

History of the University Field Station (Delta Marsh): The transitional years (1962-1966)

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Late in his life, Donald H. Bain was anxious that the people of Manitoba should share in the conservation opportunities afforded by his land holdings, particularly those on the shores of Lake Manitoba at Delta Marsh and at Grant's Lake near Grosse Isle, Manitoba. Following his death in August 1962, there were suggestions that he had planned to give a large tract of land to the Provincial Government for that purpose. Unfortunately, appropriate arrangements were never made.

The initial executors of the Bain Estate, his nephew Albert J. B. Smale and his long-time employee Duncan H. McPherson, had the Bain properties appraised for estate tax purposes soon after his death. They put all the properties up for sale, with the exception of Bain's house at 69 Eastgate in Winnipeg. There was apparently considerable interest in the land at Delta, such as people at Portage la Prairie and the United States. A purchase offer made by Octave Enterprises, a land speculation company comprised of several Winnipeg attorneys, was accepted in mid-1963. However, the terms of Bain's will were unclear with respect to the power of the executors to sell real property, so the sale was postponed until an authorizing order was received from the Court of Queen's Bench in early 1964. In the meantime, the contents of Bain's Mallard Lodge were sold at a large, well-attended auction. Subsequently, Octave Enterprises began negotiating to re-sell the land to the Provincial Government. Octave assumed ownership in March 1964, having paid \$60,000 to the Bain Estate for the Delta land, and the titles were transferred to the Provincial Government one month later for \$125,000. Ultimately, the property acquired by the government also included all Bain's property at Grosse Isle, and Lot 23 on the west side of Portage la Prairie. Despite the changes in ownership, the property at Delta Marsh remained known as the "Bain Estate."

The circumstances of the land transfer from Octave Enterprises to the Provincial Government were challenged in the provincial legislature by the Honourable Gildas Molgat, Leader of the Liberal Party, who sat in opposition to the ruling Conservative Party of Premier Duff Roblin (Legislative Assembly of

Manitoba 1965). In a lengthy response in the House, Mr. Sterling Lyon, the Minister of Natural Resources, gave several reasons in defense of the purchase. Among these he said that (1) when the decision had been made to build the Portage Diversion connecting the Assiniboine River to Lake Manitoba, the Wildlife Branch believed the Diversion waters could be used to regulate marsh water level and thereby assist in marsh management, (2) the Inkster Farm (on the southeast corner of the Bain property at Delta) could be used to grow lure crops to reduce duck depredation on farmland in the Portage Plain, (3) the land could provide opportunities for muskrat and waterfowl research, including waterfowl depredation, in an area free from disturbance, and (4) the Bain Lodge might be used as field headquarters for the Department of Natural Resources or the University of Manitoba.

In late 1964, Dr. James C. Ritchie, at the time an Associate Professor in the Department of Botany at the University of Manitoba, was asked by the then Department Head Dr. E. Roy Waygood, to prepare a proposal for the development of the Bain Estate as a centre for field biology. At that time the Provincial Government had made some progress towards establishing a research station for aquatic biology at Grand Rapids, Manitoba and it hoped to promote research there by University faculty and students. Ritchie considered it unlikely that anyone would wish to work at the Bain Estate if the Grand Rapids facility became a reality, "since the water bodies and variety of aquatic biota in the latter were rich and interesting, while little enthusiasm could be found among freshwater biologists to study the shallow, impoverished Lake Manitoba." He noted "that the Bain property is located neither in a forest or grassland biotic province, it is in a geologically, physiographically, edaphically and biologically monotonous area, remarkable only for its paucity of different ecosystems." He felt there were much richer environments within "100 miles or less" of the University campus and doubted "that the development of field classes in biology—one of the most pressing needs in the Biology Division—would be hastened or helped by a centre on the Bain properties." He believed that "field

training of ecologists in Canada should be forest-orientated,” and that “it would be unwise to commit to an endeavor without a proper expectation of even moderate success” (Ritchie 1964).

