

Working Around the Trees

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“The project to rescue historic Heritage Grove took three years to complete – from June 1977 to July 1980. Heritage Grove was rescued to protect the integrity of Hiwan Homestead Museum and to provide a community park for Evergreen.”

These words on a commemorative plaque in Heritage Grove sum up the charge that was given to the Jefferson County Historical Society in 1980 when they became the new owners of three acres of Evergreen history. In keeping with their cooperative agreement with Open Space, JCHS maintained the Grove as an extension of Hiwan Homestead Museum, accommodating lectures, concerts, exhibits and children’s programs. As well, Heritage Grove quickly became a desirable venue for a variety of events: groups dined and danced under sheltering boughs; orchestral music echoed off tree trunks; mountain men gave trapping demonstrations and soldiers re-enacted Civil War battles across the canopied land.

In the early 1980s, two notable and significant art festivals were transplanted to Heritage Grove. Over twenty years, the annual Evergreen Arts Festival and Summerfest art shows took root and flourished, bringing upwards of 10,000 visitors to the Grove in just two summer weekends each year.

As each year passed, Heritage Grove’s success as a community park threatened its alternate role as an historic preserve. Heavy foot traffic combined with many years of drought to create areas of compacted bare earth where nothing grew. Old photographs from the Douglas and Buchanan days show these same areas had supported an abundant variety of native plants and grasses beneath the tall ponderosas. Increasingly, the Grove’s volunteer caretakers voiced the same concern: if our use of the Grove destroyed this undergrowth, what were we doing to the pines?

In response, the JCHS Board of Directors formed an advisory committee in the fall of 2004, recruiting from all aspects of the Evergreen community. Under the leadership of David Cuin, the volunteer Grove Advisory Committee (GAC) labored for more than a year, compiling and assessing information and advice from specialists in the fields of botany, plant and tree pathology, and soil and forest ecology. Experts from Colorado State University, the Colorado State Forest Service and the U.S. Forest Service generally agreed that although the prize ponderosas were in no immediate danger, in the long run soil compaction would take its toll. Their warning was based in part on an exhaustive compaction study conducted by the workhorse of the GAC, Wayne Stivers. Using a hydraulic penetrometer, Stivers mapped out and completed more than 2,000 soil

compaction tests in the Grove and comparison sites in Bergen Park and forested areas adjacent to the Grove. The results of this extensive testing were alarming: while compaction levels of 300 psi are generally accepted as the upper limit of what is favorable to plant growth, the heavily worn areas of the Grove registered levels exceeding 1,000 psi.

In April of 2006, Chairman Cuin and his committee issued their final report. Among a number of recommendations, the report called for a buffer zone to preserve and protect the prized bicentennial trees in the most intensively used portion of the Grove directly east of the Museum.

This meant the JCHS Board was faced with a tough decision. How could the trees be protected from further damage and the ground allowed to recover naturally while continuing to offer the Grove as a space for community use?

The Board reviewed, discussed, argued and eventually compromised. Longstanding partners in the arts community and Hiwan Museum staff agreed that protection was essential for the Grove's longevity. A plan was devised that confines traffic to the less-stressed area to the east of the property and protects the fragile area closest to the Museum.

Very soon when you visit Heritage Grove you will see barricades and signage defining the efforts to save this historical site from destruction. This spring, JCHS will begin a revegetation project using a variety of native grasses and wildflowers comparable to the undergrowth that flourished in the days of Camp Neosho and Hiwan Ranch. Similar to previous restoration projects like Medlen School and Hiwan Homestead, JCHS's commitment to revitalize Heritage Grove is an essential part of its mission to preserve, protect and promote local history. And JCHS will do it just as this land's original owners did, by working around – and in behalf of -- the trees.

The Jefferson County Historical Society welcomes your feedback about its plans to restore Heritage Grove. Please email your comments and questions to grove@jchscolorado.org. To learn more about historical preservation in Jefferson County, please visit www.jchscolorado.org. Susan R. Halama is a freelance writer interested in historical non-fiction. Contact Susan at sh@brightstores.com.

See accompanying photos next page.