

Pathways For The Blind

**The Oerwood Braille Trail In Pennsylvania,
Designed By An Ecologist And A Blind Student,
Gives The Handicapped A Living Nature Experience**

CLOSE your eyes—lightly. Remain still for a moment—absorb your surroundings. Now—begin a walk with nature, a different walk to be sure, a new experience. Stumble, grasp for a hand hold, scrape your elbow. Anxiety will mount, but keep your lids down. Get the whole feeling. Regain your composure, walk slowly, practice using your nose, your fingertips. Record all these feelings in your consciousness. Evaluate the stream of sensations entering your mind. Put together the puzzle—your task should be easy, you have seen all this before—somewhere.

These instructions are given to "sighted" persons as they begin their first trip over the Oerwood Braille Trail. Their experience will be unique, soon not to be forgotten. At first it is a novelty, then it begins to evoke silence and thought. But then the trail was not designed for the sighted, but rather for those with a severe visual handicap. For these people it is a new door, opened to them for the first time. They enter into a world which for a long time has excluded them. They are as much a part of the natural world as we, and must be taught how to receive the maximum benefit from its wonders. They enter, without sight, into a world of multi-sensual experiences. What they will gain will be far more than their sighted brethren will ever know.

The Oerwood Braille Trail is self-guiding. Although the trail was designed for sightless and partially sighted persons, all enjoy its beauty. The visitor meanders through one-half mile of woodland, mixed

The Oerwood Braille Trail is located on the grounds of the Oerwood Nature Center in rural York County, Pennsylvania. It is but a short drive from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, south on Interstate 83 to the Emigsville Interchange, and north on Board Road to Shady Lane and Oerwood. Oerwood, a 37-acre woodland retreat, was developed by the Northeastern High School Ecology Club, a group of students devoted to better usage of the environment by their community. Though the beginning was rough, they fought opposition and a tight budget to become a non-profit organization with a beautiful and useful outdoor laboratory and environmental education center. Its praises have been heard from all parts of the East Coast. The guest book in the observation tower overlooking the lake is testimony to its wide range of acceptance and usage. The center is open every day of the year from sunrise to sunset. There is no charge for admission. Membership in the Oerwood Nature Center Association is divided into several classes and information concerning it can be obtained by writing to Oerwood Nature Center, RD #1, Mt. Wolf, Pennsylvania 17347.

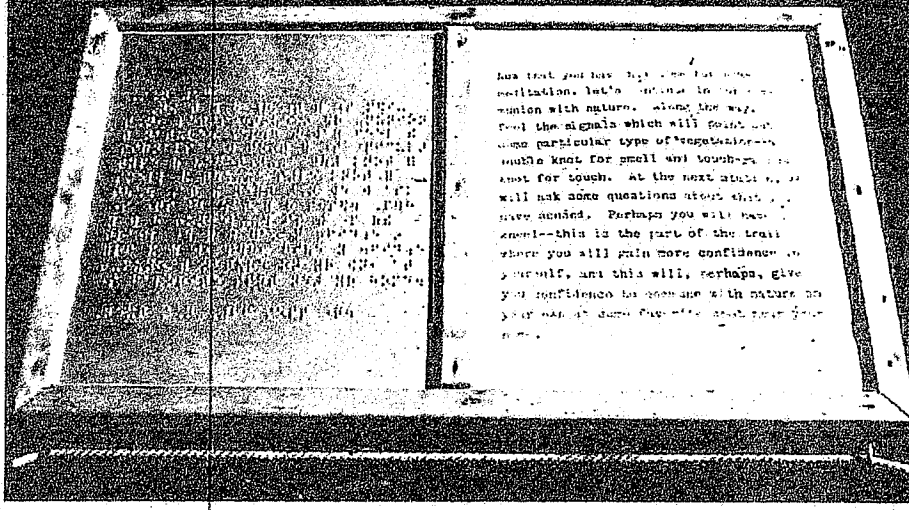
by James J. Brett
Director, Oerwood Nature Center
Manchester, Pennsylvania

bottomland-meadow, across streams and over hills. There are no hazardous objects along the way, nor are there poisonous plants or reptiles. Seventeen braille markers (with text composed by this writer), mounted on posts, greet the hiker as he walks along. Many habitat situations are covered, and, depending upon the time of day or year, the scene changes many times. For instance, the aquatic habitat situation is introduced on a braille plate by:

