

LISTENING IN/*George Vukelich*

Recalling the Big Marsh

'I don't think there's a place left in the Arboretum where you can get away from the noise.'

Gene Moran was born in 1928 on Madison's northeast side. He attended St. Bernard's School ("where they really had tough nuns," he says) and East High School. He has worked for the University of Wisconsin Arboretum since 1955, for the last 15 years as grounds supervisor of its 1,200-plus acres. Married to naturalist Marion Moran, he accompanies her whenever he can as she teaches her classes around the state. They live on the fringe of the Arboretum in the old Lake Forest area. "These days," he says, "all of us are living on the fringe."

"When we were little, we grew up in the big marsh: Cherokee. You'd see snakes out there, blue racers. They'd swallow a frog and swell up, big as a balloon.

"It was wilder then. You'd hear sounds in the marsh, noises that you don't hear out on the prairie. You didn't

know what those noises were, and they would scare the hell out of you.

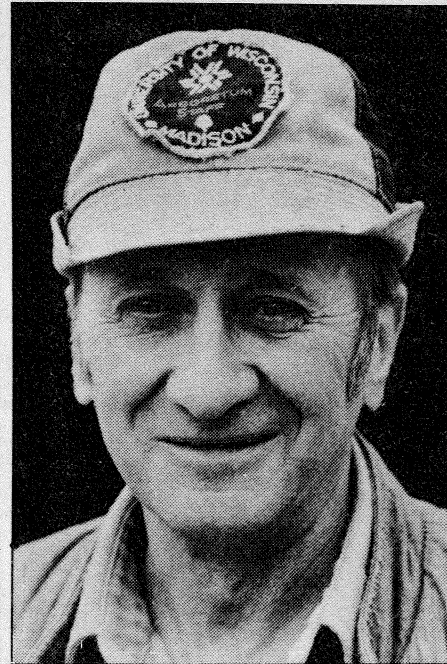
"When I first started with the Arboretum, you could get that feeling of wildness right here. Now, I can't anymore. I have to head way up into Door County to get it, and even there it's becoming pretty civified. It's the impact of people all over.

"In those days, right in back of where we're sitting now, I used to come in the mornings and watch the fox work that field there. I mean, they were just like puppies running around. They'd pick up a mouse. They'd eat a few. Then, they'd start playing with the mice, tossing them up into the air. They were red and gray fox, both.

"It was back in the 1960s that we stopped seeing the fox in numbers. Oh, we have a few now. I think, probably, there are four pair of fox in the Arboretum. You see them every now and then, running in the fire lane.

"Of course, the Arboretum is artificial, and the species that exist out here are those that get along with man. That's exactly what it is. The animals that need a little more privacy move out—or get moved out.

"The deer are being 'harvested' now because they do damage to the plants. I think when I first started here, we probably had about 10 deer in the whole Arboretum. The game warden, Al Koppenhaver, a neat old guy who's dead now, came in and harvested seven or eight of them. Then the deer were pretty much left alone until about three years ago. All of a sudden, everyone



BRENT NICASTRO

Gene Moran.

realized: 'Hey, we've got a lot of deer in here.' So the big push started on deer—the big shootout—and they killed most of them. They figure there are about two left. But unless they wipe out the deer in every county surrounding us, the deer will keep coming back.

"While we're talking about the deer damaging plants—and they do—let me just say here that the deer aren't the only ones.

"Dare I say that even photographers can do just as much damage in the Arboretum as the deer? Sometimes *more*, because the photographers will spot one particular plant—one plant way out somewhere—and then they'll trample down five or six other plants to get their picture. What can you do to them? I don't know. The deer got shot for what they did.

"The emphasis today out here is on research and rehabilitation. Restoration of the prairie. Personally, I think that if you don't teach the public to respect what they've got out here, you're not gonna have anything to restore.

"I think we need to start up a large-scale program of educating the public so there's something left for our grandchildren. We have to learn a little respect for the land around us, and I don't mean just the Arboretum. I mean all the land around us, this earth.

"Thirty years ago, the Beltline was just a little two-lane country road between the Grady Tract and this side of the prairie.

"Now, I don't think there's a place left in the Arboretum where you can get away from the noise—and there used to be. You bet. Where Marion and I live now, back in 1955, the sounds were very, very distant. Now, it's a constant roar all night long from the Beltline over the prairie.

"I've been burning off that prairie for 29 years now, and other than that, things aren't too exciting out here anymore." ■