



THE BEACHCOMBER

DUNE ACRES, INDIANA

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March, 2017

Something's Fishy in Dune Acres

by Michael Swygert

The Explosion

On June 15, 1967, a Federal Conservation official was conducting an aerial search looking for pollution in Lake Michigan when he spotted something extraordinary, beyond the scale of anything he had seen before -- a 40 mile band of brilliant "shimmering" dead fish, miles off shore and heading southerly toward the Lake's south basin. [*Alewife Explosion, The 1967 Die-Off in Lake Michigan, Federal Water Pollution Control Administration, Great Lakes Region, July 25, 1967.*](#) Estimates of the number of dead alewives in Lake Michigan and on its beaches ranged from hundreds of million to 20 billion.

From the Sea to the Lakes

They came from the sea – the Atlantic, silver-bodied alewives, 10 to 12 inches long, that for centuries have lived and still do in the Ocean's waters near America and Canada's northeastern coasts. Like many salt-water species, female alewives spawn in fresh-water tributaries where they lay between 10,000 and 22,000 eggs before returning to sea. But at some point they found an alternative destination, one that took them from salt water to fresh water.

Alewives in large numbers began to migrate toward the Great Lakes around 1825 when the Erie Canal was completed linking New York and Lake Ontario. Four years later in 1829, the Lake Erie Canal was linked to the Welland Canal, the latter having a series of locks that linked Lake Ontario to Lake Erie, bypassing Niagara Falls. Welland Canal became a vital part of the St. Lawrence Seaway project that from 1959 allowed large ships (and small fish) to navigate from the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Lakes. [*Wikipedia, Histories of the Erie Canal, Welland Canal, and St. Lawrence Seaway \(2017\); Ronald Kotulak, Great Lakes United in Alewives Plan, Chicago Tribune, sec.1, p.3, July 16, 1967.*](#) Alewives had been making that journey since the 1830s, but did so in much greater numbers after completion of the Seaway.

Alewives were first spotted in Lake Ontario in the 1870s and, decades later, at Niagara Falls in 1931. The alewife dispersion throughout the lakes took several years, the invasive fish not entering Lake Michigan until 1949. Beginning in the 1960s, through the 1990s millions, perhaps billions (see later discussion) of dead and dying alewives washed up on Lake Michigan's shorelines, the biggest concentration of which ended up in the Lake's southern basin stretching roughly from Racine, Wisconsin, to Benton Harbor, Michigan.

Alewives Overwhelm Dune Acres Beaches

The minutes of the March 11, 1964, Dune Acres Town Board meeting indicate for the first time that the Town's beaches had been invaded by thousands of dead and rotting fish. Board members discussed the

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Visitors from the lake

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problem and decided to contact **Bob Greer** who maintained and repaired the Town's roads among other chores. [D.A. Town Bd. Minutes, Vol. III, March 11, 1964.](#) Over the next few months the die-off continued. In July, the Board again debated the growing nuisance but offered no solution except telling Greer to keep at it. But, it wasn't going well. Besides equipment breakdowns, Greer's small earthmover and scraper were not particularly efficient because it was moving more tons of sand than fish. [Talks with 1960 Town Residents; D.A. Town Bd. Minutes, Vol. III, July 13, 1964.](#)



Two years later in March 1966, dead fish again washed ashore in huge numbers, challenging Town officials. Bob Greer's efforts were limited by his equipment. [D.A. Town Bd. Minutes, Vol. III, March 9, 1966.](#) In May, the Board considered options but decided they were too costly. Town resident **James Savage** was named Beach Commissioner and formed a committee to study the problem and report back. [D.A. Town Bd. Minutes, Vol. III, May 9, 1966.](#) But it was too late for action. Within weeks, the Town beaches were unusable.

In the span of four years, the alewife population in Lake Michigan had quadrupled, while the number of sport and commercial fish, including lake trout and white fish, substantially diminished. **Dr. Wayne Toddy**, Chief of Lake Michigan's Department of Conservation, estimated that the alewife population of Lake Michigan had increased from 17 percent in weight of all lake fish in 1962 to 90 percent by 1966. Astonishing! [Ronald Kotulak, supra; Alewife Explosion: The Die-Off in Lake Michigan, Report by the Federal Water Pollution Control Adm., Great Lakes Region, June 25, 1967.](#)

