Friends of Yesler Swamp

NEIGHBORS—NOW FRIENDS— UNITE TO HELP RESTORE A WOODED URBAN WETLAND

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY JEAN COLLEY

With any luck, in early 2014 workers will descend into "Yesler Swamp" to build a permanent, all-weather boardwalk through one of the few remaining swamps in urban Seattle. The boardwalk will eventually wend through a 6.4-acre site (bounded by NE 41st Street, Surber Drive NE and Union Bay) just east of the Center for Urban Horticulture and managed by the University of Washington Botanic Gardens.

The impetus for a permanent boardwalk got started on a sunny afternoon in July 2009, although University of Washington faculty and students had proposed the idea several years earlier. Kern Ewing, UW professor of plant ecology, led a tour of the Union Bay Natural Area (aka the Montlake Fill) that day, having invited anyone who was interested to tag along. I almost didn't go, but my husband, Peter, thought we might enjoy it, so we walked the four blocks to "Ub-Na." I regularly biked the trail bisecting UBNA, but I was familiar only with the basics of this 74-acre tract.

At the conclusion of what turned out to be a tour punctuated with "Wow!" and "I didn't know that!" and "Really?!" we were all asked if we'd like to help at a *different* nearby site dubbed the

ABOVE: Beavers have constructed a huge lodge near the shore of Yesler Swamp. Occasionally, they can be spotted swimming nearby at dawn and dusk.

OPPOSITE: The Friends of Yesler Swamp board of directors, from left: Fred Hoffer, Jean Colley, Rob Edsforth, Jerry Gettel, Kern Ewing and Carol Arnold.

"East Basin" that sorely needed the community's assistance. A half dozen of us signed up, and that was the beginning of our relationship with what we quickly renamed "Yesler Swamp."

Rebuilding a Damaged Ecosystem

Yesler Swamp, a complex milieu of upland grasses that give way to dense vegetation and murky water, is not in some remote location: It's only a half mile from University Village, almost as close to Highway 520, and very close to hundreds of homes. Down at water level, it's almost 20 feet below the streets, hiding it from all but the most curious passersby.

A group of us started meeting regularly and learning what was needed to restore this area. We also were getting to know each other: Fred Hoffer, retired pediatric radiologist with a passion and seemingly unlimited energy for removing ivy and blackberries and blazing new trails; Carol Arnold, retired lawyer, master gardener and highly skilled organizer; Jerry Gettel, plant lover and retired consulting engineer who knows how to build things; Connie Sidles, master bird watcher and poetic chronicler of bird life at UBNA; Art Feinglass, theater producer who divides his time between New York City and Seattle; Allie Kerr, graphic designer and webmaster, who grew up across from Yesler Swamp; Fred Hoyt, associate director of UW Botanic Gardens; Rob Edsforth, knowledgeable and enthusiastic restoration proponent, recently awarded a master's degree in environmental horticulture and restoration ecology from UW; and Kern Ewing.

None of us realized just what lay ahead, but we all loved the site and could see why, with all the muck and water, a permanent boardwalk was needed. When we put on our mud boots and ventured down the soggy temporary trail (that at certain seasons is completely impassable), we found ourselves in the midst of a dozen or more towering black cottonwoods—hence the designation "swamp," which differs from a wetland in that it contains both woodlands and wetland. We then entered a dense thicket of willows (also lovers of wet soil), whose trunks—en masse—look like an abstract art installation. Finally, we reached the shore of Yesler Swamp, where we spied a huge beaver lodge and pilings poking out of the water—the latter a visual reminder that Seattle pioneer Henry Yesler ran a sawmill

nearby, more than a century earlier, and used Yesler Swamp as a mill pond.

Beneath the trees was a less pleasing sight: The understory was a jangle of blackberries, English ivy, reed canary grass, English holly, Canada thistle, field bindweed (morning glory) and English laurel—crowding out the native species.

Kern pointed out to us that Yesler Swamp is not near any large acreages of native vegetation. "As a consequence," he said, "it is bombarded by a seed rain from non-native plants; the climate that affects the site is urban—not rural or natural; and there are not great refuges of other native plants to replenish it with a native biota." That was kind of discouraging, but there was more: "Our surroundings are not very natural, so a lot of work is going to be required to keep Yesler Swamp looking like a real freshwater swamp."

Here are some of the things that Kern suggested we—and others—must do:

- Get rid of invasives
- Plant natives
- Create shade (most invasive plants like sun)
- Create structure (forest floor, understory, canopy)
- Make habitat
- Create visual interest
- Increase biodiversity
- Build biomass and organic material

He concluded, "If we do all of these things and are able to maintain a certain level of effort, we should be able to create an environment that

ABOVE: Valerie Chu of Seattle is among the many volunteers at Yesler Swamp.

CENTER CROSSOVER: Pilings from the old Yesler sawmill of the 1880s and 1890s provide perches for plants and birds in today's Yesler Swamp.

OPPOSITE TOP/BOTTOM: Volunteers from the community and UW students have joined ranks to restore Yesler Swamp.

supports plants, birds, mammals, fish, amphibians and other organisms, while providing ecological functions that improve our lives (water quality, hydrology, local climate). In addition, we can teach, learn and enjoy because of the presence of this ecosystem."

