

South Jersey Living

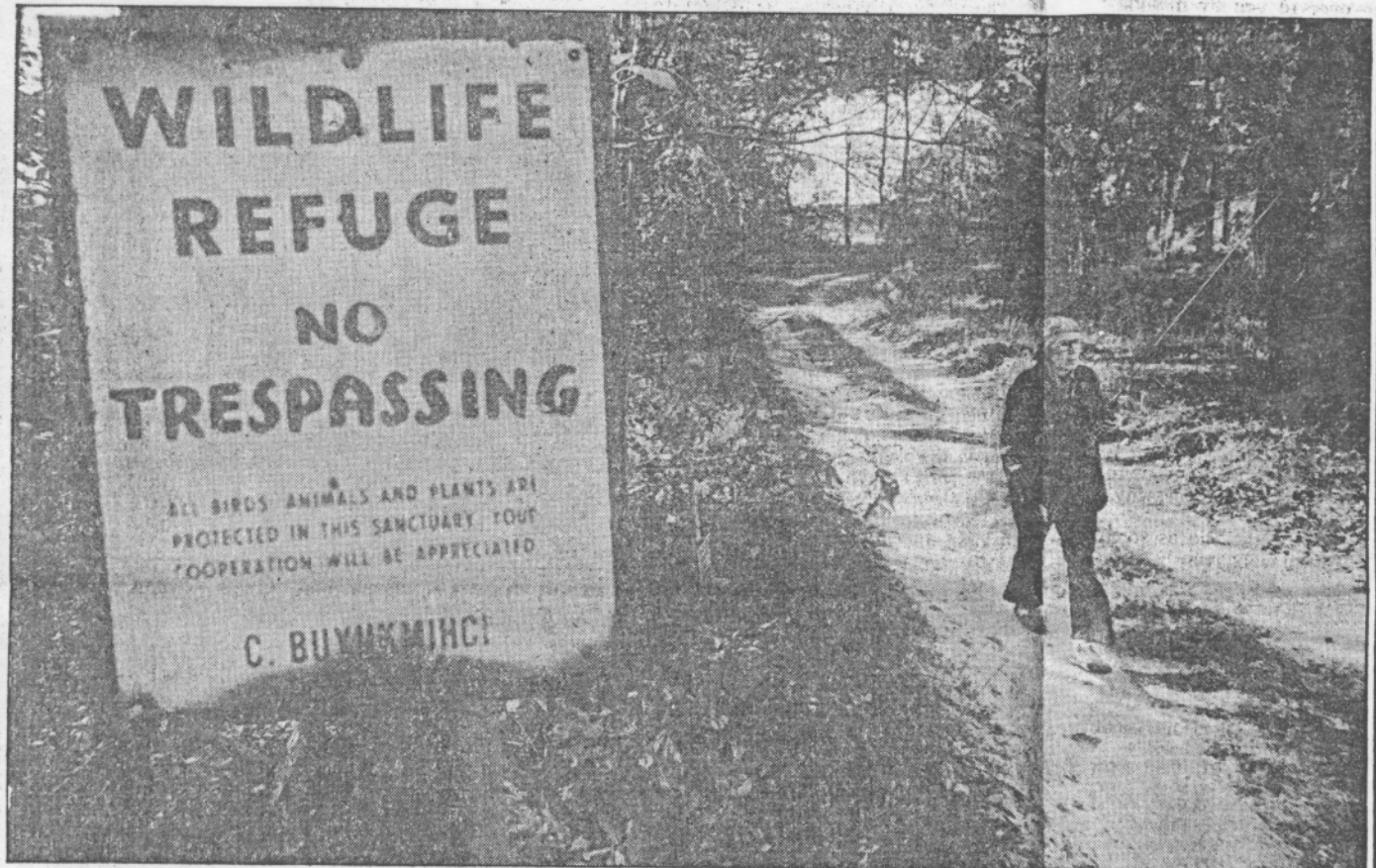


■ Vineland's Virginia she believes is hidden Page G5

■ It's been 50 years since Carlo Sardella remembered leg booze business occasionally literally

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Sunday Press □ ATLANTIC CITY, N.J.



