

the patriarch who arrived in the Croton area in 1857 from Bohemia, Austria and subsequently made money in the lumbering industry. He plowed it -- pun intended-- into farm land, giving his namesake son a good start.

After Joseph Jr. died in 1929, all of this land went to his wife and sons: Joe, Frank, and Charles. When his wife Adelia passed in 1948, all of the Deer Point land was owned by these three men.

Joe and Charles -- both single -- lived in the family farmhouse at the southeast end of the lake. Their brother Frank married Carrie Botsford and the two occupied a farmhouse and 40 acres on the corner of M82 and Elm - where Hilltop Country Store is located.

As a kid at Bills Lake in the summers of the 1950s, I neither saw nor heard evidence of construction there. Indeed, there was none until after I left Bills Lake in 1957.



Things began to change in the early 1960s. In 1961, Charles -- who seems to have taken the lead in terms of items such as leases for gas -- was awarded the right to sell the property on behalf of himself and his two brothers.

He sold it to six investors, the lead investor being John Heemstra Sr. As a result of the transaction, the two single Tannewitzes -- Charles and Joe --received a life estate on the family farm home (although neither lived very long to enjoy it). Brother Frank, in turn, married Carrie Botsford. These two owned a farmhouse and 40 acres at the location where Hilltop Express (corner of Elm and M-82) is located.

An interesting note: Charles Botsford, who owns the Hanson family cottage at the end of Vanderstel Dr. and is a former president of the Bills Lake Association, was the nephew of Carrie Botsford Tannewitz. That means that Frank, Joe, and Charles Tannewitz were his uncles.

Fair warning to those who currently live on Deer Point. You might want to sit down before proceeding.

Phase One: Deer Point Drive

Charles Tannewitz sold the entire Deer Point area, including what is known as Deer Point Drive, Deer Point Court, and Deer Point Lane to six investors for \$52,000 with \$14,000 cash down and the remaining \$38,000 on land contract at 5% interest until paid in full. In addition, as the 34 Deer Point lots were sold, the Tannewitz brothers also received an added \$1,000 per lot and an additional \$16.65 per foot for all frontage on each of the 34 lots which exceeded 60 feet of lake front.

The Tannewitz brothers share of all these sales amounted to about \$47,341. This means that they sold all of Deer Point, Deer Point Court, and Deer Point Lane for around and about \$100,000 total gain.

John Heemstra Sr., the lead investor, sold all of the 34 properties of what was known as Deer Point Plat #1 for an estimated \$4,000 to \$8,000 apiece. As Fire Chief of Engine House #4 at Kalamazoo and Burton in Grand Rapids, he was in an ideal position to make the sales in that he had one day on and one day off. He supervised operation and conducted business out of a mobile home and later a garage, used for storing tools. It included a bathroom and sleeping facilities for convenience when needed.

It is believed that in 1962, S.J. and Betty Welsh were the first ones to erect a cottage on the actual point, the red dwelling at the tip which is currently owned by Mike LaPenna. A bit later, Jeff Zeeff writes that his parents, Jack and Mert, built a place on Deer Point Drive in 1963. Craig and Audrey Kidder purchased the last lot available -- No. 34 -- in December 1965. The cost of that lot was \$4,500.

After all of these 34 properties were sold, the five "silent partners" split the sales profits. John and his wife Florence retained the remaining properties on Deer Point Lane and Deer Point Court as their share, to develop and plat as they desired.

Each of the investors, meanwhile, probably received about \$31,000 on initial investments of \$8600 each, if they invested equal portions. Indeed, there was gold in them thar peninsula woods back in the 1960's.

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Phase Two: Deer Point Court

Given that John Heemstra Sr. retained possession of the Deer Point Court and Deer Point Lane properties, rather than receiving cash for Lots 1-34 on Deer Point Drive, there might have been pressure to turn a profit. But if he was worried, he need not have been.

Charles Tannewitz had unfortunately died a year after making the sale of the Deer Point area and left no will. After the court settled the estate on behalf of Joe and Frank, Mr. Heemstra settled the remaining land contract and other considerations with the two remaining Tannewitzes and began to develop Deer Point Plat #Two: Deer Point Court.

