

The following feature article was written by a long standing member and friend of the League. The limitless number of hours, months and years expended in accomplishing the "impossible dream" can be appreciated by other dreamers. The reader should recognize and appreciate the dedication and perseverance that is demanded. Future chapters of this ongoing story will be printed at later dates.

Ed.

PRAIRIE CHICKEN

by

Paul Olson

There was a song some years ago that had a phrase "a many splendored thing". I think the song referred to "love" as the many splendored thing. This could be. I am less of an expert on love than I once imagined - but . . .

The Dane County Conservation League Prairie Chicken Foundation is, in truth, "a many splendored thing". This is true, as we used to say, "forward, backward and before breakfast" - a genuine truth.

So what is the Prairie Chicken Foundation and where does the Dane County Conservation League fit into the picture?

First of all, the Prairie Chicken Foundation (hereinafter referred to as PCF) is merely a committee of the Dane County Conservation League (hereinafter referred to as DCCL). This high sounding name "Foundation" is fancy language, maybe even a slight exaggeration, a habit picked up from long association with the DCCL "Godfather", Harold Starkweather.

The DCCL is the legal body which provides the tax umbrella, executes the leases, the gifts or the grants and holds title in fee simple to the lands. The PCF, acting in this framework, does the work.

What is the purpose of the PCF? It is simply to guarantee the continued existence of the Prairie Chicken as a native Wisconsin bird. It is pure and simple preservation--a single objective, a single purpose, a special interest.

Now there are people who take offense at special interests as something less than noble in what they argue is an increasingly complex world. I dispute that.

First of all, the world is not so damn complex--men, animals, plants come into being, live awhile and then, die to be recycled finally into the awesome conglomerate of nutrients and energy. True there are more gadgets which clutter the path of the living and even on occasion shortstop the continuance of life. But being terminated by a Buick LaSabre or a saber-tooth tiger is fundamentally the same thing--La fina, the end--no more of that.

Also, even a slight thought will reveal that life in its infinite wonder has cast upon the earth literally millions of species that have had their day and then disappeared. The blind alleys of history are fascinating, but demonstrate mostly that most alleys are blind and few have adequate turn arounds.

One of the new things on the earth is the concern men have for certain life forms. Sometimes these are plants and animals which provide food for a world with a runaway number of hungry bellies. This is basically agriculture and in our time and in our country a tremendous success, thank goodness.

Another new thing is the concern for species of little practical value. This may, indeed, be little more than a thirst for beauty which each of us defines differently--a rose rather than a rutabaga.

Or it can be an odd screwball devotion to preserving and continuing a life form found when we exploded on the continent and now threatened because its living space--habitat--is being consumed by our more practical pursuits. Such is Prairie Chicken preservation--of no practical purpose but very dear to the hearts and pocketbooks of many of us.

Leopold says everthing best--and this is an approximation--"that one species (man) should care for the future of another that cares nothing for him marks the difference between man and the beasts". This is ethics, also a new thing on the earth. Bridgeman puts it--"value, right and wrong and related ideas have relationship only to life. In the universe before life they had no existence."

Going back to special interests--a rifle is a more accurate weapon than a shotgun, provided it can be properly sighted, and single interests are easier to "sight in" than a whole complex of issues. I often think, with wonder, of the amazing integration of a centipede--all those legs moving with a single purpose.

Now I have approximately 1-1/2 legs and I find even this small number sometimes wayward. No human organization ever achieves the integrity of the centipede. Some leg or legs in the human organization always dominate and the pendulum of history swings to the left or the right or hangs twisting slowly in the breeze somewhere near center.

But special interests have rifle vision and usually single minded purpose--you zero in, you know what you intend to do and frequently you hit the target. When I go duck hunting I frequently hit the third duck in a flight. Adequate fire power and a plentitude of targets make such feats possible. But in conservation, and perhaps in other things, both fire power and plentitude of targets are inclined to be happy instances rather than regular happenings.

OK--enough of that. A quarter century of loving you guys in the DCCL prompted me to unburden my lofty, old age wisdom. Let's get back to the Prairie Chicken.

But first of all, a little more talk--talk this time about history. When the first settlers came to our beautiful Wisconsin, the chicken was found largely in the oak openings and prairies of the south. The north held few chickens because it held so many trees. Momentarily (for perhaps three centuries) trees had taken over from the grasslands (was it massive fire, climate change or whatever) and our bird was in the south.

Pioneer farming was not clear farming and the new poorly harvested crops and weeds and patches of undisturbed or little used grass favored the chicken

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and for a time there was abundance. Wildlife is basically a function of disturbance if the disturbance is not too total or too persistent. So we had chicken, lots of them, a bird of the grasslands in the south.

In the north, lumbering and fire went to work transforming the northern hardwoods and pineries into much open country. The chicken responded and after the fires calmed down a bit, chickens were found in every county of the state. This was the "golden age" of prairie chicken in Wisconsin--habitat was plentiful and birds were plentiful.

