

The **BADGER VISION** SPRING 2024



Newsletter of the
**Sauk Prairie
Conservation Alliance**
SAUKPRAIRIE.ORG



Giving Back to **THE GUARDIAN OAKS**

Fredericka's Oak

On St. Patrick's Day, we gathered to free a special and beloved bur oak on the former Gattwinkle (or Gattwinkel) farmstead in the northeast portion of Badger. Dan dubbed this tree "Fredericka's Oak" after the formidable mother of the farm family. Fredericka married Henry Gattwinkle at age 17 and raised ten children on what would become the Badger Lands. Both were active in the Free Thinkers humanist community that thrived on the Sauk Prairie.

When Henry died in 1914, he was the only remaining person in Sauk County who had voted for Abraham Lincoln. Fredericka died in 1920 and is remembered for her great love of humanity and nature. According to historian Erhart Mueller, "In her life Mrs. Gattwinkle believed that happiness was the only good, reason the only torch, justice the only worshipper, humanity the only religion and love the priest."

Thanks to you, Fredericka's oak can feel the spring sun once again!

Story on the inside.

Giving Back to the Guardian Oaks

by Mike Mossman (with Dan Halling and Grace Vosen)

This article was originally published in the Conservation Chronicle, the newsletter of Sauk County's Land Resources and Environment Department.

SPEND ENOUGH TIME among the wild grasses, shrubs and woodlands of the Sauk Prairie State Recreation Area, and you may hear the old voices: a moccasined hunter whispering to his son. The faint, deep booming of prairie chickens displaying on a distant prairie knoll. In the evening, an immigrant settler beckoning her cattle in Low German. Lipsticked workers laughing in the morning as they leave their third-shift stations at the powder plant.

Where better to hear and ponder these voices than beneath one of the massive oak trees that are dispersed along the margins of the old Sauk

Prairie, and over the former Badger Army Ammunition Plant? Landmark trees like these have spread their limbs wide over this expanse of grassland, watching over people and animals, for thousands of years. Some of the oaks standing now are over 200 years old, pre-dating European settlement—and they could last another 200.

These gnarly old-timers captured the imagination of Dan Halling, a retired history teacher and current board member of the Badger History Group. What started as Dan's solitary mission to locate "champion" oaks at Badger has grown into an historical preservation project. For, without help, these icons of our natural and cultural heritage will disappear.

When the oldest of these oaks sprouted from acorns, this part of Sauk County was prairie and savanna. Scattered oaks could grow huge in the open air, unlike the narrower, upward-reaching forest trees. Thick-barked and massive-rooted bur, black and white oaks were resistant to the fire that periodically swept this landscape and held back their woody competition over centuries.

With European settlement, many of the oaks were cut and grubbed out, but others survived. Some new ones also sprang from acorns or old roots along the roadsides, hedgerows, pastures and homesteads. Many survived the land's conversion to a massive propellant factory during World War II because there were large spaces buffering the buildings. In these locations, they were disturbed only by grazing cattle, which replaced fire as a force against brush invasion. But in non-production areas that were ungrazed or converted to pine or walnut plantations, the old open-grown oaks gradually became overtaken by faster-growing and more shade-tolerant trees and shrubs.



Watch time-lapse videos of two "oak freeing parties" on the Alliance YouTube channel: [youtube.com/@SPConservationAlliance](https://www.youtube.com/@SPConservationAlliance)





COVER IMAGE: A view of Fredericka’s oak through the encroaching woods.

FAR LEFT TOP: A small but mighty crew freed the Kunz oak on a misty October morning. Photo: Ron Lutz II

FAR LEFT BOTTOM: The first oak to be freed was on the former Kunz farmstead, near what is now Rescue Point M22. Photo: Mike Mossman

TOP LEFT: A young conservationist visits Fredericka’s oak. Photo: Karen Mesmer

TOP RIGHT: The newly freed Steuber oak. Photo: Mike Mossman

BOTTOM: Dan Halling sits in the pews around the newly freed Fredericka’s oak. Photo: Mike Mossman

This trend accelerated during the early 2000s as deconstruction precluded grazing across most of Badger. As oaks became shaded from above and around, lower limbs died, heart rot ensued and their vigor declined. Most slowly succumbed. Their bulky skeletons can be found hidden within the abundant young woods that have overtaken much of Badger—grim reminders of the vanished prairies, savannas and pastures of long ago.