"You are about to cross a 20 foot bridge over a small stream which cuts across the nature center. Before you cross, take the cord to the edge of the stream. The ground below your feet is very spongy. This area is a bottomland, an area of marshy, swampy characteristics. This too supports its own types of wildlife. By bending down, you can put your hand in the water. You can feel stones polished smooth by water and washing sand. The water you felt will eventually work its way to the Atlantic Ocean. It will have encountered many of nature's wonders along the way. So that all our children will always have clean water, speak out against its pollution."

As one approaches the mid-point on the bridge he reads:

"This small stream, part of a larger stream system, is fed by ponds and springs along its course. It is difficult to realize, as you stand at this low point along the trail, that millions of years ago mountains taller than any now standing in the world were worn away by water and ice throughout eons of time. The aquatic environment is home



Braille marker at Station 13



Reading a trail sign

for hundreds of creatures: salamanders and frogs, watersnakes, a myriad of insects, raccoons, and fishes—each interrelated in some way. This interrelationship of living things to their environment is called **ECOLOGY.**”

How does a blind person “see”? By plugging together vibrations received from fingertips, nostrils, eardrums, tongue, and skin, he paints a very accurate mental picture. A bird is noticed and recognized, perhaps long before a sighted person sees it with his binoculars. A change in a breeze is recorded on the cheek. A leaf or bark texture is compared with another and differences are perceived. Nature is more alive to a blind child than to his sighted contemporary, hence more meaningful.

Vision Taken for Granted

We who have our vision take for granted the many characters in a natural situation. We fail to become excited unless we witness spectacular happenings. A milkweed pod, an icicle, a cicada's cast skin, a box turtle are very exciting to the blind. Their finger-tips scan every nook and cranny of the object—ever searching for that mental picture. At Oerwood we are constantly striving to present new ideas to our guests. Our station descriptions point to this fact.

Station #2

“Nature will speak to you in a way in which the average hiker cannot realize. To sense the wonders of nature by touch or sound or smell or in new

combinations of all will allow you to leave with a deeper sense of involvement than you can realize.”

Benches Beside Trail

Station #8

“There are benches on both sides of the trail. Sit down and be silent for a moment. You are being watched by at least a dozen eyes. Squirrels, rabbits, and rodents live in these woods. They know every inch of it. They have their hiding places picked out in case of danger. They know where to go to feed. How many different kinds of birds can you hear? During the year, there are over a hundred species found in the nature center. A bird feeder at your

"I've been in and around nature many times but never have I felt such a closeness with it."

"Now I feel secure—I can come here and be by myself."

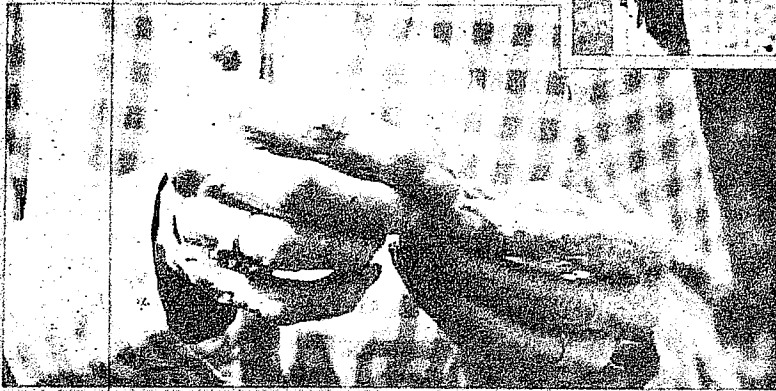
"Thank you, thank you so much."

