Interview with Audrey Arner
Voices of the River - Oral History Project

by Anne Queenan

The project has been made possible by the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund through the vote of Minnesotans on November 4, 2008.

Administered by the Minnesota Historical Society.

It is also supported by matched donations made to Clean Up the River Environment (CURE).

Q: The first question I want to ask you is your family, your ethnic heritage, and how you came to Minnesota.

A: I grew up in Eastern Pennsylvania of Pennsylvania Dutch and Italian parents. My father came from the coal mining region and my mother from the slate quarrying Italians who were imported to take rock out of the ground for the Welsh slate quarry owners. And so when I was

taken to my father's mother for the first time, she looked at me and saw my brown eyes and asked if there was anything else wrong with me because everyone she knew had blue eyes. And so it was pretty radical thinking being married to an Italian at that point. So yeah, I grew up in Eastern Pennsylvania and I came to Minnesota to go to McAllister College and met Richard there and he convinced me to come here. And I have learned to love this place, even though in the beginning, I really couldn't see the distinction in the landscape, 'cause I grew up in the mountains and in the forest, so it all looked the same to me. And I didn't know how anyone ever knew where they were and came to understand how to see things as, our friend Bill Holmes, may he rest in peace, used to call the cultivation of the prairie eye, that appreciation for subtlety in the landscape, that appreciation for gradual changes in color or altitude or changes in kinds of plants that were grown. So that's been helpful. And I always knew I needed to live on a place where there would be water. And so here there was the potential for that because there's a little stream flowing through here and when we worked with what was then the Soil Conservation Service and the Soil Winter Conservation District, here in Chippewa County, we dammed this little ravine and made a place where we could think about going to the lake and get there in two minutes. And for those of us who incorporate swimming and recreation into our workdays, as a quality of life attribute, it was a really necessary thing for me and glad to help make it manifest.

Q: So we're doing this oral history project, it's on the history of the modern movement to clean up the Minnesota River, which we say began in the late 1980's surrounding the Minnesota River Assessment Project and the Citizen Advisory Committee that was convened by Lynn Kolze.

A: And the Minnesota River Board was active at that time.

Q: I want to ask you your version, if you think that is when the movement began, if not, when do you think it began?

A: I think the movement began when people started thinking about the need to put things like the Minnesota River Assessment Project together, because that wouldn't have happened if there hadn't been people calling for it. And we needed to have that data to be able to act.

You need to have an awareness of the state of the ecology and the health of the river to be able to have an argument that something needs to be done to repair it. And so when, my channel to the Minnesota River Board was that George Boody, who was the Director of the Land Steward Project, served on that board and kind of was the conduit of information to us involved in the sustainable agricultural community, about what was coming up and what was important and how we could or should be involved.

Q: The next question was when did you first start thinking about the Minnesota River? What were your earliest experiences?

A: Well, Richard and I moved to this farm that had, this had been his grandparents' farm. They came here in 1872 and we came here in 1973. So it was a hundred years later, and when we came here, we didn't have this pond to swim in. And since we were swimmers and we wanted to swim, we just bicycled down to the Minnesota River where you can have an enjoyable time, but then you get out and there'd be kind of stuff all over you, after you got out from a swim. And that didn't stop us because we were young and carefree. But that was my earliest awareness that there was a river here and it was much later that I came to consciousness about how it was formed and what its tributaries were, because when we came here, I was very focused on this place.

And I didn't know anyone in this community, and there weren't a lot of people, there was nobody doing organizing around food issues or around environmental issues or a little bit around art and a little bit around theater, but it was kind of a lonely place when we first came here. And there was so much to do because the farm had been neglected and where the vineyard is was a dump with lots of old crap and occasionally dead pigs and stuff that the neighborhood would dump here. So I made it my business, at that point, to learn the plants and so the plants became my friends when I didn't know anybody else. We didn't belong to a church community close to here and we didn't have children at that time; we didn't have anybody in school, so I really made it my business to understand what plants were here, if they had been introduced or if they were native and how we could interrelate, what functions the plants could serve to support humans as food or as medicine. That was kind of my introduction to the watershed, through its plant beings.

Q: So when it comes to restoring the Minnesota River, what lies at the heart of the issue for you when it comes to this effort to restore it?

