



STANLEY G. DEBOER

June 1963. Game manager Clarence Smith opens up shop.

Setting a course for conservation

The land was cut over, ditched and abandoned. Wallace Grange's hard work shaped a sprawling game farm on these sandy soils. His vision sprouts again in a new Outdoor Skills Center on the Sandhill Wildlife Demonstration Area.

Mary K. Judd and Richard P. Thiel

It's hard to imagine how many people gazed at these sprawling acres of sandy soil, marshes and scrubby trees and saw their dreams. But they did. And they do. And they will.

In the 1870s, wide-eyed immigrants came to Wood County to log these thin soils. The timber they cut became the general stores, liverys, granaries, farm houses, cow barns and mile upon mile of fence lines in central Wisconsin.

Then for 50 years pioneering families fought a losing battle with sterile soils. These cheap flat lands were a natural magnet for hundreds of would-be farmers who couldn't afford the pricey fertile prairies of Illinois, Indiana and Iowa. Working these fields was back-breaking work — ditching streams, draining soggy, peat soils, yanking stumps and plowing.

The farmers had grit; the land had even more. Weather was no help ei-



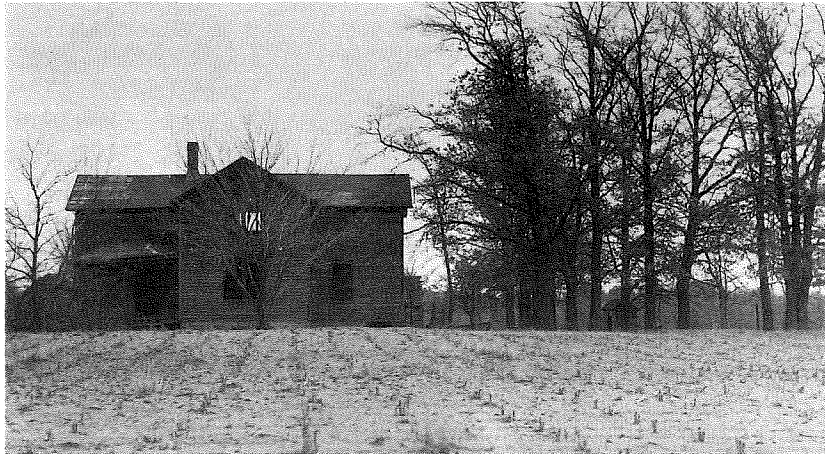
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Wallace Byron Grange in 1935. He had just finished law enforcement training with the Conservation Department.

ther. These lands were no stranger to prolonged droughts, killer summer frosts, early freezes, floods, insects and fire. Most of the rugged individuals who remained were wiped out when a massive wildfire swept through the central Wisconsin sand plains in the fall of 1930.

The tough land saw even tougher times. During the Great Depression, farm families had something to eat, but many couldn't scratch enough from these poor soils to cover their tax payments. They packed up their belongings, abandoned their farms, and returned to surrounding states for the support of friends and family. Their fields and dreams became statistics in the offices of the county treasurer and the foreclosure companies that hounded them.

From the ashes of this played-out land, another dreamer emerged. He was Wallace Byron Grange, and his vision for these failed lands was less corn and wheat, more conservation



(left) Deserted farmstead in Wood County, March 1934. Grange restored woodlands, wetlands and fields on acre upon acre of such lands.



(right) The Anderson Activity Center will house outdoor skills courses and workshops on the Sandhill property near Babcock, Wis.

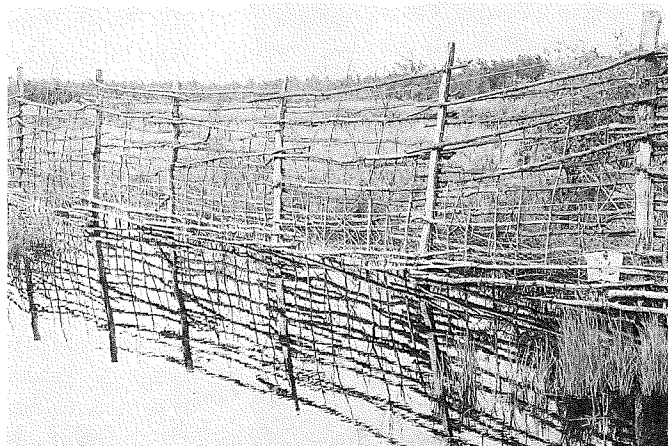
and whitetails.

