

METTLER'S WOODS IN NEW JERSEY

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Contributed through the Garden Club of Somerset Hills*

In the gently rolling farm country of central New Jersey it is amazing to find that a 65-acre woodland still stands today as a convincing and living example of the American wilderness as the first European settlers saw it. The woods are just south of the old Amwell Road between East Millstone and Middlebush, near the southeastern edge of Somerset County and only a few miles from New Brunswick. They are part of a tract of land which came into the possession of a Dutch farmer in 1701, and which he settled about 1703. These predecessors of the Mettler family gradually cleared most of their large holding, and the rich loam made fertile fields. For some reason or other, and quite possibly because they liked to look at the finest trees and the richest forest as it was, this portion was left untouched.

For more than two centuries and a half the forest has remained practically undisturbed, seemingly unaffected by such milestones in the history of the colony and state as the founding of Queens College in 1766, the tides of the Revolution that swept back and forth across New Jersey, and the digging of the nearby Delaware and Raritan Canal. Massive grey-trunked white oaks shoulder the powerful dark-barked columns of black and red oaks, with their leafy canopies more than 80 feet in the air, and hickories struggle to keep pace with the giants. This is a picture which would seem entirely natural to Peter Kalm, searching in the late 1740s for seeds of hardy and useful plants for the Swedish Government and striving to please the quickly critical trustees of his University of Åbo . . . and a picture familiar also to André Michaux, searching throughout the new nation 40 years later for plants to grace the gardens of Marie Antoinette at the Petit Trianon and Rambouillet. If these keen-eyed explorers were to ride along the narrow roadway into the center of the forest today, Mettler's Woods would be little different from acres and acres of uncleared land they knew well between Trenton and Elizabethport.

The amazing fact is that the woods were preserved during those dim early years when thousands of similar mature forests through-



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Towering above the lower canopy of dogwoods, this black oak might have been seen by André Michaux, plant hunting in New Jersey in the 1780s—though he would note it as Quercus tinctoria of Will Bartram, instead of Q. velutina as now specified.

Photo by John Wallerst, New York

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Photo by John Wolbarst, New York

handsome offers made for the trees, nor to avoid a realistic appraisal of the forest holding in view of today's taxes.

Alarmed by the imminence of the danger to the forest, and with the aim of preserving it in perpetuity as a wild-life conservation area, a small group at Rutgers has become the nucleus of a Citizens Scientific and Historical Committee for the Preservation of Mettler's Woods. Others prominent in various institutions and in conservation and forestry have joined forces with them, and a campaign to obtain \$100,000 is well under way. The committee has made a very favorable arrangement with the owner, who is deferring consideration of other bids for the present. Requests for more detailed information of the plan for saving the woods and contributions for this unique project may be sent to Dr. M. A. Johnson of the Department of Botany, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, or to Dr. Murray F. Buell at the same address.

One of the great phenomena taking place before our eyes is the accelerated pace at which cities and towns are growing and spreading. While this has been pleasantly termed "moving to the country," the point is soon reached where the country has gone, and all is city or an anomalous semi-despoiled stage that may not pass for either. In this losing battle for the natural and agricultural scenes, it is all too familiar to see the downfall of trees one by one. It is infinitely more tragic to see the loss of a forest. Conservation efforts to safeguard natural areas in the western states are well known and most gratifyingly successful, for these national treasures are irreplaceable. In the eastern metropolitan area, even small spaces unaffected by man's work and preserved from his changes are now very unusual. Here, no other natural area of the type and significance of Mettler's Woods remains. The case has been convincingly summarized by Richard H. Pough of the American Museum of Natural History: "To understand the present we must know the heritage of the past. This is as true of natural communities as it is of human societies. Throughout the nation we have set aside primeval areas—to name a few, the redwoods of California, pine forests in Minnesota, and cove forests in the Great Smokies, but in this part of the country—none. It is imperative that we save this one."