

# THE Blackbird: The View from Taylor's Bridge

By Carol Child  
Correspondent

On a crisp, blue October day, gazing out from Taylor's Bridge across the pristine Blackbird Creek timelessly meandering through cord grass bending in the breeze, discovering a treasured huddle of cattails among the waving Phragmites, watching fish leap and make whirlpools in the glinting inrushing tide, one wonders at the view had not a group of concerned citizens such as conservationist Edmund H. (Ted) Harvey, founder of Delaware Wild Lands, Inc., farmers like Jack Dukes, Governor Russ Peterson and others rushed in to wage a 10-year battle, finally saving 5,000 acres of untouched, varicolored salt marsh and agricultural land within a reed's breadth of Shell Oil's planting a wild entanglement of refinery towers, belching smokestacks and pipe lines there. How different would have been the view: Other oil and shipping companies joined the opposing forces. The conservationists were up against big players – George H. W. Bush, Richard Nixon; and, yes, Maurice Stans. In the middle of the Delaware Bay shipping terminals, islands piled high with mountains of coal, would sit where schooners piled high with mountains of oysters once sailed in prime fishing grounds. The Delaware coast from north of Bombay Hook to south of Prime Hook would have become another Marcus Hook.

"In the beginning they were like stamp collectors," said Holger H. (Rusty) Harvey, Delaware Wild Lands, Inc., executive director, from his office in Odessa's historic Old Academy Building. We bought checkerboard parcels of land so that Shell couldn't use the land in between, pieces with the idea of slowing them down, to block access to fresh water. That really did it -- big time," said Harvey. "It stopped Shell cold in its tracks." Delaware Wild Lands now owns about 4,000 acres around Taylor's Bridge. Finally, the passing of former Governor Russell Peterson's Coastal Zone Act in 1971 stopped Shell for good. Shell put up all the land for sale and Delaware Wild Lands bought most of it in partnership with the state of Delaware.

Delaware Wild Lands, Inc. "is a private, non-profit, tax-exempt organization dedicated to the conservation and preservation of natural areas through the acquisition and management of strategic parcels of land." Rusty Harvey, Ted's son, became executive director after Ted's death in 1978.



Photo by Carol Child

*Jack and Louise Dukes on their farm.*

"My father was a man of incredible foresight," said Rusty. "I've never known anybody like him. He finds a way to make people like him." For example, it didn't take Ted long to raise \$80,000 to purchase the Great Cypress Swamp in Sussex County, when he told the Wilmington Garden Club women about the beautiful white-fringed orchids growing there.

When Ted Harvey was a boy, his dad took him around to see the state, fishing and enjoying the wildlife, instilling in him a deep respect for nature. Ted became an airplane pilot. He lived many years in Florida – between Key West and Key Largo. He had a fishing lodge there. "In 1933 they had solar power and air conditioning," said Rusty. When Ted came back and saw the changes in Delaware, he was shocked and saddened at how real estate development had changed the landscape. Places he had visited as a child were no longer recognizable. He got friends interested to save the land before it was gone.

"It's a magical place down there on the Blackbird," said Rusty. "I've never seen anything like it. The long flight of

**Continued on page 84**

# The Blackbird...

Continued from page 82

the red knot [in the spring from Chile to the Arctic to breed] amazes me. They stop in this area to feed on horseshoe crab eggs and double their body weight. It took me damn near ten years to do that."

The strategic holdings of Delaware Wild Lands are protected long-term. Funds come through an endowment and tax-deductible contributions. They buy tillable acreage on which they administer land husbandry and game management.

Jack Dukes has served as Land and Farm Manager many years for Delaware Wild Lands. Long ago he put his land in farmland preservation. Generations of the Dukes family made their living from the land on their Taylor's Bridge farm at the mouth of the Blackbird Creek for centuries. Dukes' ancestors were Dutch and lived on Staten Island, he said, "until there was some sort of a dustup with the English, so they came down here in the sixteen hundreds and acquired a hundred acres from the Indians – legitimately." The farm now comprises 500 contiguous acres with over another 500 nearby. Dukes grew up trapping muskrat. The family sold the fur, in the early days to the Hudson Bay Fur Company, and they ate the meat a couple times a week. "It tastes gamey,"



Photo by Carol Child

*In 1987 the U.S. Department of Agriculture designated the Dukes farm a National Bicentennial Farm. To be so designated, the farm must be in the family for 200 years.*

he said. In between, they ate duck and pork from the farm hogs. They also caught snapping turtles. "We'd reach down in the mud with a hook, mash down the mud and pull them out," he said. In the winter they'd trap, in the summer they'd

**Continued on page 87**



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## The Blackbird...

Continued from page 84

go swimming and ride bikes. Dukes was the farm water boy, riding his pony from one farm to the next.

The Blackbird landowners were farmers, loggers, trappers, and hunters. A hardy breed, living in that remote, wet area, they respected the value of the land and practiced good local stewardship.

