



**Annual Report 2016**

# The Farm

By Deneen Kickbusch

The Farm. That's what we called our 189-acre investment: 125 acres of gully-gashed woods, 64 acres of open, rolling cropland, rented out to grow corn and alfalfa. In the beginning the intention was to earn some extra income, camp a bit in summer, and to hunt deer each November. The Farm was to become an investment on several different levels.

We had rented the land for several years when the Conservation Reserve Program became available. Joining the CRP seemed a responsible investment and a step toward preservation. Today the land has been herbicide- and pesticide-free for nearly 30 years. We are grateful to the CRP for its part in our, now, totally organic acreage.

Along with the woods and fields, two ponds have been rebuilt over the years. They are another highlight of the Farm. Clear Lake and Green Pond we named them, tongue-in-cheek. On the pond situated mostly in the woods we have seen many pairs of mallards and wood ducks, safe from harm and paddling aimlessly on the quiet water. Other bird life abounds: the telltale racket of the pileated woodpecker, gobble of the turkeys, and the ever-present chick-a-dee-dee-dee-dee.

From our gate at the end of Shepard Lane, we cross a long, bumpy mile to the goat prairie on the point of land that looks out a distance to the Mississippi River and Iowa on the far bank. This goat prairie was our biggest surprise

of all on the Farm. Situated on a dry, rock outcropping, red cedar had encroached over the years, squeezing the prairie from all sides.

It was on this point that we had a memorable camping experience, a sleepless overnight with a whip-poor-will very near and loud, that sharp whistle going on and on and on and on. The next day as we left, we talked to our neighbor Mrs. Shepard, who was horrified we had slept on the ground because of the rattlesnakes! We had never thought of possible snakes and have still not seen one in all our years tramping that land.

And tramping that land is what Ken has done spring, summer and fall as he has repaired ponds, cut invasive prickly ash and honeysuckle, cleared downed trees from the edge of the woods all around, girdled dozens of cedars on the goat prairie to open it up for the bur oak to thrive and for the lead-plum, little bluestem, and columbine to burgeon. This recent fall, with Abbie Church's keen eye and helpful knowledge, we discovered October's Ladies Tresses Orchids, a rare prairie flower never before recorded for Crawford County either in the Wisconsin State Herbarium or the Wisconsin Natural Heritage Inventory.

Finally comes November and Ken is deer hunting with family and friends, arguably

the most important time of fun and hard work. A number of trophy deer heads hang on our walls along with many, many more antlers fixed on wooden plaques, all attesting to the superb deer habitat on the Farm. Did I mention the hundreds of delicious venison meals over the years?

From deer, coyotes, birds and orchids to deeply pitched ravines, striking rock outcroppings, giant oak and grassy meadows, the Farm has been an investment of a lifetime in beauty and quiet, an ecological masterpiece. With Ken's vision and determination, we have moved from the idea of the Farm solely as a personal, monetary investment to the end stage understanding of investment in the entirely different light of land preservation and ecological justice.

And now, thanks to the able guidance of the Mississippi Valley Conservancy, this land is an investment for everyone who follows, in perpetuity, now and forever preserved from a culture of overwrought development, clear cutting and row cropping that already has damaged so much of the striking valley of this, our greatest American river. And so Ken and I say, "This land is your land, this land is my land," and a conservation easement makes it so.

*And so Ken and I say, "This land is your land, this land is my land," and a conservation easement makes it so. Deneen Kickbusch said.*



# Creating opportunities with partners

One of our Mississippi Valley Conservancy missions is not just to preserve the land but to create opportunities for people to get out onto the land and experience it in all its diversity from prairie to forest, stream to marsh, hoping that from these introductions will come deep appreciation and fascination.

Our donors are not just preserving land, but are providing these opportunities for people to get a taste and develop an appetite for the deep experiences of "being there" and learning to love the land.

We have many partners in this effort: educators, health and wellness programs, hunting and fishing groups, and groups that have a mission of tearing down barriers for physically challenged people to get access to the land.

One partner, UW-La Crosse Professor Laurie Harmon, teaches a course on environmental ethics, outdoor recreation and natural resources, a gateway class for students who want to make careers of managing resources, enabling sustainable outdoor education, and teaching both the substance and the ethics of "being here" on the land.

