

# **For the Love of Gulf Branch: Arlington's Hidden Symbol of Smart Growth**

*BY CHARLES S. CLARK*

## **What The Devil Is A Nature Center?**

That was the prevailing view in Arlington of the early 1960s, according to proto-environmentalist and county board alumnae Dorothy Grotos, recalling her leading role in creation of the Gulf Branch Nature Center.

Half a century later, the question is answered by the center's 16,600 annual visitors to the leafy Military Road site, its popular dugout canoe, its live "Ms. Owl" and its busy observational beehive. Not to mention the center's meditative tree arbors, hiking trails and active blacksmith shed.

Toss in its status as an away-from-the-neon monument to smart growth and the past presence of a Hollywood legend, and Arlingtonians have a retreat and education site that commands a ferocious army of protectors.

Current park naturalist Jennifer Soles, who has frequented Gulf Branch since 1980, has watched the center grow to offer 290 programs for school children and the public in 2015, its quarterly events calendar ballooning from 1 page to 14, including those at the cross-town Long Branch Nature Center, she says.

To commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Gulf Branch's opening on June 12, 1966, an array of exhibits, a symposium and an outdoor party was staged by center staff, the Arlington Central Library and the nonprofit Friends of the Gulf Branch Nature Center.

Among the impresarios was Duke Banks, the Friends' vice president and parks activist who has been taking his family to Gulf Branch since they "fell in love" with the idyll at a Christmas event in 1985. "Gulf Branch was not big, but it established a precedent of finding a cottage along a stream," says the former municipal government consultant who lives in Waverly Hills. "It became the crown jewel of Arlington's smart growth policies" birthed in the 1960s when the county sought green space to offset the coming commercial development of the Rosslyn-Ballston corridor.

The 600-member incorporated Friends group, which organizes an annual outdoor "birthday party" at the center, grew out of the spontaneous "Save the Gulf Branch Nature Center" movement that coalesced when the county in 2009 threatened to close it during a round of recession-era budget cuts.

That would be a sacrilege to the hundreds who over the decades have grown attached to the buff fieldstone haven alongside a creek and footbridge that evoke a Monet painting.

## Nature Boy

By rights, the origins of the Gulf Branch asset should be traced to the Native Americans who populated the river and creek-side forests long before Captain John Smith passed through. Archaeological digs near the Potomac run by 1970s Gulf Branch naturalist Scott Silsby unearthed the Indian artifacts on display at the center's (soon-to-be upgraded) American Indian room. (Silsby also helped execute the room's admired dug-out canoe.)

The property's earliest ownership traces to a Thomas Jewell, whose original 158-acre lot stretched over both sides of Military Road, according to a history by Friends of Gulf Branch. The likely builder of the nestled stone bungalow in the 1920s is a Commerce Department special agent named Aaron Cricher, perhaps seeking a weekend hideaway. Subsequent sales over the decades went to the Bley, Meyers and then Davis families, which then set the site up for county acquisition.

The stage was set by the incipient national environmental movement of the early 1960s, says naturalist Soles. A 1961 National Park Service commission on outdoor recreation resources recommended collaborations by local, state and federal governments, along with the private sector to boost outdoor leisure opportunities. The same year, Arlington's own planners incorporated open space in a land-use plan. County board members began inserting earmarks in bond referenda.

A turning point was the 1960 election of Tom Richards to the county board. An Air Force intelligence cartographer who represented the Donaldson Run neighborhood in the Arlington Civic Federation, Richards recalled in a 1984 oral history that his campaign tapped into a "consensus that the community planning was not being well done."

Richards, a hiking enthusiast, believed early on that the coming Metro and resulting commercial development should be offset with an expansion of Arlington's parks and open space. In 1963, the board began applying for federal matching funds to help acquire about 37 acres of land around Gulf Branch from several neighboring families.

