

Dedication of the Gilliom-Cherp Nature Park

Saturday, August 15, 2009

This is the unlikely background story of the creation of the Gilliom-Cherp Nature Park. So much serendipity is involved; unusual and unplanned forces converged to result in today's special dedication. Here, then, is a brief summary of the 47 years during which the extended Cherp family owned this beautiful land on the Black Fork of the Mohican River near Ashland, Ohio.

In 1960, a man named Gregor Cherp bought this land at auction from the Jacob Kohler Estate. Now, why would a 60-year-old man buy a farm located some distance from the village of Bellville, where he lived? And who exactly *was* this Gregor Cherp? Turns out, he wasn't a farmer at all. But this land stirred something deep inside him.

Gregor was, in fact, the long-time editor and publisher of the BELLVILLE STAR, a local weekly newspaper. He also had a real estate license, owned and rented several houses in the area, and was a co-developer of Bellville's Bell Crest neighborhood. But long before his many years of civic leadership, Gregor had grown up on a farm near Ivanhoe, Minnesota. And his wife, Rella Jacobs Cherp, was also raised on a farm, near Green Camp, Ohio. So, given their farming childhoods, perhaps it wasn't that surprising when Gregor was moved to purchase the Kohler farm. Both he and

Rella shared a love and respect for the land with a capital L.

During most of the 15 years he owned this property, Gregor's only child, Bonnie Cherp Gilliom, and her husband, Gene, were living in San Francisco and then in Chicago. And they heard only bits and pieces of news about the farm in weekly phone calls from Bellville. What they did hear, however, made it abundantly clear that Gregor enjoyed the challenges, and reaped the satisfactions, of being a gentleman farmer.

By far the longest long-distance call Gregor ever made (it lasted 90 minutes or so) was his enthusiastic, rapid-fire description of the day the farm's gas well came in. The phone line fairly crackled with his enthusiasm. Gregor was a little less enthusiastic several other times, when he called to report that the cattle had jumped fences in the middle of the night and made their way down Rt. 603, before he rounded them up with the help of his farmhouse renter, Doug Shaskey.

Doug and Cindy Shaskey, who rented the farmhouse for more than 30 years, were creative and very handy characters with whom Gregor had a congenial relationship. After the Shaskeys moved out in 1992, their daughter Susie and her husband, John Long, moved in and renovated the place. In 1998, another relative, Mike Long, became the final renter. No wonder the property was known by locals as "the Shaskey place."

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In 1975, Rella and Bonnie inherited the farm from Gregor. By that time, Bonnie and Gene had moved to Columbus to teach at Ohio State, accompanied by their two children, Gregor and Julia. A few years later, Bonnie and Gene decided to buy Rella's half of the farm to share with the next Gilliom generation.

Although Bonnie and Gene were absentee owners, they developed a fondness and respect for the land that grew over the 32 years of their ownership. Perhaps their fondest family farm memories date back to summer weekends in the late 1970s. With the encouragement of a county agent, the family planted 5,000 white pine seedlings on the farm. Bonnie and Gene saw it as an opportunity to give their children, then in elementary school, a way to get closer to the land — and to get their suburban hands dirty in the soil. The kids bought into the adventure with enthusiasm, and with the aid of a few young friends, they helped lay out the planting scheme and put hundreds and hundreds of pines into the soil. Although Bonnie and Gene envisioned a sea of healthy white pines one day extending to the horizon, the farm's abundant floribunda roses had a different plan. Nearly all the white pines succumbed to the ravaging roses. But if you find an occasional white pine along the trails in the park today, chances are good it's a remnant of the Gilliom clan's tree-planting adventures.

Real farmers, of course, had better luck with some of the fields. For example, Mervin and Steve Esbenshade grew some beautiful crops on this land for 25 years. Large-tree timbering was done in 1990 and again 12 years later. John Joliff, Service Forester from the Ohio Division of Forestry, evaluated the land and wrote an extensive report on development as recently as 2001.

The Gillioms had no real intentions of selling the farm until 2006, when out of the blue came a telephone call from Tom Kruse to ask if they had heard of the Clean Ohio Grants or the Ashland County Park District — and whether they might be interested in selling and gifting back a small portion of the land. Bonnie claims Tom must have been very persuasive, because she immediately said, “We will think about it.”

Months later, serendipity *really* set in. Farmhouse renter Mike Long informed the Gillioms that he was getting married and would be moving out — and there were no more Shaskeys in line to move in. Then half of a huge tree blew down on the house. And finally, an assessor determined that the foundation of the house was dangerously damaged.

Suddenly, the idea of gifting/selling a small *portion* of the land grew to include all 176.5 acres. By this time, news of a pending sale hit the surrounding grapevine, and numerous callers expressed an interest in buying the property. But Robert DiSanto had visited the Gillioms in Columbus and proved himself to be as persuasive as Tom Kruse.

The die was cast. The farm would go in toto to the Ashland County Park District and would be named the Gilliom-Cherp Nature Park, which we celebrate today. Gregor Cherp, who was an avid rabbit and pheasant hunter, as well as a fisherman, must be looking down at his hobby farm and SMILING...with Rella beside him wearing her stunning pheasant feather hat!

The Gilliom family wishes to compliment the Ashland County Park District for its foresight in developing all of their parks in perpetuity, and hopes that coming generations of caretakers will be as hard working, thoughtful, and generous with their time. They are pleased and proud to have their name associated with the Park District and this beautiful land.

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