

“DON'T LET IT BE A MUD PUDDLE”

“If it’s a mud puddle, don’t come back, Mary”
Chancellor Lee Sherman Dreyfus told me in the summer of 1976 as I left for the North Campus Plans and Utilization Committee meeting to decide the policies re: the lake being dug at the north end of campus. He meant “Don’t come back” to the office where I worked as Special Assistant to the Chancellor. He might have been kidding, of course, but I took him and “THE LAKE” seriously.

Early in 1976 I had started to work at UWSP replacing Bill Vickerstaff as Dreyfus’s Assistant. The vision and the building of “the Lake” had been in the works for several years, but in 1976 the pieces began to come together.

What caused this blue-sky dream leading up to “the Lake” construction? At some point, John Joanis, President of Sentry Insurance, and his friend, Lee Sherman Dreyfus , Chancellor of UWSP, conversed about a **man-made Lake** created by digging out a fifty acre area in near-by land, - using the product for a hill and foundation of the new Sentry Insurance Building at the corner of Division and Northpoint Drive. *It is my belief that they thought of it at the same time....turning to each other -- saying “What if.....?”*

(When tests were conducted at the site of the proposed massive excavation, particles of clay were found among the sand granules -- causing the kind of soil which would compact well for a hill and underpinnings of a large building.) It was described by the engineer supervising the Sentry Insurance World Headquarters construction as “the best fill that we could have found anywhere”. Here it was within blocks of the building site.

The UWSP Foundation had agreed to give 50 acres of its land kept in stewardship to the State (or University) to be used for a natural area and the “Lake” to be. This gift could be matched by a Land and Water Conservation Grant from the Federal Department of the Interior.

The Warzyn Engineering Company in Madison worked for Sentry Insurance, and Chief Engineer Willard Warzyn, asked for assistance from UWSP leadership - the Department of Biology, Dan Trainer, Dean of the College of Natural Resources and from UW System, Don Gerhard, the Building and Engineering Office, in order to get “The Lake” project going. An Environmental Impact Assessment had to be written in 1974 and approved before actual digging could

take place. Fred Copes and Charlie White, Biology, and Dan Coble, Water Resources, and others provided justification from University , faculty and student viewpoints. They described the existing characteristics of the area including Moses Creek, - the terrestrial and aquatic biological conditions. The Impact Assessment looked into the future and estimated depth measurements, types of fish species, flora to be encouraged, and the possible ways “The Lake “ could be used.

Ray Specht, Harlan Hoffbeck, and Hiram Krebs, UWSP staff, were helpful in the Impact Assessment, and played key roles in the planning phase and actual construction. Tim Gremmer, City Engineer, and Gerry Good, Sentry Insurance, were involved and supportive of the project especially when the connections to the City Streets were completed and the final engineering necessities were finished.

My task was to write the LAWCON grant. There was a format, to be sure, but the appraisal of the property and the necessity for having University people, the Board of the Foundation, the City administration, the UW System Personnel, AND the State Building Commission all singing

together caused much fact checking and rewriting of the Proposal. We agreed that the value of the property and the gift could be matched by a \$250,000.00 grant.

I used the Environmental Impact Assessment for the proposal, borrowing liberally from the scientific language. The document contained a drawing of the outline of the lake, its placement at the south end of the forested land **AND THE** creation of a natural conservancy area at the north end of the UWSP campus.

It sounds as if this all came together in a nifty fashion (as Dreyfus would say). And it ultimately did. However, some disagreements occurred along the way. Sentry really wanted to have Reserve Street closed from Maria Dr. to Northpoint Dr. and Michigan Avenue rebuilt. The University wanted to have Reserve St. closed, also, and proposed it to the city as part of the early establishment of Schmeekle Reserve. Ray Specht, (University planner) defended this proposal in front of an angry crowd of residents opposed to closing Reserve Street. The City, however, approved the University plan to close it.

Now we have the natural growth and **regrowth** (trees, bushes, Prairie Grass, plants of all kinds, even Buckthorn)—existing there that we see uninterrupted – the original 111 acres of the Schmeekle Reserve development.

Michigan Avenue was used as the thoroughfare carrying the trucks from “The Lake” to the Sentry construction site. Bob Kluck, the contractor, told me that 19,000 truck loads were moved night and day 1 and 1/2 miles to the Sentry Headquarters Building site. (Living nearby at Green Avenue with our windows wide open in the summer of 1976, I heard at least 10,000 of those truck movements thundering night and day).

The trucks carried 540,000 cubic yards at 28 cubic yards per truck load. The excavation crew scraped the sand and soil out as water came seeping in. The water was pumped into Moses Creek adjacent to the huge hole which had opened up. Moses Creek had been kept totally separate from the excavation for fear of contamination from the Creek. The hole in the earth covered 23 acres of the 50 acre land gift.

Willard Warzyn from Warzyn Engineering sounded alarmed one day that summer saying “We have used all of the

soil that we need for the foundation of the Sentry Building, but we don't think the lake is as deep as you want it. One option is for us to pile up sand and soil material for an Island. But we will still need a place to put some dirt.”

