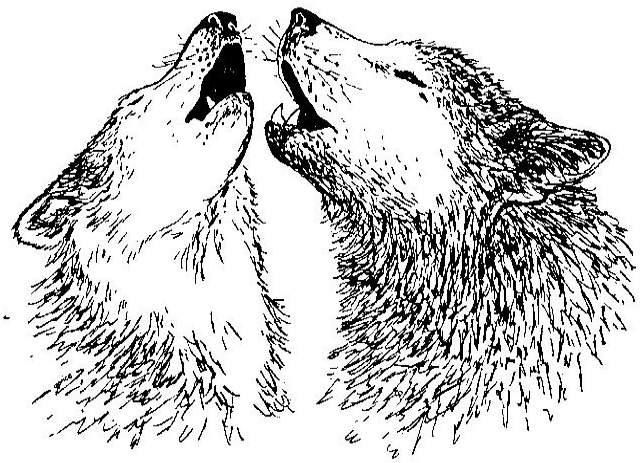
Osborne Oracle



Fall 2026 *Clayton County Conservation* *Vol. 49 No.3*

Osborne Days: Year 1 in a 50 Year Shadow

by Jesse Matt, Naturalist

Osborne teemed with people on October 10th and 11th. The parking lot hummed with food trucks, and the grassy expanse in the Pioneer Village bustled with tents, vendors, and people. This is the culmination of months of planning—most of which occurred before I joined the staff in June of this year.

For those visiting Elkader for the first time, the 1st annual Osborne days looked like a huge success—but locals remember the event by its original name: Heritage Days. October 2025 marked the 50th annual—*and the last*—heritage days. Many folks grew attending Heritage days, and took their own children as the years passed. This understandably built a lot of anticipation for what Osborne Days would look like going into the future.

Each day at Osborne, we set out with a notebook to gather some of these opinions, and talked to both newcomers and 50 year veterans of Heritage Days. Here are their thoughts:

"I like the change." Noted an Elkaderite who had been going to Heritage Days for over 10 years. "Clayton County has too much history. We've got the Motor Mill, and our museums, and the Rendezvous across the river. It's nice to have more of a focus on nature and local business."

"We were just looking for family activities in eastern Iowa." Said a group from Oelwein. "It's harder to find free events. And the kids love the animals."

Many other families echoed this sentiment, and noted the wildlife feeding by Nick Moser and Ashley Fischer as their favorite part.

Many others noted the atlatl spear throwing activity with Effigy Mound's National Park Service and the Wildthunder Animal Rehabilitation demo by Tracy Belle as their favorite activities.

Not everyone had positive things to say about Osborne Days. A sizable portion of attendees bitterly missed Heritage Days.

When asked what attendees felt was wrong or missing, many mentioned staples of past Heritage Days, such as the blacksmith and buffalo chip tossing. A sizable portion cited live music, and a small subset of attendees whished for the auction to make a return.

"The first year of anything is going to be hard." Mentioned an attendee from Garnavillo. "People have been less active since Covid. And people don't want to drive as far with the price of gas."

It's important to reiterate that the backbone and spirit of Heritage Days isn't over, it's *expanding* to allow for local non-profits, schools, and businesses to participate. Clayton County Conservation is open to the public's opinion and assistance in creating a vibrant event that the people of the Driftless can enjoy for years to come.

While some vendors are worried about reduced attendance compared to previous years, others are optimistic that there is room to grow and take the event in a multitude of different directions related to nature, history, culture, and cuisine of northeast Iowa.

Mollusks and the Face of Conservation— *By Jesse Matt*



Conservation requires love. We've brought the Bald Eagle, the Bison, and the Panda back from the brink of extinction because entire populations of people fell in love with those animals. In a sentence, they're easy to love. But not all animals (or landscapes) that need help are easy to love.

This year, we've learned a lot about mollusks, and worked hard to include more freshwater mussel and snail educational programming. We got kids in the water hunting for mussels and other macro-invertebrates at the Mississippi River Adventure Day in Prairie Du Chien, and we hosted a community mussel survey at Motor Mill. We assisted the DNR and the Fish and Wildlife Service in mussel and snail monitoring across northeast Iowa. While we learned a ton about mollusks, we learned one important thing about people: It's difficult to love something without a face.

