



The Merry Leaflet

Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center of Goshen College

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Remembering Merry Lea's First Half Century

50-Year Timeline

Where does your story fit?

We will post additional memories and historical photos on our website in 2018. If you have a memory to share, email merrylea@goshen.edu or call 260-799-5869, ext. 115.

1964 to 1969

- 1964 Lee Rieth purchases first 80 acres.
- 1965 First plan shows a campground, lodge, plant nursery, amphitheater.
- 1967 Articles of incorporation signed.
- 1967 First director hired: Doug Waldman

1970 - 1974

- 1971 Dr. Austin Fergusson serves as director through 1975.
- 1972 First research: Dr. Alton Lindsey began ongoing study of 50-acre plot of oak-hickory.
- 1972 Sunflowers planted: over 100 people come out to pick heads for birdseed.

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Dr. Larry Yoder, right, preparing students for wetland dipping in 1982.

When did Merry Lea begin? Was it the moment in 1964 when our founding donor, Lee Rieth, came home and informed his wife, Mary Jane, that he had bought 80 acres of land in Noble County?

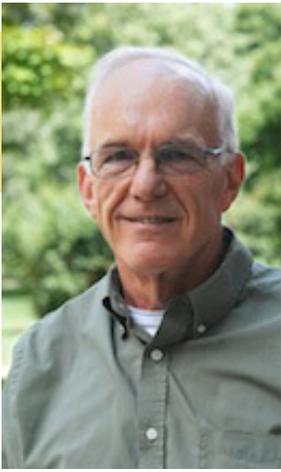
“You did what?” Mary Jane gasped. She loved telling this story.

Perhaps an organization committed to environmental education launches when the first researcher composes a species list. Or does it begin when the first child visitor finds a turtle and smiles? We are taking the conventional approach and dating the 50-year mark from 1967 when the articles of

incorporation as a nonprofit were signed.

No matter how you count them, Merry Lea has had many beginnings in its 50-year history. This is an innovative organization! The timeline on pages 1, 4, 5 and 6 captures some of these firsts and the ways in which Merry Lea has developed. Main articles sketch a brief history of Merry Lea's land, its educational endeavors and the ways it has fed body, mind and spirit.

We regret that space constraints have left many important people and events unmentioned. Ω



Director's Desk

by Luke Gascho

Building on a Vision, Part Four: Re-creation

Dr. Luke Gascho

Merry Lea's early web pages as I prepared to apply for the executive director position. Knowing that well-crafted mission statements capture the essence of an organization, I read carefully.

Preserving land and providing environmental education resonated with me, but what really captured my imagination was the third mission point:

Providing a setting for re-creating opportunities that benefit the human body and spirit while not exploiting the land or excessively disturbing its ecosystems.

Within this statement, I saw a catalyst that would inform the first two points in synergistic ways. I also sensed that my gifts could flourish in a place where people cared about both body and spirit. During my interview 20 years ago, I realized that the point about "re-creating" closely matched my hopes for the next stage of my career.

As I entered the role, I began to grow in the understanding that something significant happens to us—at our inner

I vividly recall reading the Merry Lea mission statement for the first time. It was 1997 and I was studying

core—when we personally engage with the land. At first, I didn't know how that concept would play out as the Merry Lea board and team began to develop strategic plans. Knowing that the spiritual dimension was entwined in the central purposes of this special place resonated more and more as new directions unfolded. Over the years I have learned how intentionally the re-creation of body and spirit was woven into the fabric since the founding of Merry Lea.

The first plans for Merry Lea from 1965 stated:

Frequently taken for granted and often abused, unused lands are soon lost to development. To assure their long-range integrity they must be put to intelligent use, and important activities such as education, enlightenment and spiritual and esthetic enjoyment are among some of the best uses for such areas.

The plans described how the 80-acre place could provide a setting for re-creating activities for the First Methodist Church of South Bend.

By July 1967, the acreage of Merry Lea had increased and the vision had expanded to the point that it made sense to establish a stand-alone nonprofit organization. The Articles of Incorporation say that the purpose was,

to provide a retreat for the advancement of conservation and

nature education under religious guidance and as a center of retreat for scientific, educational, cultural and recreational objectives toward and in behalf of the general public.

The intersection of preservation, education, and the religious elements was clearly emphasized.

A person who became a wise friend and advisor to Lee and Mary Jane Rieth was Dr. Alton Lindsey. As one of Indiana's leading botanists, he was called upon to write a letter expressing support for the establishment of this new center. In January 1968, he wrote a three-page letter articulating the many benefits of a special place like Merry Lea. In the last section of the letter, he reflected on a conference he had recently attended by writing,

Many (in attendance) stated that this outdoor combination approach, scientific principles and spiritual appreciation together, is an urgent present-day need and points an important direction for youth work. Few communities are fortunate enough to have access as yet to a development like Merry Lea.

Again, his words underscore the core strands of the Merry Lea fabric.

