

Prairie Smoke History

From small meetings, big things can happen! After Deb and Gary Anderson did some custom farm work for Susan and Tim Gossman of Chatfield, MN, the two couples discovered a mutual interest in prairies. Deb was a biologist and had been interested in restoring her prairie remnant using controlled burns. However, to get the job done Deb could only find used DNR equipment to borrow. Due to high demand during the burn season, the equipment available to private land owners was in poor condition, and Deb knew they would face the same situation the following year. Susan and Tim had burned a small remnant on their farm and had the same experience with the equipment. Both decided that it would be nice to get together some like-minded people and buy new equipment that they all could share.

Four people, Deb Anderson, Susan and Tim Gossman and Lynden Dirksen decided to organize ⁽¹⁾. Lynden was a board member of the Chatfield Fish & Game Club (CF&G) which had acquired some property that needed a prescribed burn. Since the CF&G shared these immediate goals it seemed logical for the new group to become a Standing Committee of that club rather than try to start an entirely new organization. Another major advantage was that they could use the CF&G Non-Profit Incorporation status, thus saving the inconvenience of filing separately for a 501(c)3.

In February 1993, a formal letter was sent to the members of the CF&G and posters were placed around town advertising the first meeting of the new group on February 25th at Kelly's Place in Chatfield. They had no idea if anyone else would be interested so were pleasantly surprised to see more than 30 people there on that cold winter night.

The new group decided to call itself Prairie Smoke (PS), after the wildflower and also the need for fire as a revitalization tool. Nancie McCormish of Drawn by Design in Lanesboro, MN designed the current distinctive logo.

Over the following year Prairie Smoke, with CF&G, purchased various pieces of burn equipment and a 200 gallon pump wagon was completed by 1994.

Early projects included:

- A one third acre demonstration prairie planting was accomplished at Chosen Valley HS at the request of Sandy Sullivan, one of the teachers there.
- Butterfly Gardens were planted as fundraisers at two private homes in Chatfield.
- T-shirts, bandannas and mugs were sold and donations solicited to raise money for projects.
- The Carson-Groen Wildlife Sanctuary roadside was adopted and planted with native wildflowers and grasses.
- A letter was sent to the Fillmore County Engineer encouraging the use of native plants along three miles of Co. Rd #2 and offering to help with plantings.⁽²⁾
- Field trips were taken and books and a video on native wildflowers were donated to the Chatfield Public Library.

Over the next few years, several other projects were completed and commitments made for many others. Highlights include:

- The original one third acre planting at Chosen Valley HS was expanded to seven acres. Community members, student and teachers planted seed that had been collected and donated by landowners. It has now been expanded to ten acres and is called the Savanna Spring Nature Area. Funding for improvements and a Karst Education & Monitoring Station Project were made

possible by a School Nature Area Project grant, a WHIP grant and a BWSR Challenge grant (through Olmsted County).

- Prairie Smoke assisted landowners who wanted to do prescribed burns.
- A Minnesota DNR grant was received to survey and map Fillmore County roadsides for native plant communities and conduct a management study of native mix planting along Co Rd 2.
- Regional field trips were offered in cooperation with the MN Native Plant Society and Zumbro Valley Audubon Society.
- Olmsted Co. presented PS with an award for Outstanding Contributions to Environmental Quality
- Native plant seed was collected from multiple local habitats and donated to projects including the Chosen Valley HS prairie project, Fillmore Co. SWCD, Olmsted Co. Prairie Nursery at Chester Woods⁽³⁾, Willow Park in Spring Valley, and Northern Hills Prairie in Rochester

By 1999, the group had grown to over 50 members and like all new groups, was beginning to have growing pains. The original Prairie Smoke CF&G board member contact, Lynden Dirksen, had moved from Chatfield leaving no CF&G contact person.

Questions arose among members regarding:

- access to equipment, the value of the equipment, who “owned” the equipment?
- what really was the mission of Prairie Smoke?
- should PS adopt a more formal structure?
- should PS focus on restoration or protection?
- did the CF&G philosophy fit well with the Prairie Smoke philosophy?
- was CF&G still the best “home” for Prairie Smoke?

Survey questionnaires were sent to all members and the responses were tabulated. The results indicated an interest in having Prairie Smoke separate from CF&G and become a non-profit with its own status. Research began on the process necessary for acquiring that status. Prairie Smoke decided to buy back the burn equipment from CF&G and become independent.

