



Neil stands by a compass plant that will double in height by the time it blooms. Penstemon and pale purple coneflower bloom behind him.

MY CO-OP

# The Decision for Prairie

Text by Al Cornell; Photos by Al and Neil Bard

**T**wenty years ago, Dr. Neil and Mary Bard made a decision about what to do with 25 acres on their farm that borders County Highway A. Twenty years of challenge. Twenty years of enjoyment and adventure. It was a time for a decision, and there are no regrets.

As they contemplated the possibility of establishing prairie, Neil and Mary attended a Prairie Enthusiast meeting to acquire information on proceeding. As intended from the inception, over half of their arable land remains in agricultural production. A local farmer rotates corn, soybeans, and alfalfa on those contour strips.

Having arrived at the conclusion that establishing prairie on 25 acres would be an exciting and rewarding undertaking, they began making contacts that would help with the project. David Kopitzke was involved with prairie species. He directed them to the Prairie Nursery in Westfield and coached them to make sure they planted a significant variety of species.

Pheasants Forever in Sauk County had donated a special Truax drill to the Department of Natural resources that was designed to no-till plant those fluffy prairie grass and forb species. As a wildlife technician, I delivered the drill to the Bards, calibrated it for their particular seed mix, and worked with Neil and the tractor driver as the planting was accomplished. Even that day presented some hand-wringing challenges, but they were overridden by a sense that something special was happening.

The Black River Trail had crossed Bards' property as it traversed primarily the ridges from the Wisconsin River to Black River Falls. Initially it was a military trail, but soon



Left: Meadowlarks are among the grassland birds that utilize Bards' prairie.  
Right: A gray hairstreak butterfly feeds on ox-eye sunflower.

served as a route for settlers coming from Indiana and Ohio who traveled down the Ohio River to the Mississippi, up to the Wisconsin, and then up river to the trail head. If that old pump near a foundation at the edge of Bards' property could talk, it would tell of many weary travelers.

As was the case for all forested ridges in Richland County's hill country, the trees yielded slowly to axe and crosscut, resulting in fields and pasturelands and providing logs for buildings. Contour strips came in 1930 and a one-and-a-half acre tobacco field was maintained for years on the crest of the field. Ten years of no-till corn preceded the prairie planting and benefitted the prairie establishment by reducing weed seed.

Neil emphasized that once the planting was completed, the most difficult challenge was the wait. There was work to be done in the early years, but prairie plantings are not an instant field of flowers. The planting was mowed monthly, first at a height of six inches and later at a foot. The last complete mowing took place in the third year. Neil knows that by that point many impatient folks have given up, converted back to traditional ag practices, and declared the planting a failure.

Today, firebreaks/walking trails divide the prairie and one third of it is

burned each spring. The unburned areas assure the continued existence of habitat for butterflies and other insects that are an integral part of the prairie. Fire yields a great advantage to prairie species and is an essential tool for perpetuating that ecosystem. Some alien invasive species, like Canada goldenrod, wild parsnip, and lathco flat pea, require ongoing spot mowing, hand pulling, or spraying.

Neil pointed out that he and Mary couldn't do it by themselves. The specific advice and help needed at the onset yielded to the need for a perpetual burn crew. Prairie lovers, most of whom have a planting or remnant on their properties, work together each spring to conduct prescribed burns. Marty Grell and Greg Dettman bring the necessary burning

expertise to the field and direct the burns. Neil said, "Like a threshing crew, the whole burn crew gets together after burns for a big meal."

One of the early disappointments of a prairie planting may just be a discovery waiting to happen. Long after one supposes that some species didn't make it, a fun finding can occur. For the Bards, shooting star added its early blooms 10 years after it was planted. Queen-of-the-prairie stubbornly waited 15 years before adding its tall, dark pink flower heads to the prairie. Nodding onion was another late comer.

Just the other day, I read that five minutes in the outdoors is quite therapeutic. Outdoor time can quickly result in stress reduction as it provides good vibes. Perhaps the doctor knew that, and the prairie is the prescription. He says they spend time each day walking the trails to see what new species is emerging or blooming, what butterflies and birds are there, and to just enjoy the grandeur of beauty and diversity.

The tall-grass prairie ecosystem produced a vast area of fertile soil in the United States. Horses, oxen, and plows were gradually able to bust the sod, and the prairie yielded to farm fields. Today, less than 4 percent of that ecosystem remains.



Neil and Mary Bard made the right decision to establish prairie.

