



Otter Banks Pursuit at the Sanctuary Sows

Profound outcomes sometimes begin with deceptively small events. Like a shift in the wind, or a few flakes of snow. Back in 1995, the young non-profit struggling to afford the 47-acre perimeter of 7 Caves was one such event. Seven years earlier, the purchase of a farm on nearby Lapperell Road by Mr. J. Stauffer, a Mennonite from Pennsylvania, was another such event. The news of these unrelated newcomers didn't make much of a ripple in the breakfast table conversations at the Rocky Fork Truck Stop. Yet, from these humble beginnings, two movements would grow that would leave this region of land—where Highland, Ross, and Pike counties come together—transformed. The saving of Otter Banks is an important chapter of this greater story and is a topic to which we will return, once we have put all the players into context.

In those early days of the Highlands Nature Sanctuary, our awareness of the Mennonite's increasing presence in our larger region grew but slowly. We would get wind that another farm had been purchased by the Mennonites, and then another. The mostly young Mennonite parents who settled on these lands belonged to Stauffer Mennonite Church, expanding here from mother communities in

Maryland and Pennsylvania. The settlers were soon raising families of their own and founding artisan and agrarian businesses to support themselves. All of this was, for the most part, under our radar. But as more and more Mennonite families moved in, the quick staccato of horses' hooves on pavement became a familiar part of our sound-scape, as commonplace as the sight of a horse and buggy tied to a tree at one of our trailheads. But to grasp the big picture of what was happening in our region? That was a bit like watching corn grow.

It was only this year that I had the mindfulness to sit back on my heels and recognize the full magnitude of the impact that the 160-plus Mennonite households have had on our landscape. Many of the fields surrounding the Sanctuary, where 20 years ago corn and soy beans grew, now support large greenhouses and row crops of tomatoes, pumpkins, bell peppers, watermelons, cantaloupe, sweet corn and eggplant; as well as dozens of other private businesses.

I can drive just a few miles to any one of three Mennonite-run farm markets. I can obtain locally-grown produce, grass-pastured chicken and eggs, and wildflower honey. Nurseries in the spring provide onion sets, flower baskets, sweet potato



New Partnerships

*Mennonite Community interviews and photos by
Tim Pohlar. Article by Nancy Stranahan*

slips, bedding plants and vegetable seeds. In the early fall, I can visit Pickett Run Farm to marvel at their production of thousands of potted mums. At JR's General Store I can choose from dozens of flours for my baking needs—a dream come true for someone who used to run a bakery. I can pick up staples of cheeses, nuts, and dried beans. Across the road from JR's, when not counting calories, I can consume a hot and buttery soft pretzel from the Country Crust bakery.

But more important for me than these resources, more so than even the beauty of the Mennonite's bucolic landscape, is the good fortune of living among people of such integrity. In the Mennonite community the qualities of humility, honesty, non-violence, patience, frugality, simple living, community-mindedness, and hard work are prioritized, practiced and protected, as are the time-honored traditions and skills of the agrarian lifestyle. It's an exceptionally wholesome environment for our staff to live and work.

The founder of the Mennonite movement was Menno Simon, 1496-1561. Born in what is now the Netherlands, Menno was raised in a countryside torn apart by political power struggles and further destabilized by the Protestant Reformation. His spiritual inclinations led him to become a

Catholic priest and it was in that station that he began to entertain doubts about the biblical basis of some of the Roman Catholic Church's precepts. After undergoing a spiritual crisis, Menno renounced the Catholic faith in 1536 and joined the Anabaptists, one of the many movements that arose out of the Reformation. So great was Menno Simon's influence that by 1544, the Dutch Anabaptists were referred to as Mennonites, literally "Menno's people."

Anabaptists believed (and still do) that if baptism is to have spiritual significance, the person being baptized must be fully mature and independently willing to make a heart, mind and soul commitment to Christ. If widely put into practice back in the 1500's, "believer's baptism" would have wrested power away from the church, state, and parents, and given more freedom to the individual. It is an understatement to say the idea was not popular among the established authorities. For the next 100 years Mennonites and other Anabaptists were brutally persecuted by Protestants and Catholics alike. Understandably, the peace-seeking Mennonites were among some of the first immigrants to New England.