Arlington's elected leaders would tap eminent domain guidance on acquiring open space. Richards and colleagues also coordinated with Kennedy and Johnson administration Interior Secretary Stewart Udall in a regional bid for open space and trails all along Washington's portion of the Potomac, the G.W. Parkway and Four Mile Run. His push for acquiring Gulf Branch prompted his

election opponent Ken Haggerty to mock him as “nature boy.” Yet when Haggerty later won his own seat, Richards recalled, he too embraced the nature theme, and nearly all related votes became unanimous.

On June 13, 1964, county board minutes record, the board voted 4-0 to authorize an offer of \$135,000 from the general land acquisition account to owner John Davis for six acres “near Chain Bridge and Walker Chapel” to expand Gulf Branch Park and enlarge a stream valley park. It resolved that if Davis did not accept the offer within 10 days, the commonwealth’s attorney is authorized to acquire the property through condemnation.

“Gulf Branch was my first experience in parkland acquisition,” recalled Richards, who described how it fit into the larger regional picture in the journal of the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club. “That one act had great influence on my board experience and my professional career.”

(He would go on to be first chairman of Metropolitan Washington Open Space Project, chairman of the Parks and Open Space Committee of the Northern Virginia Regional Planning Commission, and president of the Arlington-based Nature Conservancy. His son Doug a half-century later would run butterfly exhibits for Friends of Gulf Branch Nature Center.)

Largely under Richards’ impetus, the county in 1972 acquired the land and building that became the Long Branch Nature Center and, in 1974, the land the Northern Virginia Park Authority developed to establish the nearby Potomac Overlook Nature Center.

### **Natural Ingredients**

On March 26, 1966, the county board voted unanimously to establish a seven-member, Ph.D.-heavy Gulf Branch Nature Center Advisory Board. Among its members was biology teacher Phoebe Knipling, who would later found Arlington’s Outdoor Lab. Its chair was Girl Scouts executive Dorothy Grotos, fresh off of what in that day was a rare master’s degree in environmental



Courtesy of Marshall Meyers

**Meyers’ family housekeeper Dorothy supervises the children at White Pines.**

studies. The advisory board's charge: education, conservation, science, culture and recreation.

Grotos, who in a 2015 interview called Gulf Branch "my baby," said her past experiences with outdoor space in Maine and Connecticut inspired her to grasp "right away that Gulf Branch was a natural site for it, with its walk down to the river." But some in 1966, among them Recreation and Parks director William Hughes, weren't sold, she recalled. "They wanted a teen center, but we argued that a nature center is for everybody."

Hughes dutifully took charge of refurbishing the fieldstone cottage. Final private owner Davis had warned, according to a land agent's memo to the parks staff, of a leaky roof and sewer blockages. Teenagers frequented the empty property to illicitly smoke and drink (this writer among them). Commonwealth's Attorney William Hassan, who lived two blocks up Military Road, wrote a Dec. 15, 1965, memo to Hughes noting that "considerable vandalism occurred" and seeking a No Trespassing sign.

When, after a quiet June 12, 1966, ceremony, the staff moved in, there wasn't even a coffee urn or field guides. But newly hired naturalists began adapting that rustic residence and planted-by-God surroundings in ways that over the decades would create Gulf Branch's now familiar panoply of offerings: the scientifically labeled plants, the built-in beehive and an outdoor classroom.

Open most weekends is the blacksmith's shed that since 1981 has drawn active traditional smiths from around the region. Some 2,000 of them have the right to open the shed, light the forge and use the ancient tools in return for showing off their craft to visitors.

Gulf Branch is also home to Walker Cabin, the partially reassembled homestead originally owned by Robert Walker (1840-1908), whose family gave the land for nearby Walker Chapel on Glebe Road. (Robert was the overseer of the Easter Spring Farm, which was located further up Glebe and owned by the wealthier Henry Lockwood.)

Built in 1871, Walker's original 32-by-8-foot log cabin survived until the 1970s on the property owned by his descendent, Maggie Gutshall. When her land was acquired by Arlington County to create a recreation center and tennis court, the cabin's remnants were relocated and reassembled near the nature center. That was accomplished through support from the Arlington Woman's Club and neighbor Preston Caruthers.

