

# The many lives of Havenwoods



Deer roam freely at Havenwoods State Forest on Milwaukee's north side. In 1980, Havenwoods became Wisconsin's first urban state forest. Credit: John Gurda



[John Gurda](#)

In My Opinion

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I might be alone on this one, especially after the week we've had, but I think there's been a lot to like in the winter of 2013-2014. We've experienced the antiseptic cleanse of polar winds, enough sunshine to keep our spirits up and, best of all, snow that came early and stayed on the ground. In the yin-yang of Wisconsin seasons, this winter's yin is going to be a vivid memory in the sweltering yang of August.

Determined to enjoy winter and not simply endure it, I've been cross-country skiing more than 20 times since the snows began. The locations have been various: Upper Michigan, Lapham Peak, Whitnall Park, Minooka Park and my humble home turf: the Grant Park golf course.

One of my favorite recent excursions was to a state forest. It wasn't the Kettle Moraine or the Northern Highland but a forest much closer to home — within Milwaukee's city limits, in fact. Not only is this preserve nearby, but it's presumably the only state forest, in Wisconsin or

anywhere else, that has been agricultural land, a county penal institution, a military prison, a missile base and a dump before going back to nature.

I refer to Havenwoods State Forest, 237 acres of grassland and woodland just northwest of W. Silver Spring Drive and N. Sherman Blvd. For such a large piece of land — nearly the size of Lake and Washington Parks combined — its front door is surprisingly hard to find, but if you go north on Sherman Blvd. to W. Douglas Ave. and turn left, you'll find yourself at the entrance.

Havenwoods began, like most of Milwaukee County, as a forest that became farmland in the mid-1800s. Located in the old Town of Granville, it attracted immigrants, many of them Germans, who grew wheat, vegetables and livestock for the Milwaukee market.

The rural period ended in the early 1900s, when Milwaukee County began to eye the property for its new House of Correction. The original institution had been a south side landmark since 1866, filling a triangular piece of land that bordered what is now Kosciuszko Public School on W. Windlake Ave. By 1900, the facility was so overcrowded and underequipped that it had become a source of scandal.

When the new and improved House of Correction opened on the Granville site in 1917, its focus was the "safekeeping, reformation and employment" of up to 1,000 inmates. Most were short-termers, serving 30 days or less, typically for alcohol-related crimes that ranged from drunk and disorderly conduct to "running a still." Others were in for such antique offenses as sodomy, fornication and carrying liquor on a train.

The number of prisoners peaked at 1,439 in 1932, when the House was loaded with Prohibition violators. Cots filled the chapel and lined the dormitory halls, but the biggest bootleggers were said to live nearly as well as they had on the outside.

Every prisoner (including the handful of women serving time) was assigned a job. Some worked in an on-site chair factory, whose products were sold under the Granville Furniture Co. trade name. (The "company" made no mention of convict labor in its sales materials.) A larger number worked on the prison farm, which covered most of the property's 420 acres. Hardened urbanites became farmhands, tending a herd of registered Holsteins, collecting eggs from a flock of 1,500 chickens, harvesting fruit from a sizable orchard and processing tons of vegetables.

The yield for the 1939 canning season totaled 14,633 gallons, including 5,534 of tomatoes, 1,508 of dilled peppers and 950 of sauerkraut. The dairy herd's 1944 output was converted to 25,000 pounds of butter, most of which went to other county institutions.

Major crops and minor criminals kept the House of Correction busy for nearly 30 years, but World War II opened a new chapter in the institution's history. As able-bodied men (and thousands of able-bodied women) either went to war or went to work in defense plants, the prison population plummeted to fewer than 200, but the facility was hardly idle.

In 1941, a few weeks after Pearl Harbor, the federal government leased the women's barracks for the internment of "enemy aliens" whose only crime, in most cases, was the fact that they had

been born in Germany. It was not only Japanese-Americans who were persecuted for having the wrong last names.

The internees left within months, and they were followed later in the conflict by the real thing: German prisoners of war. There were never as many POWs in Granville as there were at the main camp at Mitchell Field, but they must have been surprised when nearby residents approached the fence to converse with them in their native tongue.

Milwaukee County's title to the land was extinguished entirely in 1945, when the U.S. Army, over the county's objections, seized the property for use as a "disciplinary barracks" — a military jail, in other words. The House of Correction moved again, this time to Franklin, and the Army repurposed old buildings and put up new ones to create Milwaukee's own "Little Leavenworth," where deserters, mutineers and the chronically disobedient were sent for punishment and rehabilitation.

The last court-martialed GI left in 1950, but the Army was not through with the old House of Correction just yet. Part of the land was used for military training — an Army Reserve Center still occupies the western portion of the site — and the northern edge housed a Nike anti-aircraft missile base, one of eight designed to keep the Milwaukee area safe from a Soviet airstrike. Long-range missiles rendered the facility obsolete in short order. The Nike site was closed in 1963, and the land that became Havenwoods was, in essence, abandoned.

It was until 1967 that the federal government began to declare the site surplus property. The announcement touched off a flurry of competing proposals from various public bodies and nonprofit groups. Their ideas included an industrial land bank, housing for seniors, a technical college campus, an incinerator, a postal facility and even a comprehensive "new town in town."

As the discussions dragged on, the property was increasingly vulnerable. Vandals trashed the old prison buildings, a contingent of homeless families occupied a portion of the Army barracks, legal and illegal dumping went on day and night and young people discovered the site's potential for drag racing and partying.

It was during these "wild years," as Havenwoods staff members describe them, that an alternative vision emerged. A citizens task force suggested turning the land into an "open space and natural area" for the benefit of local residents and visitors alike. The property had already had more lives than a cat. Now it was coming full circle as Havenwoods — a Custer High School student's winning entry in a naming contest.

Progress was slow until state officials began to take an interest. In 1980, after a protracted round of deal-making, Havenwoods became Wisconsin's first urban state forest. The detritus of the previous 70 years was cleared off, and, season by season, the property was returned to a state of nature. In 1986, an environmental education center was built practically on the foundations of the original prison buildings. It has endured as a resource for anyone who wants to know the story of the land and the story of the earth.

Given Havenwoods' rich history and unique character, it sees far too little use. The forest has its ardent supporters, but I suspect that some Milwaukeeans are skeptical about the surrounding neighborhoods. They needn't be. This is one part of the north side where the only alert is for wild parsnip, which can blister your skin on contact, and where the only bad guys are buckthorn, garlic mustard and other invasive plants from abroad. In the heart of the property, whether it's January or June, quiet reigns.

It's well worth seeing for yourself, and there's a golden opportunity coming up in less than two weeks. On Saturday, Feb. 15, Havenwoods will host its annual [Winter NatureFest](#), a full (and free) day of "winter fun and nature activities" for the whole family. Details are posted on the [Friends of Havenwoods website](#).

I had my own share of winter fun on a recent visit to Havenwoods. I skied the perimeter trail — an hour's exercise at a steady pace — and saw, even in midwinter, clear evidence of nature's remarkable resilience: the calligraphic signatures of prairie plants against the snow, the purposeful tracks of a lone coyote and a flock of robins that apparently missed the memo about flying south.

As I was closing my loop, I encountered a herd of five young deer that regarded me intently, stock-still, for nearly a minute. As they finally bounded off into the forest, white flags flying, I marveled at how far this property had come after a century of use and abuse. The deer marked, in a very real sense, the return of the natives. Here they were, surrounded on all sides by the city, but these wild ones had found a safe haven in a most unusual woods.

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