

### **36# Overview of the Class of 1918 Marsh**

The marsh you see in front of you may seem large, but it's only a tiny remnant of the wetland that was once here. As recently as 200 years ago, this marsh covered a broad area including areas today occupied by the Nielsen Tennis Stadium, the recreation fields, and the parking lots, all around you.

Wetlands are unproductive, stinky, mosquito-infested areas, right? We know better than that today! But, that's certainly what the university thought when they acquired the land in 1910.

In the early 1900s they conducted a series of experiments designed to drain the marsh to demonstrate how wetlands could be converted to productive agricultural uses—a particularly difficult prospect given that the marsh was now many feet below the Lake Mendota water levels—due to dams on the Yahara.

Nonetheless, drainage tiles were laid and a series of pumps installed to extract the water—a technique that proved successful—but only for a time. By 1965, as the marsh soils continued to dry out and shift, the drainage tiles broke apart as they were pushed to the surface. Nature was reasserting herself and the area began to revert back to a wetland. The university, though, still fighting with nature, began to dump construction debris and garbage to fill in the low-lying areas.

Fortunately, a 1969 environmental studies class understood the value of wetlands and intervened in university plans. Winning the university's consent, they turned the restoration of the marsh into a class project. The Class of 1918, as part of their 50<sup>th</sup> reunion gift, donated money to assist with planning and landscaping of a restored marsh. A portion of the former marsh was dredged and an interpretative trail was built around the new wetland habitat.

Unfortunately, the restoration of the marsh remains incomplete. Little has been done in the last 25 years to maintain the marsh, and today, stormwater run off, and invasive species threaten the health of the marsh. But the vision of a restored wetland remains strong and the marsh provides valuable educational opportunities to students. Our attitudes toward wetlands have also changed as they are now seen as integral to lake ecology and important habitats for wildlife and humans.

For more stories about the cultural and natural history of the Lakeshore Nature Preserve check out our website and interactive map. And be sure to look for other audio tour signposts throughout the Preserve. Happy trails!