Today, for the nature itself, visitors to Gulf Branch can retreat to see spicebushes, oak and hickory trees, tulip poplars and what might be the largest beech tree in the county. Living in their midst are red-shouldered hawks, and Arlington perennials such as deer, chipmunks, raccoons and fox. Naturalist Soles notes that there are no fish in Gulf Branch except eels. The site also hosts wild



Courtesy of Marshall Meyers

**The future Gulf Branch Nature Center as it looked in the late 1930s.**

barred owls and spotted salamanders and wood frogs in its pond.

“Our most famous resident is Ms. Owl,” notes Soles. “We also have had a flying squirrel, snakes, frogs and turtles. Our longest resident is our plated lizard who was first on display in 1989.”

A destination for a steady schedule of school field trips, Gulf Branch offers an annual August “Batfest” to demonstrate that winged creature’s importance to the ecosystem, and a Fall Heritage Day every October. Staff participate in countywide surveys of flora and fauna for a natural resources inventory. “Volunteers help remove invasive plants, care for animals and help conduct programs and special events,” Soles says.

Some old-timers continue to refer to the nature center by the home’s original name, White Pines. Silsby recalls a granite entry-way keystone into which the lettering for that name had been carved; he salvaged it and buried it next to the house.

### **The Ax Almost Falls**

In February 2009, with nation mired in the Great Recession, Arlington County Manager Ron Carlee proposed a fiscal 2010 budget with \$23 million

in cuts. Among them was a provision to close the Gulf Branch Nature Center by July 1, possibly demolishing the building, but keeping the park itself. Part of the reasoning was that nature-lovers had an alternative close by at Potomac Overlook, to which Gulf Branch's animals could be transported. (That proposal, according to Duke Banks, "astounded" staff at Potomac Overlook.)

In the lead-up to a series of public budget hearings, a citizens movement called Save the Gulf Branch Nature Center sprung up and organized a rally at the nature center. On March 14, 2009, it drew hundreds of protesters (including this writer), musician supporters and regionwide media coverage. Also present was the county's designated flak-catcher, Parks and Recreation employee Steve (now Caroline) Temmermand.

That effort led to formation of the Friends of Gulf Branch Nature Center, as a "way to pressure the county before the final budget to shield the property from developers and protect the creek watershed," Banks says.

In the end, the county preserved the center but cut its hours, eliminated two jobs (moving 23-year county veteran naturalist Denise Chauvette to another department) and combining management of Gulf Branch and Fort Smith under Dave Farner.



Courtesy of Marshall Meyers

**The "rural retreat" as it looked before World War II, with an altered center facade, (that is now the Gulf Branch Nature Center).**

Looking back, county board member Jay Fisette said, “the county manager proposed many creative and controversial cuts and consolidations. I think this was meant as a serious proposal during very difficult budget times. Ultimately, while dozens of staff positions were eliminated in the budget overall, the county board continued to fund Gulf Branch at a somewhat reduced level. Residents strongly advocated for it and made a commitment to generate private funds to assist with future operating and capital costs.”

Michael Peter, current Parks and Recreation director of finance, saw a silver lining. “During difficult budget cycles, the county manager is tasked with identifying potential budget and service reductions, which are developed at the department level to give the county manager an array of options,” he says. “The county manager and designated staff are then tasked to work with the community and to explain the impact and rationale behind the proposed reductions. Even though the proposal to close Gulf Branch was rejected, the proposal resulted in some good as the Friends of Gulf Branch emerged, and it has become a significant partner with the county.”

At the first of its annual “birthday” celebrations, retired county board member Tom Richards was there to cut the cake. (He died in 2011). In 2012, Friends of Gulf Branch were given the annual Bill Thomas Park Service Volunteer Award.