After he had a short channel dredged north of 92nd St. and west of the Tannewitz barn (home of the *Channel Creamery* 2020 July 4th Boat Parade Winners), he set up a mobile home on what is now Nikki Ingall's "peninsula," the lot where the gazebo stands out. The plat was established as Lot Nos. 35-60. They sold from 1968-1972. To further employ the metaphor, if white pine timber in Newaygo County was known as "green gold," then shoreline property on Bills Lake was "lakefront gold."

John developed properties all the way down 92nd St. to "the old red barn," still standing today. He also bought the Tannewitz farm (see 1971 plat).

Phase Three: Deer Point Lane

After dredging the Deer Point Court channel, Mr. Heemstra proceeded to dig another straight channel into what he proposed to be a Deer Point Lane Development. In that these properties were divorced from actual lake access, he endeavored to fix that problem by creating a situation wherein owners of these properties could pilot their watercraft into the lake proper.

Twice he had received permits from the Michigan Conservation Department (now the DNR). This latter endeavor was accomplished using a large boom crane and two large (12' by 12') heavy wooden mats on which the crane could move and position itself to continue the channel. The area consisted mostly of swamp and dead trees, literally hundreds of them. It was an abundant frog marsh and a prolific breeding ground for mosquitoes.

But the project raised concerns among lake residents in that the dredging stirred up and filtered out marl into that end of the lake (see article about what marl is), especially close to the Norquist property (now the Snarski's). There was also a concern about the potential drop in lake level, specifically at the lake outlet nearby.

The Bills Lake Association board -- namely El Deschaine and John Kirkwood -- contacted the DNR to voice concerns. In the end, the project was stopped after the channels reached areas where future Deer Point Lane residents could moor their boats in the newly created channel and proceed to the lake. That's because the MCD, the Lake Board, and John Heemstra reached an agreement to end where it is today.

That may have been unfortunate. The original plan was to dredge all the way around so that water could circulate back into the lake rather than remain stagnant. Heemstra had wanted to create an island which would be named Deer Point Private Park. Legal access would be only given to the residents of Deer Point Lane. Its western edge would still be a marsh area but the rest would be ideal for these folks to picnic, lounge, and swim. It was intended as private - for use only by nonlake accessible residents of Deer Point lane.

A stipulation was that there would be a limit of 15 lots maximum-- lots 61-73 --that could be platted in the Deer Point Lane area.

Two of the early purchasers at Deer Point Lane were Marv and Betty Miller. They opted not to buy the red cottage at the end of Deer

Point Drive -- which was up for sale at the time -- in favor of building their own place. Marv went on to be president of the Bills Lake Association while Betty was its secretary. Another original resident was Jerry Gerloski who sold sells flags and flag poles to lake residents until his death in 2021.

In addition, Mr. Heemstra arranged a small land swap with Ed Norquist on the southwest side of the plat property for several acres on the north side of the lake's outlet, Ransom Creek, on Pear Ave. In return, he then gave that property to the Bills Lake Association as a permanent place for meetings and festivals. This ended some of the ongoing disputes and quieted some ill feelings.

When John Heemstra Sr. died, John Jr received ownership of Deer Point #3 Lots 61 and 62 (NE and SE corners of Deer Point Lane and Deer Point Drive) where his dad's garage was located and where his own current pole barn still sits. He sold the garage and Lot 62 to Scott and Mary Inman. This is the open area to the left of the channel as you enter by boat.

The Inmans built a new home and pole barn on the high ground of the lot where the old garage stood for Scott's mother, Shirley Inman. The rest of the area is vacant. The Inmans have kept it clean and mowed.

Some of us who boat up the channel or wander the area from Deer Point Drive don't realize that it is actually private property. So is the private park area on the south (right) side of that channel.

An interesting sidelight: John Heemstra Sr. never actually owned his own cottage on the lake but eventually, there was indeed a Heemstra dwelling on the tip of Deer Point. John Jr. and his wife Mary purchased Otis Murphy's chalet cottage and they became residents. He also built and still maintains a pole barn on Lot 61 of Plat #3 for his use when he comes to the lake. However, he sold the chalet cottage to Dr. Ken Dood, son of residents Sandy and Ken Dood who live next door.