

Fiftieth Anniversary of Borough's Nature Preserve!

It was in 1974 that New Britain Borough established what became the Wilma Quinlan Nature Preserve



The Sidebotham Tract viewed from Matthews Avenue in 1970



Wilma Quinlan in 1981

It was over fifty years ago that New Britain Borough purchased the land that is now the Wilma Quinlan Nature Preserve. But without the efforts and vision of a small group of determined Borough officials and residents, that purchase would never have happened, and the Nature Preserve would not exist today.

The land, 23.75-acres along the Neshaminy Creek, was the largest piece of open space remaining in the Borough. It had been part of the former Spagna Farm and had been sold to Frank and Jane Sidebotham in 1965. The Sidebothams formed the Side Land Development Company to develop the property for commercial or industrial use. Alarmed at that prospect, Council member Wilma Quinlan rallied support for a different idea: to have the Borough purchase the Sidebotham Tract as a nature preserve where Borough residents and other visitors could enjoy passive recreation activities such as hiking, nature study, wildlife observation, and birding. The purchase was necessary, she said, to “preserve open space for our children and grandchildren.”

The Sidebothams were willing to sell the land to the Borough. There were no Borough funds available for the proposed purchase, however, so Wilma Quinlan and resident Larry Miller launched a year-long campaign to obtain the grants and contributions that eventually made the purchase possible. While supporting the campaign, Borough Council made it clear it had no intention of purchasing the land if the grants and contributions failed to come through.

While both the Borough Council and the Borough's Planning Commission endorsed the effort to purchase the Sidebotham Tract, not everyone did. Following the monthly council meeting in July 1970, the *Intelligencer* reported that "several citizens spoke pro and con" about the proposed land purchase. And the Mayor at the time was strongly opposed at first, citing the "too high" purchase price, the already existing park in the Borough, future maintenance costs, and the loss of tax revenue.

The initial asking price for the property was \$68,000. The Borough made a counteroffer of \$60,400, which was the eventual purchase price. Appraisal, legal, and settlement costs raised the total cost of the purchase to \$62,570, but most of that money came from federal and state government grants. Thanks to those grants, and several private contributions obtained through the fundraising campaign, the cost of the purchase to Borough taxpayers was just \$4,229.02!

Settlement for the purchase was held on August 16, 1971, which is the date on the deed to the property. The deed was held in escrow for four months until all the promised grant money was received. An *Intelligencer* article, "Many Chip in to Buy Park," reported on the formal transmitting of the deed to the Borough and stated that the Borough "closed the deal" in February 1972. A ceremony was held on the Sidebotham Tract to mark the completion of the property's acquisition.

In 1972, an Open Space Committee was established for the management of the Sidebotham Tract. Borough residents Dr. John Mertz, associate professor of biology at Delaware Valley College and Dr. Miriam Groner, a professor of botany at Penn State's Ogonitz campus, were the committee members most involved in the initial planning and creation of the new nature preserve. At the request of Borough Council, Dr. Mertz wrote a detailed development plan for the preserve, and while there were no funds available to implement the plan, Council wanted the area immediately available for "passive recreation." Dr. Groner created the first trail maps for the new preserve, conducted a plant inventory, and wrote a proposal for future plantings of "only native plants."

Formal dedication ceremonies for the "New Britain Nature Preserve" were held on September 21, 1974, at which the President of the Bucks County Audubon Society was the featured speaker. An *Intelligencer* article announcing the scheduled dedication pointed out that an objective of the committee responsible for managing the Preserve is "to provide an opportunity for nature lovers to see how nature itself reforests what was once farmland."

In January 1980, Borough Council passed a resolution recognizing Wilma Quinlan's efforts "in securing the New Britain Nature Preserve" and changing the name of the preserve to the "Wilma Quinlan Nature Preserve." The Intelligencer article reporting on the rededication included a photo showing Wilma Quinlan in front of a new preserve sign bearing her name. The article described the former council member as "the driving force behind the creation of a nature preserve." Mrs. Quinlan is quoted as saying, "we wanted to do something for preservation, thinking that if we didn't, there would be nothing left for our grandchildren." She goes on to express satisfaction that "we did the sensible thing."

Note: Since the purchase of the original 24 acres in 1971, the Borough has continued to add land to the Nature Preserve, so that the Preserve encompasses 34 acres today. Continuing the precedent set with the purchase of the Sidebotham Tract, this additional acreage had been obtained entirely through grants and donations - of both land and money. No Borough funds (i.e., Taxpayer dollars) have been used to expand the Preserve.