



## Red Stone Farm & the Resurrection of Beech Flats Swamp

Every farm in Ohio has water resources in one form or another, and every farm in Ohio has stories hidden in the land. Red Stone has both in spades. If you linger awhile in this Pike County farm and scratch the surface of the soil, water will ooze out and puddle around your feet. So will the stories.

Red Stone Farm, which lies a few miles just north of Fort Hill and southeast of the Highlands Nature Sanctuary, encompasses 1200 acres of land in one of the prettiest and most pastoral settings in all of Ohio. Gently rolling green pastures are embraced by the sweeping curve of Appalachian foothills, the region dominated by Mennonite farms.

The first European settlers in this region encountered a formidable large swamp known as Beech Flats. The water-drenched soils of Beech Flats were only barely drained by Baker's Fork, a tributary of Ohio Brush Creek that continued on to run past Fort Hill. Responsible for the swampiness of the soil was a layer of water-impermeable clay left behind by a glacial lake a few hundred thousand years ago.

The immense forested wetlands of Beech Flats, occupying a few square miles, presented a fecund if intimidating natural

feature to indigenous people and early settlers. Giant beech trees rose above the water-logged soils like luminescent ghosts. Shallow waterways crisscrossing the peaty soils were lined with marsh marigold, purple cress, and colonies of skunk cabbage. Jack in the pulpits grew nearly waist high.

Co-mingling the beech trees were towering pin oaks, swamp white oaks, and shellbark hickory trees, the latter providing nutritious nutmeats. The vernal pools that flooded the swamp forest writhed with frogs and salamanders, and even a half mile away from the swamp's periphery, the chorus of spring peepers was deafening in the spring. Beaver, otter, and muskrat flourished. In the fall, the skies filled with tens of thousands of ducks that dropped down into the swampy flats to restore themselves before they continued their journey southward.

Although the land resisted being drained for agriculture, it eventually did succumb to domestication. Today, nothing remains of Beech Flats except for an acre or two of primeval shellbark hickories and swamp white oaks that still stand at Red Stone Farm, a faint whisper of the land's previous glory. Although the entire swamp is now under cultivation, the water lying just below the surface doesn't seem to miss a



*Panorama of Red Stone Farm. The horse power behind Red Stone's organic dairy operation is supplied by Mennonite draft horses.*

## The Arc's Newest 200 acre conservation easement

chance to test fate. Turn your head for a second and cattails, rushes, and sedges will erupt right in the middle of an otherwise well-mannered cow pasture. Willow-lined ditches fill to the brim with dark waters and leopard frogs. Chorus frogs chant from wet corners in the fields that the brush hog prudently skipped following the last hard rain.

Of Red Stone Farm's many stories, the protagonist of our current tale is Drausin Wulsin, current steward of Red Stone Farm and great-grandson of Lucien Wulsin. Lucien's father came to the Ohio Valley when he felt compelled to flee from New Orleans with his mulatto wife (Lucien's mother) to escape racial biases of the South. Lucien, one of nine children, fought in the Union Army and lived on to demonstrate unusual business acumen. In 1866, he was hired as a clerk for Dwight Hamilton Baldwin, an accomplished musician who taught lessons on the reed organ and violin. Directed by Lucien, Baldwin began to retail and eventually wholesale what became one of the world's most recognized pianos. Nearly every upper class family wanted a piano in the era preceding the invention of the record player, and so, prior to the Depression, piano sales were brisk.

Lucien became a full partner in the piano business, and after Mr. Baldwin's death in 1899, Lucien bought out Baldwin's





shares to become full owner, eventually passing his position on to his son, Lucien Wulsin II. The business supported four family generations, surviving the Depression and two wars before eventually closing its doors in the 1980s. The Baldwin Piano Factory building in Cincinnati, though no longer serving its original function, still stands today as a historic icon in the Queen City.