Children hunting for river life are much more likely to snag a mussel out of the banks of the Mississippi, toss it back into the water after a quick shrug, and continue hunting for fish or crawdads. It's difficult to blame them. Humans are innately *anthropocentric,* meaning we place ourselves and other humans at the center of our worldview. We also all exhibit *pareidolia,* a psychological tendency where we look for human facial features and emotions in non-human objects, including animals and landscapes. It's no surprise that millions of humans flock to zoos, parks, and reserves to see birds, mammals, and the occasional fish while the rest of the animal kingdom (more than 98% of all animals and 99.99% of all life) gets far less attention.

But some of the most critical areas of conservation receive the least public support. Rough estimates say Iowa has lost more than 50% of its freshwater mussels, and at least 12 of its 54 species are considered extirpated, or extinct from the state of Iowa.

Fortunately, love is not static. It can be learned. It can grow and be cultivated, just like a garden. This reminds me of a job interview I attended in west-central Nebraska in 2019. I visited a lonely ranger's cabin surrounded by prairie as far as the eye can see. For someone used to the hills, forests, and caves of northeast Iowa, I was afraid spending months in a flat expanse of grass. I relayed these fears to ranger, who paused before saying, "We're born loving mountains. You have to learn to love a prairie."

She was right. Prairie is just grass to most people, until they learn to appreciate the color of purple blazing star, the root structure of compass plant, and the grazing ecology of bison on eastern gammagrass and big bluestem.

With mollusks in Iowa, I see **two avenues** to fostering a conservation mindset. We can *anthropomorphize* them, or we can *connect them to something we already love.*

Jennifer Kurth, the DNR malacologist is a pro at anthropomorphizing mollusks for human education. The phrase: "*These dudes like to hang out shallow, sandy, calm areas like this. But I'm not finding many ladies for them to chill with. Want to know the difference*?" Generally gets more mileage and curiosity from an audience than "*Here are the biophysiological differences between male and female plain pocketbook mussels*." Once the curiosity and connections are forged, *then* people can proceed to drier biology and ecology.

The second (and perhaps easier) avenue is to connect mollusks with something we already love. While many are afraid to touch slimy mud-dwelling creatures, nearly everyone loves to fish, swim, and paddle. This is more true than ever in the Driftless, where water quality remains a hot topic, and the Mississippi river is a strong part of life and culture. Those who like clean water for drinking, swimming, and more habitat for fishing and paddling will quickly find themselves appreciating these shelled heroes.



Clayton County Conservation Board's Upcoming Events & Programs

CELEBRATE 10 YEARS of the Motor Mill Bridge Lighting

Saturday, November 21st, 2026

4:00pm to 6:00pm



Kick off the holiday season by joining Clayton County Conservation for the 10th annual Motor Mill Bridge Lighting, held at the Motor Mill Historic Site at 28518 Galaxy Road, Elkader, IA 52043. Celebrate 10 years of community and history, with one of the best light shows and public events the county has to offer.

Osborne Nature Center Begins Winter Hours

Starting November 1st, 2026, Osborne Nature Center will begin its winter hours. The center will be open from *8:00am to 4:00pm Monday to Friday*. It will be closed on Saturdays and Sundays. Weekend hours will resume at the opening of Summer season, starting April 1st, 2027.

Motor Mill 2027 Season

Open Memorial Day through Labor Day
Motor Mill Historic Site
10:00-5:00 PM

Additional tours available upon request, pending staff and volunteer availability.

Osborne Riddler

Riddle #1
A Park on Osborne Property

If up was down, and day was night,
I'd be anger, rage, and fright.
If hot was cold, and low was high,
I'd quench no thirst, and leave you dry.

If you find your mind is reeling,
Searching for a clue or reason:
Know that I am half a feeling,
And lastly I am half a season.