Grange watched birds and reveled in wild things even before he could walk, so his mama said. His interest in wild things grew about the end of World War I when the family uprooted from Wheaton, Illinois and settled into a farmstead in the ragged cutover Northwoods outside of Ladysmith. Grange kept outdoor diaries and journals that would build both his powers of observation and his writing skills. His natural curiosity was cultivated by one of his science teachers, E.M. Dahlberg, a conservation pioneer, and his high school sweetheart, Hazel, whom he married. Wallace Grange worked in Wyoming for the Forest Service, for the U.S. Biological Survey in Florida, and studied at UW-Madison and the University of Michigan. At the tender age of 22, he was hired as Wisconsin's first superintendent of game.

Two years later, Grange was an administrator for the Biological Survey in Washington, D.C., but shortly tired of desk work. He and Hazel returned to Wisconsin in 1932, raised wild birds and mammals on a Door County farm and scraped together enough savings to purchase

more than 9,000 acres of tax-delinquent lands in southwestern Wood County by 1937. The Granges erected a deer-proof fence around the entire property and called the place Sandhill Game Farm for the cranes whose spectacular migration route passed through the region.

During the next 25 years, Wallace, Hazel and a host of helpers restored wetlands, plugged miles of drainage ditches, built dikes and flowages, and practiced the fledgling art of wildlife management. Surpluses of deer, grouse and waterfowl were sold to gourmet markets in Chicago and New



Spring 1942. Part of the seven-foot-high, deer-proof fence the Granges erected around 9,000 acres.

York. An extensive network of deer traps was maintained. Captured whitetails were shipped by rail to repopulate herds in southern states. Grouse were shipped to the northeastern states for restocking programs. The Granges carefully preserved their

breeding stock and funneled game farm profits back into their conservation programs.

To supplement their farm income, Wallace worked sporadically for his old employer, the Conservation Department. He conducted research on upland birds and waterfowl. He published his field notes and observations in both popular and professional journals. Grange also had a knack for telling good stories. For their 25th wedding anniversary, Wallace wrote a story for Hazel about two generations of snowshoe hares. She published the story as *Those of the Forest* in 1953. (See excerpts in our February 1991 issue.)

Nearing retirement in 1962, the Granges took steps to preserve the land they had restored. In selling the spread to the State of Wisconsin they stipulated that the property was to be operated as a demonstration area where wildlife management practices would be tested, proved and applied. The northern half of the land was to be maintained as a waterfowl refuge for at least 50 years, primarily to protect the sandhill cranes that congregate each fall. In the early thirties, when the Granges started buying property, only one pair of cranes was seen in the area. When they sold the game farm in 1962, about 350 cranes roosted each fall on the largest marsh. Last fall more than 2,000 cranes were counted on the marsh.

Today, the 14-square mile Sandhill Wildlife Demonstration Area still produces magnificent bucks, waterfowl

and grouse. A 300-acre enclosed oak savanna provides a home where bison roam. Research activities focus on a number of pressing wildlife management questions about the ecology of furbearers like muskrat and beaver, techniques for inventorying nongame species and the effects of hunting on game populations.

All hunts at Sandhill — whether deer, grouse, waterfowl or small game — are strictly limited, carefully regulated and monitored for research purposes.

For windshield conservationists, a two-hour, 14-mile auto tour takes visitors on a journey to dusty uplands and marshy lowlands alive with bird song and activity.

