

Vincent Wroblewski checks his dams, built to slow erosion in Remnant Cove. Photo by Marty Thies.



Managing old-growth forest in West Asheville

REMNANT COVE

by Calvin H. Allen

There's a story in Vincent Wroblewski's mailbox.

The mailbox stands beside a neighborhood street in West Asheville, overlooking the cove and waiting for Wroblewski.

Wroblewski comes every day to pick up his mail and to check on his two acres and a creek, which he calls Remnant Cove.

"This is my home, even though I don't have a house here yet," said Wroblewski, who owns Vince's Lawn Care. "The mailbox is a psychological first step."

For six years, Wroblewski has been recreating the wilderness that existed before West Asheville was settled.

"I call it Remnant Cove, because it's going to be a remnant of the forest that was here before the city," he said. "I'm managing these acres as old growth."

In addition to caring for his trees, Wroblewski has carpeted the forest floor with dozens of species of native plants and built footpaths along the creek, whose banks he reclaimed from erosion through a careful system of pools and check-dams.

When Wroblewski visits his cove, he moves slowly, stopping every few feet to check the growth of his half-dozen types of ferns, or to see how the mass plantings of snow trilliums, giant Solomon's seals and foam flowers are coming along.

"If the forest is undisturbed, you will see huge colonies of the same species," he said. "See how the May apples have taken over the creek banks after I controlled the erosion? I don't want Remnant Cove to have just one or two of each plant, like a botanical garden. That's like a zoo for plants."

He has equally strong feelings about his creek, which he has not yet named.

"When I bought the cove in '87, the creek was full of trash, including an old refrigerator and sink," Wroblewski said. "The banks were steep and undercut, with hardly any vegetation."

And so began the education of Vincent Wroblewski.

"I'd come down here when it rained and just watch," he said. "It was crazy, like a whitewater river. But if you watch the creek, it'll tell you what to do."

The creek told Wroblewski to dig its banks

in a gentler slope, to install seven stone check-dams to slow the water's flow, and to place stonework in the bends to prevent erosion. He has plans for another large pool and a small bridge.

"There's four kinds of salamanders in here, and a couple of kinds of crawfish," he said. "Now that the city's fixed the sewer leaks, the water runs nice and clear." He has seen wood ducks, owls, chipmunks, box turtles, rabbits and possum in the cove.

Wroblewski is also battling erosion along a stormwater culvert at the south end of the cove, which he calls the Gully.

"The city said they had caused the Gully, but they weren't responsible for it," he said, shaking his head.

Wroblewski has also dug and sifted sand from the creek to make a soft camping area under a huge American beech, the grandmother tree of his cove. He sees the future when he looks at the giant beech.

"That tree is 11-and-a-half feet around, and all of the beech in this cove came from it," he said. "It's probably between 250 and 400 years old."

He sweeps his hand up and down the creek. "One day, there might only be five giant trees on this whole side of the creek, and four over there."

But that is hundreds of years into the future, and Wroblewski is not just waiting around for the trees to grow. He's planning to build a small house to go with the sentinel mailbox, out of "rough-sawn pine, to blend in with the trees."

He also plans to invite his neighbors into the cove for an annual wildflower walk, to show off his pink and yellow moccasin flowers, hepatica, wind flowers, orchids and myriad other species.

Once the Gully is stabilized, Wroblewski plans a dwarf fruit orchard and vegetable garden on the south end.

He has taught himself about plants, trees, creeks and erosion, learning from books, botanical gardens and friends.

"It's funny, but I've learned more about myself than anything else working in the cove," he said. "Lessons about commitment, sticking to things, and doing things the way nature wants them done. Everything has to be in harmony with nature, or it doesn't work." ♦

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