

## Memories of the Green Circle History

*By John Jury*

I have often been asked about the history of the Green Circle. Here are my memories.

In 1982, the Stevens Point Parks and Recreation Commission, of which I was president, noted that the city would be 125 years old the next year, and we wanted to do something to celebrate. There were two lots privately owned between Bukolt Park and Pfiffner Pioneer Park. With interest growing in the Wisconsin River as it was cleaned up after years of pollution, we decided to try and secure those two lots and connect the two parks in an effort “to give the river back to the people” as a birthday present. We were successful in those purchases, and once cleaned up, we could see the beauty of the area and knew we were onto something good.

Next, we decided to throw the community a birthday party, and, of course, much of it would be along the new riverfront. We suggested a quasiquicentennial event we would simply call .125 that utilized different venues along the river from Bukolt to the downtown bridge. It was very successful and eventually became what we know today as the Riverfront Rendezvous. The next year (1984), a paved trail connecting Bukolt and Pfiffner Parks was constructed by the city. In surveys, we learned that the new “riverfront park” had become the community’s favorite park. The people said they loved the trail, but that it was just not long enough.

A long-term planning book had just been published by the county that included maps of park lands, corporate lands, state lands, wetlands, and Stevens Point Water Department lands. We sized the various maps and placed them on transparencies. When put together, a clear route was formed. For the next few years, I talked about a trail that would encircle the community. I called it the “Cooperation Trail” because connecting the villages of Plover, Whiting and Park Ridge, Stevens Point, and towns of Hull and Plover might be something on which we could all agree.

In 1988, a leadership symposium sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce offered an opportunity to talk about the future of recreation in the area. One of the five ideas suggested was the development of this circular trail system. Bill Werner, incoming chair of the Chamber and Al Noel, vice president of Sentry Insurance, liked the idea and asked that we meet to flush out details.

About this same time, several recently retired men were looking for some way to continue serving the community. Dan Trainer was the past Dean of the College of Natural Resources at UW-Stevens Point. Roy Menzel had been a public relations professional. George Rogers had been the Editor of the Stevens Point Journal. With Tom Schrader, Stevens Point Parks and Recreation Director, Jerry Ernst, Portage County Parks Director, and Bill Werner, these six men met weekly beginning in 1989 to start resolving all the problems necessary to create this circular trail. Gary Speckmann, who became the County Parks Director after Jerry retired, joined soon after, as did many others through the years. They gathered at the same table at Al’s Diner every Friday until 1996.

An overall plan was needed. Ron Zimmerman, Director of the UWSP Schmeeckle Reserve, indicated he had a very good graduate student named Dave Aplin who could take on this project. Roy Menzel donated all the proceeds of his book, *Hometown on the River*, to help cover the costs of a feasibility study. That was the best money we ever spent. Dave isn’t noted too often in the history of this project, but he should be as nearly 90% of what Dave suggested in that study became the route of the circular trail, which by now had a new name. The committee thought instead of the “Cooperation Circle,” it should be named for the environmental corridor it would become. It would be a “Green Circle.”

The initial vision was for a single-track trail, but the committee quickly decided it needed to be the 8-foot crushed granite trail we enjoy today. Roy became the scribe and luckily, Schrader kept every set of minutes. Those minutes described 45 minutes of every hourlong meeting goofing off and laughing over breakfast, but before adjournment, duties were assigned for the next week. Someone would make contact with a landowner, someone would be assigned responsibility for connecting with a municipality about something. Patiently and methodically, progress was made. Each time a section was completed, we would hold a walk so people could see that section, and over time, more began to see the big idea. It was always such a thrill to walk the proposed route and later, see the finished trail.

When Roy Menzel told me the trail would essentially be done when the underpass was completed on Patch St. in 1996, we decided we needed to have a grand opening. Many people walked a part of the trail on June 1, 1996, and 80 went all the way around. Interestingly, that was the day we first imagined the *Walk Wisconsin* marathon that became a regular feature for many years. It introduced thousands to the trail.

Shortly after the grand opening, there was a bit of a split within the now 15-member Green Circle Committee. Several of the members were interested in spokes and spurs to and from the Green Circle, thus creating more natural corridors and alternative transportation opportunities within the greater community. A core group, however, felt the focus should remain on maintaining what had been developed. The group split into two groups; the original Green Circle Committee and a new group called the "Friends of the Green Circle." The Friends group became involved in helping to create the Westside Loop and in connecting the Circle with the Tomorrow River Trail. Eventually, we decided it was important that the groups reconnect so we all were on the same page, and it has remained that way since 2001.

We understood we needed a regular revenue stream if we were to keep the trails maintained properly, and we also knew that if we were to secure additional sections over time, we would need even more money. So, from 2001 through 2004, we produced a bike ride around the Green Circle called "Happy Trails." We generated about \$5,000 a year, but knew that would not be enough. Eventually, the Green Circle Committee created an annual "ask" campaign driven by the Circle's finance committee, and that has helped build a maintenance fund and an endowed fund that are kept at the Community Foundation of Central Wisconsin. The original Happy Trails fund has grown and exists today to help finish the Circle as naturally as possible.

Many birthdays have come and gone since we first envisioned the Green Circle. I like to hang out around the zero-mile marker of the Circle where I can remember .125, the Rendezvous, Walk Wisconsin, watch the cyclists, walkers and runners on the Circle, laugh at the early years of the outdoor Cultural Festival, opening the old Pfiffner Building for public use, and remember those who were all part of it. Sometimes, people will ask me about my favorite part of the Green Circle, expecting it will be some section. But my favorite part of the Green Circle has really been the opportunity to work with Menzel, Trainer, Rogers, Ernst, Schrader, Speckmann, the Schmeeckle crew, the many committee members through the years, the hundreds who have touched the building of the Circle in some way, and the thousands who have donated to make it a reality. As hoped for from the earliest days, the Green Circle project has been an "of the people, by the people and for the people" project. Here's hoping citizens and visitors will be "Circling" for years to come!

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