

# UMD OUTDOOR PROGRAM

## The Hidden History of Bagley Nature Area

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Cover Photo:  
Old apple tree near Cabin site  
Photo by Author

## Introduction

A vine crowned electric pole blends into the woods, it's link to the world severed. An apple tree bears forgotten fruit year after year, standing near well crafted stone steps fading into the river bank. I have always been fascinated by the past as a process for defining a place or piece of land. The winding trails and enigmatic remains that rest among the woods of Bagley Nature-Area have intrigued me since my first exploration. This led me to begin shaping my own definitions and memories of this land. This UROP project has been an excuse to delve into the thickets armed with notepad, camera and imagination. Old Duluth plat maps, telephone directories and interviews with long time residents drew me further into the past of this area, slowly revealing a picture of life in and around Bagley under different times and definitions. Throughout the evolution of these definitions, the land endured. This paper is an attempt to share this historical information so that others may further appreciate this unique piece of land.

The Bagley Nature Area (BNA) is located in the northwest corner of the UMD campus (see map 1). This approximately 24 acre parcel includes the well-known Rock Hill and Rock pond, as well as a portion of Tischer Creek, a designated trout stream. Trails for hiking and skiing wind through a stand of old-growth sugar maples, as well as past 7 different habitat areas, each with unique plant and animal species. Of the many inhabitants,

red fox and great blue herons may be encountered during a short hike, and reports of black bear are not unusual. Also found within the area is an arboretum planted with horticultural exotics such as fruit trees.

This amazing area is utilized extensively by UMD students and local community members, both informally and for established programs. BNA is used for instruction in canoeing, skiing and camping, as well as by biology classes for outdoor laboratory experiences. BNA is a "focal point for natural history interpretation and outdoor skills instruction by the Outdoor Program"(Gilbertson, BNA MC 1990), including an extensive maple sugarbush operation that introduces the process to hundreds of local elementary students.

This valuable resource was developed through generous donations and University purchases over the past 50 years. The history of BNA's creation reflects the vision of University planners and local citizens to preserve this unique property over the decades. Also found in the history of this area is a perspective of local neighborhoods and people, those who enjoyed this area before its official designation as BNA. It was they who left subtle reminders in the woods to explore.

## Early Record

The property now known as Bagley Nature Area was first legally defined by the US Government when it was surveyed in the mid 1800's. The surveying process reduced the "wilderness" into orderly squares, more easily defined and sold. This area is contained within the Southwest corner of Section 11 of Township 50, a township that contains most of Duluth (see map 2). BNA encompasses about three-fourths of the extreme southwest corner of this area, and individual parcels will be discussed later. The first ownership transaction occurred October 5, 1860. It was registered with the General Land Office that the United States of America had transferred ownership of the 160 acre SW quarter of section 11 to Howel Satterwhite, a private in the North Carolina Militia, War of 1812. He in turn transferred the property to Kingsbury Smith (Abstract, 1953). It was subsequently bought, sold and subdivided many times after that.

Beyond those facts, the early history of this land is a bit unclear. On a 1902 plat map, and another from 1930's, large blank areas appear in these areas, indicating that the property was not owned by one large estate, such as the G.G. Hartley farm just north of this area (see map 2). It is probable that the area was owned by many people in small sections. Indeed, the abstract for the property reflects this. It is not known what these people used the land for, but it does show that the bulk of the area was never owned by timber companies, for

example. The property that contains Rock Hill, the west side of Section 10, shows ownership by the Ontario Land Company, which I speculate was a timber company. The face of the land today, with old growth trees to the east of BNA and different habitat on the hill does reflect this probability.

The mature maple trees in BNA today are found within the north half of the SW corner of section 11, property that was donated by the Bagley family, a topic to be discussed later. The early abstract to this land shows that it was occasionally owned by the county for non-payment of taxes, and later spent a good deal of time in the estate of Nicholas Miller. It was later divided several times among his heirs, and owned alternately by banking companies in Duluth and the state of Wyoming. It seems that this division and legal proceedings perhaps protected this parcel from development, a lucky consequence for the UMD beneficiaries today.