Ritchie’s memo went to the President of the University, and it is surprising that anyone at the University maintained an interest in suggesting a use for the Bain estate! But, not being completely discouraged by Ritchie’s report, a second report was compiled by Dr. Waygood, Dr. W. George Barker (Chairman of the Division of Biology) and myself, in June 1965 (Waygood *et al.* 1965). The report was titled “The Bain Estate as a University Biological Summer Station.” It stated that the University of Manitoba could undoubtedly benefit through the establishment of a field station, and close examination of the Bain Estate should take place for the following reasons:

- “1. It is an integral part of one of the finest freshwater marshes in North America.
2. It offers unique opportunities for the study of freshwater marsh ecology and its associated wildlife and their conservation. The area includes lake, marsh, woodland, prairie, and agricultural land, it offers interesting flora and fauna and is on a major bird migration route.
3. It should be an arm of the Division of Biology and not under a specific department.
4. It should be financed by a specific annual grant from the Provincial Government.
5. Consideration should be given to self containment or co-operation with the Delta Waterfowl Research Station.
6. It could serve graduate students, undergraduates, teachers and specialized groups.”

On 15 August 1965, a group of Provincial Government and University personnel met at the Delta Waterfowl Station. The Province was represented by Mr. Stuart Anderson (Deputy Minister, Natural Resources), Mr. Eugene F. Bossenmaier (Chief, Wildlife Branch) and Mr. O. S. Eagleton; the University by Dr. George Barker (Biology), Dr. Robin D. Connor (Dean of Science), Dr. Harry E. Duckworth (University Vice President), Dr. Howard Lees (Head of Microbiology), Dr. Harold E. Welch (Head of Zoology), and myself. During the meeting it was made clear that the government would be sympathetic to a proposal to use the Bain Estate as a biological field station, but it should be realized that the Portage Diversion would divide the property into two parts and some of the most interesting biological areas would be on the east side of the Diversion channel.

Three possibilities were discussed concerning the location of the station. One was to have the laboratory facilities near the Bain lodge. The second was to use the lodge as a dormitory and build a lab on the east side of

the Diversion; the third was to locate the laboratory on the site of the Delta Waterfowl Station. The second possibility received little attention, and there was little support for the third unless a bridge was built over the Diversion. Nevertheless, it was felt that the University could derive considerable benefit from close association with scientists at the Delta Waterfowl Station. If the University Laboratory was built at the Delta Waterfowl Station, it could complement their laboratory facilities and there would be no need to duplicate library facilities. The next morning (16 August 1965), Dr. H. Albert Hochbaum joined the group. He noted that to date the University of Manitoba had not been prominent among the universities conducting research at the Delta Waterfowl Station, and he would welcome greater collaboration. He felt it would be an advantage to have the University Laboratory at his Station but that decision would rest with his Board. All agreed that the discussions that had taken place would be regarded as preliminary.

In November, 1965, a proposal was sent to Dr. Hugh Saunderson, President of the University, that the Provincial Government be respectfully requested, through the Department of Mines and Natural Resources, to make the Bain Estate available to the University, to furnish the Lodge as a dormitory and to build a laboratory at the Delta Waterfowl Station for the University of Manitoba. This was passed by the University Board of Governors in December 1965.

On 23 February 1966, the Province agreed to lease most, but not all, of the original Bain property to the University (Fig. 1). A temporary committee to oversee developments was set up by the University with Dr. Lees (Chairman), Drs Duckworth, Connor, Waygood, and Welch, and Mr. Stuart Anderson, to try and secure funding for basic necessities and research. Hopes were high but in the Province’s 1966-67 budget there was no provision for support of the proposed Field Station, although the Honourable Sterling Lyon and Mr. Stuart Anderson were anxious for the project to go forward. They would support it with \$15,000 for the position of an ecologist to undertake research in the Delta Marsh. Dr. Michael Levin was subsequently appointed to this position for a two-year term. Apparently, other agencies were anxious to use the Bain Lodge (e.g., the Portage Home) and the University was encouraged by the government to use it for scientific purposes as soon as possible. I suspect that the University was unaware of the details of the financial negotiations involved in the government purchase of the Bain property, which had caused the government considerable embarrassment.

