

# Conservancy Notes

FALL 2021

## Richland County couple protects water we share

The cold, clear headwaters of Little Fancy Creek babble in the rocky creek bed that crosses under the drive upon arriving at the farm of Susan and David Weigandt. Nearby are well-constructed chutes and ramps that allow for the movement of cattle through a rotational grazing system for the production of grass-fed beef. Running through the middle of the farm's sweeping valley are the creek

with several springs and sedge meadows filled with bulrushes, and wetland plants like boneset, blue vervain, and jewelweed. Every shade of green wraps around the valley.

Having dedicated much of their lives to protecting the natural resources of the property, the Weigandts have now helped to ensure its future with a permanent agreement with Mississippi Valley Conservancy. The agreement, a conservation easement, provides permanent protection from future residential development, subdivision, or mining of the property.

One of the most notable characteristics of the 180-acre farm is its 100% coverage with perennial plants. "Protection of the perennial vegetation on farmland surrounding springs, sedge meadows, streams, and creeks

is vital for the protection of Wisconsin's ground and surface water quality," said Chris Kirkpatrick, MVC conservation specialist. Downstream from the property, Little Fancy

Creek feeds Fancy Creek which feeds the Pine River into the Wisconsin River and, ultimately, the Mississippi River.

Neither Susan nor David are cattle experts, but they knew they wanted the land they leased to be grazed in a way that would enrich the soil and nurture the pasture plants without causing erosion or contaminating the water.

They turned to the Richland County Land Conservation Department for help with protecting the creek from their tenant farmer's cattle and ensuring that livestock could be managed to prevent over-grazing.



*The Weigandt farm supports many native plants and wildlife species, as well as a grass-fed beef operation that protects water on the farm for everyone downstream.*

*Photos by Chris Kirkpatrick*

*Continued on page 3*

A message from Carol

## Creating community by sharing what we love

On a recent summer evening, I was sitting around the campfire with friends and family on our farm. The clouds drifted over the moon and the sounds of treefrogs trilled in the darkness.

I knew all the guests, but many were new to each other. As a result, the conversation seemed a bit reserved. That is, until the graham crackers, marshmallows and chocolate bars came out. Suddenly, folks who didn't know each other spontaneously passed the graham crackers. Others offered to toast marshmallows for those too far away from the fire, or who didn't have a toasting stick.

All of a sudden the group began to look more like a community of people. Everyone, from my grandchildren to my guests and neighbors, was sharing the joy of a campfire, fun, food, family, and friendship. The conversation ignited and after all was said and done, we left with the warmth of the fire and the glow of having shared something special.

I'm witnessing a similar sense of community around a shared love of the land and water.

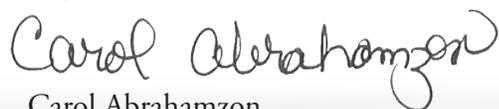
At a time when the stress of erratic weather, the virus, and an often-corresponding sense of isolation could drive a sense of despair, we need each other more than ever. Neighbors helping neighbors. Getting to know new people. Finding new ways to ensure that everyone has a chance to experience the love of nature, close to home, no matter their age or ability.

Truly, healthy communities don't happen by accident; they depend on people like you and me coming together to create places to share what we love – nature, farms, and this place we call home.

We can work together as a community to provide welcoming places *in* nature, and *for* nature. Together we can support our area's farms and wildlife and address the challenges of climate change.

That night, around the campfire, I felt something inspiring in my heart. And I feel it every day in our community. We are coming together to share our love of the Driftless Area, and to conserve and create the special places that will last for generations – at a time when it's needed more than ever. I want to thank you for sharing your love of nature.

Together in conservation,



Carol Abrahamzon,  
Executive Director





The original farmhouse is gone, but the remaining buildings are updated originals, including the former chicken coop where Susan and David took shelter in the early years of their land ownership when they lived in Madison and spent nearly every weekend at the farm, tackling the growing list of projects that came with owning the land.

