

Meadowlands was their playground



MIKE DERER/AP

PHOTOS BELOW COURTESY/NJMC

Throughout the years, the landscape of the Meadowlands has vastly changed, from a pristine undeveloped ecosystem to a land of garbage and pollution to the current state of revitalization. To celebrate its 40th anniversary, the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission has assembled a living history of the district with residents telling their fondest tales of their time fishing, playing and creating mischief in the meadows.



Don Smith, a naturalist in the Meadowlands, says 30 years ago not many had respect for the ecological value and beauty of the Meadowlands, but he sees that the tide has drastically changed over the years.



PHOTOS COURTESY/MEADOWPAST.NET/NJMC

North Arlington resident Mae DeVoe remembers sneaking around the old copper mines that dot the landscape of the borough's underground as a kid.



The Lahullier brothers, Craig, Jeff and Bobby, grew up in Carlstadt and as children trapped muskrats, erected tree forts in the dumps and made slip and slides in the clay pits.

Wetlands enhanced locals' childhoods

BY MICHAEL LAMENDOLA
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What do a mayor, councilman, Korean War veteran, historian, naturalist and regular citizen all have in common? Their memories of the Meadowlands are ones that have lasted a lifetime and now, their stories of frolicking in the meadows of yore, trapping muskrats deep in the swamps and exploring the old copper mines that once drove local commerce are part of an ongoing oral history project created by the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission (NJMC) to commemorate the state agency's 40th anniversary.

The running series, found on the agency's Web site, continually updates with the memories of locals. Their stories are told through photos, written accounts and audio recollections.

According to Jim Wright, a communications officer with the NJMC, he and fellow public information officer Brian Aberback visited nearly every Meadowlands District town and contacted historians to seek out those with the most memorable stories about the evolution of the district. So far, the two staffers have posted the accounts of 10 area residents and a group of former muskrat trappers from Little Ferry.

"The stories on the Oral History Blog really give a sense of how special this area was and continues to be," said NJMC Executive Director Bob Ceberio. "I encourage anyone who is interested in the Meadowlands or simply enjoys good stories to visit the blog."

A backyard playground

For Craig, Jeff and Bobby Lahullier, their memories of growing up in Carlstadt were those of adventure. Craig is currently a councilman in Carlstadt and Jeff is a councilman in East Rutherford. All three hold positions in their East Rutherford mechanical business. They recollect on the mischief three brothers could encounter while exploring the vast expanses of the swamps. For Bobby, it was an experience at a swimming hole that stands out in his mind.

"On a 275 gallon fuel oil drum, we were out on one of these ponds in the middle of winter," he recalls. "We fell in swimming around in like 30 degree temperatures with all your winter clothes...how we didn't drown?"

North Arlington resident Mae DeVoe recalls going underground on several occasions, and although she was afraid, the inquisitive nature of a child growing up in North Arlington could only lead you to an exploration of the old copper mines.

"There was one...it was closed, but they [the boys] ripped off some of the boards and it was beautiful in there; it was all that greenish copper color," DeVoe recalls. "It was beautiful because there were spots of light. We didn't go far because the



Lyndhurst resident Earl Jensen would hit the various creeks around his home going as far out as where the western spur of the Turnpike is now to catch everything from carp and bass to blue crabs.



Estelle Oehlmann of Carlstadt remembers when the Paterson Plank Road Bridge came down, air shows at Sky Harbor on the Hackensack River and hunting frogs with her father in the marshes.



Richard P. Kane, an environmentalist heavily involved in the Meadowlands, said the hardest part about reversing the effects of degradation in the Meadowlands was educating people about its value and how useful it is. 587 acres are preserved in his name.

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rats that might be in there. The boys always brought candles so we could see. But I'll never forget the color; it was a greenish golden glow."

