

ARBORETUM:

Larry Horner, who came to Freeman Academy to become the school's president in 1995, is credited with helping initiate the effort to create the Prairie Arboretum.

It's hard to fathom how 40 acres of pastureland south of Freeman Academy could so quickly become something so distinctively striking and part of community life.

From its three sprawling ponds loaded with fish to a mile-long walking path that passes through gardens, native trees and grasses, over bridges

and around an amphitheater, an interpretive center and island marked by a gazebo, the Prairie Arboretum is a glimmering example of what can happen when one man's idea becomes another man's passion.

One of Horner's friends and early supporters of the idea was Lyle Preheim, a farmer east of Freeman who had a love and knowledge of the prairie in general and trees in particular.

"The land told us what to do," says Preheim. "The design was predetermined for us."

Truth is, the 40 acres of pastureland on the southern portion of the FA campus were perfectly suited for a

land. The rest remains where it was laid.

"Once the arboretum was excavated, everything else was comparatively easier," says Preheim. "Once you conquer something that is very difficult, everything else becomes much easier. It's a good lesson in life."

The first tree, an oak donated by Phyllis Bixel, was planted in May of 1999. By November of that year more than 60 rare and valuable young trees had been planted - all of which were donated.

In the years that followed, dozens of additional trees were planted. By the fall of 2000, as the largest of three ponds (180 feet x 500 feet) was being constructed, more than 200 native trees had been relocated onto the grounds of the arboretum, and by the spring of 2001 all primary collections had been planted. Today, between 500 and 600 trees and shrubs making up 150 species and cultivars help shape the Prairie Arboretum; there are plans for additional trees to be planted as needed.

"It's been an ongoing process," Preheim says of the tree work, "and it continues today."

More than 400 tons of

rocks were brought in to protect the pond shorelines from the natural process of erosion.

By late 2001 all the rock-ing had been done and, for the first time ever, the 40 acres of land on the southern portion of the Freeman Academy campus included well-groomed ponds that would give the arboretum its shape for years to come.

The Prairie Arboretum was dedicated on a sunny and comfortable Sunday afternoon, Sept. 22, 2002.

By then the land had taken on the feel of a landscaped and manicured area, complete with a gravel walking path a mile long that weaved through the trees and grasses, over bridges and along the three ponds that formed one sprawling body of water.

Remarkably, the walking path was constructed in less than a month's time almost single-handedly by one person: Larry Tschetter.

At a dedication ceremony, about 150 people gathered on the shore on the west side of the island, with the backdrop of a newly-built gazebo nearby. That gazebo has become a symbol of the Freeman Prairie Arboretum -- and to some extent the

community -- over the years. It was donated to the project by Dawn Stahl and dedicated to her parents, Dr. and Mrs. Ernest J. Hofer.

While the dedication of the Prairie Arboretum marked its official opening, the project was far from complete.

In fact, some of the most visible and well-received aspects were yet to come.

One of those was the construction of the Prairie Rose Amphitheater in 2003 and 2004, made possible thanks to a gift from Freeman residents LaNae and LaVerne Waltner in memory of their son, LaMarr.

Following the sudden passing of LaMarr, who died of a brain aneurysm in January of 2002 at the age of 48, the Waltners chose to direct \$45,000 in LaMarr's memory to the amphitheater project, which includes seating for 400 and a permanent stage and soundshell across the water.

There have been other additions big and small over the years, from a sculpture work created by community native Norman Epp that stands north of the amphitheater, to the construction of the interpretive center, which

was completed in the spring of 2006.

There's little doubt that this community's best-known 40 acres -- the plot of land that sat undeveloped and as a home to cattle prior to 1999 -- has significantly improved Freeman's quality of life and resources offered here.

From organized events like the Freeman Fishing Derby and concerts at the Prairie Rose Amphitheater to random forms of recreation like evening strolls through the mile-long walking path that weaves around water, trees and various forms of landscaping, the arboretum is perhaps the area's greatest park.

On any given night, when the flowers are in bloom and the smell of fresh-cut grass lingers in the air, you'll find people enjoying the arboretum.

Countless others will enjoy Freeman's finest 40 acres in their own ways, and still others will volunteer their time to keep it beautiful, whether it's by planting and watering flowers, mowing the lawn or pruning the trees.

All of it adds up to form one of Freeman's greatest stories and, perhaps, its greatest untapped resource.