"We finally have a place of our own, in the woods and by a real stream!"

(At the mounted hawk station) "Gosh, I never saw a hawk before—It's so big and strong."



Following the guide cords



Sensitive fingers that see

home would be a way of helping nature. At night this area is inhabited by predators, such as raccoons, foxes, and owls, searching for their food."

Station #16

"This box in front of you is filled with 'things' of nature. All are products of her large storehouse of living and non-living items. None are labeled or identified—use your wonderful imagination and see if you can guess how each might have been a part of life's web. Try to tell a story by using one or all as characters in your plot. They were or are all important in nature's plan—here you can really show what an expert naturalist you are. The next time you visit, there will be a different set of characters for you to work with.

Perhaps you could bring one with you the next time you come."

An old stump with 57 annual rings and bracket fungus beckons the finger-tips to explore and question. Rosemary, marjoram, thyme, lamb's tongue—all are encountered in the herb garden, a beautiful spot which might produce a new fragrance, a pleasant feeling, perhaps a remembrance of a time long past.

Arrowheads and locust trees are introduced by:

"Meet the locust tree in front of you, its bark is very rough. You are standing in a locust grove. The locust served our Indians with a tough material for weapons. Its wood, because of its durability, is also used to construct the many bridges at Oerwood. Next to

the braille plate post is a collection of arrowheads the Susquehannock Indians used for hunting and fishing in these very woods. Can you guess by their size and shape how they were used?"

Inquiry Approach

The trail is unique in that it was designed by an ecologist and a blind student. Through this combination, a true ecological experience for the blind was developed. As a blind person becomes oriented and feels secure, his confidence builds and so the braille trail uses this confidence in developing an awareness of the environment. The inquiry approach was employed as a major theme. Many questions are asked. "After the herb garden experience, how many different

needles on the evergreen all the same?" "What did you notice about the large rock you felt?" "Did you hear anything?" An answer may come while still on the path, or maybe weeks later. The answers are there—on the other side of a memory, in the conversation with a friend, at the next station, or during some future visit.

We are all an integral part of the web of life, no matter what our state of being. Therefore it is necessary for everyone to be able to mesh with his earth. The blind should not be catered to, and they do not want this treatment. They wish to be independent and rightly so. A trail should not be constructed as a crutch, but as a pathway to new skills. Braille trails can be designed with areas set aside for increased independence. At Oerwood one need only tie a length of cord (depending on confidence levels) to the main trail cord and follow it in any direction desired. Many obstructions will be encountered on the way, all leading to a closeness with nature. The main trail cord is intended only as a means of orientation when bends or rises occur in the trail. It is there if needed.

When Robert B. Lewis of Aspen, Colorado, developed the nation's first braille facility in the rugged White River National Forest, he had no idea that his dream of "—a network of such trails across the country in woodlands, along streams, in the mountains and even in the deserts," would be so quickly realized. Oerwood's trail is a spin off of the Roaring Fork Braille Trail above Aspen, Colorado. In the summer of 1969 there were two trails. Now there are 15 completed trails across the country; four are under construction, and many more are in the planning.

The addition of a braille trail to an existing nature center or park is not as difficult as it might appear. In fact, in your own backyard or pasture or meadow there are potentials for trails. A braille trail fills only one niche in the environmental education movement. The blind and partially sighted do not represent the only handicapped. If the spark is there, ignite the fire and your community will be pioneers in the creation of new learning devices for all handicapped people. The idea of the trail at Oerwood caught on quickly, and a sketchy idea was turned into a working plan in short order.

With service projects an important part of Scouting, these girls and boys, with turned on leaders, are eager to do what-



HANDS THAT SEE

Louis Paul Jonas, world famous sculptor and museum preparator of Claverack, N.Y., who died in February of this year, for many years accurately sculptured one-tenth scale models of the major wildlife species of the world. The collection ranges from blue whales and mammoths to dikdiks and prairie dogs. While most of these were used in museum dioramas, many others were sold to art collectors, sports enthusiasts, and schools.

