

# Kaw Valley Senior Monthly

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## Kansan's legacy continues to grow in Illinois

By Kevin Groenhagen

*(Editor's note: Due to a medical issue, our scheduled Senior Profile subject for the August 2020 issue had to cancel his interview with Senior Monthly. It was too late to line up another interview, so this issue will feature a Senior Profile about Howard Fox that appeared in the August 2006 issue of Rock Valley Senior Monthly, which Groenhagen Advertising, LLC distributed in northwestern Illinois. Fox was a well-respected resident of my hometown of Oregon, Illinois. However, he was born and raised in Kansas. Howard's older sister was Bonnie Mae Fox Clutter. Two paroled ex-convicts murdered Bonnie, her husband, and two of their children in their home in Holcomb, Kansas, in November 1959. Howard and I did not discuss his sister and her family during the summer of 2006, but he had discussed his great displeasure with Truman Capote's portrayal of his sister with at least one other media outlet. Howard passed away on September 24, 2016, at the age of 100.*

— Kevin Groenhagen

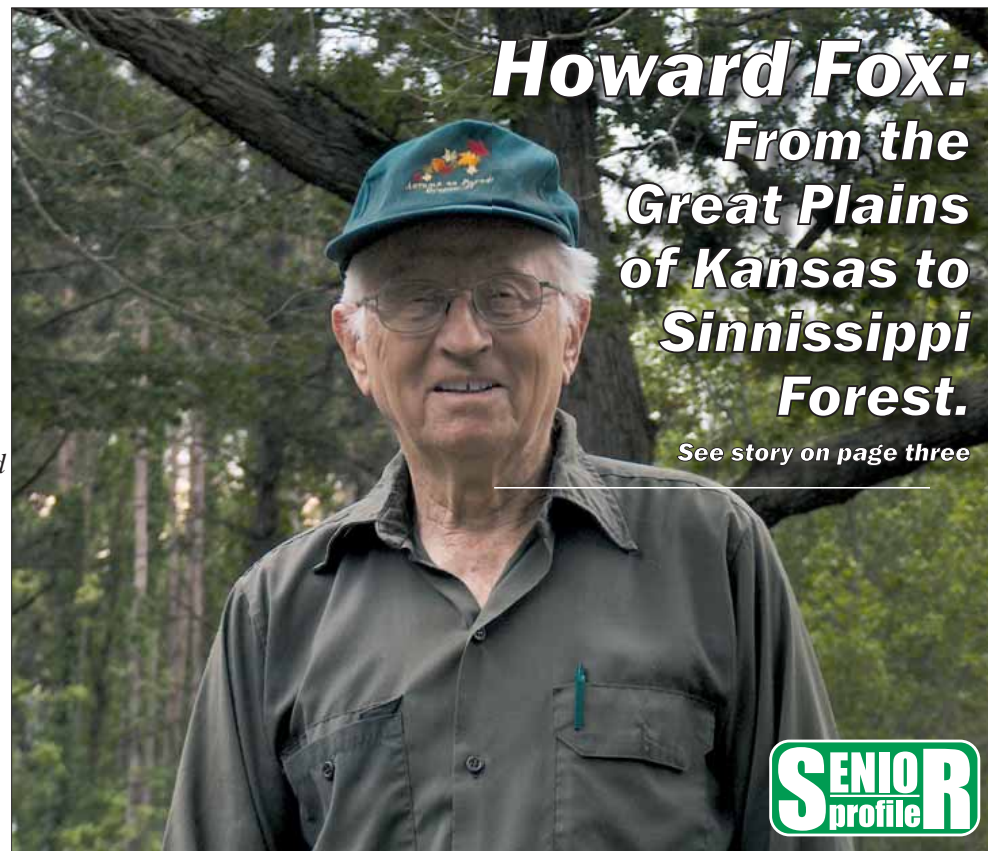
Plains farm his grandfather had in Michigan. When he graduated from high school, Howard Fox decided what he was going to do after finishing high school.

"Except for the fact that they planted trees around most homesteads, where I grew up was seven miles from the nearest tree," Fox said. "I decided I wanted to be a forester so I'd know what a tree is."

However, he had some personal business to take care of first.

"I couldn't leave Kansas without getting married to my girl," Fox explained. "So, after high school I got married and took off the next day for Michigan State College to study forestry."

Michigan State College of Agriculture and Applied Science was the first institution of higher learning in the United States to teach scientific agriculture. The Department of Forestry at Michigan State University (the name was changed in 1955) has the oldest, continuous undergraduate forestry program in the country.



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After graduating, Fox spent two years as a forester in northern Michigan. Then he learned about a job opening in northwestern Illinois.

Former Governor Frank O. Lowden and his wife, the daughter of George Pullman, the manufacturer of sleeping train cars, in 1899 purchased more than 600 acres along the Rock River near Oregon, Illinois. They later changed the name of the property to Sinnissippi, the Sauk and Fox tribes' word for "rocky waters."

Since the property included several sandy hillsides that were unsuitable for conventional farming, Lowden began growing pine seedlings and transplanting them to the hillsides. He later explained his tree-planting efforts, which became the first large-scale reforestation project in the state.

When Lowden died in 1943, his family decided to continue his conservation-oriented forestry work.

They hired Fox to oversee that effort. However, the young forester nearly became a captain of a PT boat instead of the cultivator of pine trees.

