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**Some Notes on the Early History of the Robert B. Gordon Natural Area for
Environmental Studies**

by William Overlease
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Provided May 2006
(deceased November 30, 2007)

When I first came on campus as a professor in biology in 1963, I soon became aware of the excellent wooded area on South Campus. Having spent five years with the Indiana State Parks, my first thought was how can we preserve the area? I began to inquire about its future and was told in no uncertain terms that the land was primarily for the use and development of the Health and Physical Education Department. The biology department had no real say or role in its possible use.

Plans were made to terrace some of the forested area for practice fields etc. It didn't make sense to spend the effort and money to terrace the ridge when we already owned flat open land nearby. The plan was sent to the State and was turned down for the obvious reasons. The wooded area was saved from destruction but had no real protection.

I agitated for several years on campus to anyone who would listen to preserve the wooded land. Finally, I was granted an opportunity to present my case to the Board of Trustees. This was in 1970 as I remember. I gave my proposal to the Board or representatives of the Board. It didn't appear to be a very formal meeting. They rejected the proposal and let me know in no uncertain terms that they didn't want to have me agitating for it on campus in the future. I felt squashed. It was finished.

Then a miracle happened. The first Earth Day in the United States. The Board invited Bradley Gottfried, a biology student on campus, to give a report on the "climax forest" on South Campus to the Campus Development Committee of the Board. The Board was very impressed with his report and sent him a letter "in tribute to his mature approach and effective endeavors concerning his presentation regarding the climax forest" on the South Campus.

At the April 21, 1971 Board of Trustees meeting a motion was made by Mr. Hilbush "that the Board approve a recommendation to do everything possible to save the climax forest on the South Campus and that study of this matter be begun immediately."

The motion was seconded by Mrs. Harney and carried. She had been a willing ear and great supporter of the efforts to preserve the area over the years.

I think it is significant to note that Brian Gottfried had spent nearly a month studying the structure of and function of a portion of the “climax forest” on South Campus as part of the requirements for my college ecology class. He did an excellent job in his report.

The complete reversal by the Board is a tribute to their receptivity to the new idea of “earth care” that Earth Day brought vividly into national attention.

On November 10, 1973 we formerly dedicated the Robert B. Gordon Natural Area for Environmental Studies.