But wait: here comes Dan, leading a crew of volunteers from the Badger History Group and the Sauk Prairie Conservation Alliance to the base of an old champion oak tree. The volunteers fell trees, lop off invasive shrubs and saplings, treat stumps with herbicide and stack the brush in burn piles far from the oak. They stand back, admiring the ancient and strong grandmother with her arms spread wide. They promise to

attend to her until DNR land managers can mow the surrounding brush and run fire across the land, as lightning and indigenous peoples did for millennia. They hope she will be here, speaking to all who will listen, for many decades to come.

And what inspires Dan? “My rambles at Badger have become one of the most rewarding and meaningful projects of my life. I have a greater affinity with the land and those who came before thanks to these relic trees. My hope is that by contributing to their health and longevity, others will have a similar experience.”

So far, volunteers from our two groups have freed five old savanna oaks at Badger. We work with the twin goals of preserving history and increasing the health of the trees to create focal points for ecological restoration. Follow along with either or both groups to learn how you can help.

Good Neighbors

AS THE ALLIANCE continues its outreach efforts in Sauk Prairie and nearby communities, we are grateful for the partnerships that have arisen over the past year. Be sure to support these local businesses and groups, and thank them for sharing in our vision for the Badger Lands.

First, we would like to extend a hearty thank-you to **McFarlanes'** for donating space to house the Alliance office and archives. The McFarlane family and their business staff have consistently been great neighbors to the Alliance and other nonprofits in our Sauk-Prairie community. In January, the Alliance co-presented a "Wild WILD Bird Extravaganza" at the McFarlanes' retail store with presentations by local bird experts and resources for those interested in watching and feeding birds.

The **George Culver Community Library** in Sauk City served as our venue for the 2023-24

lecture series and our Annual Membership Meeting. Attendees were treated not only to informative talks by inspiring speakers, but also to delicious coffee from **John Joseph Coffee** and treats from **The Mixing Bowl Bakery**. These free events, open to all, were made possible thanks to a grant from the **Community Foundation of South Central Wisconsin**.



ABOVE: Uncle Butzie the turkey vulture made an appearance at our first Wild WILD Bird Extravaganza at the McFarlanes' retail center. Photo by Grace Vosen

BOTTOM LEFT: The Bar Buddies van transported volunteers around Badger for a bird survey training. Photo: Lisa Hartman

BOTTOM RIGHT: Alliance Executive Director Grace Vosen and "Ginny" the toy meadowlark present at the Spring Green library. Photo: Timm Zumm



Our Executive Director, Grace Vosen, hosted screenings of "Restoring the Sauk Prairie" along with question-and-answer sessions about Badger at the **Reedsburg Public Library**, **Portage Public Library**, **Spring Green Community Library** and **Ho-Chunk House of Wellness**. Grace also spoke on "What's Happening at Badger?" for the **Baraboo Kiwanis**, the **Free Congregation of Sauk County** and **Capitol Lakes**.

We shared our vision with the community by staffing an Alliance table at the **Meyer Oak Grove Market** and **Bald Eagle Watching Days**. We attended a meet-and-greet for the **Lake Wisconsin Alliance** and signed on to the **South Central Invasives Partnership**.

In April, the **Vintage Brewing Company** chose the Alliance as the recipient of funds from their round-up program. Thanks to all who enjoyed food and drink and rounded up their tab to support our work at Badger!

Also in the spirit of Earth Month, the Alliance was asked to curate a display at the **Ruth Culver Community Library** in Prairie du Sac. We introduced many new people to our history and our work in this way. The Alliance is also featured, along with other conservation and historical preservation groups, in the breakfast room display case at the **Cedarberry Inn**.

The partnership that attracted the most attention on social media was with **Sauk Prairie Bar Buddies**. We needed transportation for a group of volunteers being trained for Mike Mossman's bird survey (see page 7). Working with Bar Buddies, we were able to get not only a 12-person van but also a driver so Mike could focus on teaching the group about Badger's bird life. Thanks, Aaron and Lori!

Finally, we would like to thank the staff of the **Sauk Prairie Area Chamber of Commerce** for championing our area. The Chamber has been an invaluable resource, helping nonprofits like the Alliance be as effective as possible.



