

Betty Upjohn Mason's Tribute

Before Parkview Hills, I knew Lew Batts from afar as a man who could inspire perfectly sane people to willingly leave their warm beds at 5 a.m. to follow him on Bird Walks. Subsequently, I served on a public relations task force for the establishment of the Kalamazoo Nature Center. I too tramped through knee-deep snow in Coopers Glen all the while fantasizing about the hot chocolate back in the bus.

The first stages of Parkview Hills changed all that and I came to know Lew very well and to admire him very much. In the late '60s Lew purchased land in the far southwest corner of the City of Kalamazoo. The marshland, rolling meadows, water ways and climax forest epitomized for him his dream. The concepts he taught at Kalamazoo College and at the Nature Center and in his every action in his own everyday life would be demonstrated in a community where residents would be surrounded by the beauty of the natural environment and would honor it.

Lew asked my late husband, Burt Upjohn, to join him in the venture to direct financial planning and overall development. Burt, a seasoned developer of business properties saw this same 280 acres as a piece of marginal farmland, with very little level area, too many trees and a great big swamp.

True, they had some common ground. Burt was intrigued with Lew's idea of country living with city services. They each honored Jean Batt's ideal of offering a wide and diverse range of house—with all amenities shared by renters, condominium dwellers and single-home owners. Jean was their conscience.

Lew, always a bit of a dreamer, thought his concepts would be welcomed by the neighbors. Burt, more of a realist, knew there would be strong objections. But, since he always loved a good fight in a worthy cause, that was more of an incentive than a deterrent.

From the very beginning they approached the project from their own points of expertise. Lew was absorbed with bird counts, studies of native plants, hydrological surveys, DNR issues.

Burt was caught up in interest rate, condominium and planned unit development law, the vagaries of the real estate market, and finding visionary architects and construction companies.

It was when their fields of interest clashed that things became really interesting. Sewers are not a particularly controversial subject. However, when it came to the incredibly expensive method of installing sewers to follow the contours of the land and to save trees, Dr. Batts was adamant. And Burt soon found himself persuading the City to hand dig trenches around great trees and

loop around the landscape.

Because I had been drafted to do the marketing and advertising for Parkview Hills, I was privy to many of these vigorous discussions. Burt, a world class negotiator and debater, met his match in calm, serene Lew, who like Mother Nature always batted last. I also witnessed the deep affect and respect that truly made their working relationship possible.

As in most initiatives, it is the product that is the ultimate test of our efforts. Burt and Lew now are gone. Throughout the country the tenets that Lew preached, which were revolutionary and so innovative, now have complete acceptance and tremendous influence in our daily lives. He was recognized and honored around the world as an ornithologist, ecologist, superb nature photographer and an advocate for sustainable communities. I was privileged to watch Lew forward his theories on that “marginal piece of Michigan farmland.”

I remember him in his waders helping Michigan State University scientists to plant bass in Willow Lake. I remember him leading groups of rapt Parkview residents in nature walks revealing to them the wonders of their own neighborhood. I remember him gently admonishing me that my advertising copy was full of incomplete sentences.

And so, as it says in Ecclesiastes, I believe “There were giants in those days.”