The Mary K. Oxley Nature Center: Tulsa's Hidden Jewel

Nestled within Mohawk Park, the Mary K. Oxley Nature Center stands as the crown jewel of Tulsa Parks, an 800+ acre sanctuary of forests, wetlands, trails, and wildlife that offers a peaceful escape in the heart of the city. What began as a simple citizen idea in 1972 blossomed into reality through vision, persistence, and remarkable community collaboration.

A Citizen-Led Vision Takes Shape

The dream of a nature center in Tulsa started in 1972 when Philip Nelson presented detailed maps and a proposal to the Tulsa Park Board. The Board endorsed the concept and allocated $5,600 from the 1972 Park Bond Issue for what was then called the Mohawk Nature Center. Progress stalled when Nelson left Tulsa shortly afterward.

In March 1974, Tulsa Audubon Society President Dick Sherry reignited the project, urging the Park Board to move forward. The Board expressed support but cited a lack of available funds. Undeterred, the Tulsa Audubon Society hosted a workshop in June 1974 to educate the community on the value of nature centers. A National Audubon Society representative visited the Mohawk site in July, and by September the Society was again advocating for funding, though inflation had eroded the original bond allocation.

Late in 1974, the National Audubon Society was asked to develop a professional master plan. To secure the necessary resources, supporters formed Mohawk Nature Center Development, Inc. (MNCDI) in January 1975 as an independent nonprofit. This group partnered with the City of Tulsa (which assumed no financial obligation) and contracted with the National Audubon Society for the master plan despite starting with no funds in hand.

Fieldwork and revisions continued through 1975–1976. The completed master plan was publicly presented and formally approved by both the Park Board and City Commission in early 1976.

The Turning Point: Generous Leadership

A pivotal moment came in March 1977 when John and Mary Oxley donated $200,000 to implement the plan. In a memorable 1976 meeting, John Oxley had asked Dick Sherry, "What can you do with $300,000?" That conversation helped spark the transformative gift that made construction possible.

In 1979, a challenge grant from the Mabee Foundation, combined with the Oxley contribution, funded the Oxley-Yetter Interpretive Building (named in honor of John's parents). MNCDI oversaw construction of the shelter, trail system, and other improvements, transferring each completed phase to the City of Tulsa.

With the infrastructure in place, MNCDI shifted from fundraising and development to a support role. The organization was later renamed the Mary K. Oxley Nature Center Association, Inc. (now known as Friends of Oxley), and it continues to provide expertise, advocacy, and financial support to sustain and enhance this premier nature center.

The John T. Oxley Family Legacy

John Thurman Oxley (1909–1996) embodied a unique blend of business acumen, athletic excellence, and a deep appreciation for the outdoors. Born in Bromide, Oklahoma, he built a successful career in the petroleum industry, working with Amerada and Warren Petroleum before founding Texas Natural Gasoline Corporation and investing in Oxley Petroleum Company. He also served as Chairman of Arkansas Valley Industries and as a director of Apco Oil Corp.

Beyond business, the Oxley family operated Hereford cattle ranches in Oklahoma and Colorado. John was an accomplished polo player, captaining eight national championship teams and leading the 1970 Boca Raton squad to a historic victory over Prince Philip's English team for the Gold Cup, the first win by a U.S. team in that prestigious event.

The Oxley family had a personal connection to Mohawk Park: as a young man, John worked at a photography studio owned by Mary's father. The couple often rode horses along the Roosevelt Bridle Trail during their courtship and later lived nearby, keeping horses in the area. John played a key role in establishing polo fields within the park.

Their $200,000 gift in 1977 was the catalyst that turned the master plan into a lasting public treasure. The nature center honors not only their generosity but also their respect for the natural world, preserving and sharing it rather than dominating it.

A Testament to Community Persistence

The creation of Oxley Nature Center was never quick or easy. It faced delays, funding shortages, and shifting priorities. Yet through the dedication of Philip Nelson, Dick Sherry, the Tulsa Audubon Society, MNCDI board members, the Junior League (which helped fund early staffing, including the hiring of founding naturalist Robert G. Jennings), and visionary donors like the Oxley family and the Mabee Foundation, a simple idea became one of Oklahoma's most beloved nature destinations.

Today, with over nine miles of trails, diverse habitats, and hands-on interpretive exhibits, Oxley Nature Center remains a powerful example of what citizen initiative and public-private partnership can achieve. It stands as living proof that community vision and determination can create something extraordinary that benefits generations to come.