

Recollections of the Frederick Family: Conserving the Springs

Friends of Pheasant Branch
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By Shaili Pfeiffer, Friends of Pheasant Branch

This past spring on the Pheasant Branch Conservancy field trip I led, a participant asked how the County property of the Pheasant Branch Conservancy came to be public lands. I did not know the answer to the question, but, lucky for all of us, Maureen Minnick was along on the hike. Her family sold the land to the County. She recounted how, after her grandparents passed away, the family decided to sell the land to the County to preserve it as open space, rather than sell it for development. You could see the delight in Maureen's eyes at being back on her grandparent's land, remembering summer visits to the farm and springs, and treasuring the open space as housing developments continue to spring up around the Conservancy. After the hike, I asked Maureen if she might do an interview for the Friends of Pheasant Branch newsletter, to share her stories and memories of the land as a working farm. She offered instead to ask her father, who grew up on the Frederick farm, if he would be willing to be interviewed.

So on an unusually cold and rainy August Saturday, I met with Maureen Minnick and her father, Jim Frederick, at Maureen's house near the Pheasant Branch Conservancy to hear their stories. Jim's maternal grandfather bought the farm in the late 1800's. Previous to the purchase, the land had been part of the Acker farm that currently abuts the Pheasant Branch Conservancy to the north. His grandfather built the house while the family, with eight children, lived in the horse barn loft. Jim and Maureen spoke fondly of the house, recounting how the master bedroom had cedar closets with glass doors and noting that Jim was born in the house. Jim explained that the eaves troughs ran into a cistern in the basement. One of his jobs as a boy was to pump the water from the basement to the attic from which the water ran through the house for washing and bathing. Drinking water was pumped from a well near the house. Prior to 1946, the house and barn were lit by carbide lights.

The Frederick's farm had a dairy herd of about twenty cattle that grazed on the hill. Hay, corn, and other grains were raised on the fields below the hill. Jim commented on the restoration on the hill and how the open character is much more similar to

... See *Frederick's Farm*, p. 8



Views of Pheasant Branch Conservancy when it was the Frederick's Farm:

Note the hill, managed by grazing livestock (top,) the old family farm (center,) and the long-running farm truck (bottom.) Thanks to the Fredericks for providing these historic images of the farm in 1982.

Frederick's Farm History Continued from page 7...

when he was growing up. Maureen remembered how the hill was a favorite spot for summer picnics.

By the springs, a big drinking mug was kept in the crook of the four trunks of the nearby oak.

Jim remembers that the spring water was the best tasting water around. He also noted that the spring runs faster now than they did when he was a child. Watercress grew thick in the springs and Jim's father picked and sold it to a grocery. Once, Maureen's brother got stuck in the spring, mis-stepping into a boil. When Jim parent's stopped farming the land, they rented it to the Ackers for grazing cattle, but, to protect the springs, the cattle were fenced out. Maureen also remembers one of her aunts recounting that Indians would come and camp at the springs occasionally.

The family used the marsh for haying, duck hunting and trapping. Pheasants were abundant; mallards and pintails gathered in the springs. Muskrats and mink were trapped and sold to fur buyers for coats. Other animals common in the marsh and surrounding area were fox, coyote, and killdeer, but in the 1930's and 40's there were hardly any deer or sandhill cranes. (Both of these animals had been hunted to very low numbers in Wisconsin.)

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Toward the end of my meeting with Jim and Maureen, the conversation turned back to conservation. Maureen remember her grandfather keeping some land in "soil bank" in which the land wasn't cultivated or grazed in exchange for government payments from the Soil Conservation Service. Jim talked of learning about contour planting in his high school agriculture class, with hands-on practice laying out the strips at a farm on the south side of Middleton owned by a Dr. Stricker. Jim also commented on how, even in the 1940's, there were always developers coming by asking to buy land on the hill for houses. Our conversation drew to a close and I reflected how much richer I was for hearing stories of the land, and

how much richer we all are for one family's decision to preserve a piece of land for the public now and into the future.

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