

Conservation History

The impetus for the founding of the Johnson County Heritage Trust (now Bur Oak Land Trust) was, ironically, a lost opportunity. In late 1977 or early 1978, the owner of land on the south side of Hickory Hill Park and north of Rochester Avenue, along what is now an extension of 7th Ave., offered to sell it to the City as an addition to the Park. But the City could not meet the owner's deadline, and the land was sold to a developer. This tragic loss led Nancy Seiberling and other public-spirited people to realize that Iowa City needed a private, nonprofit organization that could act quickly to seize such opportunities and then hold land on its own or resell it to a public body. The answer was a land trust, something familiar to many people in the East and West but less known in the Midwest. There was then only one other land trust in Iowa, in the Dubuque area.

The earliest surviving minutes of the "Johnson County Heritage Trust" are from March 28, 1978. A board of Jean Lloyd-Jones, William Hines, David Ferree, Betsy Hillman, Russ Schmeiser, Donna Epley, Fremont Isaacs, and Richard Baker elected Hines President, Epley Vice President, Hillman Secretary and Schmeiser Treasurer. They say that "the majority of the meeting centered around discussion and revision of the bylaws." They also say that as a result of an earlier meeting, March 9, "we have 50 paid members for a total of \$810."

Enthusiasm was high. There was another board meeting April 12, and another general membership meeting April 27, at which four committees were formed: Membership-liaison, Donations, Land Search, and Public Relations. Incorporation followed on May 3, handled by Bill Meardon. The first purpose of the trust, as stated in the Articles of Incorporation, was to be the "preservation of natural resources of Johnson Co., Iowa and surrounding area, including, but not limited to, water resources, woodland and open spaces, and the plant and animal life therein and the preservation of unique historic and scenic sites." Other purposes were scientific study; public education; and property acquisition, use, or transfer "to carry out such purposes."

Board meetings in June, September, and November 1978 took up the printing of brochures, appearances on radio shows, and possible acquisitions. Places listed were a riverfront tract north of I-80, Turkey Creek, the Rotary Camp, Lover's Leap, Brown's Woods, Ryerson Timber, Douglas Woods, and Elmira or Gardiner's Woods.

The next surviving minutes are of a board meeting January 9, 1980. Discussion was of a "Turkey Creek Easement" and "Ryerson Timber." There was also talk "of linking up with other groups such as Nature Conservancy, Johnson Co. Conser. Bd or the new State land preservation group appointed by Governor Ray." The last was to become the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation. Its first Director, Gerald Schnef, asked Jean Lloyd-Jones for copies of our by-laws and articles of incorporation.

On Nov. 6, 1980 at "the Story Hour Room" of the I.C. Public Library, the general membership reviewed acquisition of the Turkey Creek Nature Area, and the Board unanimously accepted the donation of it from the owners (the Gelmans, Howes, Lasanskys, and John Greenleaf and Barbara Greenleaf Buckley). At the same meeting, Cathy Johnson "explained her attempts to preserve the Rock Island RR Depot." Fortunately, the Depot was later preserved by private individuals. But preservation of buildings, although allowed for in the Articles of Incorporation, was not to become a JCHT interest.

So nearly three years after its initial organization, the JCHT acquired its first property, the beautiful 105 acres of woods, bluffs, and former pasture along Turkey Creek south of Sugar Bottom Road. Dedication of the property, with a sign honoring the donors, was planned for June 27th, 1981, liability insurance was purchased, and work-days were proposed. Management of Turkey Creek became a major concern of the JCHT.

For the annual meeting of June 8, 1983, Dick Baker invited Paul Christianson of Cornell College to give a slide presentation on prairies, and later that evening members voted to authorize up to \$750 for the establishment of 5 acres of prairie on the pasture land. This was the beginning of the Trust's interest in prairie preservation and reconstruction. Minutes from following years mention efforts to control multiflora rose (including the hiring of students in the Mayor's Youth Program to dig it up), trying to keep out stray cattle, controlled burns, and additional prairie planting, sometimes with money from Project Green. Another item mentioned in 1987 was that the Army Corps of Engineers paid the Trust \$3500 for a flood easement. That was our first major cash inflow.

