

Magee Marsh

By Scot Dahms

About 10,000 years ago, as mile-thick slabs of Wisconsin Ice Age glaciers retreated north in a warming climate, they scraped and gouged the land and their melting waters helped form the Great Lakes, including Lake Erie.

Although most of Lake Erie's shoreline rose above the waters, a stretch along the southwestern shore did not, and here formed huge wetlands, the storied Great Black Swamp, home to millions of waterfowl and other wetland creatures like muskrats, mink and otters.

For a great many years, the hand of man on these wetlands was unknown. But by the beginning of the 20th century, much of the once great Black Swamp had been drained, converted into farmland. A narrow strip of wetlands remained, and most of this marshland had been purchased by well-off waterfowl hunters as their private duck hunting club grounds.

In 1903, John N. Magee, of Elmore, Ohio, cobbled together 1,000 acres from the Crane Creek Shooting Club and 1,700 acres from the Cleveland Hunting Club into his own property. He intended to drain the marsh underfoot using pumps and dikes to draw the water out, then turn the land into productive farmland. But Lake Erie disagreed with Magee's scheme. Periods

Julia Magee poles a skiff to check muskrat traps in Magee Marsh.



of high water made farming futile, and the marsh returned to what it had always been, a haven for waterfowl hunting and muskrat trapping.

In 1925, Magee passed away and his daughters, Julia and Ruth, began managing the marsh. They leased the duck hunting rights to a group of men from Detroit but kept trapping rights, morphing Magee Marsh into a very productive fur operation called the John N. Magee Muskrat Farm.

In 1930, the farm would put Julia,

in particular, and the huge number of muskrats the marsh produced into the national spotlight.

Her entry into fame was rooted in 1927, when the Animal Trap Company of America began holding annual Fur Contests featuring a \$1,000 grand prize.

The contest was open to any trapper in the United States and Canada, except those connected to the company. To enter, trappers sold their pelts – and this included any fur legally taken during

a regular trapping season, from wolves, lynx, coyotes and foxes, to coons, skunks, possums, mink and muskrats – to a fur buyer, who noted the brand of trap used to catch the fur. Trap brand didn't matter, according to the rules. The trap brand record simply indicated the trapper wanted his or her pelts to be considered for the award. Catches were placed on an equal basis in determining the winner, with judgement solely upon the quality and condition of the pelt when compared with others of the same species. This way, a muskrat, skunk, possum or other less valuable species could win over a mink, otter or coon.

At the end of the trapping

RULES OF THE CONTEST

1. Contest will close at midnight, April 30, 1930.
2. Contest is open to everybody—young and old—except people connected with the Animal Trap Company of America.
3. Every pelt will be placed on an equal basis and the value of the species will have no bearing on the reward. Judgment will be based solely upon the quality and condition of the pelt, when compared with others of the same species. Thus a muskrat, skunk, opossum, or other of the less valuable species, may win over a mink, otter, or raccoon.
4. To enter the contest, simply sell your pelts the usual way and advise the fur buyer of the brand of trap used in obtaining your catch. The brand of trap employed will have no bearing on the award, but will serve as a record, and, at the same time, will indicate that you want your pelts considered in the award.
5. Do not write to the Animal Trap Company of America, or to any fur buyer, or to any dealer in traps, to obtain information as to the progress of the contest. The manufacturers of Victor, Newhouse and Oneida Jump game traps want this \$1,000 prize to come as a complete surprise to the winning

trapper; and, for this reason, no trapper will be advised in advance, whether or not his pelts are leading. To disregard this rule, by writing such letter for advance information, will automatically disqualify any entry.

6. Any pelt legally taken in a steel trap, during the legal trapping season, will be eligible for this \$1,000 prize. In event of a tie, \$1,000 will be paid to each tying contestant. The award will be made strictly on merit. The size and prime condition of the pelt, and the care and skill which the trapper employs in skinning, drying, and stretching will be factors that determine the winner.

