

Book chronicles one man's conservation efforts to save the wild turkey

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Sportsmen's traditions and sound conservation practices can and do co-exist. Each actually benefits the other.

In the early 1900s, outdoorsman and conservationist Henry P. Bridges was among the pioneers establishing this partnership between hunters, fishermen and conservationists.

"He set out to re-establish the wild turkey in North America. He knew it was threatened," said David Bridges, Henry's grandson. "That was one of his major goals and he accomplished that."

Mr. Bridges is the author of "The Bridges of Washington County: Spanning Work and Nature." In part, it's the story of the Bridges family, beginning in 1816, when Robert Ferguson Bridges crossed the ocean from Kirkcaldy, Scotland, to the shores of America, arriving at the port of Baltimore. He moved to Hancock in Western Maryland where he became a successful businessman, a prominent Presbyterian and raised a family of eight in a large house across the street from "the ditch," aka the C&O Canal.

Bridges' youngest son, Robert, was also a devout Presbyterian. He strongly believed that land was God-given and created for humanity, and as such, people were charged with being good stewards of this resource. It was a belief he instilled in his children, including his young son, Henry.

'A true sportsman's paradise'

The man who spent his childhood days roaming the mountains hunting, fishing and caring for animals (he even raised and trapped wild game for a petting zoo) was a successful real estate lawyer in Baltimore, but Henry Bridges never lost his zeal for the outdoors. While living in the city, he owned two bird dogs and kept a small flock of wild turkeys at a farm in Hancock.

When the Woodmont Rod and Gun Club of Washington, D.C., was put up for sale, Henry had the passion and the right contacts to purchase the prestigious fishing and hunting club. In 1907, the new owners reorganized as the Woodmont Rod and Gun Club of Baltimore City, and Bridges was elected secretary-treasurer, the office charged with directing the club's activities. His first order of business was to rebuild the clubhouse. The existing structure had burned a few years earlier and the details of its reconstruction contributed to the demise of the D.C. club.

"I wanted the Woodmont Rod and Gun Club to be the best of its kind — a true sportsman's paradise," Henry Bridges wrote.

"In that time period, there were dozens of sporting camps up and down the Chesapeake Bay," said Mr. Bridges, as well as throughout the United States. "It was part of the wilderness movement.

"Men of wealth purchased lots of land for hunting," he said. "Into the '30s and '40s, (hunting) was still a manly thing to do." Sporting clubs offered a man the chance to match his hunting skills against nature. Generally, it was the wealthy, self-made man who had the finances and time to pursue private sporting club getaways.

"I saw Woodmont as a kind of jewel with many facets — an excellent place to hunt and fish, a place to raise wildlife for the forests of the nation."

— Henry Bridges



Photos courtesy of David Bridges

Henry Bridges, left, was actively involved in re-establishing the natural wild turkey population in this country. He initiated breeding and habitat management programs at Woodmont Rod and Gun Club near Hancock. Pictured with Bridges in this 1939 photograph are Herbert O'Connor and baseball legend Babe Ruth.

Preserving the wild turkey

At the turn of the century, game was simply being over-hunted. Market or commercial hunters would fill a trench with grain. When the wild turkeys would come in to feed, the market hunters would decimate flocks of them at a time. White-tail deer populations were also impacted by overhunting.

Bridges recognized wild turkey numbers were on the decline. By the end of the 19th century, the population was estimated to be less than 30,000 birds in North America. Bridges believed they could possibly go the way of the passenger pigeon — extinction. He also believed it could be prevented.

"I saw Woodmont as a kind of jewel with many facets — an excellent place to hunt and fish, a place to raise wildlife for the forests of the nation," he wrote.

And that's what he did.

The Woodmont flock started with two pairs of natural wild turkeys. Those two pairs raised 23 young ones. By the third year, there were more than 300 wild turkeys on the property. At that point, Bridges believed the population was stable enough to allow hunting at the prestigious club.

Presidents, high-ranking government officials, prominent citizens and celebrities were invited to hunt and fish at Woodmont. Among them were U.S. presidents, baseball's legendary Babe Ruth and boxing champion Gene Tunney.

On a May day in 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt fished at Woodmont. He later visited with children at the West Virginia Crippled Children's Foundation in

nearby Berkeley Springs, W.Va. A photograph of the president, his wheelchair obscured by the surrounding children, hangs in the lodge's library.

Bridges undertook the building of a wild turkey breeding pen, encompassing an area of 500 acres. It was surrounded by miles of fencing, more than 9 feet high. The wings of the brood birds were clipped; however, gobblers from the natural flocks were able to fly in to the enclosure and breed.