Riddle #2
A Plant that Grows at Osborne

I am a god of medicine,
Dating to the ancient Greeks.
Yet I'm poison unlike venison,
A bitter taste on tongues and cheeks.

I am not grass, I am not tree,
I am plain but help the royal.
I allow wings to be,
Yet I am rooted to the soil.

If you wish to guess the answer, pitch an email to Jesse at jmatt@claytoncountyia.gov

For more information on any of these programs, call 563-245-1516, or visit www.claytoncountyconservation.org

Upcoming Holidays





Osborne Nature Center will be closed these days

Veteran's Day
Wednesday, November 11th, 2026

Thanksgiving
Thursday-Friday, November 26-27th, 2026

Christmas
Thursday-Friday, December 24-25th, 2026

New Year's Day
Friday, January 1st, 2027

President's Day
Monday, February 15th, 2027

Good Friday
Friday, March 26th, 2027

Memorial Day
Monday, May 31st, 2027

Independence Day:
Sunday, July 4th, 2027

Motor Mill 5K / 10K Planned This Spring

March 20, 2027

5 and 10 kilometer race through the Motor Mill Historic Site and attached nature trails. Prizes and snacks provided!

O.W.L.S.

Older, Wiser, Livelier Souls

Looking for an excuse to get out of the house, meet new friends, and enjoy a good meal while exploring the natural and cultural heritage of Iowa? Starting in April, join Naturalist Abbey Harkrader in a variety of themed events, the 3rd Thursday of every month. The 2026 schedule had participants visiting Effigy Mounds, Seed Savers, the Billy Clock Museum, the arboretum in Dubuque, the famous Dambo trolls, and more exciting places. Keep an eye out in the next newsletter for the 2027 O.W.L.S. schedule.

Reservations are required for both program and lunch

Call with questions on cost or time



Osborne Nature Center

Phone: 563-245-1516
www.ClaytonCountyConservation.org

Park Spotlight – Frenchtown Park

By Abbey Harkrader

One of Clayton County Conservation's hidden gems is Frenchtown Park. This park has one of the most beautiful view scapes along the Mississippi River. Frenchtown Park is mostly a day-use area with picnic tables and a small boat ramp, the boat access is unimproved and is better for paddling or smaller boats. Primitive camping is also permitted, though there are no bathroom facilities in the park. One of the best times to visit or paddle Frenchtown is when the lotus and waterlilies are in full bloom in late Summer.



Frenchtown got its name from its colorful history. Just a little upstream along the slough you can find the remains of the original Frenchtown settlement. Docks and vacation cabins line the bank there and one historic old big 2-story brick house is surrounded by the more recent additions to what was once an important trading post and later a thriving fishing village.

Frenchtown was founded in 1812 by Chevalier Marais, a member of French Royalty, who fled to America to escape the French Revolution of 1792. For a while he wandered the wild new lands here in America and eventually found his way to the Upper Mississippi. This area was French territory, so he decided to build a trading post to trade with the Native American tribes who were on this side of the river. He established his trading post near the mouth of what is now called Buck Creek. He is believed to have gotten along and traded well with the local tribes and is said to have taken his native wife, a daughter of an Ioway Chief, back with him to France after the restoration. After Chavalier Marais returned to France, Messieurs Lapointe and Charles La Tranch took over the trading post at Frenchtown in 1820.



When Iowa opened for settlement, Frenchtown became an important landing for supplies and river traffic. The steamer "Warrior," made regular monthly trips from St. Louis, with government stores to the military posts upriver and was known to have stopped at Frenchtown in early years delivering supplies to the settlers in Clayton County who had new land claims in the area.

As time went on, Frenchtown continued its tradition of making a living from the land through trapping and commercial fishing. Today there are a few residents, but many of the houses and cabins along old Frenchtown are vacation getaways used for hunting and fishing along the river. Just downstream at the park, you too can enjoy this peaceful backwater of the Mississippi River. Frenchtown Park is perfect for wildlife viewing, scenic views, picnicking and paddling.

