

## Robert and Helen Lerch: originators of the Goose Pond refuge

By Mark Martin and Janeen Laatsch

Have you ever wondered why Madison Audubon began acquiring land at Goose Pond? We spent an afternoon visiting with Robert and Helen Lerch and learned the answer to that question and other stories about Goose Pond.

The first fall Robert and Helen were married they camped in a tent on the south shore of the pond and trapped muskrats. Later they bought the property and lived at Goose Pond for 20 years before selling to Madison Audubon Society in 1966.

There have been many changes to the buildings in the last 50 years. The Lerches built a corn crib, two buildings for chickens and added to the 20-by 20-foot house. One of the chicken buildings is gone as well as the milk house, cattle barn, and tobacco shed. White pine from west of Poynette and oak from Harold Lerch's woods was used in constructing the buildings. The Lerches raised a variety of crops and animals from tobacco and potatoes to mink and peacocks.

The Lerches loved to fish, trap, hunt, plant trees, and observe wildlife at Goose Pond. A variety of fish have been stocked. One local Assemblyman had the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service stock bullheads and once someone stocked carp. Robert stocked fathead minnows which he later trapped and sold for fish bait. In the winter he trapped fatheads and shipped them to Vilas County. He transported them in a wooden barrel in which he placed six inches of snow, a layer of minnows, another six inches of snow, more minnows, and more snow. On arriving in Vilas County the minnows were placed in water.

Robert trapped muskrat, mink, fox, and badgers. One year he trapped 2,163 muskrats and 48 mink at Goose Pond. There were over 400 muskrat houses and they were so thick you could almost walk from house to house. He sold the premium pelts to Sears Roebuck. Another year he trapped six badgers in the local area and sold their pelts for making



*Sherri Laier photo*

**Robert Lerch (left) lived at Goose Pond for 20 years before selling to Madison Audubon. He reminisces with Mark Martin, Sanctuary resident manager.**

shaving brushes for \$35 apiece.

The Lerches planted the apple and ash trees in the front yard, willow suckers around the pond, and a variety of pines on the hill. None of the willows survived. In some areas, pines were planted four times and still didn't survive.

One fall they saw white pelicans on the pond and another fall they saw two whooping cranes which stayed around for about two weeks. In the 1950's they observed a brood of Canada geese on the pond. They also remember the first time they saw tundra swans land at Goose Pond in the 1950's.

Many people enjoyed Goose Pond before Audubon began acquiring land. Once there was a proposal to establish a county park on the north side of the pond. Plans were to dredge the pond and establish a picnic area. One person from Crystal Lake didn't want the competition the park may have given him and persuaded the county board to vote down establishment of a county park.

Robert loved to hunt. He once shot a banded goose that was banded in the western flyway. Canada geese were uncommon then and Robert let

the Wisconsin Conservation Department use his tame Canada geese to attract wild geese to the area.

Robert knew that a refuge was needed to attract and hold Canada geese in the fall. He worked with the Conservation Department to establish a refuge around the pond and in several sections of farmland where the geese fed on picked corn. The refuge was successful and attracted large numbers of snow geese in addition to Canada geese.

The idea of a refuge faced strong opposition and ended up in court. Robert and Helen grew tired of fighting for the refuge and approached Attorney Bill Sieker, who was on the Madison Audubon Society Board of Directors, with the proposal to have Madison Audubon Society acquire their land. After selling to Madison Audubon they moved to Vilas County and ran a resort for 20 years before returning to Poynette.

Goose Pond has many special memories for the Lerches. They are happy to see the realization of their dream of attracting geese to Goose Pond. Madison Audubon Society owes them a great deal of thanks for their idea to have Madison Audubon acquire land at Goose Pond.