This is my fourth reflection on the visionary statements that the original Merry Lea board developed in 1973-1974. The third goal of the four goals named in the final piece published in 1974 focuses

ABOUT MERRY LEA

Merry Lea was created with the assistance of The Nature Conservancy and through the generosity of Lee A. and Mary Jane Rieth. It is operated by Goshen College. The center provides a comprehensive program of environmental education and recreation.

The Merry Leaflet, published in spring, summer, fall and winter, provides news about programs and developments at Merry Lea. Jennifer Halteman Schrock is its editor and the author of articles without bylines. Check the news tab at www.goshen.edu/merrylea/ for more stories.

TEAM MEMBERS

- Luke Gascho, Executive Director
- Kerry Goodrich, Property Supervisor
- Carol Good-Elliott, Environmental Educator
- Tom Hartzell, Coordinator of Undergraduate Programs
- Jane Litwiller, Environmental Educator
- Bill Minter, Director of Land Management
- John Mischler, Director of Agroecology
- Ruth Mischler, Assistant Professor, SEED
- Dave Ostergren, Director of Graduate Program
- Joel Pontius, Director of the Sustainability Leadership Semester
- Ellie Schertz, Assistant Farm Manager
- Jonathon Schramm, Associate Professor, SEED
- Jennifer Halteman Schrock, Communications Manager
- Katie Stoltzfus, Public Program Coordinator/Environmental Ed.
- Marcos Stoltzfus, Director of Environmental Education Outreach
- Maria Tice, Admin. Assistant/Volunteer Coordinator
- Doug Yoder, Building Manager
- Jon Zirkle, Farm Manager

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

- Marcia McNagny, Chair
- Heather Harwood, Asst. Chair
- Jim McFarlin, Treasurer
- Colleen Banta
- Janeen Bertsche Johnson
- Forrest Keefer
- Kenneth Newbold, Jr.
- Fancheon Resler
- John Yordy
- Ex Officio:
- Jo-Ann Brant
- Luke Gascho

on the importance of recreation. This document is congruent with both the earliest plans for Merry Lea and what we work on today.

RECREATION

While the provision of recreational facilities is only a small part of the Center's primary purpose, it is important in terms of attracting persons and groups. The Center will be planned to exemplify the proper integration of preservation, recreation, and utility, which of course is the true meaning of conservation.

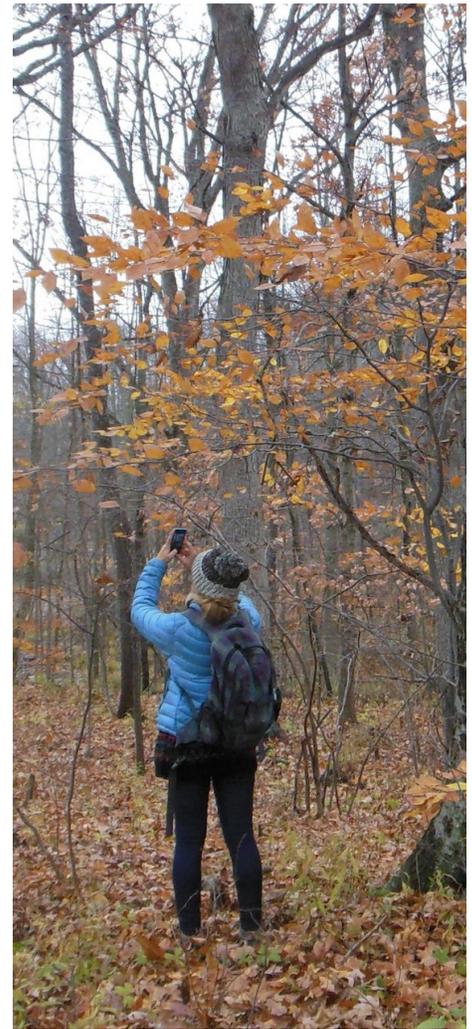
The fundamental desire of people to be happy is realized and this requires a blend of many aspects, one of which is recreation. The recreation provided at MERRY LEA will be non-consumptive. A valid form of recreation is work, when it is different from the routine. Many of the recreational purposes of the Center will be realized by "work" of individuals and groups in the betterment of the Center and its surroundings.

Where possible, the recreation should be designed to reinforce the ties between people, such as among family or religious groups.

This enduring framework that includes re-creation continually informs us. The intentional hyphen indicates that we endeavor 'to create again.' In the work we undertake, we express this concept with parallel words—*renew, recycle, restore, resilience and regeneration*. The re-creation theme is found in conferences we have led and support, as well as in courses in our undergraduate and graduate programs. This theme also accounts for Merry Lea's sponsorship of Mennonite Creation Care Network.

Perhaps most importantly, re-creating happens in the informal experiences of wandering the trails of Merry Lea and sitting in quiet places. Someone recently asked me if we had a room designated for meditation. I said, "No, we just have over a thousand acres of land in which to meditate!"

I will forever be grateful for the life-giving visionary statements that include re-creation. I personally know Merry Lea to be a place of rest and renewal. I believe this will be true for many generations to come. Ω



Re-creating moments at Merry Lea: (Clockwise from top left) Carina Zehr, a current MAEE student, admires a wild onion flower in Thomas Woods; a hiker enjoys a solitary moment; attendees at the 2010 Autumn Hope Conference share a meal.

