

COMMUNITY

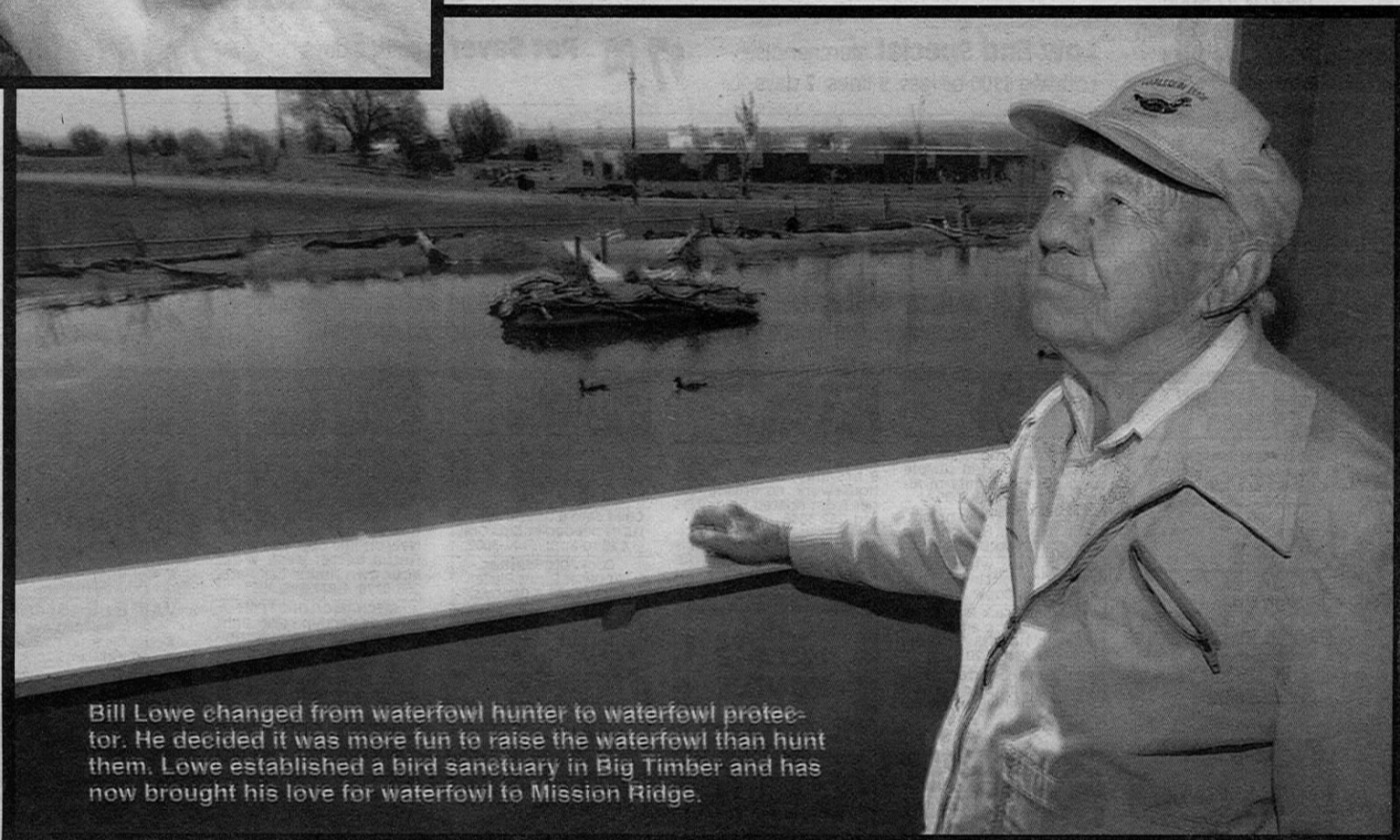
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THE SOURCE

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Mission Ridge: *a sanctuary*



Bill Lowe changed from waterfowl hunter to waterfowl protector. He decided it was more fun to raise the waterfowl than hunt them. Lowe established a bird sanctuary in Big Timber and has now brought his love for waterfowl to Mission Ridge.