Many Mennonite schisms occurred over the following centuries, one being the Amish split in 1693. Another



The center of the Stauffer Mennonites' business world is the Produce Auction, which is held twice a week, seasonally, drawing wholesale buyers from the tri-state region. Nearly all the Mennonite farmers sell the bulk of their produce here, thereby cutting out the middleman and the necessity of delivering their goods outside their community.

conservative schism, creating the Stauffer Mennonites, split off in 1845 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Over time, the Stauffer Mennonites established 12 communities across Eastern United States, including the one here in Bainbridge, Ohio.

Stauffer Mennonites use horses and bicycles for transportation, and propane for lighting and refrigeration. Their homes are heated with wood and fuel oil. Clothing is plain. They avoid electricity, television, radio, and computers. Hymns are sung a cappella. Phone booths are constructed a good walk from the residences and serve multiple households. All these simplicities are not arbitrary. They serve to diminish the human inclination toward comfort-seeking, materialism, vanity, and idle entertainment.

Once I boldly and uncharacteristically asked one of my closer Mennonite friends if he ever tired of the rules that bound him. He answered me earnestly, "These aren't rules that are imposed on us from an outside authority. They are the principles of Christian living, scripturally based, that we willingly practice and protect. Community is central to the expression of our faith." As I contemplated his answer, I realized it was individuality, not community, that I had been trained to protect at any cost. I knew nothing of the benefits of living in a community composed of people who wrestled to overcome its individuality's perils.

Another time I asked a Mennonite if their prioritized order of service was to community first, family second, then themselves. He threw back his head and laughed. "There's a whole long list after family before you get to 'Me.'"





Horses at the Produce Auction. Vegetable production is dominated foremost by tomatoes, then pumpkins and bell peppers. Though not certified, tomatoes are nearly 100% organic and are grown in both greenhouses and in the field. The earliest sowing for the greenhouses begins in December, greatly expanding the season of availability.

Our Mennonite neighbors are quick to remind us that their members and communities are far from perfect. Not all members agree on the interpretation of their guiding principles. Not all of their children stay within the community as adults. Farm life and business ventures are inevitably filled with some disappointment and risk. Challenging relationships exist in any community, as do unavoidable sickness and the loss of loved ones. Heartbreak is an unavoidable mosaic of life. But there is also, undeniably, joy.

Today, when I see the healthy glow on the children's faces on the Mennonite farms, playing in the woods and fields, their eyes dancing with life; when I see teens eagerly exert their will to perform hard work, carry responsibility, and care for others before themselves; when I see how loneliness, the curse of the 21st century, is practically unknown within the community, then the historic restrictions that protect the integrity of the Mennonite community make those regulations' founders seem uncannily prescient.

For a quarter of a century the Arc of Appalachia has been buying land along the ten-mile corridor of the Rocky Fork Gorge. Of the 66 puzzle pieces we have acquired to date, most of them have either been small tracts (with or without houses) or medium-sized vacant lands, usually forested. Only four tracts ever topped 150 acres in size. But those four were memorably challenging. Because of their size, they were so hard to afford.





More instructive are the kinds of lands we haven't been buying—the large-acreage farms that still border the creek. Thankfully, farms don't often come up for sale. If they did, our funding capacities would be sorely challenged by the higher price per acre commanded by farm fields, the larger size of the tracts, and the value of the associated farm buildings. For years, we have been secretly hoping that these farms wouldn't come on the market for a long, long time.

When the phone call finally came that Otter Banks was for sale, my heart sank. "Too soon! Too soon!" We were already fundraising for an unprecedented number of unfinished acquisitions, including the large Fern Gully project in Hocking Hills. The revolving fund we used for emergency acquisitions was drained, and the next Clean Ohio round was months away. Even though we were completely unprepared for an undertaking of this size, I just had to go and take a look.