Jonas once received an order for a variety of big game species from a school not far from his studio. When the order was completed, he decided to deliver the models himself. At the school he was welcomed by the principal who asked if he would like to meet the pupils and see their reaction to the collection. Jonas, who was always interested in people, accepted. The models were taken into a large room where they were arranged near the edge of a big table. The students were summoned. For the first time, Jonas realized that the children were blind, and wondered how they could ever see or use his models. They came to the table hesitant and a little puzzled. Then, as they began to touch the models, running sensitive fingers over them, Jonas watched their expressions. For the first time in their lives words like lion, giraffe, elephant, and deer took on form and meaning. Puzzled faces broke into delighted smiles.

The sculptor was so touched by the children's response that tears came to his eyes. He had shared his creativity and love of wildlife with others and saw it reflected in the room of excited, understanding blind children. It was a memory that he liked to share, always with deep and genuine feeling. —Wayne Trimm

Shloh, Pennsylvania, planted and maintained the herb garden and are still looking for work to be done. The Boy Scouts from North York, Pennsylvania, with the direction and guidance of Mitch Gallo-way, the blind student who helped design the trail, blazed the path and installed the bridges.

Many Groups Can Participate

Garden clubs always have an herb specialist or two, with plenty of experience in starting slips from stock plants for new plantings. Rock and mineral societies should not be overlooked. The York County Rock and Mineral Society put in an impressive display and have plans for the installation of another. The Lions, forerunners in their work with and for the blind, are a valuable asset. The Susquehanna Lions Club is planning to rebuild the herb garden to a higher level in the summer. The York Jaycee's took the trail as their yearly conservation project and funded the money for building materials.

Contact your state association for the blind; its enthusiasm is gratifying. Miss Gertrude Ulshafer, Executive Secretary for the Pennsylvania Association of the Blind, and her fine staff gave us much needed technical assistance and donated the braille plates (probably the most costly item to contend with). Nurseries, landscape services, civic groups, and lumber suppliers can all be tapped for support. Getting the whole community involved is healthy and much needed. The Oerwood Braille Trail cost the Oerwood Nature Center under \$50.00; all other construction materials and labor were donated. A local ecologist should be more than delighted to write the station descriptions.

Our task has just begun. Every person who walks our trails—Braille or Lakeside, Bottomland or Muir offers valuable suggestions for future sensitivity experimentation with the land. Nature is vast and beautiful. Our monumental task is to convey this beauty, this vastness, to everyone. The blind, the sighted, the mentally retarded, the physically handicapped—all need to have a closeness with nature, a closeness with their Creator. We find ourselves enraptured with new enthusiasm as each season comes upon us. We are constantly trying new approaches to the expression of environmental awareness. The handicapped in your community deserve the best you are capable of giving.

The Land

Braille Trails

A group of "adventurers" moves toddler-like up a not-so-challenging trail at the Oerwood Nature Center near Manchester, Pennsylvania.

Hiking the trail, for them, is a new experience. The land takes on a threatening presence; turning their movements into a series of measured steps and cautious gestures.

Yet along with their fear is a conquest, too, brought about by an abundance of lessons learned from nature. (The bark of a locust tree feels quite different from that of an apple tree, and the white pine sports five-needled clusters like no other member of the pine family.... The loss of the sun's warmth on a short-sleeved shoulder signals a hiker's approach into a berry-bush tunnel, while moss helps the disoriented establish bearings.)

Not too many years ago, a trek in the woods would have been next thing to impossible for hikers such as these, for they are blind.

Sightless persons in northern York County, Pennsylvania, have been able to enjoy such outings since 1970, when the Oerwood Braille Trail opened. It was the first braille trail in the state and one of the pioneers in the country.

