

# Peek into the Wild

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The ominous storm clouds which had inundated South Jersey for days were all but gone by the time Harold Peek arrived at the Millville wildlife preserve bearing his name.

It was late May and patches of sunlight glimmered through the newly blossomed leaves of the refuge's tall oak trees.

Standing beneath them, in a jigsaw puzzle of light and shadow, Peek and his family waited to take a trip down memory lane — to the old homestead that most of them hadn't seen for years.

After a group of school children from Myron L. Powell School in Cedarville arrived, the entourage began its trek into the 252-acre preserve. Their leader was Steve Eisenhower, regional manager at the Natural Lands Trust.

"This could have ended up a fertilizer plant," said Harold Peek, 74, as he walked along the muddy, dirt road leading into the woods.

Peek hadn't advertised the property when he and his wife, Joyce, put it up for sale in 1992. Still, some commercial developers found out about it.

But Peek had no interest in such bidders.

"We didn't want it developed," Peek said.

Joyce Peek, 72, shared her husband's concern for the land they once called home. Thousands of ducks, deer and other animals — including bald eagles — also called the area home. She wanted to see these animals protected.

"We wanted it preserved," she said. "We always wanted a sanctuary."

The Peeks used to live in apartments near the Millville Airport. He had plowed the garden for the land's previous owners, John and Beat-

rice Osburn, and had always been fond of the area.

"Once it went up for sale I bought it," said Peek proudly of that day back in 1957. "I was involved in oystering at the time."

Later, after the oystering business began to lose its profitability, he became a supervisor at a local glass company.

Peek and his wife would spend 35 years on the land now preserved. They raised four children there — three daughters and a son.

Ultimately, the Peeks decided to move out west to an Arkansas home in the Ozark Mountains, but not until they made sure their Millville land went to good use.

"It is difficult to make a preserve, money-wise," said Peek.

So, he turned to the Natural Lands Trust, a nonprofit, regional land trust working to protect land in the greater Philadelphia region since 1961. The organization bought the land from Peek in 1992.

"I'm a member of the NLT," said Peek. The group kept him informed. "They sent us brochures and all the news. It was slow getting started, but now it's great."

Alesia Contino, a teacher at the Myron L. Powell School, couldn't agree more.

She brought with her a group of seventh- and eighth-grade students. As a way of furthering the students' appreciation of the outdoors, she and Steve Eisenhower organized the class trip to the Peek Preserve.

The adventure actually began with a very wet canoe trip earlier that day and would go on to include such highlights as a hands-on lesson about the preserve's indigenous snakes and a heated, rock-skipping contest at Jenkins Landing overlooking the Maurice River.

But, to Jane Jannarone, 44, and Skip Peek, 47, two of Peek's four children who vis-

ited the property with their parents, the lessons are intertwined with their childhoods. Jannarone, now a Vineland resident and realtor, recalls playing with snakes as a game when she and her three siblings were kids. That is until her brother was bitten. He wasn't hurt badly, but it kind of put a damper on their games.

Now, years later, Jannarone returned to the preserve with her own children, Derek, 12, and Sarah, 6. She found memories hiding at every turn as she strolled through the cedar swamps and pine barrens of the preserve.

One path would go past a creek she and her siblings used to play in, trudging through knee-high mud. Another would lead to a half-buried foundation where they once had picnics.

All the while, her children were making memories of their own. Derek happily scooped up a wayward box turtle for everyone to see, and Sarah barreled down the trails with a feather she had found, stopping to hold a butterfly which Steve Eisenhower gently placed on her hand.

A couple hours later, the students returned to their bus and headed home after an exhaustive day of exploration.

But, the Peeks stayed. Theirs was not so much an exploration as it was a rediscovery, even though many changes were made to their land, and will be made in the future.

One improvement is the renovation of their old home so that Joe Patt, a botanist and caretaker of the preserve, could live with amenities, such as electricity, that the Peeks initially had to do without.

Projects planned for the future include the addition of more land to the preserve and the construction of restrooms, according to Eisenhower.

Regardless, the Peeks couldn't be more ecstatic just to see their dreams of a wildlife sanctuary finally realized.

"I like it," Peek said in a matter-of-fact tone tinged with genuine

satisfaction. "It brings back old memories."

His wife echoed his sentiment while focusing more on what is ahead. "I am really thrilled," she said. "It brings a lot of hope for the future."

## If interested

To learn more about the Peek Preserve, stop by the entrance on Route 47 between Lilac and Narcissus avenues in Millville. There are forms in the parking area for visitors to request a pass to enter the preserve.

The passes provide a way for the Natural Lands Trust to curtail any heavy traffic which might be detrimental to the area's ecosystem.

For more information, call the NLT at their main office, 670-353-5587, or New Jersey Field Office, 609-447-3425.