

Today Mitchell Lake Audubon Center is an internationally known Bird and Nature Preserve, spread over 1200 acres, it has 7 miles of hiking trails, a 600 acre lake, 215 acres of wetlands and ponds and 385 acres of upland habitat. It is a well known facility in birding circle and the annual Spring Bird-a-Thon attracts big name birding experts like Ken Kauffman to participate. There is a long and fascinating story of how this lovely bird preserve came to be.



The greater San Antonio area was a salubrious setting with a spring fed, pristine river, lined with tall stately bald Cypress trees, copses of Live Oaks, Ashe Junipers and Mesquites interspersed with swathes of grasslands all along the meandering course of the river. A few miles to the west of the river was a spring fed body of water which was a magnet for huge numbers of migratory birds in the spring and the fall. Several Indian tribes lived, hunted and fished for food and moved seasonally from the coastal areas to the Hill Country and back down to the coast every year for at least 12,000 years. Man and mammal, flora and fauna had established a sustainable equilibrium.

Then a thunderbolt from Europe landed onto this little Eden. It began with adventurers from Western Europe in the late 1600s looking for “gold for the queen and souls for Christ.” Soon enough others followed with intentions to settle and make this their future home. The river was renamed Rio San Antonio de Padua, the lake became Lagos de los Patos. Next came increased agricultural activities, irrigation ditches had to be dug, the gentle rolling meadows got terraced and the population exploded.

1870 SA population 12000

1890 SA population 37000

1900 SA population 53000

2000 SA population 1.3mill.



With the increase in population came the pressure to develop water supplies to and removal of waste material from the populated areas. Drainage ditches were dug in 1901 and waste was removed in these open ditches and drained into the lake. Due to the hazards of open sewage ditches, closed pipelines were laid out. The sewage continued to be dumped into the lake. It was untreated sewage and the lake became known for the stench and the concerns about health hazards from the thousands of cubic yards of untreated sewage being deposited daily. The vegetables grown along the banks of these sewage ditches were found to be a health hazard. The lake remained a sewage dump till 1987.



In 1973 San Antonio City Council passed an ordinance designating Mitchell Lake as a refuge for birds. Bird watchers began visiting the lake to see shore birds and migratory birds braving the sewage and the stench. After 1987 the Wastewater Advisory Committee oversaw the sewage treatment at Mitchell

Lake. The League of Women Voters, the Junior League got involved. The Mitchell Lakes Wetlands Society was formed(1994 to 2002) with the object to preserve the Mitchell Lake Bird Refuge. In 2000 SAWs set up the Mitchell Lake Master Implementation Plan. In 2003 The Leeper House was moved from McNay Art Museum to Mitchell Lake Wildlife Refuge. In 2004 the National Audubon Society began managing the Mitchell Lake Audubon Center and since then the MLAC as we know it has been operant. Many dedicated persons put in innumerable hours of effort and expertise to get to this point.



Admittedly a project of these proportions takes many people at many levels of society to make it a reality. Many visionaries worked unceasingly over the many years it took to steer the sewage filled lake into a clean and plentiful source of food and water for hundreds of migrating birds. It is important to mention some of them and laud them for this gift to the San Antonio area. Ernie Roney and Ruth Lofgren were the prime moving force behind the transformation. Their vision was to reclaim the lake for the birds and mammals and set it aside for bird watchers and for education. They did not let up until it became a reality. Anne Parrish, a member of the Junior League in SA got involved in the Mitchell lake project and helped move it along. Patty Leslie Pasztor established the Native Plants Trail. Those of us who enjoy and celebrate MLAC owe a huge debt of gratitude to these visionaries and activists.