



Tracing Sandhill to its roots

JULIE HESS

HOW WALLACE AND HAZEL GRANGE BUILT A LEGACY OF PRESERVATION IN CENTRAL WISCONSIN.

Julie A. M. Hess and Anna N. Hess

When it comes to Wisconsin's history of ecological work, education and protection of natural resources, time has enshrined many names we remember with reverence, while still others remain relatively unknown. Two often overlooked greats from the state's early conservationist group were Wallace and Hazel Grange, who defied obstacles to preserve some of the most important marshland in Wisconsin.

Contemporaries and work colleagues of such better-known names as Aldo Leopold, Owen Gromme and Sigurd Olson, the Granges took a burning and barren section of drained central Wisconsin marshland and helped to create the beautiful and highly unique Sandhill Wildlife Area.

The couple had humble beginnings. Wallace Grange was born on Sept. 10, 1905, in Wheaton, Illinois, the fifth of six sons. At age 13, his minister father moved the family to the village of Crane in northern Wisconsin. Even as a young teen, Wallace already demonstrated an excellent ability to observe wildlife and spent a great deal of time in the outdoors trying to understand the local habitat.

Hazel was born in Lynn, Wisconsin, on July 3, 1905, the seventh of eight chil-

dren in a poor family. She was stricken by an unknown illness at an early age that made her unable to walk until the age of 3. In 1918, her mother died, and her father died three years later. Five of the sisters went to live in Ladysmith, where another married sister lived.

Both Wallace and Hazel attended Ladysmith High School. Hazel worked in a private home for her room and board. She became a prized pupil, with her primary focus on finishing high school in three years.

It was at Ladysmith High School that Wallace and Hazel were taught by E.M. Dahlberg, a pioneer conservationist who inspired students to pursue a love of nature. Wallace and Hazel became scholastic rivals. However, Wallace was smitten and started to court Hazel.

Early career

Wallace found work locally with a newspaper and began honing his writing skills. He sold an article on ruffed grouse to *Field and Stream* magazine based on three years of observed data. Later, these data were incorporated into a technical paper co-authored by Aldo Leopold, contributing to game management efforts for years to come.

Grange went on to attend the University of Wisconsin-Madison, funding his education in part by traveling to Florida to collect and catalog birds for the U.S. Biological Survey and later to the Rocky Mountains to record sheep numbers. During these projects, he continued to correspond with Hazel. Grange eventually transferred to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor where, after many years, he finally proposed.

Wallace and Hazel wed in 1927. By 1928, their old teacher, E.M. Dahlberg, was the conservation commissioner in Wisconsin. After an interview and civil service exam, the 22-year-old Grange was offered a position by Dahlberg as the state's first superintendent of game, heading the Wisconsin Conservation Department's newly established Game Bureau.

Grange held this position for two years, during which time he established the state's first pheasant game farm, located in Door County on what is now Peninsula State Park property. He also developed complex plans to establish game



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Hazel and Wallace Grange operated the Sandhill Game Farm for nearly a quarter-century before offering the land – including their original cabin, top left – to the state of Wisconsin. The Granges are pictured here in May 1963, shortly after the land was sold and the Sandhill Wildlife Area was established.

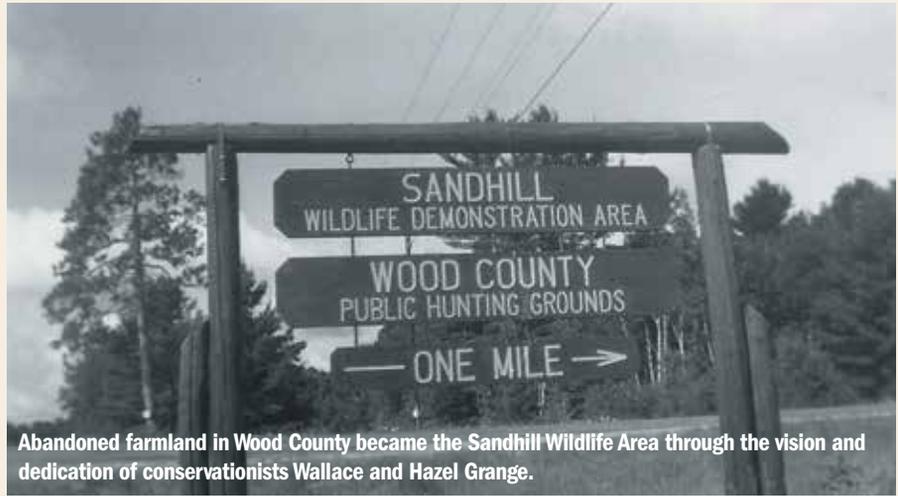
districts and wildlife refuges, as well as plans for winter feeding and game surveys. He suggested game plantings and was a proponent of reestablishing wild turkey and elk populations in Wisconsin.