But the Trust also continued to try to acquire and protect woodland. In 1981 Bill Meardon told the Board that he knew of property east of East Amana called Hanging Rock Woods. Eventually a group led by Dr. Fred Stamler, who had owned and managed this 212-acre forested tract for 30 years, arranged for its transfer to the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. Ryerson Timber / Woods, the 33 acres south of the Fair Grounds, remained on the JCHT agenda until 1986, when President Hines announced that it had been transferred to the City. Also in 1986, Dick Baker announced that he had received a call from an attorney about the possible donation to the Trust of 20 acres between West Branch and Iowa City. At a special meeting November 17, 1986, the Trust formally accepted that donation – which we now know as Hora Woods, for its donor, Mabel Hora.

1986 also saw the first release of the JCHT newsletter, which Connie Mutel was to edit for many years. Previously, information about the Trust was disseminated only by mailing out the minutes of each annual meeting. But the Trust now had more to report. Land conservation was becoming a nation-wide issue, and the creation of the Newsletter was intended to reach a larger audience and expand our influence. Two years before, Jean Lloyd-Jones had said in her "Legislative Report," a feature then of annual meetings, that the Governor had just signed a bill allowing private, non-profit organizations to hold conservation easements, which previously could only be held by governmental bodies. She also reported that the State was expanding the "Chickadee Checkoff" and improving non-game conservation efforts.

By 1988, our tenth anniversary, membership was at 45, and the newsletter reported that Edwin B. Green, the former managing editor of the Press-Citizen, had bequeathed the Trust \$5,000, approximately doubling the JCHT bank balance. At that year's meeting, Connie Mutel proposed that JCHT give out an annual Conservation Award, saying it would both recognize the winner's service and increase recognition of the Trust. (See separate list of the winners and their achievements.)

A sign of our growing community presence came in 1992 with the offer to the JCHT of 13 acres of oak-hickory forest that had been purchased by seventeen home-owners in the Ridge Road area to protect them from development. The home-owners insisted that they also did not want these woods and ravine "to be a formal park," as Dr. Isacson (one of the neighbors) said, but to remain in their "natural state." We accommodated their wish and also changed our by-laws to make sure the land remained that way even if the JCHT were dissolved. In our files is a moving letter from Richard Bovbjerg, one of the

neighbors, describing the Ridge Road Preserve (or Shimek Ravine, as we routinely call it) as it then was – the ravine, woods, flowers, birds, and animals.

The Ridge Road Preserve represented an evolution in the function of the Trust as an instrument that could not only protect land but also protect the ambiance of a surrounding neighborhood that depended on that land for its privacy, quiet, and natural beauty.

Another function of the Trust was as a forum for people to come with news of land anywhere in our area that was of special interest. In 1993 Aaron Basten of Solon reported on the unique natural features of land on the Ciha farm near Sutliff, where he and Paul Christiansen had identified a sedge bog and 192 different plant species. The Trust voted to pay Aaron and Paul \$200 towards the rental of the property, so that they could continue to study it. Eventually they identified over 250 plants there.

Our function as a forum had begun with the talks at the annual meetings. In 1985 Wendell Simonson gave two slide presentations, “The Story of Williams Prairie” and “Requiem for a Railroad.” In 1987 Jean Prior talked about the State Preserves. In 1988 Bill French spoke on the Muscatine Prairie Endowment. In 1990 President Seiberling reported on the new Natural Areas Survey (led by Steve Hendrix) that was being funded by the County Conservation Board and the replacement of the County Weed Commissioner by a new position, Roadside Vegetation Manager (to be filled by Russ Bennett). The JCHT has strongly supported the collecting of more information about our local land and landscape. We can protect it only if we know about it. In 1995 we became more involved in State-wide conservation efforts, when we joined the new Iowa Environmental Council.