James Brett, a former ecology teacher at Northeastern High School in Manchester, Pennsylvania, brought the idea back from a trip to Colorado, where he had visited Aspen's Roaring Fork Braille Trail, the first of its kind. Roaring Fork's creator, Bob Lewis, believed nature was "one of the unmeasurable influences that impinge on everyone's life to some degree or another." Lewis also recognized the value a "braille" trail could have for those who are not blind in the literal sense, but who may suffer from a "blinding" of their other senses.

Oerwood Nature Center, home of the braille trail and two other nature trails, lies on land that once served as a millionaire's 35-acre estate. Industry is closing in around the Oerwood acres, but its owners, Bernard and Anne Koval, are determined to preserve the sanctity of this "island," as they call it.

This braille trail features waist-high guide ropes spread far enough apart so

as not to inhibit the hikers, be they blind or blindfolded. A blind student helped design the trail. Seventeen stations along the way provide "lessons" via braille and the printed word, calling attention not to sights but to sounds, smells, and tactile opportunities.

Vertical ropes (coded with one knot for touch and two knots for smell) lead curious hands downward to touch a yucca plant or to count the age-telling rings of a tree stump.

Even with ropes to guide them, a walk in the woods is no easy task for the blind, according to Anne Koval, keeper of the trail. Benches situated midway up the half-mile trail are there, Koval says, because by that point the blind are "emotionally and physically exhausted."

Leading a blind expedition on the trail is a lesson in patience, Koval says. (Volunteers perform all work at the trail, with the Koval family and the Susquehanna Lions Club contributing a chunk of man-hours.)

Oerwood Braille Trail and the nature center are open sunup to sundown year-round, but they are not designed as a park. Oerwood is a wildlife sanctuary and is intended to serve as a learning experience for its visitors, blind and sighted.

Koval will lead small groups on the trail, but prefers to know ahead of time when they are coming. (Her telephone number is: (717) 764-1413. Or write: Mr. and Mrs. Bernard Koval, Oerwood Nature Center, RD 2, Manchester, Pennsylvania, 17345.) There is no charge to visit Oerwood—they ask only that the area be left intact for others to enjoy.

While Oerwood Braille Trail is one of the originals, many other braille trails have since been created. Among those in the Mid-Atlantic region are: John J. Tyler Arboretum Nature Trail, 515 Painter Road, Box 216, Lima, Pennsylvania, 19060; Reading Nature Trail, Bureau of Parks and Recreation, City Hall, 8th and Washington Streets, Reading, Pennsylvania, 19601; Nature Science Center-Reynolds Village, City of Winston-Salem, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, 27106; Gulf Branch Nature Center, Arlington County Department of Environmental Affairs, Park Division, 300 N. Park Drive, Arlington, Virginia, 22203; Massanutten Visitor Center, George Washington National Forest, Federal Building, Harrisonburg, Virginia, 22801; Trail for the Blind, Petersburg National Battlefield, Box 549, Petersburg, Virginia, 23803; and Touch and See Nature Trail at the U.S. National Arboretum, 24th and R Streets, N.E., Washington, D.C., 20002.

—Ann Diviney

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David Young of the state Parks Department tells hikers to sit down and listen to the sounds of the forest.

Record photos by Lori Badders



Blind nature enthusiasts take hike on Braille Trail

By LORI BADDERS
Daily Record correspondent

EMIGSVILLE — When most of us take a hike on one of York County's many park trails, we notice the green of the grass and tree leaves, the red and orange of berries growing in the wild and the blue and white of the summer sky.

Some hikers, however, can describe the sound of the bluejay, the feel of tree bark, the smell of crushed leaves and the taste of edible plants.

These hikers are members of the York County Blind Center and they recently got out their hiking shoes for their annual trek on the Braille Trail, a one-mile path through woods north of Emigsville.

Maintained by the Susquehanna Lions Club, the trail is lined by a guide rope and markers describing its sights in braille and print. Knots on the rope give hikers instruc-

"There's so much more to a forest than what you can see. The senses of smell, touch and hearing can be used to 'see' woodland in ways most sighted people never realized," said David Young, environmental specialist for the state parks department.