Lucien Wulsin II's son, John, became a prosperous surgeon in Cincinnati. Drausin, John's son, fondly remembers an idyllic childhood riding horses and romping in neighborhood forests. John passed onto Drausin a deep love for farming and rural lifestyles, an affinity that Drausin ruefully refers to as his father's errant gene, since it showed up in none of Drausin's four siblings. Propitiously, several years before the Baldwin Company collapsed, John took action on his longing for agrarian roots by cashing out his Baldwin shares and buying up - in stages - the 1200 acres that make up Red Stone Farm today.

Because John was inexperienced in agriculture and more than occupied with his demanding profession, he hired local farmers to manage the land in the traditional manner - growing grain and husbanding beef cattle. This didn't stop John and Drausin from daydreaming about someday taking a more active management role. Both men had an intellectual and philosophical bent, and they spent a good deal of time reading up on farming practices that were in closer alignment with nature's cycles, animatedly discussing the merits of the most innovative approaches. Drausin was deeply attracted

to the idea of replacing all or some of the grains used in the farm's beef production with grass. The notion, in theory, would not only improve the health of the farm's soils but the health of the farm's consumers.

The principles behind grass farming are perhaps explained best by Joel Salatin, a Virginia farmer and author who wrote: *Folks, this Ain't Normal, You Can Farm*, and *Salad Bar Beef*. Joel describes himself humorously but accurately as a "libertarian environmentalist capitalist lunatic farmer." Joel declares: "How do herbivores run in nature? Well, they group, they mob up for predator protection, and they mow. They don't eat dead cows, they don't eat chicken manure, and they don't eat grain. How can we most closely approximate this pattern? We use electric fence to manage these animals and then move the herd frequently so that at any one time most of the grass is at rest, recuperating, and we're only impacting one tiny portion of it." In short, healthy pastures on rapid rotation grow healthy cows; healthy cows grow healthy people.

Drausin confesses to overcoming immense emotional and financial challenges in order to transition successfully from "white collar city guy" to farmer. While living a busy life in Cincinnati and raising his family, Drausin would make pilgrimages to Red Stone Farm to restore his soul, to experiment, and to dream. Eventually he succeeded in finding farmers who were willing to work toward his goal of a grass-supported dairy herd. He methodically began weaning the farm from soybeans and corn. He laid thousands of feet

of water lines and electric fences, outfitted a milking parlor, and worked toward organic milk certification. He succeeded, but it took him 20 years to make the grass-supported organic dairy into the profitable venture it is today.

In the process, Drausin had to educate himself in the nuts and bolts of farm life. He had no choice but to learn the hard way, figuring out how to do everything from fixing a mystifying tractor to delivering a calf at 2 am in a snowstorm. Capital for the farm was a perennial issue. He HAD to somehow make the farm financially productive if he were to achieve his highest dreams, especially since he owned only one share of the farm; the other shares were held by his four siblings. He felt it was imperative he demonstrate to his so-far patient brothers and sisters that what might sound like radical business ideas were sound and viable. From these concerns arose Drausin's wildest and riskiest idea yet: to rein in the farm's water resources, restore its native wetlands, and then sell off wetland mitigation credits. It was a heady, high stakes scheme, but if successful, Beech Flats Swamp would rise again and the farm would reap significant financial returns.

After years of research and dauntingly tedious paperwork, in 2007 a mitigation plan was submitted and approved by governing agencies. In 2008, Drausin quit his banking job and committed himself full-time to the farm and the wetland restoration project. Work on the forty acre swamp commenced. Surrounding it was a 160-acre forest buffer to protect the swamp's water quality. The

**Photos:** *Top Left: Red Stone Farm wetlands. Photo by Drausin Wulsin. Bottom Middle: Marbled salamander lays eggs under rotting wood in the dried-out swamp in fall, awaiting winter flooding. Photo by John Howard. Right: One of the few surviving remnants of Beech Flats, this Swamp White Oak towers into the air. Swamp White Oaks were once common in Ohio but are no longer. Agricultural drainage has thoroughly removed their habitat.*



## From Farm to Table



Meet Susan, Drausin's wife (shown below), who has provided support, flexibility, and creativity to the innovative endeavors taking place at Red Stone Farm. Susan works by day as an attorney in Clermont County, specializing in family services. She also happens to be an accomplished cook.