A: When we think in terms of restoration, we think about making something the way it was before. And before means like how far back do you want to go? If we go back to before we mostly white, mostly European people came to live in the watershed, the river was very different than it's been ever since. And as long as we continue to host and cultivate vast amount of cultures that require tillage every year and systems that encourage more water to the river faster, the river will continue to change, but I think if, I haven't heard that it's our goal to restore it. I don't hear that pervasively, in a way that would take it back to what it was before we came, 'cause that would mean perennializing the landscape, because, as we've chosen to do here, and I don't mean to demean anybody else's decision making, but what we've chosen to do here is take the lessons from the Great Prairies, which are to perennialize and to diversify.

And the pervasive agriculture as it exists in most of the watershed and in most of the surrounding watersheds, is based on the opposite. It's based on specialization and annual cropping. So that foundational shift in held biological diversity is managed, precludes I think, a restoration to a river like it was before we came. How we are managing water for the sake of producing the crops that we as a culture, as a government-sponsored initiative are choosing to grow, commodity crops, to most effectively do that as required or at least predicated, extensive and ever-expanding tall drainage systems, which now I'm hearing people talk about how the more pattern tile will result in a sponge-like effect in the soil. I used to do wetland education and we would talk about the wetlands being, there are always metaphors for the wetlands. It's like a filter, it's like a nest, because it fosters so much new life and it's like a sponge 'cause it holds the water in a place, rather than just sending it to the river so quickly. And so I feel like some of the metaphors are being borrowed, but I'm not sure it makes good scientific sense. And it depends who's doing the research and what they decide they're going to find out because researchers will find out whatever they set out to determine.

Q. As far as you can remember, can you account for the Minnesota River Movement, how it emerged, how it grew and what your role has been?

A: I don't think anyone around here would deny that Del Wehrspan is the granddaddy of this movement in this place. And his passion and his caring, his understanding as an ecologist of what has happened and what needs to happen and what kinds of relationships would need to be cultivated to be able to address the concerns that he felt so deeply. And because he felt them so deeply, we all began to feel them so deeply, 'cause he was a good communicator and he was a good demonstrator. He'd take you out on a pontoon at the drop of a hat. And so we came to understand the river through Del's eyes and that was really useful for so many of us.

And I think the quality of people who came together with a lot of different skill sets was a blessing. And sometimes I feel like it was no accident, that there was just a synergistic convergence that happened with people who were good at politics, people who were good at communicating, people who were good at listening, people who were scientists, people who had always lived on the river, people who had generational memory about what it was like and what the lure was around the river. And as those people started to come together in the late 1980's and early 90's, it was a, I mean, you just wanted to be a part of it, 'cause it was a kind of a convening that hadn't happened here before. Certainly, and it was the kind of people who attracted more people to them because it made sense and it was fun. And I was involved as, I think because no organization had existed, and there was a new office of the Land Stewardship Project in town, which I was directing and Patrick was , sometimes Patrick was my boss and sometimes I was his boss. And then for a while, we were like each other's boss. But because we didn't really fit the mold of patriarchal or pyramidal,

Q: Who's Patrick?

A: Patrick Moore, my colleague and good friend. It was a place where people with an issue could walk in, express themselves, and we'd try to figure out how we could help, because the office was new enough at that time; there was certainly program work to be done, but organizers are

responsive to their community. And so when Del came in and indicated that we had good reason to believe that the xxx levels in the Chippewa River were exceeding any kind of standards, and that we needed to rouse people around the fact that we need to hold the City of Montevideo accountable and its management of its own waste, and that came to pass. And I think that was the momentum for the development of what is now a pretty, I wouldn't call it state-of-the-art sewage treatment facility, Montevideo, but it's big, it's got a lot of capacity, and that's why then like Jenny-O was able to come into town, because we had capacity for that kind of thing.

So it actually predicated a whole series of other development possibilities while addressing the fact that we needed to manage the coliform that comes from 5,000 people living in a place on the river.

