



Conservation
Heritage

By Gaylon Gwin, Staff Writer



PHOTOS BY KIM NIX

Trucks and cars line up neatly along the shoulder of the paved country road, their occupants patiently awaiting the 9 a.m. opening of the gate.

The gravel road on the other side of the gate leads to several previously-private fishing ponds, now open on the first Saturday of each month. Walking trails and horse trails meander through the property, and picnic tables are available alongside the ponds. The allure of these ponds lies not only in the excellent fishing, but also in their previous inaccessibility, and in the mystique of their history.

When the first Saturday also marks the beginning of a quarter, the grounds up the hill from the lake are also opened to the public. A delightful compound of old and more modern buildings form an intriguing village of sorts—one definitely worth exploring.

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KIM NIX

Above: canoes are available for visitors to paddle around the lake or to use while fishing.



BILLY POPE

Above: pioneer reenactor educates visitors on life during time of early settlers in the area.



KIM NIX

Above: Mr. Wehle had several pioneer-style cabins moved to the property. They are open during special events such as Plant Fest and Heritage Day.

Conservation Center

The Wehle Land Conservation Center is the culmination of years of planning and development, first by Mr. Wehle and more recently by the State Lands Division, to provide a center for meaningful outdoor experiences for children and adults. The Center subtly creates an awareness of how all of nature's components work together while making the experience fun and memorable.

The property contains a number of log cabins which Robert Wehle had moved to the site and arranged like a small village. The cabins now depict the history of man's use of the land from pioneer days to the present.

Beginning with a sparsely furnished trapper's cabin, visitors can follow the progression of man's interaction with the land as agrarian culture developed. Interpretive signage and illustrations contribute to the educational journey through the years of settlement.

Near Midway, in Bullock County, the Center is open on a limited schedule; visitors are allowed to come fish in the main lakes, ride the trails on horseback or bicycle on the first Saturday of each month.

The first Saturday of each quarter the gates are opened to allow access to the cabins and delightful pioneer-style village that Mr. Wehle created. Special events are scheduled for those days.

Special Events

In April, the Center is used to foster interest in the state's native plant life. The Spring Plant Fest combines educational displays, informative talks, vendors, and established gardens to create a one-stop source of knowledge about native flora. Plant Fest emphasizes the importance of utilizing native plant species in landscaping and gardening. The educational side of the event also addresses the problems which often result from planting non-native species. The potential for invasive, hard-

tions of undesirable species which need eradication.

In October, the Center celebrates Alabama Outdoor Heritage Day, a free event designed to emphasize the state's rich history and relationship with the land. Visitors are welcomed at the tiny cabin next to the parking area and then proceed along the road through the village, with stops at each of the cabins and other demonstration areas. This year's event will be October 14.

Early pioneer cabins house exhibits depicting man's use of the land. The earliest settlers hunted and trapped, and traded with Native Americans as a means of subsistence. The land's habitats were the basis for important game such as deer, turkey, and beaver. The Trapper's Cabin reflects the Spartan existence and meager lifestyle of the early hunter and trapper. Furnishings were few, but functional.

Forests were also very important to the settlement as they represented the basis for shelter, one of man's most basic needs. As the trees were cleared from the land, farming increased, producing a cash crop for the settlers. The Farmer's Cabin shows the primitive family-style living arrangements, with a bit more space and few more furnishings than the trapper needed. Much of the work was done outside of the cabins—cooking over open fires, washing clothes in huge boiling washpots, sitting under the trees to shell peas, shuck corn, repair harnesses, or to visit with their neighbors.

As the settlements grew, other needs were met by the merchants and the blacksmith. Products gleaned from the land were bartered to support the families—syrup was made from the cane; honey was collected from bee hives.

At the Wehle Land Conservation Center, these activities are part of the overall picture of Outdoor Heritage Day, with a well-furnished large cabin occupied by the Merchant and a functional Blacksmith's Shop. Guides demonstrate the cane press, squeezing sweet juice from the cane to make syrup. Beehives are "raided" to collect the dripping honeycombs. Milling of corn and wheat is demonstrated, and the resulting ground corn and flour are used to make lace cakes and fritters.

In the progression of land usage, there came a time when the lands were over-used. During the Great Depression, many small farms were abandoned and the natural succession of plant life re-established forests in much of the state. Today these forests are managed for timber production and recreational activities such as hunting.

Summary

Since the period of settlement, people have relied on Alabama's rich and diverse natural resources as a means of survival and income. Man's connection with the land continues, with more challenges to balance usage with replenishment. Wise use of the resources is imperative to the success of future landowners.