Hunting, fishing and trapping

Before there were signs posted around the Hackensack River and the tributaries of marshlands, creeks and inlets warning people to not crab or eat the fish, sportsmanship was a way of life. The Lahullier brothers remember muskrat hunting, making \$1,300 a year for the pelts.

"We'd come home with the rats, wrap them in newspaper and put them next to the furnace, which our mother really appreciated," Bobby recalls. "The newspaper would take all the water out of the fur." When dry, the muskrats would hang in the garage and would be skinned. A furrier from Wood-Ridge would come and inspect them, paying the brothers the going rate.

For Earl Jensen of Lyndhurst, his days were spent in Horseshoe Creek just east of Lyndhurst and North Arlington, fishing and crabbing, using the Jersey City water line to guide him out. It wasn't rare to come home with bass, catfish, blue crabs, perch or even monstrous carp. His biggest carp was two feet long. He brought it home for his grandfather to eat. But first, the toughest goal was catching the bait, killies or minnows that he would snare with just a string tied around a worm.

"When we felt that the minnow had the worm deep inside him, we'd pull the string and out came the small fish onto the bank; we'd very gently pull out the worm still tied to the string and toss it back to the water for another minnow," recalls Jensen. "We could sometimes catch five to six minnows with one worm. No hooks needed. When we felt we had enough of the minnows for baiting, we marched to the pier."

Estelle Oehlmann of Carlstadt hunted, but for pets. She remembers forging out to the swamps with her father to catch bullfrogs for her and her sister to keep in their home. When they brought home their catch, they put them in the bathtub.

"All we had was a pail and a flashlight. We had to walk very quietly through the swamp avoiding the sinkholes, but he [my father] knew his way around; he had been brought up there," she recalls. "When we heard a bullfrog croaking, he turned that flashlight on and the bullfrog froze; just hypnotized."

A legacy of garbage

With the Meadowlands come visions of garbage. It's not so much the case anymore as only one active landfill still survives, but in its heyday, the district was the Mecca of trash.

"The problem with the Meadowlands was people didn't realize how valuable it was," said Richard Kane, an environmentalist involved in the Meadowlands for 30 years and who was instrumental in preserving the 587-acre Empire Tract, now named in his honor as the Richard P. Kane Natural Area. "There was a massive need for education on the value."

Bobby Lahullier remembers the fires the dumps would bring. From

underground decomposition and methane gas release, fires were common in the dumps, many burning until they were self-extinguished with time, raging for weeks on end.

"Standing on the edge, two feet away, all that it would have to do is cave in," said Bobby. "You would die, you were finished, there was no way of getting out. That's when they wouldn't put them out, they'd let them burn then."

But for the Lahullier brothers, the dumps were not only a source of curiosity, they were a source of fun. Albeit, they are glad to see them gone, but when they were there, they made for a kid's wildest and dirtiest playground.

"We'd go down and make forts out of the Christmas trees," said Bobby. "During Christmas time, all the Christmas trees from all the towns would be dumped there."

Vigilance and rebirth

Through the years, as industry, pollution and garbage began to inundate and taint the landscape of the Meadowlands, many became vigilant and views on reversing the damage began to hit the forefront as a major priority.

"You see far more people are more attentive to the river [Hackensack River] and are now viewing

Hear other stories

To view the complete set of photos, read the accounts and listen to the recollections of those whose fondest memories are those of the Meadowlands, visit www.meadowpast.net

it as an urban resource than they had 25 to 30 years ago," said Don Smith, a Meadowlands naturalist.

Craig Lahullier said in one situation when pollution was running rampant, his environmental vigilance almost got him hurt. Out on a school assignment when the focus of studies was actually shifting to environmentalism in the region, he was chased by a bunch of polluters in his hometown.

"It had to be my freshman year of college or my senior year of high school and I went down to where Scientific Chemical is and I was over there taking pictures of the creek while guys were dumping drums out the back of the trucks," he said. "I was able to get away, but I was taking pictures of the guy dumping drums down there."

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