Fifty Years of Land Management:

“Providing a sanctuary for Indiana’s plants and animals.”

Continued from page 1

1974 Significant master plan sets environmental education, nature preservation, recreation and research as four major objectives.

1974 Land up to 800 acres.

1974 Earliest archived newsletter includes contest to name the publication.

1975 to 1979

1975 First official Sunflower Festival

1975 Merry Lea offers first memberships for donors; “lady volunteers” busy

1976 Public programs include an Easter sunrise service, 4-H conservation field day, nesting bird walk, Christmas crafts, study of a rotten log. A two-hour hike costs 75 cents.

1978 School programs: 24 groups visit.

1980 to 1984

1980 The Rieths donate Merry Lea to Goshen College.

1980 First of three times that Lee Reith fires Kerry Goodrich, who is still employed at Merry Lea 38 years later.

1981 New Director Dr. Larry Yoder catches first glimpse of Bear Lake Prairie.

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Carol Good-Elliott still remembers the disorientation she felt the winter of 2000 when she returned to Merry Lea to hike shortly before she joined the staff as an environmental educator. Things were not as she remembered them a decade earlier when she’d worked here as a student.

Back in 1989, Carol had mowed trails through the reed canary grass in a low basin north of the Learning Center. What had become of those trails? Instead there was water lapping at her feet. This was her first encounter with today’s Onion Bottom wetland restoration. Meanwhile, the field where she’d shocked wheat in preparation for the Sunflower Festival had become the Kesling Wetland.

While Merry Lea’s mission to provide sanctuary for Indiana’s plants and animals has remained constant, the land and its management have both evolved over the years.

According to Bill Minter, who has served as Merry Lea’s land manager since 1991, the care that the land received has occurred in three overlapping phases. These emphases parallel the land management practices taught and practiced elsewhere at the time. Many other landowners were doing similar things on a smaller scale.

The Planting Era

The 1960s and 70s can be described as Merry Lea’s planting era. At this time, most of the newly acquired herbaceous areas were either old farm fields or still under cultivation. Records from the 1960s record corn harvests from land leased to local farmers.

The Rieths’ impulse, echoing the spirit of the times, was to plant these areas to improve wildlife habitat. A 1967 letter from Merry Lea’s first director, Doug Waldman, describes the direction as follows:

Mr. Rieth is quite concerned about getting various plantings started next spring and in great numbers... Within this border, Mr. Rieth wants as many different species as possible. He is also quite concerned about food patches or feeding areas.

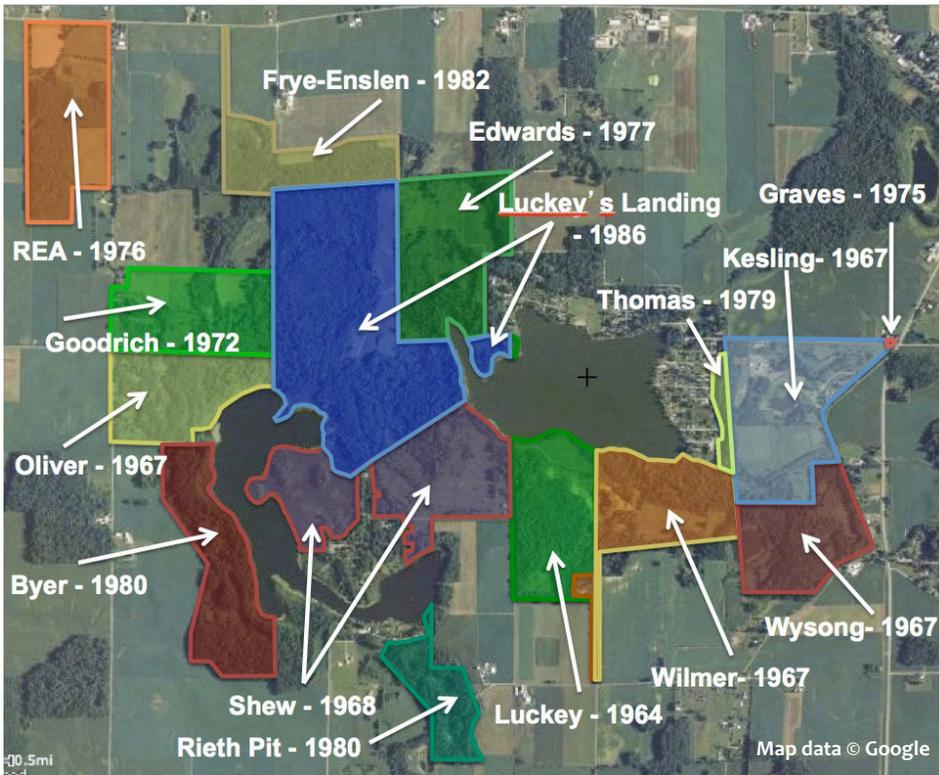
Waldman acted on these instructions, and a letter from January 23, 1969, indicates that 3,290 trees and shrubs were purchased for \$502.