A major portion of the course is devoted to first-hand experience of the land, using public spaces preserved forever by the efforts of

Mississippi Valley Conservancy and the assistance of members who know those lands intimately. Holland Sand Prairie State Natural Area, New Amsterdam Grasslands and other Conservancy properties become Harmon's classroom and are not just preserved landscapes but are also intensely used laboratories where scientists study prairie plants, land preservation, birds, bees and other pollinators.

Part of the students' learning experience is in the work of preservation, clearing brush, removing invasive species, and collecting seeds from which they get an introduction to how much work and vigilance is needed to sustain the sustainable recreation opportunities their careers may be built around.

A final requirement of the course is to engage in careful personal reflection about what each student learned from the land itself, apart from the more academic bookish learning.

Student, Aldon Kaye, reflected on his experience at the Holland Sand Prairie, writing:

*"Personally engaging in the service meant a lot to me. For once, it felt like I was actually making a change. All the times we*

*read about people making a change and telling yourself, "Hey, I want to do that" but I never actually find the time to get out and volunteer. Also, I cannot explain the feeling I experienced after seeing the faces of the volunteers that were guiding us throughout the process when we were finished. Although we were only there for a day, I felt like we did a great deal of work that would've taken them many days to complete. I found it so interesting on the amount of seeds we collected and how much money they were worth. At times during the lopping process, I caught myself mumbling under my breath; but at the end of the day and reflecting, I felt we did a great deal of service to the protected area. We often forget how much the land does for us, and we tend to abuse it, and seeing the MVC taking multiple actions to protect this land means so much."*

Kaye and his classmates collected prairie seed and cut and piled invasive buckthorn and honeysuckle at the Holland Sand Prairie on a Saturday work day in September. Professor Harmon and MVC are planning more outings for 2017—more opportunities for young men and women to have the experiences that so impressed Aldon.



Aldon Kaye (in white cap at right) listens with other members of the UW-L environmental ethics class to a briefing by Mississippi Valley Conservancy volunteers prior to a work day at the Holland Sand Prairie.  
Photo by Laurie Harmon



“Our family’s been in the valley for almost 200 years. If there’s one thing I could do to keep it like it always has been ... that’s something I can do.”



## Family farm heritage preserved

Reprinted with permission from the La Crosse Tribune

By Chris Hubbuch

COON VALLEY — Rod Ofte’s ancestors farmed this valley more than a decade before the Civil War. Now Ofte has signed an agreement ensuring his land remains a farm long after his descendants are gone.

The 48-year-old rancher is one of a half dozen southwest Wisconsin landowners who signed conservation easements in the final weeks of 2016, allowing the Mississippi Valley Conservancy to add nearly 1,000 acres of farm and bluffland in Crawford, Jackson and Vernon counties to its portfolio of more than 18,000 acres of protected lands.

MVC holds about 3,600 acres of public land, but the vast majority of protected acres in southwest Wisconsin overseen by the nonprofit land trust is privately held and protected through voluntary agreements such as the Ofte easement. Rod left the farm for the U.S. military academy at West Point. After service in the Army and later as an executive for the food giant Mars Inc., he returned to Wisconsin in 2007 and purchased 156 acres next to the family’s home farm and

began raising grass-fed beef using rotational grazing.

The farm also doubles as a retreat for writers, artists and anglers from across the Midwest who come to fish Spring Coulee Creek, a Class 1 trout stream that meanders through the pastures and which MVC Conservation Director Abbie Church calls a “poster child” for the compatibility of farming and habitat management.

Each spring the farm hosts students from Summit Elementary, where Ofte’s wife, Deb, teaches kindergarten. Kids help plant garden vegetables, learn about farm animals, wildlife and the critters that inhabit the stream.

The Oftes say they want to ensure their land remains pristine even after they’re gone. “Our family’s been in the valley for almost 200 years,” Ofte said. His great-great uncle settled Spring Coulee in 1848. “If there’s one thing I could do to keep it like it always has been ... that’s something I can do.”





He wasn't initially sold on the preservation idea.

Ofte said he first heard about the Mississippi Valley Conservancy in 2011 when he read a story about Ernest and Joseph Haugen, two aging bachelor farmers who put their 160-acre farm overlooking Coon Valley into a conservation easement.

Word spread through the coulee that it was a bad deal, that tree-huggers were buying up land and stopping people from farming.

Then a neighbor set him straight.