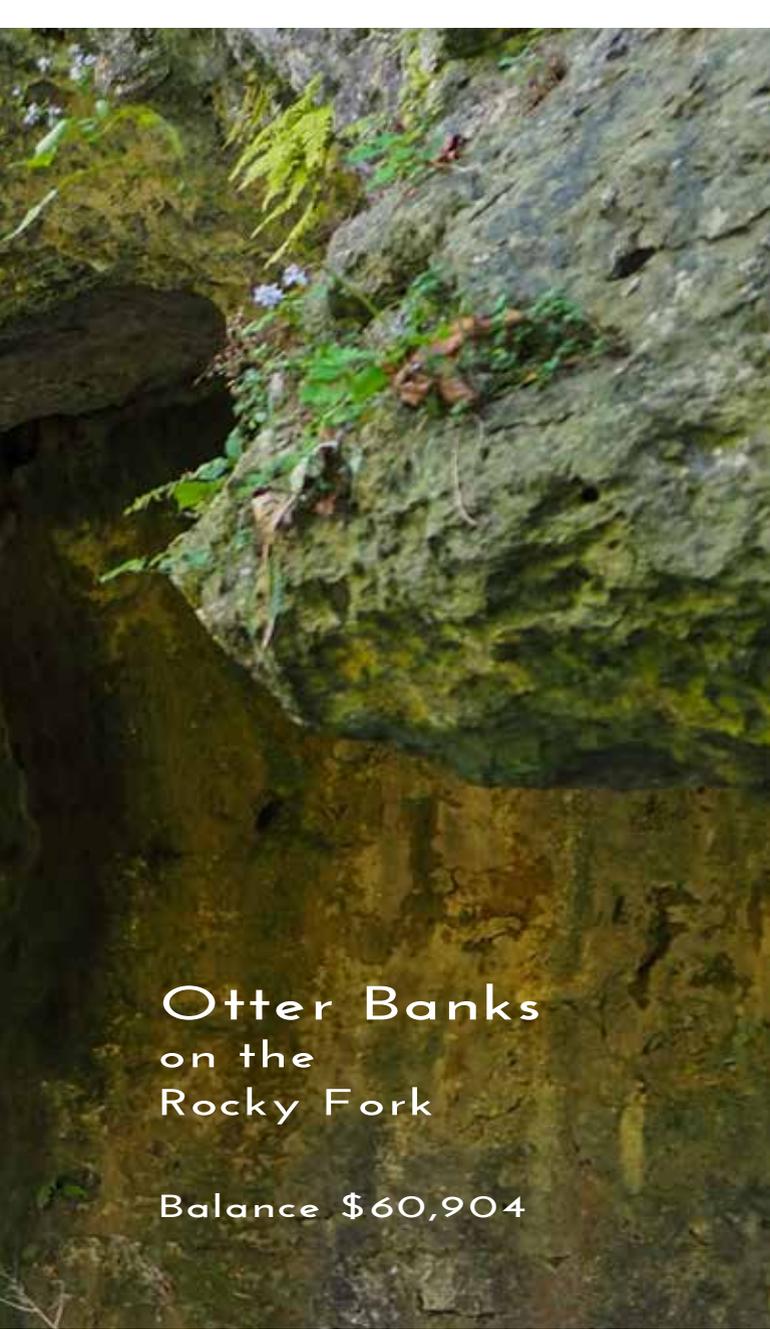
Otter Banks turned out to be even more daunting on the ground than on the map. Of its 189 acres, 120 were in farm

fields and pasture. Two houses had been built on the site, as well as multiple farm buildings. Two of the pole barns were downright cavernous; the largest measuring 100 X 120 feet. An appraisal put the land near the million dollar mark.

It was an early warm April day when I made my way across the large farm fields, heading toward the Rocky Fork Creek. It was immediately clear that the buildings, now sinking below the horizon behind me, had capital needs we could never meet. The entire farm appeared to have fallen on hard times. It would need thousands of hours of TLC and as many more dollars to bring it around.

I entered the line of forest at the rim the gorge, gingerly following an old and very eroded farm lane. The woods had been cut pretty hard in the recent past, judging from the young trees and the half-open canopy. As I rounded the curve that dropped steeply down to the creek, I paused, one foot still in the air, awestruck by the sight before me.