“I was drafted at one point in time during World War II, but they cancelled it,” Fox said. “I would have been a captain of a PT boat and probably wouldn’t have come home alive. I was married and had a child, my oldest son, at that time. My wife was packed up and ready to go back to her family in Kansas. If I had left, she couldn’t have stayed here alone.”

For more than three decades, Fox managed all of Sinnissippi Forest’s timberland, oversaw the planting of the trees, and even released the first turkeys in northern Illinois. He also set up the forest’s sawmill and Christmas tree business. Sinnissippi’s first Christmas trees were harvested in 1948.

According to Fox, most of what is now Sinnissippi Forest was pasture when he came to Illinois. By the time he retired in 1976, hardwood, conifer, and Christmas trees covered over 2,000 acres.

“The road that is now used as the loggers’ trail was made with my jeep,” Fox said. “Where my tracks were is where we stopped planting trees.”

In 1992 and 1993, Warren and Phillip Miller, Gov. Lowden’s grandsons, sold most of the forestland to the State of Illinois to create the 2,225-acre Lowden-Miller State Forest. Warren Miller continued to own Christmas tree business.

The grandsons and their mother, Mrs. C. Phillip Miller, in 1960 donated Camp Lowden to the Boy Scouts of America’s Blackhawk Area Council in memory of Gov. Lowden and his wife. Phillip and Warren were both Scouts under Fox, a longtime Scout leader.

Soon after retiring, Fox began building a new house. He didn’t have to look hard for the lumber for the framework, which he milled out of from standing trees.

“I got lumber in this house from trees that I planted,” he said with a laugh.

A sheet of paper at the back of a photo album documenting the house’s construction notes that 20 different wood species can be found in Fox’s house. All but one, Douglas Fir, was grown in Sinnissippi Forest.

For Fox, retirement has been more of a transition than a hard stop. Experiences from his childhood may have influenced part of that transition. In addition to being a wheat farmer, Fox’s father was a part-time carpenter. “My father would sell off the cattle after harvests and then had no reason to be on the farm,” Fox said. “So, he would take the whole family to California. We’d travel in an old Model T Ford and camped as we traveled. We would generally take the south-ern route, but I remember going over the mountain passes, too. My dad was adventurous.” Fox’s own adventurous side has led him to Churchill, Manitoba, to observe polar bears on Hudson Bay, and to the Caribbean to try scuba diving. “I won’t scuba dive again,” he said. “I thought I was going to drown once, and that kind of took the fun out of it.” Fox has also found a way to combine his adventurous side with his love for carpentry by going on work missions, which are generally under the auspices of the Methodist Church. He has been to Chile four times for various projects and has been invited to go again in December to help build a church there. Fox has also gone on work missions to Kenya and Mozambique. On his first mission to Africa, his carpentry skills literally hit a brick wall while building a home for the staff of a university. “There were seven of us from the United States,” Fox said. “All of us were carpenters. We went down to the job site the first morning and here was this great big pile of bricks. Not a stick of wood anywhere! We hired a bricklayer and his assistant to help us. We learned how to be bricklayers instead of carpenters.”

During a work mission on a reservation in South Dakota, the Lakotas made Fox an honorary chief because of his age.

They also allowed him to participate in a portion of an important ceremony.

“They were cutting a ceremonial cottonwood tree,” Fox said. “They were going to cut this tree and move it to their ceremonial grounds. All the braves were around the tree while visitors watched. They called me down to the tree and gave me the axe. I took the first chop. Then the chief took the axe and he took a chop or two. Other braves took turns with the axe until the tree fell. It was no small tree, but the braves caught it as it dropped. There were at least 100 men. It never touched the ground. They carried the tree away and did not allow me to watch the rest of the ceremony.”

Fox appears to be describing a sun dance ceremony. The sun dance, which is the predominant tribal ceremony of the Great Plains Indians, is practiced by numerous tribes today as a prayer for life, world renewal, and thanksgiving. The cottonwood tree, which is considered sacred, serves as the central focus for the dance.

At home, Fox uses his woodwork-ing skills to make a part for a Personal Energy Transportation (PET) Project. PET is a hand-cranked or lever-powered wheelchair for those who have lost the use of their legs due to landmines, polio, and other diseases and injuries. The PET Project has sent the “gift of mobility” to thousands of people in poor and underdeveloped countries.

Fox learned about the PET Project through Dr. Sherwood Baker. Before being recruited by the Missouri University School of Medicine in Columbia, Missouri, Baker practiced medicine in Mount Morris, Illinois, for 17 years and delivered Fox’s children. Baker (1916-2009), who had returned to Mount Morris, was volunteering with the PET Project, which is based in Columbia, and contacted Fox to help with the project.

I make the seat supports for the PET machine,” Fox said. “I’ve made over 6,000 of them.”

When he is not on work missions or making seat supports, Fox keeps busy with several hobbies, including marquetry. Marquetry is the craft of entirely covering a structural carcass with veneer and forming decorative patterns, designs, or pictures. Fox’s marquetry generally entails using different types of veneer layers of wood to make free-standing pictures.

Not surprisingly, Fox has found a way to turn his hobby into an opportunity to volunteer. He is currently teaching other seniors how to do marquetry at the Rock River Center in Oregon.