As Richards’ ally Dorothy Grotos recently said, “It would be hard to close Gulf Branch now because it has become such a part of the Arlington landscape and people come from all over.” Indeed, neighboring retiree Karl Liewer, whose Military Road home is completely surrounded by Gulf Branch Nature Center land, donated his easement to the Northern Virginia Conservation Trust—to protect his land against new development in perpetuity.

Added naturalist Soles, “It’s been here long enough that people who came as kids now bring their own children. Some things haven’t changed in Arlington, and it’s nice to have places you can connect to your personal history.”

### **Lost Images of a Rural Retreat**

To Marshall Meyers, the site will always be “White Pines.” The 78-year-old Washington attorney spent the first seven years of his life at the home that became the Gulf Branch Nature Center. The Meyers family enjoyed the country retreat from 1937-44, when his federal-employee father sold it because gasoline rationing made the trip from downtown prohibitive, Meyers says.

“We practically lived outside,” he recalls, describing the now-covered swimming pool that had a sluice gate connecting to the creek. Meyers’ Great Dane called Bruce (one of 13 the family owned) “once pulled me out when I fell in the pool,” he says. The property where he frolicked with his sister was

also home to rabbits and roosters, all well taken care of by hired hands Frank Adams and his wife Dorothy, African Americans. Because of the many animals, the buyer's representative insisted on a full medical report to protect the couple before signing the deed.

Seven decades later, Meyers retains the typed and stamped deed from his parents' purchase of the house on May 21, 1937, for \$14,000 from owner Lillian Bley. (The price would rise to \$22,000 when the Meyers sold it to the Davis family, who would sell it to Arlington County.)

Meyers also maintains an album of dream-like photos of a childhood spent in a natural haven hidden in the suburb of Arlington. Most are published here for the first time.

### **Stardust from Pola Negri**

Among the more rarified pleasures associated with Gulf Branch Nature Center is the long-repeated boast that it served as private retreat for silent-screen film siren Pola Negri (1897-1987). An intimate of Rudolph Valentino and Charlie Chaplain, the Polish star of such pre-talkie hits as "A Woman of the World" and "Bella Donna" was mentioned by the 1960s planners of the nature center as having planted rhododendrons there during her visits to Washington, D.C., in the early 1930s.

Negri's "Hollywood on the Potomac" sojourns were exhaustively documented by researcher and former Arlington Historical Society president Jennifer Sale Crane in the society's 2009 magazine.\* (Her presence was also part of childhood lore for Marshall Meyers when his family occupied the property in the 1930s.). The rural retreat known as "White Pines" was occasionally mentioned in newspapers as the scene for fancy diplomatic parties.

In the 1970s, efforts to provide proof of the actress's presence at the future nature center prompted a competition between dueling Arlington historians Cornelia B. Rose and Eleanor Lee Templeman.



United Artists, Nariusz Kotowski Collection  
**Pola Negri, publicity photo for 1943 film "Hi Diddle Diddle."**

Rose appears to have won. She scored a letter from the retired Negri's secretary in San Antonio, Texas (the center keeps a copy on file), stating that the one-time screen vamp had indeed stayed at the property, though she couldn't recall the exact year.

Once the nature center was well established, staff began regular screenings of Negri's films for interested members of the public. Rob Farr, executive producer for Arlington TV, in the 1990s assembled a "pre-YouTube" video history of Negri's work. "Her career didn't make it to the talkies because of her accent," he says, noting a rekindling of interest in her work among DVD distributors. "It's fun that there would be an Arlington connection to a silent film star."

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\* Sale, Jennifer Crane, "Pola Negri Slept Here?: Unraveling the Mystery of a Screen Siren's Stay in Arlington," *Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 14, No. 1, October 2009.

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### *About the Author*

Regular contributor Charlie Clark writes the "Our Man in Arlington" column for the *Falls Church News-Press*. As a 12-year-old, he delivered *The Washington Post* to the neighboring private home that became the Gulf Branch Nature Center.

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