



*Ron and Joyce Wolf.
Photo by Mehrzad (Tony) Alison.*

Joyce Wolf: the Making of an Environmental Activist

Michael L. Donnelly

Joyce Wolf has played an important role in environmental causes here in Kansas for going on forty years. The route that brought to Kansas her knowledge, dedication, and ability to network with sometimes hostile groups was intriguingly circuitous, filled with seeming happenstance and fortuitous connections.

She grew up in southern Ohio, where formative childhood experiences revolved around visits to the all-purpose farm of a family friend, and her mother's intense interest in birds. She would have gone to medical school like her older brother, but that was in the 1950s, and she knew her family would not have been able to finance two medical educations—especially when one was a girl, when not that many women even finished college—so she majored in bacteriology at the University of Cincinnati, where she met Ron, her husband of some sixty years, through their common interest in birding. Ron's work with the US Geological Survey took them and their growing family first to Indianapolis, then to Minnesota, where Ron's work involved field site measurements of water well depths. At that time, both Ron and Joyce became active in the Minnesota River Valley Audubon Club (MRVAC).

One of three Audubon groups in the Minneapolis area, the MRVAC was the one most engaged with environmental issues. Fellow members encouraged Joyce's involvement in local, regional, and national environmental issues, including the preservation of the Wood Lake Nature Area locally, the formation of the Minnesota River Valley Wildlife Refuge regionally, and active opposition to drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska.

When she and Ron moved to Kansas in 1982, one of the leaders of Audubon in Minnesota who had come to know her work as an activist with the MRVAC recommended her to Ron Klataske and Ed Pembleton of what was then the Kansas Audubon Council. When the National Audubon organization pulled back from its regional branches, she became one of the founding members of Audubon of Kansas, along with Ron, Bob McElroy, Richard Seaton, and Richard Tucker. Her training in bacteriology at the University of Cincinnati had led to work while still a student on various projects including weekend lab work with the predecessor of the EPA documenting coliform bacteria in the Ohio River and tributaries, and work at Proctor and Gamble studying toothpaste additives that would be effective antimicrobials but harmless to

humans. Because the Audubon chapter in Minnesota that she and Ron had joined (at first just because it had good child care programs for young couples with infants and younger children!), engaged in environmental activism, her experience was quickly valuable to the fledgling Audubon of Kansas. She was an ideal candidate for training in how the legislative process worked, and how to influence legislation on behalf of the environment. Accordingly, she was sent to an Audubon “boot camp” in Washington, D.C. to train in lobbying techniques.

She was tasked in 1985 with helping to form the Kansas Clean Air Coalition, working with the Kansas chapter of the American Lung Association to address acid rain issues. Joyce’s task force was to mobilize public opinion to appeal to Congressional representatives in support of regulations that would reduce the sulfur and nitrogen compounds in the air from industrial fossil fuel combustion, pollutants causing a mounting crisis for flora, fauna, air, and waters. Based on her increasing record of environmental activism, she was selected to represent the Kansas Audubon Council, precursor to AOK, at the Kansas Statehouse in 1988. Because of the importance of knowledge of agricultural and water issues for credibility to Kansas legislators, Joyce’s childhood exploration of her parents’ friends’ farm and her work on water quality in Ohio were important factors in her success.

Another factor, though, was her openness to personal interaction with people “on the other side.” Joyce’s native disposition is irenic, rather than polemic; she will firmly confront and challenge flawed arguments and unfounded claims made by opponents, but she never demonizes those who are making the arguments. Her credo is,

“You can disagree on issues but it’s important to remain cordial in your personal relationships with people that you work with at the legislature”

—a principle sadly forgotten in many quarters in politics and government today! When she first began lobbying on agricultural issues in Kansas that affected the environment, she often found herself in disagreement with Bill Fuller, lobbyist for the Kansas Farm Bureau. However, he always had a pleasant greeting for her: “Well, young lady, what are you up to today?” And she would reply, “Running to keep up with you!”

An example of the fruits of this willingness to maintain open lines of communication with people often perceived as “the other side” was her championing of a Conservation Easement Bill when easements, particularly designed to protect wetlands, became an issue in the 1990s.

