

Sanctuaries for Healing

Sr. Mary Denis Maher

As we reflect today about the power of nature and the landscape to heal, we might do well to step back in time to the beginning days when the Western Reserve area was first being mapped out by Moses Cleaveland for the Connecticut Land Company.

On July 4, 1796, the surveyors first found the beginning of the east line of New Connecticut. One surveyor wrote, "We run about two miles south and encamped by a pond in a swamp. Plenty of gnats and mosquitoes; poor water... We were stopped by rain and encamped near an excellent brook, which we considered a very favorable circumstance. The next morning we left this place and went on to the end of the twenty-fifth mile, through the most abominable swamp in the word..

"In the day time," he wrote in his journal, "I had eaten raspberries, gooseberries, wintergreen berries and wintergreens, and in the night I began to grow sick at my stomach and soon after vomited....we all rose early in the morning, with meager looks and somewhat faint for want of eating and drinking, for where we camped there was no water, though we had a little rum."

However, when they finally came out of the swamps and woods on high ground and were able to view the land for the first time, they had a different view... One surveyor recounted, "we had a most pleasing prospect, a hill at the distance of four or five miles, with the valley that lay between, covered with stately trees and herbage, which indicated an excellent soil, altogether exhibited a delightful landscape, the beauty of which, I suppose, was enchanted from its being the first time we could look into the woods." Certainly an early example of the healing power of nature!!

Later, as lots in this Western Reserve area were being advertised to people in Connecticut, enticing descriptions called this "the fabled region of the West... the garden of America...an earthly paradise where everything which is considered a luxury, might be had almost without care, labor or exertion."

As we know, this area is rich indeed, yet many years of hard work, disease, sickness, disappointment, hard economic times lay in wait for the early pioneers before they were able to cultivate the land, and tame the forests, let alone appreciate its healing qualities for body and soul.

W.H. Auden, the British poet wrote, "Healing is not a science but the intuitive art of wooing nature." The power of the land to enrich, reward, and heal came slowly to our ancestors in this Western Reserve area as it does for our friends and relatives today in health care centers throughout the region.

This "wooing of nature" is carried out in three places —Hopewell Inn: A Community Farm for Mental Illness; Warren's Garden at Kethley House at Benjamin Rose Place- for people with dementia; Sensory Garden, Mentor Medical Campus for ambulatory patients. The creation of each place reflects the importance and value that working the land and growing one's own food or being surrounded by the sights and smells and textures of nature's abundance in all its seasons have in the healing process.

Although we all know the physical power of nature in its many moods and storms and its devastating effect on the earth and people, we also know the spiritual aspects of nature that soothe an agitated mind, provide beauty through senses often deprived of healthy experiences, and give reassurance that life can come from the tiniest seeds.

Our speakers today will describe each of their places of healing where nature has been wooed to complement and complete the healing process that science can only begin.