

Area man gives his land back to its native inhabitants, the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma

By Mark Coddington
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DANNEBROG — Roger Welsch's land is nestled perfectly up against the Middle Loup River southeast of Dannebrog, 60 acres of trees and hills and muck tailor-made for getting away.

Except it's not his land. And, Welsch says, it never was.

Welsch gave his land last year to the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma, the tribe that once called Welsch's acreage, and all of Central Nebraska, home.

It's the first land the Pawnee have owned in Nebraska since the tribe was forced to a reservation in north-central Oklahoma in 1875.

Last month, Pawnee leaders held a reburial ceremony there to put to rest hundreds of their ancestors whose graves had been dug up decades ago.

It's one of several places in Central Nebraska where the Pawnee are regaining a toehold in their native land.

The nation was also given the former Lille Mermaid building in downtown Dannebrog in September by Gaylord and Judy Mickelsen, the gift shop's retiring owners.

Near-extinct varieties of Pawnee corn are being grown in places such as Kearney and Genoa — the first time they've been grown on Nebraska soil in several generations.

And the Great Platte River Road Archway near Kearney is planning to build Pawnee earth lodges and preparing to host Pawnee leaders for a historic pow-wow celebration next June.

"All of these things are happening to bring a lost nation back to Nebraska," said Welsch, a writer and folklorist. "I think it's one of the most exciting things I've seen, at least in my lifetime."

For many Pawnee who grew up on the tribe's reservation in Pawnee, Okla., Nebraska has been the state they've never lived in but always called home.

It's where their ancestors grew corn along the Loup and Platte rivers, built villages of earthen lodges and fought neighboring tribes over their land.

It's also where they were forced onto a reservation in modern-day Nance County after ceding nearly all of their land to the U.S. government, and where disease and hunger began to wipe the tribe out as they took their own "Trail of Tears" down to their new reservation in Oklahoma.

Francis Morris is the coordinator of the Pawnee Nation's two-decade-long effort at repatriation — the process of recovering and reburying Pawnee remains dug up long ago in Nebraska, mostly by amateur archaeologists.

He said the nation had held several ceremonial reburials in Nebraska since the 1990s, including

two in the Genoa City Cemetery. But all of those were on public land.

Last month's reburial was the tribe's first in Nebraska on its own land — and right in the center of Pawnee territory, at that.

Morris said it's difficult to express how much it means to his people to return their ancestors to the land where they lived. (Part of that expression of gratitude came last year, when the nation made Welsch and his wife, Linda, honorary Pawnee.)

Every time Morris visits that site, his mind's eye can see the village, the gardens, the families that might have been there centuries ago.

"It makes the hair stand up on the back of your neck every once in a while when you go up there and start thinking," Morris said.

The nation hasn't decided how it plans on using the former Lille Mermaid building in Dannebrog, but several members have talked about using it as a cultural center to display Pawnee art, sell gifts and educate Nebraskans.

Welsch is planning on kicking off the center's use by hosting a lecture series on Pawnee culture there starting next fall.

Welsch's relationship with the Pawnee began decades ago when he was a member of the Nebraska State Historical Society board. But another, newer relationship is also beginning to blossom at the Archway near Kearney.

Pani Arts Association Executive Director Deb Echo-Hawk and her "corn sister," Ronnie O'Brien, the arch's director of operations and education, have been working together to grow Pawnee corn at the arch since 2004.

The harvests are small — this year's produced 14 good ears, O'Brien said — but significant. Many of the seeds have been saved by the Pawnee for generations and haven't been grown for decades.

The crops grew in Nebraska for hundreds of years, so they're better suited to grow here than in Oklahoma, said Echo-Hawk, who lives in Pawnee, Okla. But before O'Brien and others such as Jerry and Nancy Carlson of Genoa offered their land, there was no place in Nebraska to grow them.

To see the crop growing regularly in Nebraska is a major step forward, Echo-Hawk said. Corn is sacred to the Pawnee: It's part of every tribal ceremony, and she hopes someday it can once again be part of the Pawnee diet.

"It's intertwined with a lot of our stories, so it really is part of our heritage," Echo-Hawk said.

She has visited the arch twice, most recently in September for a presentation about Pawnee culture. She and O'Brien are planning a pow-wow at the arch next June when many Pawnee are expected to attend, including the tribe's chief of chiefs, Pat LeadingFox.

O'Brien said she feels privileged just to be part of a growing relationship between the Pawnee and Nebraskans that's allowing them to deepen their attachment to their land here.

“It’s hard for me to even fathom the connection they must feel to this land,” O’Brien said. “But I can see it when they are here.”

Morris said he’d like to see that relationship deepen even further. The nation’s goal, he said, is to have a Pawnee family living in Central Nebraska, potentially to oversee a cultural center in Dannebrog and work with local schools and museums on education in Pawnee culture.

Both he and Welsch emphasized that the Pawnee have met nothing but open arms and willing hearts during their visits to Nebraska.

“We are very surprised and always in awe of the people we’re meeting,” Morris said. “They make us feel so welcome, and they cannot do enough for us to make sure these wrongs get righted.”

Since the early 19th century, the Pawnee's history is largely a sad one, full of lost land and lost members, especially along the tribe's trip to Oklahoma, Echo-Hawk said.

Now, the nation is finally beginning to gain something back.

“We lost a lot of things,” Echo-Hawk said. “But evidently, we haven’t lost our friendships.”