She was asked to come to the headquarters of the Farm Bureau in Manhattan, Kansas, representing “the conservation side,” to address

a group of farmers interested in possible benefits for them from the bill. When the Farm Bureau chose not to oppose the bill, and it received bi-partisan support from GOP Senator Ross Winter and Democratic Representative John Solbach, both attorneys from Lawrence, the bill was ultimately passed with little opposition.

At that time, as a result of her work on conservation easements, Joyce also became one of the founding members of the Kansas Land Trust, which just celebrated its thirtieth anniversary in 2020.

In her own estimation, however, the most significant achievement in all her years of working on behalf of the environment was working in the 1990s with Jan Garton, at that time president of the Kansas Audubon Council, to save Cheyenne Bottoms. Cheyenne Bottoms, a 41,000 acre wetland in Barton County and the largest in the interior of the United States, is a crucial stopover for migrating shorebirds and waterfowl, and was designated in 1988 as a Wetland of International Importance by the Ramsar Convention on wetlands. The marsh is owned by the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, and adjacent properties are now protected by the Nature Conservancy and Ducks Unlimited. Cheyenne Bottoms holds the senior water right for Walnut Creek, which feeds the marsh, and was formerly sustained also by the Arkansas River. However, the Ark River is now dry, and increased pumping of groundwater by irrigators in violation of the Bottoms’ senior water right is depleting the feeder streams and endangering the continued existence of the marsh, notwithstanding its recognized international importance.

This campaign presented an example of the tact and self-discipline that was so central to Joyce’s efforts, but not always exemplified by her allies in the cause. Joyce was a member of the Environmental Lobby Caucus, a group of representatives from the Kansas Audubon Council, the League of Women Voters of Kansas, the Kansas Rural Center, the KNRC, the Sierra Club, and the Kansas Wildlife Federation who met each Friday during the legislative session to consult and plan which bills to follow and who should testify on which bills. During the campaign of 1990, the members of the caucus met with gubernatorial candidate Joan Finney. At one point in the meeting, Ms. Finney said something about being “a blank slate”— meaning that she was not aware of many of the issues being introduced to her, though she expressed an interest in learning more. However, the lobbyist for the Sierra Club went to the press and told them that “Joan Finney says she’s a blank slate.” Ms. Finney had a reputation for being somewhat touchy, and when that remark received a lot of press coverage, she paid the environmental caucus back by vetoing the bill funding work on behalf of Cheyenne Bottoms.

Joyce credits Jan Garton’s “sharp mind and wonderful wit” with saving the day: she purchased yards and yards of orange fabric to cover seat cushions, on the outside of which she had written in large print, “SAVE OUR BOTTOMS!!” Volunteers from Audubon chapters delivered those cushions to each Kansas legislator. Meanwhile, an aggressive campaign of letters, phone calls, and advertisements was mounted to make state senators and



A solitary bee (likely *Andrena* sp.) nectaring on fawn lily (*Erythronium mesochoreum*) in an eastern Nebraska prairie. Joyce was active in publicizing the plight of pollinators. See her article, “Silent Spring 2016” in the Winter 2016-Spring 2017 *Prairie Wings* (pp. 8-9). Photo by Kathy R Denning

representatives aware of the crucial need to protect the Bottoms’ water right. The result was that the veto was overridden and the bill reinstated.

This effort generated some important spin-offs. As a result of a meeting at the Kansas History Center in Topeka at which representatives of the EPA and the National Parks Service were present, the Kaw Valley Heritage Alliance was formed. Ron Parks, who worked for the Historical Society, suggested the establishment of what became the Rollin’ Down the River Festival, first held in 1997 to spread information about the advantages of conservation easements to preserve in perpetuity environmentally valuable features of landowners’ property. The first Kaw Valley Eagles Day was held that same year in Lawrence and Manhattan, with funding from the EPA. When that funding was later lost, Joyce engineered financial support from a few businesses in Lawrence, including what was then Farmland Industries, Westar (now Evergy), City of Lawrence Recycling, Crown Automotive, Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, United States Army Corps of Engineers, USD 497, and the Baker Wetlands—another instance of her gifts for persistence and persuasion.

Yet another of her gifts is the ability to conceive of what might be, and to press on even in the face of ridicule or dismissal. At the time of the Cheyenne Bottoms campaign, on one occasion she and Jan Garton met with members of the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks. They presented the idea of an education center at the Bottoms to heighten awareness and appreciation of what a tremendous resource the great marsh was. The KDWP response

was to laugh at such a “silly idea”: such a facility would surely just be vandalized and wrecked. Joyce today takes particular pleasure in visiting the present-day Visitor/Education Center on Highway 281, across from the east entrance to the wetlands, which fulfills that long-ago proposal by Garton and Wolf. Joyce allows that the Cheyenne Bottoms Education Center, staffed by people from Fort Hays State University, is now “one of my favorite places to visit in Kansas.”