"Jack Dukes," among a handful of other farmers, "was one of the initiators of the Delaware Wild Lands preservation," said Dave Carter, Environmental Program Manager for the Delaware Coastal Program at the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control (DNREC). "This preservation program started with the Delaware Clean Water Act when the state together with the Nature Conservancy started buying up land so Shell Oil couldn't get it."

"We didn't like the idea of being overrun," said Dukes. "They were going to dredge Cedar Swamp." Led by Ted Harvey, they formed Delawareans for Orderly Development (DOD) in 1961. Governor Buck advised them.

A skeleton forest, the white cedar swamp at the mouth of the Blackbird that Shell wanted to dredge, is the sole New Castle County remnant of Atlantic white cedar. In 1878, the

Blackbird, once primarily fresh water, now a tidal marsh, with an abundant growth of cedars, changed in character literally overnight when, during a fall hurricane, what the locals called a tidal wave breached the barrier beach, inundating the cedars. The previously protected inner marshes have since been subject to tidal action and salinity. The slow meandering of the Blackbird Creek from its headwaters in the Blackbird State Forest, along the DNREC/Nature Conservancy's Blackbird-Millington Conservation Corridor, one of last forests on Delmarva, is the prime factor in keeping the water pristine.

Three bald eagle nests are located near where the Blackbird meets the Delaware River. There, on Mill Island "Before the Revolutionary War, the Tidewater Mill ground grain and timber," said Jack Dukes. "There was a twenty-five to thirty foot variance" [for water pressure].

"We've found pewter buttons, coins, pipe stems and other remnants on the island," said Louise Dukes.

Jack and Louise met 56 years ago at the Merry Land Roller Rink in Elkton. Family and friends around Taylor's Bridge call Louise an "Elkton Townie."

They have a daughter, Michelle Dukes Underwood, whose son graduated from the Citadel, recently got his law degree from South Carolina School of Law and passed the bar.

Continued on page 88

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Continued from page 87

However, the farm will be handed down to Neal Dukes, Jack's and Louise's son. In fact, Neal runs the farm now. Jack has retired. "Neal Dukes is the official farmer of record," said Jack.

"Years ago," Jack Dukes said, "we had dairy cattle, then sheep on the farm. Then polyester came along and the bottom dropped out of the wool market." Ultimately, they began growing corn and soybeans. They grew pumpkins, too, until the recent blight, and all the kids came and picked pumpkins and Jack took them on hayrides. "We had a man who lived here who planted a vegetable garden," said Dukes. "The soybean and corn crops are harvested to feed the chickens in Sussex County. We sent a lot of corn to Millsboro this year." If the market were there, they would sell their grain to make fuel. But, said Dukes, "There is a corn deficit in the state - not enough to feed the chickens. They have to ship it in."

"All of us have our own equipment now," he said. "We don't work any soil - not for fifteen years. We no longer till. We have better technology in the field. We plant in the existing mulch from the year before. The mulch is the corn stalks. They have a drill to make holes for the seed, between the old stalks and the machine mashes down the deteriorating corn.

The University of Delaware and the University of Maryland perfected this system years ago." They do use some fertilizer, based on soil recommendation.

"Jack Dukes, and his wife Louise, are special people, with a special love for the land," said Mike McGrath, who manages Farmland Preservation for the Delaware Department of Agriculture. "And Jack got it honest! On his mother's side of the family they can trace ownership back to the colonial proprietors and payments to the Native Americans of the region! That historical commitment of a family to farming the land has continued with the Dukes' early commitment to permanent preservation of the farm. From all the standpoints we care about in farmland preservation - good cropland, outstanding natural areas, habitat for wildlife, pristine location on the Delaware River - the Dukes farm is one of the gems in Delaware's farmland preservation efforts.

"Personally, our families go back many years. My mother and father considered Jack's parents among their best friends after arriving in Delaware in 1944. And Jack and Louise are my good friends, too. But more importantly, they are good friends to the land and its preservation. And they've made sure that their piece of Delaware will remain like that forever - a beautiful and productive reminder of Delaware's past - and a model for future generations of their love of the land."



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In 1987 the U.S. Department of Agriculture designated the Dukes farm a National Bicentennial Farm. To be so designated, the farm must be in the family for 200 years, and not all such farms are chosen. They must meet additional standpoints.

"The marshes have changed," said Dukes. "There's more salt, not the same vegetation." He trapped until the '70s, then muskrats increased in value, and it wasn't worthwhile. "Phragmites has taken over," he said. "The roots are so coarse that muskrats can't chew them." DNREC sprays aerially to control the non-native invader that chokes out the roots of the cattails muskrats eat.

"We've only had three names since the family owned the farm," said Jack Dukes: Staats, Woodkeeper, and Dukes.



*Blackbird Creek*

Photo by Carol Child

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