

This Is My Story

Since settlement with land being parceled, part of my identity has been 22-12-8, and it is shared with three adjacent parcels of land. Specifically I am the Southeast Quarter (SE 1/4) and the South Half (S 1/2) of the Northeast Quarter (NE 1/4) of **Section Twenty-two (22), Township Twelve (12) South, Range Eight (8) West of the Sixth (6th) Principal Meridian** in Lincoln County, Kansas. My new name is the **“CONNIE ACHTERBERG WILDLIFE FRIENDLY DEMONSTRATION FARM,”** which I like very much.

But I have been around forever and have seen some good and bad times even in the last century. The bad included the dirty 30s with the ceaseless dust and hordes of grasshoppers. I’ve never understood where the grasshoppers came from, but they came and they ate everything. It was the only time I ever saw my steward cry. In other times things were better. Connie

came along and she did as well as she knew how. She grew up on my creek banks, and provided many a meal for her parents from the fish in my creeks — the bullheads and sunfish — along with the lambs quarters on my banks. She and the neighbor boys had happy times building forts and such. Every kid should have land to explore, with streams and woods like mine. Later Connie left home for some period of time. She was in high school and graduated in Wyoming. After law school, she came back and lived closer; she came quite often to see me. She delighted to see the flocks of pheasants and coveys of quail that made my thickets their home during the 60s and 70s.

During 2012 she wanted to be sure that I was taken care of for the rest of “forever” and this has really made my life happy and exciting. It is nice to be cherished.

In 2013 I knew something was up when Ron Klataske, Executive Director of Audubon of Kansas, came up with Connie one June

If The Land Could Speak

If the land could speak what would it say? Would you listen to it? If only the land could speak, it might say you take from me but yet you never give back. If only the land could speak, it might say you walk on me but yet you don't really know that I'm the pathway (to)...existence...of human. If only the land could speak. The land is our history. The land was here before we were born and the land will be here when we are gone.

Thoughts paraphrased from Welley's oral poem, Vancouver Poetry Slam, view at **Welley – If the Land Could Speak — YouTube**

In reality the land can tell us a great deal: if previous stewards have retained native prairie and woodlands along the streams or plowed and bulldozed them all; if shelterbelts and hedgerows were planted and retained; if there was a homestead and remnants of a farmstead remind us of families who lived here.



Connie Achterberg stands next to the sanctuary sign designed and made by Mark Neubrand.

day. He walked from my southwest corner to the Bullfoot Bridge on the northern portion of the east side. Soon after that I learned that I had been deeded to Audubon of Kansas on November 26, 2013, subject to Connie's life estate.

Now it seems a lot of other people cherish me as well, and some want to help with stewardship.

Ron suggested early on that I should have my own committee, and then gave that committee a lengthy outline of possible improvements to be done relatively quickly, and others, which can be done in the future. The committee eagerly embraced the plan and pursued other possibilities as well. Marge Streckfus is my scribe. Steve Burr, whose early leadership in the efforts to educate on conservation in central Kansas, and whose own farm has been a prime example of the best in conservation practices, is our mentor. Ira Lee Barnard and Jeffery Kasoff are making a list of my plants. Bobby Hiebert and Mark Neubrand are marking a trail through the entire length of the property for guests to go through while “birding” or just viewing the beauty of my naturalness, if I may boast a bit! They will make a list of the birds seen living in my wildlife-friendly habitats and others migrating through during all seasons. Some birds come here every year from as far away as Central and South America; others come from northern Canada to spend the winter with resident birds.

Mark made the sign for the southeast corner of the property, and he and Bobby Hiebert erected it. Dan Baffa purchased two picnic tables for the overlook; Doug Rudick and Jeffrey helped assemble them on site.

Years ago Connie “saved” my hedgerow along a portion of my west side from destruction, a result of her stewardship. Unfortunately, many thousands of miles of Osage Orange hedgerows have been eliminated. She also “saved” close to 9 acres of native pasture from being plowed. She refers to it as pasture, but it hasn't had livestock since her parents left the farm; others refer to it as a prairie meadow. Until this past year it has been cut every year for hay. Going beyond protection of

just what was, she and the tenant farmer put in upland bird “buffers” along the hedgerow, along both sides of Horse Creek and most of Bullfoot Creek. After only a couple visits, Ron drew a master plan for additional “buffers,” and instantly calculated the acreage that would be encompassed. Connie has now gone to the Farm Service Agency to apply to have those potential buffer areas added in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Hurray!

I knew, of course, what the initials USDA stood for (the U.S. Department of Agriculture) and CRP, but then came many new initials, which neither Connie nor I had ever heard of. NRCS and EQIP came into our vocabulary, which we now have learned stand for the Natural Resources Conservation



Photos by Bobby Hiebert Jr. ©



In late September Bobby Hiebert Jr. and Mark Neubrand devoted three hours to birding on the Achterberg property and Bobby came back with a series of excellent photos, including these of a White-breasted Nuthatch, Blue-headed Vireo, Bell's Vireo and Carolina Wren. Lots of woodpeckers were present but wouldn't pose.

