

Muralt Bluff Prairie in Green County, a part of the State Natural Areas system, occupies a long, sweeping ridge top in an area of older drift situated midway between the glaciated lands to the east and Driftless Area to the west. This high quality dry prairie contains numerous rare plants and animals.

The forefather of the State Natural Areas System

CLIFF GERMAIN WALKS THE TALK OF PRESERVING UNIQUE AND PRISTINE PROPERTIES.

Lisa Gaumnitz

The car bumped along an old farm lane and stopped at the foot of a hill carpeted with prairie grasses and wildflowers. Out stepped 92-year-old Cliff Germain, the man who 35 years earlier had convinced the owner of the ecological gem he had underfoot.

Germain had not been back to the property for many years, perhaps not since the farmer agreed to preserve what are some of the last vestiges of the Empire Prairie that covered much of Columbia and Dane counties for thousands of years.

He made the trip this day with this reporter and Thomas Meyer, a conservation biologist he hired and who followed in his path at the Department of Natural Resources. The plan was to hike and talk about Germain's role growing the State Natural Areas system, a role that led to his induction in 2014 into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame in Stevens Point.

From that hill and other properties this modest, self-effacing man has saved the nation's largest and most successful statewide nature preserve system. It is a treasure trove of 673 sites across Wisconsin totaling more than 380,000 acres of unique archaeological sites, geological formations, pristine prairies, oak savannas, forests and wetlands.

The sites look more or less like they did when European settlers

first spied them, and increasingly, they are a safe haven for Wisconsin's native plant and animal species and 100-plus distinct assemblages of soils, geology, plants, animals and insects.

Often as not, these natural areas are pristine parts of larger properties such as wildlife management areas, state parks and federal forests. Two-thirds of them are owned by the state and the rest by more than 50 partners ranging from the U.S. Forest Service to The Nature Conservancy and other land trusts.

On today's exploration, Meyer led the way up the hill, cutting a path through tall prairie grasses wet from an early morning rainstorm. Germain followed slowly but steadily.

What unfolded next on that sunny day was a journey through time and the little circumstances that conspired to bind the two together, to the land and to their calling of seeking out and saving for future generations the remaining crown jewels on Wisconsin's landscape.

As the men picked their way through the waist-high plants, they stopped every now and then as Meyer identified the blooming wildflowers surrounding them.

"Naked stem sunflower. Lead plant. Flowering spurge, big blue stem. Prairie drop seed — this grass that turns a beautiful orange in the

Cliff Germain

THOMAS A. MEYER

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Situated on the rolling glacial outwash sand plain that extends from Burnett to Bayfield counties, Solon Springs Sharptail Barrens features a large pine barrens with widely scattered clumps of jack pine, Hill's oaks, bur oak grubs and occasional red pine.

THOMAS A. MEYER

fall," Meyer said. "And here we see two of my favorites, purple prairie clover and dwarf blazing star."

Germain admired the flowers Meyer caught between his fingers and cradled to display, and candidly recalled that when he first started in the 1960s helping identify places that should be preserved, he wasn't a plant expert and his hearing wasn't the best, making it difficult for him to recognize bird calls.

But he hired two graduate students with those skills, and together they orchestrated the first systematic, county-by-county survey to inventory the native plant communities to assess and prioritize areas to be protected.

The information they collected later formed the nucleus of the Wisconsin Natural Heritage Inventory, Wisconsin's part of a nationwide system that houses information on the locations of rare plants, rare animals and natural communities.

"I knew what I didn't know and I depended very heavily on those people I worked with who did know. I depended a lot on them," Germain said.

What he brought to the table was a broad knowledge of what made things tick in government agencies and counties.

"Out in the field, county agents, foresters and the fish and wildlife managers — I got along fairly well with them" because he had been one of them.

Germain's first jobs with DNR's predecessor agency, the Wisconsin Conservation Department, were as a wildlife researcher and then game manager.

He had joined the Conservation Department in 1949 after serving in the U.S. Army in World War II and earning a zoology degree at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

There, he studied with conservation giants including Aldo Leopold, ecologist John Curtis and leading plant taxonomist Norman Fassett. They inspired him

and instilled in him the land ethic and the importance of Leopold's admonition that "to keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering."

That thinking and skill set helped Germain land the job in 1966 as the first full-time staff member of the state natural areas program, then known as the scientific areas program. Before then, an advisory committee of scientists had been charged by the legislature to obtain, either by purchase or gift, botanical areas of special value, and the group had secured Cedar Grove, a hawk migration lay-over site, Parfrey's Glen on the backside of Devil's Lake State Park, and Cedarburg Bog near Milwaukee.

Germain had his work cut out for him.

Ecology, the science concerned with the interactions of living organisms with each other and with their environment, was a new area and there was not much awareness in the general public or within the department itself.

"One of the biggest challenges was working with DNR people and getting

them to think about their management and how it was affecting the whole system, not their narrow interest, whether that was managing for deer or pheasant," he said.

