Prairie Pod Transcript

Season 3, Episode 4: A legacy of love for the prairie: a landowner's perspective

Host: Megan Benage, Regional Ecologist and Mike Worland, Nongame Wildlife Biologist

Guest: Henry Panowitsch, Prairie Enthusiasts

Podcast audio can be found online at mndnr.gov/prairiepod

Transcript:

((sounds of birds chirping and wind blowing))

Megan: Welcome back to the Prairie Pod. It's Season 3 all season long and we are in Episode 4: A legacy of love for the prairie: a landowner's perspective. Hi Mike!

Mike: Hey Megan.

Megan: How's it going?

Mike: Good to see ya, not that we don't see each other most days I think but.

Megan: I know it's really hard. ((Laughing)) Mostly for me.

Mike: I'm not insulted.

Megan: It's a struggle.

Mike: It's all right, I understand. I really do.

Megan: Well we're sitting here with our fantastic guest and I'm going to do my best. You correct me if I do this wrong here, but we're going to speak a little German to introduce our guest, so: Wir werden mit Henry über seine Prärie sprechen. Henry ist ein ganz besonderer Mensch mit einer ganz besonderen Liebe zur Prärie.

Henry: (Speaking German) Das ist sehr gut (that is very good).

Megan: Danke (thank you in German), woo hoo!

Mike: Wow, I wasn't sure where I was. I felt like - -

((Laughter))

Mike: Well actually, I'm in New Ulm so that makes perfect sense.

Henry: Did you want a beer right away or something?

Mike: Yeah. Right, yeah.

((Laughing))

Megan: Just like a little bit of German and...((laughter)). We are introducing today's podcast in German not because we're in New Ulm but because we are with Henry Panowitsch, who is an amazing landowner, who has agreed to be interviewed by us, which in and of itself is a feat to sit with us for an hour.

Mike: No doubt.

Megan: Henry, why don't you introduce yourself a little bit?

Henry: Just give you something about my background?

Megan: Yeah - -

Henry: Okay.

Megan: - - tell us who you are.

Henry: I used to be a German citizen and when I was 14-years old I came to the United States. In Germany I lived in Arden, Germany in a kind – a valley that you know there were woodlands on both sides of the valleys and farmland, and there's a railroad track run through it, a state highway and a creek, and then there were houses. You have to remember that in Germany all farms, there are no farms out in the country. They're all, the village is made up of farms.

Mike: Oh.

Henry: So and that's from medieval times for defensive purposes when you were out you weren't vulnerable.

Mike: Oh.

Henry: So that's a form of, you know, historical necessity and it just and it's wonderful too. And living in the village, I was fortunate enough to live in a time that a lot of people haven't experienced. I was like 13 years old the first time I ever rode in a car.

Megan: Oh, my gosh.

Henry: Because my form of transportation was walking, bicycling, you know, horse and wagon, the bus and train. Those were the transportation. I think in the village I grew up, there were like 500 people and there was one car and one telephone for the whole village.

Mike: Wow.

Megan: You guys like take turns like Monday is my day with the car, Tuesday - -

Henry: No, there was just one owner, and then but you know.

Mike: Popular fella.

Henry: You had to ask him for emergency, he probably would take you to the doctor or something.

Megan: Oh, that's kind of him.

Mike: He probably would.

Megan: Probably, he probably would do that.

Henry: Before you guys, you know, I lived in a different century but I wouldn't trade it, and I've been back to summer to look, you know, in the same village and stuff and what has happened is before there were like 20 different people working the land in different ways. Now there are two guys.

Mike: Oh, yeah?

Henry: And they have John Deere equipment.

Megan: ((Laughter))

Henry: And so it has changed the village, the physical structure, you know, is probably better than I remember it even. The landscape and they've really done a good job. But you know, there is a certain spiritus left of the place. There's a certain, people don't know each other as well as they used to because a lot of people have moved in, in the time. Villages, there was no great turnover, people married other people just down the road from the village or something. You didn't want to walk too far.

((Laughing))

Megan: Well I'll take this one. She looks nice. She's about quarter mile from my house.

Mike: It's a good deal.

((Laughter))

Megan: ((joking)) Seems right. She's got hair. Wow.

Henry: But anyway, but that's, okay, that's my background. But what was interesting when I came to this country, I stayed with some relatives in Nicollet, Crones, it's a big family, and what's really exciting, it was a farm right between Swan Lake and Middle Lake, and the wildlife, you guys, was just incredible. You know, at night if you dove and rode, you saw ice in every ditch or something, you know. And you know, the ducks and the geese, and geese were rare. If a goose flew over, that would be recorded in the newspaper.

Mike: Is that right?

Henry: But ducks, deer weren't that many. It's just like it has changed, but all the other little critter - mink, muskrats, all these kind of things, they were - -

Mike: Quite rare to see nowadays at least.

Henry: Right. And it's sort of like - - it was an exciting time. Part of my job was to go trap pocket gophers, you know, and now I wish I had a pocket gopher. I would feed the pocket gopher and not trap it.

Megan: You would feed it ((laughter)).

Mike: Sure, important part of the ecosystem. Yeah.

Henry: Exactly. So it's in a sense I have a hobby farm by Good Thunder, 35 acres and it's by the Maple River. But the countryside has become quiet. It's a certain sad quietness. It's a lonely quietness and only time where you'll really see life is by rivers. I see more life in the town of Mankato that I see in the country.

Mike: Is that right? Huh.

Henry: I see Pileated Woodpeckers on 2nd Street, you know, just sitting and collecting money trying to find something to eat, but no.

((Laughter))

Megan: With their tiny change purses is how you usually see them, Mike, out there, those woodpeckers.

Mike: I haven't thought of it that way but maybe there's, yeah, something to that.

Henry: But seriously, it's I think the only place I see still wildlife is by rivers and ravines and then in town.