- Planting thousands of trees and shrubs, including dogwoods, hazelnuts, and ninebarks along 2,000 feet of Little Fancy Creek to provide wildlife habitat while holding the soil and keeping the waters cool
- Streambank protection, including fencing, cattle ways, rip rap, and rock chutes
- Forestry management, including timber stand improvement, in accordance with their Wisconsin Managed Forest Law program management plan
- Establishment of the rotational grazing system
- Sharing their farm to help others learn – Farm Services Administration pasture walks, UW-Madison workshops, Women in Forestry workshops, Wisconsin Woodland Owners Association workshops, Pheasants Forever Workshops

Now, forty-three years later, the success of their conservation work can be seen and heard from the ridges to the valley, with the regrowth of oaks, the reappearance of woodland orchids, the clear water of the creek, and the songs of beloved birds, including Susan's favorite, the eastern whip-poor-will. While there is much new development spreading outward from Richland Center, the Weigandts can enjoy the satisfaction of having protected clean water and wildlife habitat for today and for the future.

## Richland County couple *(cover story)*

Many of the improvements they made were possible through cost-sharing provided by the Wisconsin Land & Water Management Program.

Soon after acquiring the land in 1978, Susan and David realized they had a lot to learn, so they began attending local workshops hosted by organizations including Wisconsin Woodland Owners Association and Mississippi Valley Conservancy. Their project list was formidable, so they chose to tackle one project per year. To date, their extensive conservation projects have included:

### Country, Nature and Home

*The whip-poor-will's song  
Always comes with dusk.  
Its music signals the day's end  
And peaceful thoughts overwhelm me.*

*The moon in its unique beauty  
Appears as if never seen before.  
Cresting the ridge, peeking through the trees,  
And shimmering on the pond  
Casting moon shadows.*

*In the country when dark has fallen  
The stars seem ever, ever so bright.  
A shooting star is not so rare  
But more often a common sight.*

*My heart I know is here  
I'm close to God – I'm home.*

**Susan Weigandt**  
1/17/83



*Photo of whip-poor-will courtesy of Allen Blake Sheldon*



## Grazing for the birds – and for profit

The art of farming atop the ridge

**A**t a recent pasture walk on the farm of Jim and Phylis Munsch, farmers, birders, and other conservationists came to learn what makes a grass-fed beef operation viable – both economically and environmentally.

Jim purchased the farm in 1976. The family moved there in 1978 when he claims he was “middle-age crazy,” but he brought with him his agricultural engineering experience and the wisdom of a farmer he had worked for in his youth, back in his home state of Indiana. The Munsch farm had previously been cultivated with contour strips, and Jim continued with that but soon realized the ridgetop land was too vulnerable to erosion.

In the early 1980s, with help from UW Extension and some smart neighbors, he started a grass-based beef cattle business that would protect and build soil. This meant converting all crop land to managed perennial grassland by 1990. By the early 2000s it was clear that the market for 100% grass-fed beef was exploding. This was an opportunity to get a better price for his beef, so he eliminated grain and stepped up his grazing management to get higher quality pasture.

*Below, Jim Munsch leads a pasture walk that was offered through Great River Graziers and the Kickapoo Grazing Initiative.*

Jim describes farmers as artists – using the land, agronomic engineering and animal husbandry skills as an artist uses paints, brushes and canvas. By putting together all the pieces on his farm he has virtually eliminated erosion, improved soil health, and increased soil organic matter by a factor of 2.5 while almost doubling pasture productivity. The system is greenhouse gas neutral with sequestration of carbon balancing animal methane emissions. Animals are healthy and the resulting product is better for the consumer. When all this comes together, it’s a symphony!

In 2020 Jim’s farm was used by Valley Stewardship Network (VSN) as a site to see if slight changes in grassland management would support native bird population growth without materially impacting profitability. This was pursuant to a Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) grant. Jim managed 15% of his pastureland as a refuge area during nesting season for grassland birds, such as dickcissel, Henslow’s sparrow, grasshopper sparrow, savanna sparrow, meadowlark, and bobolink. Bird surveys were conducted by bird experts from VSN and the Conservancy.

While the final results have not yet been summarized, Jim reports that he’s seeing more of all of these grassland birds as a result of the refuge project. The change in the forage in the refuge area is still being calculated but Jim believes that he can come up with methods to mitigate any cost increases.

The Munsch’s have also protected their ridgetop land with a conservation agreement through Mississippi Valley Conservancy. It excludes future development and cropping systems that will invite erosion while keeping the farm in animal production on perennial pasture.





