyball court and a playground, then winds into the City Park amid softball fields, tennis and basketball courts and picnic pavilions.

In 1975 the river front strip that is now the parkway was the site of dozens of clubhouses lining the river bank. Most were in poor condition from age and past flooding, they obstructed the view of the river, and, of course, restricted public access to the Meramec.

The transition from clubhouses to parkway involved the strong initiative from the City of Fenton with some assistance from the Meramec Greenway Coordinating Committee. In 1979 the Committee had tested a buyout provision known as Section 1362 of the National Flood Insurance Act. This provision provided funds to purchase flood damaged structures from willing sellers, relocate the owners, remove the structures and convey the land to a local government for use as open space parkland. The procedure was initiated on a single structure badly damaged in the 1979 spring flood. The result was total success, with the owning family happily resettled in a home out of the flood plain.

With the benefit of this experience, the Coordinating Committee moved quickly following the serious flood of 1982. A major request for Section 1362 funding was submitted to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) on behalf of three Greenway member governments, Arnold, Fenton and St. Louis County. FEMA approved the request, indicating they had not previously encountered such intergovernmental cooperation. \$1.2 million was made available for the buyout of 87 structures seriously damaged by the flood.

The City of Fenton focused their buyout on heavily damaged structures along Larkin Williams Road. Most of the buildings were damaged beyond repair, and some had literally washed away. In all cases the properties were acquired from willing sellers. This buyout was the beginning of the Fenton Meramec Greenway.

Fenton, as well as other Meramec Greenway governments, continued to seek buyout funding from FEMA, including, of course, after the flood of 1993. When enough of the river front properties along Larkin Williams were acquired, the City developed the trail and other enhancements that are there today.



Above: Clubhouses in Fenton damaged by the 1982 flood.

#### OZARK TRAIL

In master planning work now underway by member governments of the Meramec Greenway, a plan is emerging that will link existing trails with new ones in the future into a vast trail network. The anchor will be the Ozark Trail, which will parallel the Meramec through the entire Greenway. From this main trail a number of feeder trails will branch out from the valley into residential areas or to other parks. These will provide easy access to the Greenway network to thousands of people who live near the Meramec Valley. There will also be loop trails beginning and ending on the Ozark Trail. These will often have special purposes, such as serving mountain bikers or providing access to a scenic overlook.

In addition to the trails already in place, a number of new ones are in the pipeline. These include trail segments now undergoing detailed planning, the submission of grant applications to assist with funding, and construction in progress. Over the last five years, an average of three miles of new trail have been opened to public use annually. This pace could increase with the approval of new grant programs such as the pending CARA legislation.



Ozark Trail Symbol



#### Education ...

A wide combination of efforts is permitting the Meramec resource to recover, bringing better water quality, less debris, better regulated sand and gravel mining and support from government zoning commissions, to name a few. With the recovery comes an exciting revelation: The river and Greenway public lands are becoming an unparalleled outdoor classroom, and one that is located right in the midst of thousands of students.

The river itself offers the wide spectrum of watershed education including studies of its rich fauna, the physical geology of a river valley, drinking water, sewer treatment, etc. Also, a wide variety of terrestrial natural communities occur in the flood plain and on the Meramec Greenway uplands adjoining the valley. These include varying forest types, marshes, swamps, bluffs and caves. Several land managing agencies are even restoring natural communities that had all but disappeared. The Missouri Arboretum is restoring forty acres of glades. St. Louis County has established a twenty five acre prairie at West Tyson County Park and the Missouri Conservation Department has a similar program underway at River Round.

Focal points for natural resource education in the Meramec Greenway include the Department of Conservation's Powder Valley Nature Center in Kirkwood, the Missouri Arboretum at Gray Summit and the Meramec State Park

Nature Center at Sullivan. At these points as well as other parks and conservation areas in the Greenway an abundance of interpretive publications and educational programs are offered throughout the year. For more information feel free to contact us at 314-822-9904.



### LABARQUE CREEK

Early last spring Associate Professor Dave Tilka took his Meramec Community College Field Zoology students to the Hilda Young Conservation Area in the Greenway to research aquatic life in the beautiful La Barque Creek. They spent the day seining crawdads, small fish and insects, piecing together the ecosystem of the stream. Mr. Tilka is but one of a number of educators who utilize the rich natural resources of the Meramec Greenway for their classroom.

Meramec River Recreation Association:



MERAMEC GREENWAY  
41 South Central  
Clayton, MO 63105

## The People ...

We judge the first 25 years of the Meramec Greenway as a huge success. What was a terribly degraded river is now well on its way to recovery. Literally thousands of people from up and down the river have had a hand in this renaissance, which is why this effort is so special. Certainly we are far from finished with the restoration of this resource, but, with the continued help of the people of our communities, we can't help but succeed.

Ron Voss of Arnold spent the last Saturday of August this year down along the Meramec River with a number of his neighbors. For at least the last dozen years they have volunteered this day to cleaning up the river. Their trophies included aluminum cans, styrofoam cups, a mangled lawn chair and a large tire that took forty minutes to dig out of the sand. Ron and his colleagues are a part of a small army of volunteers that converge on the river each August for Operation Clean Stream, that massive cleanup of the Meramec watershed that has been coordinated by the St. Louis Open Space Council for 33 years running. By days end Ron and his friends looked pretty grubby, but were all smiles as they viewed the dumpsters overflowing with the day's "catch".

Actually, in Arnold a second day each year is set up for a Meramec cleanup. This one is in the dead of winter when chiggers and poison ivy aren't a problem and debris can be more easily spotted. The focus for Ron and his neighbors now is the big stuff, refrigerators, water heaters and the like. Slowly but surely they are winning the battle, as the debris becomes more scarce each year.

To Ron Voss and all of his teammates we send our sincere thanks. Your efforts are truly remarkable. And, by the way, when not involved with the Meramec Greenway, Ron Voss has other commitments, such as serving as Mayor of the City of Arnold.

