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## Past is prologue for Cape creek

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LOWER TOWNSHIP - Mickey McPherson is probably the last person alive who has traveled to the interior of Pond Creek Meadow.

He did it before the phragmites reeds took over. Back then it was an open marsh that covered hundreds of acres. There was money to be made there.

"I was born in 1933, and in 1950 I started trapping. One year at Pond Creek I caught 324 muskrats. That's the best year I had," said McPherson, reminiscing recently at his Bayshore Road home.

Phragmites now dominate the marsh and make it virtually inaccessible to people. The reeds are taller than an NBA basketball player and so thick that most wildlife has been pushed out. The days of Pond Creek being a muskrat haven are long gone.

McPherson remembers a different landscape in which he used a pole to push a small boat and check his traps.

"It was just about all cattails then. The muskrats used to build their houses out of the cattails, and they were some big houses. That was also their food," said McPherson, who now drives a school bus.

McPherson grew up on the family dairy farm, and the trapping was just a sideline during the winter months. He also trapped at Petticoat Creek and at Route 9 near the famous Cold Spring well. He would put in a lot of work to make about \$700 a season.

"In the '50s that was a lot of money. Bread was 8 or 10 cents a loaf. Times have changed a lot," McPherson said.

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McPherson also used to hunt the fringes of the marsh. He still has the old pump-action .22 he used. The marsh helped bring in cash and food for locals back then. McPherson's days of trapping are long over, but he favors a plan by the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers and the state Division of Fish and Wildlife to eradicate the phragmites on 270 acres of Pond Creek Meadow. The project is designed to bring back beneficial uses for people, such as fishing, hunting and birdwatching.

"It's a good idea, because right now it's no use to anybody. You can't fight your way through there," McPherson said.

The phragmites, an Asian invader, arrived in the 1950s and took over the marsh by the end of the 1960s.

"I don't believe anyone has trapped that since I did in the 1950s. I stopped because the water got too high. Probably when the water went down, the phragmites came in," McPherson said.

The \$2.9 million project is not intended to bring back the freshwater cattail marsh that McPherson remembers. It seeks to go even further back in time and restore the original saltwater meadow connected to the Delaware Bay that ended in 1917 when the Cape May County Mosquito Commission blocked off the tides. The marsh was a veritable grocery store for the early settlers, who trapped and hunted it while using the deep tidal creeks to ship out salt hay, lumber, sand and fresh produce.

McPherson trapped it during the period after it had reverted to a productive freshwater system before the phragmites invaded. He would use the now-banned steel leghold traps on the higher ground and the wire cages his father, Edger McPherson, would make for the deepwater runs the muskrats used. Edger McPherson was born in 1903 and, like his son, began trapping as a teenager, about 1918, when he wasn't farming.

"Pop worked for a dollar a day during the Depression. You farmed, trapped, and did everything you could to make a buck. We raised chickens, pigs and cows and we bought about nothing at the store. We shot rabbits, squirrel, deer, ducks and geese. We got most of our meat from hunting," McPherson said.

Back then, Pond Creek was accessible from a dirt road off Bayshore Road and through Davey's Lake.

Sandy McPherson, a cousin, remembers duck hunting there in the 1950s.

"It was a decent marsh. I remember sitting in my duck blind looking across the marsh and seeing everything," Sandy McPherson said.

The open vista that was once Pond Creek Meadow is expected to slowly return as saltwater kills the phragmites and low-lying saltmarsh vegetation returns. When that happens the interior of Pond Creek Meadow will be exposed for the first time in half a century. Mickey McPherson probably won't start trapping again, but he could.

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