Mike: Well, that is interesting. There are lots of, not lots, but certainly abundant data out there showing that what you're saying is happening. The recent bird work showing that a third of the birds have disappeared since 1970 and we know trends with pollinators and insects are happening as well, and anyway, we're starting off with some really bummer news.

Megan: Yeah, before we get too depressed here, I do want to note the reason why we have Henry on the podcast today is not too depress us but instead, no, he's like - -

Mike: To inspire us.

Megan: - - to inspire us because while things are not great for lots of our species and we know that, and we've certainly lost much of our prairie, we only have 2% left here in Minnesota, so I think it oscillates between 1% and 2% if you're looking at all of the tallgrass prairies, the entire ecosystem. So yes, that is happening, but the good news is, is that Henry, when I was speaking in German earlier, I was saying that he's a very special person and he's a very special person because he's also, in addition to being retired, which makes you special, he's a prairie enthusiast. And so believe it or not, prairie enthusiasts are real things. These are not just people who drive around and they get excited any time they see a prairie like woohoo, I'm an enthusiast, I saw a prairie, yeah, no. They're a real group of people who are doing really valuable things, so I think the way that I would describe you guys, Henry, is that you're dedicated. You're dedicated to the prairie and you take your personal time to educate, protect, and restore prairie and savannah habitats, and that's pretty amazing and something that I'm very

enthusiastic about. So you're basically like a tiny prairie army with drip torches, clippers, and knowledge. It's like the best kind of army.

Mike: I see it as real reason for optimism because if Henry can spread the word and we can get, I don't know, 1 in 100 people doing 1/10 of the work you've done, we will have better prairie. We will improve the habitat in the state.

Henry: Well, I kind of come from the direction, you know, doesn't look it but the option, there's not option to quit. It's never too late to do the right thing.

Megan: Oh, I love that.

Henry: You know, so that's just the basic assumption. And I see one of the goals when -- well, first is Randy Schindle and Scott Siegfried and myself, we started the chapter and Randy Schindle is sort of, he was my mentor because I met him first to upgrade my woodland on the hobby farm and he's really the germ that infected both Scott and me in prairie. I mean, he took me to his prairie and when I saw five, six-foot grasses, I have to have those. That's what got me really going. And Randy he's, you know, Randy's a special person in the Mankato area. His enthusiasm and his generosity and kindness and skill and knowledge has really, he's been a midwife for many prairie undertakings and many good kind of things in the area.

Megan: I'm just laughing because picturing Randy as a midwife of anything is very, hilarious. So Randy does, he's a prairie enthusiast. He is very inspiring and currently he's a DNR forester working towards retirement, which will happen I think fairly soon, but he's one of the first people that I met when I started at the DNR six years ago and he's just wonderful. Like he's excited about prairie and I'm glad that he infected you with that excitement because we need so much more of it.

Mike: Yeah. You gave us a little bit of your background. Tell us about your prairie restorations that you have and that you work on.

Henry: When I bought 32 acres first and there was woodland and there was grassland, but it was not very high quality cover, and so after meeting with Randy and reading up on prairie too, I became very interested. And so I have three different pieces of prairie and anyplace from five acres to seven acres, and they're all timed because the prairie to me is like having a child. You need to have spaces so you can give them a good chance to start out right.

Mike: Nice, yeah.

Henry: You know, and so it took me a number of years and I think the last one I finished about four years ago. And to me, a prairie is you have a relationship with it, and if I don't walk my prairie once a week, there's something.

Mike: Something missing? You feel like you haven't had a good week then, yeah.

Henry: It's like you know what? It's like I don't know it. It's like a human relationship. You can't just think about it. You have to have, you know, you can have concept experience as thinking about prairie, but real juicy stuff is the experience-experience, and that's walking to the grass and prairies, all three are totally different. Okay? They're different.

Mike: Nice.

Henry: And every year, I have a leaning towards a different one that I think I might like this one better this week. And but I don't get - -

Mike: It's just like children again.

Henry: Yeah, you know, it's prairies, you have to remember they're like human beings. They come in all different forms, shapes, and so forth. Because when I started a prairie, I was really concerned, I want to see a real prairie, you know, I wanted to see a little prairie. Well, that many real prairies a big prairie.

Mike: Gotcha.

Henry: And so when you start your own prairie, the same thing happens.

Mike: You mentioned that the tallgrass. What else has motivated you or inspired you to work on prairies?

Henry: I think what I like about what it does for the soil. I remember we had once a rain many years ago that was like maybe seven inches in a short time, like hour and a half. And around the farmstead, it was like walking in a basement on the shag rug that was flooded, you know. And I walked into the prairie, there was like nothing had happened.

Mike: There you go.

Henry: So I think what I like about that, the water that falls and stays in the area it falls, and that's something we need because we have made our cities so efficient and our farm fields so efficient that it always just draws off and it just totally wrecks our river. You know the rivers, it's a shame that they're hidden behind trees but it's just they never heal. I was in Europe this summer and I've never seen a river as torn up as the American rivers.

Mike: You're kidding. Yeah.

Henry: The rivers I was on the Rhine and Europe had a lot of rain this summer, they had a lot of rain, which caused flooding and everything, but I didn't see any injured rivers, which is I saw more than one because I was watching for that and it is, we can do much better.

Megan: I was caught up in the moment because I was just thinking about that and I was thinking about what you said about how we can do so much better, and that's kind of my whole approach to my work is we can do better and we can do better together because we all live here, and so Minnesota definitely has a lot of use, it has a lot of industry in it, which is part of what, it's part of our heritage, it's part of why we're all here in some respects, but there's also, we're a natural resources state at the end of the day, and so we have a responsibility to care for those natural resources and they also contribute directly to all of those industries and economies, so I was just thinking about all my brain was like thinking about all of the ways we can do better together and just like stand in a circle and say kumbaya because I have all these ideas about how we're going to do it.

Mike: I would do that okay.

Megan: Okay, well that's fine. You're not in a circle.

Mike: All right.

Megan: But I'll be in my circle with all my farmer friends and we're going to figure it out because.

