FORWARD

PAUL Hayes makes an interesting point near the end of today's cover story (which begins on page 14): Sometimes it's a bigger struggle to leave something alone than it is to do something with it.

The effort that has gone into creating a relatively small number of nature preserves in Wisconsin is the kind of stuff legends are made of: determined, strong-willed people with the vision to save some places from the designs of human beings.

These also are the kinds of stories we like to tell here in our magazine. Today's piece focuses on The Ridges Sanctuary in Door County and the people who created it, particularly the colorful Emma Toft.

The story of The Ridges offers a look at not only some of the best in Wisconsin's natural assets but also its human ones.

—Alan Borsuk
A PARTY celebrating her 100th birthday, Feb. 9, 1991, Emma Toft lectured about her people and her place to about 50 admirers, who gathered for a potluck dinner at Immanuel Lutheran Church hall in Baileys Harbor.

For certain, it was Emma Toft. That's pronounced "tough" with a T at the end, tough Emma Toft, who stood up to 'em. It was the very woman who, in 1937, all but blocked the bulldozers to save the wildflowers on land that she would help turn into The Ridges Sanctuary, a haven for most species of Wisconsin's wild orchids.

Toft's people and place were inseparable: the Tofts of Toft's Point on Mud Bay, northeast of Baileys Harbor in Door County, the thumb of Wisconsin. Emma Toft was born in the pioneer home's front room near a window that looks out onto Mud Bay. Don't look for Mud Bay on a map; developers changed it to Moonlight Bay, a euphemism. Emma Toft was incensed. The mud, or marl, in the bottom of the bay held anchors of sailing ships, and so captains ran for the bay when Lake Michigan storms came boiling up. Change its name; lose its history, she believed.

This was the same Emma Toft who, later in life, donated the Toft's Point land to be a nature preserve and who believed that, in some places, plants are more important than people.

It was the same Emma who, in the 1920s, left home to teach school in the Dakotas and Iowa, only to return to care for her mother after the death of her father, a Door County pioneer from Denmark. It was the Miss Emma who converted the Toft family home into a no-frills resort. Nieces made the beds and helped serve meals; nephews cut wood and did other chores outside. Other teenagers from Baileys Harbor were hired. Emma herself cooked for artists, urban escapees, fishermen, the gentle people who returned summer after summer to spend time...
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nature center shop two or three times a week during the season.

"If we had $200 in the treasury in the early years, we thought we were doing well," said Traven. "We never spent a dime for anything but land. All the work was donated."

E MMA Toft's handshake was as firm as a man's, and that strength reflected decades of physical labor, according to Roy Lukes. He thinks he saw former Gov. Patrick Lucey wince as Toft gripped his hand tightly in a reception line and demanded that the governor stop a plan to straighten a country road in Door County, which would destroy the road's charm.

Door County writer Norbert Blei, who met Toft in her later years, wrote: "She was the most striking old woman I've ever seen."

Blei and two other writers, poet Niedecker and the late Virginia Eifert, who was author of Journeys in Green Places, passed on the legend that Miss Emma lay down in the path of the bulldozers, that she linked arms with others to protect the trees from loggers.

Of the three, only Blei supplied the facts. Emma herself told him she did not lie in front of the bulldozers. It was all right with her if people believed so. Had it been necessary, she might have, she said.

It was not by accident that Jensen, the jolly-faced Chicago landscape architect and a prime mover in saving the ridges, insisted upon calling the place a sanctuary.

"Sanctuary" means a holy place. It comes from the Latin word sanctus, meaning sacred.

ONE day in 1963, Lukes was invited by an acquaintance, Harold Wilson, to join Wilson and Murl Deusing in banding young herring gulls near Ephraim. Banding is done routinely for research, to learn the habits of birds.

Deusing, then director of education for the Milwaukee Public Museum, had a home on Ridges Dr. across from the sanctuary. He had become president of The Ridges in 1962.

The day was perfect, said Lukes, and the three of them banded 1,100 gulls, which may be a record. Driving home, Deusing and Wilson began discussing the prospect of hiring a naturalist for the sanctuary.

Both men looked at Lukes and asked simultaneously if he would like the job.

At the time, Lukes was teaching science and math at a two-year teachers' college in Algoma. When the academic year ended in June 1964, Lukes worked the summer as a naturalist at the sanctuary. He did the same in the summer of '65. By late winter 1966, Lukes had decided to take a job the next fall teaching junior high school science in Fish Creek, to move to Baileys Harbor and to work at the sanctuary six days a week, before and after school and on weekends.

He would conduct an environmental program and one early morning bird tour weekly, all for $60 a week. To help him with living expenses, The Ridges board invited Lukes to live in the upper-range lighthouse.

A 1966 photograph shows Emma Toft and Lukes standing on the front steps of the lighthouse on the winter day when Lukes was given the key, a few months before he moved in. Both are in prime form: Lukes in a winter jacket with a big collar; Emma with wisps of white hair fringing a bandanna, a heavy wool coat that looked like US Navy surplus, denim jeans and laced rubber boots. Both are grinning as they stand on snowy steps.