A Gathering of Friends

Fortunately for us, restoration was already underway—thanks to teams of UW undergraduate students who, in a series of capstone projects beginning in 2000, dug out some of the blackberries and reed canary grass, planted willows and other native species to shade out the invaders, and mapped out a rough trail.

Our part was to jump into students' efforts at restoration, and to figure out how to raise the funds to build a permanent boardwalk to replace the wood-chipped trails that were in constant danger of disappearing beneath the vegetation and the ooze.

Our little group collectively has a pretty good skill set, which we and many other volunteers who joined us began to apply to the tasks at hand. Neighbors didn't know about the site or the project, and they needed to be informed. We held regular guided "Swamp Walks" and advertised them widely. Not everybody was keen at first, but with time and effort, people have come around.

Organizationally, we became Friends of Yesler Swamp to provide us a public identity and allow us to raise money and hire experts to help. After a competitive process, we chose SBA Landscape Architects, who led the arduous and lengthy effort to obtain permits and approvals from city, state and federal environmental regulators. Charles A. Warsinske, principal with SBA, is still involved, now designing the permanent boardwalk and coordinating construction details.

Applying for grants is a time-consuming and thankless task, but Carol Arnold has kept us on track and optimistic. We've succeeded in raising

Yesler Swamp on a spring morning. The swamp, tucked in the northeast corner of Union Bay in Seattle, is close to the Center for Urban Horticulture.

more than $150,000 from City of Seattle and King County grants, our neighbors, and others supportive of the work and vision. That money will go toward building the boardwalk, which the UW has pledged to maintain over the long term. The trail will not only offer views of the swamp, the beaver lodge and the lagoon, but also protect wildlife by directing human foot traffic away from these sensitive areas.

Kern Ewing has continued as the faculty leader of the restoration, and more and more UW students dedicated to environmental restoration have adopted the site as a project. They—along with community volunteers—have

Yesler Swamp: A Recent History

Yesler Swamp is not pristine territory. In the 1880s and early 1890s, it was the site of a holding pond for lumber to be milled at Henry Yesler's nearby sawmill. In 1916, Lake Washington was lowered 8.8 feet when the Montlake Cut was excavated to link it with Lake Union. When the level of Lake Washington fell, the edges of Union Bay—including Yesler Swamp—were drained of water, leaving a fringe of cattail marsh. The last remnant of this original cattail marsh can be seen today in Yesler Swamp and in the unmanaged wildlife area to its west.

The swamp is part of the vast water system linking Lake Washington to Lake Union and the Ballard Locks. Water levels in this system fluctuate, gradually rising beginning in March and gradually falling in August. The slow flood into Yesler Swamp each spring changes its character, as portions of trail useable in winter become submerged in summer.

In the 1940s, student and faculty housing (demolished in the 1970s) was built on the present site of the Center for Urban Horticulture. The upland portion of Yesler Swamp was used for World War II "victory gardens" that can still be seen in a 1949 photograph.

Yesler Swamp marked the outflow of Yesler Creek until the 1950s, when the creek waters were diverted into a stormwater drain. But nature has its way: All sorts of plants, both good and bad, have provided habitat for numerous bird species—including ducks, coots, blue heron and bald eagles. And the swamp itself shelters beavers, fish and other creatures.

planted hundreds of native shrubs, including vine maple (*Acer circinatum*), serviceberry (*Amelanchier alnifolia*), red-twig dogwood (*Cornus sericea* ssp. *sericea*), black twinberry (*Lonicera involucrata*), western crabapple (*Malus fusca*), Indian plum (*Oemleria cerasiformis*), Pacific ninebark (*Physocarpus capitatus*), stink currant (*Ribes bracteosum*), red-flowering currant (*Ribes sanguineum*), baldhip rose (*Rosa gymnocarpa*), peafruit rose (*Rosa pisocarpa*), thimbleberry (*Rubus parviflorus*), red elderberry (*Sambucus racemosa*) and red huckleberry (*Vaccinium parvifolium*). A number of Sitka spruce (*Picea sitchensis*), western red cedar (*Thuja plicata*) and western hemlock (*Tsuga heterophylla*) also have been planted.

The indefatigable Fred Hoffer continues to chop out blackberry and ivy, and to document the restoration, section by section. Fred organizes "work parties," where volunteers wrestle with long ropy strands of ivy that still cling tenaciously to some of the trees, chop back the ever-encroaching vegetation from the trail, and don heavy gloves to prevent stabs from blackberry thorns. Invasives will likely be a problem to some degree for decades, but progress is being made.

The trail system, which we hope will be completed in the next few years, will ultimately include approximately 1,330 feet of raised boardwalk and 400 feet of a crushed rock surface trail. The access point will remain at the eastern parking lot at the Center for Urban Horticulture. The trail will be built using hand-held power tools in order to minimize our impact on the environment.

Two main factors have made us persist over the past four years: We have really enjoyed working with each other, and we believe we have an eminently worthy project.

Anyone interested in learning more or joining us should visit our Web site at http://yeslerswamp.org/.

Jean Colley, an editor and writer, is a member of the board of directors of the Friends of Yesler Swamp.