#### **Settlement in Area**

The late 1800's were a period of intense growth in Duluth. Most of the property now included within the city of Duluth was annexed by 1895. Section 11, the area including Bagley Nature area, was annexed before 1891. The area was still quite rural at that time, but changes toward development were beginning.

One question that is often asked about this land concerns farming. While it is entirely possible farms were located in this area, my search did not lead to any information about

actual farming activities within BNA. In the City of Duluth, building permits were required for all projects after 1895. The Building Inspection office of St. Louis Co. shows no record of any buildings within the wooded sections of BNA, as well as no demolition permits. Therefore, any farming activity that existed in this area was finished by 1895. A few possible clues exist, such as barbed wire near the pond area. However, a local resident who grew up near BNA in the 1930's stated that the barbed wire "was before my time" and remembers no farming in the immediate area (Pederson, interview).

It is known, however, that large scale farming operations did exist in the surrounding area. The G.G Hartley farm, located just north of BNA, began operation in the 1890's and grew to a large scale vegetable and dairy farm (Slabodnik, 1990). A dairy farm remembered as Singleton's or Bayview Zenith by local residents was located in what is now the main UMD campus, and seems to have operated into the 1940's.

### **A Neighborhood Perspective**

Much of the traceable history of this area lends a picture of neighborhood development, a story of subdivision and suburbs. The area was within the city limits, and RJ Slabodnik describes the Hartley estate as "a virtual island in a growing urban sea" (1990). It can be assumed that the wooded BNA tracts were similar islands, even in the early part of this century. Just to the northeast, the GlenAvon Addition began rapid development in

the late 1800's, building substantial churches and schools. In 1890 the Motor Line Improvement Company was organized by a group of "Duluth capitalists" (McCrae, 1960) to provide streetcar service to the area. The single track railway ran along 4th Street from the area of 24th Avenue, up a short stretch of St. Marie street and along Woodland Ave. to the north (See map 3). This service was important in opening up the area to Duluth workers who wished to live further from downtown, and even delivered packages to outlying corners (MacCrae, 1960).

It was in this rather urban setting that the first recorded dwellings were built in the BNA region. The neighborhood history is to be found in the far eastern side of BNA, as well as the surrounding University property and still privately owned parcels (Map 1, region D). The university's desired property line extends to Midway Avenue. Most of this property was acquired through purchase, beginning in the 1960's and continuing to the present.

Most of the current neighborhood visible today along Gold street is found within the Oakland Park Addition, a 39.9 acre area platted in 1887. The 10 acre area adjacent to that which now includes Oakland Apartments and parts of the wooded BNA and pond is known as the Motorline Park Division, platted in 1891 (see map 3). The early platting of this area shows optimism for development that does not seem to have occurred. Some streets shown on paper were never built, even after installation of city sewers in the 1950's. They can still be seen today, dislocated among the woods. Halsey and Maryland streets were



slated to continue westward into the woods, and a 1950's era concrete culvert can be seen spanning the creek for the planned Maryland street. Again, it is fortunate that these large scale plans never materialized. The neighborhoods that did develop, however, offer an interesting historical perspective of the area.

The subtle remains of a house and garden located in the woods of this eastern area are what originally interested myself and others in the history of this area. With a little searching, a productive apple tree can be found near the remains of a garden. A rhubarb plant, raspberries and a highbush cranberry can still be seen. Near the garden area is a sunken foundation area, with evidence of landscaping all around, including slate steps leading down the riverbank. Many large, dead trees exotic to Minnesota surround the likely house area. It was obviously well cared for long ago, but had been fading for many years. The first step to information was to place the last probable years of habitation. A nearby abandoned electric or telephone pole and even the rhubarb bush offered clues. The pole displayed a nail inscribed 39, which I was told by Minnesota Power denoted the year of installation. Rhubarb plants can live approximately 50 years, which also fit into the general era of the 1940's to 50's. I was intrigued. Who planted this rhubarb plant, who cared for these trees?