Likewise, three Prairie Falcons, observed when they arrived and again when they left, were elusive.



Service and Environmental Quality Incentive Program. As my long-term plan takes shape, NRCS staff have been consulted for recommendations for additional

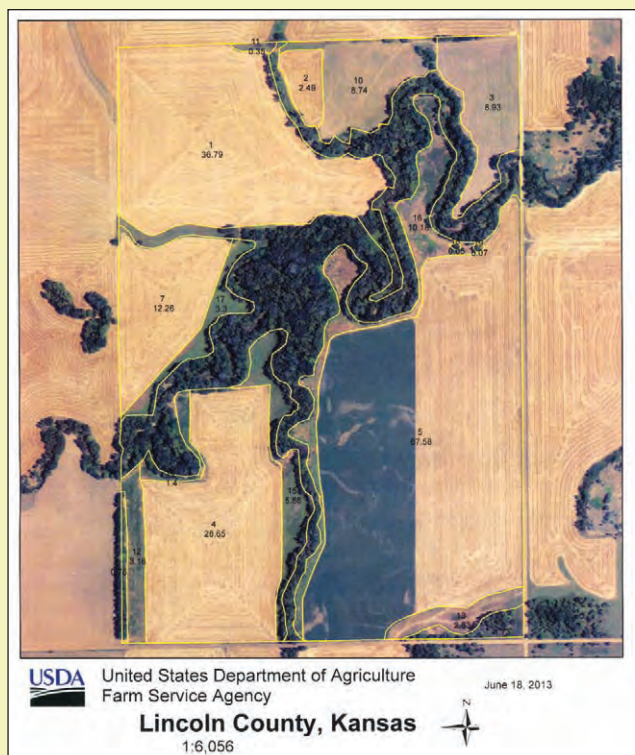
environmental enhancement improvements, specifically converting the brome grass waterways to native grasses and native forbs which will be much better for wildlife. It's great fun to have so much attention showered upon me.

I am neither a neglected farm, nor one where all traces of past family life or wildlife and wild places are being erased for intensive agriculture.

The hill on my southeast corner is being ridded of invasive Siberian Elm trees and they are being removed as it is being spruced up so visitors that come in the months ahead. They will have a place to walk, and to sit on a bench or picnic table while having an enhanced view of the fields and forests below. I've always enjoyed the sandstone outcrop that graces this hilltop.

Marilyn Helmer, who owns a business called “VILLAGE LINES” in Lincoln, Kansas, has organized tours of approximately 40 to 50 people each year for the past 14 years on alumni day, which usually falls in September or October. They visit various sites of note in Lincoln County. This past year she brought the group to look at me, and Connie visited with them when they arrived at the farm, and told them a small portion of my story. Dan Baffa, current president of the Smoky Hills Audubon Society and a member of my committee, followed with some of the beneficial aspects of the improvements on the farm, particularly the buffer areas. Mrs. Helmer has advised Connie that she is going to bring the group by with this year's tour again. That was particularly exciting to me.

On Monday, November the 10th, Ron and Connie met with NRCS biologists, Tyson Seirer and Allie Rath. They work for Pheasants Forever and NRCS. The morning was very pleasant and my wildlife came out from hiding and displayed themselves:



A USDA aerial photo of the Achterberg Farm delineating the various cultivated fields, the prairie meadow, and other features including woodlands along the streams, two grass waterways between fields, and the upland gamebird buffers along the riparian woodlands and hedgerow bordering the fields.



The large sandstone outcrop on the hill overlooking the farm is inviting, not only for their beauty for human enjoyment but also for the Mourning Doves that come to drink following rains.

Ron Klataske photos

forty-three Wild Turkeys, three White-tailed Deer, a Downy Woodpecker and several Meadowlarks. Many of my other birds were lying low in the afternoon because of the horrendous north winds.

At this point we are awaiting word from the NRCS biologists regarding additional conservation recommendations. These include the possibility of changing the two waterways in the fields that were long ago seeded to brome grass. The concept is to eliminate the brome grass (a major challenge) and reseed the corridors to native grasses and forbs to provide better wildlife habitat—protective cover and diverse sources of food. Connie and Ron are also proposing to plant a small field to native wildflowers for pollinators. I have been short on some forms of wildlife for the last several years; but during the recent milo harvest there were signs of recovery. Ron Buitenhoff, the farm tenant, saw pheasants and one covey of quail when he was harvesting the milo last fall. Hopefully this is a sign of a possible resurgence, at least on my 240 acres.

I am eager to start partnering with my big brother, who also belongs to Audubon of Kansas. He is the **Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary** along the Niobrara River in Rock County, Nebraska. It sounds like so many exciting things are going on up there at that sanctuary too.

