



Asylum has history as refuge from society

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The crunch of running shoes on an old cinder trail startles a pair of geese and sends them honking off above the small, clear lake. From the reedy beach of the lake's eastern shore the summer sunset reflects brilliant orange on the quiet waters. A silent, spreading V from a lone muskrat paddling for evening shelter flashes bright ripples, and the first of the night-frogs has begun to call out from the shoreline grasses.

In the distance, beyond the marsh, beyond a crown of mature oaks, the rumble of traffic is a whispered reminder of how close the city is to this quiet, lovely place. Big trucks sound like far off thunder as they exit U.S. 131 and roll along Stadium Drive — heading east toward downtown Kalamazoo.

This place, the lake and the land around it, is called Asylum Lake. It has been owned and

maintained by Western Michigan University since 1975 as a nature preserve and agricultural research site.

A current debate concerning the appropriate use for such a large undeveloped area so close to downtown Kalamazoo raises many questions about the history and character of the Asylum Lake environs.

What exactly is this place? What is it like to walk its paths? What is its history?

Asylum Lake is no pristine reserve of pure nature. Those who know its trails and fish its waters soon become aware that civilization has passed through this land before — sometimes with a fairly heavy tread. Large concrete foundations still stand, crumbling at the shoreline — and vestiges of ornate walkways can be uncovered with the scuff of a boot beneath stands of mature oaks on the lake's hilly southern shore. In the meadows within the shady forests,

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unlikely flowers can be found, varieties that look suspiciously like the descendents of a grand and formal garden.

An ironic and central aspect of Asylum's beauty is that it has successfully borne the weight of successive waves of human habitation — its intertwined ecologies acknowledge a history of human presence — and so remind us that nature is not something apart, but rather something we are part of.

Woodland Indians knew of the lake and made use of it in many

ways. The first Europeans to make more of it were trappers and surveyors. Settlers soon followed and a dairy farm flourished on the north side of the late in the 1860s.

In 1878 the land became the site for "The Colony Plan," a government-funded, largely self-supporting asylum for the mentally disabled. The Colony was a thriving community and its residents raised high-grade Holsteins and pigs, and grew celery, rhubarb, apples, blueberries, strawberries

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and peaches.

At its peak the 300-acre colony supported 200 full-time residents and the community's buildings included a large male dormitory, a smaller women's building, a power plant, and, overlooking the lake from the oak-covered hillsides, grand residences for the doctors.

At certain times during the "Colony Farm" era severe threats to the lake's water quality occurred. Turn-of-the-century news accounts tell of serious concerns for the Asylum Lake's stock of bluegills, sunfish and large-mouth bass, because of the Colony's inadequate sewage disposal systems.

For almost a century, the Asylum Lake area was intensively occupied as civilized refuge from society for the most vulnerable, a role not entirely different from how it is used today — as a brief, natural refuge from the pressures of civilization.

In the 1970s, the lake suffered serious pollution again, this time

from the mobile home park that still exists to the west, upstream from the preserve, across Drake Road.

As the lake's fishermen will tell you, bass, bluegills and sunfish are still plentiful, although some mention that they've watched the lake silt up in recent years, perhaps as a result of the recently constructed apartment complex built to within a quarter mile of Asylum's steep and sandy northern banks.

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The heightened concern over the future of Asylum Lake is a microcosm of the debate taking place in our society between the needs of an expansion-based economy and an evolving awareness of the importance of a stable, protected ecosystem.

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