

After the Hearing -

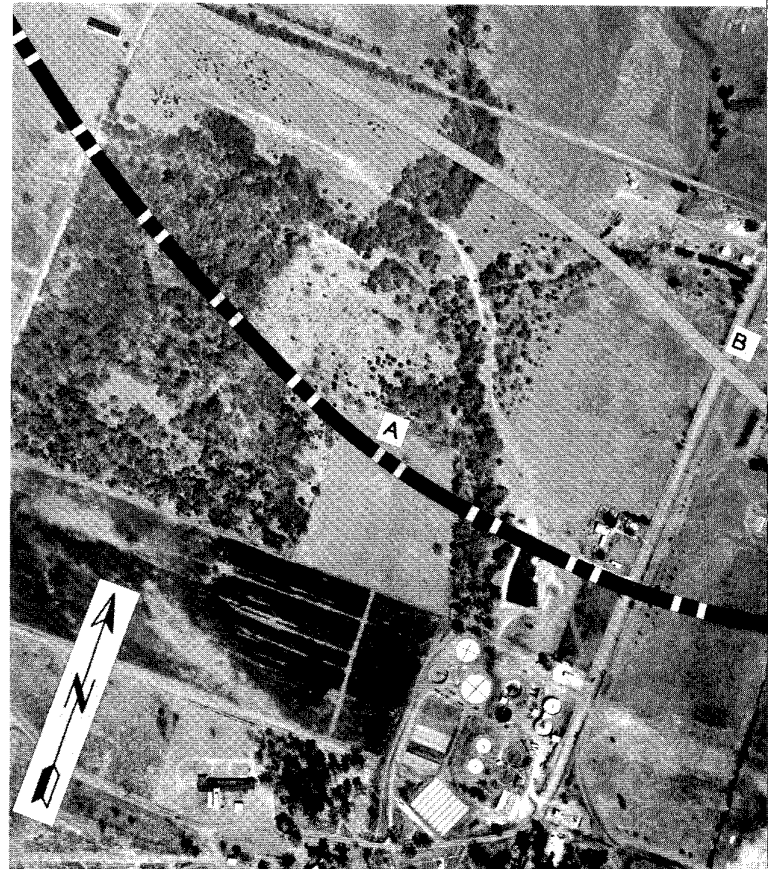
How a Patch of Woods Was Saved

What happens after a hearing? Does the transcript of the hearing go into a dusty file never to see the light of day again or is there someone listening at the Highway Department? The answer is Yes . . . the planners **are** listening and all letters and comments are carefully considered. Valid points raised by the people at the hearing can cause a complete change of plans. To demonstrate what really happens, hark to the tale of a professor, a farmer down in Cleveland county and a patch of woods.

Back in less tumultuous times Professor Arthur Bragg, Director of Zoology at the University of Oklahoma, used to leave the classroom far behind and head for a quiet stroll in Oliver's woods south of Norman near the South Canadian River.

The leaves rustled in the breeze and there would be furtive stirrings under the fallen timber. It was fall and the air had a little bite to it. Low flying clouds hinted of chills to come but that day the chickadees still flitted about. Come hunting

Proposed route A of State Highway 9 would have ruined the Wildlife Preserve. Route now under construction, (B), skirts the northern edge of the woods.



season the professor might get together sometimes with Fred Oliver, owner of the bottomland forest.

At other times Dr. Bragg would go out to the ponds below the bluff to study the frogs and toads there. Mr. Oliver didn't mind if the professor's students came out too, to study the wildlife on his land for their research papers.

With such a "laboratory" only two miles from campus, students in botany, zoology and entomology flocked to Oliver's Woods and soon one of the few native flood plain forests left in Oklahoma was being extensively studied and documented. In 1953 Mr. Oliver deeded the main forest area to the University of Oklahoma to be established as the Fred Oliver Wildlife Preserve although he retained lifetime hunting and pasturing rights. In 1960 Mr. Oliver refused an attempt to get oil drilling rights to the area, saying he didn't

need the money and didn't want to spoil the forest. In 1961, soon after Mr. Oliver's death, an additional 20 acres was purchased by the University.

The grasslands up on the bluff attracted students as did the grassy meadows and green ash woodland. Through the years the large variety of animals and birds, lizards, three-toed box turtles, coyotes, raccoons, squirrels, and owls were chronicled. One of the few breeding populations of salamanders in Oklahoma resides in the Preserve. A recent doctoral dissertation by Dr. James R. Curry compared the Carolina chickadee and the tufted titmouse living in the area. At least 35 research projects have been based on the studies in the Preserve.

Botanists find Oklahoma an especially favorable place for study as it is a border state and lies on the western edge of a deciduous forest; the eastern edge of grasslands formations and



Oliver Wildlife Preserve near Norman

contains many southern floral elements. It is between the humid east and arid west and the cold northern temperatures and warm southern temperatures.

The earliest botanical reports were made in 1820 by John Torrey, a surgeon who collected plants on a journey near the source of the Canadian and Arkansas Rivers. Early railroad exploration records in 1856, and military journals kept by Captain Boone in 1843 and Lieutenant J. Albert in 1946 also contain scientific observations of plant life.

