

# BOBCAT NATURE TRAIL

by Peggy Lantz



Mrs. Hartsaw's class, walking the Bobcat Trail.

As soon as Orange County announced plans for the new Palm Lake Elementary School in 1986, a Parent-Teacher Association was organized for it. Long before the principal was named, the PTA drew up a list of things they wanted their new school to have, and it included saving a piece of the beautiful forested area for nature study. A year before the new school opened — before the bulldozers even broke ground — they were at work — planning, wheedling, fighting for a natural area with a nature trail.

The school was built on a transitional pine flatwoods, and acres of slash pines, scrub live oak, and saw palmetto were pushed away to make room for the buildings and playground.

But two acres of the woods were left undisturbed, and after the school was finished, the dads spent Saturdays building a nature trail through the trees. PTA president Kathy Suriano, with the help of Dick Deuerling of the Tarflower Chapter of FNPS, flagged a route that would round the trees for a quarter mile, requiring the removal of only one tree. Assisted by money from the PTA and grants from the Dr. Phillips Foundation and Martin Marietta, the dads outlined the trail with railroad ties and built benches and three raised decks to facilitate outdoor teaching. Mulch covers the ground between the railroad ties, and pine needles cover the ground under the trees.

The school mascot, the bobcat, was chosen from among five of Florida's endangered mammals, and the trail is



What do they see?



Squirrel nests. . .



Liatris. . .



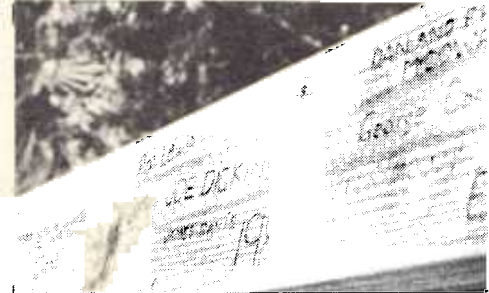
Mushrooms. . .

called the Bobcat Nature Trail.

Twelve markers along the trail, and a trail guide for teachers and students, help to identify plants. Among the native species growing along the Bobcat Trail are wax myrtle, live oak, saw palmetto, slash pine, shiny and rusty lyonia, reindeer moss, sand pine, smilax and grape vines, pennyroyal, and silk bay.

Donna Hartsaw, 5th grade teacher and chairperson of the Bobcat Nature Trail Teacher Committee, thinks her classroom is the best room in the school — it's only 30 feet from the wooded nature area with windows looking out on it. Her class has environmental studies whenever something moves in the woods. Children have seen, or seen signs of, black racer snakes, squirrels, rabbits, rats and mice, Red-bellied Woodpeckers, lizards and anoles, a flying squirrel, owls, and raccoons.

Teachers are developing curriculum for use of the trail, and are planning to incorporate the Bobcat Nature Trail into the



Not juvenile graffiti, but the names of the parents who helped build the Trail, burned onto the railing of the first teaching platform.



Some early students saw 10 Bobwhites out the window one morning. How can they get any work done?

Orange County Science Curriculum of Essential Skills. Various classes at Palm Lake Elementary have "adopted" a tree in the woods for study. They learn about its needs, its habitat, its growth patterns by taking measurements and making observations.

A subcontractor for a housing development adjacent to the school stirred up an angry hornet's nest of children and teachers when he failed to understand his job and bulldozed down all the trees up to the edge of the schoolyard. A thirty foot strip of natural woods was supposed to have been left. But the two acres of school-owned woods remains untouched and beautiful for children to see, touch, smell, hear, and study.

Given the advance notice of a new school, and the interest and persistence of the teachers and parents involved, any new school in Florida could have an acre or two of the "real" Florida for their children to wander through and learn about.