



photograph by author, 26 August 2007

Digging Through the Past

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Two years ago my family purchased fifty acres in the township of Ridgeway, Wisconsin. On this old, quaint, country farmland, we became acquainted with the land after we unpacked and set out exploring. The seasonal changes across the property brought new surprises while ghosts of previous land usage still haunted the landscape. Farm buildings, mining digs, invasive species, and prairie and old oak openings dotted the landscape to form a mosaic tied to the history of ownership. Many exploited the land for economic interests, including farming, mining, and logging, which often degraded the land by creating a shift in vegetation and invasive species. However, the few prairie remnants, along with the towering open grown oaks, gave us a plan for future management to restore native vegetation and thus leave our mark on the landscape. Each season we work towards these restoration goals, as we explore and delve deeper into the history of our land.

For my family, spring represents more than a time for starting our gardens and watching the birds return. The wild geranium flowers mark the start of the mushroom hunt. The quest takes us far across the southern valley, hiking through savannas and ancient oak trees, splashing across brooks, and reaching into dense thickets of black raspberries to finally gain the elusive morel mushroom. While these quests aren't always successful, the trek provides a new view on the land since most of it takes place in hidden ravines and lonely hills off the beaten path. Today, there are three dominant compositions of vegetation: a mesic forest full of spring ephemerals, ferns, berries, maple and elm trees; an old oak savanna we've been working to restore due to garlic mustard growth and invasive brush understory; and an open floodplain with grasses along the stream.

Near one of the seasonal springs, we stumble upon a limestone outcrop of rock that looks like it could be a possible old foundation at first; however, closer inspection reveals a possible mining test pit. This reminds me that I'm not the first person to traverse and live on the land. Most of the vegetation around me is due in part to anthropogenic effects, and not natural processes alone. Although environment and climate determine the range of vegetation that can grow in Wisconsin, the oak savanna in particular represents the native Indian influence, including fire to clear the land for hunting. The 1832 Sibley Survey, set in place by the 1785 *Land Ordinance*, reveals the land was originally dominated by rolling prairies and open-grown white and burr oak trees. The distribution of native species changed dramatically in the wake of European American settlers invading Native American territory.

Although we've found little evidence and artifacts of native settlements on our land, Iowa County was home to many people before mining. Miners created conflict for the Winnebago tribe, especially near Dodgeville, Wisconsin in 1827, just one year before the first record of mining claims on our property (Rewey, Wisc.: The Historical Committee, 1980). The *History of Iowa County* describes further conflicts between Euro-American settlers and native Indians around southwestern Wisconsin, resulting in the Blackhawk War of 1832, around Blue Mounds. Both conflicts focus on towns on either side of our property and the 1832 Sibley Survey describes the Blue Mounds-Dodgeville Road that passes directly through the original property boundaries. The position of the road, along with the abundant mineral deposits in the adjacent land, and source of water from the local springhead created an ideal location for the first Euro-American settler to strike a mining claim and start a homestead.

James Morrison purchased 160 acres from the United States government when Wisconsin was still part of the Michigan Territory in 1835, according to the *Iowa County Abstract*. However, he established a claim on the land prior to the purchase in 1828. He built a furnace for smelting and mined 17,885 pounds of lead before 1830 (*History of Iowa County*, 1881). Morrison's original claim included the entire western half of the northwest quarter and western half of the southwest quarter, but today the property lines have shifted dramatically. However, referencing old maps and Sibley's Survey notes list Morrison's wooden frame house and furnace at 50 chains north of the southwest corner of section 23 and 18 chains east. This puts his lodgings and furnace either adjacent to the spring on our land or on a border of our neighbor's property. In the *History of Iowa County*, the Morrison furnace is listed as "a sort of cavern dug into the hillside, the front of the hole being rudely walled in, an opening being left in the wall for the ingress and egress of the workmen. This furnace was in full blast up to 1835, and perhaps later, at which time Mr. Morrison abandoned the business. Vestiges of this old institution for the manipulation of mineral are still to be seen. The other furnaces spoken of have long since entirely disappeared." Due to the construction of an artificial pond in the 1960s, along with erosion along the steep slope of the ravine, we haven't seen obvious evidence of the furnace or house yet.

