

# The Wolf River Trails

by Leigh Tanner



*When access to public lands is free, there are as many suggested uses as there are specific interests. In this article, Leigh Tanner, Sportspage's cycling columnist and feature writer, offers our readers a brief history of the Wolf River Trails, and outlines some of the past controversies and conflicts.*  
Editor

The Wolf River Trails have existed in some form or another since the days when the Chickasaws and Cherokees roamed the area. Within the modern era, Sierra Club members became aware of the trails in 1949. The section between Walnut Grove and Germantown Road in particular has been the subject of much controversy over the last 25 years. Controversies range from the pedestrian to the industrial to the military. The trails have survived the channelization of the Wolf River, threats of logging, being taken over by the U.S. Marine Corps for use as a

practice area for war games, motorcyclists, the Kirby Parkway extension, and being swallowed by privet hedge and honeysuckle. Most recently, the trails have been at the center of a continuing debate between concerned user groups. Why do people have such strong feeling about this narrow strip of hedge and trees? And what does the future hold for this escape from the city within the city?

## A Brief Description of the History of the Wolf River Trails

The Wolf River trails are a series of 15 miles of intertwining paths within 1000 acres of bottomland hardwood forest in the Lucius Burch Natural Area at Shelby Farms. In the forest a tuned-in visitor can enjoy over 200 species of birds; deer, bobcats, and coyotes; cypress, elm, maple, American holly, and mature oak trees; rare red iris and other endangered species common to wetland areas.

There are two parallel trails in the Wolf River bottomland. The

Yellow trail follows the northern bank of the Wolf River, while the Blue trail is inland and rambles through the denser parts of the forest. Each trail has been re-routed many times over the years — to protect vegetation, to route users around hazards, and to let certain areas dry out or recover from heavy use.

The trails as we know them now were originally built in 1967 by prisoners at the Shelby County Penal farm for use as motorcycle trails. At the time the Penal Farm property was prohibited to civilians, and motorcyclists had exclusive use of the trails. However, in the early 1970's, when the Penal Farm property was in the process of becoming Shelby Farms, horseback riders and hikers discovered the trails and conflict began.

The 1970 Bartholomew and Associates Plan for developing Shelby

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Farms stated "The chief natural resource of the Shelby Farms area is the Wolf River and the trees and other vegetation along its floodplain." At the time there was selective harvesting of mature trees going on in the forest area under a logging contract approved by Shelby County Commissioner Lee Hyden. On July 3, 1972, timber cutting was voluntarily halted by Memphis Hardwood Flooring at the request of the the Shelby County Court. A 750-foot strip along the Wolf River was set aside as a greenway. Shortly thereafter, around the same time as completion of the I-40/240 loop, Rudolph Jones, a member of the



Shelby County Conservation Board, laid out a dual set of trails. Extensive wooden bridges were built and plentiful signage was used to mark the new trails which were set up for horseback and motorcycle riding.

Motorcycles and horses do not coexist peacefully. Neither do hikers and motorcycles, wildlife and motorcycles, or birdwatchers and motorcycles. Enter Lucius Burch in 1975. He and John Ferguson began the fight to preserve the forest. As members of the Shelby Farms Planning Board, they supported the Eckles Plan for Shelby Farms, which called for independent pedestrian, bicycle, and horse trails throughout the park. In 1978 they successfully denied a request by the Marines to use Wolf River bottom-

lands west of Germantown Road for war games (infantry training), and, in 1979 the Graduate Department of Planning at the University of Memphis recommended that the motorcycle trails be removed immediately from penal farm property because of excessive erosion and because the noise disturbed the natural wildlife in the area.

During the drought of 1980 the bed of the Wolf River dropped and the sturdy wooden bridges installed by Rudolph Jones and company collapsed. The trails were left unattended and became completely overgrown and impassable.