The legal record of this mystery proved to be rather sparse. No building permit exists, leading me to believe it was built before 1895. The first record appears in the form of an

electrical permit from 1920. The house is described as "old" and only 1 floor, requiring 3 light fixtures. The owner was A.L. Glenn, a timbercruiser who moved in sometime between 1914 and 1918 (Polk directories). Lack of a building permit indicates that he did not build the structure, and he lived there for a short time.

Local residents proved to be a wonderful source of knowledge for the era of the 1930's and beyond. The house is remembered by four separate people as the "Penny cabin", a summer dwelling used by Dr. Arthur Penny, a Duluth physician. I was unable to find any record of this, and am unsure of how it matches with other information. It is likely that Dr. Penny rented the property to others, as it was not his permanent residence. Jean Harden, who grew up in the area in the 1930's, remembers it as "an ideal summer place". She believes that it was a dark green shingled cabin, with a porch and a back that was just windows. (Harden, interview). She and Kenneth Pederson, another long time resident, remember the cabin as quite primitive, but surrounded by large gardens, apple and plum trees, and a tennis court. I was told Dr. Penny's son often played tennis. It was also a "real good sunny place for a garden", remembers Jean Hardin, and Dr. Penny was apparently quite a gardener. Irma Jacobson, a later resident, remembers that he offered a plot to Mr. Taylor, a principal at Denfeld High. Mr. Taylor was afflicted with arthritis, and was "cured" by this gardening activity.

Other residents of this cabin, officially known as 418

Halsey, included Blanche and John Loveland and family. City directories show them as residents here from 1931 until the 1940's. Jean Hardin remembers that Mrs. Loveland was a midwife, and likely helped Jean's mother deliver her sister, who was born at home on Gold street. Dr. Penny was also known to assist with neighborhood births if needed (Hardin, interview). Mrs. Loveland is listed separately from her husband as a nurse in the 1931 directory, an unusual condition that existed when the woman was also employed outside the home. She is also later listed as a WPA government seamstress. The Lovelands applied for the first building permit on this property, a chicken coop built in 1930. I have been told that the residents of the area often raised chickens and even an occasional cow, a sort of neighborhood farming. There is very little trace of these structures left, and neighbors remember the fire department burning them down for practice in the 1960's (Fontaine, interview).

Another house that once existed in this property was found on what is now the baseball field east of BNA. It was known as 420 Worth street, on one of the planned streets that no longer exists. It was built in 1902 by Otto Ackert. The project included a 36' by 20' single story house, as well as a 16' by 32' "barn". (building permit #4547). Otto Ackert is listed alternately as a dairyman or a laborer in 1920's city directories, and it is likely that he was employed at local dairy operations. It is possible that he did keep a cow or two, but local residents assert that by the 1930's, "it was not a farm" (Pederson,

interview). The fact that Ackert built the structures in an area that had been platted as a neighborhood eight years earlier further indicates that it was not a typical farming operation.

In later years, the barn was used as a garage by such later residents as "Apple Tree" Ingewald Anderson and his wife Irma. This nickname resulted from the 6 apple trees surrounding this house. Mrs. Irma Jacobson (previously Anderson) remembers trading apples for chickens with the neighbors, and raised a few ducks and a goose herself. This house was removed amidst some controversy in the 1980's to make room for the current baseball field.

Even though these structures are now gone, the neighborhood context they existed in still largely exists. A few residents of the present Gold Street grew up in the area and remember past events well. Kenneth Pederson remembers it as a "good old neighborhood" and fondly recalls roaming through the woods and Rock Hill area as a boy. Throughout his childhood, he never knew who owned the property, and said that "all us kids used it". He said that the creek was a particular focus in the neighborhood, both for clubhouses for the kids, and shacks, dumps and gardens for the adults. The Junior Birdmen of America, a club devoted to airplanes, apparently maintained an exclusive clubhouse there. The dump that still remains in the creek area dates from at least the 1930's, when all the neighbors used it instead of garbage pickup service (Pederson, interview).