But the fires stopped and the openings were planted to pines and in the south farming grew efficient until finally the chicken was squeezed into only a few areas of habitat--chiefly the Buena Vista marsh in Portage county--and greatly reduced in numbers.

Enter the PCF. The vice was closing and an effort had to be made on the Buena Vista or the chicken would be only a memory.

That moment was the spring of 1958. Gene Roark, and I think Buzz Holland, took me up to the Hammerstrom's to see the "Booming." Like nearly everyone else, I came off the marsh "bug eyed". Here was something so grand, so exciting, I could put my restless energy to work. Furthermore, I had children--four of them--and oh, God, how a man wants to leave a heritage.

I went to a DCCL board meeting--I was real faithful in those days--and asked the boys for \$200 to start a "movement" to save the chicken. We could buy a piece of land (40 acres) for \$800, so \$200 made a down payment and I launched a newsletter as well to stir up interest.

The next decade was the time of great growth. Both Proxmire and Wiley helped us get IRS tax exemption. A radio show or two (Wilbur Stites' Wisconsin Out of Doors) and the newsletter and we accumulated enough in 1958 to pay off the \$800--we felt we had done well. Little did we dream that by 1976 we would have over 5000 acres and, at today's market, well over one million dollars of market value.

I also impressed Bill Seiker, a lawyer with remarkable devotion to "decent" causes, who works for us for nothing. In those years Bill examined abstracts and drew deeds for the PCF and more recently the Nature Conservancy on mostly little pieces--a 40, an 80, sometimes bigger, but at least hundreds of such jobs--and all because he is a "true believer". You don't find many Bill Seikers--were there a Supreme Court for life on earth, Bill would be its Chief Justice.

Of course there were many others. The Hammerstroms, researchers on the project; Os Mattson, game manager in the earlier years; and the man who supplied at least 90% of the muscle, the money, Bill Pugh of Racine.

The Conservation Department (DNR) cooperates fully. They lease our lands (99-year leases) and pay us \$1 per acre per year or the annual taxes, whichever is higher. Taxes now run over \$10,000 per year and the Department pays us and we pay the local community.

The Department also does the managing--food patches, mowing brush and burning--thus maintaining habitat and in many cases, creating new habitat.

How have the birds done? For a long time they were down each year, but now are rebounding. It looks that, despite annual fluctuations, there will always be Prairie Chicken in Wisconsin. This year broods are large and, despite the drought, food patches are maybe the best ever. So . . .

In recent years our land purchase activity has moved from Buena Vista to the north into Wood county, about 15 miles away to the towns of Sherry and Segal. Here there is a small but persistent flock of chicken. Birds from Sherry-Segal and Buena Vista interchange somewhat--banded birds have been sighted in both areas. All our eggs are no longer in a single basket.

On Sherry-Segal we do not lease, but give the lands outright to the Department under agreements similar to those on Buena Vista. We have purchased and given about 1000 acres in Sherry-Segal.

In the last two years we have supported research by Stevens Point University on an attempt to re-introduce Prairie Chicken into the Crex Meadows area in Burnett county. This has been a long time dream of many of us made possible two years ago by the first successful pen raising of chickens at the federal Jamestown, North Dakota (or is it South) complex.

We have helped to fund a researcher at Crex. Last year we received 250 young birds, held them over winter and released them in the spring. In two weeks every bird was dead--a disaster!

This year we did a better job of holding over, a better job of immediate predator suppression. At this point there are three known broods of chicken at Crex. There probably are a few more. IF--if we can make it through to next season with wild, locally hatched birds--maybe, just maybe, we have it started. How many times were pheasants introduced in America before they took?

Our close cooperators are the Society Tympanikus Cupida Pinnatus, largely Milwaukee based. The Society, although it started three or four years later, now has acquired more Buena Vista land than we have. Together we have about 11,000 acres. Neither organization--the Foundation or Society--make a move without consulting the other. And together, there is no question that the Wisconsin Prairie Chicken story is the most successful private effort with governmental cooperation in America.

This article grows long and perhaps wearisome, but those who condemn the hunting fraternity might note that none of us ever expects to shoot a prairie chicken again.

Why then this uncommon devotion to the preservation of a species? Could it be that deep within the dark soul of the "naked ape" the love lust is only a distillation of the blood lust? Man--his appetites, his devotions, his dreams, are strange, but sometimes "many splendored"!

We wish to thank the proprietors of A & B Heating and Cooling, Fahey True Value Hardware, Inc., Jerry's Midland Service, Main Tap, Organized Masonry and Roeber's Oregon Pharmacy for their donations of merchandise. Your contributions were awarded at the October 28th meeting of DCCL that was held near Oregon. The dollars generated using these gifts will help build a few more rods of fencing on the Sugar River project!