

Whiskey-Barrel Rain Barrels a Rolling Success

by Charlie Zine

On October 4, 2008 the Valley of the Fox Group of the Sierra Club got into the rain barrel business. Not only was it a success, we also enjoyed a fine afternoon at Walter Payton's Roundhouse, and we helped 17 people each get an authentic Heaven Hill Distillery white oak bourbon whiskey barrel which they will convert to a rain barrel for their homes.

Rain barrels are rain water storage devices that capture rain water runoff from your roof. The rain water is later used for watering plants or other outdoor uses, thereby reducing the amount of water one needs to obtain from the tap (which you pay for twice, once for the water and again for the use of the sewer system). Rain barrels also allow more of the rain to be used in your yard or garden — rather than being channeled into the storm sewers, rivers and streams — thereby recharging the underground aquifers, and reducing runoff.

Rain barrels can be bought online for up to \$295 dollars each, already converted with the addition of a spigot. Used whiskey barrels can also be bought online for \$100 to \$200, without the spigots, so our price of \$50 was a big savings, even with the cost of the spigot (\$10) and the downspout diverter (\$25) added in.

Many people, myself included, prefer the character of old hand-crafted white oak barrels over the alternatives which are often plastic and originally used to import food-grade products like olive oil. Both work equally well; it is just a matter of personal preference.

Of course these oak barrels had a pedigree; not only were they used for aging bourbon whiskey (a one-time-only whiskey-making process) but they then were sold to Payton's where America's only four-time gold medal brewmaster Mike Rybinski used them to make his bourbon-flavored stout beer (another one-time only use, as all the bourbon flavor is gone after one use). The barrels even came with a certificate of authenticity.

Besides expanding the use of rain barrels, our chapter made over \$500 in the process — money we will put to good use in Kane and Kendall Counties. We would like to thank Scott Ascher, Roundhouse owner Ike Rybinski, and marketing manager Eric Mersch, for all their help on this fun and worthwhile project.

But wait, there is more! Brewmaster Mike stopped over at my table last week while I was there for lunch and asked if I wanted more barrels. I thought we used his entire stock (and we did) but he relayed our story to Chicago's Goose Island Beer Company's president, John J. Hall, who loved the idea so much he called me and asked me if I wanted 285 more whiskey barrels! (Goose Island distributes its beer nation-wide, so they brew in much larger quantities.) Of course I said yes, and now we are looking forward to "Whiskey Barrel Rain Barrel II, the sequel" planned for this spring, maybe Earth Day in April.

With 285 more barrels, we not only will have a greater impact in terms of rain barrels and water conservation, but we also can raise much more money! Last night the Executive Committee (ExCom) voted to dedicate the proceeds of the next whiskey barrel rain barrel sale to one of our favorite causes here in Kane and Kendall County — the Fox River! Our goal is to use the proceeds to create a rain garden on the shores of the Fox River ideally in the new Rivers Edge Park in Aurora, for which the city is now planning (with extensive citizen input, I might add!) and acquiring property.

The Rivers Edge Park is Aurora's newest commitment to the transformation of the Fox River from its outdated industrial age era to its newer, greener and cleaner recreational era. Not only have 15 acres been taken out of inappropriate and obsolete uses, like auto repair shops, junk yards, and factories, but Aurora is rededicating the riverbanks to public gathering places, botanical gardens, and farmers and French country markets. They are also planning pedes-



A whiskey barrel rain barrel on location.

trian bridges to function both as recreational extensions of the Fox River Trail System and as a means of promoting public transportation by making it easier and faster for near-west-siders to walk or bicycle to the Aurora Transportation Center (the largest and most-used of all suburban Chicago commuter train stations).

Not only will this make it easier for commuters to take public transportation to work instead of personal cars, it will also spur sales of new residential high rise condos lining the Fox River in and near downtown Aurora, such as River Street Plaza on south River Street. Aurora actually modified their comprehensive plan to encourage high rise condos along the river corridor near downtown. These new buildings all require interior parking (no more surface-level parking lots on the beautiful Fox River!), and they also require linkage to the Fox River Trail System, which doubles as a pedestrian transportation corridor allowing people a beautiful and peaceful walk along the Fox River to the commuter train station.

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Help Wanted

We need help on the following VOF committees:

Global Warming Committee — We have two PowerPoint slide presentations targeted for students and community groups. We need people to help publicize and present the shows, to do research to expand them, and to keep them up-to-date. The Global Warming Committee also helps in the Cool Cities campaign, where hundreds of municipalities across the country have pledged to reduce their future carbon emissions. Do you know of a city council that is ready to take it on? Become an activist and help us to persuade more municipalities to join this very successful movement.