When Lukes started teaching that fell at Gibraltar Junior High School in Fish Creek, he developed an environmental education program for kindergarten through eighth grade. Three Door County school districts adopted it. The program began with simple ideas in the lower grades and moved to the complex. It dealt with things at hand: fossils, which were abundant in Door County's limestone; the food chain; trees.

Ridges membership grew. By 1976, Lukes realized he no longer could do both the teaching and naturalist jobs, so he quit teaching.

Three years earlier, he had married Charlotte Koch, a dental hygienist.

"She began to work full time so we could survive," said Lukes. She also became his partner in natural history, developing an expertise in fungi. In addition, she applied her artistic skills to illustrating Lukes' books, and she helped edit them.

Sixteen years after Lukes moved into the lighthouse, years of enduring cold, damp air, which may be good for growing orchids but can promote pain in human joints, Roy and Charlotte moved, in 1982, into their bright, passive-
solar home west of Baileys Harbor.

Then, last August, he retired. Ridges members called for contributions to a retirement fund for Lukes and raised $25,000. In 1964, when Lukes began as naturalist, there were 175 members; today there are 3,100, from 46 states, most from Wisconsin, one-fourth from northeastern Illinois.

After he had been at the sanctuary a number of years, Lukes realized there were many things about nature people should know. He offered a column to the Door County Advocate. In that first column, June 20, 1968, he laid out his philosophy: If people were made aware of Door County’s richness of natural plants and animals, people would preserve them.

The columns, illustrated with his own photographs, proved popular. A few years after the columns started, he suggested that he be paid naturalists in southern Iowa when he learned that The Ridges needed a naturalist. Iowa was nice, but they missed Wisconsin’s winter and water, he said.

He finished first among 80 applicants for the job, and Kathleen became a teacher in Sts. Peter and Paul School in Institute, 14 miles south. They are living in the upper-range light-house, which had been unoccupied since Lukes moved out, except for summer staff.

The day before Emma Toft’s 100th birthday, Regnier was working at the end of the road into Toft’s Point, a road that in February was more dependably walked than driven. He was clearing brush from around the old Toft house, preparing for a public hike Lukes would lead as part of the birthday party.

Emma Toft used to sit on a hanging swing on the porch, which spanned the front of the house, and watch the evening. Today, the front porch leans precariously toward Mud Bay.

Inside it is evident that this never was a luxurious resort. Here was country plainness at its most severe. The people who came here in the summer slept in rustic beds made of birch logs, ate at a single table and, before 1941, read by kerosene lamplight.

If they undertook whole body baths, they either had sponge baths with hot water from kettles that were always on the cast-iron stove or they plunged into the chilling waters of Lake Michigan. They were provided with two outhouses, one each for men and women.

They minded not to pick the flowers, lest they be scolded by Miss Emma. They appreciated her garden, the views, silence, starry nights, the geraniums in the window boxes, Emma’s planked whitefish and thimbleberry jam, and a sense of rightness and place.

T HIS is what Madison’s Bill Tisher wants to save. It was an essential part of his growing up in Baileys Harbor, next door to Will Toft, Emma’s brother. At the end of each summer, Emma would dismiss her teenage help (including Bill Tisher’s sister, Adeline) and move in with her brother’s family for the winter.

It’s not just the house that should be saved for cultural history, said Tisher, but the whole complex: Emma’s garden, the log barn built in 1881; the outlying cabins built in the 1920s and 1930s; the old icehouse, which kept bay ice cut in winter frozen under sawdust in summer; the circular lime kiln, remnant of an unsuccessful business venture; and the evidence of the old quarry itself.

Today, the interior of the two-story house reveals only a hint of the life that filled it each summer. Its rooms are empty and few of their lines, horizontal or vertical, remain true. There are only rectangular stains on the wide-board floors where the wood-burning, cast-iron, heating stoves sat. The big Mayflower cook stove, bought for $100 in the 1920s from Sears Roebuck, on which Emma cooked thousands of plain, hot meals, is missing.

Upstairs is evidence of serious damage. For years thousands of brown bats have used the Continued
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attic as a cave. Guano and urine have seeped down the plastered walls, staining them. Needless to say, the smell of ammonia is intense.

When the resort was active, Miss Emma stayed in a room built onto the rear of the house behind the kitchen. Porcupines have been eating at the pie safe that she evidently had been using as a dresser next to the bed.

On a Halloween night 50 years ago, the sight of the tipped-over outhouse outside would have earned Miss Emma’s fury, but it would be understood as a prank. Pranks are played on people. With the place abandoned, this amounts to mindless vandalism.

These buildings form the complex that was started by Thomas Toft, who came here in the early 1870s to operate a quarry for the Michigan Quarry Co. He and his workers, including,

A rare calypso orchid grew somewhere on Toft’s Point, but Emma would not disclose where, not even to friend Lukes

in the 1880s, Bill Tishler’s grandfather, pried out chunks of dolomite from the surface with iron bars, dragged them to the lakeshore and loaded them aboard barges bound for Michigan, for use in construction and as riprap.