Hope Sawyer Buyukmihci, armed with walkie-talkie, patrols the refuge during hunting season

Border Guards

Family Faces Threats To Protect Wildlife Refuge They Love

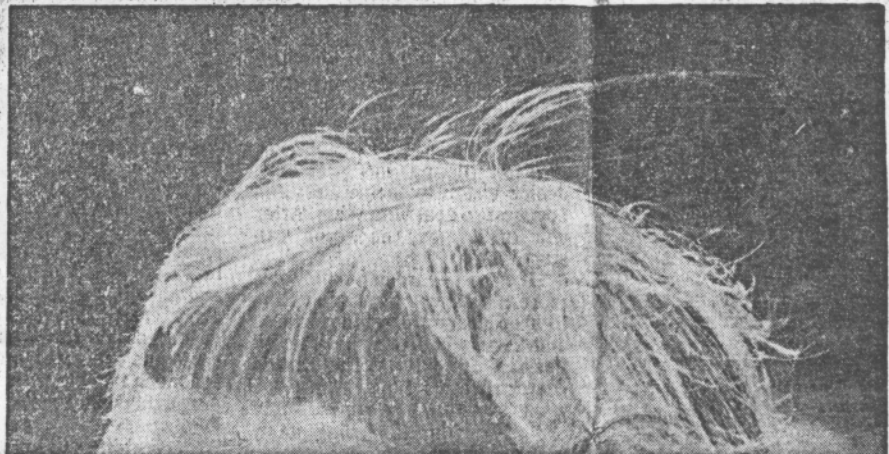
By Mona Moore

It was the bluebirds that led Cavit and Hope Sawyer Buyukmihci to move to a small house beside a big pond deep in the woods of Gloucester County 22 years ago. Or rather, it was the lack of bluebirds.

Hope recalls her astonishment that long-ago day. She was talking about how much she loved bluebirds and her son, who was 8, asked, "Mom, what's a bluebird?"

"I realized my kids had never seen one," she says, settling back in a comfortable chair in her paneled, book-lined living room, where a white cat with one blue eye and one green dozes beside the wood stove and the still-green trees rustle in the cold fall air outside.

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"We could see bulldozers everywhere destroying natural land, and we had the idea of starting a wildlife preserve," she recalls. She had met her husband, a metallurgical engineer and a native of Turkey, when they were both college students. After he completed his education, they returned to Turkey to work for a few years, then moved back to this country and started raising their family of three children in a house with three acres on Tuckahoe Road near Newfield.

When they decided to move again, they looked for about 10 acres. But when they saw the property that would eventually become the Unexpected Wildlife Refuge, it had 85 acres, a pond and a sense of serenity that made them mortgage everything they owned, withdraw money they had been saving for their children's education and buy the land. Since then, they have gradually added to the property until their refuge encompasses about 300 acres of forests and fields filled with an abundance of birds, beavers, turtles, snakes, otter and even a few deer.

"Of course, you know, you never get enough land," she says. "At the borders, there is always somebody hunting, somebody killing."

That statement, perhaps, sums up the lives of the Buyukmihci family over the past two decades. They have been secure in their refuge, surrounded by the things they love, dedicated to preserving nature at its wildest and most beautiful. But always there has been, at the borders, someone killing.

In recent years, hunting season has turned the quiet refuge into something more resembling a war zone. In the past, hunters and trappers have trespassed frequently and killed freely. Now friends of the family, armed with walkie-talkies and CB radios, patrol the borders in pairs to ward off hunters.

Now, when a car nears the end of the long, winding dirt road that leads to the little green



(Press Photos by Dominick J. Rebeck, Jr.)

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Mona Moore is a Press staff writer

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Hope Sawyer Buyukmihci and the family cat in the paneled, book-lined living room of their home in the woods

(Press Photos by Dominick J. Rebeck, Jr.)

Buyukmihci

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house, a buzzer goes off in the living room. Problems with vandals, with people who would drive up, shout obscenities and leave have made such measures necessary.

But despite the constant worries, despite intruders who have killed already-wounded ducks and destroyed wild animals who were more like family friends, despite people who misunderstand what the Buyukmihcis are trying to do, the family has made more friends than enemies here.

"It was here we met the beavers," Hope says, with a smile. When the family moved here, there was just one family of beavers in the pond. They named the female Whiskers and the

male Greenbriar. Hope spent a year just trying to make friends with them, bringing gifts of poplar (their favorite wood) and apples. At first she wouldn't see them, but would find peeled poplar sticks and apple cores every morning.

Eventually they would come and eat while she was there. The female was especially friendly and her babies were even more so. "They would come right

up in my lap," she says. "I even went swimming with them once and they came right up and nudged my legs under the water."

Once when one set of babies was old enough to come out of the beaver lodge and into the pool surrounding it, Whiskers turned Hope into a beaver babysitter, leaving the woman alone with the babies and swimming on upstream to one of her feeding places.

"While I was sitting there, Greenbriar came, and he was much disturbed. He slapped the water with his tail and made an awful fuss. Then he swam over near me, looked up at me a long time, then swam away and left me with the babies. I knew then he trusted me."

Whiskers and Greenbriar were part of the family for about 10 years before they disappeared. The Buyukmihcis assumed they died of old age. Later they got another pair, October and Lenapi, who were brought to them by a game warden. And then there was Chopper, the family favorite. He was the only survivor when a farmer dynamited a beaver dam. Chopper was adopted by a woman who cared for him for two months, then brought him to the Buyukmihcis because she wanted him to live in the wild.

