



Photo by Ron Klataske

Dreams Becoming Reality:

AOK Expands Its Stewardship of Sanctuaries

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Sunny days and lots of conversation prevailed as Audubon of Kansas held open houses at wildlife-friendly farms in September and October. The open houses in Lincoln and Morris counties are part of AOK's evolving initiative to develop more partnerships with landowners and other donors that will allow for protection of land and provision of conservation stewardship in perpetuity.

The open houses were designed to acquaint people from various walks of life with AOK's goal of a robust sanctuary system and supportive endowment that will assure that lands donated to AOK or left to AOK as bequests are managed in perpetuity in accordance with the donors' wishes.

The emergence of a sanctuary program represents a serendipitous convergence of several personal visions. Some members of AOK had been interested in developing a sanctuary program for years, and AOK has for some time made it known that it would accept properties supported by monetary donations. Dreams began to mature into action when the late Connie Achterberg, a popular attorney in Salina, approached Ron Klataske, AOK executive director, after a presentation Ron had made in Salina. Connie Achterberg was seeking a permanent custodian for her childhood home—240 acres of farmland

in Lincoln County. A friendship flourished between Ron and Connie.

Like a lot of people, Connie did not want to see the trees, fields and wildlife she had grown to love since childhood dramatically altered by a future owner. Similar feelings of Harold and Lucille Hutton resulted in AOK's becoming the owner of the 5,000-acre Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary along the Niobrara River in Nebraska. AOK was the only organization that would make a pledge to the Huttons that their beloved ranch would not be sold, developed or otherwise changed in ways they would find unacceptable.

As Connie and Ron discussed plans to develop a sanctuary program, Margy Stewart, now chair of AOK's Board of Trustees, and I had independently communicated to Ron our interest in leaving our properties to AOK for permanent management upon the deaths of ourselves and our spouses. Margy and I did not know each other as we sat down next to one another at an AOK board of trustees meeting in the summer of 2016. Prior to the meeting Ron had been recruiting Margy and myself as AOK trustees.

After listening to the board discuss the potential for land

acquisitions, Margy and I almost instantly agreed that AOK had to think big, which included a program to raise funds for a sanctuary endowment fund. Connie Achterberg had been telling Ron the same thing, and Connie was backing up her idea with her pocketbook.

Margy was elected to the AOK Board of Trustees and in January 2017 she became board chair. I was subsequently asked to chair AOK's Sanctuary Committee and was elected to the board in June 2017. At the first Sanctuary Committee meeting, it was decided to host two open houses, one at Connie Achterberg's Lincoln County Farm and one at the farm my wife, Carolyn, and I own near the western edge of Morris County.

Several goals were expressed as the Sanctuary Committee planned the two open houses. Among the goals were to demonstrate that wildlife-friendly farms would be people friendly, to make landowners aware of AOK's existing sanctuaries and perhaps to stir interest in creation of future sanctuaries, making non-property owners aware of the effort in the hope they would donate money to assure management of existing and future sanctuaries in perpetuity, and demonstrating sound wildlife-friendly management. My wife, Carolyn (Kendall), grew up on part of our Morris County farm, and after we started dating in 1964, I quickly grew attached to land owned by her parents and her oldest brother. I have always had a soft spot for trees and as a child cried when my father pulled out some fruit trees that had been planted along the edge of one of our fields. We didn't have much in the way of special trees on our farm four miles north of Kanopolis, mostly unspectacular Osage orange, Siberian elm and hackberry. One of my earliest memories is of our family planting a shelterbelt, which as it grew attracted pheasants, quail and eventually such rarities as migrating Long-eared Owls. I learned to appreciate the value of trees for shade and cover as I roamed the nearby countryside with the family's English shepherd. I was entranced by the towering Bur Oaks I found along Clarks Creek. While dwarfed by redwoods we've seen in California, or an immense Cecropia we visited along the Amazon in Peru, they create a dramatic setting for a small stream on the western edge of the Flint Hills. Over time I became intimately involved with the massive oaks and other trees. On one occasion the involvement was more intimate than comfortable. Based on the growth rings of a windfall that came crashing down while a friend and I were sitting under it, some of the oaks on our property date back to the 1860s. Our suspicion is they sprouted shortly after trees in the area were clear-cut to support settlers moving west. They weren't big enough to be used as railroad ties as the Rock Island Railroad cut through

the area in the mid-1880s. Latimer, which is located 10 miles northeast of Herington, was a railroad stop where the trains took on wood or coal and water as they traveled back and forth.

