

300-Acre Tract Made Nature Preserve

By JOAN LEE FAUST

THERE is a place at East Haddam where eagles nest, bobcats hunt and northern pike spawn. It has a 90-acre freshwater pond connected by two small channels to the Connecticut River, which flows 12 miles downstream to join Long Island Sound.

This special place, 300 acres long known as Chapman's Pond, will be dedicated today as the Cynthia B. Carlson Nature Preserve. It honors a spirited conservationist and longtime resident of the Connecticut River Valley. The ceremonies will take place at Gelston House, a restaurant near the Goodspeed Opera House, as part of the annual meeting of the Connecticut chapter of The Nature Conservancy, a national conservation organization.

W. Kent Olson, executive director of the chapter, said that despite the torrential rain that has affected the whole Connecticut River Valley, "the pond and its environs are doing their job and acting as sponges."

However, because of road washouts in the area around East Haddam, the conservancy has issued new travel directions for those who are going to attend the annual meeting. Take Exit 8 on Route 9 and from there follow the directions posted.

The dedication day culminates a race against time to raise \$700,000 in less than four months to rescue one of the state's most treasured river-scapes.

"The protection of Chapman's Pond," said Mr. Olson, "is easily the most important project ever undertaken by the chapter."

It is also considered one of the most important conservation projects in New England because the Connecticut River, the second largest on the East Coast and one of the cleanest rivers for its size in the nation, drains 11,000 square miles, and nearly 1,000,000 residents live within the watershed.

In a survey made last year, the Federal Government's Soil Conservation Service said that the area, which includes the new preserve, encompasses 660 acres and supports 250 species of fish and wildlife. The report also noted that the pond is the only tidally influenced freshwater body in the state.

The area has long been a priority target of many organizations including the conservancy, the state's Department of Environmental Protection, the Connecticut River Gateway Commission and the East Haddam Land Trust.

Late last year, when it was learned that the owners of the property had filed a plan to log the hillside above the pond and had taken steps toward residential development, these organizations moved quickly to protect the area.

The property was owned by the heirs of Vivien Kellems, a manufacturer, who died in 1975. Miss Kellems had been a foe of the Federal tax system, and spent a great part of her life battling the Internal Revenue Service for what she maintained was discrimination against single people.

When the acquisition plan became known, organizations and individuals rallied to the call. They included a broad bipartisan coalition headed by Governor O'Neill, Senators Christopher J. Dodd and Lowell P. Weicker

Jr. and Representatives Sam Gejdenson and Stewart B. McKinney.

The Connecticut chapter signed a \$700,000 option to purchase the property, the largest undertaking in the group's history. Pledges of \$300,000 came from the Connecticut River Gateway Commission, \$160,000 from the Federal Soil Conservation Service and contributions flowed in from members and individuals. Assistance also came from the Middlesex Soil Conservation District and the Eastern Connecticut Resource Conservation and Development Area.

On April 1, the conservancy took title to the 300 acres at Chapman's Pond, a joint undertaking with the East Haddam Land Trust. A total of \$639,000 was raised. Funding is still needed for the remaining \$61,000 and a purchase loan has been taken from the national office.

"Raising that amount of money in under four months is a remarkable accomplishment, a credit to our benefactors," commented Peter Cooper, chairman of the chapter's board of trustees.

The conservancy and the East Haddam Land Trust have identified critical tracts adjacent to the property and have begun acquisition, mostly by gifts, to form a larger fish and wildlife refuge. This will protect the area completely. It will be managed jointly by the two organizations with help from the state's environmental department and the Federal Soil Conservation Service. As management plans develop, compatible recreational uses will be permitted.

The pond itself is the centerpiece of an upland-lowland area with many scenic vistas. To the east are four hills rising 300 feet with brooks tumbling through. The hills are part of the chain known as the Seven Sisters. The famous Gillette Castle State Park is located on the seventh hill.

In these uplands of several 100 acres, project surveys have identified forests of both deciduous and coniferous species as well as an abundance of wildflowers. Three plants listed as rare in the state have been found there.

The pond is a spawning ground for many species of fish and lends support to a population of native brook trout. Eagles use the tidal creek area for a winter perch and ospreys roost nearby. Both are threatened species.

To the north, west and south of the pond are the flood-plain wetlands. To the far west, two small islands screen the pond from the main channel of the river.

Historically, the tract was the first land between the English settlement at Hartford and the fort at Saybrook to be acquired by a white man, Robert Chapman. When Mr. Chapman purchased the land in 1642 from the Indian, Chapeto, the pond did not exist and the region was called Chapman's Meadow. Salt hay thrived there and was harvested as a crop. Not until sometime between the early 1700's and 1850, when there was probably an unusually high flood, did the pond form.

Acquisition of Chapman's Pond is considered the crown jewel of the conservancy's efforts to secure unprotected lands in the Connecticut River Corridor. By gift, easements or purchase, the chapter has established 12 sanctuaries which protect 800 additional acres of prime natural land bordering the river or an important tributary or forested upland watersheds.

This major step in the chapter's acquisition program reflects the recent change of direction made by The Nature Conservancy, which is headquartered in Arlington, Va.

Established in 1950 with 521 members, the organization started by protecting small natural areas in the Northeast. Its first acquisition was the 60-acre Mianus River Gorge in New York's Westchester County. Today the conservancy has more than 128,000 members, 40 field offices and chapters representing nearly all of the 50 states.

Now national in scope, the conservancy has developed a systematic approach to protect some of the nation's most important areas of natural diversity. In 1980, it launched a National Critical Areas Program to identify those regions of highest ecological value that are in jeopardy.

"Here in Connecticut, we are play-

ing environmental triage," Mr. Olson said. "Man is eradicating species faster than they can replace themselves. We are attempting to take the theory out of species and ecosystem extinction and doing something practical."

The chapter is accomplishing this goal with a supporting grant from the national office. It has hired a young intern, Julie Zickefoose, as a field scientist to make an inventory of the state's critical areas. With the help of some of the state's top environmental scientists, she is defining how best to do the job of protection.

Eleven areas in the state have been identified to be in greatest need and have become the basis of the chapter's priority list for acquisition. The conservancy now has its sights on Onion Mountain, a 900-foot-high basaltic ridge in Canton. It has been identified as a diverse habitat, one of five known areas to support certain unusual flora.