

"HOW IT BEGAN"

THE NATURE CONSERVANCY'S NASSAWANGO CREEK NATURE PRESERVE

*From the files and recollections of
Ilia J. and Joseph W. Fehrer, Sr.*



Photo by Diana Hastings

Ilia and "Nassawango Joe"

In 1972 Ilia and Joseph "Joe" W. Fehrer, Sr., of Snow Hill, Maryland (organizers of the Worcester Environmental Trust), having done extensive canoeing in the Chincoteague Bay and along the Pocomoke River and its tributaries, felt that the need for preservation of lands along these waterways was imperative. They began intensive efforts to try to persuade the State of Maryland, The Chesapeake Bay Foundation, and various land trusts and conservation groups, including The Nature Conservancy, to acquire those lands either in fee or by conservation easement, and preserve them in their natural state.

An early contact (1973) was William F. Nickel, III, Coordinator, Chesapeake Bay Program, The Nature Conservancy, who expressed interest. The Fehrer's furnished Nickel with information on five parcels of land which were available for purchase and recommended they be acquired. Subsequently, two of

these parcels were acquired - about 40 acres of land along the Pocomoke at Porter's Crossing (the Ulher property); and about 178 acres of land along the Chincoteague Bay east of Stockton (the Hancock property). From Worcester County assessment records the Fehrer's also compiled a list of landowners along the bay and river areas so Nickel could send informational letters to them.

In 1974 the Fehrer's joined The Nature Conservancy. In that year, too, the Smithsonian Institution published a survey of Chesapeake Bay Natural Areas. This study was designed by The Nature Conservancy to locate the most ecologically important wilderness areas in the Chesapeake Bay area. Of 262 sites studied the Pocomoke/Nassawango cypress forest was in the top three, and since only this area had received any protection the Conservancy decided to proceed with acquisition.

The Maryland Chapter of The Nature Conservancy was chartered in 1977. The Chapter's first campaign in 1977 was the successful rescue of Nanjemoy Creek's great blue heron rookery in Charles County. Acquisition of the Nassawango Creek area was to come later.

It was in that year, 1977, the Fehrer's learned that the Worcester County Historical Society was planning to clear and flood about 300 acres along Nassawango Creek north of Furnace Road (on land then owned by Foster) for reconstruction of a lake as might have existed during the time the Nassawango Iron Furnace was in operation (1830s and '40s).

In the meantime George Monroe, Worcester County Extension Agent and Secretary of the Pocomoke River Advisory Committee, had, in cooperation with the Historical Society, arranged for work release prisoners from the Poplar Hill Correctional Facility at Quantico, Maryland, to clear land for "nature trails" about 15' wide on both sides of Nassawango Creek above Furnace Road and above the high water line of the

proposed lake, and also along the berm of an old canal downstream from the iron furnace. By the time the Fehrer's learned of this a great deal of clearing had been accomplished for the trails.

The Fehrer's brought this to the attention of state and federal officials, and numerous conservation groups. They also urged The Nature Conservancy to give priority to acquisition of the proposed lake area. Soon thereafter Steven "Steve" T. Hamblin, Director, Mid-Atlantic Office of The Nature Conservancy, met at the iron furnace site with Joe Fehrer, Sr., and with Jack Graham of the Worcester County Historical Society.

Fehrer pointed out that it would be tragic to destroy the swamp - one of the most beautiful natural areas in the county - to make a lake. He stated that it would be virtually impossible for the Historical Society to get the required permits from the State and the Army Corps of Engineers to perform work entailed in creating the lake, and entreated Hamblin to proceed with acquisition as soon as possible. Fehrer also said he felt that the Historical Society and The Nature Conservancy could be good neighbors and that their respective interests could be served if the Conservancy acquired the Foster land. Fehrer intensified watchfulness of lands along Nassawango Creek and contacts between Fehrer and The Nature Conservancy continued.

In October 1978 Steve Hamblin asked Fehrer to make a baseline inventory of species on, and describe the primary features of the Foster lands. Fehrer recommended that Hamblin ask local botanists Franklin "Frank" S. Hirst and Mary E. Humphreys, to do the field work and offered to accompany them to record their findings and type the inventory data. On October 5, 1978, Hamblin advised Fehrer that he called Frank Hirst "last night" and Hirst gladly agreed to help in any way he could in the inventory. Hamblin planned to call Mary Humphreys and ask that if she is interested to call Fehrer, who would be the coordinator for the inventory effort.

Steve Hamblin also mentioned that negotiations were under way with E. Stanton Adkins of Salisbury, Maryland, for a gift to The Nature Conservancy of a 154.04 acre parcel of his land between Red House Road and Furnace Road. Hamblin said it was his hope that the group assembled to do the Foster inventory can begin next spring to do a detailed inventory of the Adkins gift property.

"Vegetational surveys" of Foster lands were made in four areas. Frank Hirst's impressive findings were sent to Steve Hamblin on November 10, 1978. Participating in the surveys were Joe Fehrer, Jr. of Stockton, Maryland, Henry Corrdry of Salisbury, Maryland, Gilbert Cavileer of Port Republic, New Jersey, and Kenneth Lange of North Freedom, Wisconsin. Joe Fehrer, Sr. made field notes and typed the reports.