Dune Acres' frustration with the alewife program reached its zenith in 1967 when the Town Board asked resident **Ray Tittle** to study ways to resolve the problem. He reported back that Indiana and the Federal government proposed a joint-plan that would have trawlers patrol near-shore waters between Gary and Michigan City. A mile-wide net would stretch between two trawlers and as the boats moved slowly in concert the net would scoop up alewives and then dump them in holes

on Bethlehem Steel's property. But, the earliest the plan could be implemented was June 1968! Fortunately, Tittle had another option, one that the Town did implement. Ogden Dune had been using a mechanical "fish sweeper" with some success. On Tittle's recommendation, the Town purchased a similar sweeper but it, like the dozer, had difficulty cleaning the beaches due to the constant washing in, and mixing of waves, sand, and dead alewives. [D.A. Town Bd. Minutes, Vol. III, March 13, 1968.](#)

At the end of 1967, Great Lakes states and the federal government were planning ways to combat the alewife onslaught. The *Chicago Tribune* described it as a "double-barreled attack." First, it required stocking the lakes "*with large*

numbers of Coho and Chinook salmon that feed on alewives." Second, the governments would ask "*the commercial fishing industry for boats to remove dead alewives from the lakes . . . that a single boat dragging a huge net could haul in 2.5 to 5 tons of the fish in an hour.*" The *Tribune* story includes a statement of an official of the U.S. Department of Interior's Bureau of Commercial Fisheries: "*The combination of these two approaches looks most hopeful for controlling the alewife nuisance in Lake Michigan.*"

Dune Acres' Biggest Die-Off Ever

In the summer of 1967, Dune Acres experienced the worst consequences from an alewife invasion ever. "*Disgusting, horrible, unbelievable*" — these words best describe the 1967 fish die-off. Moreover, Town residents had confronted these conditions for the three prior years.

Mary Ann and Ray Tittle and **Sharon and BG Snyder** witnessed the alewife invasions of the Dune Acres beaches in the 1960's. Mary Ann describes them the "dreadful summers." She explains: "*We were not about to let the smell of the dead fish deter us from enjoying the beach.*"

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One year we kept raking them into piles and burying them. The next year we just raked a path from our stairs to the water, raked a place to put the towels and sat there as if nothing was awry, though the maggots were difficult to tolerate."

Sharon and BG Snyder worried that the Dune Acres beaches would never be the same. Sharon writes: *"We worked on the alewives constantly. BG and I dug holes then buried the dead fish. The flies and maggots were all over the beach; it was impossible to sit anywhere. I once tried to get alewives to the trash pickup but they were very heavy. While we worked, the smell was almost unbearable; it came into our home and we closed all the windows. We wondered if our wonderful beach was ever going to be "wonderful" again. I wondered, why can't something be done about this? The situation just ruined any use of the beach."*

Resident Bob Hartmann remembers: *"We used small fishnets to scoop up fish while they were still in the water. We would put lye in the holes that were filled with alewives."* *Wikipedia: Lye, an alkaline hydrolysis chemical -- can be used to digest tissues of animal carcasses.* Bob Hartmann also recalls seeing more than once **Barbara Bennett** (who lived right on East Beach) *"spray the beach with her personal deodorant [emphasis added] after the alewives were raked up and put into holes!"*

Meanwhile, beyond Dune Acres, Lake Michigan's entire shoreline was feeling the effects. Amy Hubbell, a reporter for the newspaper *Leelanau Enterprise*, wrote: *"Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dead alewives have washed up on the Leelanau Peninsula beaches, making for a stinky and squishy trip to the Lake."* The paper's story quotes a Leelanau resident that the die-off was *"of unprecedented magnitude. Masses of alewives washed up on the beach and we had to burn them, the stench was overpowering; summer residents packed up and left; bathers did not bathe; picnickers did not picnic."*

Hundreds of miles south and west of the Leelanau Peninsula, conditions were no better. The largest city on the Great Lakes, Chicago, was not spared the onslaught. Its beaches too were covered with silver blankets of dead alewives, causing the city to restrict public access. The *Chicago Sun Times* reported that city employees buried 3,500 cubic yards of alewives in the beaches or in private and public dumps, and used 5,000 gallons of deodorants to quell the smell. There was some good news: the alewives did not get into Chicago's water-supply pipes

from Lake Michigan because, the summer earlier, the city had constructed an alewife diversion system in the lake, one that worked when needed.

