

Marsh Resurrected:

The Story of the Patrick Marsh Wildlife Area



By Daniel Wiersema

Every spring scores of seventh grade students from Patrick Marsh Middle School take vans down a short road to the water feature that their school is named after. Led by their science teacher (there have been several over the years) boys and girls of inquiring minds, and a few just enjoying not being in a classroom, spread out across the Patrick Marsh Wildlife Area. As they move through the tall prairie grasses and amongst the old oaks that used to mark property lines, these children are greeted by dozens of plant, animal, and bird species. Their footprints and handmarks join the hundreds, if not thousands, of people that have left their own around Patrick Marsh.

The story of Patrick Marsh is one of life, death, resurrection, and preservation. In

each stage of this ecological landmark's life human hands and feet and minds have left an unmistakable impression. The recorded history of Patrick Marsh is one of near constant human interaction for better or worse. The words of Effa Duscheck in 1922 are appropriate at this point: "One who has seen the tufted crane wading in the Old Lake; heard the sandpipers call along its shore; followed the flight of the wild ducks that frequent its waters; or looked upon the colorful Indian arrowheads or dull stone hammers turned up by the farmer's plow in its bordering fields, has caught something of the spirit of the early history of this attractive little body of water, just over the hill, one-and-one half miles northeast of Sun Prairie (Langeland 1)."

Just recite the many things that Patrick Marsh has been called

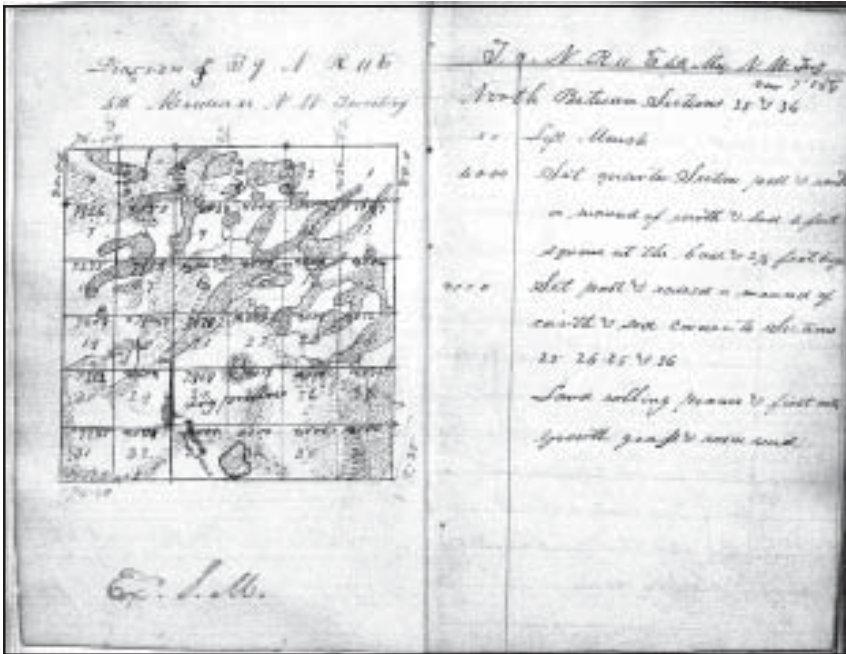
over the years: Patrick Lake, Brazee Lake, Duscheck's Marsh, or Old Lake and the human impact is at least as deep as naming rights. Patrick Marsh is a place of beautiful natural beauty, but man's impression, whether it is native or European-American, is ever influential.

Life

Patrick Marsh's recorded history dates back to 1834 when surveyor Orson Lyon remarked of a "pond" while he laid section lines for the government. The Ho-Chunk people also were frequent visitors to the marsh calling it *Ega Hocak Hominal Ni* and using the area for extensive camping, canoeing, trapping, and hunting (Dane County Parks 7). The year

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Patrick Marsh



A page from Orson Lyod's survey book. Patrick Marsh is the small blot at the bottom of the drawing. The survey of Wisconsin was conducted between 1832 and 1866 by the federal General Land Office. This work established the township, range and section grid; the pattern upon which land ownership and land use is based.

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1841 saw the first European-American settlers make their mark on the land. That was when William W. Patrick from Scotland constructed his home on the west shore of the pond, promptly naming it after himself: "Patrick Lake." Four years later another individual, David Brazee took up residence on the eastern shore also claiming naming rights for "Brazee Lake."

