

Proud Lake - - Ecology's Paradise

Story and Pictures
By DENNIS L. PAJOT

A deaf girl stood for a half-hour with her mouth wide open, looking straight up. She couldn't believe trees grew so tall. She was standing in a "climax" beech-maple forest whose stately trunks were over 400 years old.

And it took less than a half-hour for her school group to get to it from the big city.

Barring someone's carelessness or maliciousness, the forest will still be standing for her descendants in another 400 years. It's located in a 4,000-acre state preserve: the Proud Lake State Recreation Area just north of Wixom in Oakland County.

Unless disturbed by man, fire or disease, this forest will continue in its present state forever. Being a "climax" forest means it has attained the highest form of plant life and that the beech and maples will perpetrate themselves.

THEIR LEAVES will provide the correct amounts of sunlight and shade to bathe the area beneath and -after falling- will provide the correct mulch to produce their food.

As an added benefit, this climax condition also provides the necessary environment for the state-protected trillium, a wildflower native to the Farmington area.

Sixteen varieties of the green and white aristocrats will soon be nestled under the trees. Those not growing naturally are being transplanted there by an affectionate park naturalist.

"I've been getting them ahead of the bulldozers and bringing them back to a native condition here," said Hartley Thornton, who has been at Proud Lake nine years after becoming the first state-hired naturalist in 1960.

He has a double reason for rescuing the flowers. He's also a resident of Farmington, which is the hub of the only place you'll find one species with particularly prominent white surrounding green in the blossoms.

Outer edges of this trillium's habitat are Southfield, Livonia, Northville, Novi and Walled Lake. You'll find all varieties of trillium in this area, also.

BUT THE CLIMAX forest and trillium episodes are only a small fraction of the amazing nature story of Proud Lake recreation area and its immediate surroundings.

It was probably no accident that this particular area was chosen for a preserve and educational-recreational area.

It is located at the headwaters of the Huron River and adjacent to the headwaters of the other two major drainage basins of southeastern Michigan: The Rouge and Clinton Rivers.

This explains the near purity of Proud Lake waters, despite the proximity to suburban developments.

Between the town of Orchard Lake and Proud Lake is a high ridge caused by glacier pull back. It's here that Proud Lake waters originate as springs, rain and snowfall. Orchard Lake community effluent can't get over the ridge and runs the other way into the Clinton River system. Only the state-controlled land, a private nature preserve and Commerce Lake itself precede Proud Lake.

THORNTON SAID, "You'll find some of the nicest rainbow and brown trout this side of Canada in that lake." It's not hard to understand when one sees the crystal clear water uncommon to lower Michigan.

Another feature of the lake - very uncommon, but not-unusual - is that the river

flows steadily through it. The lake itself is actually an overflow of the river. This means food is being constantly circulated for water animals.

The lake - its adjacent landforms and the river - which flows out of the lake and toward Lake Erie - provide a monumental nature study story. It has a beginning, a middle and an end.

Thornton points out that every type of soil found in the United States is found in the Proud Lake recreation area, that "the whole story" of water is dramatized there, and that each of the five types of land life origin are likewise dramatized.

A GLACIER BROKE off there thousands of years ago to form a quaking bog. Anything that fell into the water then is preserved under a 10-inch cap of soil at the original temperature.

On the surface of the bog grow 17 varieties of orchids, which you would normally find only in warmer climates.

There's a true marsh, a form of water-soil refinement. This is literally evidence of a dying lake. Water runs through it, and there is a growth of reeds and grasses but no shrubs or bushes. It's a fish spawning paradise with its clean, clear moving water.

A hardwood swamp is also in evidence on the Proud Lake grounds. Here stagnant water and supersaturated soil form muck and peat; no stream runs in.

Thornton has created an ecology trail starting in the climax forest on a ridge and dipping in 100 feet to this swamp.

PROUD LAKE ALSO contains an out-wash plain. This was caused by rapid runoff of glacial water. Heavy materials sank and decayed. Lighter materials were washed away, leaving an absolutely clean surface.

In time, winds and animals bring the seeds of low forms of life. When conditions become ripe, lichens and mosses begin to grow. Their growth creates conditions for rough grasses.

These, in turn, create conditions for higher forms of life, which eventually create the same for a softwood forest, which leads to the takeover by the hardwoods.

When hardwoods have choked out the lower forms, the cycle is complete, or in a "climax" state.

Fifth type of water-soil transformation is a swale plain, existing at Proud Lake. This is a depression left by glaciers which became a lake with no inlet or outlet, usually quite shallow.

It is literally dying as plants consume its available nourishment. Eventually it dries to a point to create tall, lush swale grass, the type cherished by pheasant hunters. It is literally a dead lake, with possibly a soft spongy center section.

AMIDST THESE WONDERS the state has created facilities that bring school, college and scout groups numbering in the thousands each year to spend weeks at a time in nature study. Its outdoor education center includes dining hall and two dormitories. Thornton spends much of his time guiding and instructing these students.

Also provided at the park, through diligence of a small staff of rangers since 1946, are a completely winterized developed campground, tenting campgrounds for organizations, picnic area, boat launches, snowmobile trails, and gun ranges, among a host of facilities.

But it's the numerous nature trails developed by Thornton, his guided trips along them and other nature study and outdoor living programs he provides that are the real attractions.

There are five entrances. The one most used and most easily reached is near the main park office on Wixom Road north of that tiny city.



THE HURON BEGINS-While Park Naturalist Hartley Thornton chats with a group of hikers Proud Lake, for which the state recreation took its name, flows from the background and forms the Huron River at this rapids. (Observer photo)



STORY OF A FOREST-This carved board in Proud Lake Recreation Area tells the story of the Climax beech-maple forest through which hikers may pass on old Chief Pontiac's foot-trail. Park Naturalist Hartley Thornton points to the first stage of the forest's ecology. (Observer photo)



FARMINGTON TRILLIUM-Rescued from bulldozers, this species of trillium native to the Farmington area now nestles in the floor of a hardwood climax forest. (Observer photo)



THE AREA-Shaded area on the left is Proud Lake Recreation Area proper, with lakes, streams, the Huron River and roads in dark black. To right of center is another shaded government recreation area. (Observer photo)

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It's an art contest that will end all art contests. Buck-Opel Kadettes will be the canvases. Student groups from Stevenson, Clarencville, Farmington High School, Reelford Union, St. Agatha's and Lady of Sorrows will be the artists. Be there when it starts, 6 p.m. Friday evening.

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SADDENED BY VANDALS - Hartley Thornton, Proud Lake Recreation Area Naturalist, finds that some of the nearby public campgrounds had burned out bees that have nested in a hollow wild cherry tree for 10 years that I know of. (Observer photo)