

Thumb Land Conservancy NEWS

March 29, 2017

There's not much new since the last news on March 17, but I want to let you know a few things.

Historic North Street Station Clyde Township, Saint Clair County

Thanks to the metal detecting work of Fred Feldhouse, he found remnants of the old Pere Marquette railroad. Fred verified with local railroad expert, T. J. Gaffney, that the spike and plates shown below are from a narrow-gauge railroad, so may date back to the original Port Huron and Northwestern Railway of 1879. Other than this, Fred has found a lot of junk, but we can hope for better as he works his way down. THANK YOU for your work Fred.



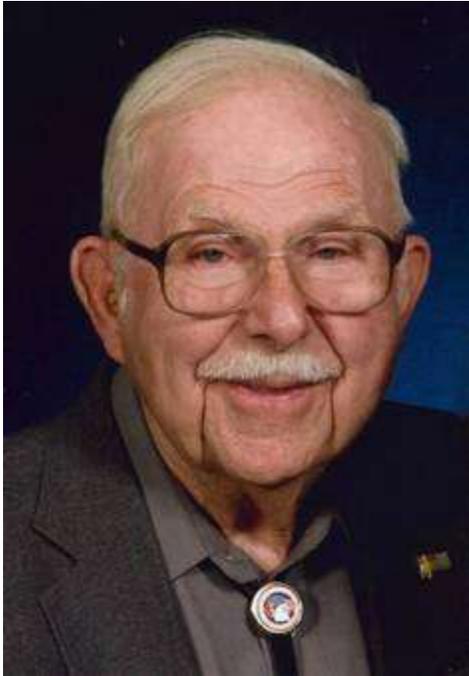


Dead End Woods Sanctuary Fort Gratiot Township, Saint Clair County

Another big THANK YOU to Brian Martin for cutting dead ash trees around the Dead End Woods Sanctuary. Our latest session was last Wednesday. We spent half a day cutting in a narrow part of the property along State Road. First, we cut up a tree that fell in the adjacent yard south. Then we cut down 5 other large standing dead ash. All went well with Brian's skilled guidance and arsenal of equipment ... all but the last tree. It was mostly my fault. I saw that the tree had a large limb perpendicular to the direction we wanted it to fall, but thought with a good notch and Brian's winch, we would prevail. Think again. Just as the tree was tipping, sure enough, it twisted toward the weight of the limb and fell exactly perpendicular to where we wanted. At the same time, I attempted to exit through my cleared get-away path, but tripped and fell flat on the ground, at complete mercy of the tree trunk. Thankfully, the trunk bounced away from me, or I would have been crushed. The upper part fell in the adjacent yard north, sending out a shower of deadly limbs and wood splinters that stuck in the ground. By coincidence, Don's Tree Service was also in the yard cutting trees that had fallen in the last wind storm. Thank God they were far enough back. I thought about warning them before we cut the last tree, and I really should have. Anywho, the worst part of the deal was that Brian and I spent the next 45 minutes cleaning up the yard. Our next target is the boundary along Old Farm.

Orville Swick

Orville Swick passed away on March 20 at the age of 93. It's hard to know where to begin with this man, and where to end. I'll try to keep it short. Orville was my Scoutmaster in Fort Gratiot Boy Scout Troop 169, along with the equally great Reginald "Jerry" Nuss. Jerry is another story for another time. From the year I joined the troop in 1974, Orville was a big influence on me. Many people remember Orv as a World War II veteran who served in the South Pacific, or as a railroad worker who kept the engines running on the Pere Marquette lines from Port Huron to Saginaw. By coincidence, our paths cross again in the historic North Street station project. Mostly I remember Orv as a man who loved the outdoors, nature, God's creation, and everything that goes with it. Orv also opened my mind to new possibilities, from basic things like organic gardening and solar power, to understanding different people, appreciating the world, and having hope for a better future.