Morrison created less obvious changes in the land including the shift in vegetation from prairie and timber due to logging and agriculture. Trees provided fuel for the furnace, while land was frequently converted to wheat (*History of Iowa County*, 1881). "The first farm in the town was opened by James Morrison as early as 1832 certainly, for by 1837 he had about thirty-five acres improved and a frame house built, which was

doubtless the first of its kind in the town. There was a large grove of timber here, and also a splendid spring, which is yet active. This place is now known as the Moon farm,” (*History of Iowa County*, 1881). Morrison eventually left the farm and moved to Madison in 1840 because he was commissioned to build the state capitol (Levitan, 2006). Due to his poor building techniques, slow construction process, and strange habit of keeping pigs in the capitol basement, he lost his job and returned to buy back a parcel of the land (Mollenhoff, 1982).

From 1840-1872, ownership passed back and forth from the Morrison family to a variety of other owners, including the Wisconsin Shot Company, as well as being divided into smaller parcels. While most of the surrounding land transitioned into intensive agriculture, the Moon family purchased the land in 1872 and divided it up for different purposes. According to the *Wisconsin Land Economic Inventory*, the southwest portion (no longer part of our property) became farmland, while the majority remained timber and oak-hickory woods used for logging, grazing, and conversion to an apple orchard.

In late spring and early summer, these trees still burst into bloom along the southern hillside. However, the Moon family left other visible changes. They built a barn around the turn of the century using local limestone for the foundation. Throughout their ownership, the Moons made additions and upgrades to their buildings for dairy farm production. Tom Collins, a local from Ridgeway, who grew up in the 1920s/30s and remembers playing with the Moon children, describes one building as a low-roofed structure over the spring used as a refrigeration system, where the kids would cool off in the summer. As the days get warmer, this cool place would be a comfort, but unfortunately, this does not exist anymore due to changes in technology and energy.

Other buildings left a mark on the property, including a white farmhouse built in the 1920s. The structure no longer exists, but the foundation is extremely flat and we often find old bottles, pieces of broken china, and many other household items scattered across the area. The surrounding land is home to a remnant farm garden, including lilacs, peonies, asparagus, and raspberries.

One old building besides the barn still exists: a cinder block milk house. I approximate this building to date to the 1940s because it has electricity inside, which I contrast to the barn, which does not, due to the fact that the rural electrification process took place in 1946. The *Iowa County Land Abstract* shows Wisconsin Power and Light Company received an easement to implement electricity on the farm. Another important technological change included purchasing a tractor in 1954, sold with the land since its purchase, which replaced time-consuming human labor for fuel.

Technology was not the only major change as ownership of the land transitioned during the 1960s. In 1967 the Southern Wisconsin Cattle Credit Company used the land for a grazing operation. This had the greatest ecological impact on the land, causing severe degradation. The cattle selectively grazed and ate oak and maple saplings, allowing elm, walnut, and other brush in the understory (also shown in Curtis' *Vegetation of Wisconsin*). In the fall, invasive species dominate the understory, including garlic mustard, buckthorn, and honeysuckle. Since the cessation of fire and grazing over the last 30 years, these invasive species have grown out of control. The cattle, combined with increasing amounts of fertilizer and runoff, created contamination problems in the water. According to neighbor Jeff Anderson, who grew up in the 1970s, the pond was clean enough for swimming and also home to trout. Currently, it can only hold bass,

which are less sensitive to the pollution and eutrophic conditions. These conditions worsen over the course of the summer and clog up the drainage pipe especially in fall, when the brilliant fall leaf display fades and blows into the water. As the temperatures drop, the macrophytic weeds finally die down.

