Asylum Lake Preserve
A Kalamazoo Treasure for All Seasons

An invitation
To a celebration honoring those who have protected Asylum Lake Preserve

Join us for events at Gibbs House, 3403 Parkview Avenue, and the Parkview entrance to the Preserve, including a celebration and gathering from 1 to 5 p.m. on Saturday, May 18.

The Asylum Lake Preservation Association invites you to join local experts who will be giving tours of the Preserve. Learn about its plants, birds, history and the research that’s going on here.

Participate in the brief dedication of a plaque to Renay and Monty Piercey, pioneers in the association’s efforts to make the land surrounding Asylum Lake truly a "Preserve." There will be an opportunity to see displays about the many efforts that are being undertaken by local organizations dedicated to preserving our precious natural heritage here in Kalamazoo. There also will be an ALPA annual membership meeting.

Gather with us to celebrate our environment and the people who have helped us to preserve and appreciate it.
INSPIRED BY ASYLYM LAKE PRESERVE

Some people come to Asylum Lake Preserve for exercise. Some to walk the dog. Some to simply soak in the ever-changing sights of nature. Others come for inspiration. Whether it be artists, writers, or poets the lakes, trees and grasses encourage the muse.

These drawings by Ladislav Hanka, and poetry by Conrad Hilberry, Lynn Pattison, and Renay Piercey are examples of the inspiration nature provides. As one of Renay’s poems describes the Preserve:

A sylvan enclave of peace and serenity
surrounded by busy roads and highways.
Asylum Lake, graceful and glistening
in the sun, mysterious
in a midsummer fog
asylum for troubled souls
and creative spirits, alike.

Green
No one else can claim it.
Steep slope west of the path,
oaks, maples, dead grape vines

hanging on, and below, in a slant
of sun, my pond scum lake.
A hundred yards of tight valley,
bushes in the water, nothing
flowing in or out. Stalks bend
east, bowing to the wind

in their reedy way. A click
of cricket, or time
passing through. I frighten

a frog. He jumps and swims
slicing the green silence.
On the way back, a haunt

of notes from Jeff’s melodion—
no keyboard, just air pressed out,
pulled in, and buttoned down,
music for an August afternoon.

— Conrad Hilbery

Editor’s note: This poem is a tribute to the small potbole lake next to the walk on Winchell.

At Last
A woodchuck waddles from the thicket
to lunch on young shoots. The marsh rings
with cries of peepers—Easter creatures, a cross
on each tiny back. I want to wind the trunks

of saplings in blue ribbon, hang flags over
the gate. Soon we’ll clean feeders and brew thick syrup
for the hummingbirds eager for bee balm and bleeding
heart. A clutch of turkeys cuts

across the path, males fanning full displays.
Under a mat of leaves daffodils nudge up, appraise
the light. I tie prayer scrolls in the sweet gum,
cut woody vines from trees. Soon,

a haze of green in the treetops and soil
softening. Time for wind chimes of hollow bones,
bottles that whistle in the wind. Mayapples
unfurling, Lilies of the Valley rising. Oven birds.

— Lynn Pattison
ASYLUM LAKE PRESERVE IS A TREASURE FOR ALL SEASONS
WHAT'S GOING ON

Under the ground?

Hydrogeology. That's the scientific word for it. Back in the mid-'90s the department of geosciences at WMU developed a test site and buried metal drums and pipes in a distant corner of the prairie at the Preserve. Now, every summer, hydrologists from places such as Virginia, Minnesota, Peru, Japan, Denmark, and Norway come to Kalamazoo for a seminar course that teaches them to monitor the level and quality of the groundwater, and how to detect oil drums, pipes and other items that have been buried underground and which threaten the quality of the groundwater in places where the barrels or pipes are rusting or leaking.

Using electric, magnetic, and ground-penetrating radar tools they practice on a far corner of the prairie, learning to how detect the barrels and pipes. They take these skills back home and use them there to help clear the environment of buried trash that can cause pollution.

The barrels and pipes buried in the Preserve do not pose a threat to the Preserve. They are clean and not degradable. You could think of them as "seeds" planted there to help train the growing number of professionals now being employed in the field of environmental studies and ecology.

A second project of the hydrogeology program in Asylum Lake Preserve studies its groundwater. Each summer a special seminar spends a week drawing samples from wells located in the preserve.

