

PRAIRIE PLAINS LINK



Amy Jones

Tom Sherman land and cattle along the Platte in Hamilton County, Nebraska.



Bill Whitney

The Sherman Land: A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity

As Tom Sherman gazes out over the land he's called home for the last 48 years, he is filled with gratitude. Gratitude and, no doubt, a strong sense of accomplishment. As a WWII veteran who experienced 600 days of combat – documented in his book, *Seek, Strike, Destroy: A History of the 636th Tank Destroyer Battalion* - he considers every day a gift. Much to his continuing amazement, Tom not only survived the war; he lived to see his dream come true. He found the perfect piece of land on which to live, raise his family and make his living - land that lies in Hamilton County, Nebraska, its northern border a solid mile of Platte River.



NEWSLETTER - October, 2011

Tom grew up in Peru, Nebraska, a small farming community in the southeastern part of the state. Before entering the Service, he worked in Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps. In 1942, at the age of 22, Tom was one of 200 draftees from Nebraska that went to Camp Bowie, Texas, to join the newly-formed 636th Battalion destined to be chronicled in his book.

It was during a time on leave from the Army that Tom met Louise Cox in her home state of Massachusetts. They married there in 1945, at war's end. The couple then moved to Nebraska, where Tom enrolled at the University of Nebraska on the GI Bill, and earned a degree in agriculture.

Tom spent the first four years after college working in the University Extension Service. But what he really wanted to do was farm on his own. When he heard about a professor from Texas A&M that owned farms in Hamilton County - and who wanted to place college graduates on those farms - Tom wanted in on the deal. He pursued the opportunity and succeeded, farming a place near Murphy for nine years - a 50/50 deal with the Texas professor.

At that point, Tom and Louise (with, by then, their three children) really wanted a place of their own. They heard of one possibility from ➔

Above, left - Tom Sherman on his land, his jacket bearing the insignia of the 636th Tank Destroyer Battalion; an example of the rough bluffs on the property; one of many group tours of the land in the past few months, this one including, from left, board member Randy Ruppert, Tom, and members Ernest Ochsner and Jim Cyr.



Bill Whitney



Bill Whitney

The Farmers Home Administration (FHA), but felt they couldn't possibly afford it. Then Tom decided to take a look at the place anyway. His response: "I just fell in love with it when I saw it."

It nearly slipped through his fingers. When he called the FHA back, he was told it was too late; they'd found another buyer. Something must have gone wrong with that deal, because Tom got a call a few days later, offering him the place after all. So in 1963, Tom and Louise were loaned the money for the farm and 100 head of cattle. They worked hard and paid everything off in a few years.

Part of that hard work involved clearing a large tract of river bottom forest to create more rangeland. In fact, Tom spent 20 years clearing 160 acres of what is now a beautiful wet meadow and tallgrass prairie. His recollection: "I started in with chain saws - wore out about seven - and a big buzz saw behind my Ford tractor . . . I had some terrific fires down in here when I was clearing it off. But I'd plow around the edges with the tractor, make a couple of furrows to control it so it never got away."

The Shermans never kept their place all to themselves. As Tom explained, "I feel so lucky to have it, I like to let other people enjoy it, too. So we let saddle clubs come down here and ride, and we've had 4-H clubs and scouts out here. A lot of people have enjoyed it along with us - duck hunters, other hunters. So it's been a nice deal for me, I think."

Tom is known to be an excellent land manager, conservationist and public servant. He and Louise received the Central Platte Natural Resource District's Agricultural Award in 1979. He served on the Bader Park board for several years, has been the caretaker of Tooley Park for the last twenty years, and was a Hamilton County Commissioner in the 1990s.

The preservation of his land as it is, and sharing it with others in the future as he always did, is a deep concern for 91-year old Tom Sherman. As he puts it, "I'm feelin' good, but I never buy green bananas!" We share his concern.