The face of the land was a bit different in those times. Jean Hardin, who described herself as a tomboy, recalls her

mother telling her to "stay out of that swamp", which existed in the area of the current Rock Pond. Rock Hill is remembered as less grown over, with more boulders visible. Paths were popular walking destinations even in those days. (Hardin, interview). The people I have spoken to give a sense of a fairly typical mid-century working class neighborhood, located in a unique natural setting. Children went to Chester Park school, and often walked across the surrounding fields to pick strawberries and visit the local dairy for free chocolate milk. (Hardin, interview).

Some building of houses continued in this area into the 1950's and 60's, with the most recent being the house that currently sits surrounded by BNA. Don Fontaine, the owner of one of these houses, remembers moving in, pleased to find a rather rural area where not much further development was expected. The current plans of the university include purchasing and removing these houses when they are available. This occasionally leads to delicate politics, and all efforts should be made to negotiate fairly. I have enjoyed speaking to the residents of the area and feel that they add to the historical value of the land.

## Expansion of UMD

The process by which this land became the Bagley Nature Area we know today is closely tied to the expansion of the UMD campus itself. In 1947, the Duluth Teacher's College property was transferred to the University of MN, and thus became the Duluth branch campus. This marked the start of a large expansion of the University into an undeveloped area northwest of the original East 5th Street campus. In 1947 and 1948, a 160 acre area known as the Nortondale Division was acquired as the site of the new university buildings. (Bridges, 1984). This area was platted for roads and houses at the time of purchase (see map 4), but local residents remember it as a dairy farm and pasture area, a place where you "were careful of where you stepped" (Pederson, interview.).

The first mention of the land that would eventually become the BNA is found in the minutes of the July 6th, 1951 U of M Regents meeting. The Regents accepted a one acre gift of land from Charles K. and G.G. Dickerman, brothers who owned a real estate company in town. This property was just northwest of campus, near Rock Hill, an area discussed previously as a likely spot for a campus recreation area. (see map 1, area C) Mr. R.L. Griggs, a U of M Regent, had discussed this property with the Dickermans and was "prepared to purchase it for the University if they were unwilling to donate it" (Bridges, 1984).

Much of the other property in that immediate area was in tax-forfeit status, and was being held "in conservation". Much

of the land Kenneth Pederson remembers as being owned by "no one" during his childhood was actually being preserved by a foresighted city council. In 1942, the previously tax-forfeited property containing Rock Hill was placed in conservation "chiefly for the reason that this hill has been from time to time used for a ski slope..."(Hunner, letter 1951). University officials recognized the value of this property to the new campus, and if acquired it "was hoped that a recreation area for winter sports and biology field work could be developed" (Bridges 1984). The city council agreed this was a good idea, and in 1951 the title of a 12.8 acre parcel, including Rock Hill and surrounding area, were transferred from the City of Duluth to the University. Regent Griggs paid the delinquent taxes (see map 1 area B).

It is in this era that the first connection to the namesake Bagley family arises. On July 10, 1953, the Board of Regents voted to "accept with appreciation a gift from Dr. and Mrs. William R. Bagley and Dr. Elizabeth C. Bagley of the following legally described land..." (Bridges, 1984). The family donated in all about 17 acres to the new University campus in the Rock Hill area, north and south of the newly accumulated land (See map 1 area A). In a letter dated June 22, 1953, Dr. Bagley stated that "Lying as it does adjacent to the main University grounds and amplifying the setting of an 'observation hill', it adds to the facility for amateur winter sports" (W.R. Bagley, letter). He and his family wished the land to "add to the welfare of the UMD student body" and hoped that others would "also enjoy its resources". He "indicated use of the acreage as a nature

center would be appropriate" (Duluth Herald, 7-16-53). According to Charles Bagley, William's son, the Bagley family had little to do with the property before purchasing it in 1953 and donating it to the university. The interests of Dr. Bagley, however, make it fitting that the area bears his name today.