I am still amazed at how much time Orv and Jerry and other adult volunteers gave to our troop. We had our weekly meetings. We camped at least once a month every year. We attended a week-long summer camp at Silver Trails Scout Reservation. We participated in the Scout-O-Rama, the Klondike Derby with sleds we built, delivered food bags at Christmas for the Salvation Army, and many other activities. I remember Orv at most of the Order of the Arrow work conclaves at Silver Trails. Every two years, Jerry and Orv led the Blue Water Council contingent to Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico where we hiked in the Sangre de Cristo Range of the Rocky Mountains for 11 days. I went out in 1978, 1980, and 1990. For about 10 years, Troop 169 was an extended family, and our leaders, Orv Swick and Jerry Nuss, our extended fathers.

Perhaps more than anything, I am most grateful that Orv set me up to work on the 1978 summer camp staff at Silver Trails Scout Reservation, our council camp along the Black River near Jeddo. I started as an assistant to Nature Director Chris Walker, currently on our TLC executive board. Thanks to Chris, a very large world of formal nature study was opened to me. Chris and I again worked together in 1979, and in 1980 I became the Nature Director. My horizons were again broadened in 1982 when the Blue Water Council sent me to BSA National Camp School at a camp near the Indiana border for training in ecology and conservation. I continued teaching nature at summer camp through 1986. All of this was realized because Orville Swick took notice of my interest in nature. He started me on a path of rich experience, and a lifetime of study and employment.

I have so many memories of Orville. His favorite campfire story was about the vampires that invaded his old troop in the dunes along Lake Michigan. Orv taught us boys many important skills, like how to hang our bodies perpendicular from a small tree, or how to ride a cow's head in a manger at Roy Sischo's farm in North Street. Maybe more practical was how to skin and cook the bullheads we caught in the Pinnebog River at Port Crescent. Orv and his sons tapped his woods for maple syrup where we learned all about collecting and boiling sap. He later helped his neighbor build and operate a sap house and tap his woods for years. He made his woods available to us boys to cut tree saplings to build sleds for the Klondike Derby every

winter, and taught us how to bend wood with steam. Sometimes we taught Orv. On a campout at the old Camp Chickagamee along the Black River, the adults ran out of coffee. So, being knowledgeable of edible plants, I made a brew of roasted dandelion root and beech leaves. Orv loved it and talked about it for years. Even when Orv wasn't intending to teach, he was teaching.

With equal amazement and frustration, I watched many times from one canoe back as he effortlessly navigated the most treacherous obstacles in a river, while I tried to do the same. Solar power was a hot topic in the late 70's and early 80's and Orv became a real advocate. He and his son, Jim, built a small house and renovated his existing house to use passive solar heating, which he loved to show and were featured in a local solar homes tour. He taught us to build solar ovens with cardboard and aluminum foil. Orv's solar-powered propeller hat became his trademark at summer camp. Sometimes Orv was an artist, literally. I have one of his works somewhere in a box; a landscape in colored pencil. Other times, maybe he was an artist more figuratively. I'm thinking of the many winter campouts when we lined a snow-covered hillside in the woods with two rows of emergency flares and slid down between for half the night on sleds, toboggans, inner tubes, and whatever else. It was kind of a magical experience with pinkish-orange light cast across the snow, and flares hissing and sputtering burning sulfur. I mean, who would have thought to do this, and it couldn't have happened unless Orv worked for CSX Railway who threw out all of these old flares after an expiration date. This must have come from the mind of an artist.

Orv was an encouragement to stick up for what's right and go against the grain if need be, like when the National Scout organization wanted to merge our council and probably sell Silver Trails. On one of our early trips up to Port Crescent, he pointed out the massive channelization of the upper Black River and described how destructive it was to the river. Orv came from a conservative background, but maintained a rational and progressive mind. In the early 90's, Orv and I planned the routes for switchback trails at Silver Trails in response to new treated lumber stairways being built that we didn't like. The switchbacks require less maintenance, do not use unsustainable resources, are handicap accessible, and are more fitting for a scout camp. We pushed the properties committee for approval and built the switchbacks soon after. I think, most importantly, Orv taught us to see the hidden value in things and people; to not write-off someone because of what they seem to be outwardly. In so many ways, Orville Swick was life-affirming, which is why so many people loved him.

Orville Swick's obituary is at: pollockrandall.com/obituaries/12585

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