

(from The Milwaukee County Grounds: Island of Hope by Eddee Daniel
with Foreword by Nancy Aten)



Map by Nancy Aten

Foreword

Milwaukee County Grounds, Northeast Quadrant. The awkward name doesn't tell us much about this place, but does remind us of its history of geographic division and of public ownership. Because the Northeast Quadrant is the last quadrant with remaining public open space, today people simply call it the County Grounds.

Milwaukee has had its share of visionary ideas, and the planning and reserving of our public lands surely measures up in anyone's estimation. In 1937, thirty years after he led the establishment of the Milwaukee County Park Commission, Charles Whitnall was optimistic: "We face a future in which directed planning and development, with careful conservation of all natural influences, will have brought about revolutionary change." He believed that the whole country would be zoned for the conservation of its natural resources, "...and this will

incidentally *conserve its humanity*.” (C. B. Whitnall, Five Lectures on Planning, UCLA Institute of Government, 1937, emphasis added).

Containing some of those conserved public lands, the County Grounds is compelling enough just for its size, comprising 300 or so acres of largely open space in urban Milwaukee. It also has a gift of topography, with long, unobstructed views in most directions but most dramatically to the sunrise and sunset, where 300 acres feel like three thousand acres. Underwood Creek and the Menomonee River wind around the site.

The scale of the place can make it seem, misleadingly, completely resilient to change.

Buildings come and go and come again, as do roads. Large trees grace the area. In my youth, the Eschweiler buildings hummed with County Extension and 4-H activities; today’s community gardens and beekeeping classes echo those experiences. Neighbors walk their dogs on trails they’ve walked for years, as well as those around newly carved flood control basins. The perception of the place as experienced on foot varies from open grassland with oases of large trees to open woods, dense forest, and intimate pockets of wetland. There are patches of bare ground, grown-over roads and foundations, and weeds.

What you don’t perceive, thankfully and surprisingly, are property boundaries. You don’t differentiate between the 67 acres, mostly hardwood forest, of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources; the 90 acres of grassland in two flood control basins; the 55 acres of re-seeded County Park; the 89 acres newly belonging to the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Real Estate Foundation; and the acres of public land often enjoyed by walkers behind We Energies and the Ronald McDonald House.

Neither hawks and owls nor people notice property boundaries here. It is perhaps the greatest strength of this place that throughout a complex history of change (in all ways) and recovery (in some ways), the County Grounds has sustained a large degree of wholeness. Something to cherish and to keep, that wholeness matters to wildlife, the community, and the larger region.

This book shows you the presence and the character of the County Grounds. What it asks is our collective understanding that its wholeness is crucial. For all of us who love the County Grounds, whether as old or new caretakers, this is a time to shine. We have knowledge, creativity, and commitment. We can identify common ground on the fundamental and critical elements that make the place whole and we can ensure their recovery and longevity.

In the past twenty years, we have had to really think about what is important for this place. What has emerged in the public’s mind is a clear vision. The sense of open space is key, enhanced by the site’s elevation and the largely natural character of the landscape. The diversity of habitats maintains vitality. Monarch butterflies, so far, still stop here to rest on their long flight to Mexico, in dramatic fashion. In 1899, zoologist Dr. Paul Dernehl described

swarms of thousands of Monarch butterflies in Milwaukee in early September. How lucky we are to still witness this same migration over 100 years later. But the butterflies, whose migratory stopover on their long flight to Mexico is both iconic and fragile, are a measuring post: What must we do—not just in 10.98 acres but in buffering lands and waters—to sustain their habitat?

Milwaukee has for more than a century valued its river and creek corridors, and their adjoining lands, as an intrinsic community priority. Here on the County Grounds that legacy can be sustained and strengthened. Existing ecological jewels, including ephemeral wetlands and remnant savanna and forest, are cores to improve upon. As with the Monarch butterfly migration, the historic Eschweiler buildings are iconic but diminished and still at risk. Because they help to express the complex cultural history of this quadrant, it is important to bring them to robust life again as planned.

The community has a deep attachment to the integrity of this place. For some it is joyously conscious, of the fields of milkweed, the ephemeral woodland wildflowers, the sense of wildness that is rare and treasured in the city. For others it is the welcome comfort of familiarity and longevity, a place for long walks, the green oasis seen from afar in everyday life. If we can nurture these relationships between people and place, we continue Whitnall's work.

As change comes to the County Grounds yet again, how can we work collectively for the public good? We live in a time of tremendous innovation in building, operating, and living in ways that respect limited natural resources. We know how to provide living creatures a place of sustenance rather than a place of obstacle. We understand the web of biodiversity that feeds everything. We therefore know why native plants need a continuum of habitats—between buildings, alongside roads, next to sidewalks, in gardens, and in fields and forests. We envision the County Grounds filled with biodiverse habitat instead of lawn. Wildness is precious in cities; the fact that wildness has survived here at our beloved County Grounds is truly a remarkable gift.

The preservation of wholeness is a central tenet of ecology and a vital question for the County Grounds. It will take all of us, if we can do it, in every step we take. We hope that the images in this book convey the wild essence of this place, throughout all of the complications of change, and with the unexpected surprises that sum up a long interaction between land and community. Our hope is that people and wildlife will be able to experience the wholeness of this place for a long time to come.

Nancy M. Aten, January 2012