

Oaks from Acorns

In October of 1994, I led a small group of butterflyers on a trip to the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas. In Mission, Texas, we stopped at a graceful old building that had been a retreat for the Catholic Order of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate but was no longer in use. Wandering through the beautiful and extensive grounds, I thought, this would make a wonderful Butterfly Center — a place that would always be filled with butterflies and where people could learn about the beauty and importance of butterflies.

We went to the Mission Chamber of Commerce and broached the idea to the woman at the desk — Viola Espinosa. Amazingly, she was interested! For quite a while we pursued obtaining the land from the Oblate Order, but that never worked out.

However in 1999 Viola, now CEO of the Chamber, approached a developer who was donating land for the World Birding Center, a project of Texas Parks and Wildlife, and asked whether he'd be interested in helping to establish the National Butterfly Center by donating land. A few days later, I flew to Mission and took Scott Calhoun on a tour of the butterflies of the area. There were clouds of butterflies everywhere and he was sold!

Scott, and his partner Mike Rhodes, generously offered to donate 80 acres of land to NABA, if NABA could raise \$500,000 to demonstrate that it was capable of creating the National Butterfly Center.

It took a while, but by June 2002, thanks to many NABA members and some major foundations, we had raised the money and took possession of the donated land — an empty agricultural field. We set about planting a research and demonstration garden and in the fall of 2004 officially opened the National Butterfly Center, holding the 2004 NABA Members Meeting in Mission. Soon afterward, NABA obtained another 20 acres to bring the total to 100 acres.

Since 2004 the National Butterfly Center (NBC) has put down deep roots in the Lower Rio Grande Valley and a widening circle of support

2 *American Butterflies*, Spring 2010

for the NBC has formed. Thousands of adults and schoolchildren have visited the NBC which has already been the subject of major stories in the *New York Times* and *Southern Living*.

Now, after some hiccups (NABA's Treasurer states that this was more like a near-death experience) caused by the national financial meltdown in 2008, NABA is constructing the first major structure at the National Butterfly Center — the Visitors Pavilion. An article about the enthusiastic groundbreaking ceremonies begins on page 4 of this issue.

To celebrate the opening of the first major building at the National Butterfly Center, we will hold the 9th NABA Biennial Members Meeting in Mission, Texas this October. We hope that you will attend, seeing oodles of butterflies and helping to support NABA while having a great time.

With the beginning of actual construction, all types of details needed to be addressed. One decision that needed to be made was the species of tree to plant in the parking lot. We created a data sheet for each species of tree native to the area and narrowed the choice to live oak (*Quercus fusiformis*) and Mexican ash (*Fraxinus berlandieri*). We considered that Mexican ash grows more rapidly than do live oaks — a real plus for jump starting the plantings. But then again, live oaks live longer than do Mexican ashes, which are prone to drop some limbs in high winds. In addition, the live oaks support Mournful and Horace's Duskywings. So, we went with the live oaks.

Last week, I was in Biloxi, Mississippi to attend the military funeral of my father-in-law. As the Air Force honor guard fired their guns in salute, a Cloudless Sulphur appeared and then flew across the open portion of the cemetery before disappearing under the extensive live oaks shading the grave sites.

I think that we made the right choice.