# Does hunting have a place on Conservancy properties?

by John Wetzel

Photo courtesy of Len Harris

Hunting is allowed on many of the nature preserves you've helped protect, as the acquisitions of these properties have been supported by the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program which requires that they be open for hunting and fishing.

When we look at hunting activity, it takes place in the fall and spring and doesn't involve manipulation of habitat, so biologically it does not interfere with the Conservancy's primary purpose to protect and enhance habitats. Also, hunting takes place under strict regulations that assure hunted species are not impacted by hunting harvest.

Species that can be hunted on the nature preserves include squirrels, rabbits, waterfowl, pheasants, turkeys and deer. Some hunting of coyotes and raccoons may also take place. But, by far, the major share of all hunting is for turkeys and deer.

Are there any benefits that hunting provides for Conservancy properties? The answer, perhaps surprising to some, is yes.

Managing deer on the nature preserves is especially important. Deer in high numbers degrade habitat and can prevent oak seedlings and other native vegetation from surviving. Considering that CWD (Chronic Wasting Disease) is present in the Driftless Area, the control of deer is important. With few natural predators in this area, hunting helps to keep the deer population in check.

Deer, turkeys, and other game species can spread the seeds of invasive plant species; new patches of garlic mustard are often found along game trails. High raccoon populations can negatively impact many wildlife species, such as ground-nesting songbirds, so holding raccoon populations in check also has positive conservation benefits.

In addition, those who hunt the Conservancy's nature preserves (including neighbors) will have a positive opinion of the Conservancy and may, as I have done, become supporters. Hunters tend to be well-aware of rules and regulations, and they generally like conservation practices because they help to ensure their chances of a successful harvest from year to year. Often, they will be interested in improving the habitat and can participate in volunteer work days and other habitat restoration efforts.

Thus, although some people may not like hunting, it has a place on the Conservancy's nature preserves, is necessary for sustainable land management and ecological health, and has positive effects that are beneficial for everyone. So next time you see a hunter on a property, say hi, and wish them well.

Hunting on the nature preserves is subject to local and state regulations. For details, visit the Nature Preserves page on our website at [www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org](http://www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org). Hunting is not allowed at Holland Sand Prairie and Wilton Hemlocks.

Full-length versions of all the land protection stories in this publication are available in the *Wild Reads* section of our website. There you can sign up for our free eNewsletter and learn about ways to get involved.

[www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org](http://www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org)

# One man's conservation legacy

The Paul E. Stry Foundation

Philanthropy helps fund solutions to widespread problems all around the world. It also plays an important role here in the Driftless Area, where we face some global challenges on a local level. Among those challenges are threats to the prairie, wetland, and woodland habitats that sustain diverse natural communities and serve many beneficial roles for all of us.

Over the past 24 years, the Paul E. Stry Foundation has granted nearly a million dollars to the Conservancy for land acquisitions, restoration projects and equipment, and education projects. The foundation's first donation to the Conservancy, back in 1998, funded the purchase of a copier and a file cabinet for maps.

Since then, the foundation has helped fund major land acquisitions in the blufflands of La Crosse, Onalaska, and along the Mississippi River spanning from Buffalo County to Grant County, as well as properties with imperiled habitats such as Holland Sand Prairie, New Amsterdam Grasslands, and Kickapoo Caverns, to name just a few. Major habitat restoration projects and the purchase of restoration tools and equipment have also been supported by the foundation.

The foundation was created by the will of Paul E. Stry (1922-1987). Born in La Crosse, he graduated from Central High School in 1940. He received his bachelor of science degree from UW-Madison and went on to work for the government as a meteorologist at Indianapolis, Detroit, and Waterloo airports. Upon retiring in 1979, he returned to La Crosse to take on the stewardship of his father's 5-acre property.