The story of the alewife invasion of the Great Lakes, especially Lake Michigan, became national news. Articles appeared in newspapers and magazines including *The New York Times*. The July 7, 1967 edition of *Time Magazine* featured the story and reads in part: *"From the Chicago waterfront to the Mackinaw Bridge, the shores of Lake Michigan were taken over last month by dead alewives. They washed ashore on every incoming wave, piling up on beaches faster than bulldozers and tractors could clear them away. They filled the air with the odor of decay and drew swarms of mosquitoes and flies."*

Dr. Curt Meine, a conservationist biologist, historian, author, and adjunct professor at the University of Wisconsin (where he earned a Ph.D. in environmental studies) has authored an exceptionally interesting and informative article on alewives in Lake Michigan during the mid-1960s. The article integrates Meine's personal reactions and scientific analysis of Lake Michigan's alewife die-off in 1967. *Curt Meine, Washed Up on the Shores of Lake Michigan, Minding Nature, Vol. 8, No. 3, Sept. 2015 (published by the Center for Humans & Nature) (accessible on the internet).*

Meine was eight-years old when he first stepped foot in the Windy City in the summer of 1967. After touring the city and seeing many of its attractions, he and his family saw the beach and were astonished. Meine never forgot the first time he saw *"the opaque eyes of the dead alewives floating bottom side up . . . the rotting fish exuded horrendous odors . . . When I first saw alewives along the beaches of Lake Michigan, they were both gross and engrossing. They were stealthy in life, obvious in death."*

By 2015, 48 years after Meine's first encounter with alewives he viewed them in a different light. *"Now, I see the alewife, for better or worse, as a companion, stranded in its multitudes on the shores of Lake Michigan, at the borders of past and future, light and dark, sound and silence, life and death, natural and human, land and water, city and lake. I see that, as I held my young nose against their stink, the alewives and I had come to the same place, the same fluid edge of our existence."*

The Numbers -- 20 Billion?

Estimates of the 1967-68 Lake Michigan alewives die-offs varied widely. Early estimates appeared in newspapers including *the Chicago Tribune*, *the Chicago*

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Sun Times, The New York Times, the Milwaukee Journal, the Chesterton Tribune, and the Gary Post Tribune. Later, scientific and academic journals published die-off estimates in articles written by engineers and scientists. But their estimates covered a wide range. As one ichthyologist put it: "No one knows how many fish perished. Estimates ran into hundreds of millions." Well, except for one: the highest estimate by far was reported in the June 17, 1967, edition of the *Chicago Daily News* – **"20 billion."** Statisticians consider such an estimate unreliable, an "outlier," because it falls outside the range of other estimates based on the standard deviation theory.

The Nuisance Continued

Besides the 1983-84 die-offs on Dune Acres beaches, others followed. A 1992 report in the *Chicago Tribune* noted: **"At North Avenue Beach, a band of rotting fish 4 to 10 feet wide hugs the water's edge, and officials up and down the Illinois and Indiana shoreline report similar scenes."** [Stevenson Swanson, *Alewives Are Back*, Chicago Tribune, May 17, 1992.](#) Four years later a much larger die-off swept onto Dune Acres beaches. *The Chesterton Tribune* on June 12, 1996, reported: **"Dead fish are a problem on Dune Acres' beaches: the worst die-off in decades."** The paper reported that Town official **Don Gourley** applauded the heroic efforts of residents in their effort to clean up the beaches, but Gourley added that Lake Michigan each day was depositing more of the small silvery fish; the battle wasn't over. The Town Council then asked **Irv Call**, Road Commissioner, to talk with the Town's snowplow contractor about using his plow to help to clean the beaches. The answer was yes. Councilman **Ben Bolton** told the *Chesterton Tribune* that dead alewives and carcasses would be buried in a long trench on the beach. [Jim Hale, *Dead Fish Stinking up Dune Acres Beach*, Chesterton Tribune, June 12, 1996.](#)

Meanwhile, area newspapers in June 1996 were reporting that visitors to both the Indiana Dunes State Park and Dunes National Lakeshore were being driven off by the tons of dead alewives on the beaches. As the 4th of July approached, crews -- some starting as early as 5 a.m. -- worked furiously for days to clean up the beaches before America's birthday and the invasion of thousands of celebrants. According to the *Chesterton Tribune*, they succeeded and by the 4th of July, the parks' beaches were clean.

More recently, in the summer of 2015, dead alewives once again washed ashore in Dune Acres, but in much smaller numbers. This is a reminder that the alewives are still in Lake Michigan and that imbalances in the lake's eco-system could change dramatically as has happened many times in the past fifty years.