So that first convening was called, called themselves Montevideans for Clean Water and then there was a meeting at which we decided well really a more substantive, broader initiative was underway and that we should try and name that. And so it was a moment that everybody remembers. Patrick remembers, Dave Minge remembers it, Richard, Butch, many people were present when there was the throwing out of kinds of words that meant what we were wanting to be about and eventually it became crystalized in Clean Up the River Environment. Actually, it was Clean Up *our* River Environment at first, but I think when CURE spun from Land Stewardship Project, when it was no longer a program of LSP's and was its own 501c3 nonprofit organization, I think the way incorporation happens with the state, there are only certain words that they allow not to be in the acronym. That's what I was told by Duane I think, so that you couldn't have "Our" in it. Although Cuore, is a word that I'm familiar with. It means heart in Italian, but it doesn't have the snappy community response capability that CURE does because cure is about healing, it's about making things well again.

Q:	What has been your role in this movement, in your mind, and any history with it, and also, what are you involved in here?

A:	My role has been, I've done some facilitation for some meetings. I've never been on the board, and that's been kind of purposeful because it

allows me a little more latitude and I'm plenty of other boards. The Board of Clean Up the River Environment. I've always been an active member, and in the early days I was involved in cleanups, picking up junk along the river and I think that that kind of initiative was really good for getting people engaged, because it's so tangible, you just feel like at the end of the day, wow, we made a big difference. But I haven't really organized individual events. I try to be supportive; I show up whenever I'm able to.

Q: Can you tell me about Moonstone, can you make any connection between it and the watershed?

A: This is the old Handeen place, Richard's dad still calls it the South Farm as opposed to the one he lives at which is ten miles north of Montevideo. And I'd say when we came here there was nothing special that would relate it to the watershed any more than any other farm, because using the best knowledge he had at the time and with the influences that he had at the time, Richard's dad had made it all corn one year, and all soybeans the next, which is still what we're surrounded with on many sides. But we've chosen to, not to make a demonstration farm, and not to without being too self-effacing about it, what we've hoped to create is a place where nature's ways can be honored. I talked to a friend last night who said that they're starting to get really good scientific documentation now that family therapy works much, much better under a tree than in an office, and that kids who have green time in their daily experience, are not as likely to experience ADHD. So when I set about to create a harbor, not only for ourselves, but for other individuals who are seeking refuge from the city or from the busy lives that we lead,
and so we have sought to become a microcosm of ways that people can be with each other and with nature that honors what we're learning about the natural world and can become useful for ourselves and others.

Q: For someone who doesn't know what Moonstone Farm is at all, can you tell me?

A: So this is the old Handeen place and it became Moonstone, we started calling it that, because when we first started kind of cleaning up around here, we started finding lots of old wheel rims that were cast in concrete. They were like full moons everywhere. We'd be digging and

getting a bunch of junk out of somewhere and oh, there's a moonstone. And we still find moonstones, which were made by the ancestors. And up in our yard right now, Richard has just made a couple of new ones that were kind of left over concrete from a recent project that we did, so we continue to create moonstones. And so that's just where the name comes from. But we do have a goal here of being a place that can create a place for balance between city and country, between work and play, between farming and art, between work and leisure, and it's about knowing what the quality of our lives to be like and pursuing a landscape that can support that.

So when we know what we want our relationships to be like, we can have a better, our relationships and other aspects of our quality of life, we can also extrapolate that to understand what kind of production, what kind of relationship with nature's processes we can capitalize on to be able to support ourselves, and also doing that in a way that fosters healthy ecosystem processes. So we monitor for water quality; we pay attention to the kind of energy we use and the patterns of use of energy, so that we're seeking to decrease our dependence on fossil fuels and perenialization has helped us do that. So even though we make less money, we spend less money also.

Q: Can you give me an example of the perennialization?

A: Perennialization, we started doing something in addition to just growing annual crops when we joined the Alfalfa Co-Op in the late 80's. And that's what gave us the gumption to plant a crop other than corn or soybeans or wheat. We were doing specialty crops for the organic market, some domestically and some international. The kind of soybeans that you raise for tofu that the Japanese were buying at that time, but it was really a big jumping off the cliff for us to plant alfalfa, 'cause we didn't have livestock at that time. But because with the alfalfa crop we had a market that we could, where we could sell that crop, and we came to understand that we didn't want to be exporting the nutrients of raising alfalfa or raising corn and just shipping it off and then having to buy nutrients back in. That's part of that ecosystem process that is the mineral cycle, understanding how we could more effectively cycle the nutrients on our farm. So we, after being 20 years vegetarians, realized that we needed large ruminant herbivores to

be able to harvest grass. Taking lessons from the great prairies, grass really likes to grow here; really does well here. And not only the native grasses, but European grasses grow really well here. And we have both; we have paddocks that are natives and paddocks that are European grasses, 'cause they fill different niches in the grazing season.

