

## Traveler

### Discover the Two Creeks Buried Forest bed of Lake Michigan.

Story by Julie A.M. Hess and Anna N. Hess /  
Photos by Anna N. Hess

Late one summer afternoon, on the shores of Lake Michigan, at the long-abandoned village of Nero in Manitowoc County, two college buddies, Bob Hess and Tom Tuschl, parked a rusty, early-1950s Mercury on the clay bank overlooking Lake Michigan. They pitched a tent on the beach, built a campfire, roasted some wieners and opened a six-pack of beer. The year was 1963.

What started as an idyllic day of camping quickly went south. A nasty summer storm descended upon the beach camp with fury sometime after midnight. Tent and bedding were soaked. Unpacked gear was scattered on the beach. The boys were cold, wet and hungry, and the next morning the car, damp from the storm, would not start.

A one mile hike to the west brought them to the International Harvester dealership in the village of Two Creeks. Hess, a local boy, was able to borrow an old Farmall H tractor and a chain, which they used to tow-start the old Mercury. Thankful to have survived the dark and stormy night, they retreated to the nearby Hess farm for dry clothes and a hot breakfast.

The Two Creeks beach has always been a popular local hangout, but it also has a little known secret. An ancient 12,000-year-old forest graces the lakeshore banks.

Today, you will find a small county park and State Natural Area there, where white sand beaches lie at the base of red clay cliffs. The Two Creeks County Park and Two Creeks Buried Forest State Natural Area cover portions of the Lake Michigan shoreline, and mark an important interglacial landmark that record a glacial period known as the Two Creekean substage. During this period, spanning

about 250 years, a large boreal forest grew across eastern and northern Wisconsin. This forest was ultimately buried beneath advancing massive glaciers. Today, the eroding clay banks expose incredibly well preserved tree trunks, insect casings, mosses and pollens approximately 6 to 8 feet below the adjacent farmlands.

Other buried forest sites also exist in the region, spanning from the shoreline of the Manitowoc/Kewaunee county



The beach at Two Creeks County Park.

lines, west to the cities of Appleton and Denmark. Two Creeks, however, is the most well-known, most accessible and most protected of these sites, drawing geologists, climatologists and others curious about its buried treasure. The history of this site, and the small town

that it is named after, is relatively unknown by any except those who have lived there.

Two Creeks today can be found at a tiny crossroads community located on State Highway 42 about 10 miles north of Two Rivers. In the 1950s, Two Creeks consisted of a small general store, a Farmall implement dealer, a small cheese factory, an abandoned tavern/hotel/dance hall called the Dew Drop Inn, and three or four homes.

By driving east for about a mile from Two Creeks you would arrive at a T intersection with a north-south town road. From that point a grass-covered two-rut trail continued east to a cut in the high clay banks leading down to the shore of the lake. On both sides of the trail were old foundations. Projecting into the lake for several hundred feet from the cut bank were rows of posts rising from the water. This was the site of a village and lake port named Nero. The posts in the water were the pilings that supported a pier for docking lake steamers. The town would later be renamed Two Creeks, simply because the site was flanked by two small intermittent streams



# What's cooking?

## MAPLE SYRUP MADNESS

Each year, the annual MacKenzie's Maple Syrup Festival takes place during the first weekend of April (this year on April 7). Begin your day with a pancake breakfast held in the main lodge, hosted by the Friends of the MacKenzie Center from 8 a.m. to noon; \$7 adults/\$5 children. The rest of the festival runs until 2 p.m.; activities are free. Visit [dnr.wi.gov](http://dnr.wi.gov) and search keywords "MacKenzie Center" for more information. To get your taste buds ready for the festival, try this recipe on for size.



SUSAN SENATORI

### HOMEMADE CRUNCHY MAPLE QUINOA CEREAL

- 1½ cups cooked quinoa
- 1 tablespoon chia seeds
- 2 tablespoons pure maple syrup
- ½ to ¾ teaspoon cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- A pinch or two of sea salt

*Makes a single serving.*

In a small bowl mix everything together. Pour onto a cookie sheet lined with parchment paper. Break up into chunks with a spoon and flatten with a hand as if you were making flatbread. Bake for 30 to 50 minutes at 325 F, being sure to check halfway through and adjust baking time if necessary (longer for crispier). Flip cereal around with a spatula for more even baking. Cereal should be slightly golden brown when finished. Remove from oven and cool. Enjoy in a bowl with your favorite milk and other toppings.

Recipe by the Wisconsin Maple Syrup Producers Association. Visit <http://wismaple.org/recipes/>.

that fed into the lake on either side of the old town.

Old timers in that area said that Nero was once a bustling little shipping port. Lacking a natural harbor, the townspeople constructed the large wooden pier for shipping farm produce to markets in Milwaukee and Chicago. There was also a tanning factory there for processing hides into leather. The location was good because of extensive forests of hemlock, the bark of which contains acids used in the tanning processes of the time.

Local legend had it that Nero was a vibrant growing business community that was at one point competitive with the ports of Two Rivers and Manitowoc a few miles to the south. At least it was competitive until a great fire destroyed the entire town, all the businesses and even the wood pier. The town was never rebuilt on that spot and a new Two Creeks settlement was established a mile inland.

The 1950s was a time of severe weather and huge storms on the lake. Water levels were high and there was extreme bank erosion. This was especially true of the clay banks that started at the old Two Creeks site and extended northward along the shoreline as far as one could see. As kids, Hess and his siblings would ride bikes down to the lake to walk the beaches and skip stones. Sometimes there would be branches and even tree trunks sticking out of the clay banks. They knew a little about the buried forest at that time but stayed away from

the steep cliffs that towered 20 feet or more above the beach. Once in a while there would be huge collapses of those banks. There were rumors that a local naughty teenager was buried alive in one of the mud slides.

Sometime in the 1960s the Nero site was donated to the township. The town buried all of the old foundations, leveled the area, developed a boat launch at the approach to the old pier, and turned the site into a park. The park remains to this day with little evidence of the former town except for some slabs of concrete projecting from the banks above the two small creeks that named the village and the buried forest.

Incredibly well preserved flora and fauna can still be found along the shoreline after a storm. Many of these species are living today in bo-

real forests north of Wisconsin. Tree trunks and other wood from this site have been radiocarbon dated to about 11,850 years ago, including upland species such as black spruce, white spruce and jack pine. The forest floor was covered in mosses and several lichens, with scattered sedges and buffalo berry, a mountain plant of northern latitudes common to sandy shores in boreal forests. Several mollusk species made their homes in the wet mud on the forest floor, while beetles, flies, ants, wasps and mites made homes in the forest.

These preserved organisms record substages of the massive Green Bay and Lake Michigan lobes that advanced between 18,000 and 11,000 years ago. Thus, this innocuous site at Two Creeks preserves moments in time when life thrived on the edge of the mile-high glaciers, to



Exposed red clay banks.



Possible buried forest tree specimen.

10,000 years later when college boys had to tow-start their wet Mercury "beater" after a stormy night on the beach. It is a place of memories, of beauty and of ancient secrets.

To learn more about the Two Creeks Buried Forest State Natural Area, visit [dnr.wi.gov](http://dnr.wi.gov) and search keywords "Two Creeks Buried Forest." 

*Julie A.M. Hess is a senior paper process engineer, moonlighting as a naturalist during the warm seasons. Anna N. Hess is a natural resource manager for the Minnesota DNR, managing the Lake Superior North Shore area.*