



OASIS IN THE FOREST

By Mitch Brown

Photograph by David J. Schwartz - Pics On Route 66

In the center of the state of Illinois, just eight miles southwest of Bloomington and 150 miles from the nearest skyscraper in Chicago, is the small unincorporated community of Funks Grove. Named after its earliest settlers, Isaac and Absalom Funk, back in the early 1800s, the area is famous for its vast expanse of prairie land and untouched forest. Located on the east side of one of the largest upland timbers in the state of Illinois, the woodlands of Funks Grove was designated as a national natural landmark around 1974, back at a time when that was a rare occurrence in the country.

"Back then, there were only about seventeen landmarks in the United States [there are now roughly 600]," said Eric Funk, one of the founding board members of the Sugar Grove Nature Center. "Portions of the land had never been touched, and there are roughly a thousand acres of timber which Sugar Grove is at the far edge." The research and paperwork were done by third-generation Funk brothers Gene, Lafayette, Paul, and Ted, who were responsible for a prosperous seed corn family business in McLean County.

And tucked shyly away from the main road, aka Route 66, that runs parallel to the land, rests what was previously a simple barn structure that is now known as the Sugar Grove Nature Center. It showcases to the public the natural beauty that Mother Nature has bestowed upon the land of Lincoln and earned Illinois the accolade of "The Prairie State."

It was January 1993, and the Funks Grove Cemetery Association had purchased an attractive piece of land, approximately 246 acres, that was previously owned by the Funk and Stubblefield families. The purchase was made with the intention of reforesting the area to a pre-settlement landscape. By November of the same year, a young woman named Mary Olson presented the idea of a nature center to the association board, citing that there was no nature center in McLean County, and that this would be the perfect location for it. The board agreed.

"They thought that it was a good idea and contributed raw materials and labor, but no money," said Funk. "She worked at it for a couple of years and then decided to leave to get her Master's degree. The cemetery association still believed that it was a good idea, so they took on the job of building it while, at the same time, beginning to do reforestation that was run by John Rehtmeyer."

Between 1994 and 1999, the board, along with help from family and volunteers, turned that simple barn into a thriving nature center. Gary Woith was hired as the manager, and took on the project until 2002, after which, Angela Smith came on board around April 2003, and became primarily responsible for its development. She would also go on to marry Eric Funk.

Angela quickly set out to attract volunteers from Habitat for Humanity, the Twin City Astronomer Club, and the Illinois Nature Preserve Commission. She also put together a grant in 2006 for \$2,484,000 in order to acquire an additional 476 acres of forest, the money attained by the Clean Energy Commission.

However, possibly her most significant contribution to Sugar Grove, which is also one of its more popular attractions, is the Imagination Grove. Growing up in Chicago, there was an area of construction where Angela liked to play in the piles of dirt that would inevitably accumulate. This childhood experience inspired her to develop a safe area at Sugar Grove where kids could play freely with minimal parental supervision. On July 1st, 2004, Imagination Grove was born, consisting of a creek where kids can splash around, trees that they can climb, an open area to dig in the dirt, and even a zipline and treehouse. Not only did this area become popular with families and an attraction for field trips, but it was also a cost-effective addition.

"She developed it with a total investment of one hundred dollars," said Funk. "She was approached later by organizations who told her that they had \$200,000 to build their own Imagination Groves, and she said, 'You can do that if you want, but you don't need that kind of money.'"

While Imagination Grove is great for the kids, the nature center has kept the attention of the public thanks to its other attractions, such as the observation buildings (which were constructed in 2000) where the Twin City Amateur Astronomy Club hosts monthly viewing sessions for the public. There's also the Blacksmith Forge, which came in the fall of 2002 and provides summer classes to teach people how to forge metal, a program so popular that they often have to turn people away. But a nature center wouldn't earn its proper name without just that: Nature. Sugar Grove offers eight miles of trails through beautiful prairie and forest, ranging from widely mowed grass trails to dirt and mulch. The hiking maneuverability is never too challenging, extending between easy to moderate difficulty. A stroll through the historic forest is serene and restorative and walking through these woods offers a definite escape from the busy world only 30 minutes away.

Sugar Grove is currently in a transitional period following COVID-19. While there are no solid numbers of yearly visitors, back in 2019, it was estimated that the Nature Center's programs brought in roughly 20,000 people. When taking into account the number of hikers who walk the trails and enjoy the scenery, it increased the number to around 45,000. Then 2020 happened, and things took a hit.

"Because of COVID, everything shut down. The trails were open to people, there was a reduction in the maple syrup program, but the pandemic closed everything down," explained Funk. "Now, we're in the process of trying to rebuild. It's a not-for-profit organization, so we're in need of donations."

Both outdoor enthusiasts and everyday individuals are sure to appreciate the calm and serenity of being completely engulfed in nature; surrounded by the aged maple, hickory, and oak trees that envelop visitors in a panorama view of greens in the summer and rustic hues in autumn. Its stillness and untampered qualities are bound to teleport visitors to what it must have felt like, way back in the 1800s.