A tree census was made in Oliver's Woods when the area was first acquired and the Preserve was surveyed by Dr. E. L. Rice, David Ross Boyd Professor of Botany and Dr. Wm. T. Penfound. Since that time the effect of climatic conditions on the soil, water table, vegetation and wildlife have been documented every year. Where cottonwood trees once predominated, the green ash is now king. Classes regularly adjourn to the Preserve to learn techniques of measurement and observation. The annual spring flooding of parts of the Preserve furnishes an unique aspect for study as do the grasslands in the upper part of the Preserve.

This happy state of affairs continued until 2:30 p.m. Wednesday, December 15, 1965. On that date a public hearing on Federal-Aid-Highway, Project No. F-173(15) was held in the Cleveland County Court House in Norman. Under discussion was the proposed construction of 4.1 miles of State Highway 9 from Interstate 35 west of Norman to U. S. Highway 77 in Norman. It was planned to be a four lane divided highway with two twelve-foot lanes in each direction and with ten-foot outside shoulders.

Thirty-three people attended the hearing and did everything but stand up and cheer to show their enthusiasm for the proposed road. The State Senator for the area said construction of the road would mean more to the people of Oklahoma than any other piece of highway construction that he could think of. He pointed out that the heavy truck and tourist traffic forced to travel Lindsey Street in Norman would be routed around town on the proposed road. Also the commuters and the football traffic now traveling the narrow black top Lindsey Street would be able to exit from town more easily.

The State Representative noted that all east-west traffic traveled on Lindsey Street which is the dividing line between the academic portion of the University of Oklahoma and the housing and dormitory area. This situation creates a safety hazard for the many pedestrians crossing the street. The mayor of Norman commented on how important the new road would be, both to the University and to the town of Norman.

Then Horace Brown, vice-president of the University of Oklahoma at that time, stood up. He agreed with the previous speakers and said that the road as a whole was such a good thing he was reluctant to mention another point but felt he must. On the maps of the proposed highway it appeared that the right-of-way would cut directly across the middle of the Oliver Wildlife Preserve. Such construction would completely ruin the Preserve, which had been deeded to the University as a trust with the understanding that it would be preserved forever as a wildlife sanctuary.

Dr. Charles C. Carpenter, Dr. William T. Penfound and T. H. Milby of the departments of botany and zoology spoke on the irreplaceable nature of the forest. Most any university laboratory could be replaced through allocation of large amounts of money, but no amount of money could replace the laboratory value of the Preserve. Even if a similar untouched native forest could be found within range of the University, benefits of the continuing records of evolution within the Preserve would be lost.

The highway department had been operating in high gear before the hearing, aware that the proposed highway was high priority and desperately needed by both Norman residents and through traffic. When Norman residents and members of the University showed such concern for the Wildlife Preserve during the hearing, the highway department came to a screeching halt. They decided to take a second look at the proposal.

The tape of the hearing and the many additional letters written on behalf of the Preserve were circulated to various offices within the Oklahoma State Highway Department. The statements made at the hearing were carefully studied by the engineers in the planning and roadway design, survey and right-of-way branches. They could have shaken their heads and said "it's a shame but that's the price of progress," but they didn't. Instead the Oklahoma State Highway Department and the United States Department of Transportation, Bureau of Public Roads, conferred several times and finally agreed that keeping the preserve intact was worth the extra thousands of dollars it would require to move the road. New surveys were run, design and drainage features were changed and the highway was relocated on the upper edge of the preserve where it would cut across only a corner part of the grassland area. The University agreed to the loss of part of the grasslands and students now go to "Johnson's Pasture" in McClain County for grassland studies.

Preliminary grading and drainage has been completed on Route 9 and bidding for the paving portion of the construction will take place in January 1971. According to the Assistant Project Control Engineer in the Oklahoma State Highway Department, Route 9 is scheduled for completion in the spring of 1972.

Highways and trees frequently find themselves in conflict. In most cases the needs of the people using the road and the economic and safety aspects weigh more in the balance than the esthetic value of a tree. Whenever possible though, the Highway Department makes every effort to keep the trees and still serve the needs of the mass of people using and depending upon roads.

The importance of Oliver Wildlife Preserve to all residents of Oklahoma was pointed out by Dr. E. L. Rice, David Ross Boyd Professor of Botany, and the University of Oklahoma. In order to predict the effect of man upon the environment, ecologists must first know what effect nature has upon itself. Once scientists have studied the evolution of an area and the effects of climate, population and other factors on the flora and fauna, they can then predict what will happen when man causes changes in that environment.

Dr. Rice commented favorably on the new road. "Yes, I am an ecologist, but am aware that there has got to be some trading off. The new

State Highway 9 is a necessary and needed development and the University is willing to compromise with the highway department in order to save the important parts of the Preserve. We are most appreciative of what the highway department did for us."

It is winter now in Oliver's Woods and there's a light dusting of snow on the ground. The professor and the farmer are dead now and the woods they both loved is very quiet in the winter. Turtles are hibernating in the ground and squirrels stay abed counting their nuts. Tracks of a rabbit speeding by are the only sign of life.

Soon it will be spring, the ponds will flood, the green ash trees will sprout and budding ecologists will note more changes in Oliver's Woods.



A tufted titmouse near its nest in a hollow tree trunk in the Oliver Wildlife Preserve near Norman.

The highway above on the bluff will resound with noise of bulldozers and paving machines.

The woods and the highway found a way to dwell together because of people's willingness to listen to each other. The professor and the farmer valued Oliver's Woods and thought it should be preserved in its native state for the benefit of all Oklahomans.

The Oklahoma State Highway Department thought so too.