The campus administration and the Committee were delighted about the Island. The athletic fields diagonally across the street from the Lake were pointed out as being in need of additional layers of soil to improve their drainage. Soil was placed there and spread out, and additional dirt was piled up for an instructional ski hill in the Schmeekle Reserve.

The ski hill did not fully materialize, but the athletic fields were much improved. The Island looked like a tall bald sand dune out in the middle of the rapidly filling lake. Trees did not grow the first year, and 12 trees were actually planted the second season. Until Island plant growth appeared, I worried about its eroding or tipping over or some other horrendous event, but the Island exists today covered with trees of all splendid kinds.

My anxiety about the Island was not hysteria. I had been indoctrinated (and proud of it) by the scientific community

and had been convinced about the fragility and vulnerability of the shimmering water and blossoming Reserve vegetation.

The North Campus Plans and Utilization Committee met regularly in the spring and summer of 1976 to address the issues around the use of the LAWCON grant, the building of Michigan Avenue through the Schmeekle Reserve, and what was to be or not to be regarding the Lake. The Biologists wanted a “wet shore” on the Lake. I thought all lake shores were wet, but I was patiently taught that a shore with reeds and other water plants (not a beach) is a “wet shore”.

It was suggested that a Chancellor’s residence should be built (with donated funds) at one end of the Lake. It was definitely a possibility with the amount of dirt available to build an incline for a home to view the Lake, but the idea did not gather momentum.

We had learned that the LAWCON grant was approved in Washington D. C. and armed with the language that any program granted funding **must have public use**, I argued for recreational ways for the public to experience and appreciate the Lake and the Reserve. John Munson, Health, Exercise

Science, and Athletics (the modern name) wanted recreational use, also, but was very respectful of the scientific arguments.

Some of the scientists maintained that the Reserve and The Lake should have only academic purposes and a modified public use. With the intense scrutiny that every activity in the Reserve was being studied, I had the most joyful feeling of relief and , indeed, accomplishment when compromises were reached. For example I wanted swimming (my lifelong love) in The Lake. There HAS BEEN AND WILL BE no swimming in The Lake.

The other day I asked David Hillier about those “compromises”. He said, “It was and is such a “good” project that we couldn’t really screw it up. For example we wanted only certain species of fish in The Lake. Today there are all kinds of fish. People must have brought their catch from elsewhere and released them.”

What he did not say to me but was undoubtedly thinking - this was a grand experiment, but it was in the midst of a population within 20 miles of 60 to 70 thousand people, very close to a busy Interstate thoroughfare, and threatened by pollutants from land, water, and air.

Finally after reviewing 11 designs for the completion of Michigan Avenue (extended from Maria Dr. to Northpoint Dr.) a design was selected which received agreement from the City, the campus authorities (including Foresters, Botanists, Environmentalists) and the Warzyn Engineering firm for Sentry Insurance which rebuilt Michigan Avenue at that time.

Bob Miller, Urban Forester, played a key role in bringing about consensus. David Hillier did not want any street lights on Michigan Avenue noting the potential harmful effect on flora and fauna. A wide street was desired with good drainage, but not too wide and not too straight – to discourage speeding. Upon research certain lighting was discovered with less penetrating rays, and underground wiring was permitted with a Common Council Resolution signed by Mayor Michael Haberman.

“The Lake” was called Dreyfus Lake by all for months, and, indeed, years until the University Naming Committee, when Philip Marshall was Chancellor, called a special meeting to give it the name, “Lake Joanis”.

In 1974 - John Joanis, President of Sentry Insurance, participated with Tom Nesbit of John J. Flad and Associates,

Architectural Firm -- in receiving the tested soil report (soil tested in the UWSP Foundation 50 acres). The report was to reveal its suitability for use as foundation material for the Sentry World Headquarters Building. The Report also contained information about the scraping of soil and the pumping of water when the filling of the excavated area began.

Thus began the practical, basic steps taken by John J. Joanis, a man of action, to assure that the foundation of the Sentry Building would be on firm footings and “The Lake” would become reality. John Joanis believed in the Lake proposal and truly did something about it – therefore it is **LAKE JOANIS**.

The Reserve has received good fortune in so many ways, and Ron Zimmerman, Director of the Schmeekle Reserve, has been an able shepherd of its activities and happenings. He has cooperated with many who have wanted to participate in the Reserve such as the Green Circle, and The Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame.

Today, he is watching the development of the newest adventure with the restoration of Moses Creek and “wetlands mitigation project” in the eastern portion of the Reserve. The Department of Transportation restoration is literally dredging out the Creek, strengthening its banks, planting appropriate rocks and trees and delivering a moving, vital Creek. The work should be completed in December, 2010.

All of this visionary thinking, thoughtful planning, and generosity (SENTRY INSURANCE, UWSP FOUNDATION, MANY PERSONS SMALL AND LARGE WHO PITCHED IN ALONG THE WAY) has resulted in a gift that simply will never stop giving. You are invited to see Lake Joanis, to tramp the Reserve trails, to watch the seasons change, to marvel at the **power of nature**, or you can join me with a heartfelt, **“Thank you, God, for it is not a mud puddle!”**

MARY M. WILLIAMS