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[**Ugly legacy: Creosote mars Little Menomonee**](http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=gGwaAAAAIBAJ&sjid=7ykEAAAAIBAJ&pg=3226%2C3434397)

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[Transcript]

Even the life-restoring forces of spring can’t cover the desolation of a much-abused tract of land in Milwaukee’s northwest corner.

True, wild strawberries have somehow found ways to sink roots through the cinder-covered soil. The plants were blooming last week.

And the dead stalk of one of last year’s mulleins remained sturdy enough to support this year’s swamp sparrow nest and its clutch of five eggs.

Killdeers strode across the old crushed-limestone roads like Marine recruits in fast time, calling out their shrill cadences. And cock pheasants found enough grass in which to hide and from which to urgently squawk their whereabouts to their mates.

But all in all, the tract remains a saddening place; the Milwaukee County Park Commission’s sign along the north ditch that exhorts good citizens to “preserve nature” is a hollow joke.

Even barren land has its human visitors. In one area near a copse of willow, dogwood and ash, there was unsettling evidence of a camp left in a panic.

Not only were two weatherbeaten blankets, two vacuum bottles and three plastic coffee cups abandoned in haste, but so were a pair of jeans, a jacket and a hooded sweatshirt.

Also, a tent stake was still in place, and pieces of a windblown, winter-ravaged tent were strewn about.

It wasn’t clear what happened here last fall, and what scattered the participants, including one who left his pants behind.

But the place remains largely unvisited, not only because it lacks convenient access – one must walk along a railroad to reach it – but also because it is unattractive.

This barely living barrens stands in contrast to the vibrant activity – industrial, residential, commercial – that has grown up around it.

**Questionable value**

The tract was a “gift” to the county, but the county parks staff sees little future for it. Perhaps someone should have looked this gift horse in the mouth.

The tract is a remnant of the old Moss-American Co. factory where railroad ties were treated with creosote to give them long life. The process involved forcing creosote into the wood pores under pressure.

After treatment, the blackened ties were stacked in the yard, rain or shine. When the sun shone hotly, the creosote became soft and dripped onto the ground. When it rained, the creosote-laden runoff entered the Little Menomonee River.

Although the plant ceased operations in 1976, and although scores of truckloads of creosote-impregnated earth were removed, the creosote sill is evident today.

A shovel turns up thick layers of the drippings where ties once were stacked. The same shovel thrust into the bottom sediments of the Little Menomonee River would release buried globules that burst into oily sheens at the surface and emit a creosote odor.

**Sinking sediments**

Everyone who has studied the river accepts as fact that the bottom sediments are polluted with creosote. Creosote, a derivative of coal tar, is heavier than water and sinks.

The factory began operating in the 1920s in the old, unincorporated town of Granville when northwestern Milwaukee County was rural. The northern boundary of the site was formed by the tracks of the Northwestern Road. Track of the Milwaukee Road formed the southern boundary.

Railroad spurs penetrated the firm’s storage yards. The rotting ties that were their beds mark the route today.

The enterprise supplied railroads with treated ties from 1921 through 1976. Therefore, for half a century, residues dripped from the high stacks onto the floodplain.

And, despite a variety of attempts to restrain the creosote, for half a century gortions of the gunk got into the Little Menomonee.

**Frightening fact**

That may not have been considered to be serious in earlier days, when youngsters walking railroad tracks were known to hook shiny, black beads of creosote off ties with forefingers and pop the beads into their mouths to chew like gum for its pungent taste.

I did this in the 1940s in southern Illinois, an activity I now recall soberly in the context of what I since have learned: Creosote contains a range of chemicals called polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons, some of which cause cancer.

The stream, however, has taken on increased importance as fields along either side have given way to the growing city. Just blocks downstream from the old plant site are new subdivisions whose residents may see the Little Menomonee and its strand of wild growth from rear windows.

The Little Menomonee is a minor stream, and calling it a “river” is inappropriate. It rises from marshes in Ozaukee County, then flows straight south into Milwaukee County. It passes under Brown Deer Rd. under little-noticed bridges and into the old Moss-American grounds.

**Menomonee tributary**

Although it is more ditch that river, some people still say that bullheads and undersized northern pike can be caught north of the Moss-American tract. The stream rides down Milwaukee County’s Northwest Side for about four miles, then joins the Menomonee River at about Hampton Ave.

Even downstream, the Little Menomonee is not without charm. Paths along the stream near a new subdivision reveal both shoeprints and deer-prints. Slider turtles live in the water and bury their eggs in the soft mud of the banks.

In 1971, a group of youngsters joined an Earth Day cleanup and waded into the stream to pull out trash. They stirred up the bottom sediments, released the creosote and were burned, some of them quite badly.

That attracted a lot of attention and stirred a flurry of actions:

In 1973, the US Environmental Protection Agency paid a contractor to partially remove the sediments in a 4,000-foot segment of the Little Menomonee.

Moss-American was sued by the EPA, but the suit was thrown out of court when an EPA scientist admitted falsifying test results. Milwaukee County sued the company, but dropped the suit when Moss-American presented the county with the 50-acre site.

The company shut down in 1978 and cleaned up the site somewhat.

Also that year, the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission suggested that the cheapest permanents solution to the waterway’s contamination would be digging a parallel channel 20 feet away from the present one, rerouting the stream and filling up the present streambed with the dredgings.

But interest dwindled. The embarrassing tract of land seems all but forgotten. The creek and its condition also seem to be all but forgotten.

One day, said Lee Egelhoff, landscape architect in the Milwaukee County Parks and Recreation Department, the land could be used as an extension of the Little Menomonee River Parkway. Before that happens, the county would have to buy land to the south.

One day, too, said Egelhoff, the tract could be used for hiking trails, but it does not lend itself to “organized, high-density use.”

“There are no funds to accomplish this, and we have not spent any on it,” he said.

Meantime, the barrens are in their seventh year of a war with nature. Spring, with the patience of seasons, is winning – slowly.