Gazette photos/DAVID GRUBBS

By **DONNA HEALY**
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What was once a mud hole to catch storm runoff at the Mission Ridge retirement apartments has become one of Billings' most exotic waterfowl viewing sites. Ducks nest and trumpeter swans glide on a man-made pond behind the apartment complex on Rimrock Road.

Bill Lowe, 85, the driving force behind the pond's creation, talks about the waterfowl like prized children.

He points out freeloading mallards who come flying in for the easy meal. The small upper and lower ponds are separated by a small waterfall.

"Those two little fellows are ringed teal from South America," he said, pointing from the balcony of a friend's apartment overlooking the duck pond. "I think they're so cute. They're little and well-marked and they just run around together like mad," he said.

Lowe is tickled to see that a duck box that looks like a hollowed-out tree stump already is being used by a cavity-nesting wood duck.

"I lifted the lid on that one and here looking up at me was a little hen," he said.

Lowe, who was born and raised in Glendive, started Lowe Construction in Billings after World War II. He hunted waterfowl, until he decided that it was more fun to raise them than hunt them.

In 1967, he and Warren Hancock bought land along the Yellowstone River, east of Big Timber. With water from natural springs, they turned marshland into six ponds.

His first birds were of ducklings that came through the mail from a Sears Roebuck catalog order. Predators ate those ducklings in the first week.

Over the years, he established a bird sanctuary at Big Timber known as Wild Birds Resources. Now, sandhill cranes and bald eagles nest along the 2 1/2 miles of riverfront. Canadian honkers fill 25 nesting boxes at the sanctuary, returning each year. For 18 years, Lowe was on the board of ZooMontana.

Although he and his wife, Connie, still spend a few days each week at the ranch outside Big Timber, they moved into an apartment at Mission Ridge about two years ago. Lowe spent six years on the board at St. John's Lutheran Home. Mission Ridge is owned by St. Vincent Hospital and St. John's Lutheran Ministries, which manages the facility.

Lowe had no intention of building a pond when he moved into the complex, and he chose an apartment facing the wrong direction for a great view of the pond. He keeps an eye on his beloved waterfowl from a neighboring apartment.

Lowe has a federal permit to raise waterfowl. The 30 exotic birds at the Mission Ridge pond are pinioned — a wing-tip clipped to prevent them from

flying away.

In winter, the number of ducks and geese at the pond grows to more than 100 with "freeloaders" who take advantage of the food and open water. A pump keeps the water circulating and prevents the pond from freezing.

This spring, someone dropped a domestic goose over the fence. The goose promptly laid 14 eggs, but without a male goose to fertilize them, she won't raise any young.

The pond project, which started last spring, cost about \$16,000 in addition to volunteer labor and donated materials. Bill Hancock, who operates his own bird sanctuary in Billings, the Warren J. Hancock Bird Resources, donates feed for the Mission Ridge birds. Most of the cash donations have come from friends and residents of Mission Ridge, but International Wild Waterfowl also provided a small grant. Construction is under way on a handicapped-accessible walkway from the apartment complex to the pond. Backers are still raising \$3,500 to pay for the walkway.

"What I see that makes the project unusual is that it's resident driven," said Kent Burgess, CEO for St. John's Lutheran Ministries. Lowe has enlisted Mission Ridge residents to help with feeding the waterfowl and with other pond chores. Residents helped put the fence around the pond and other building projects.

At a "viewing house" beside the pond, visitors can watch the birds through a large cutout window. Pictures help identify the exotic species, like the mandarin ducks. The colorful male mandarins have two showy fin feathers that stick up like sails along their back.

The birds have established a pecking order in the pond, Lowe said.

"Birds are not sweet-tempered with each other," he said.

Last fall, Lowe brought in a pair of black swans. Within fifteen minutes, the pair of trumpeter swans had killed the female black swan.

"The two of them got on her and held her underwater and drowned her," he said.

The pond, which was filled for the first time last summer, already attracts regular visitors. Children from the Center For Generations day-care center at St. John's Lutheran home troop over at least once a day to watch the birds and play on the grassy lawn.

Lowe has also given school talks to youngsters at Arrowhead School, just south of the pond.