The diverse and fascinating plants of the prairie support a unique array of insects, birds, and mammals. Seasonally, in addition to watching the prairie grow and bloom, Neil and Mary see a variety of bees and butterflies, and train binoculars on various grassland birds.

When first crop hay was cut in early July, broods of birds fledged from those fields. As hay cuttings transitioned to a month earlier, bobolinks, meadowlarks, dickcissels, and other grassland species experienced major population declines. Neil mentioned that bobolinks are regular nesters in the prairie and ring-necked pheasants are frequently present, even through the winter. He said the pheasants are a payback to Pheasants Forever for use of the Truax prairie seed drill.

Now the Bards have to concern

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themselves with what will happen to this labor of love and provider of serenity. They know that a modern plow or herbicide could end the prairie in a matter of minutes. They are contemplating working with the Driftless Area Land Con-

servancy, of which Kopitzke is a board member, to establish a conservation easement that would protect the prairie into the future. Even a small piece of established prairie has significant value for the members of that diminished ecosystem.

Neil said he hopes people driving by experience respite as they pass this bit of change from the normal ridge usage. They can at least seasonally enjoy a field in bloom.

Some of the people who have worked on prescribed burns have contacted the Bards and come by to visit the prairie. Neil said that other people who are interested in establishing or maintaining prairie are welcome to arrange a time to come view and discuss nuances of prairie management. 



Left: Spiderwort blooms before the yellow flowers dominate the prairie. Below: By late summer, compass plants may reach over 10 feet tall, towering over the other plants.

Right: Neil with Rosa admires a late arrival but early spring bloomer. Shooting-star first appeared 10 years after it was planted.





## GRANDPA'S AUCTION

**After Grandpa Witt died, Pa was in charge of the estate. "First thing we've gotta do is hold an auction," he said.**

On a cold blustery day in April 1941, everyone gathered at the Witt Farm. Promptly at 10 a.m., the auctioneer, a plump middle-aged man wearing a cowboy hat, announced that the auction was beginning. A steel-wheeled wagon had been pushed in front of the pump house door. The wagon was piled high with forks, milk cans, hammers, saws, garden hoses, used water pipes, wrenches, buckets of bolts and nuts—stuff that accumulates on a farm. The auctioneer grabbed a shovel and began: "What am I offered for this good shovel? Who wants to start it off? Do I hear five dollars, anybody give me a five dollar bill for this good shovel?" He had a patter, a singsong way of stringing words together that made people listen, that sometimes excited people and made them bid higher than they intended.

"Anybody give me a dollar?" the auctioneer chanted. "Got a dollar, and now two. Who'll give me two, and three, and four?" The bidding picked up and then as rapidly stopped. Farmers knew the cost of a new shovel at the hardware store in Wild Rose.

"All done? I'm gonna sell it." Brief pause. "Sold to the fellow with the red cap; and mark it cheap." He wanted people to believe, no matter what they paid, that they got a bargain. Pa and I stood in the background, at the edge of the crowd, watching.

The auction continued, items large and small—a McCormick grain binder, a corn binder, chicken feeders, a hay loader and a side-delivery rake, a one-bottom plow and a two-row corn planter, a disc and a grain drill with grass seed attachment, a spike-tooth drag.

"Got a good team of horses here," the auctioneer intoned. His helper had harnessed them and driven them in front of the crowd. "We're selling them with the harnesses, so you get the whole package." The pair of gray horses fidgeted and tossed their heads in the air. They were not accustomed to crowds.

"Stand back," the auctioneer warned. "We'll drive them a little and show you that they're in good shape and got good feet. The helper drove the team toward the road and brought them back at a trot, yelling "Whoa!" when they were once more in front of the auctioneer.

"What am I bid for this team of good horses?" the auctioneer began.

Pa nudged me and whispered, "It's a willing team."

"What?" I whispered back.

"One horse is willing to pull and other is willing to let him."

"Oh," I said, smiling. I knew the buyer would find out soon enough what kind of team he had purchased.

Later in the afternoon, the auctioneer turned to the household goods, and when the sale was complete, Pa and I went into the house where Ma was sitting with Grandma at the kitchen table. Grandma was crying. I'd never seen her cry.



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To contact Jerry use: [jerryappsauthor@gmail.com](mailto:jerryappsauthor@gmail.com).  
Go to [jerryapps.com](http://jerryapps.com) for further information about Jerry's writing and television work.

**Shannon Clark, Manager/CEO**

1027 N. Jefferson St., P.O. Box 439, Richland Center, WI 53581

608-647-3173

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