With our 21st Century perspective, we can see the problems faced by our predecessors and the results—both good and bad—of their use of the land. One of the main purposes of the Wehle Land Conservation Center is to impart this knowledge to the current generation of visitors. A clearer understanding of the land's history will help encourage them to be aware of man's responsibility to future generations of land users. ☐


This is the Wehle Tract —

1,546 acres in Bullock County—one of the first public land acquisitions of the Forever Wild Program. Since its beginning, the Program has successfully brought other critical lands into protection and use by the state, under the watchful eye of the State Lands Division – but none with such a unique history and potential for public enjoyment.

The benefactor who made the land available, Robert G. Wehle, had a vision for educating young people about the importance of using all natural resources wisely, and especially for taking care of the land. He believed so strongly in this that he also donated 25 acres of adjoining land to the State Lands Division and provided substantial funding to build and maintain an environmental learning center.

The Robert G. Wehle Nature Center opened in 1998, featuring conservation and environmental educational exhibits, a state-of-the-art audiovisual theater, and three trails with interpretive stations highlighting the unique characteristics of many local plants and animals. The Center is open to the general public every Saturday with a schedule of informative programs and weekend events.

During his lifetime, Mr. Wehle practiced wise land stewardship, and encouraged others to follow his lead. The land he used as a winter retreat thrived under his management tactics as the abandoned farm land was converted into a wildlife sanctuary. Within the acreage, eight ponds are home to many waterfowl, wading birds, otters, and even alligators. From the hardwood creek bottoms to the upland pine forests, the variety of habitats provides for the needs of abundant wildlife species.

When Forever Wild acquired the property from Mr. Wehle, he retained a life estate on a small portion of the property – he would maintain his home and private grounds for personal use during his lifetime. After Mr. Wehle died in 2003, all the property was turned over to the state. 



Robert G. Wehle



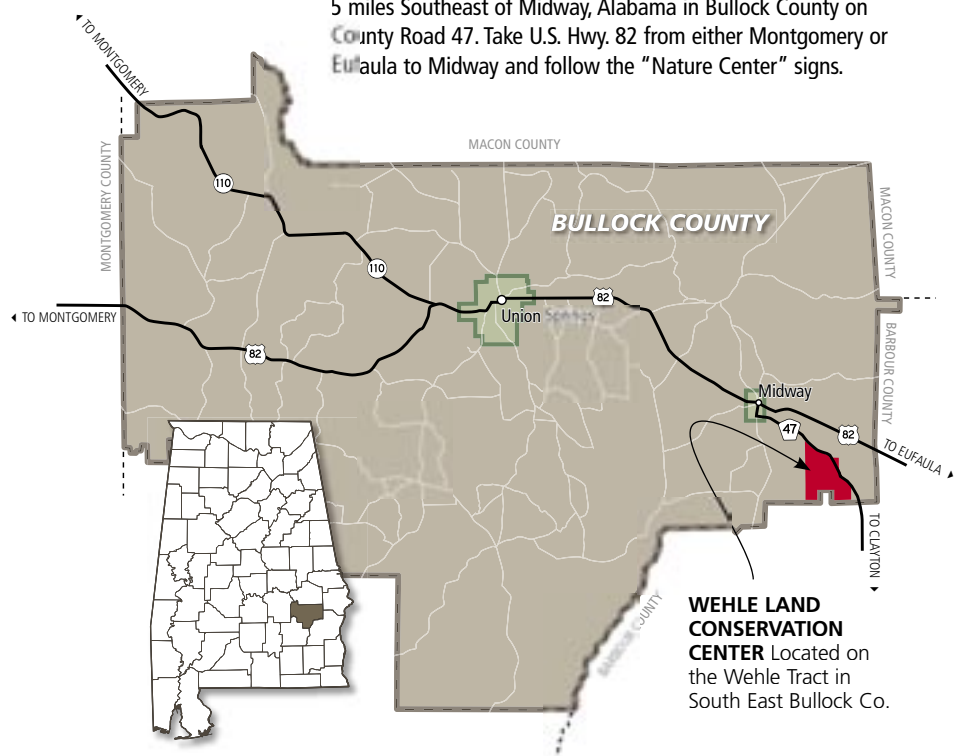
DAN BROTHERS



DAN BROTHERS

DIRECTIONS

The Wehle Land Conservation Center is located approximately 5 miles Southeast of Midway, Alabama in Bullock County on County Road 47. Take U.S. Hwy. 82 from either Montgomery or Eufaula to Midway and follow the "Nature Center" signs.



WEHLE LAND CONSERVATION CENTER Located on the Wehle Tract in South East Bullock Co.

Left and below: The Wehle Nature Center is open on Saturdays with informative programs about Alabama's natural resources.