7. At the close of the 1929-1930 trapping season the Animal Trap Company of America will conduct a canvas of the fur houses to select the winner. The final judges will be members of the editorial staff of three national publications and the advertising manager of the Animal Trap Company of America. The decision of the judges will be final, and announcement of the winner and awarding of the prize will be made as soon after the close of the contest as the judges can complete their work.

season – midnight, April 30, 1928 – Animal Trap Company personnel would canvas fur houses for participants. Later, a panel of judges from the editorial staff of three national outdoor magazines, including FUR-FISH-GAME, along with the advertising manager of the Animal Trap Company, would choose a winner.

Animal Trap Company hoped the \$1,000 prize would come as a complete surprise to the winner. For this reason, no trapper was advised in advance if their pelts were in the running. If a trapper disregarded this rule, wrote to Animal Trap Company for advanced information, he or she was automatically disqualified.

Herman Schoning of Montevideo, Minnesota won the 1927 - 28 \$1,000 prize with a prime mink pelt.

In the 1928 - 29 competition, O.H. Blackerby, of High Divide, Wyoming, took the \$1,000 award and a gold medalion, with his gray wolf pelt, sold to E.A. Stephens Fur Company of Denver, Colorado. In May that year, his pelt was displayed at Animal Trap Company's Lititz factory. Everett Powell of Warren, Ohio, won second prize with a coon. And Arthur Lowell of Franklinville, New York, won third with a black skunk. Also, another \$1,000 was divided among the dealers who sold the steel traps that brought the greatest success to their customers.

The Animal Trap Company's 1929-30 competition would put Julia Magee in the national spotlight. The contest that year included the \$1,000 prize and \$500 awards for runners-up.

The final judging committee met in Columbus, Ohio, on May 1, 1930. The judges included A.V. Harding, editor of FUR-FISH GAME. He'd assumed editorship of the magazine, after his father and F-F-G founder, A.R. Harding, passed away that same year. He shared this role with his sister, Louise Harding-Adams.

Other judges included Otto Kuechler, of Hunter-Trader-Trapper, Jason C. Lewis, R.C. Blackburn and E.J. Vogeler.

It took three hours for the judges to narrow their choices down to the top 12 furs.

Julia's muskrat pelt was the winner. It ranked top among an estimated catch of 34 million muskrats that year, according to news sources.

Floyd Gibbons of radio station WJZ

delivered a nationwide broadcast of the contest results on May 2. This was a big news event, because hundreds of newspapers from Maine to California picked up the story.

Julia sold the pelt – and more than 12,000 other muskrat pelts harvested from Magee Marsh – to L. Frank & Sons Company of Zanesville, Ohio. Julia's sister, Ruth, and 17 assistants made this huge catch.

Second prize, \$250, went to Leon E. McIntyre, of Ditfield, Maine, for a huge black otter pelt that "closely crowded" Julia's muskrat for top honors.

Muskrat trapping proved to be big business for the Magee sisters and their helpers. They were harvesting 12,000 to 15,000 muskrats annually from Magee Marsh, producing some \$30,000 in income, which certainly wasn't chump change during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

In 1940, the sisters sold Magee Marsh to the Magee Marsh Hunt Club. At the time, duck hunters were bringing down 2,500 ducks annually.

In 1951, Ohio's Department of Natural Resources acquired 1,800 acres of the Magee's 2,700-acre marsh. The property's management was split between the Division of Wildlife and Division of Parks. In the next decade, marsh purchases continued at both the state and federal level. In 1961, the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge opened. Now, there are more than 10,000 acres of Lake Erie marshes available for public use.

Today, thousands of tourists visit Magee Marsh to participate in the American Birding festival. The annual festival is held in early May and runs for 10 days. Activities include bird banding demonstrations, guided bird walks, book signings by famous bird watchers and photography opportunities. This event correlates to the best time to visit the area, the second and third week of May, when up to 30 different warblers can be observed.

Although failure is looked upon poorly, every once and a while, failure results in more positive outcomes. That was definitely the case at Magee Marsh, where one man's failure to convert a marsh into farmland produced a wild area where hunters, trappers and birdwatchers can all still enjoy the natural beauty of Magee Marsh's wetlands. ■



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