

## **A Fresh START for Turkey Creek. Part 1**

by Sarah Gilkerson. Turkey Creek Nature Preserve Current (blog). July 2013

Today, Turkey Creek Nature Preserve is a beautiful area for recreation and relaxation, but there was a long fight to establish the preserve. The Preserve wouldn't have been possible without the work of dedicated citizens - many of them from Pinson - and a web of partnerships, all organized under the name START, or Society To Advance the Resources at Turkey Creek.

In 1998 the Jefferson County prison in downtown Birmingham was becoming overcrowded and the county had begun searching for a site to construct a second prison. After much searching, the area that is now Turkey Creek Nature Preserve was proposed as a location. Jefferson County hoped to build a new jail - at a cost of \$50 million - to house 900 minimum and moderate security prisoners. This plan was opposed by many Pinson citizens. With a desire to protect the beloved Turkey Creek site, a local grassroots organization, START, formed and grew to 7,000 members.

START had many reasons to oppose the jail site: the land was in a residential area and would lead to decreased property values, the area was rich with history and Native American artifacts had been found at the proposed jail site, and the construction of the jail had to potential to seriously harm habitat for the Vermillion Darter, an endangered fish found only in Turkey Creek. Prepared with these arguments, START began to meet and organize with the dual goal of preventing the construction of the jail at Turkey Creek and preserving the land for future generations.

START was very active. Members fundraised for the project, attended county commission meetings, and met with local and state officials. They discovered that Jefferson County had a court-ordered mandate to buy and preserve lands to protect its watersheds. An initial solution was proposed to use the land for both purposes. That sparked the idea that if the jail could be avoided, Turkey Creek could become a preserve for environmental education and recreation.

However, before much headway could be made in preserving the land, a new jail site had to be found. START members communicated in meetings with the commissioners that they did not oppose the creation of a new jail to decrease overcrowding, they only objected to the proposed site of the jail. With this position, START won the support of one of the district's five commissioners, Bettye Fine Collins. But more support was still needed. START co-founder and vice president, Mike Hamilton, went so far as to talk to Birmingham mayor Richard Arrington about alternatives for the jail site, even proposing an old US Steel Property in Ensley.

By November of 1998, START had won its first battle, as plans for the Turkey Creek prison site were discarded. However, there was still a long way to go in deciding the future of the property. The citizens of Pinson could rest easy though, as START was becoming one of the most successful local grassroots efforts of all time and a prison would not be in their backyard.

*Sarah Gilkerson - a biology major from Birmingham-Southern College - interned at Turkey Creek Nature Preserve during the summer of 2013. She is from Atlanta and enjoys canoeing and comic books.*