So perennialization has included planting a whole mix of legumes and grasses to be able to support grazing cattle and they have really good memories and all the time in the world, so if we let them just graze the whole farm, they'd go around to their favorite plants and just eat those all the time. And then less desirable plants would come. But because we manage them by controlling their grazing, in smaller paddocks and by moving them onto fresh salad bars fairly frequently, they have to eat a little of this and a little of that, but they kind of taste everything without rebiting so often the plants that we want to foster. Because when you overgraze an individual plant, and the roots diminish, the plant becomes less stable. And we want lots of kind of stable plants. So the cows have helped us create a landscape that does that, that more effectively holds water in its soil because there are more perennials, more deep-rooted plants that are able to bring up the nutrients and bring up the water. If we hadn't, I think, been exposed to other farmers, and those mostly through the Land Stewardship Project, other farmers who were making transitions to perennials and bringing cattle onto farms that had just become the corn, soybeans monoculture, I don't know where we'd be if we hadn't had the unique exposure to that community of farmers, which came about through work that I was doing that Patrick and Ron Cruz hired me to do through the Land Stewardship Project. And so as we started networking farmers to create the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota and do training and holistic management, and now come to realize that another thing we need to do to be able to support the kind of ecosystem that we want and the kind of river that we want and the kind of food system that we want, is to provide a hospitable climate for beginning farmers. So that's where I find myself channeling my energy now, because we want to foster a new generation of stewardship farmers.

Q: So have you said all that you want to about what happens here?

A: I want to talk about the transition points a little more.

Really lucky to be involved with other farmers who are studying what it would be like if we planted a diverse mix legumes and grasses where corn and soybeans had grown. And what we would plant and how we would manage it became something that we thought through collectively. And that included people like Ed and Gerard Radermacher, and Marshall Herfindahl and Paul Homme I would say was one of the key leaders of that group. And it was interesting over the course of the next few years where we had planted a mix of 13 different grasses and legumes, what persisted in a certain soil type or a certain management method. And it's great now to see so many of those species still persisting in one or another of our pastures. And it was that collective thinking and support that gave us the capacity to jump into that lake, to make the plunge, to first plant perennials where corn and soybeans had grown and then to, as former vegetarians, buy a bunch of beef cows.

And our friends were like, what are you doing? And then we would have to explain that we needed large ruminant herbivores to effectively help us cycle our nutrients so that we would be able to better utilize the internal resources of our farm, rather than to import nutrients. But the perennials, the cows are the harvesters and they're the sunlight harvesters. They're the non-fossil fuel-based sunlight harvesters. And we have become better, I think, managers of the solar cell that is our farm's surface on the planet.

And so we've only been able to get to this point now with a little bit of help from some federal farm conservation programs, through the EQIP Program and a little bit from CRP, the Conservation Reserve Program. But really, it was that group of people, encouraging one another to discover a different way of farming. And it's that core value of human relationships that really work that are going to form the basis for landscape change, for further landscape change and for, if we could do it, restoration of this watershed.

And until we resolve the many problems that face us in human relationship, the resources will continue to deteriorate.

Q: Can you tell me, just from a size standpoint, how many acres you're talking about?

A: Well our farm is 240 acres. We rent a few more acres for pasture on top of that. But it's a very small farm in our neighborhood. When you talk to Easterners or urban people, they go wow, 240 acres, but you talk to ranchers about having cattle on 240 acres. But we used to rent other farmland, other family farmland, and stopped doing that in the mid 1990's because we just wanted to create our home. We wanted to put our energy in the place where we live and to be able to walk the places that we were working consistently. And it was too hard to, it wasn't in keeping with the values that we were expressing to be able to get to a farm 15 miles away and you'd get there and the tools you needed for whatever just broke are back at the other place and that isn't the only reason, but it just became a practical decision for us to be able to....

Q: What did you think when Arne Carlson, Governor of Minnesota, announced the Minnesota River should be cleaned up in ten years? Made to be fishable, swimmable, in '92? Were you around? Did you hear it? What did you think?