On December 29, 1978, E. Stanton Adkins, a Trustee of The Nature Conservancy's fledgling Maryland Chapter, launched the Nassawango Creek Preserve with his gift of the first parcel - 154.04 acres between Red House Road and Furnace Road - a beautiful combination of cypress swamp and mixed hardwood uplands. The tract was designated by TNC as the "ADKINS GIFT," and so it remains to this day.

William H. "Hugh" Adkins, III, Esquire, member of the legal firm of Henry, Hairston and Price, of Easton, Maryland, and local attorney for The Nature Conservancy, offered stewardship help for the Preserve. On February 9, 1979, Steve Hamblin wrote to Hugh Adkins, expressing appreciation and asked him to work with Joe Fehrer, Sr., to assemble eight to ten interested people to serve as a Stewardship Committee for the Nassawango Creek Preserve.

On March 27, 1979, Steve Hamblin met with Hugh Adkins, Ilia and Joe Fehrer, Sr., Frank Hirst, Mary Humphreys, Joe Fehrer, Jr., and a few others, in Adkins' office in Snow Hill, Maryland, to brief them on managing the Preserve, which was expected to expand considerably. Hugh Adkins volunteered to become Chairman of the Stewardship Committee.

On June 1, 1979, the Mid-Atlantic Field Office of TNC was set up in Chevy Chase, Maryland, with Steve Hamblin as Director (in 1980 it was redesignated as the Maryland/Delaware Field Office, with Steve Hamblin as Director.)

Adkins' chairmanship ran from March 1979 to December 1981, when he left the area to continue legal practice in Easton, Maryland. The first meeting of the Nassawango Stewardship Committee was held in the afternoon of June 8, 1979, in Adkins' office. The meeting was conducted by Steve Hamblin and Committee members present were: Chairman Hugh Adkins, Ilia and Joe Fehrer, Sr., Frank Hirst, Mary Humphreys, Henry Corrdry, Mark Mengele, Rev. Tom McKelvey, and Steve Childs.

During Adkins' chairmanship a special field trip on the ADKINS GIFT tract was arranged by him for many TNC Maryland Chapter members on May 17, 1980, with E. Stanton Adkins leading, and botanists Frank Hirst and Mary Humphreys identifying species. Prior to this walk Frank Hirst made exploratory trips on the tract.

Also in May 1980, the Fehrer's began leading canoe trips for Nassawango donors and potential donors, an activity which continued for many years.

During 1981 Frank Hirst and Mary Humphreys, often accompanied by other Stewardship Committee members, made numerous botanical trips on the ADKINS GIFT tract from April through December.

Joe Fehrer, Sr. became interim Chairman of the Stewardship Committee in January 1982, when Hugh Adkins left the area, and continued until March 1982, giving Jim Stasz, a paid Project Manager for the Preserve, time to become familiar with the area and take over.

Jim Stasz was hired by the Maryland Chapter of TNC to spend one year February 1, 1982 to January 31, 1983 - to assist the Nassawango Creek Stewardship Committee in the difficult task of inventorying and planning at the Preserve, which had then expanded to 1,500 acres. His responsibilities included

working on a Nassawango Creek master plan, inventorying, identifying management problems, boundary posting, policing preserve abuse and drafting proposed long term management policies, budget and implementation schedule. He was also instructed to assume Chairmanship of the Nassawango Creek Preserve Stewardship Committee.

Joe Fehrer, Sr. again assumed responsibility as Chairman of the Stewardship Committee as of February 1983, after Jim Stasz completed contract. Fehrer has continued in that capacity to date (January 1993-~).

By 1990 the Preserve had grown to 3,000 acres plus, and the Stewardship Committee exceeded 30 members. Although Joe Fehrer, Sr., received excellent cooperation and help from all members, the responsibilities and volume of work became overwhelming.

Fehrer foresaw the need for others to learn the various aspects of Preserve management and in March 1990 asked the following persons to assist him in certain phases of management as Co-Chairmen: Michael D. Conger and Ronald M. Wilson of Snow Hill, and Joseph C. B. White of Salisbury. In June of that year Harry Smith of Salisbury was asked to also assist as Co-Chairman. In February 1992 Sharon Himes was asked to assist as Co-Chairman and Editor of "Nassawango News, The Newsletter of The Nassawango Creek Nature Preserve to be given to all Stewards to keep them informed of Preserve activities and other items of interest.

Only two volunteers have had the honor to succeed Nassawango Joe as Chairman: Michael Conger and Joe Fehrer, Jr.

Since 1979 members of the Nassawango Stewardship Committee have led more than 200 canoe trips for more than 1,700 people; led over 100 walks for 1000 people; and have given 17 slide shows for 600 people. They have posted and maintained more than 35 miles of boundary lines; constructed many muck and stream crossings; constructed rustic fences along trails and to barricade vehicular entrances to the Preserve; and developed nature trails, including the Paul Leifer Trail, principal Preserve visitation

area, complete with boardwalks, signs, benches, bulletin board, and sign-in box. They have also prepared informative brochures on canoeing and walking trails.

Of the original group of Stewards in June 1979, the following continue to remain in the Committee through the past many years - Frank Hirst, Mary Humphreys, Joe Fehrer, Jr. and Ilia Fehrer. Since formation of the Stewardship Committee many wonderful people have joined and remained to become productive and dedicated workers. Now, there are only four.

Compiled by Michael Conger

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