As fall ends and winter begins, snow falls and I'm able to take a moonlit ski around the land. I remember the people who created this landscape and visualize the changes as I pass through the oak opening, with two huge trees that survived the logging era; circle around the apple trees, which remind me of the Moon family; climb up a steep hill, and then glide down the hillside with the hidden mining digs towards a split oak tree. I pause near the pond and a muskrat scurries across the ice and falls through a thin spot and vanishes beneath the water. I worry about the future of the land and its ability to support the native animals and plants with all the human effects. The cessation of fire, animal overgrazing, and chemical input all influenced the land far beyond natural disturbances. I ski back to our house, which represents the newest building addition to the land, eight years ago. I wonder how my family's management goals will impact the land and if the effects will last as long as other management styles. The 1785 *Land Ordinance* still defines our western property fence, shown in the aerial photograph of our property. The photograph shows the effects of the conversion from prairie and oak savanna to forest and agriculture. The advent of strip and contour cropping surrounding our land, set up in the 1930s as a response to the dust bowl erosion and agricultural failures, create a mosaic intertwined with the structures dotting the landscape. In time, we hope to restore the natural prairie vegetation and decrease the invasive species, to increase wildlife habitat and create an aesthetically pleasing landscape.

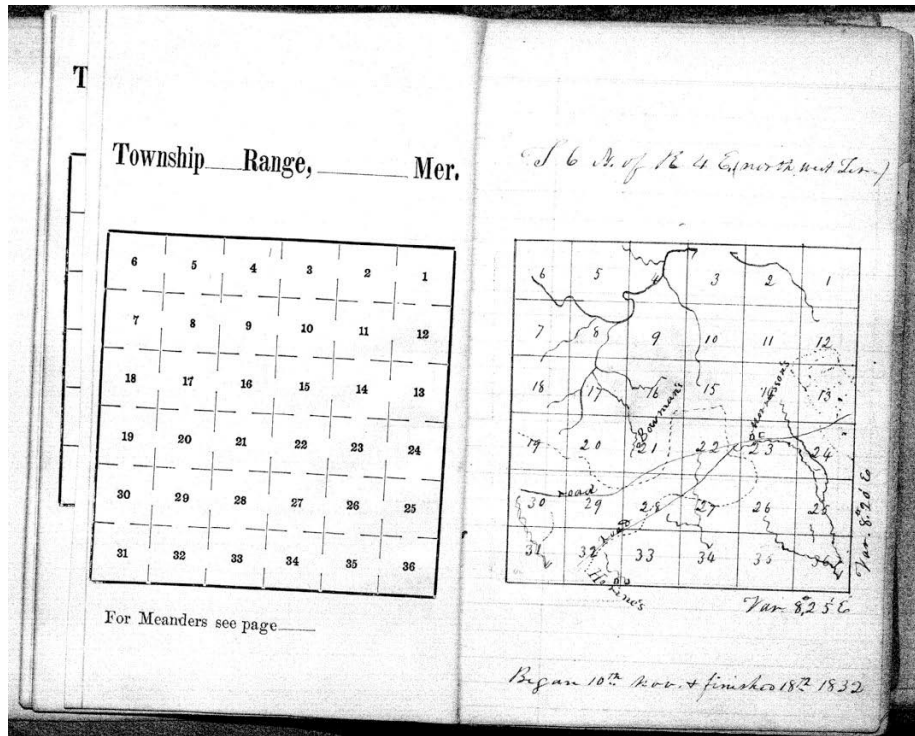


Figure 1

Figure 1: Sibley's original survey notes from November 1832, depicting Morrison's house and furnace in section 23 T6N R4E. Sibley also makes note of the Blue Mounds-Dodgeville Road passing through the property and the location of the springhead and stream near Morrison's house. Photograph courtesy of Wisconsin Public Land Survey Record, <http://libtext.library.wisc.edu/SurveyNotes/> (Accessed 14 November 2008).



Figure 2

Figure 2: James Morrison in 1856; original owner of the property, who set up local mining claims on the land and built the first house and furnace. Photograph courtesy of the Wisconsin State Historical Society, <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org> (accessed 14 November 2008).