At that time, the conventional wisdom did not distinguish between the use of native species and exotic species in land restoration. Autumn olive shrubs were planted in great numbers as wildlife food and cover, and university extension agents considered crown vetch a wonderful solution to erosion problems. These species were planted at Merry Lea, along with many non-native trees such as Scotch pine, Colorado blue spruce and pinyon pine. No one yet knew that some of these exotics would spread and form monocultures, choking out the Indiana species.

Minter, who now battles aggressive autumn olive and crown vetch, is not judgmental about these decisions. He recalls recommending autumn olive himself in the early 1980s. “The best thing they did was to plant something rather than leave the land barren. The worst thing they did was to plant species like Scotch pine,” he says.

The Cataloging Era

The transfer of Merry Lea to Goshen College in 1980 brought a new level of curiosity about the resident flora and fauna. Dr. Larry Yoder, who became the executive director soon afterwards, was a botanist with the training to recognize the ecological value of sites such as the Bear Lake Prairie. Attention turned to cataloguing what species lived on the land.



The map above shows the land purchases that created Merry Lea. Overlay by Luke Gascho.

Goshen College biology students and volunteers examined ecosystems in depth. In 1983, Steve Yoder (class of '85) repeated a study Dr. Alton Lindsey began in 1972 documenting the growth of a tract of oak-hickory forest. In 1988, Volunteer Christine Guth found and preserved many plants for the herbarium. Kevin Bacher (class of '89), returned in 1990 as a Lindsey Teaching Fellow. During his two years at Merry Lea, he surveyed bird and plant populations and prepared species lists still in use. Tony Swinehart, (class of '92), studied Merry Lea's bogs, finding uncommon species such as purple pitcher plant and pink lady's slipper orchid.

Dave Miller, an entomologist, arrived as the new program director in 1988 and began an insect collection that current entomology students still use. His first "Nature Notes" column appeared in the *Merry Leaflet* in December of that year. From boxelder bugs to bobwhite quail, each column described a species in detail. In 1989, Dr. Mary Linton arrived at Goshen College bringing expertise in wetland ecology. She studied the salamander populations at Merry Lea.

The Restoration and Management Era

By the time that Bill Minter was hired in 1991, the field of conservation no longer assumed that native ecosystems could remain pristine if simply left alone. Land managers were seeing the need to protect and manage ecosystems.

"I don't plant any trees. We don't need more trees and I don't want to feed deer... I need to spray and burn and contain," Bill says, referring to the invasive species he keeps in check. One of his goals is to provide as much ecosystem diversity as possible for Merry Lea's educational functions.

Between 1991 and the present, Bill undertook eight wetland restorations totaling 52 acres. His wetland toolkit includes assessing soils to find sites that were previously wetlands before European settlement, manipulating the drainage and using herbicides on difficult spots. A few projects have included seeding or planting plugs.

Bill has also worked on eight prairie reconstructions and three savanna/ woodland restorations for a total of 77 acres. Prairie reconstructions

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1984 Merry Lea loses first founder: Lee Rieth passes.

1985 to 1989

1986 Luckey's Landing property purchased

1988 – 89 Merry Lea adds program coordinator and office manager: Dr. Dave and Marion Miller arrive.

1990 to 1994

1990 Environmental Studies minor established at Goshen College

1990 First Enchanted Forest

1991 Staff swells to five with arrival of first land manager, Bill Minter.

1991 First wetland restoration

1991 First hint of climate change: Merry Lea concludes ski weekends and sells cross-country skis due to lack of snow.

1994 Dr. Mary Linton named Lindsey Research Fellow.

1995 to 1999

1997 Nature photography workshops begin.

1998 First strategic planning session with new director, Dr. Luke Gascho

1998 Farmstead Barn renovated; Michael Yoder Dome constructed.

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2000 to 2004

2000 First environmental education internships

2001 First season of bird banding

2005 to 2009

2006 First Mennonite Creation Care Network council meeting

2006 First Agroecology Summer Intensive

2007 Rieth Village becomes first Platinum-rated LEED facility in Indiana

2008 First Master's in Environmental Education cohort

2008 Mary Jane Rieth passes

2010 to 2017

2010 Ash trees show first signs of emerald ash borer

2012 First Sustainability Semester for undergraduates

2013 First PROWL after school program with Wolf Lake Elementary School

2014 Woody Perennial Polyculture planted

2015 - 2017

2016 First Exploring Merry Lea Sustainable Farm programs

2017 First Kinderforest programs

2017 Goshen College approves majors in Sustainability Studies, Sustainable Food Systems Ω

typically begin with site preparation involving herbicides. Native grasses and forbs are then seeded. Mowing the fields for the first two seasons afterward keeps the weeds at bay while the prairie plants get established. After that, the prairies are burned every few years to control woody plants. At present 103 acres are under fire management to maintain all of Merry Lea's fire-dependent ecosystems.