By 1996, as a result of these increasing activities, President Seiberling and others saw a need to expand the Board of Directors. In its first eighteen years there had been only three different Presidents (Hines, Baker, and Seiberling) and little change in Board composition. The Board voted to increase its size from 9 to 15 members and to amend the By-Laws so as to limit members to only two consecutive terms of three years each. In 1997 Dick Sjolund became the new President, with Sam Fahr re-elected Vice President and Russ Schmeiser continuing as Secretary and Treasurer.

A different expansion of the Trust came in 1998 with the donation by David and Kathie Belgum of their 40 acres of land along Dirty Face Creek west of Hills. This former cropland and pasture, with a small garden, orchard, and stable was not woodland or prairie. On the other hand, the Belgums wanted it preserved for educational and recreational purposes, and it had the potential for both. Professor Steve Heard soon conducted pollination experiments there, and Hills elementary school was interested in the land as an outdoor classroom. The Belgums retained the right to use the garden and orchard, and in 2001 the Trust put 13 acres into the Conservation Reserve Program, for which we are receiving \$1400 per year in rent for 15 years. We have also participated in a Johnson Co. Soil and Water Conservation District plan to reduce flooding and pollution in Dirty Face Creek. In the summer of 2002, Dick Baker led a group in monitoring the water there and in Turkey Creek.

But we saw that management of Belgum Grove would present new challenges to the Trust. Moreover, Johnson Co was growing so fast that there were additional roles for the Trust. So in 1999 President Mary Neuhauser headed a Planning Committee that met seven times that autumn and also heard from other private and public conservation groups. Its recommendations, approved by the Board in February 2000 and later by the general membership, included:

- joining the national Land Trust Alliance;
- doing more to identify land worthy of protection and then working with land owners and other groups to do so, by acquisition or holding of conservation easements;
- developing management plans for all our properties;
- developing funding strategies;
- and expanding our educational activities via more newsletters, a new brochure, and participation in more public events and activities.

Since then these recommendations have guided the Board. In 2003 Judith Klink, David Curry, and Carol Spaziani developed a new brochure. Terry Dahms developed our first website. And the four management committees, chaired by Dick Baker (Turkey Creek), Alan Nagel (Hora Woods), Wayne Petersen (Belgum Grove), and David Curry (Shimek Ravine), presented long-range funding needs for each property. At the same time, negotiations with Dick Schwab began for a bargain sale to the Trust of 40 acres of his “Natural Woodlands” property in the County’s North Corridor and the Trust’s taking of conservation easements on 75 more acres. These 40 acres, now called Big Grove, were acquired in the summer of 2004.

Thus the JCHT currently owns five properties, totaling 228 acres, and has the responsibility of monitoring 75 acres. Providing for the management of this land and the building of a reserve fund for future acquisition is the purpose of the “Watershed Moment” campaign to raise \$400,000. The new strategic plan, which was developed in the Fall of 2004, outlines the policies which will guide the Trust in this management, acquisition, and growth.

The Johnson County Heritage Trust has grown a lot in 25 years, perhaps not as much as we would like, but solidly. Although begun in reaction to a lost opportunity, it has constantly tried to be more proactive – to look ahead and work with change, so that change can make us better stewards of our land and natural heritage. This is not always possible. Surprises happen, for better and for worse. But as we grow in size and experience, we become better prepared to anticipate opportunities and to seize them when they come. Today, as in its beginnings, the Trust is a meeting place for people with diverse skills – legal, financial, scientific, and custodial – dedicated to the common goal of land preservation. The great strength of Johnson County is the talent and expertise of its many different citizens. The Johnson County Heritage Trust has been a very effective means by which people with these many skills can work together in protecting our land, with its glorious woodlands, prairies, creeks, and rivers.

Robert F. Sayre

JCHT President, 2000-04