I have followed a lot of farm lanes in my life and I know what to expect of them. Their usually rough-mowed



Otter Banks on the Rocky Fork

Balance \$60,904

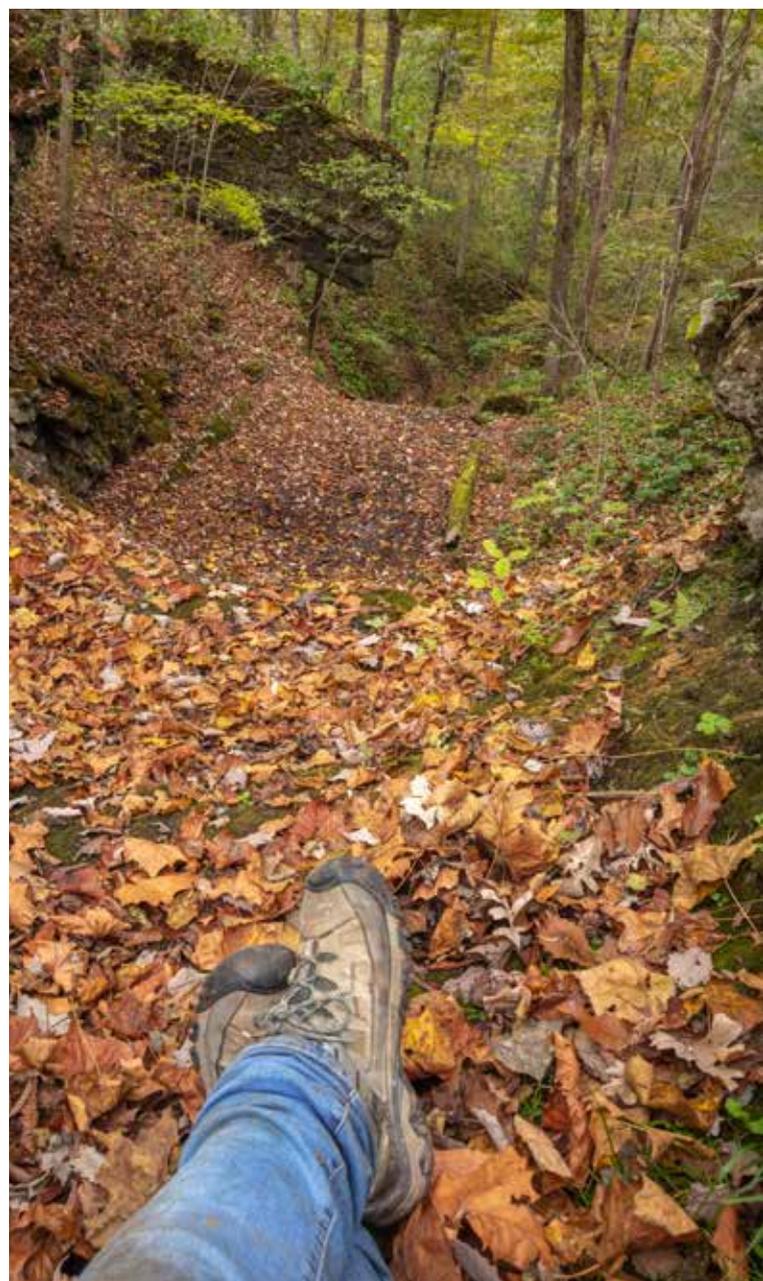


Photo Above: Otter Banks' limestone recesses with Betty Rogers, Land Steward. Photo right top: freshwater mussel shells in the shoals of the Rocky Fork on Otter Banks. Both photos by Kim McCoy. Photo bottom right: descent into the gorge by Kathryn Cubert.

edges are predictably rutted and their borders lined with invasive shrubs. I saw the usual evidence of abandoned farm equipment, but where was the expected mono-culture of invasive plants? Instead, as I descended into the ravine, on my left I saw drifts of trilliums pouring out of the woods— incongruently tumbling right down to the roadside—along with mounds of sweet William and star fields of rue anemones. To my right was a small sparkling waterfall in a verdant green glen filled with ginger, bishop's cap, fawn lily, and false rue anemone.

I left the lane and began to trace my way along the steep rocky slopes high above the Rocky Fork. To my astonishment, I was presented with scene after scene of handsome rock formations and flowers so proliferate that they took my breath away. There were four kinds of trilliums, banks of shooting stars, and ancient colonies of Solomon's seal, large



Large-Flowered Trillium

Otter Banks has the most spectacular floral displays we have ever witnessed in the Rocky Fork Gorge

flowered bellwort, and blue cohosh. Sometimes, single-species colonies covered an entire cliff side. The forest was a far, far cry from old growth, but the floral displays at my feet certainly appeared to be. Seeing an otter floating down the creek on his back sealed the deal for me!