These restoration efforts help Merry Lea to provide a home for uncommon species of birds with specific habitat requirements. Lisa Zinn, who worked at Merry Lea from 2003 to 2015 as an environmental educator, professor and bird bander, recalled increasing diversity of species over her tenure. She reports:

We certainly noticed changes in nesting birds at Merry Lea. In the last years that I worked there, we were regularly hearing prothonotary warblers [in wetland areas.] We also had nesting Henslow sparrows in the Kesling Prairie and grasshopper sparrows in Luckey's Prairie. These are both grassland species that are attracted to open prairies.

Lisa also mentioned increases in parula warblers, cerulean warblers, sandhill

cranes, redheaded woodpeckers and pileated woodpeckers.

Bill continues to patrol for invasives such as reed canary grass, glossy buckthorn and oriental bittersweet. New invasive species keep arriving. He has yet to spot the shade-loving Japanese stilt grass that plagues some nature preserves, but he is watching for it.

Looking ahead

When Bill imagines what Merry Lea might look like in another fifty years, he hopes for plant communities that are even more diverse than they are now with less pressure from invasive species.

"I keep nudging it," he says. One gratifying moment this year was the discovery of white turtlehead. It appeared along High Lake in an area where he'd recently removed a shrubby overstory to provide sunlight to what was likely a sedge meadow.

Bill is also working to make life easier for future land managers. Whoever follows him will find a plan detailing what has been done and what the suggested next steps might be on each of 116 management units. Ω



Dr. Mary Linton, center, leads a program on wetland ecology at Onion Bottom, Merry Lea's first wetland restoration. Mary, a biology professor at Goshen College, served as Merry Lea's Lindsey Research Fellow from 1994 to 2002. She conducted research on salamanders.

Fifty Years of Environmental Education

“Providing environmental education for people of all ages”

The first record of “environmental education” in Merry Lea’s archives is a short letter from Lee Rieth to some 1960s picnickers. He tells them not to leave any trash behind.

During the week this article was written in December 2017,

kindergartners looked for shapes and colors in the woods, high school students learned about jobs in the food system, a botany class estimated the carbon stored in woody biomass, sustainability students tweaked their research on a local bike path, master’s

students visited environmental leaders in Detroit and a handful of people took rewarding hikes on their own. This article summarizes the fifty-year path from that early picnic to last week.

The 1960s and 1970s

An undated document from the mid to late 1970s lays out some assumptions about what Merry Lea’s programming was about during its first 15 years. “The name, happy meadow, sets the theme for the Center; a place to appreciate and enjoy the fullness and happiness of life...” the author writes.

The philosophy of education described above sounds similar to a line from Charles Silberman’s *Crisis in the Classroom* (1970). Silberman’s widely read book was one of many reactions against the math and science-focused education of the Cold War Era space race of the 1950s and 60s. Silberman urged schools to be “genuinely concerned with gaiety and joy and individual growth and fulfillment...” Former Director Dr. Larry Yoder, who was part of contexts similar to Merry Lea in the 1970s, sums up this era of environmental education as “edutainment.”

The program lists left behind on mimeographed copies do sound like fun. People came for hayrides and skating parties, skiing and campouts. They made bluebird houses and terrariums and Christmas crafts; counted spring birds and went ice fishing. They studied houseplants and rotten logs. Occasionally, Merry Lea offered workshops for teachers or hosted visitors from universities.

The available records offer program titles and the number of people that attended but do not describe content or objectives. Therefore, it is hard to know what staff and volunteers taught in their programs. The variety of topics—combined with limited

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Volunteers

Francis Bundy, one of Merry Lea’s longest-serving volunteers, leads a school group in 2006.

For all of its fifty years, Merry Lea has depended heavily on volunteers. Opportunities have ranged from teaching school groups to building, painting, species inventories, bird banding and sewing.

At the 2017 Volunteer Appreciation Dinner on December 5, Volunteer Coordinator Maria Tice announced the volunteers who had donated the greatest number of hours this year. They were Chuck Harvout (113 hours) Julie Davidson (104 hours) and Deana Baker (100 hours). In recent years, volunteers have contributed between 900 and 1200 hours per year.

Environmental Educator Carol Good-Elliott says that teaching volunteers enhance the quality of Merry Lea programming in several ways. For one thing, trail and activity groups would need to be much larger if there were no volunteer teachers. Volunteers also bring a wide range of gifts and backgrounds that supplement those of the staff. For example, retired classroom teachers know what it is like to navigate field trips as a teacher and can make helpful suggestions from this perspective.

For those who don’t care to teach, opportunities abound at the Merry Lea Sustainable Farm. Ω

staffing—suggests that they did not belabor curriculum. This was before the era when phrases like “educational assessment,” “accountability” and “the professionalization of nonprofits” crept into common usage.

What the sixties and seventies lacked in focused curriculum development, they made up in civic engagement. It appears there was more time for community outings in the days before the Internet. Already in the 1968-69 budget year, 345 people visited. They came even though old farm fields still made up much of the land and there was little in the way of facilities. In 1978, forty people spent their entire Saturday at a workshop on heating with wood, and 2000 came to ski.

The list of visiting groups is a mosaic of the surrounding community. Schools, scout troops, Brownies and organizations such as the Cromwell Business Association and the Happy Homemakers Club all spent time at Merry Lea as well. Within one two-year period, Wolf Lake United Methodist, Big Lake Church of God, the Kimmell Church Youth and a Christian Youth Fellowship from Merriam all came to Merry Lea.