Wells? You may be wondering, will someone fall down one of these wells while innocently taking a walk or a run? The simple answer is "never."

These are not the kinds of open wells that people fall into. In fact, it would be a challenge to even find one of them, since the tops are covered with metal plates that are locked and bolted down flat to the surface.

When the water samples are taken to test the flow and quality of the groundwater seminar students (people from all over the U.S. and the world) camp out in the field next to the wells. They take samples on regular intervals over a 40-hour period and work to protect the site.

To learn more about these efforts, you can visit the website of the geology department at WMU.

DID YOU KNOW?

At Asylum Lake Preserve there are 455 plant species, 117 bird species, six varieties of frogs, six kinds of turtles, and an indefinite number of snakes, and of course, many white-tailed deer. Asylum Lake Preserve is made up of mature oak-hickory forest, sedge meadow, old fields, and prairie/savanna.
WHAT’S GOING ON

In the water?

How is the water in the Preserve?

The state of the groundwater that hydrogeologists have tested is good.

Unfortunately, the news about the water in the lake is not so good, and researchers are working at this moment to find out more about what’s in the lake water and what we might do to keep up its quality.

Here’s the situation: The major pollutant in Asylum Lake at this point is phosphorous from the runoff of fertilizer for plants. It causes increased growth of algae and other plants that take oxygen from the water and which block sun from the lake water itself.

As the algae grows it produces biomass and as the algae dies the biomass decays, which removes oxygen from the water. As the particles of algae drift down, the oxygen is likely to become depleted, unless more oxygen is actively mixed in from a fountain or rapidly flowing water. Oxygen doesn’t move efficiently through stagnant water.

To keep this depletion from occurring, drainage can be adjusted so that the phosphorous runs off in a different direction and goes into the soil where it will percolate out as it sinks through the soil.

What we can’t get rid of is the salt that runs into the lake from the roads that surround it.

Of course, we don’t want to drive on Stadium, Drake, or Parkview without their being salted during Michigan winters, but unless we figure out a way to divert the flow of salty runoff from these roads into the lake, Asylum will become a "dead" lake in the not-too-distant future.

Salt never disappears from water, even if it percolates through the soil.

The way a lake stays alive is for its water to mix, usually twice a year at the change of seasons. The water on top of the lake gets cooler and sinks, while the bottom water rises. This keeps oxygen circulating through the lake, exposes the water to sunlight, and guarantees healthy plant life, which in turn supports healthy fish and animal life.

But salt water is heavy. (That’s why we can float in it.) So the layer of salt water in a lake sinks to the bottom and stays there, thus preventing the mixing essential for a healthy aquatic environment.

The combination of too much phosphorous and a layer of salted water eventually kills the healthy aquatic plant life, and eventually the animals, which have nothing to feed on.

Asylum Lake has water that is not runoff coming in and the water runs out under the berm at the east end of the lake, so if we correct the amounts of salt and phosphorous coming in, the lake could avoid a "death" and eventually recover some of its original balance.

Interns from the Environmental Studies program at WMU will take samples of the water in Asylum Lake through the coming year to determine the state of the water.

The canoes tied to trees near the south side of the lake aren’t pleasure boats. They were bought with part of a National Science Foundation grant to WMU and are used to take samples from the lake water and the lake bottom.

We are fortunate to have an outstanding Environmental Studies program here with faculty and students from WMU who are learning about our local environment and are sharing that knowledge so we can preserve the natural gifts that we have here.
**ASYLUM LAKE: A FASCINATING HISTORY**

**1830-1839: Settlers purchase land in the area.**
Among them is Enoch Harris, the area’s first black settler. They arrive on this “Genessee Prairie” from Ohio in 1830, bringing seeds which it is said were used to plant the first apple orchard in Kalamazoo County. Harris is so respected that his neighbors often ask him to mediate property disputes, which must have been numerous and complicated in those early days. The Harrises are buried in Genessee Prairie Cemetery, at Parkview Ave and 11th St., where there is a historical marker dedicated to them.

**Where was the lake?** Early maps show only a small pond-like body of water on the site that is now Asylum Lake. It is believed a horse-drawn scoop, like this one, carved dirt out of a nearby hillside to make the earthen berm we see today, thus making the lake the size we know now.