Germain and his staff, along with the advisory council, reviewed master plans for state wildlife properties.

"We told them (game managers) we thought that there were parts of their property that should be designated scientific areas. Frequently there was an objection to that. 'Cliff, mind your business. Let us do our own thing,'" Germain said.

He worked through those concerns, cultivated strong relationships with private organizations that could move more quickly to acquire properties at risk of development, and moved the program along.

"Without Cliff, the State Natural Areas system wouldn't be what it is today," Meyer said.

The two reached the top of the hill, which Meyer said was a drumlin, an oval or elongated hill formed when glacial ice sheets moved across rock debris.


"The glacier here was thin," Meyer said. "It was not thousands of feet thick like it was to the east where it was like a bulldozer and flattened everything in its way. So the ice here didn't have the super crushing weight of a glacier. It just covered over this bedrock ridge, which was already here, and streamlined it."

This drumlin had been part of the original acquisition of 14 acres in the 1970s.

"That's all that the farmer wanted to sell at that time and we were lucky to get this," Germain said, looking around.



Germain at the state natural area that was named in his honor in 2002.



An old-growth hemlock forest is one of Germain's favorite natural communities.

"This is pretty pure prairie."

The site, known as the Westport Drumlin Prairies Unit of Empire Prairies State Natural Area, has since grown to more than 200 acres through acquisition of adjacent lands by the Natural Heritage Land Trust.

"This was a good buy, Cliff," Meyer said. "You did a good job."

In more recent years, the Department of Natural Resources and the land trust have been able to have a work crew conduct prescribed burns on the prairie here, and volunteer groups from The Prairie Enthusiasts have been involved as well.

"If we didn't burn, these oaks would grow up and shade out the wildflowers. One of the reasons we apply fire to the prairie system is to stimulate native plants and knock back woody species," Meyer said.

"I'm impressed we have management crews," Germain said. "I am very impressed with the program since I left. It's become much better...I still worry about acceptance and funding for the program. It's still tenuous."

Half an hour into the hike, Germain said he needed to take a rest and settled on a small rock deposited by the glacier.

Meyer took some photographs and then reminded Germain he had hired him as a student intern in 1984, an action now seemingly guided by destiny.

Meyer, 57, grew up on Bohner's Lake near Burlington in Racine County where Germain had been a game manager decades earlier and had purchased 3,000 acres of land that became a state wildlife area open to public hunting.

He explored those lands and particularly was intrigued by nearby Karcher Springs State Natural Area contained within the Karcher Marsh Wildlife Area that Germain had purchased in the 1950s. That natural area featured a complex of springs, calcareous fen, and a stream, and it was here that Meyer would later conduct an inventory of plants for a college course while at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

Meyer was introduced to Germain through a family friend who was on the committee advising the Wisconsin Conservation Department on preserving natural areas. Meyer ended up getting an internship at the department. He didn't work directly under Germain, and in fact Germain retired within the year, but he has loomed large in Meyer's career.

"You gave me my start," Meyer told Germain.

"Little circumstances like that shape

our lives," Germain said in reply.

He has learned over his 92 years that it's the connections to people that matter the most, like his connection to his wife, Colleen, who was inseparable from him before she passed away in 2010.

"In terms of my work, I get a little satisfaction knowing I contributed a little bit toward the way you think things should be going," he said.

Germain contributed more than a little bit. Working with others, he succeeded in protecting more than 200 state natural areas totaling more than 50,000 acres. He's given people the right to gems like these across the state: Chiwaukee Prairie in Waukesha County, Moose Lake and its majestic stands of old-growth forest in Iron County, Port Wing Boreal Forest along the shore of Lake Superior, New Hope Pines in Portage County, the prairie bluffs of Rush Creek along the Mississippi River, and the pristine wetlands surrounding Lulu Lake in Walworth County.

In 2002, in recognition of the State Natural Area system's 50th anniversary and to honor Germain's contributions to its success, the department dedicated an 88-acre Oneida County nature preserve in his honor. An old-growth hemlock forest was named the Germain Hemlocks State Natural Area and today serves as a living testimony to his work and an apt analogy for the State Natural Areas system he nursed along. Such an old-growth hemlock forest is one of his favorite natural communities.

"Hemlocks live 300 to 400 years but they are very fussy where they regenerate. They often grow where an old tree fell," Germain said. "Knowing those requirements of the tree and how it regenerates, I was always impressed when I walked through the forest. You see all these little mounds where the old trees have fallen and young hemlock seedlings are growing out of the rich, organic material the dead trees provide. To me, that represented longevity. This goes on and on if you leave it. It is true climax vegetation. The hemlocks need life to regenerate. They tip over and life begins anew."

Meyer said it's time to get back and Germain agreed. He thinks he has just enough energy to make it back to the car.

The men walk back deliberately over the path they created on the way in. As they reach the downhill, Meyer asks Germain if he wants to hold onto his arm.

No, he'll be all right. 

Lisa Gaumnitz writes for the Natural Heritage Conservation program.