

IRISH ANCESTORS INSTILL A LOVE OF THE LAND

Five generations of Irish lineage have honored the land since homesteading in Spring Lake Township in 1862. With that kind of history, you are bound to end up with some residual effect. John Hickey owns 150 acres of the original farm – with tillable, native prairie, wetland and woodland areas. A stroll around his property reminds John of this history every day, from the towering red pine trees his father planted near the home he shares with his wife, Michelle, to the golden hillsides that overlook the serene wetlands that benefit local waterfowl.

When John bought this land from his siblings 15 years ago, he saw the many possibilities ... but what also caught his eye were the warning signs for possible ravine and sediment problems. In spite of their beauty, the steep slopes and hillsides on the site also meant gullying. Soil from the crop fields during heavy rains began filling the wetland areas that eventually connect with the Credit River.

“My grandfather and father bought this land from their siblings and somehow I was compelled to follow their example,” Hickey noted. “My father was a farmer at heart, a gentleman farmer who studied animal husbandry at the University of Minnesota. Even though he ran a printing company in St. Paul, he tried to make a go on the land. He once started a dairy operation after being inspired on a trip to Ireland with the family, and even attempted to graze steers on the property. Neither enterprise lasted long, but his love of the land was apparent.” That’s probably why John also considers the possibilities for improvement on his land. He gets his sense of something much bigger than ownership, driven by determination, love of nature and curiosity.

“I’ve planted some alfalfa and am experimenting with planting flaxseed,” he noted. An owner of Smyth Companies, a family printing business since 1900, John admits he is not a farmer, but with the help of a friend has acquired the basic necessary equipment to hay and harvest whatever they plant. He used to rent out the farmable areas for corn and bean rotations before considering the idea of planting native prairie not only for its beauty but for its ability to keep hillsides intact.

About six years ago, John began noticing very steep hillsides were eroding next to wetlands, so he planted almost eight acres of native switchgrass filter strips along the wetlands.

While building his home on the property, he connected with Alyssa Alness, native prairie contacts with the Scott Soil and Water Conservation District in Jordan. They talked about converting some of the gullying and non-producing crop areas to native prairie back in 2013. Twenty-eight acres and three years later, the

prairie is flourishing with colorful, pollinator-attracting native grasses and wildflowers. Because of the hardiness and deep roots of these native plants, the maintenance is quite minimal. And the gullying is no longer occurring, because the soil underneath the plants is staying in place.

And numbers speak volumes! Soil loss before the prairie was almost 500 tons a year. After the prairie was planted, that number dropped to seven tons. With the prairie up and flourishing, John is now concentrating his efforts on his trees. “I love the woodlands and try to improve the woods by removing old trees and letting young native trees grow. Every day I’m on the property is really a joy because I can feel the connection with the past,” he said.

“This is my ‘LIFETIME Fitness’” John joked. “I call it chainsaw yoga,” even though Michelle worries when he heads out to the woods with chainsaw and clippers in hand. His goal is to eventually connect all woodland areas, taking down aging basswood to allow for the oak canopy to take hold once again. And when canvassing the forested areas, John keeps a lookout for the ever-invasive, troublesome buckthorn. He’s discovered that it grows heaviest next to dead elm trees, so that makes his work at eliminating it less random.

“I feel I make a difference by investing my time and energy in one square acre at a time and do what I can to improve it, whether it’s identifying and removing invasive species, e-engineering a particular woodland area, or just identifying cool new stuff that could be replanted elsewhere on the property,” he explained. “I’m trying to open up the canopy for elm, hackberry, oak, black cherry, sugar maple and cottonwoods growing thick in many areas.” John remembers planting many of the 20-year-old black walnut, red and white pine and white spruce with his siblings. Some of these trees now stand up to 40 feet tall ... and many of these trees were purchased as seedlings through the Scott SWCD’s program.

And it’s not just about the trees. It’s about the wildlife who find a welcoming habitat on the rolling acreage and eight wetlands, including deer, coyote, possum, raccoons, great horned owls, red tail hawks, eagles, turkey buzzards, muskrats, mink and pileated woodpeckers, to name a few. “It’s like a theater out there!”

Because protecting these animals and keeping their surroundings as natural as possible is important to him, John reached out to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and restored his first wetland back in 2002. Since that time, several other wetlands – some former cropland – have been injected with new life. That was 25 acres and more than 13 years ago.

Why is conservation so important to John? “I’ve always been interested in the unwritten plan nature seems to have,” he summed up. “I learned an appreciation for conservation as a Boy Scout and liked doing things that improved the environment. I learned that nature is incredibly reactive to even a

small amount of positive help from us because, over the long haul, nature can leverage our efforts a thousand-fold. I find it extremely rewarding. When you “dance with nature, we all win.” With nature as his partner, John hopes his ancestors would be pleased if they could see the homestead today.

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