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TRYING TO PRESERVE A LEGACY

Relatives rally to save the home of first forest preserve chief

By Marni Pyke, Reprinted from Page One of the Daily Herald, Friday, May 12, 2006



Russell McKee, 81-year-old son of the first DuPage County forest district chief, gathered at the Glen Ellyn home he lived in to try to save it from demolition.

Combining a protest and a homecoming into one, descendants of the DuPage County Forest Preserve's first superintendent rallied Thursday to save his legacy.

Thirteen relatives of Robert McKee — some hailing from as far away as North Carolina, New Jersey and California — gathered outside his former home at Churchill Woods Forest Preserve in Glen Ellyn.

Two Depression-era limestone buildings at the preserve, which also housed the district's original headquarters and board room, are slated for demolition.

McKee family members, backed by Glen Ellyn historic preservationists, said the structures, constructed as part of the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s, are valuable and must be spared.

"If we don't act now, the buildings will be lost and with them an important part of history," said Lance McKee, Robert's grandson, who lives in Massachusetts.

Members of the Citizens for Glen Ellyn Preservation said a state agency has confirmed the McKee house, which reflects colonial revival architecture, would have a good chance of landing on the National Register of Historic Places.

Supporters say the structures could be rented for social and corporate events or used by the district staff.

District commissioners voted in March to bulldoze the buildings, which are in need of repair. It was estimated fixing them up would cost \$450,000, while demolition would cost \$100,000. The savings could be used to improve trails across the county, commissioners said.

President Dewey Pierotti said he would ask for an independent appraisal of the costs of fixing the structures.

"I'm in a difficult position," he said. "I can't be subjective about this, I have to be objective. On a personal level, I'd love to keep it open."

But the district faces many expensive projects — including ones involving historic buildings such as the Peabody Estate in Oak Brook, estimated to cost \$12 million to fix, Pierotti said.

And \$450,000 would only make the buildings functional; it would cost more to have them used for public functions, he noted.

Pierotti did promise there would be no sudden actions.

"I'm not going to do a Meigs Field thing," Pierotti said, referring to the destruction of the runway at the Chicago lakefront airport in the wee hours of the morning in 2003 on orders from Mayor Richard M. Daley.

On Thursday, Russell McKee, 81, gazed through a window into the home where he spent his boyhood. Now a Michigan resident, the son of Robert McKee recalled his dad's passion for conservation.

Russell said he and a friend would tag along while his dad worked, riding on the running board of Robert's Buick as he drove through the preserves. Every time Robert saw trash, the Buick would stop and the kids would hop off and collect it.

"He was the first environmentalist I knew," Russell said. "By force of his will he was able to extend his values to a place like this."

Russell fingered the limestone, recalling watching the building come to life in 1936.

"I was the unofficial and unpaid water boy for the stone masons," he said. "It's unbelievable craftsmanship. I hope it's not thrown away."

Commissioner Roger Kotecki of Carol Stream said the district has a wonderful track record of preserving historic buildings. These include the 1939 Danada House in Wheaton, the 1920s-era Peabody Estate and the 1850s-era Graue Mill, both in Oak Brook, and the 1890s-era Kline Creek farmhouse in Winfield.

All these structures cost millions to maintain, he noted.

"We have all these historical buildings that absorb resources," Kotecki said.

This comes at a cost to the main mission to preserve open space. There are thousands of acres of land that need to be restored to a native state and miles of trails that should be built — both of which are expensive too, Kotecki said.

"The most important thing is to get people out on the land, instead of into another building," he said. "It's a sad thing to lose a reminder of history. But we can record it and display it in other locations."

However Lance McKee argued that preserving the original headquarters is more important than priorities like the Peabody mansion, owned by coal baron Francis Peabody.

"If you can put millions into the mansion of a coal magnate, you could put \$450,000 into the homes of the people who built the forest preserve system," he said.

The district's second superintendent, H.C. Chuck Johnson, lived in the residence for 30 years.

"These guys," Lance McKee said, "were conservationists and environmentalists before it meant anything to anyone."