

The guardian angel of Rattray Marsh

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If you enter Rattray Marsh from Old Poplar Row, you'll see a large stone explaining how the marsh was saved.

"Ruth Hussey" is emblazoned on the plaque followed by the words, "Because of Her, Rattray Marsh is Ours."

When the stone was installed in 1985, a year after Hussey's death, MPP Margaret Marland said, "We stand here today in all this beauty because of two things: God's beauty in creation and Ruth's beauty in vision, her vision to capture, protect and preserve for all time."

If Dr. Hussey were still with us, she would deflect that praise, though it was absolutely earned.

When I interviewed her in 1980 about the 14-year battle to save the last significant wetland along Lake Ontario's shoreline, she in-

sisted on inclusion of others instrumental in protecting the natural marvel.

It wouldn't have happened without the steely will of the veterinarian and naturalist, who didn't even know Rattray existed when she moved nearby in 1954.

She fell hard for the marsh, where Col. James Rattray encouraged her children to fish and swim in Lake Ontario. About that time, he offered land to Toronto Township for property tax exemption until his death.

His offer went unanswered. After his death in 1959, Hussey and neighbours pressed government unsuccessfully to buy it. It was sold and partially developed.

"It was heartbreaking," Hussey said. "Every day I walked around there, I came home in tears. Those bulldozer drivers were like little kids with dinky toys."

Construction fuelled community resolve, al-

though the cause looked lost frequently. Two councillors even bought lots in a plan of subdivision planned around a yacht basin.

Over 14 years, Hussey never gave up. When a Toronto columnist said there were no Greater Toronto Area natural areas worth saving, Hussey wrote a rebuttal reigniting the save Rattray movement. "If this unique area is to be saved for posterity, something must be done fast," she wrote.

The "watershed" 1973 election ushered in a reform council. Record rain-falls that Hussey called "a Godsend" flooded Rattray, lowering its acquisition price from \$1.8 to \$1,050,000.

When we talked, only 10 per cent of Hussey's eyesight remained. Yet she expertly navigated every twist and turn through the marsh with typical steely determinism.

"She was such a great motivator," says Jean Wil-

liams, who heads the Rattray Marsh Protection Association that Hussey formed with Yvonne Bendell. "If she asked you to do something, you did it because you knew she was doing so much."

Bendell, 91, recalls from her home near Ottawa that Hussey never wavered from her goal. She developed political skills that rivaled her legendary knowledge of the marsh which surpassed that of the biologists.

"She saw the goal," said Bendell. "I don't think that she ever thought she couldn't do it."

Just before we talked, Hussey's arthritis doctor had ordered her to stop walking, advice she and guide dog Belle ignored. "I'd rather be able to walk than have my sight," Hussey told me. "I've been walking all my life."

We continue to have the pleasure of walking Rattray because of her.



Submitted photo/Morris Lamont

Dr. Ruth Hussey was the driving force behind a 14-year-long public campaign that eventually resulted in the acquisition of most of Rattray Marsh by the Credit Valley Conservation and the City of Mississauga in the mid 1970s. Despite failing eyesight, Hussey and her guide dog Belle walked Rattray almost every day.