

# Phyllis Haehnle Memorial Sanctuary

## Wildlife Refuge Amidst Change

By Joan Irish Hoffman, Pleasant Lake

At the turn of the century there were many marshes along the Portage River of Jackson County. Ducks were plentiful. Hundreds of Wood Ducks could be seen leaving the Grand River woods to feed on wild rice in the Portage marshes. Typically hunters owned or leased large tracts of marsh as their private hunting grounds, and the "take" was legally liberal. Casper (Cap) Haehnle had a hunting cabin near these marshes.

Men fished shallow Mud Lake for Bluegills, Dogfish, and Sunfish, as Black Terns swooped overhead. Nearby, a small, deeper lake — later named Bogus Lake — was also fished. Claude Flick remembers vacationing with his parents at Eagle Lake, where frog legs were served by the dozen at breakfast, and where he recalls seeing a pair of Common Loons in 1917-18. There were also Muskrats, a few Eastern Cottontails, and Ruffed Grouse, but no White-tailed Deer.

Then in 1919 part of the Grand River was dredged, followed by dredging of the Portage River in 1921-22. These broad, straight drains replaced the meandering rivers. The bordering marshes were reduced; Mud Lake became Mud Lake Marsh.

The thirties brought the inception of the federal Waterloo Recreation Area plan, which would retire many acres of submarginal land from agriculture and provide public hunting, fishing, and recreation for southeastern Michigan. Mud Lake Marsh lay on the western edge of this plan.

Wild 'rice, once known to grow along the southern marsh border, is no longer evident; probably due to a change in the water level. On the other hand, geese, uncommon in the fifties, are regular nesters today. The White-tailed Deer, unseen here 65 years ago, have increased to the point of being destructive to farm crops in the area. With draining and cultivating, the muck field to the northeast produced onions, potatoes, peppermint, corn, and sod. As farming ended it gradually reverted to marsh. An old peppermint still just north of the sanctuary boundary is the only reminder of a past industry. Since its dredging in 1920-21, the Portage River drain has silted in. Adjacent muck fields flood, and increasingly they can't be farmed. Today, in the fall, people flock to the hill overlooking the marsh in ever-increasing numbers for a Saturday or Sunday afternoon of crane-watching.

Change is inevitable. Gone are the Prairie Chickens and wild rice, but other species have flourished. The stream, severely changed by dredging, is reverting to a more natural state. One thing has not changed: stewardship of the land by the Jackson and Michigan Audubon Societies. Haehnle Sanctuary continues to serve its intended purpose — a refuge for wildlife.

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During the Depression veteran soldiers and sailors were permitted to take wood from a strip of state land to the east of the present sanctuary. Fortunately, this didn't affect the stately Tuliptrees growing in the beech-maple woods to the southeast of Mud Lake Marsh.

Over the years Cap Haehnle had bought land for hunting purposes piece-by-piece, including Mud Lake Marsh. For easy access into the marsh he also leased ground between his holdings around Eagle Lake and Mud Lake Marsh from a man named Charles Wiffler. This was likely the same access used



Aerial view of Haehnle; x marks the high crest overlook.

Ron Hoffman Photos

years earlier by Indians who had a village on that upland.

There is a tale about an unusual use of this access sometime during Prohibition. Some Jacksonians were counterfeiting money. Pursued by the Feds, who had gotten wind of their operation, the counterfeiters drove through this land and dumped their plates into a small lake near Mud Lake marsh. That is how it was named Bogus Lake.

In the mid-thirties Prairie Chickens could be heard booming to the north. (Last record 5 May 1941, Walkinshaw.) Yellow Rails and Sandhill Cranes were also among the marsh occupants.

Through the years several dams were put in to back up water and improve hunting. In the early forties Harold Wing began to think of this marsh as a possible MAS sanctuary. (See *Michigan Audubon*, September/October 1983.) The Michigan Conservation Department also wanted it as part of the Waterloo Recreation Area, and eventually bought 40 acres (east of the present sanctuary parking lot).