Mike: I'm happy to join as long as there's no singing kumbaya.

Megan: Okay, all right, fine. You can be in the circle.

Mike: I know you meant it figuratively.

Megan: Yeah. So switching gears a little bit, Henry, while Mike and I fight. What made you want to start volunteering with the enthusiasts?

Henry: Well, first is we started the organization, we felt like we could do some good because I think it always starts with education no matter what. And I think if you look at, we don't have that many options. I mean, we need to bring back an ecosystem that was born here, that is at home here that can really help us keep the air clean, keep the water clean, keep the water in place, and erosion and various aspects of, you know, it's like bringing something from the past that we have forgotten about and reestablish it. And one thing I like about like Mankato with the bison now in the Minneopa, that sort of is the cherry on the cake even in the sense that kind of completes the ecosystem and people are so drawn to that. And the nice thing is I'm very optimistic. You know like in Mankato, the city is using prairie fence for landscape.

Megan: It's beautiful. I was driving there the other day and I was like aw, instantly like it struck the competition chord in me and I was like New Ulm, let's do this up. Like I was because I live in New Ulm and so I was like man, if Mankato can do that, I'm ready, like New Ulm can definitely do this. We got a pollinator park. We're ready to go.

Henry: You know the roundabouts, they're outstanding, the prairie plants that are - -

Megan: They're beautiful and they did such a wide diversity of plants too.

Henry: And you know, I've been tempted to get a city outfit shirt so I could collect seeds while I'm in the circle there, you know, and my wife drives slowly while I jump out of the car and pick them. I am a city worker.

Megan: Attention, City of Mankato. If you see a German gentleman - -

Henry: Well we, we work with the city of Mankato.

Megan: - - is picking your roundabout.

((Laughter))

Henry: And then you know, it's like the Children's Museum, they have outstanding landscaping in prairie.

Megan: Oh, my gosh. They do.

Henry: You know, and so prairies, it's one goal when I started out, I wanted prairie not to be a special word, to become like a common word that everybody had a sense of, you know?

Megan: Of what it means.

Henry: And I think we're going in that direction very well. And I have farmer friends, and it's like this. I see an innocence, some of the old guys, they're used to certain way, and changing over is like changing religions.

Mike: Right.

Henry: It's not easy but the young ones, so we have to work with whatever's given and to all of this my point is we have to be kind and understanding and trying to really to their point of view and not just throw data at them and the thing it's an emotional issue and you can't solve it by being more intellectual by giving an intellectual answer.

Megan: That's very true. I always, so in my last job I worked with the Natural Resources Conservation Service in the Soil and Water Conservation District and the fellow I worked with there always said everything's about relationships. And at the end of the day, I mean, again, we all live here and people want to do the right thing. It's just I used to feel, and I still feel bad for farmers, I really do, because they receive so much information, it's hard to know which of it's credible, which of it's trustworthy, and I would say from the intellectual standpoint, we know so much more now about how things work and just even knowing that prairie roots trap soil and they improve water and they create space and structure in your soils, and we know through the roots project in Iowa and all of these other things that those can contribute directly to your bottom line as a farmer, and so that's just, there's, I don't want to get us off on a - - I'm already down a rabbit trail, Mike, pull us back.

Mike: That's okay. I mean, okay, Henry, tell us how your approach to restoration and management, how that's changed over the years since you first started working on prairies.

Henry: You know, I helped other people get started in prairies but your own and you live with your own mistakes and you learn the most, you know, because they're your home. What I've learned the most from is I think there's nothing, well, first, you have to remember the P in prairie stands for patience. And is I can't emphasize how important it is to prepare the site. It's not just like let's do once with Roundup and kill it and then next time throw the seed on it. It's I had one project and I took me like close to three years, and then what do you do? And then the one spring it was very wet and I have a big cottonwood not far away, and it just put so much seed on it all took because it was - -

Megan: Yeah.

Henry: - - so what do I throw this seed. You know, I had to stall another year and say is I have to control them first but you know what has happened. This person is the most blooming prairie.

Mike: Really?

Henry: Yeah, and somebody paid me a really compliment. I still have some problems with cottonwoods but he said it looks like an old original neglect prairie and it's a high compliment, you guys.

Megan: That's a very high compliment.

Henry: That's you know like and out there are Blazing Stars, I have hundreds of them.

Megan: And they're hard to grow in a reconstruction. They don't always come.

Henry: You guys Randy harvested I think over 200 and he said it doesn't show like anything I was there. So out of this kind of situation, some good things have come.

Mike: Sure.

Henry: And one thing I noticed with old prairies, grass kind of take, when flowers really get going, they suppress the grasses. It's like I know a cemetery, I won't name the names, it's just here in this area and we collect seed from it and hardly any grass but my gosh. But the prairie, I'm really touched when I see original prairie plant that man never had anything to do with it. Because we have a tendency we have too much to do with anything. It's not that good for the plant. It becomes more vulnerable to surviving and might produce good for a year but the second year it'll probably die.

Megan: So would you say is it fair to say that your approach has changed in that, so number one, we need site prep and then number two, I could be putting words in your mouth here, Henry, but I swear I'm hearing you say diversity is important. Kidding. Lots of different kinds of things.

Mike: Yeah, that's weird here you say that, Megan, I've never heard that out of your mouth before.

Megan: It's like a common podcast theme, diversity, diversity, diversity.

Henry: Well because you know what? Is, and I'm not, I have good friends who are farmers. It's like I told some of these guys, you know, a monarch has to pack a lunch to get across Southern Minnesota, you know?

Megan: Pack a lunch. ((Laughing))

Mike: That's a good way to put it.

Megan: Diversity is definitely important and we definitely are an agriculturally dominated landscape, which we need agriculture but I think for a while, we've been not quite in balance. And so we need to find a way to get back in balance so that we can have farming, we can have the prairie, and we can have all of the harmony that that provides and those two things are working well today.