Like a proud mother showing photographs of her children, Hope pulls out a file folder marked "Chopper" and displays photographs of the beaver playing in the living room or eating beside the pond.

A trap door in the living room led to Chopper's den in the cellar. From there, a pipeline extended outside to a culvert which led to the cove. Chopper came and went undisturbed and was allowed in the house when there was someone there to watch him. Hope often took Chopper

with her when she spoke at schools, and he was always an instant hit with children.

"He had a wonderful, wonderful personality," Buyukmihci says. "There were thousands of people who met him, and everybody loved him."

At first the cove where Chopper swam was fenced off, but later the fence was opened so he could swim free. He disappeared once, only to reappear not far away at Camp Sacajawea — much to the delight of the Girl Scouts who immediately befriended him. The Buyukmihcis brought him home, but two days later, he was back at camp. Three days later, he was dead.

"There was a fisherman in a boat, and Chopper went right up to the boat to make friends. The fisherman beat him over the head with an oar, then threw him on the shore and said, 'This thing tried to get in my boat.'"

"Which brings us to humane education," Buyukmihci said. "People just don't know. Most animals are harmless. If only people knew how harmless they are, they wouldn't hurt them."

"I never saw my husband cry like that. When Chopper died, we thought we'd lost a child."

Hope Sawyer Buyukmihci has had three books published — the first, in 1968, about the refuge, called "Unexpected Treasure," then "Hour of the Beaver" in 1971, and the third in 1977, with Dorothy Richards, called "Beaver-sprite."

At 70, she is full of plans for the future. She'd like to see a humane education center established on her property here. She'd like to see the bill banning leghold traps — an issue on which she and her husband have spent much time and energy — passed by the state Legislature or by the Congress. A talented wildlife artist in her own right, she's almost given up drawing and painting because she's too busy, but she writes nature columns for two magazines and would like to write more books.

But right now there are other things to occupy her time. Duck and goose hunting season began recently, and Hope has been out every morning before daylight and again in the evening, patrolling the pond to keep duck hunters away.

Last week, squirrel and grouse season began, and in November comes small game season when rabbits and her beloved quail may be in danger.

"We sacrificed everything to have this place as a sanctuary — that means a place of safety," she said. "And the first thing they did was tear down our signs. They've threatened to kill us. They've threatened to burn us out. They've set several fires on the property. And they keep trying."

Things have gotten somewhat better, though, she says, thanks to friends who help patrol, a game warden who is willing to take trespassers to court, and a husband who is a marathon runner and can catch up with just about anybody he

can see. And thanks also to attitudes that may be changing.

"When we first started the refuge, nobody had heard of ecology," she says. "Now, even in kindergarten, they know about it."

"But there's a battle going on all the time between humane attitudes and inhumane ones. I think things are getting better, I think people are getting more humane, more willing to work together to solve problems."

All three of the Buyukmihci children are, like their parents, vegetarians and animal lovers. Their son Nedin ("Ned") is a veterinarian in California and a founder of the Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights. Daughter Linda is married and lives in Pennsylvania. Youngest daughter Nermin lives next door to Linda, and both love to take in stray cats and dogs, according to their mother.

It's a natural progression, since Hope Buyukmihci can trace her love of nature to her father, who was a wildlife artist and naturalist who spent most of his time in the woods.

"They called him the dean of American bird artists, but he wasn't as well known as some others. He wasn't after fame. In fact, it wasn't even much of a

living. My mother left him before I was born. He couldn't support my brothers and me, but he sent us nature books. And he visited once or twice a year.

"I remember when I was about 6, going into the swampy woods with him in the evening, and we saw a woodcock spiral up and sing. It made such an impression on me. And he used to show me grouse's nests."

"I studied one grouse here for three years, and every year it came to the same log to drum. But I never found the nest." She explains that during mating season a male grouse will perch on a log and fan his wings up and down, faster and faster, until he is a blur of feathers. Then he'll dance.

"Even here in South Jersey, in February, the grouse begin to dance," she says. "Once, in the woods when there were still patches of snow, I saw a male grouse dancing, and the female, his prospective mate I suppose, just watching very calmly — very coy, you know?"

"And lots of times I've watched the woodcocks sing..."

During his mating season, she said, the woodcock — either at sunset or just before sunrise — will repeat his mating call over and over, then suddenly spiral upward, singing, "just like the larks in England."

And then, of course, there are the bluebirds. Attracted by the Buyukmihcis' specially built bluebird houses, one nesting pair came that first year. One year there were four pairs, and nearly every year, there has been at least one pair.

"So my dream of bluebirds came true," she says. □