### **The Bagley Family**

Dr. Bagley was a well respected doctor in Duluth who was also known for his interest in wildlife conservation. He helped organize the Izaak Walton League in Duluth, serving as president at the local and state level, and director at the national level in the 1930's (Bridges 1989). He spent hours filming wildlife from duck blinds when the idea of wildlife photography was quite new. One newspaper article exclaimed that "Dr. W.R. Bagley Goes 'Shooting' With Movie Films as Ammunition" (D.N.T, 4-26-42). Showings of his films at local schools were known to draw 800 people. He was also interested helping young people abstain from smoking and drinking, once starting a teen night club for this purpose (Bridges, 1989). Mrs. Bagley was also well known around town, winning the "Mother of the Year Award" and other joint awards with her husband. Daughter Dr. Elizabeth Bagley, who participated in the land donation, gained recognition in 1961 as the first female Chief of Staff in a Duluth hospital (D.N.T. 1-20-61). Overall, the Bagley family members were outstanding citizens of Duluth.

In 1975, UMD Building naming committee proposed changing



the name of this nature area to recognize the Bagley's generous gift, estimated to be worth \$157,058 at 1974 prices. On March 12, 1975, it was decided that the area previously known as Rock Hill or University Park would be officially named the W.R. Bagley Nature Area (Bridges, 1989). It is a fitting reminder of the ideals of this Duluth doctor.

### **Early UMD Uses and Plans**

Once the University obtained the BNA land in the 1950's, uses and plans began soon after. In 1957 a tow rope was installed, and Rock Hill saw continued use as a ski area. Many sections of ski classes were offered, and the hill was open to students, staff and the public on the weekends. (College Management, 1972). One of the first records concerning "development" of BNA is found in a 1961 letter from Biology Professor Paul Munson to the business manager of UMD, about projects requiring attention in this land. Among projects discussed were the elimination of dumps, removal of "wilderness camps" and the clearing of trees "which obstruct the view of Duluth Harbor" from the top of the Hill. The perspective on management of the trees is quite interesting. Workers were instructed to leave other downed trees where they fell, as it is "natural and necessary part of the total picture" (Munson, letter 1961). One project that seems out of line with this total picture is the proposed golf green- it was, however, listed number 10 out of 11 projects, and it is assumed the project

never materialized.

Intrusive development and the creation of an exotic species arboretum was discussed by Biology Professor Flaccus in a 1963 letter. He stated that he was opposed to the "improvement" of Rock Hill, and felt the planting of exotic conifers in the area was wasteful and foolish. He focused on the "attractive spring wildflowers" found in the area, and hoped that "there are some areas that can be left entirely alone, so that some natural vegetation can be enjoyed for its educational and esthetic value" (Flaccus, letter 1963). From these early letters, it seems that much of the management and ideals behind running the new nature area fell to the Biology Department, occasionally at odds with landscape planners and other university employees.

This situation was somewhat remedied by the creation of a Master Plan for the area in 1967. Ideas of "development" were somewhat different from current ideals, but it is amazing how concerned early planners were with preservation. This Master Plan shows a focus on developing this "unused and undeveloped" area into a demonstration "multi-purpose recreational facility". There is an emphasis on opening up the area to the "handicapped, elderly and underprivileged" as well as UMD students. The plans for an exotic arboretum were substituted by a desire for a native species planting, and more emphasis was placed on the existing natural resources of the area such as the stream, bog and woodland habitats. High or medium intensity use was "expected in sections of the park with much of the site being retained in its natural environment" (Master plan, 1967).

This development was made possible in part by a fund-matching grant from the US Department of the Interior, through the Land and Water Conservation Program. The University invested \$57,000 in this project, and the government contributed the same amount. These funds were used to hire the Duluth firm Architectural Resources to design trails, bridges and the pond, and even a Nature Center shelter structure. In 1968, a contract was granted to a Duluth construction firm, and work began on these "recreational improvements" (College Management, 1972). This project included digging the 1.3 acre pond and moving an old warming house previously donated by the DM & IR Railway (Bridges, 1985). A ski tow power house was built to improve the ski facility, but the planned multiple use shelter was deleted due to lack of funds.