Grange abruptly changed careers in 1930 when he accepted a two-year research position with the U.S. Biological Survey. He and Hazel moved to Washington, D.C., at the height of the Great Depression. There, Grange was able to make important contacts and hone his knowledge of game management.

Game farm and other adventures

In 1932, the couple returned to Wisconsin, moving to Door County to pursue Grange's dream of running a game farm. They established the farm near Bailey's Harbor, where they dealt with poor living conditions, harsh winters and hard physical labor. Their primary focus was rearing pheasants for live shipping and raising waterfowl.

During winter months, Grange would supplement the game farm income by heading to northern Minnesota to help with management of snowshoe hare populations. Upset with the government position of poisoning hares to reduce numbers, he developed a first-of-its-kind live-shipping business to send excess snowshoe hares to the East Coast to reestablish their dwindling populations. Hazel accompanied Wallace to the "rabbit camps" and assisted with camp cooking and live hare shipping preparations.



Abandoned farmland in Wood County became the Sandhill Wildlife Area through the vision and dedication of conservationists Wallace and Hazel Grange.

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It was a complicated business involving much trial and error. Hares on some train cars experienced a very high mortality rate, while rates on other trains were low. After much study, Wallace discovered that the arrival status of the hares depended on how healthy the animals were upon trapping and factors such as shipping cage conditions and animal hydration.

In addition to his work with the hares and the Door County game farm, Grange also was busy buying up tax-delinquent abandoned farmland in Wood County — despite Hazel's objections. With capital in short supply on the game farm, she was not convinced the barren former marshland and sandy upland in central Wisconsin would be the game mecca Wallace insisted it could be.

Grange's vision was to turn this unappealing property into the original

game-rich territory it had been before settlement. After much negotiation with Hazel, the couple moved to Babcock in 1937 to begin another game enterprise on the former farmland.

New challenges at Sandhill

The task of reviving this treeless wasteland proved to be a daunting one. The first requirement of the game farm was to install 16 miles of 9-foot fence around the perimeter. This immediately drew opposition from local sportsmen, who had been using the property for free. This opposition was joined by skepticism from the conservation commission and conservation wardens, who filed a lawsuit.

Despite bitter objections, the lawsuits were negated and work continued on the farm, although vandalism of the fence recurred for many years. In the years that followed, the Granges built dikes and roads on the property to refill the shallow marshes and begin restoration of wildlife habitat. Wallace worked tirelessly on biotic surveys to determine how to return the land to its pre-settlement, abundant game conditions.

The primary focuses of the Sandhill Game Farm were deer, grouse and waterfowl. Some of these were live shipped to restore populations in areas with low animal numbers. Deer were shipped to Florida, Mississippi and Georgia as well as being sold to the restaurant market in Chicago.

By 1949, 10 years after first establishing the farm, the Granges were shipping 300 to 800 deer a year when the rest of the state continued to have very low deer populations. Wallace was adamant that proper management of both forest land and hunting was key to developing healthy game populations. The results were so outstanding that Aldo Leopold



A sandhill crane at the newly created Sandhill Wildlife Area in June 1962.

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would send graduate students to Sandhill to see the excellent example of game stewardship.

