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A SCHOOL "IN THE WOODS"

Many preschools serve the Kensington, Bethesda, and Chevy Chase areas. One has a setting with unique ties to prominent figures in regional and national history. This setting also has reflected and shaped the school's approach to early childhood education – an approach exemplified by the fact that the children spend 80 percent of their time outdoors.

Outdoor Nursery School is tucked into two-and-a-half acres of woods near Connecticut Avenue. Evelyn Litwin, a Parkwood resident and a longtime teacher at the school, recently recounted its history and current activities.

A PAST CONNECTION TO ALEXANDER BELL

While the school's history goes back over 50 years, the story of its home goes back even further – almost to the turn of the century. In 1905, Alexander Graham Bell's daughter Marian and her husband, the noted horticulturalist David Fairchild, decided to buy 43 acres of land on the outskirts of Chevy Chase. They enjoyed picnics there, and Bell himself had a hut in which he did some of his experiments.

A PAST CONNECTION TO ALEXANDER BELL

The myriad and unusual plants and trees on the site today reflect David Fairchild's lifelong curiosity about plants. This curiosity led to his wide travels, particularly in Japan, China, and Australia. There, he gathered many kinds of Plants and tree seedlings. He brought them to his estate to see how they would do in this climate. One of the trees – which still stands – is the first Japanese cherry tree ever planted in the Washington area. This tree is the forerunner of the famed cherry trees that surround the Tidal Basin. And it was David Fairchild who arranged this gift from the Japanese government. The soybean, Japanese rice, Peruvian alfalfa, and thousands of other plants are also lasting legacies of David Fairchild's worldwide explorations and his research for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"JAPANESE VICTORIAN" ARCHITECTURE

When the Fairchild's decided to have a house built, they wanted it to embody their love of the outdoors and their appreciation of Japanese architecture. Completed about 1910, the house blends aspects of Victorian and Japanese design. The 2-story stucco building uses much oak in the interior, especially in the front hall staircase. The building has 12 rooms; each main downstairs room has access to the outdoors.

OUTDOOR NURSERY'S ROOTS

The Fairchild's eventually sold their home and land which they named "in the Woods." When Chevy Chase resident Bertha Belt started an out-of-doors nursery school from her backyard in 1933, the importance of early childhood education was a new concept. She went from door to door on Meadow Lane. Ten children enrolled in her school. When the school outgrew its original home, Mrs. Belt found "In the Woods" in 1954, where it continues to this day.

THE PROGRAM "IN THE WOODS"

The school has flourished, and now serves children aged 2 ½ to 5 in 2, 3, and 5-day programs. The school's philosophy is that young children need a broad base of experiences with materials and people and that their social and emotional progress is their most important need.

"Young children are ready to learn many things about the world they live in, and the outdoors is an ideal place to learn," says Evelyn. "The children are learning all the time – from each other, from group experiences, from their teachers, and from the natural environment. Explorations of plants and living things, vigorous physical activity, crafts and painting on tables and easels set up outdoors under huge trees, and activities celebrating the traditions of diverse cultures are all part of the program."

"We hope that we're opening doors," says Evelyn. "Each day when we go outside there's something new. We don't know what we'll find. Maybe we'll find a perfect web, and talk about spiders and webs that day. Or maybe we'll find locusts or a beautiful patch of moss."

The staff is another strength of the school. Jean Burgard, who lives in Garret Park, and Evelyn Litwin have been there almost 25 years each. Barbra Hutchison, another longtime teacher, lives in Chevy Chase View.

Children who have graduated come back to visit, and some have been aides in the school's summer program. In recent years, some parents who attended the original school have sent their children their.

Each of the school's four classes has its own suite of homelike rooms and its own outdoor yard. The yards' names hint at some of their main features. "Walk in the Woods Yard" has a tree-canopied path and a climbing tree. The other yards are the Spruce Tree Yard, The Jungle Yard, and the Front Circle Yard.

Parents who would like to arrange a visit to the school should call Evelyn Litwin at 564-0152 or the school at 656-8871.

...Charlotte Wunderlich