

A family legacy of love for the land

Thomas C. Agnew Nature Reserve

A stretch of protected natural land along the Trent Severn Waterway near Washago has recently been increased through the efforts of the Couchiching Conservancy. The Conservancy's acquisition of the Thomas C. Agnew Nature Reserve, which adjoins the Robert and Emily Fawcett Natural Area, has created a wilderness corridor for wildlife and for people to enjoy. The purchase of the property was made possible by a part-donation of the property by sisters Joan Berndt and Susan Campbell, granddaughters of Thomas Agnew.

An early settler to the area, Thomas C. Agnew originally owned several hundred acres near the village of Washago. Thomas was involved in some logging and small farming until the early 1920's when the Trent Severn Waterway was being created through his lands. Construction crews spent many years blasting and digging a channel linking Lake Couchiching and the Severn River. The sand and gravel soil was an invaluable resource for the new canal. Several pits were dug on the Agnew property for the work. Remnants of these pits can be seen today although now they have turned into active ponds.

Over the years his land holdings were divided up and sold with a small remainder being handed down to following generations.

His granddaughters, Joan Berndt and Susan Campbell were deeply attached to their remaining property and have kept it in its natural state for decades. The once denuded forest grew back in; dense stands of hemlock, white pine and balsam fir in the lower, moist areas and a mix of maple and beech in the higher areas. Forest plants such as pipsissewa and wintergreen find shelter in the shade of the growing trees.

The mixed upland property provides habitat for mammals such as deer, moose, and coyote, as well as forest birds such as barred owls, thrushes, and various species of warblers.

The scattered ponds on the property are alive in the spring and summer with turtles, frogs and salamanders. The ponds provide the perfect nursery for amphibian eggs and tadpoles and turtles seek out the safety under the water and

One of the old sand pits has been used for many years by snapping and painted turtles for egg laying. Unfortunately, the area has been disturbed both by animals such as raccoons and by people on motorized vehicles.

Several years ago, the Couchiching Conservancy undertook a turtle habitat enhancement project with funding from the Endangered Species Program through the Ministry of Natural Resources. Part of the project involved the erection of barrier fencing around suitable turtle nesting sites to shelter them from disturbance. It is hoped that this will allow for successful hatchings of upcoming generations of turtles.

The Thomas C. Agnew Nature Reserve is open to the public for passive recreation, no motorized vehicles permitted. Directions: Hwy 11 North to Anchor Drive/Agner Road exit; left over Hwy 11 to Fawcett Drive; turn north for 1 km to Severn River and park near the bridge (don't block roadway or park on lawns). Walk along access road beside the Canal past the Fawcett Reserve.