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The Story of O'Hara Woods

If you've taken in a concert at Deer Crossing Park or walked around Lake Strini, you've seen O'Hara Woods. Do you know the story of the woods, who O'Hara was, and why they are named after him?

A large portion of the land occupied by O'Hara Woods was owned by two brothers, John and Herbert Alexander (no relation to the Alexander Construction Company that built Hampton Park). Late one night in 1969, Romeoville Mayor John O'Hara was told that the woods were for sale. He spent the next few hours trying to reach the Alexander brothers, who had since moved to Colorado. When he was finally able to reach John Alexander, he told him the Village wanted to buy the woods. John said he needed to discuss it with his brother and would call back the next day. True to his word, John called back and asked if the woods would be used for a park. When O'Hara assured him they would be, John agreed to the sale and even lowered the price from \$3,250 to \$3,000 per acre.

On October 15, 1969, the Village Board unanimously passed an ordinance for the purchase of the 68 acres of woodland and authorized a payment of \$204,000 to the Alexanders. By the end of October, a down payment of \$10,000 was hand delivered to the brothers in Grand Junction, Colorado by Mayor O'Hara and village attorney Richard Buck. Thanks to a matching open space grant from the federal government, the purchase only ended up costing the Village \$102,000. Following the Alexander purchase, another seven acres were purchased from Allied Chemical and five remaining acres were bought from another corporation. By the end of 1971, the Village owned 80 acres of pristine woodland, something Mayor O'Hara called at the time "probably my most profound accomplishment [as mayor]." As O'Hara left office in April of 1973, the last official act of the seated Village Board was to name the woods after the man who had spearheaded the purchase.



Mayor O'Hara presents a check to John, Mary, Herbert and Dorothy Alexander for the purchase of 68 acres of woodland.

Nearly a decade later, the woods would receive special classification. On July 7, 1982, the Village Board dedicated O'Hara Woods as an Illinois Nature Preserve under the Illinois Nature Preserves System Act. This status is reserved for the highest quality/most important habitats in the state. Permanently protected by state law, nature preserves are private and public lands that have rare plants,

animals, or other unique natural features. About a year later, on July 9, 1983, a ceremony for the new classification was held. John O'Hara, then living in Connecticut, returned to Romeoville for the festivities.

What makes O'Hara Woods worthy of this classification? According to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, O'Hara Woods is a natural prairie grove containing undisturbed forest and savanna once typical of the region. "Protected from prairie fires in pre-settlement times by wet soil and a steep ravine, it is one of the last undisturbed maple prairie groves remaining in northeastern Illinois. O'Hara Woods has been lightly grazed and timbered since pre-settlement times." IDNR states the complex biological cycles of the forest soils are a key feature of the woods and lists bur oak, hawthorn, white ash, sugar maple, basswood, red oak, blue ash, and walnut as the dominant tree species. Flora of the forest floor include species such as broad-leaved puccoon, squirrel corn, blue-eyed Mary, bluebells, fire pink, skunk cabbage, and marsh marigold. As for animals, one may spy deer, squirrels, raccoons, and red foxes scampering about. Because the woods lie along a migratory route, there are roughly 130 species of birds, from great horned owls and songbirds to migrant waterfowl that can be found among the trees. In early May, a visitor in the wee hours of the morning can be greeted by the singing of 60 different species of birds, all at one time.

55 years after John O'Hara delivered a check to Colorado, the woods are still with us and have actually grown! Between 2006 and 2008, the Forest Preserve District of Will County purchased 53.5 acres of woodland to the west of O'Hara Woods. While not as biologically diverse or pristine as the original sections of O'Hara Woods, its addition brings the total protected area to 137 acres. You can enjoy this preserved nature by walking along the trails that wind through the trees or relaxing near the Pete Capone Pavilion on the eastern edge of the forest.



All 137 acres of O'Hara Woods

Since the fall of 2019, the Conservation Foundation has been working with the Village to maintain this land. Volunteer workdays are held once a month, inviting members of the community to learn what is necessary to maintain the woods and then applying this knowledge. Activities include removing invasive species like garlic mustard, collecting seeds from native plants, making burn piles, and picking up garbage. If you would like to help take care of this community treasure, visit www.romeoville.org and search for "O'Hara Woods" to see the schedule and details of upcoming workdays.

There are over 2,400 acres of protected open space, parks, and forest throughout Romeoville and now you know the story behind 80 of them!