Skiing continued for a few years after this on Rock Hill, but activity was essentially finished by 1975, when an injury lawsuit and the newly opened Spirit Mountain ski area made the site impracticable to operate (Gilbertson, personal comm. 1996). Remains of these structures are still somewhat visible on the top of Rock Hill. Other concrete structures on the hill are present, but do not offer many clues to their use. One small square building likely dates from the 1950's, when the US Geodetic survey maintained a seismograph station atop the hill (D. Herald, 7-16-53).

The new Rock Pond was used early on by Biology classes, but in recent years has not seen much use. This is probably due to a variety of reasons, including a shift within the Biology

department away from field based activities. Other resources in the area are often utilized instead.

The idea of a multiple use shelter or nature center has been a persistent theme in plans for BNA from the start, even though one was never built. A proposal was again made in 1988 by the UMD Outdoor Program to "construct 2 log buildings as an Interpretive Center for natural history education" including the large scale maple sugarbush operation (Gilbertson, letter 1988). This project was also defeated due to lack of funds. The Outdoor Program suffered another facilities setback in 1992, when the "sugar shack" burned, destroying valuable equipment and the only building present in the area.

#### **Current Uses and Concerns**

As previously discussed, BNA is the site for a variety of diverse uses throughout the year. It is a perfect setting for teaching nordic skiing, and offers a unique outdoor classroom for many academic and informal courses. It is an example of biodiversity in both the UMD and Duluth context, and is a valuable resource for all. This resource must be preserved. As far back as 1972, university officials realized that "Rock Hill will be ruined as a natural refuge and subject of scientific study unless strict control is exercised over its use" (College Management, 1972). In 1990, this continuing protection process led to the creation of the Bagley Nature Area Management Committee, made up of university employees and officials that

are involved in the use of BNA. This Ad Hoc committee was created to "help protect the area as well as serve as an advisement for future use" (Gilbertson, BNAMEC 1990). The committee offers considerations for wise planning, including "maintaining use of the area that is most conducive to its present state with minimal environmental alterations"(BNAMEC). BNA is a valuable community resource, and must be managed accordingly.

Many people who enjoy BNA have developed strong feelings about preserving it. David Johnson, a past ski instructor and ski trail groomer, states that BNA is "too important as a recreation and nature area to not receive special protection" (Johnson, report 1990). Johnson has also been vocally opposed to the destruction of a beaver dam in the area. Personally, I have enjoyed BNA immensely in its present state, and worry that any changes may destroy the delicate wilderness-like environment.

One change that is eventually planned for the BNA region is the construction of a Grounds Maintenance facility directly east of the current BNA boundary. This would place it squarely within the neighborhood region discussed previously, creating an impact on both historical and environmental resources. Ken Gilbertson, Outdoor Program director, has expressed concern at this proposal, asking for proper "consideration of the educational and recreational units that use this area" (Gilbertson, Letter 1990). David Johnson, ski instructor, feels that construction would "eliminate an excellent cross country (ski) teaching area and would have nothing but a negative impact

upon the BNA" (Johnson, report 1990). Greg Fox, vice chancellor of finance, explained recently that the plan is not set in stone, and that protecting the surrounding area is a priority (D.N.T. 2-11-96). It has been said that the building is not planned for a number of years, and that opportunities for public comment will be available.

### Conclusion

As a red fox is glimpsed ambling through the woods, a child first tastes a bit of real maple syrup. A student discovers the joy of skiing, while still others enjoy tracking rabbits through the snow. These events are all part of the educational experience at UMD, and all are made possible by the existence of Bagley Nature Area. The history of this area shows a long tradition of appreciating and preserving the land, as well as an amazing joint effort to establish this campus resource. It is my hope that by telling the story of Bagley Nature Area, I may inspire others to appreciate and preserve this area in the spirit it was created.

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