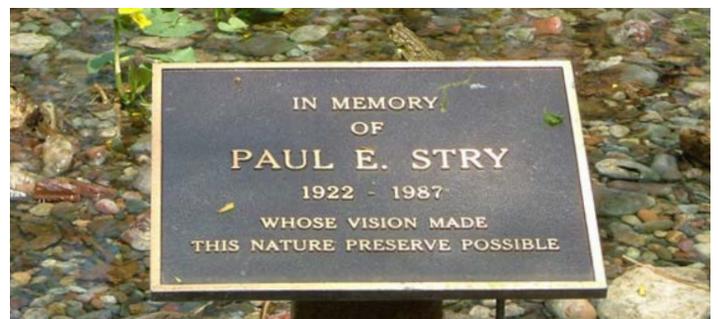
Stry was involved with his church and his local Sierra Club chapter. He donated a walnut tree to the UWL campus, and it was planted with a small commemorative plaque. Stry said he envisioned a young couple sitting in the shade of the tree and planning their futures.

Knowing he was ill, Paul met with his attorney, Robert Skemp, Sr. and directed him to create the Paul E. Stry Foundation in his will. He directed that about 10% of the income from his estate go to several specific charities but that 90% of the income should go to the maintenance of his property, on the outskirts of La Crosse, as a nature preserve.

Because the income from the estate became greater than the amount needed to maintain the property, the foundation obtained a "construction of the will" from the courts to make grant awards to like-minded organizations and environmental efforts. To date, those organizations have included Mississippi Valley Conservancy, the land management crews of the Wisconsin DNR, local schools and colleges, and several park projects in La Crosse. Indeed, his hopeful vision for the walnut tree has now provided opportunities for thousands of people to spend time in nature with an eye toward the future.

When we enjoy breathtaking views, cold streams, amazing wildlife, and memorable hikes at Conservancy nature preserves, we can all be thankful to the Paul E. Stry Foundation for helping to conserve those places for us and for future generations.

***Gathering Waters, Wisconsin's alliance of land trusts, recently announced its 2021 Land Conservation Leadership Land Legacy Award is going to the Paul E. Stry Foundation. The Land Legacy Award honors the foundation's generous support of Mississippi Valley Conservancy, and its dedication to protecting and restoring the natural environment in La Crosse and the surrounding Driftless Area, as well as supporting various youth environmental education efforts.***



*The foundation established by Paul E. Stry protects his family's land as a small nature preserve near La Crosse and has grown to protect many tracts of land in western Wisconsin, from the Chippewa River to the Illinois border.*

# Stronger Together

Join us for Mississippi Valley Conservancy's  
24th Annual Fall Fundraiser!

**5:30 p.m. on Friday, Nov. 5, 2021**

This live event will take place online  
so you can hear the latest Conservancy news,  
bid in the LIVE auction, and enjoy local music  
in the comfort of your home.

Together, we'll celebrate all you've done and all  
we will do together for the future.

Watch for your invitation with  
details coming soon!

*Please join us  
in thanking these  
Conservation  
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## The Stewardship Circle Bequest Challenge

The Stewardship Circle is a special group of land conservancy supporters who have made a lasting commitment to land protection through a variety of estate planning tools. Right now you have an amazing opportunity to expand the work of protecting, caring for, and restoring our unique and beautiful Driftless Area for the benefit of everyone. When you make a planned gift, \$1,000 will be donated to Mississippi Valley Conservancy in your honor from the Stewardship Circle Bequest Challenge Grant. Details are on our website at [www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org/ways-give](http://www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org/ways-give)





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**Like us on Facebook for more news!**

Mississippi Valley Conservancy is a regional, non-profit land trust based in La Crosse, Wisconsin. The Conservancy has permanently conserved 21,907 acres of blufflands, prairies, wetlands, streams and farmlands in and around the Mississippi, Kickapoo, and Wisconsin Rivers since its founding in 1997. Over 5,000 acres are open to the public for hiking, bird watching, hunting, fishing, photography, and snowshoeing.

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**With Naturehood Connections, everyone's invited to discover and help**

Our adaptable activity box, complete with nature activities, tools, and instructions on caring for the land, is now in the middle of La Crosse at a wooded nature preserve near the end of Floral Lane. It will be there for you and everyone to use 24/7 from now until the first week of October, when it will be moved to New Amsterdam Grasslands.

We'll hold additional training sessions in October, but you can go ahead and get started as soon as you'd like. We're happy to support you and help people participate in any way we can—just contact Siena at [siena@mississippivalleyconservancy.org](mailto:siena@mississippivalleyconservancy.org)

All the details and FREE sign-up to get the lock combination are at:  
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