The 1980s

In 1980, Merry Lea began a new era under the ownership of Goshen College, and a new director arrived in 1981. Dr. Larry Yoder thrived in an entrepreneurial context where resources were limited.

“I find great sport in looking around my environment and seeing what resources can be used. What do we have? What can we do that’s unique?” he says. The “edutainment” model of environmental education at that time also appealed to his sense of drama. For Larry, a bus that failed to return for its students on time was not a crisis; it was an opportunity for improvisation.

A typical school program of the eighties took place in the Learning Center area because the Kesling Farm was not yet renovated. The teaching staff consisted of Larry and Groundskeeper Kerry Goodrich—for whom leading groups fell under “other duties as assigned.” Larry would lead a hike. Kerry recalls catching snakes to show groups. Then they would load everyone on wagons for a hayride and end with a hotdog roast in the picnic area between the Learning Center and Rieth Cottage.

Threshing Days was a “Larry innovation.” His family farm near Hometown, Ind., had an old threshing machine for grain and wheat shocks which he brought to Merry Lea. They planted wheat, set it up in shocks and hosted a day of old time threshing.

When the *Merry Leaflet* first mentions sunflowers in the early 1970s, people are simply invited to come and pick seed for bird feeders. Over time, the event developed into a fall festival. In 1985, people came to the Sunflower Festival to mill flour, press sorghum, make apple butter and cider or take hayrides. A 1988 account describes blacksmithing demonstrations, a steam popcorn wagon and refreshments served by the Wolf Lake Fire Department Auxiliary. Lizzie Woolever and the Round Town Ramblers played bluegrass music.

Ski weekends were an important part of the 1980s. Goshen College faculty, staff or students would volunteer as hosts in exchange for a weekend getaway at Merry Lea. Hosts greeted skiers, checked out equipment and patrolled the trails. Larry brought his characteristic flare to this event by offering ski weather

The Sunflower Festival 1973 to 2002

Laura Moshier (center in braids) remembers:

At the Sunflower Festival, wheat and corn shocks were hulled and the wheat ground at Merry Lea would be made into pretzels to sell to hungry observers. When I wasn’t busy making pretzels in my pink pioneer dress, my friends and I would climb up into the attic of the granary where we could peer down at the stained glassmaker and other artists.

Laura is pictured with Molly Meighen, left, Marsha Powell, right, and an unknown child, bottom corner.



reports on the WGCS radio station similar to the kind one would hear in Vail, Colorado.

In this era, Merry Lea owned over sixty pairs of skis and could outfit complete school classes. Sadly, climate change and the lack of reliable snow put an end to ski events. The skis were sold in 1991.

The 1990s

In 1988, the staff expanded to include Program Director Dr. Dave Miller, an entomologist and woodworker. Marian Miller began as office manager in 1989, and the couple worked together on educational events.

Like all of his predecessors, Dave had no formal training in environmental education. However, he loved natural history and the sciences and had a strong desire to share these things with others.

“Delivering programs that were scientifically strong was important to me,” Dave says. This meant he gave attention to curriculum development and volunteer training. Entomology and ornithology programs were a natural for Dave given his background,

and these were popular with older students. After the Kesling Wetland was restored in 1992, he developed a wetland program.

Dave’s gift for organization enabled Merry Lea to expand the number of school groups it served. In the 1990s, the number of pre-K to 12 visitors peaked at over 8,000 a year. Frequently, three groups were on the property at one time. Once, when a school group showed up on the wrong date, Dave managed to handle four groups with some deft juggling of volunteers. Another day, Dave recalls having 90 second graders dipping in the wetland at one time. On the day that scheduling opened for the coming season, teachers would leave messages just after midnight in hopes of getting their desired date.

A number of the public programs Dave and Marian worked on have had a long run. They began the Enchanted Forest in 1990, and it continues. The Sunflower Festival enjoyed a healthy attendance until staff ended it in 2003 because there were other similar programs in the region. Dave also added off-site birding and wildflower trips and a nature photography workshop.

The 2000s

In 1999, Paul Steury brought a new set of skills and a master’s degree in outdoor recreation to Merry Lea. Paul taught through games and songs. He was playful with groups and sent them home with the sense that being outdoors in a natural setting can be a fun experience filled with wonder. Songs like “The Scat Rap” and “Rock Cycle” became Merry Lea classics during this time.

Carol Good-Elliott, who taught with Paul since 2001, describes his fifteen-year contribution this way:

“It’s easy for people to think of Paul as lighthearted, but he also had a strong sense of the importance of engaging in advocacy related to issues that you feel passionate about.”

This sense of urgency about the vital work of environmental education continues to fuel Merry Lea’s educational programming.

The 2000s, Collegiate:

Under Dr. Luke Gascho who arrived in 1997, Merry Lea has invested many of its resources in post-secondary programs. Up until that point, Goshen College students only came to Merry

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Hay rides with draft horses were a beloved part of the Sunflower Festival.