The permanent settlement of Patrick Marsh led to dramatic changes for the surrounding area. Settlement during this time usually meant farming and Patrick and Brazee were no different. Construction of homes and planting of crops cleared the land of many of the tall oaks that circled the lake. The wilderness tamed by the Ho-Chunk through

prairie burning was inherited by European settlers and brought under the new authority of the plow.

The marsh remained an active settlement for many species of plant, animal, and bird life as well. Much like they have for a long time, migratory birds made Patrick Marsh their home or a stopping point elsewhere. A little more than a hundred years after Patrick settled near the marsh humans would even more severely disrupt the natural flow of the ecosystem.

Death

Patrick Marsh had been called "Old Lake" by a number of people throughout its history. This title has often been attributed to it because of the numerous times that the lake has receded or practically disappeared. Since

Patrick's settlement in 1841 through the final days of marsh in 1965 this recession had occurred five times.

It was in the low point of the marsh's water level that the low point in the marsh's history also occurred. The greatest threat to wetlands throughout the postwar period was drainage for agricultural purposes (Rome 155). In 1965, two farmers, Hanley and Krebs, with land adjacent to the marsh, appealed to rezone the lake bed for agricultural use. The two men found themselves with an ever increasing tax burden (they were taxed for owning the neighboring marsh land even though it couldn't be used) without the means of meeting that burden. If the marsh could be successfully drained the spongy black soil at the bottom would be a farmer's dream and an economic boon. Despite a lawsuit from the Public Service Commission the farmers were ultimately successful in their endeavor as the lawsuit was thrown out in circuit court.

The draining of the remaining water of the marsh proceeded. Hanley and Krebs installed pumps and drainage tiles at the bottom of the lake and the next spring it was used for growing corn and other crops. Until its rebirth in 1992, the lake bed of Patrick Marsh was used for agriculture in some sense (some years the field went fallow). The marsh suffered under the hand of man for almost thirty years.

Resurrection

It is kind of ironic that a process that destroys such a large amount of natural land would end up becoming the salvation of Patrick Marsh. During the 1980s the Wisconsin Department of

Patrick Marsh

Transportation determined that U.S. 151 between Sun Prairie and Columbus was in need of expansion. The resulting expansion to four lanes required extensive land purchases and wetland destruction. Under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act the state is required to replace or recreate an equal amount of wetlands destroyed during their construction (EPA). This policy is called mitigation.

The construction of U.S. 151 consumed 26 acres of wetlands and so the state DOT sought to purchase the drained farmland and adjacent uplands to mitigate the loss. By this time much of the farmland lay fallow and some of it had partially flooded.

In an unprecedented move, the DOT sought the purchase of a greater number of acreage than had been destroyed during the construction phase. An agreement in 1991 with local landowners saw the DOT buy 225 acres of farmland for wetlands restoration. The state DNR and the DOT created a “banking” system to manage the destruction of wetlands in the state. The difference between the acres destroyed and the acres purchased would be “banked” for use in future construction wetland demolition. The DNR’s Alan Crossley said the banking concept was crucial to Patrick Marsh’s evolution:

“Without this banking concept Patrick Marsh would not have been restored. The DOT wouldn’t impact 137 acres in one highway project. The banking idea in effect gives birth to the restoration of larger wetlands areas (Garcia 1-2A).”

In the winter of 1991 the DOT disabled the pumps and drainage tiles that kept the lake bed dry and by April of 1992

Evolution of a Marsh



1937



1965



1994

about 100 acres of water covered the area with an average depth of 18 inches and a maximum depth of three feet (Dane County Parks 8). Almost immediately life began to return to Patrick Marsh. In the spring of 1992 over 5,000 ducks, 200 tundra swans, and 28 different aquatic plants species were observed in the reformed marsh (Dane County Parks 8).

When the Patrick Marsh Wildlife Area was dedicated in 1994 it was hailed as a massive success story for nature triumphant. Crossley said: “Within a few months, we had 100 acres of water, and swimming above the corn stubble were 5,000 ducks. It was a phenomenal response. We had not done a thing. It was kind of a testimonial

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to the regenerative power of nature.”