Henry: Eventually, I mean, it's just a matter of time that we would have to each number of acres on the field would have a holding pond before the water goes in the river. I note Lake Washington, the lake association has bought land and a lot of the tile used to drain in lake actually goes in the pond with a lot of cattails and woodchips and they take out

all the chemicals. And I think we need slow release. I mean, we all know that how many days is it before the river rose after shower, now it's like flushing a toilet.

Megan: Yeah, it's fast. Well, and prairie roots, if you had more prairie roots on the landscape, then you get more infiltration and you trap, well, you trap that water basically, you slow it down, that's what you do, so again, we just have to find a way to get it.

Henry: And I think that can be done. That will be just take time and I think we have no choice but going that direction.

Megan: Oh and there's lots of good things happening.

Henry: Absolutely.

Megan: With soil health initiatives, there's lots of farmers doing pretty incredible things.

Henry: The no till and some of those things and I think what's exciting soil that now looking at the micro level of soil, how the organism and I find that really exciting.

Megan: It is exciting and that's another world where we know so little.

Henry: Yes.

Megan: I said to somebody that we're having this conversation, okay, this is a prairie drop see rant, Mike, bear with me for a second.

Henry: Thank you, okay.

Megan: Okay. We were talking about prairie dropseed, which is a very important bunchgrass for your restorations, and well, in any remnant prairie. It's a very important prairie plant. But we have trouble with it in reconstructions because it doesn't seem to grow when you seed it unless the site conditions are just right. I have sites where 15 years later, all of a sudden prairie dropseed is growing, and so I am convinced that there is some connection that's broken in the soil that has to be repaired before it can really thrive in a reconstruction type setting. I don't know what that is. It hasn't been proven yet but I'm - - so when you talk about soil microbes, I get really, really excited because I think there's some connection going on with bacteria and fungi and all of these hundreds of thousands of organisms and we don't even completely understand happening to make my beloved prairie drop seed grow.

Henry: I love that plant.

Megan: It's an amazing plant. You should, this is one that if you're planting a home garden and you want to feature native plants or if you're just planting a prairie in general, make sure that you buy plugs and you get it in there. It looks like a fountain, smells like popcorn. What's not to love? It's a very, very important plant for getting that structure in your prairie. Anyway, that's my drop seed rant.

Megan: Fact Check update: Hey all, Megan here with a quick fact check update. Do you ever have those moments where your brain just stops working? So, this entire time I was talking about prairie dropseed, I was actually picturing in my mind leadplant.

Goodness, we have to remember that sometimes there is not an ecological constraint, but there might be an economic one. And we have to make sure whatever the limitation is, that we're thinking about it in the correct way. So, in the case of prairie dropseed, still a super important plant, definitely include it in your plantings, but there's not an ecological constraint to getting more of it. Just plant more of it and then you'll get more of it. But with leadplant, there is still something that we don't quite know about with soil connections and biology that has to be just right in order for us to see leadplant. So, leadplant was what I was thinking of when I said that sometimes you don't see it until 15 years after you've planted it. Sorry about that, I should've known it's always a leadplant rant I'm on. Alright, fact check update out.

Henry: You know, one thing is I don't know if in the woodlands there's a botanist come out now it's a few years, Peter Wohlleben is a German forester and he's taken research from all over the world and he has shown different research from United States, Canada, and different kinds, how trees communicate through electric currents, through chemicals, to pheromones, you know how, you know, I wish we could get to the prairie in this kind of thing point exactly what you're saying, like yeah, the table has to be set a certain way before dropseed shows up.

Megan: Right, before things will happen.

Henry: See, that's another thing about prairie is you put a seed in and you think oh, God, that was a dud. Never give up on the prairies. If you go long enough, all of a sudden, there it is, and you think it's some kind of miracle. No. It's just a delayed bloom, you know.

Megan: Yeah. I don't think I've ever had a failure in all the years that I've been doing this. I've had things go the way I didn't want them to go, let's be clear that things, I've made plenty of mistakes, but if you take the time to do your site prep and plan your seed mixture, not going to fail. You just may not get what you thought you were going to get.

Henry: When you wanted it.

Megan: When you wanted it, yes, exactly. Like the prairie is going to have a way of doing it, but. Okay. Tell us quickly what are the most important things you've learned that you want to share with others.

Henry: That I think is like when you start a prairie, it's like having a small child. The first three years, it will take a lot of time. But after that, the adolescence very fast or the adulthood and their - -

Megan: So your children were teenagers at four - -

Henry: Exactly.

Megan: Okay.

Henry: You know, in the metaphorically way of speaking, yeah, is so I think you keep that in mind. Don't set you up. Go into it realistically that it will take that much, but it's a long-term investment and later on, you just have to go and snip there or something like

that. And each soil is different. I mean, the soils I had, they were very neglected and there was incredible seeds of thistles. And I think one thing that I've really been impressed, the farmer sprays for thistles - - for weeds every year and like the neighbor, this year it was too wet, they couldn't get in the field. And all of a sudden, they were full of weeds, and they have to work, and so the bed of weeds that is in soil is just unending. I always call it the dance of the witches because different things, I mean like the treaty site at St. Peter we had marijuana one year was the big sale, you know it was just full of, marijuana but old hemp plant, they're not as powerful.

Megan: But there are no silver bullets. If you have never heard that before, you are hearing it here right now, there are never any silver bullets, no plant, no person, nothing, there's not one thing that ever going to get us there, it's always going to be a combination.

Henry: Right and what you have to learn is to forgive yourself and move on.

Megan: I feel very peaceful right now. We were talking about kind of earlier and he said that for your job, you were a psychologist in school, and I feel like I'm having my one-on-one like therapy with Henry, prairie therapy with Henry moment.

Mike: Can you come by every Tuesday?

Megan: Yeah, could you Prairie Tuesday with Henry, every Tuesday.

Henry: Just let me tell you this. A fully adjusted person is dead, the rest of us are always adjusting and okay, we have to learn from that. So the standard isn't that impossible.