Then Adam DeKerel, a passionate supporter of prairies, suggested to Andrea Mueller (PS President) and Jaime Edwards (MN DNR) that PS consider partnering with a Wisconsin-based regional group known as The Prairie Enthusiasts (TPE). This idea appealed to many members since not only did the group have a similar focus, but it would also avoid the protracted process of acquiring a separate non-profit designation – PS would be able use the 501(c)3 status of the regional organization, TPE.

Andrea and Jaime contacted TPE through Barb Christie (then President of the Coulee chapter of TPE) and negotiations began. Meetings with CF&G took place in the Chatfield library and the CF&G president’s house to propose this shift and help people understand that this was a positive move for the organization. There were many hoops to jump through, including notification of change in affiliation to the MN Registration board, preparation of Chapter Guidelines documenting the PS mission, writing bylaws and electing officers, payment of a fee, and signing an equipment contract.

All this work resulted in Prairie Smoke becoming the SE Minnesota chapter of TPE in March 2002. The members of the board of Directors at that time were Andrea Mueller, President; Jaime Edwards, VP; Sue Wieseler, Secretary; Dan Mueller, Treasurer; and Joel Dunnette, Director. The first meeting as a TPE chapter occurred in March 2002 and featured a presentation by Kathy Bolin from MN DNR on establishing a prairie corridor on I-90.

Since then, PS has continued its mission of public education, management, protection and restoration of prairies in the SE Minnesota area. Membership is now above 200 and many field trips, prairie work

days, seed collection trips and prescribed burn classes have been offered. The chapter continues to offer landowners help with restoring and maintaining their local prairie areas. Given the limited resources available to such a small group, Prairie Smoke has chosen to focus on management and maintenance of privately owned prairie rather than acquiring and managing remnant areas.

In addition, many acres of prairie have been improved through burning, cutting, spraying and seeding, often using the PS Cost Share Program Jaime Edwards arranged with the MN Conservation Corps in 2006.

On March 10th and 11th, 2006, Prairie Smoke hosted the Prairie Enthusiast's Annual Conference called "A Gathering in the Blufflands" held at the Eagle Bluff Environmental Learning Center near Lanesboro, MN. It included a concert, banquet, children's activities and featured regional experts, many learning sessions and workshops. It was a great success, with over 290 attendees.

Picnics and potlucks have been well attended, as was a Rochester City Council/Mayoral Candidate Forum that PS co-sponsored on October 10th 2006 at which the candidates were asked questions regarding conservation and the environment.

Other excellent programs will be offered in the future, so join us as we work to restore Minnesota's healthy, beautiful, natural environment for us, our loved ones and the creatures with whom we share this fragile planet.

Footnotes

1. Mini Profiles of the Prairie Smoke founders:
 - Deb Anderson: Biologist with strong interest in native plants
 - Susan Gossman: Graduated from the College of St. Benedict with a degree in biology and an emphasis in ecology. She studied native plants and remains interested in them.
 - Tim Gossman: Graduated from St. Johns University, where the rural campus fostered an interest in nature.
 - Lynden Dirksen: Member of Chatfield Fish and Game Club and interested in wildlife habitat.
2. The county was planning a major reconstruction of Fillmore Co Rd 2 in 1994. Three miles of the west end of this road were seeded to a native mix. Most of the seed was purchased from Prairie Moon Nursery and some was donated by Prairie Smoke. In 2006 the east end of Co. Rd. 2 was reconstructed. Part of that road had been planned to cut through a Decorah Edge wetland that had, among other native plants, the only patch of skunk cabbage in the area. Ann Pierce from the MN DNR was designated a point person for the group to argue for preservation of this remnant. The road was eventually rerouted to avoid damaging this area. The Highway engineers were then planning on seeding the resulting ditches with their generic "highway mix" of non-native plants. Dan and Andrea Mueller contacted Fillmore County to allow Prairie Smoke to plant the right of way adjacent to the wetland with native grasses and forbs. The planting was done in the fall of 2007.
3. The Chester Woods nursery was planted with local ecotype seed that came from many prairie remnants in the area including forbs and grasses from Deb Anderson's prairie, side oats grama from Joel Dunnette and other forbs and grasses from various sources.