

My Obsession with Gravel Roads

By: Laurie Searle 4/15/07

My obsession with gravel roads began in the second grade, when my brother discovered a shortcut on the way home from school. We lived in Lake Zurich, IL which was then, as it is now, surrounded by forest preserves.

At first I was nervous about getting my school clothes dirty as we wiggled through the brambles and thickets, but when we came upon a gravel road, my whole world changed.

As we crunched along the gravel road, I saw more shades of green than I could imagine—even more than in my big box of Crayola crayons. Up ahead at a bend in the road, light filtered through the canopy of trees like God's fingers. Dancing just steps in front of us, I saw my first rainbow in the iridescent wings of a dragonfly. The colors, the bird songs, the heavy weight in the afternoon air, all seemed to awaken my youthful senses.



That wonderful childhood memory stayed with me when we later moved to a basement apartment in Chicago, with no view, no yard, and only a concrete courtyard to play in. When I turned 18 and left Chicago, I hoped that I would one day live near a gravel road like the one I remembered. Thirty years later, my dream has come true.

In 1998, after searching for a little more space and a lot more nature, my husband and I moved to Rico, GA, a small rural community in the largest county in Georgia. There we settled on a gravel road, canopied by trees in even more shades of green, and surrounded by more gravel roads.

As avid runners, one of the first things we did was to map out several jogging routes of 3, 4, 5, and 6 miles. Those few jogging routes became our blissful mainstay over the next few years, until 2005, when I started searching for longer routes while training for a charity walkathon. That's when I discovered Vernon Grove.



On MapQuest, Vernon Grove was hardly a squiggle of a line that connected two familiar paved roads—Rico Road and Hutcheson Ferry Road. So as I walked up to Vernon Grove the first time, I wasn't surprised to be greeted by a gravel road.

As I journeyed down Vernon Grove, my child-like sense of wonder returned and I began thinking about the people who lived on this road. I passed an old chimney, standing tribute to a time long gone, and wondered about the people who had been warmed by its hearth, and if this road looked the same now as it did then.

I came upon a magnificent white fence that edged the road for a quarter of a mile, and I wondered if the family that lived on the hill top behind it counted its blessings every day.

At the 5 mile point, I came across an old country church that looked as if it had weathered many storms. I took a short break on its shaded side porch and wondered who attended this little church, how long it had been around, and what stories its walls could tell.



When I returned home from my walk, I couldn't wait to tell my husband about the new, old road I had discovered. We returned to walk Vernon Grove several more times before the walkathon, and then it faded into a fond memory, until I returned this month.

As it turned out, one of our Neighborhood Information Meetings was scheduled at the house on the hill top I had admired two years earlier, the one where I wondered if the owners counted their blessings every day. As it turned out, they do.

The lady of the house is a working professional and devoted parent. She could work at any firm in town, but chose one that offers her the greatest flexibility to spend time with her family. The man of the house, also a working professional and devoted parent, participated in the meeting until 9 pm then headed out to the barn to feed the horses. The children of the house, who joyfully greeted the guests, are clearly this family's blessings.

After receiving permission to take the children's photo in front of the family's home, we headed out of the front door for the traditional porch shot. But the gravel road in the distance beckoned to be included, so I posed the children in front of Vernon Grove for the perfect picture.



Garnet (8), Quin (11), Grace (9)
Pictured left to right

As I snapped the shot, I realized that the children had the same look of wonder and joy that I felt all those years ago when I encountered my first gravel road.

When I think about what the future holds for our little community, and how we might go about preserving our cultural heritage, it will take more than a hope and a prayer to ward off development pressures and sprawl. It will take a strong community with a clear vision and the determination to control its destiny—one that believes that the road to progress is not always paved.