Max Lake chaired Merry Lea's board at the time that Rieth Village was dedicated in April 2006. He spoke on behalf of Merry Lea's board at this time.

Merry Lea's Longest Serving Board Member Retires

Max Lake, Ossian, Ind., attended his last Merry Lea board meeting on November 2, 2017.

Max's tenure spanned 24 years and included serving on both the Board of Trustees and the Rieth Foundation Trust Advisory Committee. He was also part of the steering committee that led to the formation of today's board. This makes him the longest serving board member in Merry Lea's history.

By profession, Max was an administrator with Fort Wayne Community Schools. His interest in science education made him an especially good fit for Merry Lea. Executive Director Luke Gascho describes his contribution as follows:

"Max had a keen understanding of good organizational function—especially for an educational organization. He honored and protected Lee and Mary Jane's intent, and he also believed in the vision that was unfolding for Merry Lea in the present." ❧

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Lea for May terms and a few labs and recreational activities.

During a strategic planning process in 1998, the staff decided to develop both collegiate programs and housing for undergraduate students. Their rationale included the following:

- The quality of Merry Lea's land base merited advanced study.
- The expertise of the staff and Merry Lea's relationship to a college would enable Merry Lea to occupy a unique niche that most nature centers lacked the resources to pursue.
- Collegiate training and research was part of the Rieths' original vision that had yet to be developed.

Furthermore, the new programs could build on available resources—restored land, a proven track record in environmental education for children and Merry Lea's roots in a farming community.

Work on the first collegiate program began in 2004 when Dale Hess was hired to develop an agroecology semester. Meanwhile, Morrison Kattman Menze, an architectural firm from Fort Wayne, collaborated with other experts in green building to design Rieth Village. The biological field station was completed in 2006, and Merry Lea offered its first Agroecology Summer Intensive that summer. In 2007, the facility received Indiana's first Platinum LEED® award from the U.S. Green Building Council.

In 2008, a cohort of three students pioneered the first Master's in Environmental Education courses offered at Merry Lea. The unique features of this degree include an intensive schedule that allows students to complete the degree in 11 months; practicum work teaching school programs and—since 2017—a course in the Bahamas in February.

Faculty offered the first Sustainability Leadership Semester in 2012. Undergraduates study the local watershed and its inhabitants

from the perspective of multiple disciplines such as ecology, political science, sustainability and ethics. One distinctive element is a weeklong canoe trip that follows the Elkhart River from its headwaters to Lake Michigan. Another is a course called Sustainability Problem Solving where students work with a local organization on a challenge they face.

Looking ahead

No new collegiate endeavors are on the horizon. At present, Merry Lea's focus is on strengthening what already exists and increasing enrollment.

In 2016, Merry Lea's Pre-K to 12 Team was reorganized as the Environmental Education Outreach Team (EEO) and now includes public programs.

"We are trying to bring a new deliberateness to which programs we are running when and for whom," says Marcos Stoltzfus, director of the EEO. "We're asking, 'Who really is our

target audience?’ and ‘How do we most effectively impact them?’”

One EEO consensus is that enabling children to build ongoing relationships with the natural world is a priority. While one-time, half-day programs will always be part of Merry Lea’s menu, multiple exposures have more potential to change lives and create environmental advocates.

Two programs that Merry Lea provides for its closest school, Wolf Lake Elementary, are examples. Children at Wolf Lake have the option of signing up for PROWL, an after school nature club that meets at Merry Lea. A child who attended every session offered would visit Merry Lea 15 to 20 times a year. Meanwhile, through Wolf Lake’s Kinderforest program, kindergarteners spend a day a month at Merry Lea, rain or shine.

Merry Lea’s relationship with Wolf Lake Elementary School is also indicative of a paradigm shift that Dr. Jan Bender Shetler, a historian at Goshen College, sees in Merry Lea’s trajectory. She says:

This move toward learning to know and form a significant relationship with the community reflects a larger national trend in environmentalism from “sanctuary” to “sustainability.” The new literature sees the goal of environmental work not just to cordon off nature in a separate space but to work towards environmental health as an integral part of human well-being.

As Jan observes, Merry Lea’s local community is becoming more central in terms of relationships and as an intentional audience. This is expressed not only through the Wolf Lake programs but also the involvements of the master’s and undergraduate students who now live here and whose studies immerse them in Noble County.

It will be interesting to see how Merry Lea serves its community—both local and far-flung, both human and otherwise—during the next fifty years.

Ω

Merry Lea Remembers Mark Eisfelder

Merry Lea lost a valuable ally and trusted friend on September 13 when Mark Eisfelder, age 57, died unexpectedly following a heart attack. Mark worked for Zehr Construction for 36 years, and in his role as a carpenter and foreman, frequently worked at Merry Lea during the past 19 years.

“His hand was on every building on the property,” observed Luke Gascho, Merry Lea’s executive director. Mark’s first project was renovating the Barn at the Kesling Farmstead in 1998. The week Mark died, he had been renovating a building at Luckey’s Landing on the west side of the nature preserve.