Publicity committee — Help us get the word out about our events and functions. People with imagination are needed to help us attain

good attendance and to keep our name in the public eye.

Smart Growth (urban sprawl) Committee — We put on a PowerPoint slide show that illustrates a myriad of ways to reduce the footprint of our cities while improving living standards. People are needed to publicize and present the shows, and to help in our efforts to continually improve the presentations.

Service Day Activities — With possible cuts for forest preserve budgets, I would like to organize a group to help out once a month with service projects in the Kane County Forest Preserves. It could be brush-pick up, trail brushing, prairie plantings or a variety of other projects. If you are interested in getting involved please contact me, Julie Koivula, at julieakoivula@sbcglobal.net

Pizzo Speaks to VOF

by Nate Stelton

On October 13, Jack Pizzo, President and Senior Ecologist from Pizzo & Associates, Ltd., gave an inspiring presentation at a VOF general membership meeting. Pizzo's talk, accompanied by his own colorful and dramatic photography, touched upon the true original natural state of our area and how current land developers may or may not fit into our ecology of prairies, wetlands, and savannas. Pizzo's approach is unique in that, to create settings of natural beauty, he works with land planners and developers rather than opposing them.

The presentation provided a both sad and entertaining view of the many uninformed landscaping mistakes currently being committed on public, residential, and industrial sites. Aside from their defiance to nature and lack of esthetics, these errors often impose higher maintenance costs as well as expensive and unfortunate rework. Another facet of the talk,



Pizzo addresses the VOF group.

however, was the illustrated successes achieved by Pizzo & Associates.

Perhaps surprising was the emphasis placed on prescribed burns, and how such burns in some cases almost singlehandedly restored areas to their natural states in a very short time. Pizzo's operation, headquartered in Leland, IL, provides a variety of ecological consultation and management services, and even includes a nursery of native plants. For more information, go to www.pizzo.info.

Winter Tracking: It's More Than Just Footprints!

by Valerie Blaine

Many species of wildlife are out and about in the dead of winter. We often don't see them but know of their presence by the signs they leave behind. There are clues in the snow, in the trees, on rocks and in the water. There are audible signs and olfactory clues as well.

First in this two-part program is an indoor presentation Jan. 12 at the Batavia Public Library. Naturalist Valerie Blaine and outdoorsman Mark Romano will present an overview of wildlife native to northern Illinois.

The importance of habitat, population dynamics, changing climate, and the wildlife-human interface will also be discussed. We'll mix in an activity or two to get you thinking about animal signs and how to read their clues.

Following the indoor presentation, on January 24 there will be a guided hike at Tekakwitha Woods. Naturalist Jaclyn Olson will join Valerie and Mark in leading this trek through woods and fields. We'll look for signs of deer, owls, raccoons, voles, mink, and coyote!

From the Co-Chair

Grassroots: the power of many! The soil under a native prairie is a very sturdy and dense mat of tangled roots, rhizomes, bulbs, and rootstock. The plants on top die back every winter, but are kept alive year to year by the strong root system. Roots of prairie plants can be much longer than the plant is tall.

Per Wikipedia, a grassroots movement, powered by volunteers, is often referenced in the context of a political movement and is one driven by the constituents of its community. The term implies that the creation of the movement and the group supporting it is natural and spontaneous, highlighting the differences between this and a movement that is orchestrated by traditional power structures.

I was elated when our 44th U.S. President was overwhelmingly elected by the American People. Was it a landslide? Or was it in reality something much more — perhaps the largest grassroots effort in history. Up until this recent campaign, few persons understood how powerful the energy, time, and efforts of the common, ordinary person can be.

As a veteran community, political, and environmental activist, I have learned to plan for the worst, but to always expect miracles. And they do happen — the election demonstrated that. However, more than just the concrete evidence of the election tally, the true miracle manifested itself in the myriad of citizens from all walks of life who chose to become involved in their government. What really was the success and stands at the forefront and is the lesson that was learned and remains timeless — it is the truth in the great statement that “This nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom — and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

Those folks who stepped up and volunteered; investing their time, energy, and passion in something and someone they truly believed in. Those who knocked on doors, made calls, gave small donations, and talked made the difference.

As we stand at this great historical crossroad, we know that the work is not done and that this is our ongoing opportunity to strive toward a cleaner and healthier environment, a greener economy, and a better world that can realistically lead us to a flourishing and prosperous future. Based on the past performance of the big polluting industries, it is highly unlikely they will voluntarily comply.

