



Dr. Henry Lewis Batts, Jr. (1922-2001) Teacher, Activist and Environmentalist

"He introduced the word 'ecology' and its principles to this community"

—Monica Ann Evans

Few have left a more indelible legacy on local conservation efforts than Dr. Henry Lewis Batts, Jr. (aka "Lew"). Synonymous with the Kalamazoo Nature Center, Batts was both a founder of the environmental education and land conservancy organization, and its first Executive Director, a position he held from 1961 to 1988 (notably as a volunteer). An award-winning scholar and activist who was both visionary and steward, Batts was a prominent figure in the environmental movement that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s after the 1962 publication of author Rachel Carson's seminal book, *Silent Spring*.

Kalamazoo College

Batts was born in Georgia in 1922 and arrived in the Kalamazoo area around 1935, when his father took a position as the director of the Inter-Church Student Council. Batts began his teaching career at his alma mater in 1950 after receiving his bachelor's degree from **Kalamazoo College** in 1943. He later earned a master's degree and doctorate in zoology in 1947 and 1953 from the University of Michigan. From 1943 to 1946, Batts served in military hospitals in Texas and Missouri. Batts married his wife Jean McColl Batts in 1945, ten years after meeting her in high school. She too held a master's degree in zoology, and understood the need for getting children involved in outdoor activities that would engender a lifetime of respect for nature and wildlife.



Kalamazoo Gazette, 17 May 1991

In the mid-1960s, Batts made two 16 millimeter color films about the birds of New Zealand along with Dr. Olin Sewall Pettengill Jr., an ornithologist from Cornell University. In 1969, he received a Golden Eagle award from the Council on International Non-theatrical Events for his documentaries. A gifted photographer, whose love of the outdoors and

birds provided no shortage of inspiration, Batts earned several photography awards. In addition to his academic and

Stephen Batts, a conservationist, died Thursday, Dec. 10, 2001, at his home in Kalamazoo. He was 79.

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nonprofit endeavors, Batts carved out time to edit *The Jack Pine Warbler* (1947-1958) and *Wilson Bulletin* (1959-1963). He was a longtime member of the local, state and national chapters of the Audubon Society.

Kalamazoo Nature Center

By the late 1950s, a small but persuasive number of conservation-minded citizens understood the impact that unfettered commercial development and growth was having on the environment. Batts and his wife worked closely with several community stakeholders with varying expertise and influence to bring the idea of the Kalamazoo Nature Center into being, including Harriette V. Bartoo, Edward P. Thompson, Katherine Miller Webb, Mary Upjohn Meader, Martha Gilmore Parfet, Janet Farley Upjohn Gavagan, Roswell D. Van Deusen, and Edward L. Ihling. The area chosen was an endangered portion of land located about five minutes north of Kalamazoo called Cooper's Glen. When the opportunity to purchase the land arose in August of 1960, Batts and the group of community stakeholders quickly put the finishing touches on the organizational framework by incorporating in October 1960. On 20 May 1962, Batts' vision of a protected area of natural beauty and ecological diversity set aside for educational programming and conservation came to fruition with the opening of the Kalamazoo Nature Center.

"These people shared a single-mindedness of purpose and a compatibility of basic philosophy. The underlying themes were a love of nature, a commitment to the preservation and sustainability of ecologically fragile natural communities, a concern for the quality of the environment in which humans live, and the need to pass on this outlook to future generations."

—*Glimpsing the Whole*, p.5

After more than two decades of leading the successful organization to national prominence as a model for educational environmentalism, Batts retired from the KNC in 1987-88. In 1991, he received one of his many awards, the E. Earl Wright Community Achievement Award, in part due to his work in establishing an important community gem that continues to thrive today.

Environmental Defense Fund, Inc.

Established to fight against the manufacturing and use of dangerous pesticides, Batts along with attorney Victor Yannacone Jr. and a group in New York formed the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) in 1967. Like Rachel Carson, Batts worried about the potential consequences of the proliferation of under-studied chemicals like pesticides and their impact on the environment.

"About the same time, Batts co-founded the Michigan Pesticide Council to coordinate the citizen fight against "hard" pesticides such as DDT, galvanizing such groups as the League of Women Voters to study and distribute scientific information about the impact of such chemicals. News of high levels of DDT found in Lake Michigan salmon added credibility and a sense of urgency to the

cause. Much as a result of Batts' efforts, Michigan became the first state in America to ban DDT in 1969."

Parkview Hills

Batts' longtime struggle to develop and normalize a land-use ethic would find its best manifestation in the Parkview Hills living community, platted just west of the Oakwood Neighborhood. Envisioned as a balanced, residential community, Batts played a major role in the development of the project to harmonize housing with wildlife and the nearby wetlands. He teamed with his business partner, Burton Upjohn, in 1970 to put his vision into action by purchasing 280 acres of land. His lofty ideas for a planned urban development that married the natural world's needs to human development were connected to the writings of the naturalist Aldo Leopold, another visionary like Batts, who saw the need for humans to develop responsibly, leaving nature mostly intact when possible.

"My greatest hope is that humans will learn to live with nature in a way that preserves the earth's beauty for future generations. In working toward this goal, I believe we also enhance our own lives."

—*Parkview Hills*, p.110



Jean and Lew Batts. Photo: Jack Short

Sources

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Local History Room Files

Name File: *Batts, H. Lewis Jr. (Dr.)*