Young and Darryl Smith, environmental interpretation technician for Codorus State Park, led more than 40 blind center clients and staff members as well as Lions Club members over the trail.

During the two-hour trek, hikers identified birds by their sound, trees by their feel and plants by their smell.

Staff member Virginia Childs said the hike, followed by a picnic dinner provided by the Lions Club, is a popular event among the center's clients.

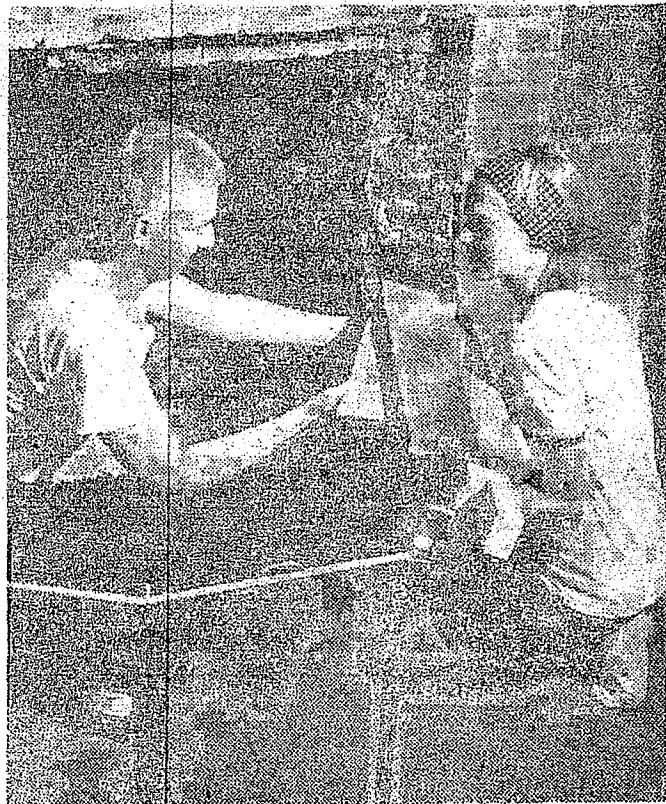
"This is an annual thing for us. It gives everyone a chance to enjoy nature and the good old outdoors. With the program by



—Sunday Patriot-News Photos

Hard at Work

Sawing log for fireplace at the nature center are Joan Kling (left) and Sue Trimble.



Loading Up

Michael Snelbaker and Carol Koval stack firewood, one of many chores being done at the center.

...evidence for ...
...members ...
...Maltby, Randy ...
...Brammer, David ...
...Shelton, Dennis ...
...The department ...
...approximately 100 ...
...whose savings, ...
...checking and ...
...other accounts ...
...have been dor- ...
...mant for many ...
...years, that it ...
...will claim the ...
...money in Sep- ...
...tember if the ...
...accounts remain ...
...inactive.

**Snyder View
On Gym Hit**

YORK — The statement by York Mayor John L. Snyder on Friday that renovation of the old York Junior College gymnasium would be a "sentimental mistake" was blasted yesterday as "regretful" by Danile L. Hall, of the York Recreation Commission.

Several members of the commission were "extremely upset" by the mayor's comment that city residents should take second thoughts about contributing to the \$50,000 fund drive to finance renovation of the building, Hall said.

"Ridiculous" was city councilman Christopher Lewis' reaction to Snyder's stand. The restored gymnasium would enhance public welfare, Lewis added.

Last year York County claims netted \$11,000 of the department's total receipts of about \$2 million.

Shrewsbury Parade Prizes to Total \$545

SHREWSBURY — A total of \$545 will be awarded in prizes at the annual Shrewsbury Fire Company parade Thursday, Aug. 1, at 7 p.m.

The event will be held in conjunction with the fire company carnival, which will open July 28 and continue through Aug. 3 at the fire hall and adjoining carnival grounds. Rain date for the parade is Aug. 2.

Spring Grove Board To Meet Wednesday

SPRING GROVE — Spring Grove Area School Board will meet Wednesday at 8 p.m. in the senior high school cafeteria.