Why and How? Part Two (next Beachcomber)

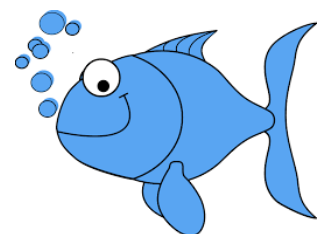
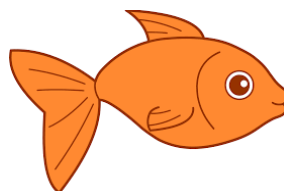
Part One of this two-part article emphasized the impacts, especially on Dune Acres, of alewife die-offs on Lake Michigan. **Part Two** (to be published in the next *Beachcomber*) will focus on why and how these events happened. The Great Lakes' biotic communities underwent enormous changes, including the upheaval of food chains, the extinction of fish species, the roles of other invasive fish, and the impact of changing lake temperatures – stay tuned.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

[Irene Newman](#), for expertly and artfully putting together each issue of the *Beachcomber*, including this one; [Bev Hubbs](#) for supplying relevant digital files from Dune Acres Historical Commission's archives; [Mary Ann & Ray Tittle](#), [Sharon Snyder](#), [Tom & Lou Roberts](#), and [Bob Hartmann](#) for sharing alewife memories; and, [Dianne Swygert](#), [John & Nancy Wilhelm](#), [Bev Hubbs](#), [Jan Bapst](#), [Carolyn Mellen](#) and [Susan Truesdale Christian](#) (a Carleton College classmate) for their excellent proofreading and editing of earlier drafts. **Thank you all!**



Fish sweeping begins in March, 1996





IN MEMORIAM

Bill Nixon

William Charles Nixon of Dune Acres, IN passed away at the age of 83 in Naples, FL February 27, 2017 of natural causes.

Bill was born in Adrian, Michigan, in 1933. His family lived in Wamplers Lake, Brooklyn, MI, and in South Haven, Michigan, where Bill graduated from Central High School in 1951.

He graduated from Western Michigan University in 1955 with a degree in Engineering and was commissioned as a Quartermaster into the U.S. Army. He served two years at Fort Lee, VA, and three years in Ansbach, Germany. He was honorably discharged in 1960.

He worked for the Trane Co., General Foods Corp and Grand Union, where he rose to senior management before retiring in 1998. He moved back to South Haven, MI, where he was elected to the city council. In 2002 he moved to Dune Acres, IN, where he was involved in the town council and where he resided through his final days.

Our condolences to his wife, Lois, and the entire Nixon family.

Anne Clark Haffner

We mourn the loss of long-time Dune Acres resident Anne Haffner who passed away on March 6.

In lieu of flowers the family asks for memorial contributions to the following: Lurie Children's Foundation, Attn: Founders Board, 225 E Chicago Avenue Box 4, Chicago, IL 60611; Access Living, 115 W Chicago Ave, Chicago, IL 60654; St Chrysostom's Episcopal Church, 1424 N Dearborn Pkwy 60610; or Chicago City Day School, 541 W Hawthorne Place, Chicago, IL 60657.

Our condolences to her sons Ted and Will and the entire Haffner family.

Andree Walczak

It is with sadness that I have to announce that my mom, Andree Walczak, passed away November 18 at 9:50pm. She died peacefully in her sleep. I want to express my deep gratitude to the individuals here who have been very helpful in the last years of my mom's life.

A funeral service will be held in Dune Acres this spring.

Marc Walczak

Sandhill cranes photographed by Ryan Carey on March 5



Donations to DACIF General Fund

Donations to the Max Carstens Memorial Fund

Nancy & Michael Anton, Jr.
Darlene & Steven Baker
Sarah & Austin Bancroft
Jan & Mark Bapst
Marti & Tony Belluschi
Beth Bergson
Cathy & Peter Bomberger
Nancy Bremner
Cecilia & Irv Call
Sharon & Stephen Carlson
Karen & Richard Cass
Susan & Ivan Chermel
Marcia Cleveland
Carol Cornwell
Jamie Cunning
Rob Das
Elise & Alex Demkovich & family
Marsha & Richard Demkovich
Jane Dickey
Debora & Michael Dill
Tammy & Tom Donnelly & Family
Tamara Eaton
James & Juanita Elder
Chris Elder
Cheryl Evans
Christine Feiler
Linnea & John Forchetti
Margaret & Ralph Fusco
Thomas Gozdecki, Jr.
Susan & Richard Grussel
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Kathy & Tom Kalotta
Kellie & Todd Klein
Heather & Randy Knotts
William Kollada, Jr.
Madge Kollar
Ellen & Timothy Kollar
Darlene & Mike Lapinski
Charmain & Stephen Later
Kathy & Bob Lauer
Timothy Leary
Rene & James Martin
Sara & John Masloroff
Patricia McDonald

