

Barbara Westfall
The Teaching Lodge, 2003
Wingra School, Madison, WI
Willow branches
Scale: 22' long x 7' wide x 8' tall

"The Teaching Lodge", is a bent willow sculpture made from trees cut from Wisconsin's Governor Nelson State Park. In the fall of 2003, Barbara Westfall and students from Madison's Wingra School, collaborated with restoration ecologists from Governor Nelson State Park to cut the willow. The stands of willow, which were encroaching on a restored tallgrass prairie, were cut to bring necessary sunlight back to the shaded prairie plants. Barbara, who is the art teacher at Wingra School, used this opportunity to teach her students about art and ecology and the importance of restoring tallgrass prairie habitat. The trees were used to build a bent willow lodge on the campus of Wingra School, as a gathering place for members of the community to learn more about the environment. Robert White Wolf Lujan, a Madison native, was invited to participate in the project to share his knowledge about the importance of Native American teaching lodges and restoration of the prairie habitat, in the context of the Ojibway spiritual tradition that he practiced. Robert, who passed away in 2005, is fondly remembered for the positive impact he had on the many people associated with this project. His service work and compassion for fostering personal and environmental healing will never be forgotten.

In Wisconsin, less than one half of one percent of the state's original native tallgrass prairie remains—due to farming, development, and the suppression of fire. Willow is native to Wisconsin, but can easily block out much needed sunlight to the prairie. Prairie fires once set by Native Americans for hunting and gathering purposes and natural fires that occurred due to lightning, helped maintain balance between prairie and woodland habitats. After the arrival of European settlers, fires were suppressed. Now with help from the park staff at Governor Nelson State Park, routine prescribed burns are a regular occurrence in the prairie, to help stimulate and balance this fragile and endangered habitat.