During this last year Tom granted Prairie Plains the legal option to buy his land, and we are in the process of raising the funds. We have submitted a proposal to the Nebraska Environmental Trust (NET) for a substantial share of the price, and have been showing the property to our members and organizational partners. Comments on grant applications will be accepted until April 4, 2012 at NET, P.O. Box 94913, Lincoln, NE 68509-4913 or via email to marilyn.tabor@nebraska.gov.

Through all of his life's hardships, including losing comrades in the war, and his beloved Louise in 2006, Tom Sherman remains grateful: "I feel very fortunate to be here. I went through World War II, 600 days in combat. I never dreamed I'd make it through . . . I feel so fortunate to get through it and have this place. I'd like to have other people enjoy it, too. It's been quite an experience."

On September 24th, Bill and Jan Whitney from Prairie Plains, and videographer Larry Molczyk (pictured) toured the land with Tom Sherman, recording his stories and comments. The video can be seen on YouTube.com; enter "Thomas Sherman on the Land" on the search bar.



From top, Cardinal Flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*) and Nodding Ladies' Tresses Orchid (*Spiranthes cernua*) were found in the lowland prairie along the river, where Tom spent twenty years clearing trees and brush. Discovered atop a high bluff, Prickly Pear Cactus (*Opuntia sp.*).

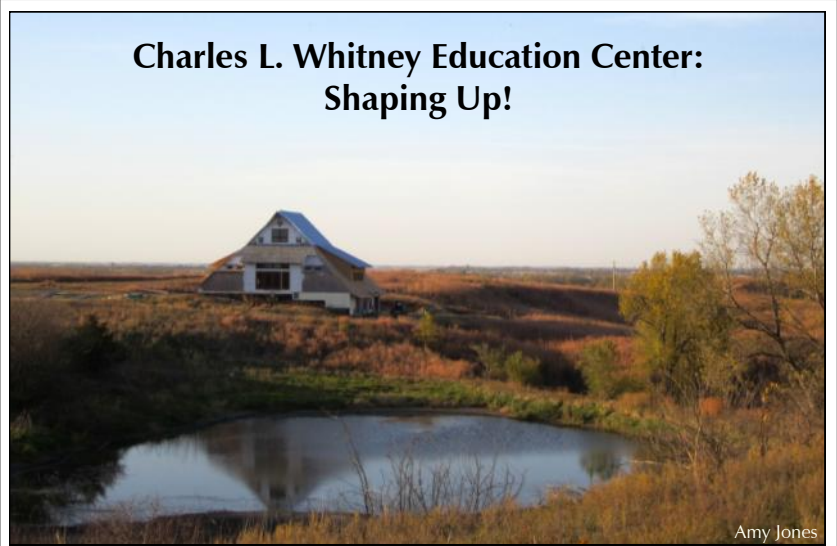


The Sherman land spans 650 acres, a half-mile wide on its south end, then widening along the northeasterly flowing Platte River main channel to a mile-wide frontage. Located one mile east of Griffith Prairie, it offers a different yet complementary landscape of eroded loess bluff and canyon topography. From its ridge tops one can view a long, rugged canyon, a great Platte Valley panorama of savanna-like bottomland wet meadow that Tom cleared, the river and cottonwood forest, a long stretch of the river and meadow looking up into the bluffs, and, to the southwest, across the bluff prairies to the Prairie Plains Charles L. Whitney Education Center. Wherever one is on the north half of the property the feeling is of being surrounded by a grassland wilderness.

The land is ecologically diverse. Habitats range from upland mixed-grass prairie on the steep to rolling bluff terrain, to tree and shrub edges on escarpments, to accretion bottomland (now a wet meadow), with its wet sloughs running the length of the meadow, including a few open ponds. There is an extensive accretion shrub area along the river. This mix of land forms and habitats, rich in wildlife, is unique on the entire Platte River, particularly this far east in Nebraska.

