



Virgil Phillips Farm County Park

Heritage Trail



Before the arrival of Europeans about 200 years ago, this area was inhabited by members of the Palouse, Nez Perce, and Coeur d'Alene Nations. As the years passed, some of this area was logged, a homestead was built, an orchard was planted, and some of the land was converted to annual crops like wheat or barley. Then, over 25 years ago, Virgil Phillips bequeathed the property "for the benefit and recreation of youth...." Large scale farming stopped. Old, unstable or unsafe buildings were removed. A garden was fenced off. Some trees were planted; some trees were removed. A system of trails was established.



This interpretive trail encourages you to look for evidence of human uses of the natural environment and to look for evidence of the natural environment re-establishing itself when it can. From your observations, try to decide what this area was like 200 years ago.

Trailhead. The trail starts here in the home-
stead area. At least three different "permanent"
human dwellings are known to have been built
somewhere on the property. What evidence do
you see of human occupation? Where were the
homes located? (Hint: the homes were not all in
the same area.) As you walk through the
orchard towards the meadow, how many
different varieties of fruit trees can you find?
Virgil enjoyed grafting different varieties onto
the same tree; several of the apple trees bear
three or more varieties!

1. Look around you in all directions. How many
different geographic features and vegetation
types can you see? The Virgil Phillips Farm is
located where Moscow Mountain meets the
Palouse Prairie, and is therefore characterized by
a number of different habitat types.

2. If you had been Virgil Phillips, how would
you have farmed this area? Would you have
plowed east-west, north-south, working around
the field from outside to the center, or some
other way? What crops would you have planted
– wheat, barley, peas, lentils, alfalfa, grass hay,
or something else? Would you have grown the
same crops every year? Do you see evidence
that Virgil Phillips actually farmed this area?

3. Did Virgil plant this apple tree, or did it grow
from seeds in a carelessly tossed apple core?
Notice how the vegetation near the apple tree
(snowberry) is different from the plants growing
in the surrounding area. Look back at the
starting point. What can you see now that was
not obvious when you were standing down
there? How do you think the temperature differs
between this location and the lower fields?

4. As you entered the forested area, you became
surrounded by more than just trees. Bracken Ferns,
Chokecherries and Hawthorn were among the first
plants you encountered, followed by Mountain Maple,
Ocean Spray and Ninebark. These are the most
common understory shrubs in a Ponderosa Pine and
Douglas Fir forest; what animals do you suppose that
these understory plants support?

5. At this junction, you will either continue to the left
on the interpretive trail or you will take the trail on the
right and quickly return to the starting point. But
before taking either option, walk out to the crest of the
grassy knoll between the trails. Once there, look to
the northwest. In the near distance are Palouse
agricultural fields. Beyond the fields are buttes
topped with evergreens. The largest and westernmost
is Kamiak Butte. In the far distance is cone-shaped
Steptoe Butte. How does the distant landscape help
you decide how your immediate surroundings might
have looked 200 years ago? What has not changed?
What has been added to the environment? What has
been taken away?

6. The large rock on the left and the rock outcroppings
ahead and on the right are granite. These rocks were
formed between 70 and 100 million years ago when a
large mass of magma (molten rock) pushed upwards
from the Earth's mantle. The magma did not reach
the surface; instead, it cooled slowly, allowing crystals
of feldspar, mica, and quartz to form – a mixture we
call granite. Why is granite found on the surface here,
and not elsewhere on the Phillips Farm? What do you
notice about the nearby environment that suggests
answers to this question?

7. You probably noticed a different kind of tree
growing along the right side of the hill for the last
several yards. In a light breeze you can see why this
white barked tree is called a Quaking Aspen. As you
continue on the trail, notice the Cow Parsnip on the
left where the trail turns sharply to the right.

8. The tall grass in the wetland on the right is
Reed Canary Grass, a plant native to New
England. About 1900, it was introduced into
the Palouse to control erosion. The large tree in
the middle of the wetland is a Black Willow that
grows near a temporary pond. What might have
lived here 200 years ago, before the introduction
of Reed Canary Grass? As you walk on, what
features do you observe in this area that would
have made it an area attractive to people for
thousands of years?

9. You have just walked along part of an ancient
Native American trail which became the original
route of Highway 95. The slope is gentle and
there are reliable springs along the way that
would have provided water for people and their
draft animals. The large Douglas Firs are
probably the oldest living organisms on the
Virgil Phillips Farm. If only these trees could
tell the things that happened in their shade!
What stories do you think they could tell of
Native Americans, of the horse and buggy era,
and of Virgil Phillips' joy at seeing youth learn
directly from nature as they visited his farm?

10. Take one last look around; notice especially
the grassland north of the developed area. Take
a few moments to contemplate or discuss the
thoughts you have developed during this hike.
Having reflected on the past while you
experienced the present environment, take a
moment to consider the future. The past cannot
be changed, but the future remains to be created.
What would you hope to find here were you to
return in 25 years, in 50 years, in 200 years?

Come again! Come in all seasons!
Virgil Phillips wanted visitors to learn from
nature at his farm throughout the year.