The last eight years have been a battle ground on which we environmentalists we have fought long and hard. As we transition into the next four years, this could become the best of times, but it can't and won't happen overnight — and not without a lot of work from both the blades of grass growing above us, and we the American people who are the strong and enduring root system.

As my year of serving as co-chair draws to an end, I'm honored to have had the opportunity to have worked with all of you and to be a part of our efforts and accomplishments. I want to express gratitude to all who were there in the trenches. I plan to stay very involved though I'm not sure on what committee or where the path will take me next. This much we do know: Go grassroots! We can expect miracles!

Terri Voitik, Terri.Voitik@illinois.sierraclub.org

On weekends, the newly conceived Rivers Edge Park becomes a festival park served by trains, as well as several bike trails including the Fox River Trail, the Illinois Prairie Path (Aurora spur), and the Gilman Trail. In addition to bikes, the River is being made friendlier for canoes, kayaks, and paddle boats, completing the vision of a recreation-based river corridor.

This is a complete turnaround from the past, where Aurora had one of the most intensive concentrations of factories in the state.

Local kayakers, myself included, are also working with city, county, park district and state officials to create the Fox River Whitewater Trail and Competition Channel, which will be the first "water trail" in the country with "whitewater" features. The whitewater will be created by modifying dams to create bypass channels for paddlers

and tubers. Aurora's canoe chute already exists just across the river from the Rivers Edge Park and although it has never functioned very well (it was among the first urban bypass channels built in this country), plans are now under way to convert it and the two dams in downtown Aurora to a whitewater competition venue suitable for world cup and Olympic qualifying events. Another bypass channel is being built in Yorkville and will be completed by next year. Other dams in North Aurora and Montgomery are also targeted for bypass channels, and two more dams have already been removed in South Batavia and North Ave. in Aurora. The North Batavia Dam, already severely damaged, is also slated for removal once funding is found.

The result will be a Fox River that is drastically different from its industrial past. Many

groups like the Sierra Club, municipalities like Aurora, Montgomery, and Yorkville, and park districts like the Fox Valley Park District, have participated in this transformation. The Valley of the Fox Group is proud to help in our small way to make this transformation a reality.

You can help by buying one or more of our whiskey barrel rain barrels in spring. Ballydoyle is a brand new Irish Pub on the banks of the Fox River in downtown Aurora and they have ordered 25 whiskey barrels from us, for rain barrels, as well as tables, and exterior signage (that is what I call "adaptive re-use" and, of course, recycling!)

If you are interested in getting on the list for rain barrels, or if you would like to volunteer to help us with this rain barrel project, contact me at: cfmczine@aol.com.



Charlie Zine invents a low-carb-footprint kayak trailer

Because We Can

by Fran Caffee

It's Wednesday, November 5, 2008 and it seems like we have been traveling a very long time. I am referring to the election. Valley of the Fox Group was fortunate to have many activists volunteering to help the campaign of their favorite politicians. We all questioned at some point why we were out there walking in the wind and cold, or making all these phone calls. Because we can! Because we were able to freely walk or drive to our polling place and cast a vote for the people we think best qualified to hold that office.

We work for the people that we think will

best put into place the laws we know are needed to continue the work we do as environmentalists. We can't do it alone; we need good people to be the decisions makers. Senator Chris Lauzen once remarked to me that "good environmental laws make good business laws." However, we can't leave those laws to chance. We need to have the right people in office and we need to help them stay current with the needs of our environment. First we help elect them, then we lobby them.

Thank you to everyone who volunteered in

any capacity, and I hope you have great memories because your candidate won.

The following were endorsed by the Sierra Club in the VOF Group area with input from VOF Members. They ALL won their elections!

Bill Foster 14th Congressional District
Linda Holmes ILState Senate District 42
Linda Chapa LaVia State Representative District 83
Keith Farnham ILState Representative District 43

VOF Calendar of Events

For more information about outings and hikes, see the Outings section of the *Lake & Prairie* and also the VOF web site.

All meetings are held at the Batavia Public Library at 7 p.m. the 2nd Monday of each month except July, August and Dec. The public is invited to attend.

January 12 (Monday) -

General membership meeting. Naturalist Valerie Blaine and outdoorsman Mark Romano present "Tracking Animals in the Snow."

January 24 (Saturday) -

Meet at 9 a.m., Tekakwitha Forest Preserve parking lot, St. Charles. We'll hike about an hour with a Kane County Forest Ranger, followed by a stop at the visitor center. Contact julieakoivula@sbcglobal.net. Cost: \$3.