Bridges was adamant about keeping the Woodmont flock "wild" and would go to the mountains and trap adult birds and collect eggs, as well as purchase eggs from other regions to infuse wild genes into the flock. Numerous fields were planted with grains for the birds to feed, but human contact was limited to keep the flock truly wild. To make the property more suited for game birds, he hired a lumber company to cut down all trees on the property over 12 inches in diameter. The logging would encourage the growth of cover for game birds. Woodmont-bred turkeys were also shipped to game farms around the country.

Bridges strove to stabilize the white-tail deer population at Woodmont as well. He shipped in white-tail from Michigan to breed with the native population to produce bigger deer. It was not uncommon for one of these Woodmont deer to weigh as much as 300 pounds.

Breeding was an expensive project, notes Mr. Bridges, one that would not have been possible without the financial and labor support from Bridges' company, the Berkeley Glass Sand Company.



David Bridges is the author of "The Bridges of Washington County: Spanning Work and Nature."

"Woodmont could not have survived without money from the sand mines," he said. "Whatever Woodmont needed, he sent over."

A new era

Henry Bridges died in 1957 at the age of 79. He worked until the end of his life to promote Woodmont and its conservation programs. "For almost half a century, I have been a full-time conservationist, hunter and fisherman, a man whose life has been dedicated to the health of our woodlands and the animals and birds that live in them," he wrote.

After his death, Woodmont experienced a slow decline in membership and by the mid-1980s,

it was teetering on the brink of dissolution. The clubhouse was in need of renovation and was on shaky financial ground. Timber was being cleared to help reduce the club's debt.

At a reunion of the Bridges family held at Woodmont, David Bridges met Henry Roemer III, the club's manager. Both men were third-generation members of the club. Mr. Roemer was able to spark a revitalization and membership grew to 50. With its "meager revenues," the clubhouse and grounds were improved and the club was able to forestall a sale until the mid-1990s.

Then the property was sold to The Conservation Fund, a nonprofit conservation organization. One of its goals, according to the Web site, is to help government agencies and nonprofit organizations acquire property from willing sellers to protect open space, wildlife habitat, public recreation areas and historic sites.

The Fund then sold the property to the Maryland Department of Natural Resources and, through a unique cooperative arrangement with the Isaac Walton League of America, the club is maintained under private/state funds. According to DNR's Web site, most of the funding for Maryland's state wildlife programs comes from hunting licenses and fees, and from a special, federal excise tax on sporting hunting devices and ammunition. About 70 percent of the state's budget for wildlife programs comes from these two sources.

"(Woodmont) is still a private club," said Mr. Bridges. "It's the private funding that keeps it going."

The club's members have exclusive use of about 1,400 acres of the property and the clubhouse for six months of the year and contribute to its upkeep. The public has hunting rights during the firearms' deer season and two weeks in the turkey season. DNR oversees conservation-related activities on most of the acreage and sponsors

outdoor-related activities throughout the year.

"When I started going back as an adult, I fell in love with the place," said Mr. Bridges. He started collecting memorabilia on Woodmont and interviewed townspeople who knew his grandfather or worked at the lodge. He also had access to his grandfather's papers and diaries.

"He was an icon in my mind, but I didn't know him," said Mr. Bridges, who was born after his grandfather's death. "I wanted to know who he was."

Mr. Bridges grew up in the suburbs of Chicago and made his first visit to Woodmont at the age of 9 months, a visit documented in photographs. He wanted to be a dairy or beef farmer and pursued a degree in agricultural economics at the University of Kentucky.

"I think that parallels my grandfather's love for the outdoors," said Mr. Bridges. "My father had a love for the outdoors and he instilled a love for hunting for (Mr. Bridges and his brothers), and a love for the Presbyterian church."

Mr. Bridges was an ordained minister for 18 years. He has a master's in Divinity from Louisville (Ky.) Presbyterian Theological Seminary and studied at the University of Chicago Divinity School. He's now a full-time author.

"The Bridges of Washington County" is Mr. Bridges' second book. His third book is still in the works and he's still seeking information on the subject: Major James Breathed, the author's great-great-uncle. The book will be titled "Major James Breathed: A Forgotten Civil War Hero Under J.E.B. Stuart."

"It's the first biography written on him," said Mr. Bridges, who now lives in Alexandria, Va.

"The Bridges of Washington County" is available at Market Street Books and Hunting Creek Outfitters, both in Frederick, online at amazon.com or from the author. He can be reached at DPBridges@aol.com.