From the History of Clayton County, 1882



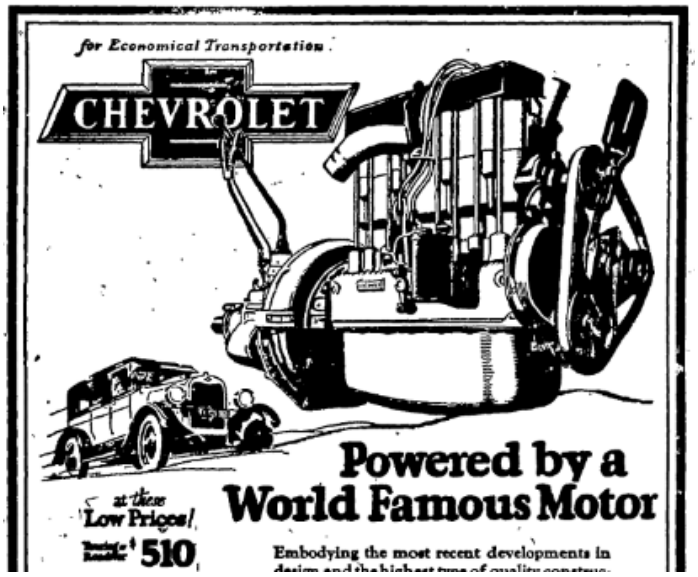
Life 100 years ago... Fall and Winter 1926 *By Jesse Matt*

From The Clayton County Register Nov. 18 to Dec. 2, 1926

Things are optimistic in Elkader and the surrounding towns. The area received 6 inches of snow, with drifts big enough to block automobile traffic in some areas.
The Red Wing Ferry, captained by L.H. Beerman, which ferries residents between Guttenberg and Glen Haven Wisconsin, was forced to close due to icebergs and dangerous conditions on the Mississippi.

Local news is full of barn dances (*tickets starting at $0.30*), music gatherings, and supper clubs. Sales of draft horses, giant African Geese, sows, and heifers fill the classified ads. The mill in Postville boasts of exporting train cars full of Timothy and Japanese Millet to Manitoba and New York, respectively. The town will also host the district meeting for butter makers, as well as a fiddling contest.

The obituaries for 1926 call back to times older still. The community mourns the death of its oldest railroad conductor, J.M. Morse, who was born in 1844 and arrived in the area by covered wagon. He ran the railroads around Elkader since 1889.



The 20s are clearly an exciting decade, as the people of northeast Iowa begin to adjust to a modern lifestyle that starts to resemble ours today. Local interest in automobiles is booming. Tons of news stories feature automobile accidents and it's considered noteworthy just for someone to travel to Cedar Rapids or Chicago. Many ads display car prices, such as the Raftis Chevrolet company in Elkader



(*pictured, left*) offering cars starting at $510 (*approximately $9,600 in 2026*). Cars are becoming so popular in 1926 that the writers noted a 1,500% increase in vehicle registration in Clayton County since 1911.The Lutheran Church in Elkport is proud to announce it has electric chandeliers for the first time. Eischeid & Co. in Elkader advertises a "home entertainment radio" for the low price of $300 (*$5,677.63, adjusted for inflation in 2026*).Despite this push into modernism, some tasks still have to be done the old-fashioned way. The December 2nd issue of the *Register* describes a team of farmer shoveling snow for *18 hours,* clearing 4 miles of road, so a doctor could reach the house of a seriously sick child.

Some of the stories in these century-old newspaper columns still affect our lives today. They write about ongoing construction of the roads and fish hatchery at Backbone State Park, largely completed by the inmates of the Anamosa Reformatory. The Rivola Theater (currently the Elkader Genealogical Society) advertises shows (*pictured above)*. Though the theater closed in the 1940s, its owners opened the Elkader Cinema, which still operates today, along with the Opera House. What might people say about our present life in 2126? *C'est la vie,* they say.



