

CHANGES IN THE BOTTOMS

Fulton County, Ill., has a rich heritage. Once vibrant with agriculture and strip-mining of coal, it had a well-earned reputation as a hunter's and fisherman's paradise. The Clark family settled there in 1832, clearing land on some of the richest soil in the nation—the Illinois River bottoms.

After Russell Clark retired, he built a home down the road to make room for his son Jack and family, the next generation to

*From farmland to wetland,
when The Nature Conservancy gets involved,
local farmers can't compete.*

Words and photos by Joyce Morrison

the land became an estate, and the house and about 80 acres found its way into the hands of The Nature Conservancy. TNC tore the house down, but Jack Clark still owns and lives in the home place.

in. It was promoted as a way to restore the land that had been mined, but residents say they are afraid of what the heavy metals may be doing to the underground water and surrounding lakes. Cattle are not permitted to graze the pasture where the sludge has been spread. Edible crops cannot be grown there. Local residents have tried unsuccessfully to commission a study on the situation.

A “nitrogen farm” has been proposed on the

Illinois River about 15 miles north of the Clarks' farm. The Nature Conservancy and a Chicago-based group, The Wetlands Initiative (TWI), want to lease 4,500 acres of farmland from local farmers, with the completed project consisting of 4,500 acres in the Spring Lake levee district. Farmers are skeptical. When TNC and TWI proposed leasing farmland at a local meeting, one farmer said, “You go on downstream and leave us alone.”

So they did. After being turned down in two areas, still determined to get their nitrogen farm, TNC and TWI went to the third neighborhood along the river where they once again met with a hostile crowd.

TNC and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) have

already drawn national attention downstream from the nitrogen farm endeavor in their pursuit of 11,000 acres of the Wilder Farm (formerly Norris Farm) and surrounding small tracts to turn into wetlands. They call this project Emiquon. For some time FWS employees had their eyes on the big piece of land that was fondly known as the largest farm in Illinois. The Norris Farm raised livestock, corn and soybeans, but also had commercially raised popping corn, tomatoes, green beans and other food products. Their property line joined the Clark farm to the south.



PHOTO COURTESY CLARK FAMILY

Russell and Henry Clark running reaper, Norris Farms, 1930s.

live at the home place. From his front deck, Russell overlooked land that he and his dad had farmed. For decades the Clarks had been tenants on part of the big farm next door to their own, which was once owned by the Morton Salt Company in the 1920s. Joey Morton sold the farm to the Norris family in 1947. Folks there boasted that the Norris Farm was the “largest farm in Illinois.” Good jobs with good paychecks once kept food on many tables.

All that now remains to indicate Russell's home was ever there is a bent-over mailbox out by the road. After he passed away in 1992,

The area is slowly but surely being eaten away by the taking of land by the government and groups such as TNC. The population is dwindling. Fulton County treasurer Valarie Harper says: “We are now a poor county. As we see land values decreasing because of land-use changes, we wonder how we will pay for the two new schools with our already high tax rates.”

The county lost tax revenue on 15,000 acres that had been strip-mined coal ground and that the Chicago Metropolitan Sanitary District used as a sludge dump. The sludge was barged in, piped in, trucked in and knifed



*The Nature Conservancy representatives walking on top of levee on the Illinois River with barge in background.
BELOW: Jack and Peggy Clark at home with their 4-wheeler. Jack uses their 4-wheeler to work cattle and ride their fences.*

“When the Norris Farm, owned by the Gillette Cattle Company, was in operation,” Clark says, “they would feed between 7,000 and 8,000 head of cattle in their feedlot. They even had their own alfalfa mill.”

Jack Clark earned his master’s degree in animal husbandry and spent time working in Kansas feedlots and for the University of Missouri before returning to his roots in the Illinois river bottoms. When he could spare time away from his own grain and livestock opera-

tion, Clark worked for the Gillette Cattle Company. In the late 1980s, the operation employed over 40 full-time and 30 part-time employees.

Norris Farm changed owners several times, but the name and operation didn’t change much until the Wilder Corporation purchased it from the Gillette Company. Maurice Wilder, a businessman from Clearwater, Fla., reportedly controls about 130,000 acres of farm and ranch land in eight states,

but folks around Havana and Lewistown say he is “not a farmer at heart.”

The feedlot was leased out and eventually abandoned except for a penned elk herd where people could come and shoot a trophy. The buildings began to show neglect. Local businesses had to ask for “cash up front” on transactions.

When TNC purchased the farm from Wilder it demolished the Norris feedlots,

buildings and grain bins. About 10 homes the farm had provided for its workers and managers were razed. Only remnants of concrete are left now to indicate the years of contribution this farm made to the community. TNC, with a motto “to protect the places you care about,” removed all the symbols of prestige this once famous farm had brought to Fulton County.

In 1993 when FWS began its land purchase for Emiquon, with about 90 percent of the 11,000-acre boundary planted in row crops, Wilder became a willing seller “for acquisition and restoration.” TNC would help accumulate the acreage the government wanted, beginning with 800 acres purchased from Wilder in 1994 and then sold to FWS.

“We do work closely with the Fish & Wildlife Service,” said TNC’s William Weeks. “We buy these properties when they need to be bought so that at some point we can become the willing seller [to the government]. This helps the government get around the problem of local opposition.”