I emerged from the trek committed to finding a way to protect the astonishing scenery I had just witnessed. We needed two miracles and we needed them fast: money for the quick close the seller was demanding, and some really good partners. This project could not be done alone.

I went right to work. After notifying the board, who quickly voted their enthusiastic support, I called the non-profit *The Conservation Fund*, from whom I requested the procedures and paperwork for a bridge loan. The last time the Arc borrowed money for a land project was way back in 2003. Neither the board nor I were keen to go into debt again, but the specter of losing Otter Banks was the more painful of the two options life was presenting to us.

It was clear we couldn't and shouldn't buy the farm fields. They were not only expensive, but the farm-altered soils would not easily support the transition to a healthy forest. We could plant the fields with native prairie seeds, but we would have to dedicate the rest of eternity to weeding the invasive autumn olives out of them. The houses, both needing work, were two more things we did not need. And thus I made a little flyer announcing to the local community that the Arc wanted to buy the creek corridor of Otter Banks and we were looking for partners to buy the remaining land.

After distributing the handout to the largest farmers in the neighborhood, I drove to the home of Mr. C. Stauffer, a Mennonite family I have had the honor of knowing for 25 years. While Mr. C. and I sat alone at the kitchen table, chatting about various light topics, the kitchen hummed with post-dinner activity. Children ranging in ages from youths to full adults entered and left the room, each focused on their own productive missions. When I finally eased into the topic of potential land partnerships, almost immediately all other conversations ceased and Mr. C's two oldest sons joined us at the table, fully at attention. In Mennonite communities, there are always young men looking for new opportunities. Farmland for sale is a dependably a very interesting topic.

My little flier was passed on to Mr. T. Zimmerman, a Mennonite family who lived across the road. "Yes," Mr. T said, "the Mennonites would indeed be interested." In time Mr. T was chosen as the negotiating representative of what evolved to become three Mennonite buyers, two of them planning to move into the community from out of state.

Despite the initial rush, it ended up being a long and complex negotiation that lasted the entire summer. Twice I thought for sure that the entire deal was over, only to find out that while I was licking my wounds, negotiations had resumed. Because I had a car and internet, I often became the runner, moving information between the seller, the three buyers, and the two attorneys. Splitting the land equitably between the needs of four buyers was an interesting endeavor. I have two poignant memories of looking at survey maps outside Mr. T.'s farmhouse in the fading evening light of summer. Once, when the lightning bugs of June were flashing, and another when the katydids of late summer were chorusing overhead. Like I said, it was a long negotiation.

Today, as I write, three Mennonite families now own the farmland portion of Otter Banks, two of them already in residence. On my last visit, they had made good progress cleaning up the residences and barns, and were already leveling a site for their first greenhouse. Their dream is to dedicate the farm primarily to vegetable production. A planned system of ponds will supply the irrigation. Work horses, mules, and buggy horses already graze the pastures.

I am also delighted to announce that the Arc applied for and was successfully awarded Clean Ohio funding for Otter Banks. A trusted non-profit partner, Wilderness East, currently holds the deed to the creek corridor and will continue to do so until the Arc has 100% of its funding in place. We are at the last leg of our marathon to secure Otter Banks! The finish line is now in sight for what proved to be the most challenging acquisition in all the Arc's history.

But so much has been gained. We will be able to protect the land we know as Otter Banks. We saved ourselves hundreds of thousands of dollars by working with partners. We served our agrarian-based community by not taking farmland out of production. We have made new friends. Most importantly, we now have a strategy in place when the next big farm on the Rocky Fork comes up for sale.

We couldn't have found better partners. Perhaps in decades hence we shall look back at this event and perceive it as "one of those deceptively small beginnings..."

When the deeds were ready to sign, Mr. T shook my hand and said, "That was fun. Let's do it again someday."

I suspect we will.



Columbine



Drooping Trillium



Ohio Spiderwort