"He said no, they don't want you tilling up slopes that shouldn't be tilled," Ofte said. "He kind of walked me through it. He's also sharp as a pencil so he told me about the tax advantages."

There are some restrictions against clear cutting or unsustainable farming practices, but Ofte retains ownership of his land, which remains private.

"I think the biggest misconceptions are that because we're a conservation organization we're anti-farming," Church said. "And that is absolutely not the case. Agricultural use and conservation is compatible, hands down."

In fact, MVC has partnered with Ofte to promote rotational grazing, in which cattle spend a few days grazing in small pastures, moving on to the next patch before they mow the grass down to the roots. Pastures are given time to recover between each grazing, which makes for healthier grass, soil and cattle.

Church said rotational grazing is a good fit for landowners, especially because grass-fed beef sells for a premium.

And it provides bird habitat and keeps topsoil and nutrients in place, not in waterways. "The impact goes all the way down to the Gulf of Mexico," Church said.

# Glad there is a conservancy

"I'm a prairie nut," said Bob Piros in a telephone interview recently. "Maybe more than a fly fishing nut," he quickly added.

It was fly fishing that attracted him to the property on the North Fork of the Bad Axe River that he and his wife, Sherry, purchased 13 years ago. In 2016, they permanently protected the 58-acre property with a donated conservation easement through Mississippi Valley Conservancy.

They learned about MVC when they happened upon a screening of the *Mysteries of the Driftless* movie in Viroqua where they met Jim Theler who owns property downstream from theirs – a property also protected with an easement and part of the Conservancy's Bad Axe River Priority Area. They discovered a common interest in prairie restoration.

Bob and Sherry have 30 acres of land where they live in Ogle County, Ill., 25 of it in prairie.

Bob, 70, a retired science teacher, became interested in the Driftless Area at meetings of the Rock River Fly Casters where he heard people talking about buying property in the Viroqua area. The property they found included a small cabin on the ridge overlooking the river and the Runge Hollow Reservoir. They tore down the dilapidated cabin and, with help from relatives, built a new one – a primitive cabin sometimes described as "camping

with walls." That may be, but "it's wonderful for us," he said. Sherry doesn't fly fish, but she loves the solitude, the flowers, and the connection with family and friends at the cabin. Her brother bought 60 acres nearby on the ridge "and her son, my stepson, bought 90 acres, pretty much all contiguous."

Bob said his mission statement for the property is to restore the habitat to pre-settlement conditions and promote and protect an oak savannah habitat so favorable to wildlife including turkey, deer and other species – "an intact ecosystem."

And he is concerned about maintaining the water quality of the river. The property provides "crucial filtration" along the river, according to the MVC environmental assessment. The property also includes a Department of Natural Resources streambank easement for public fishing access to the Class II trout stream.

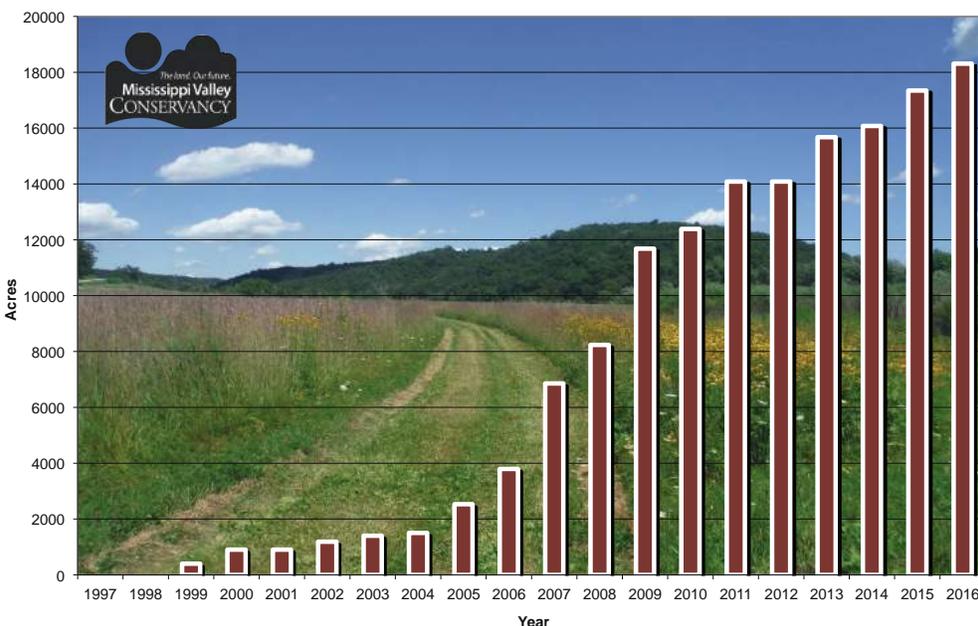
Sherry said that she simply loves the peace of the place and the wildlife – the trilliums and wild geranium in spring and the rose-breasted grosbeaks that come to their feeders. And she enjoys the ruggedness of the place. "And there are always places to explore."

