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# A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NATURE TRAIL

*John Shontz*

Students who were members of the Biology Club in the late 1960s and early 1970s were struck by the beauty and uniqueness of the forests growing on the steep slopes of the ravines on campus. They were being taken into the forests on field trips in biology courses such as Systematic Botany, Natural History of Vertebrates, and Local Flora, and there they identified wild flowers, birds, salamanders and insects. The Biology Club, looking for a project, came up with the idea of building a nature trail through one of the ravines so that individuals and groups who were not taking biology courses could also experience and enjoy the forests. Another person on campus, who was also moved by the beauty of the ravines, was Ken Thomasma of the Educational Studies Institute. He worked with students who were going into K-12 teaching, and he recognized the great resource that are these forested ravines. Together the students and he developed a plan for the trail, laid out the trail, and then, about 1972, built it. It was those students who carved the trail into the hillside, built steps, railings, bridges and benches. They put wood chips on the trail and even erected large sign boards at the two trail heads.

Over the years, the Biology Club and the Biology Department have worked to maintain the trail. Up until the university changed from quarters to semesters in 1980, Grand Valley students led guided trips on the trail for school groups, scouts, senior citizens and other community groups. With semesters, those no longer occur, because the Grand Valley students are taking final exams and then leave, just about the time the wild flowers bloom. Maintenance has been a big task. Wood rots rapidly in the moist conditions of the forest and so there is a constant struggle to replace broken pieces. Use of the trail by runners hastens the damage as well. Toward the end of the 1980s the repair of bridges, railings and steps became the responsibility of the Physical Plant Department.

Beginning about the third week of April and extending through the next four weeks or so, wild flowers bloom in huge numbers along the Nature Trail. This display is among the largest and most impressive that you will see anywhere in the lower peninsula of Michigan. There are dozens of kinds of wild flowers, and for most species there are literally thousands of flowers in bloom on the hillsides. The Biology Department has a booklet describing the trail and some of the plants found along it. You can get a copy by calling the departmental office.