

AN ENVIRONMENTAL PIONEER

By Cal Husmann



Spending time with Virginia Steffensen Purdy '38 is like spending time with your favorite aunt. She is genuinely happy to see you, has the gift of gab, tells wonderful stories, and has a constant concern about your comfort and appetite. "You must have pie before you leave," she said, and true to form, she makes a gorgeous berry pie!

Virginia is much more than a good cook and a pleasant conversationalist. A product of a Lawrence liberal arts education, Virginia's life exemplifies the college's mission statement, living a life of "service, achievement, leadership, and personal fulfillment." Lawrence also fostered many passions and interests in Virginia: She has performed in several symphonies, served as Mayor of Buffalo, Wyoming, traveled the world, and emerged as a successful entrepreneur and rancher, while also becoming an environmentalist — long before Earth Day broke on the scene in 1970.

Virginia was the only child of Danish immigrants who settled on a farm in south Appleton in the 1920s (currently, the Copsps grocery store on Calumet Street sits in the location of Virginia's childhood farm). She lost her right hand in a farm accident while she was a young girl, but never let that deter her from playing French horn or riding horses. She has always loved animals — especially horses and dogs. While in her late teens, she managed some real estate that her parents owned in downtown Appleton. She earned two prestigious scholarships to attend Lawrence and became very involved in the Conservatory of Music and in the literary organizations.

Virginia believes that it is important to become involved in activities throughout life, and especially during college. "Half of one's education is to learn how to deal with and get along with other people," she said. "Lawrence's community, comprised of diverse, intelligent, and creative students and faculty, was a perfect place to learn how to get along. The Lawrence community gave me the confidence I needed for life. All my professors in the conservatory and the college encouraged me and helped me develop the maturity and confidence that has helped me find success in life."

With her bolstered confidence, Virginia moved west shortly after her time at Lawrence. She has been quoted as saying she didn't want to be a milkmaid; rather, she preferred the life of a rancher. She teamed up with her uncle who had homesteaded in north central Wyoming, and began to build up her own ranch.



It was at about this time that her concerns for the environment began to manifest. In the early 1940s she and her first husband successfully lobbied the Springfield, Illinois, legislature showing the safety merits of CO₂ in coal mining (as opposed to the more dangerous practices of using explosives). Their work resulted in safer coal mining practices.

On her ranch in Wyoming, Virginia became concerned about water conservation and preserving the natural habitat for animals. In the 1940s, Virginia set up two reservoirs and established an irrigation system for the ranch that continues to provide water to the entire ranch. She became involved as a civic proponent for water conservation and served on state commissions on the issue.

Virginia is also outspoken about her disdain for hunting natural predators like wolves and mountain lions in the wild. While she understands that her stance can have detrimental impact on her livestock, she is more concerned about sustaining the delicate ecosystem established by nature. "Let's keep things fair," she said. "If you kill the wolves or the lions, other animal populations will become inflated which results in unhappy outcomes, like starvation and disease." Among other organizations, Virginia supports Alaskans

for Wildlife, which promotes responsible management for wolves.

"Education is absolutely critical for us to win the battle for the environment," said Virginia. Elected trustee emerita in 2002 after serving as Lawrence trustee for 17 years, she is pleased to note the emerging environmental studies program at Lawrence and has welcomed Lawrence students and faculty to her ranch for field research. She and her son Jim recently donated land to Sheridan College to establish a 5,000-acre outdoor classroom while preserving wildlife habitat.

She takes pride in knowing that she's making a difference but also reflects that her actions are self-serving. "It is important to me to live in an environment that feeds the soul and takes care of the body," she said.

For Virginia, so much of success in life is about getting along. Her success at getting along transcends interactions with people and applies to the earth, with symbiotic results. "If you take care of the land," the prescient Virginia observed, "it will take care of you." ■

A POSITIVE FORCE

John Schade '68 calls his friend Virginia Purdy an individual who is larger than life and who is always asking of and giving more of herself. Schade, who owns property in Wyoming about 40 miles south of Virginia's ranch, said that throughout her life she's had a hand in a number of significant events that have positively impacted the people, the land, and the environment:

- Helping to introduce the Charolais breed of French cattle into the United States in the 1960s
- Participating in efforts to successfully reintroduce the wolf into Yellowstone National Park
- Serving on the Wyoming Financial Institutions Board (banking commissions) under two Wyoming governors
- Initiating the development of an airport in Buffalo, Wyoming
- Delicately balancing the responsibilities for developing and overseeing one of the finest ranches on the east slope of the Big Horn mountains with her passion for protecting mountain habitat and the animals that live there

Said Schade, "Virginia is a big part of my decision to be in this part of the Old West. She introduced me to this land and the people who have lived here for generations in a way no one else could. I have come to admire the way Virginia has lived her life. Mention her name anywhere in Buffalo and throughout the surrounding region and everybody will know whom you're talking about. Being so well-regarded by so many people is a testament to how she's lived."