Toft was paid partly in land, this land, on which he built the small farm that supported the family of seven children. Thomas Toft was the one who demanded that 40 acres of virgin timber be saved. It still stands, some trees perhaps older than 200 years. Emma guarded it with the zeal of her father, and so it remains the only stand of virgin timber in Door County.

Emma Toft is said to have interrogated prospective guests. Only after she was convinced they would appreciate where they were and what they were seeing would she agree to renting them a room. She patrolled her boundaries during deer season carrying a gun, not to shoot deer but to keep hunters out.

Lukes said that a rare calypso orchid grew somewhere on Toft’s Point, but Emma would not disclose where, not even to friend Lukes.

“I guess she didn’t trust even me,” he said.

An old rusting yellow sign is still attached to a tree along Toft’s Point land, dating from the days of the resort. It says, “Take only pictures. Leave only tracks.”

ABOUT 30 people walked into Toft’s Point on the morning of Emma Toft’s 100th birthday. The sun was bright, the air clear and clean, pouring down the throat like ice water.

Carl Scholz, former president of The Ridges, and retired superintendent of the Sevastopol School District at Institute, south of Baileys Harbor, brought a pul of freshly cut balsam poplar sprigs. Emma would have put these in water in her kitchen, Scholz said. When the buds were forced in early March, their spicy odor was the first scent of spring. He invited everyone to take a few.

Scholz also brought a charred white oak plank on which Emma baked her famous planked whitefish for guests. He reminisced, then changed to a sensitive subject. Last summer the UW-Green Bay academic committee that operates Toft’s Point as a natural area had decided to take down the main house. A carpenter had inspected the house and found rotten boards at the foundation. Saving it would require virtual demolition and rebuilding, costing hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Later, Paul Sager, professor of biology at the university and head of the committee that oversees the natural area and its uses, said:

“From the beginning, our philosophy was opposed to operating Toft’s Point as a heavy-use area. We are most concerned with preserving the natural values in this otherwise developing part of the state. The lime kiln, the barn and the cabins, they’ll be maintained.

“But it would take a tremendous endowment to finance the restoration of the house, and even then it would be difficult to find a use for it. We don’t want to attract the kind of use that would threaten the natural values.”

Tishler had appeared before the committee, and had been heard.

“I am well aware of some of the headaches, about how the buildings are to be used, about the wonderful natural area,” Tishler said later.

These two Toft’s Point trees, which sunk roots in cracks in Door County bedrock and have withstood Lake Michigan storms, are called Jens and Emma by people who admired the toughness of Ridges’ founders Jens Jensen and Emma Toft.
“But I hate to think that these cultural and historical values have to be obliterated. We should sustain both values, natural and cultural. Meantime, I’m afraid it will become a case of demolition by neglect.”

If and when the wreckers come, would Miss Emma have linked arms with Tishler to protect her family’s heritage, as she supposedly had linked arms in the 1930s to protect the wildflowers? For one of the few times in her life, apparently, Miss Emma did not speak clearly on the subject.

Scholz, Sager and Lukes think she wanted the flowers saved more than anything. There were some places in the world, she had made clear in the fight to save The Ridges, where plants were more important than people.

Taken together, Toft’s Point and The Ridges Sanctuary are the size of a big Illinois grain farm, about 1,300 acres. A family well-equipped with machines can run a grain farm, cultivate it, plant it, fertilize it, spray it, harvest it, guide it through the cycle of production that profoundly changes the land.

By contrast it has taken hundreds of people, each of them emulating some of the toughness of Emma Toft, just to maintain these 1,300 acres in an undisturbed state. What can we conclude about our culture from this? Clearly, Americans find it easier to scrape, fill and excavate land in the US than to leave it alone.

To keep that effort on, its toes was one reason 50 Door County friends took potluck at the Lutheran Church Feb. 9, 1991. Lukes was at the head of the class, leading discussion as he had countless times in front of classroom children, tourists and other nature lovers.

He solicited anecdotes from shy people who had known his friend Emma. He was getting good stories, old classics about Emma and the California flower picker, about Emma and the stone sledgehammer, about Emma and the pet deer, about Emma and the snake in the bluebird box.

Lukes said he could stand up there and listen to the stories “till the cows come home.”

Indeed he may. People at the potluck were still snickering that this was the second 100th birthday party held for Miss Emma. Lukes organized a similar one last year, potluck, slides and all. By the time Emma’s niece, Virginia Johnson, who lives north of Baileys Harbor, pointed out that it was only Emma’s 99th birthday, the plans were too far along to cancel.

“So we just called it a dress rehearsal,” said Lukes. “But it’s been so successful for two years, that I think we should make it an annual affair.”

Remember the date, Feb. 9, 1992, for the third consecutive 100th birthday party for Miss Emma Toft, legend of The Ridges Sanctuary, guardian of Toft’s Point, and the fiercest friend a flower ever had.

Paul G. Hayes is a WISCONSIN staff writer.