**1887-1955**

**1887—The State Legislature purchases 324 acres for an addition to the "Michigan Asylum for the Insane."** At this point, the lake, which had been previously named after the settlers who owned the land, becomes known as "Asylum Lake."

**The Colony Farm operation:**

**1887-1955:** This was what we might think of as the "agricultural and campus" phase of the land, as it becomes part of the the farming operation run by the hospital and the campus of the hospital itself. It is called the Colony Farm. (What is now Drake Road was called Colony Farm Road, and the Asylum’s presence was reflected in the original name of Oakland Drive, Asylum Ave.)

Patients who are able to do farm work cultivate the land, tend the cows and pigs, and raise food for the patients and for the animals. Besides providing food, which makes the hospital self-sustaining, farming has therapeutic value for the patients who are given meaningful work and fresh air, the only "medications" available to them.

**1910: The tunnels:** An interesting feature of the hospital campus is the tunnels which connect the buildings.

The opening of the tunnels is celebrated with a dance to which all the employees are invited, according to the Kalamazoo Gazette of October 19, 1910.

"During the stormy days of winter," says the Gazette, "or inclement weather, in the summer, patients will not be compelled to buff with the elements in going from the cottages to the dining room. ...

"(It is) illuminated with electric lights and the patients are protected from wintry winds and snow in their passage from the cottages to the dining room."
ASYLUM LAKE: A FASCINATING HISTORY
1955-1971

Farm operations end, land sold off, patient population shrinks: As the cost of growing food and raising animals becomes greater than buying it, and as new medications shorten hospital stays, the population and the farming operations decline. The piggery closes in the mid-50's as it is polluting the lake and the water table.

Adding to the cost of the farm operation is the fact that many of the new patients are former WWII soldiers who are inexperienced in working farms and operating farm machinery.

As Dr. Clarence Schreier, the head of the hospital, says in 1955, "the majority of our patients now are city-bred, and not only know nothing about farming but look with great distaste on this form of activity ... years ago much of the farm work was manual, or by horse, but now tractors and machines do the work ... the cost of farm operations has risen ... while the therapeutic value of the farms has decreased."

In psychiatric hospitals across the state and the nation, fresh air and manual labor are replaced by new medications and community placement programs.

In 1959, the legislature passes a resolution ending farming operations throughout the state.

The cottages are emptied and eventually demolished by 1971.

The Asylum Lake Property is declared surplus to the institution's needs.

1971-1990s

1973-1990s: The land begins to return to a "natural state." As the cottages are demolished, the underground tunnels remain. They serve one useful purpose—as a practice area for the local police SWAT team. But they are a serious safety hazard, and are eventually blown up and filled in, so that no trace of them remains.

The land as a desirable commodity: During this period, the land, returning to its "natural" state, is an appealing target for many developers, and many initiatives for its use are proposed during this era. They include:

• a Planned Housing Development with 1500 units;
• an armory;
• a children's psychiatric hospital;
• an industrial park;
• a golf course; and
• a city park with a boat launch, shelter, bathroom facilities.

As the legislation is finally passed, an interesting discussion goes on about the name of the area.

Though some suggest calling it "Fair Oaks," Rep. Welborn prevails when he says that it should remain "The Asylum Lake Preserve," because "due consideration (should) be given to the past history of the surrounding area," ... even though perhaps "many of us are ashamed of the past when the Kalamazoo State Hospital was an insane asylum."

1990: Asylum Lake Preservation Association forms: In response to proposals to use some of the property for an industrial park, residents from throughout the region form the Association and lobby against having the natural state of the area so radically changed.

Intense and sometimes bitter debate goes on for several years around the issues of having the land which was originally conveyed as open public space now being used in a different way. Finally, an agreement is reached whereby WMU would use the land south of Parkview for a research and business park, and the land north of Parkview would be preserved to "promote ecosystem integrity and natural aesthetics, ensure passive recreation, support research and education."

Dr. Elson Floyd, president of WMU, and the City of Kalamazoo also establish a fund at the Kalamazoo Community Foundation that yields an annual income to preserve and maintain the natural area. Expenditure of this money is determined by the Asylum Lake Policy and Management Council, which has members from the University, the surrounding neighborhood associations and the Asylum Lake Preservation Association.
IN GRATITUDE

Memorial stone: A plaque will go on this stone to remind those who visit of the work of Renay and Monty Piercey.