The Alliance at 25

Last year marked the 25th anniversary of the Alliance's formation to guide the responsible reuse of the Badger Army Ammunition Plant. We asked some members to reminisce about "the early days" in a short questionnaire.

When did you get involved with the Badger reuse process, and why did you choose to do so?

MIMI WUEST: In the mid '90s. I joined the CCCSP [former name of the Alliance] because Virginia Metcalf and Mary Yeakel told me to. Their advice was generally very good.

JEB BARZEN: My direct involvement with Badger began around 1996. My predecessor at the International Crane Foundation, Konrad Liegel, had helped with restoration at Badger in the early 1980's. This included working with Dr. Donald Kindschi. In 1996, or perhaps 1994, Dave Fordham and Charlie Luthin formed a group called the Sauk Prairie Restoration Council. I was invited to join this group and did. In retrospect, Dave knew that Badger would be decommissioned, though he did not tell us that. Dave offered to dedicate two or three thousand acres for restoration efforts, and our group was to figure out how to do that and who would take the project on. Simultaneously, the Citizens for Safe Water Around Badger were promoting a "Restore the Prairie and not the Ammunition Plant" campaign and the two efforts were synergistic.

AMANDA FULLER: I heard about it in 1997 when I was an intern at ICF and the idea of restoring the Sauk Prairie got its hooks into me. Thanks, Curt & Charlie! I stayed involved because I decided to work on Badger for my graduate thesis.

Please describe the Alliance activities or projects you participated in during the late 1990s and early 2000s.

MW: A thousand meetings! I did most of my conservation work on my butt. The Reuse Committee, the BOMB [Badger Oversight and Management Board] and the BOMC [Badger Oversight and Management Committee]. I also murdered a lot of parsnips and garlic mustard and dame's-rocket.

JB: The Klug Commission altered these early efforts at restoration and forced a re-ordering of priorities. The reuse plan developed as an alternative to the Klug Commission recommendations and agenda. I was involved in the reuse committee but only in a tangential manner. In 2008, I coordinated a group to identify and propose research questions that could be implemented at Badger by a broad group of practitioners. Finally, I implemented prescribed burns at Badger for the Alliance from 2006 to 2009.



AF: I organized work parties with graduate students from IES [now the Nelson Institute] in 2001 and 2002. I organized other volunteer days at Badger between 2002 and 2005. I collected seed from local remnants and restorations, and I helped organize the Dave Fordham planting along Highway 12. I also helped the Alliance organize events at Badger and about Badger to keep the community informed and engaged. People were always curious to learn about the land and its history, because people had been kept off the land for generations. And I went to so many meetings. If I could knit worth a hoot, I could have knitted a pair of mittens for the whole town of Baraboo during all of the meetings I went to.

Take the story up to present day. What was the outcome of some of these projects?

MW: A slow but steady battle with invasive plant species on the old prairie continues, with some encouraging progress. I have met many cheerful and dedicated people as we have worked together to heal the old prairie.

JB: The Alliance is still the primary outside group engaged with restoration efforts on all of the former Badger lands. Though the earlier efforts were accomplished under different auspices, the people involved have largely remained constant, so the Alliance is the ultimate outcome of these efforts.

AF: I am really good at going to meetings and I still can't knit worth a hoot. Somehow sitting in a lot of meetings resulted in trusting relationships, mostly, and the partnerships that developed would not have endured without that ground-work. I gather that it hasn't been easy though—as people come and go, we lose that trust and have to keep working on it. I would like to come back and see the Dave Fordham prairie and the other restoration areas.

Continued on next page.

Greetings from Charlie

by Charlie Luthin, past Alliance Executive Director

HELLO, ALLIANCE MEMBERS! It has been a while since I had contact with most of you, and I miss that contact! Grace asked me to offer a brief update on my whereabouts.

For those new to the Alliance, I was one of the founders of the group back in 1997 when it was a volunteer group of concerned citizens that we called the Community Conservation Coalition for the Sauk Prairie (CCCSP—the acronym looked like a Soviet satellite!). After spending a few years helping “launch” its successor, a new nonprofit known as the Sauk Prairie Conservation Alliance, I stepped away from the Badger effort for some years. My various conservation positions and a recent marriage at the time (2000) distracted me from volunteering.