Megan: Mike's the most relaxed I've ever seen him.

Mike: I know, that's what I'm saying.

Henry: Yeah.

Mike: While we have here, I just wanted to make sure we got your thoughts on how we inspire a new generation of prairie lovers, getting more people than there are now, not just after restoring a prairie, but that are behind and supporting prairie conservation that understand how important it is and how cool it is. What's the best way to go about doing that?

Henry: You know, what we have done a two kind of prong approach. We have connection with a college, so we have students who come. But the students at the college site living on the campus, you know everybody leaves in a short time you know, is the same thing but, you know, they get good, they come from burns, and they get excited and we have a professor there who is very excited and he works with us, you know, so that's one way. And then - -

Megan: Is this Mankato State?

Henry: Mankato State University, right. And then for instance here in New Ulm, the Izaak Walton League has been very good to us and for instance, last summer, the high school has two classrooms, they're outside classrooms, okay. And the teacher there who wanted to call us to see how we could help him, he was interested in prairie. So the

first thing is we listen to the students and once we, you know, as soon as we get out there, you got a paper, the wind blows it away. And what it is, it's really a first-rate site. They're all benches made out of limestone kind of structure. It's really excellent. And then it's this cord site from New Ulm is the floor of it. It's very well-done, designed by architect. So what we did is we planted a wind break, okay, so that would because it faces kind of the western direction, there's a lot of wind blowing, and that's one thing. And then we have a display garden of plant identification and we got over 40 plants and we bought the plants already and then we have them, so the students can walk around and learn about prairie plants right there, and so we have another year because there's a piece that's maybe a little wider than this room and twice as big between the classrooms and we want to put just a prairie just random planting, but anyway. But there's challenges of building. There's a really great building, the high school, but the thing is you know, the soil has been so thick you know they dug down for footings to get all the clay up and then once you get into that. So what we needed to do, we needed to amend. First we had to rotor till all this stuff, and then we found some old guy here in New Ulm, he was a really nice man, he rotor tilled it, you know, we paid him obviously and he asked for price, we even gave him more than he asked. So we had to amend the soil before we put the plants in, and the plants really took like gangbuster, you know, so see, that's why mean the youth is the future. And then we recommended data, I mean books to him. You ask like Madson, John Madson, I don't know if you know the writer. Oh, he's a wonderful guy. He is I just - -

Megan: Mike's nodding so Mike knows.

Mike: Yeah, I used to have the book. It disappeared. I thought maybe you stole it, Megan.

Megan: I do not take your things. Stop blaming me.

Mike: Somebody stole it. So it's that good of a book. It was worth stealing, anyway.

Henry: He died over 20 years ago but he's still in print, so he was a guy who he called himself a prairie dog. When he writes, you actually are there when you just read it, and he ran around all the prairies in Iowa and various places and he even has part of the information is how they used to start prairies. I mean, we have learned so much how to make it much easier. Before at one time, I think they even had 4x8 plywood sheets they would lay down that holes drilled and then they put the seed in these holes because they weren't quite sure how to space them and so forth. I mean, it was like doing dental to your foot, you know. It wasn't easy.

Megan: Dental work through your foot. That sounds terrible.

Henry: Yeah, it is. Anyway.

Megan: What's the name of the Madson book?

Henry: I can give you here.

Mike: The exact title is it's - -

Henry: *Where the Sky Began*.

Mike: Yeah there ya go.

Megan: *Where the Sky Began*.

Henry: Here, wait, I have one here I can give you.

Megan: Oh, excellent.

Henry: Yeah. You know what? He is a very good writer and he loves prairie. Just no question. And.

Mike: Yeah, that was one of the first I read on the subject of prairie, one of the first I ever read.

Henry: I used to have it. We sold our house December, so everything's packed away but I used to have it on my nightstand where I would just read four pages, five pages before I went to sleep. You know, he writes with heart and the love for the prairie and you get the juiciness of the whole experience by reading him.

Megan: It was published in 1982, a good year.

Mike: Oh, no.

Megan: The year the prairie broke its mold for little baby Megan. ((Laughing))

Mike: Wow.

Megan: Well, while we're talking about books, I think that this is a great time for us to transition.

Mike: I just want to make sure. So you're saying they key to inspiring a new generation of prairie lovers is to get them out, get their hands dirty working in the prairie, working restoring prairies.

Henry: Yeah and you know what? It is good if you could be excited in the process. If you can be really vulnerable with your caring for prairie and show that. Because you know what? Everybody wants the experience on genuineness. When you really talk about something you love, you can't screw it up. You know?

Mike: Yeah, that's a good way to put it.

Henry: Because it just comes and people thirst that because we have a tendency to speak by numbers and, we kinda, like we paint by numbers. Nobody wants to take a risk to sound funny.

Megan, Mike, and Jess: (Pre-recorded) LET'S SCIENCE: TO THE LITERATURE! Science!

Megan: Okay. This is the part of the podcast where we recommend a book, a blog, or a paper and it's only right that we already sort of mentioned John Madson and his work, and so we're going to jump into a few other things. My pick for the day is the Prairie Reconstruction Initiative website. It is a Google-hosted website. And I'm mentioning that because if you haven't heard of the Prairie Reconstruction Initiative, you really should and you're doing reconstruction work, work with prairies in the Midwest, you really

should join to get information about that group. They're a multistate group, they're made up of scientists, researchers, land managers, and basically we're all working together to try to figure out how we can answer some of our most challenging questions about what makes reconstruction successful through time. So our goal is really to make sure that if you're going to plant a floristically diverse prairie, that we maintain that diversity through time and we keep that resilience on the landscape. And that's not something that we quite, we're much further along, we know more than we ever did, but we've got work to do. There's still, I mean, there's hundreds of thousands of critters that we don't even know anything about that we're mentioning earlier about some of our soil microorganisms, so there's lots of things that we don't know when people talk about space being the last new frontier, I always think that soils is like, soils and prairie connections is still a frontier that we have yet to discover because so much of that ecosystem is underground.