A: Yeah, I was around. I remember the goal being set and I thought wow, things are going to have to really move fast for that to happen. And things weren't really moving too fast in the political sense, but it kind of gave us a good target, you know? And there are a lot of parts of the river that are fishable and there's a few that are swimmable. I don't know how many years it's been now. How long has it been? But yeah, it was a great target to set. I think it got people thinking in terms of relating to the river again, not just going somewhere else to swim or somewhere else to fish.

Q: What did you think of the Upstream Downstream Friendship Tour?

A: I didn't get to participate in it.

Q: Because they were focusing on conventional?

A: I believe so. I think it was more important to engage people who hadn't been part of the discussion. I don't know of any sustainable type farmers who would call themselves sustainable farmers who were involved in it. I'm sure that was well thought out for ???

Q: TMDL, the Minnesota River TMDL process, Total Maximum Daily Load, the water quality standards developed by the PCA, are you familiar with them and what do you think about them? What are your beliefs or attitudes about the TMDLs?

A: I haven't been deeply immersed in it. In the course of facilitating occasional meetings, I need to bring myself up to date on what latest protocol has been released by the PCA, and I know there is a defensive nature posture being taken by some people about what they feel is an imposition.

But people basically want to do what they want on their own piece of land and to have to factor how that fits into the bigger picture of how much phosphorous is being pumped into the Chippewa every day for example, is not easily relatable for an average land manager. So I'm glad that somebody's thinking about it. I'm glad that there are standards that are understood to be what the system can bear, but it's, at any point that you establish that limit, that's what the system can bear to support, what optimum swimming and fishing.

Q: Where do you see things going from here, like in the next 25, 30 years? What does it hold for the Minnesota River?

A: I think that there is a broader community support for water quality improvements generally, that's been continuing to provide support for political decisions and individuals taking action that can help support cleaning up the river. I really feel that it's kind of like the way people are more aware of what they are eating. They are becoming more aware that their food choices have everything to do with what kind of agriculture is supported. And I think that likewise there's a human consciousness evolving, it is 2012 you know, that people are more realizing their connection to the circulatory system of the planet and will help support that in many ways.

And I think, like kids, like in school, are more aware than even my children were. The kinds of educational opportunities that exist now, I think on all levels are attuning people more to the responsibility of caring for this precious resource.

Q: Can you tell us about the various agencies and the organizations that are involved in this work, this river work, and your relationships with them?

A: Well there's the Old Guard, the Natural Resource Conservation Service and the Soil and Water Conservation District, and then there is the work in our territory here of the Watershed Project that, where this work was heralded first in the Chippewa as far as a watershed project. And then helped create the Lac que Parle. And so as those entities emerged as quasi government organizations, not really having taxing authority, but being able to undertake research, being able to undertake education programs in each of their bioregions, I think has been an important focal point for people to realize what watershed they live in and how far it extends and what the ramifications of our decision making do to effect it; the health of any of our home watersheds. So some of those newer developments that I think are able to make the inroads and include engaging landowners in a new way, being able to convene community meetings, rather than just expecting people to walk into an office. And I think the annual meetings have been really important. The annual meeting of the Chippewa Project certainly has been, as a means for people to understand what the latest research is revealing. And I think in our watershed, in the Chippewa, Paul Weimer, our scientist, has done an exceptional job of portraying that information in a really graspable way for ordinary humans who aren't techies, who don't know what TMDL means, but who understand that the decisions that they make on a daily basis has something to do with the quality of that river, and who are willing to make those changes based on the way that that science is delivered.

Q: And is that done on a watershed basis ...

A: Yes, and that's done on a watershed basis, watershed level.

Q: Can you tell me just a little bit more about the Chippewa Project?

A: The Chippewa Project was rooted in a Land Stewardship Project initiative called the Chippewa River Stewardship Partnership, which Patrick Moore was the staff person for. And it was the first convening of people from all over the watershed to make a decision that we wanted to do

something. And so we invited speakers, we exchanged information, we learned how to listen to each other, we visited different landscapes, we hosted events on farms and on hunting preserves and lots of different venues that would form a focus for people of a lot of different mindsets to be able to come together and talk to and listen to one another for the first time.

Q: Do people know what a watershed is?

A: You know, I asked the fourth graders if they knew what a watershed was, and there were a few of them. And there were a few of them who could tell me what watershed they lived in. But it isn't something that we inherently understand.