The Sherman land is also rich in history. There are trail ruts from the 1800s, and remnants of a squatter's dugout dwelling. This area was once inhabited by the Pawnee, and artifacts have been found. There have been Pleistocene elephants excavated from Tom's county road cut.

The condition of the land today reflects the care that Tom has taken over the last 48 years, maintaining the rangeland and growing crops on the south end for cattle production. Our role, should we become the next stewards, is to maintain the land much as it is today, and to honor Tom's wishes to keep it open for public recreation and education.



**Charles L. Whitney Education Center:
Shaping Up!**

Amy Jones

Thanks to the bequest of Curt Twedt - and lots of good weather - great progress has been made on roofing, dormers, interior framing and windows. The view above is looking northwest at the south (main entrance) side of the building; below, looking toward the northeast from inside.



Amy Jones

**ONP
Enchanted
Evening
October 1st**



It was a beautiful evening for the annual Boone County event. Participants enjoyed hiking the trails, studying the stars, and gathering around the campfire for the spell-binding living history presentation "Promise in a New Land" by Cherrie Beam-Clarke. Her program was sponsored by the Nebraska Humanities Council. Thanks to Enchanted Evening organizer Paul Hosford.



Sarah Bailey



Sarah Bailey



The Power of Griffith
by Ben Hahn

Oh the wondrous things that can be felt in our great prairie.
Silky seeds of fluff escape the pod of the rough milkweed
While the sleek shoes of children crunch down on dead leaves.
It seems prickly plants always find the lonely places where people step.

One must listen closely to understand the prairie.
The buzzing whispers of small organisms greet passers-by
As the light howl of the wind echoes through the prairie
While dancing grasses slowly mimic the waves of the ocean.

Sarah Bailey

Following their September field day at Griffith Prairie, Aurora fifth-graders wrote about their experiences. Ben Hahn shared his thoughts in this poem.

SAVE THIS DATE:
Saturday evening, January 28, 2012
Prairie Plains Fund-raiser
 UNL East Campus Union
 Fabulous dinner featuring local foods
 Entertainment & Auction
 Please consider donating items for auction
 (Notify Amy, amyppri@hamilton.net or 402-694-5535)

New book includes chapter by Prairie Plains Director Bill Whitney

The book is *Human Dimensions of Ecological Restoration: Integrating Science, Nature, and Culture*; compiled by editors Dave Egan, Evan E. Hjerpe and Jesse Abrams. It is part of the series "The Science and Practice of Ecological Restoration," from the Society for Ecological Restoration and Island Press. Bill's contribution is Chapter 23, "Great Plains Environmental Education: A Personal Reflection." An excerpt:

One recent year I related to groups of SOAR campers the Loren Eiseley story in The Immense Journey, in which he talked about floating in the shallow Platte River of western Nebraska - sliding down the face of the continent with his fingertips reaching up into the cold mountain stream and his toes in the warm Gulf waters. After walking a ways against a stout current, we turned and floated down the Platte on our backs. It was memorable and I'm sure not just for me. A graduate student volunteer mentioned that at SOAR we "enforced a sense of beauty" about place, something she had never heard in her entire educational experience in rural Nebraska or in architectural studies at the University of Nebraska and MIT . . . The future holds great potential to cultivate land knowledge and sense of place in all age groups in similarly soul-uplifting educational adventures.

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MISSION:

**Maintaining and restoring
Nebraska ecosystems -
Creating opportunities for
education, research,
stewardship and community
development.**

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Next Bader Park Tour:
Saturday, Nov. 12th
9:00 a.m.

THANK YOU to

- Tom Sherman, for all the tours and interviews;
- Larry Molczyk for producing the interview video, "Tom Sherman on the Land;"
- Gerry Steinauer for seeds;
- Jeanne Dill for the orchid photo;
- Paul Hosford & family for all their work on the ONP Enchanted Evening and
- Ben Hahn for his poem.