February 9 (Monday) -

General membership meeting. State Senator Chris Lauzen is the featured guest presenter. Senator Lauzen was the first public official endorsed by VOF, a relationship that's continued since 1992.

March 9 (Monday) -

General membership meeting. Program TBA.

April 13 (Monday) -

General membership meeting. Program TBA.

April 25 (Saturday) - Earth Day

Mark your calendars now to help the morning of 4/25. We'll do a river clean-up along the bike trail. Tell your friends and bring a group (more details later). Sierra Club is also promoting "Take Back Drugs." Bring old medications to turn in to be properly disposed. We are trying to educate the public to not dispose of meds into the sewage system.

VOF Leadership

Charlie Zine	Chair
Julie Koivula	Secretary/Outings
Ron Bedard	Treasurer/Clean Air & Water

Additional ExCom Members

Terri Voitik	Political Chair
Jan Mangers	Executive Committeeman
Terry Murray	Executive Committeeman
Fran Caffee	IL Chapter Water Sentinels Chair
Gene Schultz	Lobby Chair
Craig Zabel	Publicity/Global Warming/Sprawl

ExCom Support Team

Marlene Bedard	Membership
Dudley Case	Executive Consultant
Ron Gilkerson	Dams
Mike Hanlon	Webmaster
Ted Penesis	PaddleBoat Fund Raiser
Nate Stelton	E-mail/Database
Marcel Wen	Mining

Newsletter

Nate Stelton	Editor
Barb Vrchota and Fran Caffee	Editorial Consultants
Lisanne Freese	Layout and Design

All VOF Officers can be reached via e-mail by using firstname.lastname@illinois.sierraclub.org, e.g., fran.caffee@illinois.sierraclub.org. Check the website for updates at www.sierraclub.org/il/vof.

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You can also sign up to receive *Sierra Club Insider*, the flagship e-newsletter. Sent out twice a month, it features the Club's latest news and activities. Subscribe and view recent editions at www.sierraclub.org/insider

Monitoring the Mighty Mississippi

by Fran Caffee, National Water Sentinels Co-Team Leader

As part of the Sierra Club's Project Renewal in place since late 2008, most committees are now known as Teams. One of the newer Teams is the MissRIT, Mississippi River Issues Team. The Mississippi River drains the largest watershed in the country, affecting almost 40 States.

Unfortunately, a large part of that flowage carries levels of nutrients, mainly nitrates and phosphates, causing a dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico. Dead zones are hypoxic (low oxygen) areas in the world's oceans, the observed incidences of which have been increasing since oceanographers began noting them in the 1970s. These occur near inhabited coastlines, where aquatic life is most concentrated.

Hypoxia, or oxygen depletion, is a phenomenon that occurs in aquatic environments as dissolved oxygen (DO; molecular oxygen dissolved in the water) becomes reduced in concentration to a point detrimental to aquatic organisms living in the system. Dissolved oxygen is typically expressed as a percentage of the oxygen that would dissolve in the water at the prevailing temperature and salinity (both of which affect the solubility of oxygen in water). An aquatic system lacking dissolved oxygen (0 percent saturation) is termed anaerobic, or anoxic; a system with low DO concentration (in the range between one and 30 percent DO saturation) is called hypoxic. Most



Illinois Chapter Clean Water Advocate Cindy Skrukud demonstrates to VOF members Ron Bedard and Linda Cole the use of a DO machine.

fish cannot live below 30 percent DO saturation. A "healthy" aquatic environment should seldom experience DO less than 80 percent.

What we fail to realize sometimes is that dead zones begin upstream. Yes, right here in Kane and Kendall counties. For that reason the local Water Sentinels will be training more monitors to test DO in our local tributaries. You can be part of this important work and help as we try to find a solution. Contact vf-cons@illinois.sierraclub.org. We provide training and any equipment needed.

Prairie Rivers Network on Wayward Pharmaceutical Waste

Members who attended the VOF meeting last November were graced with a visit and informative talk by Cecily Smith of the Prairie Rivers Network. Smith explained how pharmaceuticals can enter the hydrologic cycle and warned of the negative effects these drugs have on aquatic animals and vegetation.

Filtering out these substances has thus far not been a viable option. The best thing we can do

is avoid adding unused drugs to landfills or flushing them down the toilet. Locations in our area that take back pharmaceutical waste include the Naperville hazardous waste center (www.naperville.il.us/hhw.aspx) and the Yorkville Police Department (www.yorkville.il.us/HomeHealthCareDisposal.cfm).

For more information about Prairie Rivers Network, go to prairierivers.org.