

## Mary Ellsworth: Mother of the Nankin Mills Nature Center

*By Daryl A. Bailey*

*“It was quite a challenge, but it was fun.”*

So said Mary Ellsworth, the mother of the Nankin Mills Nature Center. The nature center operated from 1958 to 1979 and was the forerunner of the present day Nankin Mills Interpretive Center.

Wayne County had acquired the mill from the Ford Motor Company in 1948. In 1956, Mary Ellsworth, a Michigan State University graduate, was hired by the Wayne County Road Commission who had assumed responsibility for the mill to create a nature center there. Mary accepted the challenge. Armed with her degree in natural science she set about the task of creating a nature center from scratch. It was a daunting task from the very beginning.

In an interview with Joe Rossiter, Detroit Free Press Special Writer, Mary said, “They gave me a building without heat, water or electricity. There was a pot-bellied stove down in the basement and I had to split wood the first winter to keep warm.”

For two years Mary collected exhibit materials and painted backgrounds for the many displays. She did not have a staff until just before the Nature Center opened. During the first difficult months, she was aided by neighborhood children.

The Center opened in 1958. Mary nurtured and protected it as mother bear would care for her cub.

Two years later Wayne County acquired about 500 acres of woodlands near Nankin Mills. This is known today as the Holliday Nature Preserve. Twelve miles of trails were marked. They wind through groves of oak, hickory, and beech trees, as well as around marshes and meadows. Mary often led tours along these trails. Many of these tours were with school-aged children.

Next to the Mill was a compound for injured and orphaned animals. In a 1973 interview with Detroit News reporter Beverly McAnally, Mary explained the goal of the animal compound. “We are not trying to have a zoo, our goal is to rehabilitate and restore the animals to their natural environment. So our displays are constantly changing. But some of the animals, because they are not native, or because they are so damaged they can’t take care of themselves, will spend the rest of their lives here.”

It is said that at its height the Nature Center attracted about 30,000 visitors a year.

Sadly, all good things must come to an end. And so it came to pass for the Nature Center. In 1979, facing a budget crunch, Wayne County cut funding for the Nature Center. The job of closing the Center fell to its creator, Mary Ellsworth.

*"I started it from scratch ... and I closed it up."*

When the Center closed the animals were given to the Detroit Zoo. Mary was transferred to the county forestry operation. She continued to visit the Nature Center, which then housed county offices. She still gave tours along the trails.

Mary Ellsworth died on January 28, 1987. She was 68 years old. She was laid to rest at the Mount Hope Catholic Cemetery in Pontiac, Michigan.

Mary's legacy continues at the Nankin Mills Interpretive Center. An exhibit near the first floor elevator says: "Today, Wayne County Parks looks back with appreciation at the inspired dedication of Mary Ellsworth, Arthur Richardson and his uncle William Holliday, and looks forward to a bright future for what is now Nankin Mills Interpretive Center. With new interpretive programs, exhibits and all the advantages of a modern facility, we welcome you here."

In the fall of 1988 the Westland Historical Commission established a memorial for Mary Ellsworth at the Westland Historical Museum. The plaque reads:

*"Historian, Founder of the Wayne County Nature Center, Naturalist, Westland Historical Commissioner, and a True Beloved Friend of All People and Other Living Things."*

The stone for Mary's memorial came from the Nankin Mills area, a very fitting choice.

*~ Author's Note: I want to thank Virginia Braun of the Westland Historical Commission for her assistance with this article.*