“It is a wonderful thing to have a contractor that you can trust to understand what you want and to ask good questions,” Luke remarked. When a fallen tree damaged his own property, Mark was the contractor he called.

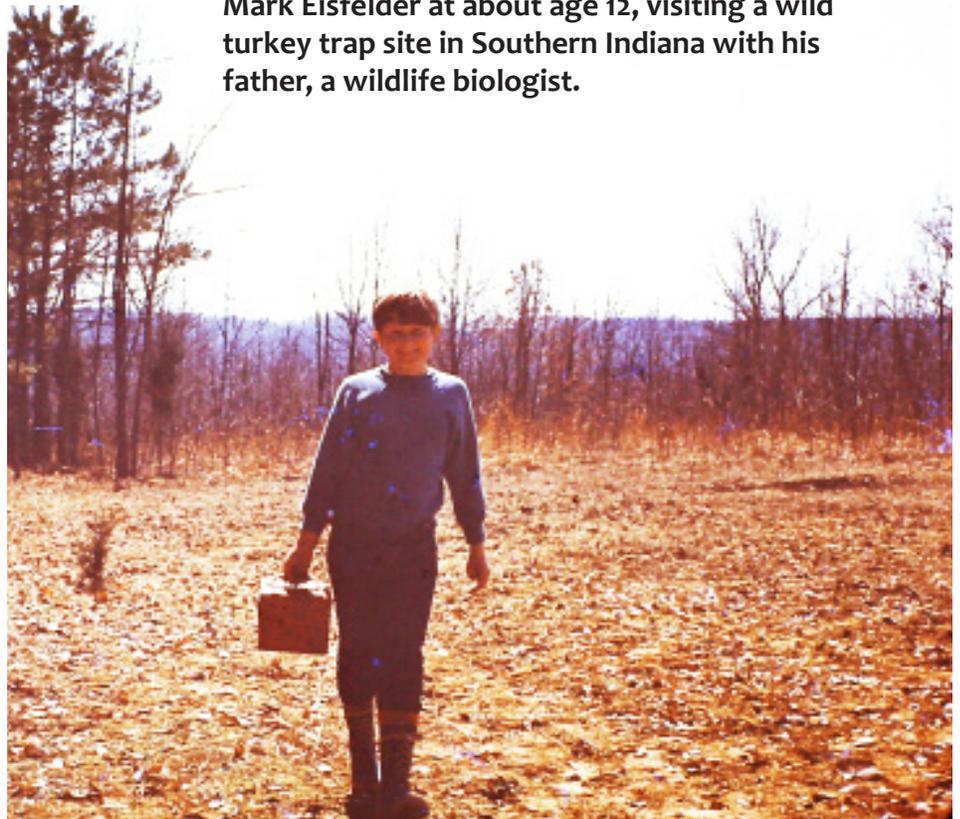
Mark’s relationship with Merry Lea began in childhood. He first came

in the early 1970s with his father—a wildlife biologist with the State of Indiana who was licensed to use explosives. Mark played in the woods while his father blasted holes to create wetland habitat near Rieth Cottage.

Mark’s interest in nature continued into adulthood. He enjoyed working outdoors at a nature preserve. He would sometimes send family and friends phone videos of animals he witnessed. Mark had a particular fondness for snakes and was amused to find the shed skins of black rat snakes in the rafters of the Kesling Farmhouse. The blue racers that frequented the Luckey’s Landing Site where he last worked did not disturb him either.

For today’s young visitors, Mark’s legacy lives on in a more visible way than sound shelters. Environmental Educator Jane Litwiller recalls that Mark was the one who found Sippy, a Northern watersnake. Sippy is on display at the Learning Center Building where she fascinates many children. Ω

Mark Eisfelder at about age 12, visiting a wild turkey trap site in Southern Indiana with his father, a wildlife biologist.





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“ Where Earth and People Meet ”

Fire and Ice

by Laura (Yoder) Moshier

“Some say the world will end in fire, some say ice,” according to Robert Frost’s poem, but my world began with both.

As a young girl, I explored the magical wonderland of Merry Lea. During winter, the happy meadows were transformed into fields of snowflake diamonds under the moonlit skies. I remember hosting guests for evening and weekend cross-country skiing. There was always a warm buzz under the rustic wood beams of the Kesling barn as my family outfitted visitors with skis and boots.

When the ice melted into summer nights, I remember standing on the bank of Bear Lake where I watched as my father, Larry Yoder, in his brown rubber boots, waded into the dark waters with my mom’s empty pickle jar. He’d fill the jar with water and turn it over. He stirred the mucky bottom as an eager Goshen College student directed the flashlight.



As I peeked through the crowd of students, I could see bubbles of mysterious gas rising to the water’s surface. My father methodically gathered the gas in his jar. Rays from the flashlight spotlighted the jar that now looked empty again. The flashlight went off and my Dad would quickly open the jar and set it ablaze. Flaming

methane illuminated our faces as we gasped in amazement. How could gas come from the water?

What I learned from my family’s enchanted weekends at Merry Lea is that nature creates a mysterious balance that must not be destroyed, but viewed with child-like wonder. Ω