Jerry and Fran Cooper: Planting seeds for the future
Planting seeds for the future at Pioneer Farm

On their rural Richland Center farm, Jerry and Fran Cooper have planted 75,000 trees, leaving for their grandchildren’s generation a thriving forest of red oaks and white pines. They are also helping sow seeds for the future at UW-Platteville.

As administrators plan for anticipated growth through a $40-million fundraising initiative, the Coopers are among those alumni who are helping the university continue to offer excellent educational opportunities at an affordable price. Their planned gift of more than $500,000 is part of a $3.2 million campaign to help continue the revitalization of Pioneer Farm. It is also the lead gift for the Platteville 1866 Fund, which is designed to raise $18.66 million to assist mainly in UWP infrastructure improvements through the year 2010.

New developments have given the 430-acre Pioneer Farm a new face. The Agriculture Technology Center, built in 2003 at a cost of $1.6 million, features state-of-the-art modular classroom space for hosting workshops, training sessions, online courses and other educational activities. The Living and Learning Center, built in 2004 for $1.5 million, provides lodging for researchers, retreat participants and guests. The Swine Planting seeds for the future at Pioneer Farm Center, opened in 2004 at a cost of $1.4 million, is the first high-rise composting hog facility in the state. Future construction of a new Dairy Center, which is in the final planning stages, will double the farm’s milking capacity to 200 and allow students to learn on robotic as well as conventional milking machines. These developments and many more at Pioneer Farm wouldn’t be possible without the support of UWP alumni and friends.

“We really count on that. The resources are state dollars, tuition revenues and outside funding. With tax dollars for higher education shrinking, there’s a continued reliance on outside funding,” said Mark Zidon, director of the UWP School of Agriculture. “Alumni, people like Jerry and Fran Cooper, that’s a real plus for us. We have some alumni who’ve been successful, and they come back and remember [UW-]Platteville. We’re grateful when they lend support.”

The farm has changed quite a bit over the years. Agriculture studies began at the Platteville Normal School in 1900, but it wasn’t until 1914 that the institution purchased a plot of land for a farm. A dairy barn was erected in 1928 (where Ottensman Hall stands today), and was followed by facilities for hogs, sheep and poultry. In order to make room for new academic buildings and residence halls, land for a new farm was purchased three miles east of Platteville in 1958. The college’s Prairie Farm was dedicated in 1960, and today it is known as Pioneer Farm.

Jerry graduated with a degree in agriculture education in 1956, and remembers the old college farm. With the advent of new technologies and large-scale farming in the five decades since, the face of agriculture has been forever altered.

“It’s changed so much,” said Jerry, who taught agriculture at Viola High School from 1956-1959. “If I was going to get back into teaching agriculture, I’d have to go back to school.”

Jerry’s enjoyed his time at UW-Platteville, and when asked of his favorite memory, the answer is simple: meeting his future wife.

Fran was born and raised in Platteville, but by the mid-1950s was working as a nurse in Madison. She met Jerry when she came back to her parents’ home one week. Her mother rented rooms to a number of students, and Fran was surprised to find one of the boarders “all black and blue.” She remembers...
“The birds are wonderful, and there’s a lot of wildlife,” Fran said. “We enjoy the quiet more than anything.”

While caring for the environment is a passion for the couple, caring for animals was Jerry’s first love. After being drafted during the Korean War, he served in the U.S. Army for two years (1950-52), including one year assisting surgeons at a M.A.S.H. (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital) unit in Germany. “It was the best vacation I ever had,” Jerry said. In fact, he liked the medical field so much that he set his sights on becoming a veterinarian. Wisconsin didn’t have a veterinary school at the time. After finishing his studies in Platteville, Jerry tried to enroll in out-of-state schools, but found that more a matter of “who you know” than “what you know.” He never became a veterinarian.

Things might have been different if he was a student today. Wisconsin has its own school of veterinary medicine at UW-Madison, and UW-Platteville offers a pre-veterinary program that primes students for advanced study. Pioneer Farm plays a role as well. When Jerry and Fran spent the afternoon at the farm this summer, they shared the facilities with 38 high school students who came from as far away as Omaha, Neb., for the annual UWP pre-vet camp. It’s just one of many educational activities held in the Living and Learning Center lodging spaces and the Ag Tech Center’s learning areas. The Ag Tech Center is perfect for conferences and meetings, and fiber-optic technologies there allow visiting educators to conduct distance education courses. The Living and Learning Center features meeting spaces, a kitchen area, patio and a dozen rooms for up to 40 guests.

“It’s a place where people can come and stay on the farm and conduct business. The attraction is that it’s a rural setting,” Zidon said.

Campus clubs, alumni groups, regional businesses, local church organizations and scientists have all used these areas for meetings, retreats, programs and lodging. It’s all part of an effort to utilize Pioneer Farm for diverse educational opportunities. Research activities at the farm have also increased tremendously, Zidon said, in conjunction with the Wisconsin Agricultural Stewardship Initiative.

These facilities, the state-of-the-art Swine Center, the upcoming Dairy Center and other changes on the horizon for Pioneer Farm wouldn’t be possible without donor backing. The Coopers are proud to support their alma mater. They have funded two UWP scholarships for many years, contributing more than $100,000 in endowments that have benefited more than 30 students to date. Their recent planned gift of more than $500,000 includes a $100,000 cash gift over the next five years that will help School of Agriculture administrators fund developments at the farm as well as student recruitment efforts and additional scholarships.

“It’s really pretty awesome when you think about it. It’s just a great opportunity for everyone,” Fran said.

UW-Platteville faculty and administrators are grateful to the Coopers for helping provide some of the “seed” funding that will benefit UWP students for years to come.

“Fran and Jerry Cooper are two of the best people I have ever known. They have been great supporters of UW-Platteville and of our students,” said Duane Ford, dean of the UWP College of Business, Industry, Life Science and Agriculture. “Though their latest gift is truly awesome, I believe their best gift is their simple friendship. They are such genuinely nice people. I am blessed to know them and honored to count them among UWP’s alums.”

By Daniel Lehnherr