Joyce’s time as a registered lobbyist ended in 2000. Since then, however, she has continued tireless efforts to educate the public on the importance of water issues in Kansas, the State Water Plan, and various other matters of environmental concern such as declining populations of pollinators and encroachment of wind turbines on unsuitable sites. She has served faithfully and, thankfully, without editorial comment as recording secretary for AOK Board meetings and various subcommittees for many years, finally stepping down only two years ago. She has been an active member and often the driving force in the Jayhawk Audubon Chapter in Lawrence, one of the most active in the state in education and outreach.

One of the things that has made Joyce so effective in pushing for environmental issues in Kansas is her patient willingness to go to water- or environment-related meetings year after year after year, and sit and listen, and not only maintain an openness to hearing often the same personalities reiterate the same talking points over and over, but to actually master crucial details in the midst of all the give and take, and put those details into a more persuasive rejoinder or position statement.

As Rex Buchanan has remarked,

“If members of the water community were to be asked to name somebody from the environmental community that they respect and know and who shows up, they’d be hard pressed to identify many people, **but they would know who Joyce is from her having done just that.**”

Joyce’s thought has always been that “you can’t be successful making enemies out of potential friends. Why not try to have a frank discussion about what your different positions are and see if you can’t come up with something that both can agree on?”

Despite health issues in recent years, she tirelessly keeps up with environmental issues in the state and region. She views with dismay divisions among the friends of the environment over wind energy, wishing for an accommodation between enthusiasts for green energy without qualifications and those who urge that wildlife concerns—migratory bird corridors, bat concentrations, destruction and compromise of crucial habitat—would have a larger share in decisions about suitable siting. For the future of the Quivira Federal Wildlife Refuge, she wishes that the solution to the similar problems of enforcement of senior water rights that faced Cheyenne Bottoms thirty years ago might provide the template for a solution on the Rattlesnake Creek watershed today, satisfactory to all parties. Only two things were needed, she said in an interview in 2019 with Rex Buchanan for the Kansas History Project: “It’s going to take somebody to 1) to sue for the water right, and then 2) I’m hoping that Mr. Barfield [current Chief Engineer, DWR] will understand, and that there will be data developed and presented, similar to that for Cheyenne Bottoms, that makes the case that it’s possible to do this.”

In the last years of the previous administration in Washington, it appeared that Dave Barfield was ready to move in the desired direction, but the US Fish and Wildlife Service, at the intervention of the then-Secretary of the Interior, stepped in and prevented further action. Audubon of Kansas has now put forward the lawsuit; we can hope that the climate (political and, unfortunately, meteorological) has changed enough in the interim that Joyce’s hopes for this irreplaceable wetland can be realized.

In her interview with Buchanan, Joyce noted that most of the environmental lobbyists when she was active in the last years of the twentieth century were women. Jan Garton, Laura McClure, Joyce herself are prominent examples—“grassroots women who felt strongly about an issue and pushed it.” She speculated that one reason was that lobbying on behalf of the environment was “not a high-paying job. I don’t know that anybody could maintain a family on [it]—when I first started out, I had a negative net income because of going back and forth.” One might also speculate that in gender stereotypes, women are seen as nurturers, more attuned with nature and with aesthetic values; and in a day when many highly intelligent and able women were not employed outside the home, they had the time and inclination to do the homework

necessary to master the facts and details of environmental issues that Joyce made so much her own—and perhaps, not being tied by employment to the interests of large corporations and polluters of the environment, they were able to exercise a more independent judgment on what we now see as matters of universal concern, from the standpoint of health, and even from the standpoint of the economy—not to mention the future of the earth.

In her years of service to the landscape, water needs, and wildlife of Kansas, and to her fellow-citizens who enjoy the benefits of her efforts, Joyce Wolf is a sterling example of what one of those able, well-informed, dedicated, bridge-building and persistent women can do as an individual working for positive change.



Joyce loves tending large indoor plants like this Norfolk Island Pine in the background. Photo by Ron Wolf.