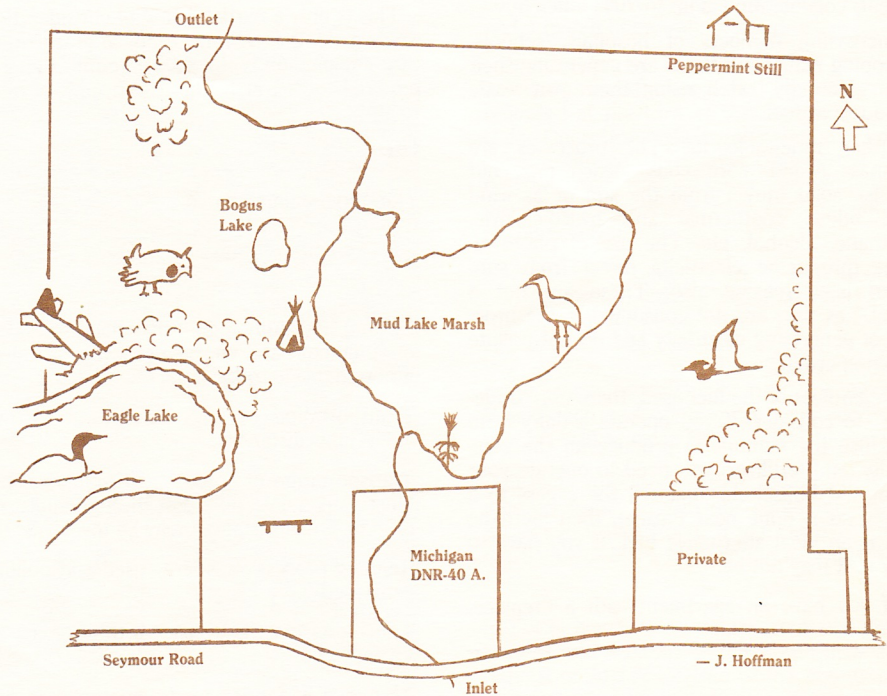
A colony of Great Blue Herons nested in Tulip trees in the southeast woods from 1943 to 1952. In 1950 Bob Whiting and the Cottrilles put up a photographic blind in the heron rookery. One day Bob was photographing when it came time for an expected telephone call. As he descended from the blind he looked up to see a Bald Eagle come in and feed upon a heron egg. Yolk streamed down the eagle's face — a scene Bob regrets not having captured on film.

On 22 January 1955 Casper Haehnle gave 497 acres, including Mud Lake Marsh, to the Michigan Audubon Society. It was to be managed by the local Jackson Audubon Club. In August 1957 the Michigan Conservation Department dedicated it as a wildlife sanctuary, thereby closing it to hunting, fishing, and trapping. A long-established hunting tradition, however, did not change overnight.

The question arose whether the Society could control fishing on Mud Lake Marsh. The wetland was defined as a marsh, not a lake. Under the Swamp Lands Act marsh access is controlled by the owner, thus no fishing would take place.

The sixties and early seventies were important years for the acquisition of key parcels of land necessary for access to the marsh, and control of hunting. In 1966, after Wiffler's death, MAS purchased his 160 acre upland. Now access from Seymour Road was assured. In 1971 a second key purchase, 30 acres known as the Halbeisen property, was made possible by a gift from the Kresge Foundation. Following this acquisition the state closed its adjoining 40 acres to hunting. (As hunting decreased, fall sightings of Sandhill Cranes increased.) Three additional purchases rounded out the present sanctuary of just a fraction over 705 acres. One of these parcels was purchased with money paid for damages after a private jet plane crashed there in the early sixties.

From the time of Haehnle's gift, into the seventies, there were visions of a permanent MAS headquarters at the sanctuary. Plans were drawn for an interpretive center, but they did not materialize. After Casper Haehnle died, MAS' ten-year lease of his farm house



Looking back in time from a bench on the hill we would see many cranes, the peppermint still, a plane crash, a rookery of Great Blue Herons (1943-52), Prairie Chickens (until 1941), visitors to Bogus Lake, wild rice, loons (1917-18), and an Indian village.

(to the west) ran out and it reverted to the Haehnle estate. To meet some of the outdoor education needs of the area, the Michigan DNR built an interpretive center at Mill Lake in the Waterloo Recreation Area. Later, Dahlem Environmental Education Center near Jackson Community College served this function.

Over the years Haehnle Sanctuary has become a haven for roosting Sandhill Cranes (1,325 recorded 12 November 1980), waterfowl (about 2,000 ducks is a conservative estimate seen there during recent fall migra-

tions), and many other birds. Fourteen Black Tern nests were observed in 1983, and again in 1984; this is a declining species in many areas. Among others on the "Michigan Bird Watch List" which take refuge at the sanctuary are the Eastern Bluebird, Black Duck, American Bittern and Least Bittern. One hundred eighty-nine bird species have been recorded at Haehnle since 1935.

A plant survey is underway. The Small White Lady's-slipper orchid, another threatened Michigan species, has been found.