

Trees, plant life at Willowbrook must be preserved

By TOM ANDERSEN

On a recent afternoon, several naturalists examined the woods that comprise much of the Staten Island Developmental Center's 382 acres to determine if the woods supported species which should be included in the next edition of the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences' "Flora of Staten Island."

Those interested in the preservation of the Greenbelt will view the findings as both fascinating and significant. They confirm what informal surveys had suggested: The center's woods are unique on Staten Island; they have been flourishing with little

disturbance for more than 100 years.

The discrete tracts are located in the southwest section of the center grounds, and their unique characteristics provide three arguments — practical, aesthetic and idealistic — on which to base preservation efforts.

Five species were found which grow naturally nowhere else on Staten Island. They are the wild leek (allium tricocum), the bladder nut tree (Staphylea trifolia), the American sycamore tree (Platanus occidentalis), the zigzag goldenrod (Solidago flexicaulis) and a natural hybrid of Goldie's fern of the genus Dryopteris.

Surrounding these were other plants and trees only slightly less rare. A stand of sugar maples, hundreds in all including saplings, was discovered; the Island's only other stand, in Blood Root Valley, has about two dozen trees. Also discovered was false hellebore, a tall, green-flowered plant, which thrives in moist woods; High Rock Park is its only other Island home. Yards of wild ginger, a low plant sensitive to human encroachment, comprised much of the understory.

Several specimens of Indian cucumberroot spotted American basswood trees grew throughout. Sweet cicely, blue

August 27, 1981

cohos, down yellow violet, high-bush cranberry, and spikenard were also identified. All are rare on Staten Island.

Most of the vegetation grows in an area adjacent to a stream identified by a 1917 atlas as Corsons Brook. Willow Brook and at least one other seasonal stream also cut through the area.

The rare flora indicate an equally unusual soil. According to Steve Parisio, the staff naturalist at the Institute of Arts and Sciences, the soil probably has a high pH. Most of Staten Island's soil has a low, acidic pH. The acidity accounts for the Island's abundant oaks, and for the chestnuts which flourished before being decimated by the blight. The pH of the developmental center's soil is indicative of a northern hardwood forest — hence the sugar maples and American basswoods.

Parisio theorized that the woods have been undisturbed for more than a century, a theory supported by the journals of William T. Davis, the naturalist. On Sept. 23, 1893, he wrote, "There is one portion of the large patch of woods lying between New Springville and Willowbrook, that is particularly original-forest-like in the growth of the large trees and in the character of the lesser plants. It is low, moist and dark, and several dead trees spread their arms aloft and there are fallen trunks. Fire has not been here for some years at least.

"I found *Solidago latifolia*, and many sugar maples and lindens (basswoods) growing in this woods."

The woods, which have resisted encroachment so successfully that Davis' 1893 journal entry sounds as if he'd been there last

week, will be threatened when the developmental center population approaches its goal of 250 residents. The temptation will be to view the woods as a superfluous buffer. No legal barriers exist to deter their sale; the land was residential zoning and no freshwater wetlands designation.

Both Willow Brook and Corsons Brook are the area's major drainage basins. The land adjacent to Corsons Brook in particular is mostly moist, sometimes swampy — two indications of poor drainage. During a heavy rain, water progresses slowly from cloud to brook — it must penetrate the leaf canopy, the thick understory, and the soil before reaching the brook. This progression is a natural flood control. Alterations of the brook by development could subject neighboring communities to flooding during major rain falls.

A practical reason exists, therefore, to preserve the woods: Development risks flooding. An aesthetic reason also exists: Rare flora will be preserved. And the undisturbed woods also present an ideal chance to preserve nature in a pure state — nature for and of itself, rather than nature primarily for the benefit of mankind.

As the naturalist John Muir wrote, "Nature's object in making animals and plants, might

possibly be, first of all, the happiness of each of them, not the creation of all for the happiness of one...."

For those who don't subordinate nature, who accept it as an equal, the few acres of developmental center grounds, along with Blood Root Valley, can be a small, temporary passageway into wildness — a wilderness that offers respite.

"If the vexations of people were the whole world, I would not enjoy it at all," wrote E.B. White. "But it is only a small, though noisy part of the whole; and I find the natural world as engaging and as innocent as it ever was."

On Staten Island, the natural world is still engaging. Its innocence, however, is in danger of being lost, both by overuse and over-management. When an undisturbed area is "discovered" and catalogued, common sense calls for its preservation, particularly when the undiscovered natural delights on a developed Island are few. Lost land can't be recovered. If we err on the side of development, there is no correction.

(Tom Andersen is on the staff of Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly, whose office is located at the Staten Island Developmental Center.)

Page 2 of 2 Pages