A Man's Work is Never Done

Even as the DNR praised nature for its wondrous efforts, man was not far behind in giving a helping hand in the restoration process. The following spring the marsh filled to roughly its maximum level pool level of 160 acres with an average depth of

five feet and maximum depth of eight feet. The fall of 1993 saw the installation of an outlet structure that ran underneath nearby Stone Quarry Road to establish the maximum depth of the marsh and prevent localized flooding.

DNR ecologists stripped the marsh area of invasive species and planted prairie grasses and plants in an attempt to recreate the marsh as closely as it would have been in the 1840s. Volunteers return on a regular basis to remove any remain foreign plants that may have avoided earlier sweeps or crept into the ecosystem. Even the water level of Patrick Marsh differs from 150 years ago. Dane County officials said that the present water level of the marsh

continues to drive out large numbers of shore line aquatic vegetation (Dane County 8). The preservation of Patrick Marsh in its “natural” state requires the near-constant meddling of the human hand.

The effects of mankind continue today with both positive and negative results. The most pressing issue for Patrick Marsh is one that faces much of nature: the continued encroachment of housing developments into environmentally fragile areas.



This map shows the divisions of the Patrick Marsh Natural Resource Area. Note the two NHLT protected areas.

double over the next 20 years. As Sun Prairie booms so do fears that Patrick Marsh's protection has an expiration date. Already a few houses boarder on the marsh and a new housing development sits within a few miles. There is concern amongst conservationists that the privately held lands next to Patrick Marsh will be sold to developers, increasing the risk to the marsh's delicate ecosystem. In 1996, Sun Prairie annexed 65 acres of land pushing the city

limits up against the Wildlife Area border. The new land was set aside as the site for one of two new middle schools, but worries are that development will soon follow.

In direct response to the expansion of subdivisions near Patrick Marsh, concerned residents, in 2000, established the Patrick Marsh Conservancy, a non-profit group stating their “mission to preserve this valuable area is extremely urgent given the ongoing proliferation of suburban

Patrick Marsh is located immediately outside the city of Sun Prairie. The Madison suburb was recently listed as one of the fastest growing cities in the state and its population is expected to

“This property is a gem in terms of its conservation, cultural, and historical values and in terms of the educational opportunities it provides. We're delighted we could protect it.” - Jeanne Behrend, President of the Patrick Marsh Conservancy

housing tracts in the City.” In five years, the Conservancy along with the National Heritage Land Trust and local, county and state government officials, in two separate deals, secured the purchase of 57 acres for protected status within the 785 acre Patrick Marsh Natural Resource Site (the DNR's Wildlife Area only encompasses 225 acres of the site). This site has been identified for protection in the DNR's Land Legacy Report, a list of the 288 places in the state that are critical to protect Wisconsin's “conservation and recreation needs in the next 50 years (NHLT 1).” The group hopes to be able to acquire the additional land as fundraising continues. Much of

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the preservation of the land around the actual marsh is dependent on the goodwill selling of land by their private owners to groups such as the Conservancy and not to developers.

The Future?

For thousands of years Patrick Marsh existed with no man-given name, subject to natural receding and flooding that occasional visited. The arrival of first the native peoples and then European-Americans had a profound impact on the marsh. Later as the city of Sun Prairie grew the marsh was lost to agricultural expansion like many other wetlands across the United States. In the 1990s a curious by-product of highway expansion brought the rebirth of Patrick Marsh while suburban sprawl gave birth to a movement of energetic local citizens determined to preserve the area for future generations.

It is those future generations that gather on the shoreline of Patrick Marsh during



This fence post is one of the last reminders of the farmland that existed before the recreation of Patrick Marsh.

the school year. The students observe wildlife, wade in the cool waters of the marsh, and gather data to bring back to the classroom. Just like the early settlers of the lands around then marsh, the students are leaving their mark on the land. Patrick Marsh is a fascinating story about man's ability to be both the destroyer of nature and the creator

of nature. It is an interesting choice that we all face in the next generation about the role of humans and their relationship with nature. We can choose to cover up our nature or resurrect and preserve our nature for the satisfaction and survival of those who have yet to, but will, leave their human mark on the planet.

Then... and Now



A child sits on the rocks of "Old Lake" while fishing.



Members of the Patrick Marsh Discovery Club watch birds after school.