I was recruited in 2015 to help the Alliance by conducting a strategic planning process and to

grow its membership and citizen engagement. That short-term commitment landed me a part-time job as the first Executive Director of the Alliance in 2016. I retired from this position in 2020, thus ending my 43-year career working for a variety of conservation nonprofits.

What have I been up to since then? I tell people that I’m volunteering for groups that once paid me, including the Alliance. I have participated to the degree I can in restoration at Badger, clearing brush and pulling garlic mustard at Hillside Prairie and along the Great Sauk Trail. I volunteer regularly on trail maintenance projects for the Ice Age Trail Alliance in Dane and Columbia counties, and I have done trail work on the Superior Hiking Trail on the North Shore of Lake Superior. Over the past several years, I’ve participated in strategic planning with various organizations, including the Badger History Group, Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame and the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology. I’ve also been helping the latter with their fundraising efforts.

Late in 2022, I was invited to serve on the board of advisors for an international conservation organization, Caribbean Coast Conservancy, which is based in Merida, Yucatan, Mexico. The CCC’s primary focus is monitoring and conservation of the Caribbean flamingo and its coastal habitats throughout the Caribbean. It’s a gratifying volunteer gig, as I worked 13 years in international conservation and spent a great deal of time in Mexico and Central America. Through CCC I planned an excursion for 12 people in January to explore the natural and cultural treasures of the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico as a fundraiser for the group. The excursion was so well received that I am planning a similar excursion, mostly for birders, in winter 2025. Just as my return to the Alliance after a 14-year hiatus was a “full circle” experience, so too is my return to a part of Mexico that I love.

Charlie canoes the Kickapoo River in May 2023.

Photo: Triet Tran



The Alliance at 25

Continued from previous page

How do you feel now about your involvement back then? What lessons have you learned?

MW: How painfully slowly government processes work and how blithely govern-

ment agencies can forget their agreements, even signed agreements. I also learned what a wealth of conservation experts we are blessed to have in Sauk County.

JB: The process has been slow and at times frustrating, but it is very much worth it. The overall consensus

regarding managing the former Badger lands as a whole is still strong, and that is a great credit to the Alliance’s collective efforts.

AF: It takes patience and dedication. And the more people are committed and rooted to a place and love it, the better chance we

have to heal the land and make friends we’ll never forget.

What was your favorite nature observation at Badger?

MW: I have always said that the Alliance has the best-looking collection of men with beards to be found anywhere. I also liked finding some bird’s-

foot violets and a hole that may have belonged to the Badger badger.

JB: Upland Sandpipers.

AF: The neotenus salamanders were fun to see when we would occasionally get to spot them. The occasional eagle sighting is always fun too.

House Keeping!

Thanks to the creativity and generosity of Alliance founding member Virginia Metcalf, we have an exciting new educational tool: a 513-piece jigsaw puzzle, made in Wisconsin and featuring Victor Bakhtin's beautiful "Sauk Prairie Remembered" painting.

For the rest of 2024, if you donate \$250 or more to the Alliance you can request a free puzzle as a token of our gratitude. Make it yourself or share it with a puzzle enthusiast in your life who will be captivated by the story of Badger.

Included with the puzzles will be a key to the native plants and animals shown in the painting, as well as a letter by Virginia that encourages the reader to think about Badger's significance while they make the puzzle. We will arrange several local pickup days and can also mail a puzzle to anyone who needs one shipped.

As we work to put the Sauk Prairie back together through restoration, you can put a (much) smaller version of it together while ensuring that our work can continue.

Grant Updates

The Alliance has received grant funding for two of our conservation projects on the Badger Lands. Last fall, we were chosen as one of the recipients for funding from the Wisconsin Bird Conservation Partnership, based on Badger's status as an Important Bird Area. This grant is being used to support Mike Mossman's research as he does a fourth iteration of his breeding bird survey.

Breeding bird records were crucial in making the case for conservation uses of the ammunition plant. Mike's new data will be used to encourage the landowners to pursue conservation within and among their portions of the property. Mike also has a team of volunteers collecting additional data. Some of these volunteers have never been to Badger; others are returning in a new capacity to help us document its biodiversity.