She hopes that a hundred or more years from now there will still be the same places to explore. "That's why we protected it. I'm so glad there is a conservancy. I was glad to find something like that in Wisconsin."

**Sherry doesn't fly fish, but she loves the solitude, the flowers, and the connection with family and friends at the cabin.**



**Cumulative Total Acres Protected  
Mississippi Valley Conservancy**



The rising bars on this graph show the progress Mississippi Valley Conservancy has made in 19 years to protect important Wisconsin land. From 1999 when the first 402 acres of land was purchased, donated, and conserved under easements, to the end of 2016 when a grand total of 18,308 acres is now protected, forever. Your support has saved forests, prairies, farms and streams. Thank you!

# Fly like an Eagle

Each morning I leave my driveway and slowly make my way down a steep, winding, gravel road. At the bottom of the hill, I cross Crooked Creek. She sits perched high in the dead elm. I say good morning as I roll slowly across the cement spillway to the county highway. I know it's going to be a good day because my favorite eagle has greeted me on my way to the Mississippi Valley Conservancy office.

Some say when an eagle appears, you are on notice to be courageous and stretch your limits. Do not accept the status quo, but rather reach higher and become more than you believe you are capable of. This is how I feel about 2017 at Mississippi Valley Conservancy. We are entering our 20th year. It's time



to stretch our limits, leave the status quo behind and reach for the sky in land protection. Our 20th anniversary is a time to celebrate past accomplishments, but more importantly it's a time to reach new heights, explore new possibilities, and soar like an eagle.

Our board of directors, staff and volunteers are planning for a great year of celebrating the past and reaching for the stars. This month look for the 20th anniversary edition of *Conserved* magazine. We'll have a brand new website for you to stay up-to-date on our events, news, and the latest in land protection. On June 25th the inaugural Trail Trek Challenge will take place, a chance for you and your team to compete in a trail hiking event. And be prepared for a really BIG

announcement in 2017! I'm keeping that one a secret for now.

Thank you for making the past 19 years amazing. Together we can assure that eagles have a clear sky to soar in, a tall tree to nest in, and clean streams to fish in. Together we can reach new heights in land conservation for generations to come.

Together in conservation,

Carol Abrahamson  
Executive Director

*"We are entering our 20th year. It's time to stretch our limits, leave the status quo behind and reach for the sky in land protection."*



*Thank you!*

Your wonderful support makes everything we do possible. Let's celebrate the success of 2016.

**18,308 acres**  
*protected forever*

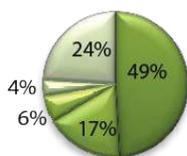
**1,031 acres** of forest, prairie, wetlands, rivers and farms were protected for birds, bees, butterflies, frogs, fish and fresh, local food.

**2,896 school children** learned about trees, flowers and plants that invade as well as the animals that live on the bluffs and in the valleys.

## Fiscal Year 15/16 Income

	Unrestricted
Contributions	\$305,742
Grants & Endowments	\$109,136
Special Events	\$36,800
Investment income	\$22,441
Released from restrictions	\$150,248
<b>Total Revenue</b>	<b>\$624,367</b>

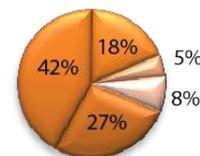
- Contributions
- Grants & Endowments
- Special Events
- Investment income



## Fiscal Year 15/16 Expenses

Land Management	\$129,120
Land Protection	\$201,089
Outreach & education	\$88,514
Management & general	\$23,114
Membership & Fundraising	\$36,671
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>\$478,508</b>

- Land Management
- Land Protection
- Outreach & education
- Management & general



Thanks to **YOU** amazing things are happening.

