

Alberta's First Migratory Bird Sanctuary:

The Gaetz Lakes Sanctuary Turns 80

It's a funny thing. Sometimes you think you know somebody really well, and then you hear a story about them and a whole new side of them is revealed. It is the same thing with places. Most people in Red Deer know The Sanctuary. (*"Oh yeah, it is that park in Red Deer behind the Nature Centre with the trails. I saw a moose there once!"*) And yet, there are stories about the Sanctuary that make us look at it in a new light.

The Gaetz Lakes Sanctuary came into being in 1924, at the urging of the local naturalist community and with the support of the landowners, John & Grace Gaetz. Riding the crest of the new conservation movement, the people of Red Deer wanted their favourite local natural area protected. By Order-in-Council on June 27, 1924, Alberta's first Dominion Bird Sanctuary was created. The people of Red Deer have treated it as "their" Sanctuary ever since: it never was a case of *"Hi, we're from the government: we're here to help you."* The local people wanted it, and always have supported it.

The actual federal migratory bird sanctuary is smaller than what people see today. The designated land is along the east escarpment, the east lake and only a bit of the west lake. The rest of today's sanctuary used to be part of the River Glen Dairy (later the McCullough family's Glenmere farm) or government/school board land.

The first settlers on the former Cree and Blackfoot traditional lands were James and Elizabeth Wishart who arrived from Poplar Point, Manitoba in January 1885, and squatted on what is now the Southeast section of the Sanctuary. Their arrival in the community was particularly welcome since, according to the Calgary Bulletin at the time, *"rumour has it that two young ladies are with the party and the weatherworn bachelors are brightening up considerably."*

The Wisharts didn't stay for long, but they were involved in momentous events. During the Riel Rebellion, the family baked and cooked for the soldiers of the 65th Mount Royal Rifles stationed at Fort Normandeau. After the rebellion, the Wisharts moved to the Rosebud Creek area near Gleichen. They left behind a small log cabin on the bank above the two lakes and very little in the way of cleared land.

In the fall of 1885, John Jost Gaetz and his mother, Catherine arrived in Red Deer. They spend the first winter with the Leonard Gaetz family, before moving into the Wishart cabin. J.J. Gaetz applied for a homestead on what is now the south part of the Sanctuary and Michener Centre, while his mother applied in 1891 for a homestead on what is now the north end of the Sanctuary.

This caused some controversy as this quarter section was reserved by the Department of Indian Affairs as a site for an Indian Industrial School. However, Indian Affairs agreed to let the quarter be opened for homesteading as they had secured another site across the river from Fort Normandeau. There was some concern about a woman applying for land, but the local land agent recommended acceptance of Mrs. Gaetz's application on the grounds that

“her son ...has homesteaded the S.W. 1/4 of the section and has effected considerable improvements, besides belonging to a class of settlers that are of importance to a young and growing town like Red Deer in the way of spending their money and employing labour in it.” The land agent added that if one of the competing applications made by other individuals was accepted, *“it is very doubtful that we shall gain a resident settler, my impression being that these applications have been made in a spirit of speculation.”* Imagine the uproar today if a woman would be denied the right to buy land today unless her son was involved in the deal? Or that the “class” of the person buying land would be a factor?!

Jack Gaetz married Grace Elder in 1905. No longer in the Wishart shack, they lived in the beautiful and modern Willow Villa. The Gaetz's had an appreciation for nature and decided to neither cultivate nor log any more land around the two oxbow lakes or along the heavily timbered slopes.

The Alberta Natural History Society (now called the Red Deer River Naturalists) asked Mr. Gaetz in the spring of 1922 to consider designating the land as a bird sanctuary. After his agreement, on May 23rd. 1923, the ANHS made a formal application to the Commissioner of Canadian National Parks to have the land designated as a Federal Bird Sanctuary under the Migratory Birds Convention. On June 27th, 1924, Order-in-Council No. 1080 formally established the Red Deer Bird Sanctuary with the *“killing, hunting, capturing, injury, taking or molesting of migratory game, migratory insectivorous, or migratory non game birds, or the taking, injuring, destruction or molestation of their nests or eggs”* being prohibited. The Order-in-Council also stated the *“the use of this area as a Sanctuary shall be secondary to its use for agricultural purposes”*.

There have been many threats and disruptions to the Sanctuary have over the years. After Mr. Gaetz's sudden death from a heart attack on December 24th, 1937, the ownership of the Sanctuary was transferred to his wife, Grace. However, in 1938, when Mrs. Gaetz sold the land to the Provincial Department of Public Works, no conditions regarding the status of the land as a Sanctuary were attached to the transfer of title.

In late 1946, the Provincial Government ordered the logging of the spruce trees on the escarpment. Fortunately, Red Deer City Council, the Board of Trade, service clubs and members of the public joined the ANHS' protest and the decision to cut the trees was rescinded.

On June 10th, 1950, a party of City workmen left a roadside fire unattended and sparks blew into a thick covering of poplar fluff causing a tremendous blaze. The Red Deer Fire Department came out and doused the fires along the edge of the roadway, but decided that the main part of the Sanctuary was beyond the City's jurisdiction. They spent a couple of hours holding the fire clear from the Cemetery, before returning to the station. Kerry Wood, Wellington Dawe and a few friends spent the night controlling the remaining fires and flare-ups and saved the Sanctuary woods from almost certain destruction.

After the fire, people renewed their efforts to have the legal protection of the Sanctuary restored. In the fall of 1950, jurisdiction for the area was transferred to the Provincial Parks Department and there was talk of establishing a Provincial Wildlife Park, with the ANHS responsible for its maintenance and supervision. This never seems to have come to pass, however. In the 1960s, a storm sewer from the Deerhome complex of Michener Centre

created a large gully and caused severe silting of the East Lake. Throughout the years, there have been proposals to “beautify” the area by clearing the underbrush or to spray insecticides or drain the wet area. There were plans to build an amusement park, complete with little train and boat rides. Condominium development was rejected, as were plans for a major highway. Not all battles were successful. Highway 11 (67 Street) was built into the Sanctuary, and the City thwarted efforts to provide a decent wildlife underpass. The headwaters of Gaetz Creek, feeding into the Sanctuary, were cut off and diverted into storm sewers.

Still, we are left with something special. School Board and Michener Centre lands were bought for a dollar, and Glenmere Farm was expropriated and added to further increase the Sanctuary’s area. The Sanctuary now is part of Waskasoo Park. Visitors “know” the Sanctuary as a beautiful and peaceful area, ever more surrounded by the growing city. Hopefully, they will also learn of the other side of the Sanctuary, and its many and varied stories, and will continue to fight for its protection as generations have before.

This article is based on Michael Dave’s history of the Gaetz Lakes Sanctuary, available at the Kerry Wood Nature Centre or at www.waskasoopark.ca/history.htm.

For more information, read The Sanctuary by Kerry Wood. A reprinted version of this classic book is available at the Nature Centre for \$7.95.