Thanks to Susan's culinary talents, in addition to meat, Grassroots Farm sells finished pasta sauces, meat and bone broths, soups, and seasoned meats. Also available are two and six month bi-weekly subscriptions for meat entrees requiring 30 minutes or less to prepare. Products are sold by appointment from the farm and also at the Hyde Park Farmer's Market in Cincinnati on Sundays.

[www.grassrootsfoods.biz](http://www.grassrootsfoods.biz)



water impoundments had to be just the right height - high enough that water would stand from late winter through mid-summer, yet low enough that the swamp would dry out in August, just as a good swamp should.

Years of ecological monitoring and site improvement practices began. Invasive plants, especially multiflora rose, were removed by the tens of thousands. Planted were 15,000 saplings of green ash, pin oak, shellbark hickories, river birch, sycamore and swamp white oak. Federal agencies praised the results, pointing to Red Stone as one of the most successful wetland restoration projects in all of Ohio. The swamp was coming back!

All of this, of course, cost a great deal of money. Drausin spent many a sleepless night wondering if this hare-brained idea of his was going to save the farm or be its ruin. Four dry years passed without a substantial sale of wetland credits and the debts mounted up. Finally, in 2013, a large sale came through that enabled Drausin to pay off all of his development

**Photo Below:** Jacob Bartley, left, and Drausin Wulsin, right. Jacob has been monitoring and stewarding Red Stone Farm to fulfill the obligations of the Wetland Mitigation Project since its earliest conception. Drausin and Jacob are standing in front of one of the few remaining "mother trees" of Beech Flats.



costs. Other sales followed. Today, the wetlands mitigation project is the financial pillar of the farm, making other innovative farm projects possible. The 200 acre wetlands project is under permanent conservation easement, which, in 2017, passed from Northern Kentucky University to the willing and eager hands of the Arc of Appalachia, secured with a \$45,000 endowment fund.

Drausin's latest project, Grassroots Farm, began in 2009 with the production of grass-fed meat. Today those meats include farm-raised beef, lamb, pork, and chicken. When asked if he is making money on the venture, Drausin just rolls his eyes. He estimates it will take at least 15 years for the grass-fed meat project to become a profitable venture. For now it remains a labor of love.

Success may come faster than he thinks. Taking into consideration America's growing concern regarding the perils of eating grain-fed beef and eating too much grain in general, Grassroots Farm is poised to ride the next wave of America's ever-evolving changes in how we view nutrition.

Many young people entering the work force ask themselves the question, "Where can I make the most money with the skills I have, and how can I find ways to love or at least tolerate what I do?" When Drausin started out he stood a couple of rungs higher up on the consciousness ladder. His first question was simply, "What do I love?" Only then did he ask, "How can I make enough money to be sustainable doing it, where can I learn the necessary skills, and how can my passion be of service to the world?"

When you ask yourself the right questions, you ask them in the right order, and you are willing to wait a long time to solve the seemingly inscrutable puzzles that lie before you, the results can be extraordinarily beautiful.

We are proud to recognize Drausin as a neighbor of the Highlands Nature Sanctuary and a worthy partner in wildlands conservation and restoration.

**Photo below:** Drausin is up to his elbows in autumn Bidens, standing in the heart of his forty acre wetlands. In most years the swamp dries up by August, as this photo illustrates.



Drausin pointed out in our interview with him the important influence of mentors in his life journey. Allan Savory, founder of the Savory Institute, was one of them.

*"Allan Savory taught me how to think, his ideas endorsed by my father. Joel Salatin taught me how to act."*



## Tours of Red Stone Farm



### Wildflower Pilgrimage

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Registration is online and filling up fast.

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Beauty, Balance & Biodiversity

July 13 - 15, 2018

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*Developing Spotted Salamander eggs. Photo by Doug Wechsler.*

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- Fort Hill Trail Map
- Arc Preserves Map
- List of trails open to the public and summarized directions.

Note: Much more detailed trail maps and trail information can be found on our website.

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