Throughout the seasons, Sandhill is enjoyable to explore on foot. The fall stage highlights sandhill cranes that form flocks before their southern

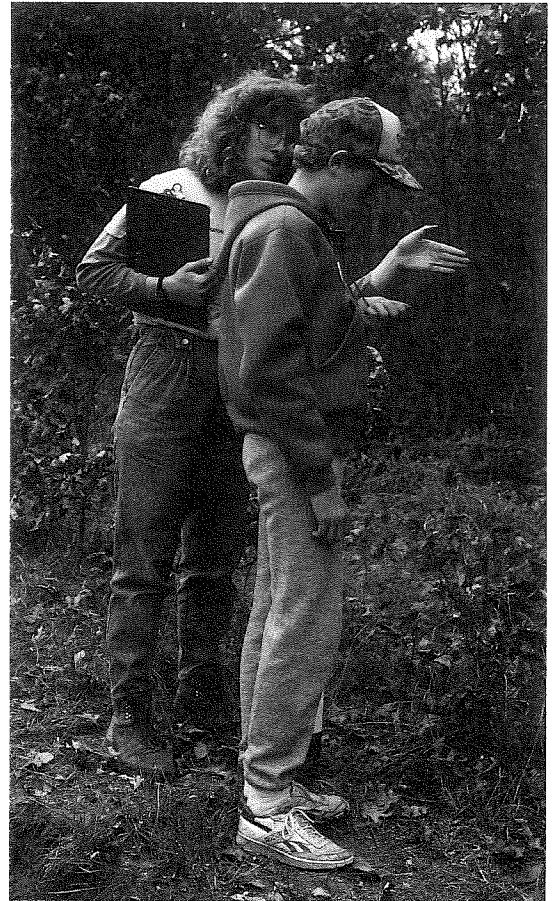
could learn skills to better appreciate the outdoors, wildlife and plantlife. A portion of the Sandhill property is a testing ground for the concept. Programs currently being developed will offer participants introductory skills to identify and track animals, watch wildlife, hunt safely, photograph wildlife, or learn skills like orienteering, camping and outdoor cooking.

The concept is to provide hands-on training in a enjoyable, safe and secure setting.

Why an Outdoor Skills Center? Society is changing. Single-parent families, a lack of country cousins and the expense of summer camp mean that more kids are growing up on manicured playgrounds than exploring woods, fields and ponds. Changing family structures means kids and adults have fewer uncles, grandparents and siblings to pass on camping, hunting and hiking traditions. The pilot wildlife program will give kids and adults the chance to learn outdoor skills that used to be learned from family and friends.

This fall, the welcome mat will be down and the doors flung open on the new Anderson Activity Center — a meeting place and classroom complete with bathrooms, kitchen and offices. Groups visiting Sandhill will come to the center for orientation, plan their day and prepare their meals.

Special workshops at the center will teach wildlife viewing and tracking. Several programs developed at Sandhill in recent years will be held in the comforts of the new center. A two-day Learn to Hunt Deer workshop for 12-15-year-olds and beginning adult hunters teaches basic hunting skills and culminates in a chaperoned deer hunt on the property. The International Crane Foundation co-sponsors a Morning on the Marsh program. Birders camp overnight on the rim of Gallegher Marsh, arise before dawn and are ushered into blinds in the



Orienteering lessons are part of the path to feeling at home in the outdoors.

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Robert Yachinich teaches his daughter Emily a bit about trapping during a workshop.

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migration. The deer rut, specialty hunts, wildlife tracking and winter skiing on 15 miles of trails liven up the crunchy and colder seasons. In spring, this land bustles with din of breeding songbirds and migrating waterfowl. Logging trails and dikes are fun to roam in the summer, rounding out the recreational year.

The Granges' vision for Sandhill keeps moving forward. In 1987, a small group of DNR wildlife managers saw the need for places and outreach centers where youth and adults

marsh to view the sunrise show of cranes, geese, ducks and marsh mammals.

Programs this fall and winter will teach waterfowl identification, wildlife tracking, orienteering, wildlife watching, hunting and trapping skills. With significant help from conservation groups and outdoor educators, future programs aim to continue the Granges' vision — restoring lands to attract wildlife, honing skills to feel at home in the outdoors, recognizing the wild features around us, and taking actions that conserve wild resources, wherever we live. □

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