In 1946, the Granges obtained a heifer bison from the zoo in Racine. A bull was added in 1949 and by 1960, the herd consisted of nine animals. There was no commercial reason for having the bison herd; however, because this was an area where wood bison once roamed, it would prove to benefit the surrounding game conditions. Once, when interviewed by a Milwaukee reporter about it, Grange replied, "I just like them."

A wild menagerie

The Granges were famous for their menagerie of wild animals. Hazel especially loved her diverse pets and spent a great deal of time taming them. One pet included Foxy, wild caught when a vixen moved her den near the couple's farm. A fawn became a household pet when workers found the emaciated creature caught in a hollow log and Hazel nursed it back to health.

The most eclectic pets, though, were the skunks. At one point, there reportedly were 27 of the smelly black-and-white fluff balls. Only three of the animals were de-scented, so at some point the farm help and the Granges were all bombed by the fragrant pets.

As the story goes, while Wallace was off serving in the Pacific Theater with the Navy's Seabees and Hazel was away for business, the skunks "dug out" of their pens and escaped. According to Wallace, "This was undoubtedly the greatest mass release of skunks in history."

Silver, a female sandhill crane, became



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In this May 1963 photo, Wallace Grange feeds Silver, a resident sandhill crane who was popular with visitors to the Granges' game farm.



Bison were introduced to Sandhill Wildlife Area in the late 1940s and a small population remains today.

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a particular favorite of visitors. Silver came to the Granges in egg form in 1953 from a nest that was going to be washed away. At the time, not a lot was known about the rare and endangered sandhill cranes, and the Granges had to determine the best ways to feed the chick and care for the crane as it grew. They kept her wings clipped in the spring and fall so she would not follow the wild populations of cranes.

Silver became famous at Sandhill for her handkerchief dance. Wallace would throw a loose handkerchief into the air while Silver would call out and dance wildly.

State benefits

In 1962, after nearly 25 years of running the game farm, the Granges approached the state of Wisconsin with the proposal to sell the property. The couple felt state ownership would be the best way to preserve the marshland and keep game management at the forefront.

The property was offered at a value of \$274,500, much less than the appraised value, and Gov. Gaylord Nelson signed

the purchase agreement. With strict requirements from the Granges, the property became the wildlife demonstration area and game refuge that it remains today. Visitors to the 9,150-acre Sandhill Wildlife Area can still appreciate the couple's vision by taking a hike on the Swamp Buck Trail or driving the Trumpeter Trail, among other outings.

Hazel and Wallace Grange quietly retired to Calio, North Dakota, after the sale of their Sandhill Game Farm. Wallace died in 1987. He was posthumously inducted into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame in 1993 in honor of his pioneering game management research. Hazel died in 1997.

Through good years and bad, the Great Depression, low capital, negative public opinion and controversy, the Granges persevered and created a vital legacy. 🌿

Julie Hess belongs to Friends of Sandhill and is a senior paper process engineer, moonlighting as a naturalist during her spare time. Anna Hess is a natural resource manager for the Minnesota DNR. They both grew up wandering the wilds of Sandhill.

>>> GRANGES' WRITINGS

Through their busy game farm years, both Wallace and Hazel Grange found time to write. Wallace would escape to the rustic Sandhill cabin on the point of a marsh island to do the majority of his writing in those quiet surroundings.

He used his game farm experience and wildlife research background to write the landmark "The Way to Game Abundance" in 1949. The book looked at the use of fire for game management, the life cycles of game species and why populations fluctuated.

Grange followed up with the John Burroughs Medal-winning nature book "Those of the Forest" in 1953. The book followed the fictional life of a snowshoe hare and the intertwined lives of the forest animals. Wallace presented this book to Hazel as a 25th anniversary present. Nature books were not popular at the time, so Hazel formed the Flambeau Publishing Co., and printed 10,000 copies of "Those of the Forest."

Hazel wrote her own game farm memoirs from 1932-1946. "Live Arrival Guaranteed," likely her best-known piece, was not published until 1996. The Granges' books can still be found today.