Of course, my roots are here and I don't travel. But Connie was invited to journey to the Hutton Ranch, to see all of its features along the beautiful Niobrara River, a 76-mile stretch of which was designated as a National Scenic River by Congress in 1991. Our own Ron Klataske was instrumental, together with the landowners along the aforesaid stretch of the river and statewide conservationists, in securing designation as a protected river.

He formulated the plan to accomplish this and tailored draft legislation which they took to several members of the Nebraska Congressional delegation. It was presented as a "positive alternative" to the proposed Norden Dam and O'Neill Reclamation (diversion) Project. That half-billion dollar boondoggle would have dammed and diverted this spectacular river. The legislation enacted in May 1991 saved the river in a manner consistent with the pastoral and natural character of the land. Connie was privileged to have dinner at Sparks, Nebraska, with the two daughters of Franklin Egelhoff, who was one of the most committed landowners with whom Ron was privileged to work.

Connie loves Nebraska. Her parents were traveling, and so she was accidentally born in Grand Island rather than here at home. Connie loves that country, even though she recently experienced a strong storm there. When she went to visit the Hutton Ranch, the tornado alarms sounded in Grand Island when Ron was in the Piggly Wiggly getting groceries for the week to feed himself and Robert McElroy, one of the Audubon of Kansas Trustees. Bob was bringing his Tennessee walking horses up the next day. Ron came out to get Connie, and the store manager tried to put both of them in the freezers with the other customers. Fortunately the all-clear signal rang before they were sandwiched in the frozen-pizza freezer. Connie has claustrophobia and she might have been a problem for them!

Connie told me all about the wildlife on the ranch: the deer, the nesting Sandhill Cranes, the Black-tailed Prairie Dogs and many birds, including Bobolinks and Long-billed Curlews. I hope when all my improvements are finished, I might play host to an increasingly impressive array of wildlife species. If she had been up there during this past winter's snow storm she



Most cultivated fields no longer have annual forbs and grasses (“weeds”) which once provided brood cover with a diversity of insects for the nutritional needs of young quail chicks and other foraging birds. However, CRP field buffers can compensate to a considerable degree and provide many year-round habitat needs, especially when adjacent to grain fields. This excellent 2014 milo crop established by Ron Buttenhoff and the adjacent CRP buffer illustrate the potential. After additional buffers are planted in 2016, all cultivated fields on the Achterberg Farm will be nearly surrounded by upland bird field buffers and/or riparian buffers. The satisfaction of stewardship is even greater when Bobwhite Quail, Pheasants, Meadowlarks and Harris’s Sparrows are found feeding on waste grain in fields with adjacent escape cover throughout the winter.

would have told me that an Elk had come across the river and was on the wet meadows. At 5,000 acres, the Hutton Ranch is more than 20 times bigger than I – but I am okay with that. It will be wonderful to know that sanctuary will always be there, sharing our respective strengths, as part of the same system.

She also told me about the Harold and Lucille Hutton’s home, which has been beautifully appointed and refurbished as a guesthouse. And, now with the urging of the Nebraska members of that sanctuary’s committee, the AOK board has approved restoring the original Hutton homestead in a grove of stately bur oaks near the river where Harold was born.

I have a little sister, too, called the Mount Mitchell Heritage Prairie, which is located in the Flint Hills south of Wamego. I haven’t learned much about her yet, but I hope to do so soon. I have heard that she has some of the most wonderful natural prairie in Kansas and Audubon is dedicated to protecting it.

It is wonderful that we can always have this network of AOK sanctuaries between us to further our common goals. Maybe we can welcome additions from other parts of our states before too long. .

I mentioned earlier about reports of Nebraska storms, but I have my excitement too. Plentiful rains come around once every several years causing Horse Creek and Bullfoot Creek to overflow. I get a complete bath when the water rises above my furrows so my whole body is covered for about 24 hours. It brings new nutrients, and it feels wonderful even though it is always somewhat of a shock.

There have been reports of water conferences and development of a state water plan. I am greatly interested in that. I am hurting badly because most of the water that used to come down my creeks is no longer there. In late summer a bare trickle

flows, hardly enough for minnows and seldom sufficient in which my bullheads and sunfish can play. After the dry 30s when Connie was growing up, it was a fairly good stream all year long. I hope to hear someday that they will restore aquifers and reliable instream flows in central and western Kansas.

A love of streams and fishing was spawned here. *My Lady*, as I sometimes think of Connie, married a master fly-fisherman, the late C.L. Clark, and that further inspired her to become an equally avid angler—fly fishing for *trout* in Montana in her 80s!

Now that I have shared my story, and some of Connie’s, please visit me.

With love, 22-12-8



Pat Neustrom photo

“You will find angling to be like the virtue of humility, which has a calmness of spirit and a world of other blessings attending upon it.”
- *The Compleat Angler*, Izaak Walton (1593-1683)