## Members of 2016

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Forrest Moe  
David and Sheila Momont  
Mike Mulroy

Every year, with your support, there are more trails for kids to roam, more farms for food to grow, more streams run with cool, clear water, more forests and prairies quietly host the birds, bees and wildlife of this unique and special place we call home.

James and Phylis Munsch  
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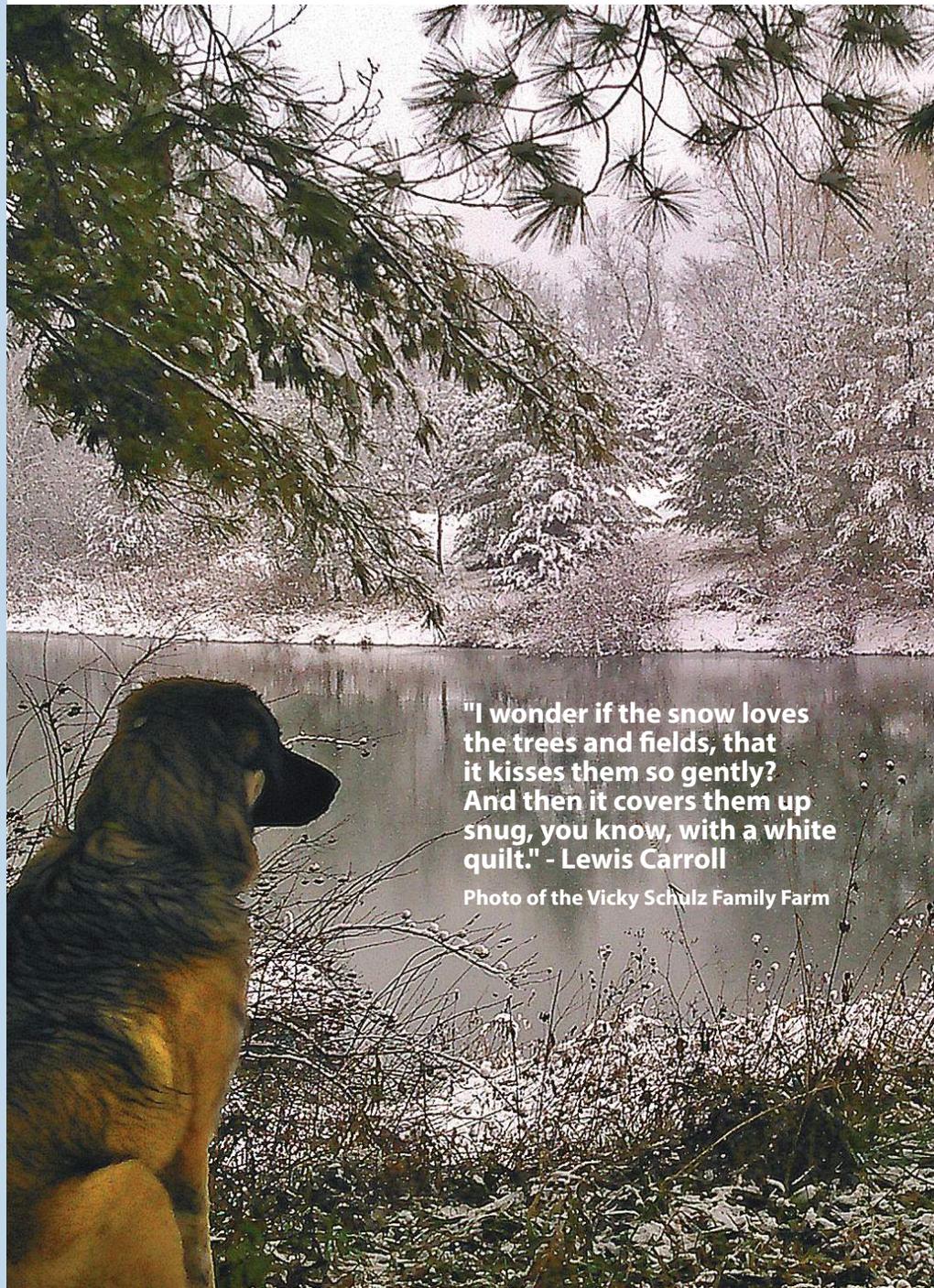


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