The board has accepted the proposal of C. M. Eichenlaub Company to rearrange the language lab at the senior high school, including the installation of new cables to the booths for \$1,207 and also the purchase of 28 new headsets at \$73.50 each.

Scouts Seek Paper

SPRING GROVE — Boy Scout Troop 30 will hold a paper drive in the area on Saturday beginning at 1 p.m. Contributors are to place paper at the curbs in front of homes securely tied to prevent littering.

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MEN

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slacks and old white shirt

James O. Booth, Sr.

Pastor

WOMEN

Wear bathing suit
under old washable dress

Students Toil at Nature Center

'Ecologists' Busy at Mt. Wolf

MT. WOLF — The school year ended for most Northeastern High School students last month, but not for two dozen members of the Northeastern Ecology Club.

The teen-agers have been busy cutting down trees, clearing nature trails, banding birds and doing other chores at their Oerwood Nature Center, James Brett, club advisor, reported yesterday.

The students are restoring a 17-acre tract of land near Mt. Wolf which had been lying idle for years before Mrs. Carl Oerman, Mt. Wolf RD 1, gave the club permission to develop it. The center is named in the memory of her late husband.

Brett, a science teacher at Northeastern, has done graduate work in ecology, which he defines as the "relationship of living things to their physical environment."

THE LAND FEATURES various flowers, trees and plant from foreign countries, and plans are under way to incorporate the organization as a non-profit unit, Brett reported.

Two houses near the plot reputedly were built in 1817 and 1821. Several other old buildings in the area are scheduled to become museum-like facilities.

Jack hammers had to be used to cut through the thick stone walls of the buildings in the reconstruction phase of the work, Brett recalled. The students built a large fireplace, complete with a screen made in the high school industrial shop, in a building formerly utilized as a greenhouse.

Even the female members of the club learned to use the "two-man" saw in the path clearing project.

THE MUSEUM contains stuffed specimens of wildlife native to the area. Included in the display is a bobcat which was shot by the grandfather of one of the members, John McHenry, half a century ago.

Plans for the museum include the erection of book shelves, which will be filled with volumes on animals and plants. The second floor will be used as an office.

The students are restoring another greenhouse so that plants may be raised in it the future.

In addition to the nearly one-mile-long nature trail, there is a lake in the area. The members have built a dam along a nearby



—Sunday Patriot-News Photo

On the Trail

James Brett, director of Northeastern Ecology Club, points out the sights at Oerwood Nature Center.



nature hikes are in progress from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday. More than 200 children have hiked the trails to date, Brett re-

land are American chestnuts which haven't been stricken by the blight of recent years. Also growing on the land is a ginkgo which was imported from

**Yorkers Face
Loss of \$5,000**

Due Presidential

Honors

Seven Northeastern School District students are in line for the President's Environmental Merit Award, to be conferred at school assembly program on May 11.

The students to receive the national award are Michael Haffer, Steve Stambaugh, both 8th grade students at the senior high school; Monica Koval, Bridget Deckman, Randy Easton and John Aughenbaugh, junior high students in Grade 8, and Jeorganne Yoder, 7th grade. They were recommended for their activity in three areas — cleanup and improvements at Oerwood Nature Center, participation in York County Environmental Council's recycling programs, and for planning and carrying out Earth Week activities.

At the nature center their participation included trail and building maintenance, winter wild bird feeding, displays and bulletin board, learning more about trees, flowers and wildlife and teaching others, and working with members of the Susquehanna Lions Club on the Millie Trail and serving as guides for visiting groups.

For the environmental council the students worked on recycling days and helped with publicity and education for the recycling program.

They are presently working on plans for Earth Week.

The advisory and evaluating committee includes William Haffer, school principal and member of the Susquehanna Lions Club; John Sprengle, student council advisor; Anne Yoder, of the Oerwood Nature Center; John Davenport, of EC, and Stanford Lehr, state legislator, who will make the awards presentation.