We who enjoy the Preserve are grateful to the many people who have had a part in ensuring its survival as a gift to us and to future generations. The dedication of the memorial stone to Renay and Monty Piercey is one expression of that gratitude.

We also want to remember the early pioneers of Asylum Lake Preservation Association, the many community members who came to meetings and petitioned government and university bodies, and the legislators who pursued legislation which would keep the Preserve in its natural state.

We further want to acknowledge people who today are contributing to the effort:

David Nesius, who picked up the torch for the Preserve when Renay had to put it down.

Mark Hoffman, a founder of ALPA, and the unofficial "historian" of the Preserve, whose tireless research and publications have been so important in preparing this newsletter.

The members of the ALPA board, who have remained faithful to the "cause" in good times and in difficult ones:

David Nesius, president; Lauri Holmes, vice president and newsletter publisher; Mark Hoffman, treasurer; Sherry Sims, secretary; Amy DeShon, past-president; and board members Pat Klein Cal Mastin and Wayne Marvin.

Western Michigan University Faculty members Carla Koretsky, Steve Kohler, Sharon Gill, and Tom Howe, who gave us their time and knowledge to contribute to this newsletter. They treasure and use the Preserve to educate their students about environmental issues.

Tyler Bassett, whose Ecological Assessment of the Preserve provided much information to us, and whose study and education about the Preserve has benefited many over the years.

Steve Keto, whose leadership of the Natural Areas Program at WMU provides oversight and maintenance for the Preserve and whose help in the preparations for the Celebration is invaluable.

Kalamazoo Environmental Council for its financial contribution toward this newsletter.

Craig Vestal at Portage Printing for help in newsletter production.

Kathy Jennings, Media Consultant, ALPA Newsletter editor.

WHAT DO THESE TWO CREATURES HAVE IN COMMON?

You wouldn't think this frog and chipping sparrow have a lot in common—other than they both live in the Asylum Lake Preserve and they depend on the protection of their habitat here to survive. But they share another trait—they both change their calls or songs when their environment is filled with the noise that we make, especially traffic noise.

Since the Asylum Lake Preserve has in fact a lot of background noise, often a whole lot of background noise, it's a good place to find out about those changes that our animal friends make in something so basic as their calls to each other.

Two graduate assistants in the WMU biology department working with WMU Assistant Professor in Biological Sciences Sharon Gill are comparing the calls of the animals at Asylum Lake Preserve with those at a nearby preserve, one which is far away from "anthropogenic noise" (the noise we create).

It's one of the adjustments animals have to make to our presence that we don't often think about.
WHERE YOUNGSTERS LEARN TO LOVE THE LAND

The day starts with Buster Bronco welcoming third graders to the 274-acre Asylum Lake Preserve.

The 150 students from four schools -- Mattawan Early Elementary, Montessori School in Kalamazoo, El Sol Elementary and Woodward Magnet of Kalamazoo Public Schools -- are about to spend the day on the land.

The day grew from the Kalamazoo No Child Left Inside Initiative developed by the Kalamazoo Nature Center and is rooted in the understanding that children who have positive experiences outside are more likely to become conservation stewards.

It's goal is to get students outdoors to explore, observe, appreciate and connect with the natural environment and each other.

The program has been ongoing for four years now. It started with a pilot program in 2010 for 68 students and has welcomed nearly 150 students for the day in each of the subsequent years.

The way it works is children participate in activities at stations set up throughout the Preserve. Western Michigan University students, serving as nature guides, lead the students from station to station where they take samples from Asylum Lake, study water ecology, and learn about invasive species by pulling out garlic mustard plants.

The youngsters also practice journaling and build leadership skills throughout the day.

The elementary students have the opportunity to build relationships with youngsters from other schools as they are encouraged to team up with them for their activities.

About 20 volunteers help make the day possible.

The program encourages youngsters to be curious about nature.

The event is organized by the University's landscape services department and president's office. It was created by an employee from each of those units to complement the program developed by the Nature Center and local public schools in partnership with WMU.