Sources

- *Clayton County Register. Elkader, Iowa. December 2, 1926*
- *Clayton County Register. Elkader, Iowa. November 26, 1926*
- *Clayton County Register. Elkader, Iowa. November 18, 1926*

Summer Reflections *by Olivia Holdsworth*

Written after interning as a seasonal naturalist

As I sit here in an office surrounded by neutral colors and cool air and listen to the soft banter of those who have been my coworkers for the past few months, my mind quietly wanders through the happenings of the summer. There's something exciting when you don't know what exactly you have gotten yourself into after accepting a job offer. It's like being at the top of a roller coaster just about to embark. All you can do is take a deep breath and brace yourself for the plunge. I have found that I tend to make the unknown and new out to be much scarier than they really are and so I've learned to adapt and carry on into the unknown until it is known and then revaluate and determine if my fears were truly as founded as they felt. And so, this way of doing was not unlike how I approached my summer working at Clayton County Conservation.

My first few weeks of employment were surrounded by the hustle and bustle of fieldtrips and the cleaning of bathrooms. I was pleasantly surprised by how welcoming the unknown could be. My new co-workers turned out not to be mean ogres, but were kind and willing to assist with what they could. The main authorities over my internship were knowledgeable and shrewd enough not to let me stay in the shadows of fieldtrips for too long lest I talk myself out of ever leading one, but gave me the tools I needed and promptly had me leading hikes, tours, and pond studies. I wish I could tell you these all went wonderful and that I am a natural, but I can't. Amongst my blubberings, rambles, and stutters, it was my hope that my audiences at least came away with learning something new and had a pleasant experience with nature. During these weeks I gained priceless experience with what I now know to be called "Interpretation". The art of interpretation is connecting people to nature and history to which I unknowingly have been a recipient of many times throughout my life, but now I had the chance to be the one doing the connecting and that was an exhilarating feeling!

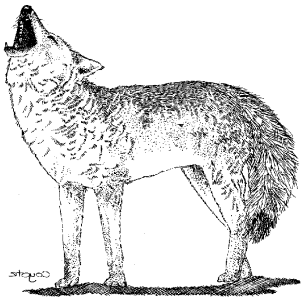
Soon the fieldtrips began to wane and the season of programs proceeded. Whether it was a care center, library or summer camp, I am glad for the chance to get to help plan and execute these programs. It was a valuable experience to preform programs, evaluate how they went, and then adjust where needed. Looking back, I've gained knowledge of what works in certain situations and what doesn't.

Anytime a person has an opportunity to face a fear and gain a valuable skill it is a huge benefit and I am thankful for the opportunity I had to do that, here at Osborne. Experience is said to be the best teacher and I had a lot of opportunities to experience the different aspects of what the job as a naturalist is. Through the fieldtrips, Project Aware, oyster survey, completing a radio show, and the planning of events and all the work that goes into them, I have gained rich lessons that will not be soon forgotten. So, my advice to anyone who is brave enough to sign up for this job is to embrace the opportunities you are given and say yes to new experiences that come with them.



Clayton County Conservation
Osborne Conservation Center
29862 Osborne Rd, Elkader, IA 52043
(563) 245-1516

Osborne public programs listed inside!



The Clayton County Conservation Board does not discriminate against anyone on the basis of race, color, sex, creed, national origin, age or handicap. If anyone believes he or she has been subjected to such discrimination, he or she may file a complaint alleging discrimination with either the Clayton County Conservation Board or the Office of Equal Opportunity, U.S. Dept. of Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240

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Molly Scherf……..……..Office Manager
Kelsi Davis……..Clayton County Energy District Coordinator

Website: ***www.claytoncountyconservation.org***
Facebook: ***Clayton County Conservation***
Instagram: ***@ClaytonCountyConservation***

Osborne Nature Center & Gift shop Hours



Monday-Friday
8:00am - 4:00pm
Weekend Hours
(Starting April 1)
Saturday
8:00am - 4:00pm
Sunday
Noon-4:00pm



Clayton County Conservation Board meetings are the second Tuesday of every month. Meetings are open to the public. See website for details, locations, and past meeting minutes.

The mission of the Clayton County Conservation Board is to promote the health and general welfare of the people and to encourage and model preservation, conservation, education, and recreation through responsible use and appreciation of our natural resources and cultural heritage.