Larry Smith, an environmentalist who grew up in a neighborhood near Shelby Farms and played in the forest as a child, took an interest in the area. He and Art Wolf, a Boy Scout leader, relaid the Yellow and blue trails in late 1984 and early 1985. Hikers rediscovered the area. Runners and mountain bikers began using the trails regularly.

In 1986 the Agricenter opened. Bill White, former president of the National Hardwood Lumber Association and Agricenter Board Member, and Tommy Hill, Shelby Farms Superintendent, visited the area during discussions of plowing the woods under and expanding the Agricenter all the way to the river. They noticed the paths and saw the value of the forest as a recreation area. Bill White even envisioned Shelby Farms becoming the "Central Park" of the Memphis area.

Canoe landings were installed at Walnut Grove and Road and Germantown Road in 1987. In March 1988 the State House of Representatives endorsed legislation designating more than 1000 acres of Shelby Farms (including the Lucius Burch natural Area) a Class 1 State Natural Area. Legislation was signed into effect by Governor Ned McWherter on April 7, 1988. Motorcycles were banned on the south side of the Walnut Grove bridge.

The completion of Humphreys Boulevard and the projected Kirby Parkway extension was becoming a reality in 1989. Heated discussion between developers and environmentalists, the far East residents of Shelby County and Save

Shelby Farms committee were commonplace for months. Finally, plans were shelved and the Tennessee Highway Department got to work on developing a more acceptable plan. J. Bayard Boyle, Jr., of Boyle Development, called Shelby Farms "the most serious urban growth obstacle in Shelby County."

The disgruntled motorcyclists meanwhile had shown a renewed interest in the trails. Having been banished to the north side of Walnut Grove since 1988, they wanted to reclaim their territory. In 1991, after much debate concerning the environment impact of such a move, permission was granted to the Memphis Trail Riders Association to hold a fundraiser race on the trails. Emotions ran so high between the motorcyclists and the environmentalists that no spectators were allowed on the course and the race was delayed for two hours for security reasons. After the race, motorcycles were banished entirely from the Lucius Burch Natural Area.

Controversy has been limited in the last five years to flare-ups between the pedestrian community (walkers and runners) and the mountain bike community. The Yellow trail on the south side of the Walnut Grove bridge suffers from serious overuse. With this overuse come many near head-on collisions between runners

and cyclists. Also, on occasion a visitor will find tacks, wire stretched across the trail, or nasty notes posted to trees, insinuating that there are booby-traps. Missiles come out of cars passing over the Wolf River bridge. People throw cans and bottle. It is no longer safe to park your car under the bridge due primarily to the possibility of a break-in.

There is no operating budget for Shelby Farms. Public input and volunteerism keep it going. Those who donate their time and manual labor have a proprietary feeling about the trails. Maintenance including brush trimming, laying alternative trails, and repairing ruts and ditches is most commonly contributed by the mountain bike clubs, boy scout troops, environmental groups, and an individual citizen, Mark Dobbins, who also laid the high Blue trail and built the kiosk at the trailhead. The steel bridges on the south side were donated and installed by Bobby Bowers. Those old county road bridges were cut down to size and placed over the worst ditches.

With no money to hire rangers or maintenance crews, the ability of Shelby Farms personnel to

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monitor usage is severely limited. Recreational use has been encouraged by the bicycle shops, environmentalists, and running clubs. They realize that if people are using the area they won't want a road through it. Other groups are angry because the trails have been discovered and used by so many more people.

The usage system that was recently put into place is forward-looking. By dividing the week into bicycle days and pedestrian days,

each group can enjoy the trails without fear of altercations. However, the Kirby Parkway issue is looming. Walnut Grove is slated to be immensely widened in the future. Kirby will most likely go north through the soccer fields and Farm Road. David Bennett, Shelby County Engineers, says that we can expect a new proposal from the Tennessee Highway Department in early 1996.

What does the future hold for the forest? Only time will tell. But the people who care so much about this tract of woods will have to put aside their differences and learn to coexist peacefully if they want to keep this little haven safe from the impending

danger of losing it forever to development or apathy.