In the spring of 1966, Mrs. Colleen Nelson became the first resident at the University Field Station. She carried out research on day-old, downy ducklings and produced stunningly beautiful paintings of them. (A book

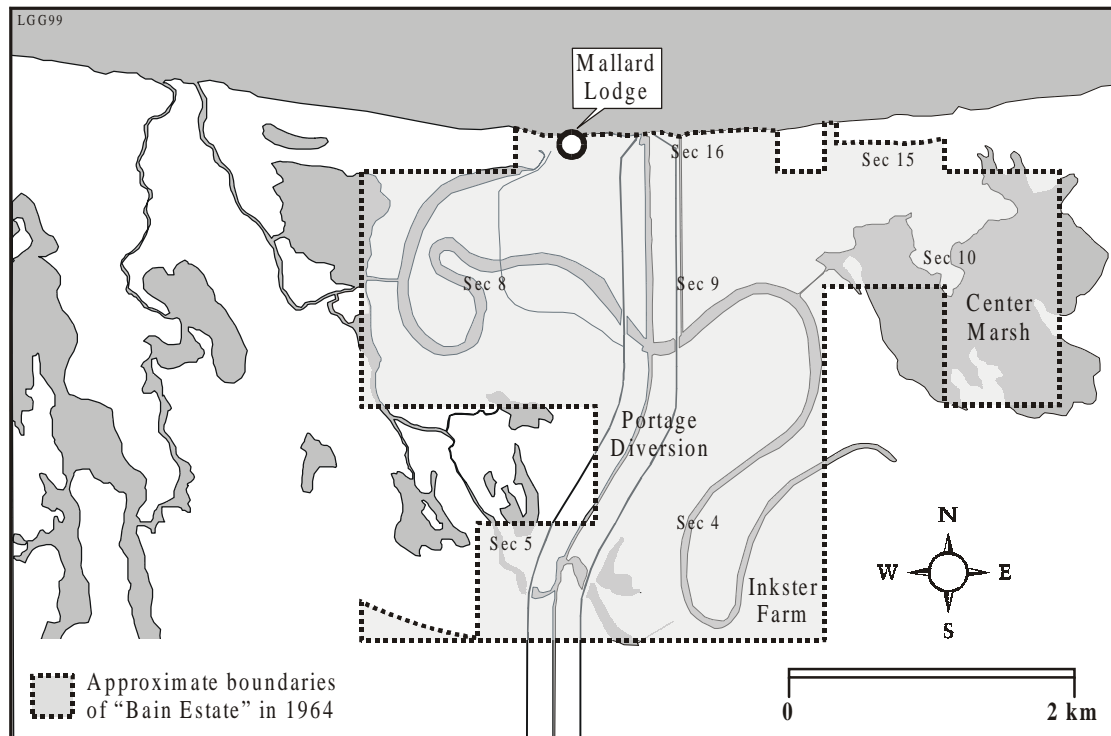


Figure 1. Location of the Bain property at Delta Marsh, most of which was leased to the University of Manitoba in 1967. Land that was not leased included the area covered by the Portage Diversion, and Section 10 (T14, R7) on the east side of the property. The small southwest parcel in Section 5 was transferred to the Portage Country Club in partial compensation for land expropriated during construction of the Diversion.

entitled "The Downy Waterfowl", that contains many of these paintings, was published by Delta Station Press in 1993.)

In May 1966, while on sabbatical leave, I was offered and accepted the role of Director of the newly named University Field Station (Delta Marsh). I returned to Winnipeg in September to teach in the Department of Botany and take up the challenge of developing the Field Station. I was totally committed to the importance of field work in the training of ecologists and of the need for facilities for field research in the Biological Sciences. Shortly thereafter Dr. Hochbaum requested a proposal from the University to present to his Board about the location of the University Laboratory. But after some discussions, he was told the University was undecided and wished to operate for a year before considering where to locate its laboratory facilities.

During the winter of 1966, a resident of Delta Beach was engaged to check the property on a regular basis and ensure that the heating system in Mallard Lodge was maintained. In 1967, Mr. Nan Mulder was offered the job as the first Resident Caretaker of the station and his wife Gertie became the Cook-Caterer. So the first steps towards developing the field station had been taken.

Sources*

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- Waygood, E. R., Walker, J. M. and Barker, W. G. 1965. The Bain Estate as a University Biological Summer Station. Tentative Proposal. Unpublished document, June 21, 1965. 4 pp.

* Copies of the above documents are available from the Director of the Field Station.