Eileen McKnight
Carolyn & Lou Mellen
Jerry Mickelson
Holly & Kent Mishler
Emily & John Modjeski
Elizabeth & William Montgomery
Tamatha Murpjj
Diane Muskin
Kermt Myers
Bruce Nagel, DDS
Debra & Peter Nau
Irene & Arnie Newman
Lois & Bill Nixon
Bette Norris
Dixon O'Brien
Michael O'Connor
James Paglia
Mimi Pezzuto
Daniel Pishkur
Onnie & Bob Pucel
Dona & John Quinn
Jim & Tina Read
Mary & Paul Reilly
Beverly & Dr. Harry Richter
Bruce Riffle
Tom & Lou Roberts
Lynn & Dennis Schermer
Salvatore Schirripa
Linus Schrage
Linda & Howard Silverman
Marie & John Slaughter
Susan Smith
Gerry Snyder
Bill Spence
Mary & Robert Stolper
Heidi Studebaker
Nancy Sullivan
Thomas Swirski
Linda & Vic Szurgot
Bobbi & Dick Taylor
Robin Tennant
Bonnie Thomas
Linda & Scott Thornburgh
Mark Wahlers
Brunhilde & Alfred Wahlers
Lucille & John Wehner

Clubhouse Window Replacement - Carol & Tom Cornwell
Plampin Park - Barbara Plampin
Environmental - Jan & Mark Bapst
Strategic Plan - Jane Dickey
 Anne & Newton Murphy
Holiday Party - Irene Newman, Bette Norris, Bill Spence
 Laura & Terry Truax

2017 DUNE ACRES SOCIAL SEASON

With the onset of Spring comes the promise of seeing our neighbors again! Dune Acres will once again host three major parties and the Easter Egg Hunt this year. If you are new to town, it is an unwritten rule that every resident participate in at least one annual social event. That is part of what makes Dune Acres the unique community that it is. With so many part timers living here, the parties are great way to meet and get to know your neighbors.

I am pleased to announce that Jenny Carey has agreed to Co-Chair the Social Committee with me. We are asking for volunteers to head up the Spring and Fall parties, as well as volunteer for our Independence Day activities which will be held July 1st. I will be the Chairperson for the July celebration. A Social Committee Planner will be distributed in your mailbox sometime in the upcoming weeks.

Planning a party is easy and we will be there to help you. Everyone in Dune Acres will be assigned a party committee to be on. Let us know if there's a particular party you would like to help with. With a little bit of planning and delegating, the parties are a blast.

Please get involved in our community. Whether it's running a party, working a Town clean-up or attending a Town Council meeting, the more involved you are in your town the more you will enjoy it.

Thanks in advance for your help. Party on!

Carolyn Mellen

Dune Acres Social Chair

Bats in the Belfry?

If wildlife is causing economic damage or poses a health concern and you need removal assistance, Illiana Wildlife Services can help. See their website at <http://illianawildlifeservices.com/> for more information.

submitted by Mary Ann Crayton

The Elderberry Group will meet next Tuesday, March 7 from 1 to 3 in the Town Hall.

Refreshments will be served. We would love to have you join us. Call Mary Ann Crayton at 787-8104 for more information.

Migratory Bird Festival and Habitat Improvement Day

at the Westchester Migratory Bird Sanctuary
1050 South 11th Street, Chesterton, IN 46304



Saturday, April 8
9 AM to 3 PM
Lunch provided

Come join wildlife and plant experts to learn about birds, invasive plants, and how you can help the environment right here in Porter County! Local experts will be on hand to show you how to identify native plants and birds, how to spot plants that harm the local habitat and things you can do to improve local habitat for birds and other wildlife. Kids can participate in games and crafts! Bring gloves and gardening tools.



Free to the public!

For more information, contact us at info@westchesterbird.org or call (219) 201-5498

Thanks to the following people who made this issue happen:

Jan Bapst	Irene Newman
Ryan Carey	Mike Swygert
Mary Ann Crayton	Mark Walczyk
Carolyn Mellen	

We welcome all submissions - news, stories, photos, ideas for articles, information about upcoming events, etc.

The Fine Print: *The Beachcomber* is published on-line monthly during the summer and periodically during the winter. All information, news, creative contributions, articles, reports, corrections, suggestions, Letters to the Editor, art work, comments and otherwise are welcomed and encouraged. *The Beachcomber* is a grass roots publication not officially affiliated with either the Town of Dune Acres or the Dune Acres Civic Improvement Foundation, Inc. (DACIF). All content is believed to be reasonably accurate and reliable but not "guaranteed!"

Editorial Board: Irene Newman, Jan Bapst and Mike Swygert.
Email submissions to inewman680@aol.com. Please use "Beachcomber," in the subject line.