Mike: Absolutely.

Megan: Mike, your pick.

Mike: My pick. The Minnesota Conservation Volunteer Magazine. So the magazine as a whole is amazing and I highly recommend it. But in particular, I'm going to talk about the sense of place issue. I think this comes out on an annual basis.

Megan: I don't know if it's annual or not.

Mike: Okay.

Henry: Monthly.

Regardless, what did you say?

Henry: Comes every month.

Mike: Okay, the magazine comes every month.

Henry: Yeah.

Mike: There's a sense of place issue that I wanted that in particular came out, regardless, the latest one is what I really want to talk about because there's some focus on prairie over here, so there's two articles. One is a photograph article and to me, photographs are a key part of communicating the value of prairie because of the distances you can see, there is so much beauty in prairie that you don't get elsewhere, and this fellow whose name again is.

Megan: Jim Brandenburg.

Mike: Jim Brandenburg. Thank you, Megan.

Megan: You're welcome.

Mike: Takes some fantastic photos and several of them highlight the prairie sky, which I really like. It's one of my favorite parts of the prairie. Coming from a forested area in my youth, meaning like five years ago.

Megan: In my youth ((laughter)).

Mike: I really appreciate being able to see the sky and that combined with the biota and the rocks and the dirt in the prairie, it's beautiful.

Megan: It's soil if it's a in prairie, let's be clear. Soil is alive, dirt is dead, soil is alive.

Mike: You're just an elitist, you know.

Megan: That's not elitist. It's called being a scientist.

Henry: Soilist.

Megan: Soilist?

Mike: Okay, so a soilist. Then there's an essay also in this article, I just wanted to read a quick, can I read this? Is that okay?

Megan: Sure, yeah.

Mike: So this is by a famous local author.

Megan: Oh, gosh.

Mike: And so just hang on and listeners, you can guess who wrote this, okay?

Megan: Oh, boy.

Mike: Every time I step on to a site, whether for my job, no, this is going to give it away, I can't read that part. Okay, all I want to do is pause to take it all in, the waves of golden-tipped Indiangrass, the deep blues and purples of bluestem intermingling with the bright green of drop seed. Wildflowers in a riot of shapes and colors, symphonies of calling birds and buzzing insects. The rich, spicy smell of spoil that took thousands of years to gain its unique aroma. The prairie is alive. How many times have I been surprised by a vole scurrying through its secret tunnels in the grass or startled by a garter snake basking in the sun? It doesn't take long to get lost in wonder. So I gave it away, that was our own Megan Benage that wrote that.

Megan: Oh, wow. Thanks, Mike. That was very complimentary.

Mike: I really like how you emphasize the importance of wonder in the prairie and that's something we don't emphasize enough. We talk too much probably. Well, we don't talk too much but we talk a lot about ecosystem surfaces and stuff like that.

Megan: Like water infiltration and flood control.

Mike: Like Henry was talking about, we do lots of quantification, lots of numbers, and that sense of wonder is important.

Megan: I'm still in it for that.

Mike: Your essay does a good job of highlighting that, well done.

Megan: Thanks, Mike. I really appreciate that.

Henry: I think we wonder not enough.

Mike: That's right. I agree.

Henry: We are all underperforming in the domain of wonderness.

Megan: I would have to agree with that. That's why I - - well, they ask me, when they ask me to write the piece, they ask me to write about my connection with prairie and why it matters so much to me, and I always struggle a little bit when people ask me that question because I'm not sure if I should give the scientific answer of all the benefits, all of the things the prairie is doing for us right or if I should give the real answer, which is just I'm emotionally connected to it. Like you said, it's a relationship. I'm in a deep committed relationship with prairie. We cellmates. Like we living together, life is good, it's beautiful.

Mike: I'm going to have a talk with your fellow about this.

Megan: ((Laughter)) Yeah. Oh, gosh. And one thing I want to mention really quick because we're going to jump to Henry's pick, but I forgot to say this about the Prairie Reconstruction website, and so I want to make sure I do. They also have their repository for research, so research that they're doing related to prairie reconstructions, how we can become better. Field days, which is where we all get better because we learn from each other, and now they have a database and monitoring protocols to help us do a better job of evaluating when something went right, why did it go right, and when something went wrong, why did it go wrong, so I want to make sure I said that. Henry, your pick.

Henry: I think is what I did is the prairie enthusiasts have a magazine that comes out and the nature toolbox citizen science, and is I found it very helpful is and the plant they're talking about is the wood betony, and it is an interesting plant. For instance, one thing that I hear and I have seen a lot is that people have prairies and they're like wheat fields, all tallgrasses and there's nothing - - so it's better than maybe what it was before but it doesn't feed diversity. It's a very stingy prairie, you know?

Mike: Stingy prairie.

Henry: And so the thing is so they say well, what can we do? You know what we have recommended, take Roundup and kill spots, and then keep doing this for a time, and then for a year, and then the seed that would plant. Now, this is an approach with wood betony, is you take this author what he recommends is that you take a piece maybe like five feet by ten and stake it out, mark it, and then you burn it. Now that's hard - - I didn't follow the article but it's hard to burn a piece of prairie in the middle of a prairie, you've got the whole thing on fire.

Megan: Right, and do it safely.

Henry: That's the way he started burning at first, and then mowing it, and then putting seed in, and he indicated that the seed he would need is about as much as you have in the hand, not up to your finger, just in this cup. And that, the magic of this plant is that it is a parasite on tallgrasses, so it takes moisture nutrients from big bluestem,

switchgrasses, and those, so it suppresses them or Canadian goldenrod. It suppresses those because they're pretty pushy flowers in the prairie.

Mike: Pushy.

