

SUCCESSFUL, AWARD-WINNING FARM FAMILY MARCHES TO THE BEAT OF A DIFFERENT DRUMMER

Conservation farmers typically say they want to leave the land as good as it was when they became responsible for it. Lyle and Garnet Perman say they want to restore their land to its original condition, before it was “subdued” by the plow and barbed wire. “What will it take to restore what was once here?” they ask. In this they are inspired by the writings of Aldo Leopold, the conservationist of the early 20th century, who in *A Sand County Almanac* wrote, “We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.” (xvii) “Our goal,” the Permans say, “is to convert solar energy into products which can be consumed by humans, while making a positive impact in our ecosystem.”

Since “what was once here” at their north central South Dakota farm was native prairie, it is no surprise that the primary “product” of their 7500 acre ranch is beef. They also raise commodity crops like corn and wheat and soybeans on their farm, recognizing that these monoculture crops are temporary, not sustainable. But that’s not all they “produce” on their ranch. They seek to utilize all the native plants and animals of the prairie ecology, from what we call weeds to insect communities, birds and mammals, employing biological controls wherever possible. They “market” wildlife on their ranch, running a bread and breakfast hunting operation every fall, primarily for pheasants. They “market” the cultural resources of their ranch with the development of a 5 mile hike that visits Native American teepee rings, highlights prairie life on the 100th meridian, visits an 1889 cedar homestead cabin, and notes the impact of the human presence on the land. Now, for the third year they are hosting student interns, making their ranch a living experimental station on land, ecology and human community.

They also have a human “product”—their son Luke’s presence on the farm, and the transitioning of the ranch to Luke’s young family, which will be the 5th generation on that land. Luke and Naomi Perman moved back to the ranch after graduating from SDSU and their marriage in 2007. The Permans have leased the land to Luke and Naomi, and now about 60 years old, they have turned the day-to-day management decision making over to the younger generation, though all four adults have an equal voice in the greater vision and mission of the ranch, as Garnet emphasized. Luke and Naomi are the parents of two sets of twins, three boys and one girl, Ella and Isaac, 4, and Micah and Noah, 4 months, (Marian Gering of Freeman is the proud grandmother), so there’s the prospect of adding a 6th generation to the ranch’s life.

At their Friday evening presentation in the Freeman Community Center, Lyle and Garnet described a number of the conservation practices they have initiated since the 1980s, when they began thinking holistically about their Rock Hills Ranch at Lowry, South Dakota, in an effort to make it a drought proof ranch. They seek to reduce the carbon footprint on their ranch. Hay is fed to livestock in the fields where it is produced, so there is no expenditure of energy in moving the hay or hauling out manure. They rotate their herds 100 times a year, grazing them with the help of polywire and moving them every 5-7 days. They seek to retain all the water that comes to them (average of 17 inches a year) on their land, and are rejuvenating natural springs on their land. They are returning cultivated land to native prairie grasses, though the 15 or so species they plant fall far short of the 100 plus species of grasses and plants found in native prairie. They seek to plant cover crops on the cultivated land on which monoculture crops are grown.

Perman has recently prepared a talk on water infiltration, after observing the results of rainfall simulator tests on different uses of the land. It is clear to him that no use of land can match native prairie in water infiltration, saying “tilling the land negatively impacts water

infiltration.” He acknowledged this is a challenging conclusion in a time when more land is still being brought under tillage in conventional agriculture.

The Permians were nominated to receive the 2014 Leopold Conservation Award by the South Dakota Grassland Association, and were granted that award by Governor Dennis Daugaard last spring (see May 14, 2014 *Courier*). About the same time, they were nominated to receive the Environmental Stewardship Award by the South Dakota Cattleman’s Association, whose national organization is one of the sponsors of this award. After winning the Region VII award, they also won the national award at a ceremony in San Antonio, Texas, earlier this month. There is a “price” of such awards. Garnet has counted over 500 visitors to their ranch in the past year, many of whom were guests at her table!

Asked what we might do locally to promote land stewardship, the Permians replied that those engaging in such practices need to be willing to tell their story and to open their operation as a place of study. Lyle does this through his speaking, and Garnet does it through her writing. Garnet, a 1972 Freeman High School graduation (daughter of the late Earl and Marian Gering) with a biology degree from SDSU, writes a regular column in the South Dakota Grasslands Association publication. Garnet testified to the addictive nature of holistic agricultural practices, and both Lyle and Garnet emphasized the importance of life-long research and learning and experimentation, and using the expertise of private and governmental agencies.

Regarding their local connection to the Freeman community, Lyle said the smartest thing he ever did was to marry a Schweitzer woman from Freeman. Of course, what else could he say, with her family in the audience!

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