

STEVE FOUGHT TESTIMONIAL

Fought Preserve - Bison Hollow Addition

I remember the first time I visited Bison Hollow. I was working in Washington, D.C. and looking for land in the Hocking Hills. Growing up in the flatland Mercer County Ohio, I had fallen in love with the Hills area as a student at Ohio University in the early 1970s.

I had already purchased a five-acre parcel in northern Vinton County as a potential cabin site, but I was looking for something special--a scenic property with rock outcroppings, a waterfall, a stream, hemlocks--your basic paradise. So I triangulated an area with Rock House on the north, Lake Hope on the east and Tar Hollow on the west, faxed it to area realtors with the message that I was looking for vacant land in that area. Larry Menchhofer (LRM Realty) called me and said, "I think I might have found what you're looking for." I was skeptical, but made arrangements to view the property.

The first time I saw Bison Hollow, I fell in love with it. I tried to curb my enthusiasm so that I didn't appear overanxious to the realtor, but when I saw that rock face for the first time, I knew immediately that it was what I was looking for. I was sold.

Actually, it was the aroma that got me. That pure, Southeast Ohio air I remember. There was ramp everywhere and millions of wildflowers. But it was the aroma that got me. That clean, refreshing aroma that you can't find everywhere in the Hills.

I had found my place. My journey was over. I have been to many spectacular sites in the world but this is one of the prettiest. Southeast Ohio has such wonderful natural areas and landscapes. I knew such a place as Bison Hollow existed somewhere in the Hills – and I went looking and found it.

Soon after I purchased the property I showed Bison Hollow to friends and family. My best friend asked me if he could hunt deer there, but I wouldn't give him permission. "It's just not part of the ethos of that property," I said. He persisted and I finally agreed to let him hunt it if he donated the venison to the food bank in Vinton County. He readily agreed.

I joined him and another friend one bitterly cold morning during muzzle-loading season. It was below zero and I stayed back in the truck. About mid-morning, I heard a shot. At lunch, when my two friends came back for lunch, I asked what had happened. My one friend had seen a deer, but his gun misfired. That was the shot I heard.

My best friend said he hadn't even done much hunting. "I was so busy admiring the beauty of this place that a deer could have come up and licked me in the face and I wouldn't have done

a thing." I said to him: "Now you understand why I was reluctant to allow hunting." Nobody got a deer that day.

Over the years, friends tried to convince me to build a house on the property, but that was never my intention. I would never build on the site – it is too beautiful. I had bought it to preserve it, not to develop it.

By the time AOA approached me about permanently conserving the property as part of the Bison Hollow preserve, I was aware that Bison Hollow was something truly special and very worthy of permanent protection.

It has unique properties – geologic features and biological diversity – which is why it needs preserved. This is one of the reasons that I decided to sell to AOA. I was so glad to learn that AOA had bought several neighboring properties and is working to conserve the gorge area.

I had discussions with ODNR Forestry officials about the biological diversity. Hikers were always interested in visiting. One summer morning I met a young man and woman, college age, ambling down the dry streambed. I asked them their business and they said, "We're just walking through. We think this is the most beautiful place in the state of Ohio." I said: "I do, too. I just happen to own it. And with that mindset you're welcome to visit here anytime."

My brother-in-law and I sat under the large rock overhang during a summer electrical storm and didn't get a drop on us. "Imagine how many people over the years have sat right here under this shelter during a thunderstorm."

When I think of the property I often imagine taking a nap in the woods and waking up with a Baltimore Oriole perched in a tree overhead. I know all of the features on the property and the animals who live here and make it home – where they are and travel to. The Cerulean Warbler is a cause of mine. I get spiritual about it. These birds are in decline. Their preferred habitat is large tracts of deciduous hardwood forest such as those found at Bison Hollow.

I have known Neal Hess from his work on other conservation projects. When he first approached me to discuss conservation of the property on behalf of AOA my first thought was no. It was mine. I rejected his entreaties to sell and I didn't really want to do an easement. I was too attached to it and didn't want to give up my dream property.

I truly love this property and my love affected my decision process. After a while I came around to a different perspective. Bison Hollow is a sanctuary. It's a place where it's easy to forget the outside world as you watch the swallows swarming around the rock face or admire the colors and sounds and aroma. It's one of the prettiest places in Ohio, as gorgeous as anything in the Hocking Hills. Maybe only Conkles Hollow is prettier.

There's something special about it. Without fail, everyone with whom I have shared Bison Hollow has come away with a special feeling. Friends and family all say the same thing. There is an undeniable feeling that you get when being there. Certain spots feel sacred, something spiritual or mystical going on. My uncle calls it "holy spirit hollow."

I try to visit the property on the summer solstice when I can. One time a friend visited with me. It was his first time to Bison Hollow. After walking around a while he commented "you are the only one I know who owns a state park."

To me the value of the property is transcendental. The natural beauty and spirituality you feel has such a profound impact on so many who visit. It is a very exceptional place in Ohio.

Preservation of such sites is so important today. Hemlocks produce oxygen that helps us breathe. The forest protects the streams and our water quality. The rock features are truly unique. The forest habitat is important for so many species. It is crucial to protect these places for us all. Everywhere I go I see pressure on natural areas.

My feelings for the site compel me to visit – it is my calling and a place I can always feel peaceful. I want others to be able to enjoy it as I have all of these years.

Because it is such a special place and because I had bought it with the specific purpose of preserving it, I began to be concerned about permanent protection of the property. I started to see the wisdom of entrusting a special property such as mine to a land conservancy such as the Appalachia Ohio Alliance.

At some point in my consideration I realized that I didn't really own it. Yes, I did own it in a legal sense but the real owners are the deer, pileated woodpeckers, cerulean warblers, turkeys and all of the other plants and animals that make their home there. I recognized that this site should really belong to AOA and be part of their Bison Hollow Preserve Conservation Area. This is why I bought it - to preserve it - and this is what AOA does best. It is even better with AOA.

In the end, I decided to sell the property to AOA because I love it so much. I knew that AOA was the right organization to permanently preserve the property. I explained to my family I would accomplish my original goal of protecting the property forever while leveraging the expertise and commitment of AOA.

It was hard to part with it – but I am not really parting with it – it is there forever thanks to AOA. Bison Hollow, this special, mystical place, would actually be in better hands.

Knowing that the property is now owned by AOA, I am assured that I am always welcome to visit. It is very comforting to know that I can, at any time, go back and find that peace and serenity that I feel in being there. There are so few places where this is possible in today's world. If I knew that I had only one day left to live, I would want to spend it there.

Thank you AOA for all that you do to protect properties such as Bison Hollow Preserve for me and the many others who enjoy these special places. I am 100% supportive of what AOA is doing. I encourage other property owners to work with and support AOA and their conservation activities.