GARLIC MUSTARD HAS GOT TO GO

If you’re a gardener or a conservationist, you know this plant. It leaps into any space it can find and chokes out anything (like native grasses, trillium, other beautiful flowers,) and even after it’s pulled out leaves a chemical in the soil so that nothing can take its place unless carefully planted there, thus leaving that space for it to invade again. This is why we have the "garlic mustard army," which pulls this noxious invader every spring in Asylum Preserve before it sprouts seeds and gets even worse. Whenever possible, WMU includes garlic mustard pulls in its public outreach events to help control what has become one of the preserve’s most persistent invasive plants. A garlic mustard decomposition area is dug at the preserve each year so the collected plants can be buried on site as a more environmentally friendly alternative to sending the weeds to a landfill.
KEEP YOUR DOG ON A LEASH, PLEASE

We love dogs, we really do.

But dogs that run loose or that poop at the sides of the trails can be deadly to ground-nesting birds, or to some of the native plants our hard-working volunteers have so carefully planted by the trails where they can get sun.

If you let your dog run loose over the field, you might not only have to pay a fine, but you may have had a hand in destroying the home of a field sparrow, or other ground-nesting birds. Dog poop not only destroys plants but it pollutes. One more reason for keeping our four-footed friends on a leash, as as the poster at the entrance says, picking up after him or her.

Work was done to resurface the path, improve erosion control, and plant native vegetation.

LOOKING AHEAD FOR ASYLUM LAKE

Changes in the landscape: In the spring and summer of 2012, the Management Council of WMU contracted to have the path from the Winchell entrance past the end of the lake improved. The path was re-surfaced, erosion control terracing and drainage was put in place, native plants planted along the path, and the berm was repaired and widened to its original size.

What's in the future? There are plans, not written in stone, to continue the effort to restore the Preserve to its more "natural state." Much discussion has been held, and will be held, about what the "natural state" of this Preserve is. ALPA will try to keep you informed about these plans in future communications.

This is where you come in. We need the input of the users of the Preserve about what projects are important for the Management Council to put into their plans. Join ALPA, come out to volunteer, stay in touch. We need you!

THIS IS HOW THE FIELD Sparrow's song looks in an audiogram. But the audiogram doesn't capture the magic of the song. Those last repeated notes often rise upward, like bubbles in a glass of champagne. It can lift your spirits to hear it. But since they nest on the ground in the prairie section of the Preserve, romping dogs can destroy their home before the young can fledge.
ALPA needs support of the community

Asylum Lake Preserve has a fascinating history. a bounty of animals and plants... an endowment fund for its maintenance. What else does it need? It needs you, as part of a supportive community! You can see that this property is not a Preserve by accident, many people have worked long and hard to keep it this way.

While many now use the Preserve for rest and renewal, there are fewer who have understood its history and fragile nature.

After reading this newsletter we hope you too understand and that you can help create the community that the Preserve needs to survive. Please consider filling out the form below giving us your contact information for the mailing list and indicating if you wish to volunteer for ALPA and the Preserve.

If you wish, add a suggested donation of $15 per family to support ALPA's volunteer efforts.

We promise to never share your e-mail with anyone and not to bother you with frequent e-mails.

We will update you on what is happening in the Preserve and alert you to opportunities to help guard and improve this beautiful treasure.

Membership form: Asylum Lake Preservation Association

Name(s) ________________________________________________________________

Mailing address: _______________________________________________________

Email address: _________________________________________________________

I/we would be interested in being on a committee of ALPA: YES ☐ NO ☐ (We all hate committee work, but we need active ALPA members, and this one won’t be boring or arduous.)

I/we would like to volunteer in the Preserve: YES ☐ NO ☐

Suggested donation: $15 a year.

Please mail this form with your check made out to ALPA to:
Mark Hoffman, ALPA treasurer
PO Box 3316,
Kalamazoo, MI 49003-3316.
Controlled burns really are 'rocket science'  

You're going to WHAT?
Many people greet the idea that prairies or forests are going to be purposely burned with disbelief, since we've been raised to understand that fires kill the valuable plants and animals in a forest or a prairie.

But the fact is that such fires occurred before we became the dominant species on this planet, and these fires actually helped keep the native plants strong.

Now we set fires to burn off invasive species and regenerate the prairie.

But, "prescribed burns" are, in the words of one expert, "rocket science!"

You don't just go into a forest or onto a prairie and light a match.

Paul MacNellis, retired Director of Landscape Services at WMU and a controlled burn expert, says that such conditions as wind direction and speed, barometric pressure, relative humidity, solar gain, atmospheric mixing—up to 187 factors in some cases—have to be checked out before the go-ahead is given.

That's why it took nearly two years before those brush piles in the Preserve were burned.