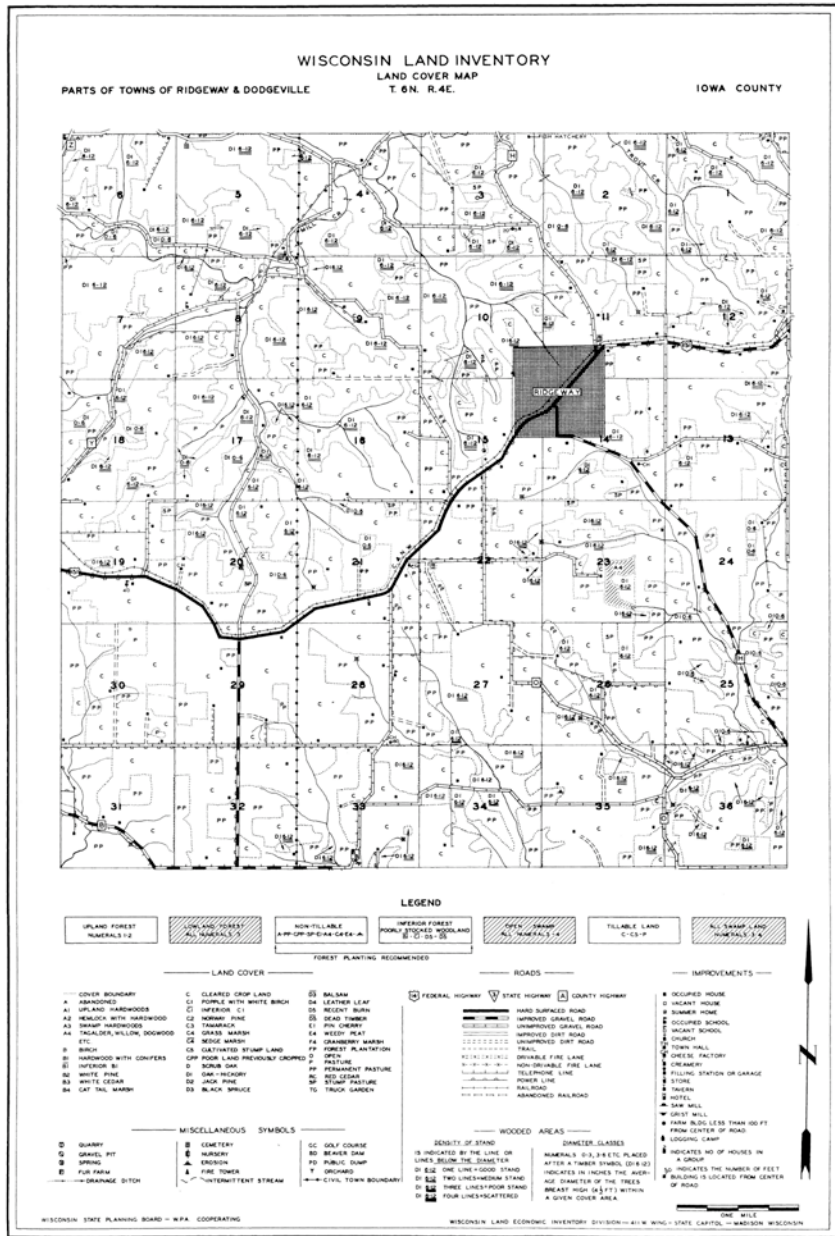


Figure 3

Figure 3: Map of the land usage from the Bordner Survey of 1933-1945. Section 23 shows the shift to more intensive agriculture around the Moon farm, while most of the steeper ridges and hillsides remain forested with a medium oak-hickory stand. Photo courtesy of the Wisconsin Land Economic Inventory, <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu> (Accessed 16 November 2008).



Figure 4

Figure 4: An aerial view of the property dating to 2000 before the construction of our current house. It shows the contrast between the outlying crop lands, which follow the contour and strip cropping, and our property, which remains forested. Courtesy of USGS, <http://terraserver-usa.com/> (Accessed 22 November 2008).



Figure 5

Figure 5: The author surveys the understory vegetation in the mesic forest. This section of the land has many invasive shrubs and thorns due to the intensive grazing thirty years ago and the poor management, including cessation of fire. Photograph by Dr. Thomas C. Hunt, 13 September 2008.



Figure 6

Figure 6: The springhead and artificial pond with a check-dam. This might be the location of the original furnace and frame house; however, erosion and pond construction have wiped away lasting traces. Photograph by author, 1 November 2008.



Figure 7

Figure 7: The current and future land management goals, started in 2006 by the owners. These efforts include prairie restoration and controlled burns to manage invasive species. Photograph by author, 21 July 2008.

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