In August 2001, FWS purchased another 712 acres of Wilder Farms from TNC for \$1.78 million. Ducks Unlimited donated \$124,000 and another \$124,000 came from the Illinois State Duck Stamp Program. Fulton County Outdoors reports: “Participants





Frank Hofreiter, New Holland implement dealer, doesn't like the look of the future.

in the development would be representatives from FWS, TNC, Ducks Unlimited, The Natural History Survey, Army Corps of Engineers, IDNR and many scientists and managers from across the state.”

Tax revenue to the county has been lost with the destruction of these buildings, and as the land use is changed from cropland to wetlands for a refuge area, more taxes will be lost.

“When the feedlot closed and the farm no longer used hired help as they had in the past, it hurt a lot of people,” Clark says. “It’s difficult to find jobs in small communities.”

Across the river from Emiquon in the town of Havana, there are huge grain-storage elevators. In a good year, the bins cannot hold all the grain from the area and they are forced to stack the grain in gigantic mounds protected by plastic covering until it can be barged to the ports in New Orleans. Grains produced from the rich soil in the Illinois River bottoms feed millions of people around the world.

Frank and Judy Hofreiter own the New Holland implement dealership in Havana. “The loss of sales of seed, feed, fertilizer, fuel, parts and equipment will have a major impact on our little community when they complete their project,” Hofreiter says. “But they tell us it will be made up with tourism dollars.”

According to TNC, this property has local, regional, and global significance—when completed it “will draw thousands every year to view its magnificence.” Frank Hofreiter believes that promised tourism will never replace the jobs that will be lost when this land is no longer farmed.

FWS’s and TNC’s idea of restoration means that cropland will become a massive wetlands although corn has been grown in

the area for 700 years by the Indians. The Illinois River levee has been an important part of agriculture since the 1920s, but TNC dreams of the river running free and it is not opposed to using a little fearmongering to sway public thought. It says the river is “near death and habitat has been disappearing at an alarming rate.” It wants to “revive the semblance of the rhythm of flooding and recession that nature uses to control rivers more effectively than any levee ever built.” TNC wants to bring back the lakes, marshes and forests and to reconnect them to the Illinois River, now

barricaded by a 20-foot-tall levee and refers to the land it has purchased as “manicured farmland that scientists eye from their perch...a common example of how the modern world has transformed the Illinois and other large floodplain rivers.”

TNC received \$10.7 million from USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service, to be partners in the Emiquon project. TNC has signed a 30-year wetlands reserve program with NRCS and will receive yearly payments based on the agricultural land value—the value as it was when farmed. TNC will receive an additional \$500,000 to help pay for the first phase of restoration and may apply for

other restoration funds later. The cost of Emiquon’s restoration is expected to be between \$1.5 and \$4 million.

TNC received a hefty \$12 million donation from the Caterpillar Corp.; the Ameren Corp. Charitable Trust made a donation of \$224,000; Exelon Corp. pledged \$1 million over the next four years between Emiquon and a wildlife project in Pennsylvania; the state of Illinois gave a grant of \$242,514. Many more unlisted donations have been made toward the project.

Farmers like Jack Clark cannot compete. TNC’s financial statement shows its net assets to be more than \$4 billion. They acquired \$153 million and \$794 million in property through federal grants for the years ended June 30, 2005 and 2004, respectively.

Removing the levee would not be good news for Jack Clark and his neighbors. “As long as I can remember we have helped each other around here,” Clark says. “When the Norris Farm was operating, they were always willing to give a hand to a neighbor anytime there was a need. I’m afraid those days may be gone.” ■

Joyce Morrison and her husband Gary farm in the Illinois River bottoms. She writes for many national publications.



Firemen burning good homes that once housed employees of the Norris Farm.



ABOVE: Trees are where houses of the Norris Farm employees (inset) once stood. Flowers can be seen growing in what was once a lawn. This land is now closed and gated, marked with a sign.

RIGHT: TNC representative, offering the big picture for the future of the Illinois River Bottoms.



FEAR

Forget urban sprawl taking farmland—fear the government and TNC, its real estate agent.

By Joyce Morrison

About 50 miles south of Emiquon, located near Meredosia, Ill., is another wetlands project. It is headed by The Nature Conservancy and called Spunky Bottoms.

TNC states: “There are glimpses of a new future for the Illinois River Valley and ultimately the Upper Mississippi River. It will be a future of renewed abundance, a future of sustainable health—and it will not be an isolated accomplishment. The effects of the restoration on native floodplain communities will be measured and monitored carefully so the models can be used for the restoration of large floodplain rivers everywhere, from the United States to Brazil to China.”

TNC has partnered with the U.S. Corps of

Engineers on the Spunky Bottoms project where 800 acres of upland and river bluff and more than 1,200 acres of prime farmland has been drained and enrolled in the Wetlands Reserve Program, receiving annual payments based on the agricultural value of the land when it was farmed.

The Spunky Bottoms Preserve is in the natural floodplain of the Illinois River, but has been protected from the Illinois River by levees and pumps since the early 1900s. To begin to restore this highly productive farmland to a wetlands, TNC removed the pumps and allowed water to again gather in the floodplain. Because of cost considerations and the potential for flooding adjacent lands, TNC said it will not remove the levee; however, it does plan to construct a water-control structure through the levee for water to enter Spunky Bottoms as the river rises during natural seasonal fluctuations.

Farmers who plant and harvest millions of acres of corn and soybeans along the Illinois River are anxiously watching to see if land in their drainage district could be next on the acquisition list.