Henry: And so they will recede and then you can introduce flowers, and a lot of plants that get along with this particular plant, so you, it's not too late to improve. I mean, I've gone like from Mankato to Pipestone and there are a lot of big prairie places but they're not very, they're kind of stingy, stingy prairies. And I think this is a - - and you know what? You do this for a year he claims, you know, the once you seed it, at first you have to keep mowing as soon as everything gets eight inches, you should mow it down before. And but this plant will then take over, and after one year of giving it, making sure it gets sufficient light so I can form and you can plant these seeds in bunches and it's a plant that likes to have its family members close by, and.

Megan: It's more of itself.

Henry: And after, and then over time, you can see that goldenrod, big grasses recede because the basically get worn down by, the interesting is, it's a green plant, so it can actually, it is a parasite lives in big grasses but it also produces its own photosynthesis.

Mike: Wow.

Megan: I'm glad that you picked it because there's a mixed bag of literature on wood betony and it really does work or not. There's some research that suggests that it doesn't actually work that way and but then there's other research that suggests that it could, so I feel like it's one of those mysteries still where it's not fully certain how it's working when it's working, but I like that this article includes pictures.

Henry: See, it has pictures.

Megan: Yeah.

Henry: You know, is, and this is apparently you can see the ready variety has been able to introduce and that these other more aggressive plants. I think that's another thing when you start a prairie. You don't want to have certain plants right away. Let them establish and then introduce them. You know, there's a Canadian, it's they call it bigger slice, it sticks on you, you know, tick foil, Canadian tick foil. I have it in one piece of the prairie. It's such a pushy plant. I just mow it and the prairie looks like it's been attacked by moths or something. But I suppress that plant because it's just like an old buffalo rope that's seen better days. But anyway, it's you could see that's the plant that you want to not have many seeds of it because this is very successful of spreading out because anybody that gets close drags it someplace else.

Megan: Well, the hardest thing I think about prairie restoration in general is that prairies have successional stages just like forests and everything else, and so there are certain things that are supposed to be there in the beginning and there's certain things that are supposed to move in over time. Now, when you're starting from scratch and you're trying to recreate that, it's difficult to know when to put what seed in where and how to make it all work with our funding constraints and our timing constraints. We're still not there yet but your point is well taken.

Henry: Well, people are impatient. They want to see results right away.

Megan: The P in prairie is for patience.

Henry: Yeah, and that's why we have the black-eyed Susan and that blooms right away. It doesn't last very long, but people say oh, wow, look at the prairie. It's done something. And yeah, anyway. But yeah, I find that it's nature's way. Again, you have to be careful with nature's help. We have screwed up in many ways using that kind of approach.

Mike: Hey Megan.

Megan: Yeah, Mike?

Mike: Take a Hike!

Megan: Let's all hike together, Mike! I want to hike with Henry. I would hike with Henry every day just so I can listen to his beautiful accent.

Mike: Me too. Can you have a shift and I have a shift or do we go the same time?

Megan: No, we can all do it together. We're in this together. Well, Henry made a face, so maybe you can't come. I made him coffee, you didn't. So this is the part of the podcast where we are going to talk about some of your amazing public lands, that's right, you are a public landowner. So like we do when we have a guest, we gave them the opportunity to pick some of their favorites. Henry, do you want to start us off with your favorite, some of your favorites, I should say your - -

Henry: You know what? Is, yeah, some of my favorites actually is I haven't explored you know, western Minnesota much, but I've spent like in the sandhills of Nebraska, I spent a week with a rancher, at this ranch house and the friend who knows the guy and we went to all those prairies. You know, it's like an ocean bottom just with grass. It is just phenomenal. But to very honest, favorite, I would say my favorite prairie is the one I'm standing in at the moment.

Mike: Okay.

Henry: Because I want to go and really experience this prairie, not through my concepts of if you have a favorite, that means you have a picture how they should be, what a prairie should be, and then you superimpose it over this wretched little plot, you know, whatever it might be, you don't give it a chance for you to really see what it has to offer. So my favorite prairie is just like the guy whose hunger, his favorite hamburger is the one he's eating. That's the same thing as far as I'm concerned as far as prairies concerned.

Megan: But if you were going to hike today, I think earlier you told me, you gave me two. Yeah, I'm nailing you down. You gave me two.

Henry: Yeah, yeah, yeah, the Kasota prairie. I know that piece of land when it was cow pasture, when cows were in it. I still remember, and it used to be a place to go parking when you had a girl and you had to get out of town for a little privacy.

Megan: Oh, boy.

Henry: It was out in the country and then you're parked. I mean, you talked, and anyway.

Megan: Lots of relationships going on the prairie.

Henry: And then it went through a phase, the National Guard wanted to make it into a target range, you know to run their vehicles, so then there's an uprising of the locals and so the Friends of Minneopa of the Kasota Prairie, there was pretty politically active group that changed that, and then Unimin you know the sand for fracking and they have done it, and they have been very supportive of prairie and they have helped give money. They actually had a prairie restor come in and burn and produce, so the Friends of Minneopa are kind of group and they do some work and they do tours but a lot of the work was done by Unimin, but Unimin got sold and now the whole fracking has gone kind of sideways, so I think the prairie's going to benefit, you know, land to recover if people just leave it alone. And there's enough heart of prairie that it can spread, so I think it's exciting areas here, guys, to go. I've gone there and collected phlox and various things and dragged it to other places, but to me, the prairie is like a relationship. You have to see it changing and see that just going as a tourist. I don't want to be a tourist, prairie tourist, okay? I want to have a relationship with the prairie and it is close. I can go and I love my prairies. And you know, Gary Rathman, I don't know if you know, he's Western Minnesota. He is one of the best restore prairies around.

Megan: He does.

Henry: He's a retired farmer who took his land and put it into prairie, and he's incredible nice man, and he has a big heart and he's a very skilled man with fixing things and he's one member of the organization. But if you want to ever see.

Mike: That's what I need to see.

Henry: And if you ever want to see an example, really an excellent one. And you know he has houses for bats. I mean, he, he - -

Megan: He made our bee house here at the headquarters. He makes bee houses.

