

HIDDEN



TREASURES

A Vision for the Future

By **LAKEDRA C. BYRD**, Southwest Region Outreach Forester

One fall afternoon while riding the subway home from work, Mrs. Ellen Byrd realized she was fed up with the hustle and bustle of city life and wanted to get back to the basic, simple life. For many years, Mrs. Byrd spent her summer vacation in Wilcox County doing volunteer work at the Snow Hill Institute with a close friend. Each year her love for the South grew stronger and stronger. One afternoon, she received a phone call from her friend, notifying her about some property for sale in Furman. Not knowing the condition of the land, but having a great love for the South, Mrs. Byrd purchased the 37 acres, sight unseen. Arriving in Furman several weeks later, she was surprised at the deteriorated condition of the property. The forest was very dense and overgrown, and the pond had not been maintained for several years. That did not break her spirit. There was a great deal of work to be done!

Having a spiritual vision and divine motive, Mrs. Byrd began implementing her plan to establish The Black Freedman's Living Historical Farm for Children, Inc. (BFLHFFC). Because of the various needs of this community, the goal of the BFLHFFC is to provide an educational, cultural, recreational, and historical environment that will inspire the youth to develop a sense of self-respect, as well as become responsible individuals in relation to their history and natural resources. The BFLHFFC was founded on February 24, 1994, and is located 52 miles southeast of Montgomery and 32 miles southeast of Selma in rural Wilcox County in Furman, Alabama.

Being a retired preschool teacher and having a love for children and a strong

concern for the environment, Mrs. Byrd wanted to show children how their inner world connects to the outer world of all living things: people, plants, and animals. On October 12, 1995, the farm established its Environmental Education Program (EEP). This program is



Mrs. Ellen Byrd

designed to stimulate environmental awareness and educate youth as well as the citizens of Wilcox County to understand the importance of good stewardship and how to protect our natural resources.

Since the establishment of the EEP, the farm has touched the lives of more than 400 elementary and middle school students throughout the Wilcox area. During the year, the farm has several programs to promote environmental awareness, such as Forestry Day,

Wildlife Habitat Day, and Water Ecology Day. Specialists from different state, private, and local agencies come to teach the students about wetland preservation, tree identification, soil and water conservation, and wildlife conservation.

As an extension to the EEP, the farm also participates in an annual poster and essay contest sponsored by the Wilcox County Soil and Water Conservation District. The students enjoy the competition of this yearly event. Certificates and cash prizes are awarded for their art and essays on various environmental topics.

The EEP is supported through grants, donations, county agencies, volunteers, and board members. With their assistance, Mrs. Byrd was able to install a syphoning system in an existing 3-acre fishpond to control beaver and the water level, construct a one mile nature trail, install tree identification posts and plates, build a bridge across the wetland area where a small alligator resides, install duck boxes and bird houses throughout the farm and create an oval-shaped flower garden that serves as a "backyard garden" for wildlife activities.

Lynn Garris from the Department of Conservation was so impressed with the work that Mrs. Byrd was doing, she decided to write a letter of recommendation to the Wilcox County Forestry Commission requesting that she become a candidate for the TREASURE Forest Program. In March 2000, Mrs. Byrd was certified as a TREASURE Forest landowner through Environmental Education. Within a few months of this certification, she became a proud recipient of the W. Kelly Mosley

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Environmental Achievement Award for her excellence in forestry, wildlife, and related sciences.

Having accomplished so much, Mrs. Byrd feels that there is still much more to be done. There is another segment of the farm that has not been completed. The historical aspect of the BFLHFFC entails linking history and environmental education together. Presently, she is working on a 3,000 square foot facility that was once used as a dairy and is now

being converted into an environmental lab for hands-on observation. This project will be completed soon will be an asset to the community as well as an enhancement to the TREASURE Forest program.

With spiritual guidance and commitment, Mrs. Byrd envisions The Black Freeman's Living Historical Farm for Children, Inc. as a major educational center not only in Alabama, but eventually the nation. 

Visit the AFC Web Site: www.forestry.state.al.us