We would also like to thank the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology and the Rooted in Conservation Fund for providing supplemental funding for this project.

The second grant was awarded by the Alliant Energy Foundation and will support a partnership with Operation Fresh Start. The OFS "Conservation Academy" program prepares young adults for a career in conservation through hands-on work at natural areas in southern Wisconsin. The Alliance received funding to hire a Conservation Academy crew for one week. We will work with the DNR to choose a priority site at the Sauk Prairie State Recreation Area where the crew can cut and treat brush. We look forward to welcoming this group of young people to Badger!

Stay tuned to our eNews or Facebook page to follow along with these and other programs.

Announcing the 2024-25 Lecture Series

Mark your calendar for the following dates, when we will once again hold free lectures in the Sauk-Prairie area. This year, we're excited to be partnering with the Badger History Group on a series that will highlight our shared love of Badger's nature and culture.

The lectures will take place in the evening of the second Thursday of the month. Venue and topics to be announced. All are welcome!

- September 12, 2024
- October 10, 2024
- November 14, 2024
- February 13, 2025
- March 13, 2025
- April 10, 2025



From the Desk of Grace Vosen, Executive Director

Hello from the Alliance office! I'm proud to have these updates to share with you, not only about our community's recent accomplishments but also about plans for the season ahead.

This winter found me in a "speaking tour" phase of events, lectures and film showings. Education and outreach have always been at the heart of the Alliance's mission, and our theme for

2024 is The Power of Community. As we work to grow that community, we will also be acting on other parts of our mission to conduct restoration, research and outdoor events on the Badger Lands.

You will receive a letter from me later this month with a reminder that Alliance memberships are annual and yours may need renewing. If you choose to support

us with a donation of \$250 or more, you can request a locally made jigsaw puzzle featuring the "Sauk Prairie Remembered" painting (see above). And if you have any questions about your membership status, please don't hesitate to ask me.

This is your community, and your story—read on and enjoy!

Grace

Grace representing the Alliance at Bald Eagle Watching Days in February.

Upcoming Events

You can play a part in the story of transformation at Badger!



We're helping...northeast portion of Badger.

We're helping the DNR restore these two areas between points 7S and 8S in the northeast portion of Badger.

Workdays begin at the Museum of Badger Army Ammunition along Highway 12.

**Hillside Prairie Workday
World Migratory Bird Day
Saturday, May 11**
9:00 AM–12:00 PM

**Farmstead Workday
Wednesday, May 22**
10:00 AM–1:00 PM

**Free Lecture: What's
Happening at Badger?**
Friday, May 24
10:30–11:30 AM
*Baraboo Area Senior Citizen
Organization, 124 Second St.
Room #24, Baraboo*

**Hillside Prairie Workday
Saturday, June 8**
9:00 AM–12:00 PM

**Northeast Savanna Workday
Wednesday, June 19**
10:00 AM–1:00 PM

**Hillside Prairie Workday
Saturday, July 13**
9:00 AM–12:00 PM

**Northeast Savanna Workday
Wednesday, July 24**
10:00 AM–1:00 PM

**Hillside Prairie Workday
Saturday, August 10**
9:00 AM–12:00 PM

**Northeast Savanna Workday
Wednesday, August 21**
10:00 AM–1:00 PM

**Free Lecture Series
Thursday, September 12**
Time and venue TBA

**Hillside Prairie Workday
Saturday, September 14**
9:00 AM–12:00 PM

**Northeast Savanna Workday
Wednesday, September 25**
10:00 AM–1:00 PM

**Free Lecture Series
Thursday, October 10**
Time and venue TBA

**S-Curve Seed Nursery
Workday
Saturday, October 12**
9:00 AM–12:00 PM

**Northeast Savanna Workday
Wednesday, October 23**
10:00 AM–1:00 PM

**Hillside Prairie Workday
Saturday, November 9**
9:00 AM–12:00 PM

**Free Lecture Series
Thursday, November 14**
Time and venue TBA

**Hillside Prairie Workday
Saturday, December 14**
9:00 AM–12:00 PM

Join Our Community!

The Badger Vision is mailed to Alliance members and partners. If you are reading this and are not a member, you can join us by making a donation of at least \$25 by mail or online.

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SaukPrairie.org



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Office and archives open by appointment

