

Clear Lake sheds spotlight on small pocket of nature

By Amy Oberlin

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CLEAR LAKE — Spangler Grove is a small preserve near one of Steuben County's natural treasures.

The Spangler family, which has a five-generation history at Clear Lake, donated a little over an acre at the corner of Lake Drive and Hazenhurst Condominiums for a natural area in 2005. The property was developed with assistance from Blue Heron Ministries and is owned by the Clear Lake Township Land Conservancy.

Some may see the plants there as weeds, but they are colorful species that grow naturally in northeastern Indiana. The preserve was meant to be a showpiece of Clear Lake as it may have looked before it became a resort and residential area.

To encourage appreciation of Spangler Grove, the Clear Lake Township Land Conservancy purchased a large, full-color interpretive sign to educate the public on the flora. The photos were donated by local photographers and nature lovers, including Don Luepke, Judy Oxenger Johnston, Fred Wooley, Nate Simons, Cheri Knoblauch, Kathy Latz and Dave Drogos. It includes a photo of a prescribed burn from Blue Heron Ministries, which maintains the preserve with regular fall fires.

Natural legacy

Latz, whose father-in-law Bob Federspiel was a forefather of the Clear Lake community, sat on a steering committee in 1990 to create the Clear Lake Township Land Conservancy, which was founded in 1991, and she served two four-year terms on the board of directors. Over the past decades, she said interest in land preservation has increased by "leaps and bounds."

"A lot of it I think has been with the change in people," she said. She said people want to educate themselves and better appreciate their surroundings. It is evident, she said, in the participation in a summer youth outreach called Knee-high Naturalists, which in 2014 sprouted an adult volunteer environmental program — Neck-high Naturalists.

"It's continuing to grow," said Bridget Harrison, conservancy executive director. Nancy Webster currently serves as the conservancy's board president. One of the organization's current focuses is on preserving the shoreline at Kasota Island and last week, Harrison announced the conservancy had raised \$5,000 to get \$5,000 in matching grant funds. With the matching funds included, the effort raised just over \$15,000.

The Spangler Grove project got similar public participation. On a beautiful spring morning in 2005, people of all ages joined together to plant wildflowers and grasses. Planting was guided by Blue Heron experts, who care for the plants throughout the year through a contract with the conservancy.

Today there are six properties owned by descendants and relatives of Arthur G. Spangler. In all, five generations of the Spangler family have shared a love of Clear Lake.

The plot that is Spangler Grove was the site of the North Shore Grocery and a roller rink in the 1950s. A. G. Spangler bought North Shore Grocery in 1936. Ted Spangler was the manager.

Public parcel

Spangler Grove is a "postage stamp" on the winding shoreline of the 800-acre Clear Lake, said Latz, describing it as a "pocket park."

"It gives a glimpse of what this area used to look like," she said. Among the plant species are purple blazing star, big bluestem, golden alexanders, wild bergamot and wispy Indian grass. The new sign lists each plant's name with a photo of each one. Those who continue their research on the native plantings at Spangler Grove will discover that it also a small wildlife habitat. Wild lupine, for example, attracts the rare Karner blue butterfly.

Ted Spangler expressed a desire to leave the land he donated undeveloped. The area is not a playground, noted Latz, it is a public area designed for the appreciation of nature.

Preserving history

"It's really preserving the history and the native vegetation," she said.

"People can look at this and get an idea of what to plant on their own property," said Harrison, "what you can do as an individual to chip in to the naturalness around the lake."

Latz said she'd seen many neighbors take an ownership in Spangler Grove, picking up trash that blows in and making it part of their regular walks or runs. There are sidewalks through the preserve, and now the sign, which was developed in cooperation with Blue Heron to be sure it is not damaged by the annual prescribed burns.

Latz spearheaded the effort to purchase the sign, which was accomplished through donations earmarked for the project, said Harrison.

"We had a strong interest in getting this sign put in place by the community," Harrison said, thanking "selfless giving" by anonymous donors for making it possible. The focus was on doing the project locally, utilizing Steuben County photographers and ACS Graphics of Fremont.

"I had been thinking about it for a long time," said Latz. With the excitement surrounding the conservancy's 25th anniversary this past summer, she said it seemed like the perfect time to keep the natural energy flowing.



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Clear Lake Township Land Conservancy Executive Director Bridget Harrison, left, and Clear Lake resident and conservancy founding member Kathy Latz stand with a sign recently erected at Spangler Grove, where people can take a short walk through native plants maintained by Blue Heron Ministries and the conservancy through a donation from the Spangler family.