Among the settlers who benefitted from the cutting of the trees originally on Clarks Creek were Carolyn's great-great grandfathers on her father's side. One great-great grandfather came from Kentucky in 1857 and got a job as a captain of a wagon train on the Santa Fe Trail. He spent the winters of 1858 and 1859 in the Stephen Atkinson Cabin. That cabin, which was on property adjacent to one of our two parcels (located two miles apart), is now preserved as a historical display in Council Grove. The other great-great grandfather brought his family to the area in 1867, after temporary residencies near Lawrence and then Skiddy, Kansas.

A lot has changed on our land since Carolyn's great-great grandfathers received some of our land as part of grants from Presidents Buchanan and Lincoln. Beaver, extirpated from the area in the early 1800s, now have dams along Clarks Creek. They sometimes cause crop damage and have killed large oaks, but they also benefit other wildlife by raising water levels. When I met Carolyn in 1964, deer (and ticks) were a rarity on our land. Turkeys hadn't been seen for decades before being reintroduced to the area in the early 1980s. Now they are everywhere. Bobcats roam the fields and wooded areas. Coyotes, no surprise, are abundant. More surprising has been a sighting of a grey fox. Bobwhite Quail, scarce just a few years ago because of drought and unknown factors that puzzled biologists, are thriving in and around our CRP and quail buffer strips. Recently a Pileated Woodpecker has become a semi-regular. Great Blue Herons have a heronry in a huge sycamore. None of those creatures could have survived or returned without wildlife-friendly habitat.

Over the past few years Carolyn and I began development of a nature trail on one of our two parcels. To some extent one doesn't appreciate the beauty of the woods until it is made more accessible through a trail. Interestingly, wildlife, particularly white-tailed deer and turkeys, also like to use the trail we have developed. What was obvious during the open house on our property is that people also enjoy easy access to natural areas. Nearly all of the thirty-three visitors to the open house at our farm walked a portion of our nature trail. As Margy Stewart notes: "Many families have few places to go where wildflowers and other native plants, birds and other wildlife can be seen and enjoyed. We plan to have a sanctuary system that extends across the state of Kansas."



Massive Bur Oak on Haden property. Photo by Ron Klataske

As Ron Klataske has said, “AOK is willing to forge agreements with the landowners to assure that any property donated or bequeathed is managed in accordance with their wishes. Over the long term, we would like to develop a system of sanctuaries that would accommodate diverse wildlife and also be available to the public for appropriate activities and available to universities and other entities for research on agriculture, ecology and habitat management. The Massachusetts Audubon Society, founded in 1896, accepted its first property in 1916 and now has a statewide network of fifty-six designated wildlife sanctuaries, additional protected lands and nature centers.”

Members of AOK’s Sanctuary Committee hope we are on our way to a vibrant sanctuary system. About thirty people attended each of the open houses held in September and October. Visitors had the opportunity to view pollinator plots, CRP plantings and Bullfoot Creek on the Achterberg property. On our property visitors could view CRP plantings, native prairie, a pasture with a good mix of grass and forbs, and a below-pond watering system designed to keep cattle and silt out of a two-acre pond. The aforementioned nature trail was the primary attraction on our property, while the pollinator plot sparked

the most interest at Connie Achterberg’s farm. Presentations on the local geology of the two sites by Rex Buchanan, director emeritus of the Kansas Geological Survey, also held visitors’ interest. Meals at both field days were donated by Feyh Farm Seed, Alma; Sharp Bros. Seed, Healy; and Star Seed, Osborne.

Since AOK’s sanctuary initiative was announced with a news release on August 25, another individual has come forward to advise AOK of his intention to develop an agreement with AOK for donation of his land.

A second individual has indicated he now sees AOK as a viable future option for his land. A lot of work and fundraising remains before AOK’s Sanctuary Program rivals that of the Massachusetts Audubon Society, but we hope that thinking big will have its rewards, and that in the future, wildlife- and people-friendly farms managed in perpetuity by Audubon of Kansas will be sprinkled throughout the Kansas landscape.