Henry: Yeah. And he had a pond for turtles. Well, so then he dug out and made a beach, he hauled in sand, so they could lay their eggs in.

Megan: He's great.

Mike: I see he's managing the whole ecosystem, it sounds like.

Henry: You know, his bluebird houses is their kind of wind they turn, so that wind doesn't blow in the opening.

Mike: All right.

Henry: You know, I mean - -

Mike: Genius.

Megan: He's incredible with the stuff he engineers.

Henry: Yeah, he is and everything he does is really well-done.

Mike: Okay, did you know about that?

Megan: I would agree with that. Just a reminder that if you wanted to go to Gary's property, it's on private land, so you would need to - -

Mike: It's private land, and you have to call. You have to - -

Megan: Chat with him, bring him some cookies - -

Mike: Chat with him first.

Megan: - - that kind of thing, but this Kasota Prairie SNA, you can, I think you were talking about Kasota Prairie as a whole, that whole complex that's over there, your public land that's over there is the scientific and natural area that you could visit, but it is a larger prairie complex that's currently owned by lots of different folks, mainly Covia Mining Company owns quite a bit.

Henry: But the Kasota Prairie is for public, I mean, you can, it's a public.

Megan: The scientific and natural areas, yes. Yes. Mike?

Mike: Mine is Joseph A. Tauer Prairie Scientific and Natural Area. Tauer spelled T-a-u-e-r, right?

Megan: Yes, sir.

Mike: So you're talking about developing relationships with prairies. I kind of have one with J.A. Tauer, I think. It's just mainly it's so close to New Ulm that you end up going there lots for trainings and we're trying to work out some survey protocol, run to Joseph A. Tauer and figure it out. And then it is actually a site where I've done some monitoring, the site where I did some management, an attempted prescribed burn. It is a floristically diverse, pretty high-quality prairie. I can't remember how many acres it is. It's kind of a small one, it's unfortunately indicative of a lot of the prairies in this area. It's surrounded by agriculture, so it's kind of a, I don't know if you want to call it a postage stamp prairie. It's a smaller prairie in an otherwise ag-dominated landscape.

Megan: Well, and it persists because of the farmer who owned it. He knew that there was something special and he's the one who said I'm not going to convert this to farmland. This is something pretty amazing, and so he kept it that way until he sold it to the DNR, and that was part of his intention is that he wanted it to remain a prairie, so we owe a big debt, I mean, to farmers as well because they're the ones who are stewarding the land, as are all other private landowners. Anyway, so I didn't mean to - -

Mike: That's all I have for that. It's a cool place I recommend visiting.

Megan: I do too. It's really neat. It also is one of the largest populations of leadplant that I have ever seen. Yeah. It's very, very pretty.

Henry: It's a long-lived plant.

Megan: It is a very long-lived plant. So my pick is kind of a maybe not a as known site. Devils Run Wildlife Management Area. So this is in Murray County, it's just northeast of Slayton, and it's right off of Highway 8. And I believe there's also a US Fish and Wildlife Service Property adjoining it to the north there, it's the Devils Run WPA, so we're very creative with our naming there. We have the Devils Run WMA and the Devils Run WPA. That's just part of our synergy working under the conservation plan together. Prairie partners for life, Fish and Wildlife Service DNR. So I did some seed harvesting this past year out with Bill Schuna, one of our wildlife managers, and it is just beautiful. It's a hillside for most of it and then it's got some wetland basins that you look over and it's one of those sites where Jess, she would talk about a prairie vista and how gorgeous it is. It really has a nice prairie vista and there's, it's very diverse as well, and so the seed harvesting that we were doing obviously is to make some of our other prairies that might be less diverse, more diverse, that type of thing. Just as a reminder, since we keep talking about harvesting seed, that you do need a permit to be doing that on DNR lands, but you don't need a permit to just go out there and enjoy it, so.

Mike: Another place I need to go.

Megan: Yeah. It's a really, really pretty prairie. I highly recommend it. Gosh, I could just talk all day with Henry. I can talk all day, well, let's be honest. I can talk all day with Henry. ((Laughing))

Henry: That was - -

Megan: - - That was a thousand plants, you're welcome. But we'll be back next week on Prairie Tuesday where Mike and I get to continue talking. We're going to be with an oldie but a goodie, Invertebrate Ecologist Jessica Peterson, you might recognize.

Mike: Did you say Jess is old?

Megan: An oldie but a goodie.

Mike: I'm going to tell her.

Megan: Like not old like oh, dear, goodness. Anyway, we're going to talk about her work surveying bees with the Minnesota Biological Survey, bee survey specialist Nicole Gerjets. My gosh, I hope I said your last name right. And last time we did an official bee list was in 1919, which is super easy for me to remember because here in New Ulm.

Mike: You were born then. Oh sorry, go ahead.

Megan: Oh, dear sweet baby prairie grass. Like what is wrong with you? No, 1919 is the name of our root beer that we have in New Ulm that Schell's produces, so I just whenever I think 1919, I think of that delicious root beer, so that's when our last official list of bees came out. We are currently making a new state list for bees and we are up to over 466 species and counting, each playing a unique role in the ecosystem. Ready? Are you ready for my pun? There's lots to buzz about in this episode. You're not going to want to miss it. Oh, my goodness. This episode today was produced by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Southern Region under the Minnesota Prairie Conservation Partnership. It was edited by Dan Ruiter and engineered by Jed Becher. As always, you can find all of the resources, including the Take a Hikes and the

LET'S SCIENCE on our website at mndnr.gov/prairiepod. Super glad that we had to spend this time with you guys today.

Mike: Thank you so much, Henry.

Henry: Yeah, same here.

Mike: It was really an honor to talk to you.

Megan: Yeah, thank you. We should say in German tschüss.

Henry: Tschüss

Mike: Tschüss. What does that mean?

Henry: Goodbye.

Megan: It means bye.

((sounds of birds chirping and wind blowing))