

**In Nature's Image**  
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**Chapel Hill Angus Farms**

Chapel Hill Angus Farms, located in east central Indiana, is an all grass, beef cow-calf operation. The following is a brief synopsis of why grass farming became its chosen endeavor.

Malabar Farm located southeast of Mansfield, Ohio, is the product of the late Louis Bromfield. Having established a famous and lucrative literary career, this homesick farm boy returned to his native area in 1939 and purchased over six hundred acres of worn out farms. He then began restoring the farms' fertility via livestock and grass farming accumulating a considerable amount of international fame with his results. During this time he wrote several popular books about his activities at Malabar until his death in 1956, after which Malabar and Bromfield's writings faded into obscurity and nonrelevance within the emerging, industrialized, monocultured agricultural system.

About twenty years ago and unaware of Bromfield or grass farming per se, I serendipitously purchased one of his Malabar books at a used book sale. Reading this awakened deeply within me an instinctive awareness that grass farming was the system of practical agriculture internally suited to my person and circumstances. Additional reading of similar literature solidified in my mind a new paradigm of thinking and the decision was made to initiate a rotational grazing program.

The way things were is the way things should stay had been so inculcated within me; however, that the first attempt to break with times past was a major mental challenge. With some diffidence a few paddocks were established for rotational grazing in what had for antiquity been a continuously grazed, permanent pasture along with older hay fields paddocked for stockpiled grazing. With only minor expenditures and after just a couple seasons of rotations and stockpiling, confidence bloomed in the credibility of grass farming in this manner due to observable improvements in forage and livestock production.

Then in 1988 we suffered a very severe drought with no grazing from late July until the following spring. During this time the cows were confined to a barn lot and fed hay. When spring arrived and the cows were moved from barn lot to pasture, the abundant manure was harrowed several times and then forgotten. However, the forgotten barn lot was about to become the focal point which germinated the underlying, philosophy inspiring, conversion of the entire farm to an all grass and livestock operation.

Plentiful spring rain assisted in the harrowed manure being absorbed into the soil and was replaced by a VOLUNTARY ley of mixed grasses and legumes. The growth was so heavy that it was difficult to walk in and provided an abundantly producing paddock that the cattle relished. As I studied on this, it became profoundly apparent to me that the dynamic natural relationships between plant, animal, environment and management that Bromfield and others had written about was the cause of this prolific and unexpected occurrence.

These relationships can be thought of as spokes on a wheel that is continuously turning to keep a natural dynamic in process. Animals as one spoke, consume forages; another spoke, producing animal waste; a third spoke, that works within the soils creating organic matter; and humus the fourth spoke that feeds the plants as the last spoke for regrowth and recurring animal consumption. A continual recycling process of birth, life, death, decay and rebirth, i.e., the system Nature employed in the original prairies that produced some of the most fertile soils on our planet.

It now seemed to me that the barn lot had been, in effect, an intense micro emulation of a prairie system. Since the soil indicated a tangible proclivity to produce abundantly in this manner, why not emulate that system farmwide with a planned reforaging program?

So, for the past fifteen years a program of "reverse sodbusting" has been in progress by reclosing former row cropped soils within a protective blanket of perennial grasses and legumes. Accompanying this prairie modeled revegetation is a high intensity, short duration, flexible rotational grazing system with environmentally adapted livestock, possessing a demonstrable harmony or "nicking" with a forage dominant system. Consequently Nature's wheel of dynamic natural relationships is reoccurring and a sustainable, naturally successive, self-regenerating, no-till perennial, prairie polyculture is its artwork.

This systemic artwork expresses itself physiologically in numerous ways. Soil fertility is improving through increased organic matter and humus. Forages have proliferated in variety and tests well in quality. Grazing seasons have been extended even during drought. Optimal animal carrying capacity is increasing along with improvements in livestock performance and quality. The need for purchased inputs such as commercial fertilizers has significantly diminished; indeed the dependency for such seems to be a non-issue.

Truly, farming in Nature's image by an emulated rebirth of the original prairie system is producing a low cost, less work more enjoyable environment to invest one's life. Grass farming though is not Camelot. The full rewards accrue at their own pace as it takes time for Nature to heal her wounded and create its own self-optimal equilibrium. But after only a modicum of years invested in this by Nature's timetable, I'm in agreement with Bromfield that "No force on earth will give such response and such reward as Nature when you understand and work with her".

Today, Malabar Farm has reemerged as a State Park and receives thousands of visitors annually who are exposed to the same inspirational writings I experienced. Louis Bromfield and Malabar have, like the phoenix, risen from the ashes of forgotten ideas and are nexing with a new generation of like-minded enthusiasts. This new breed of innovative producers is grazing fresh paddocks of thought and through their real world results and compelling literary articulation are providing inspirational fertility to diverse alternative methods of agriculture.

May Nature produce greener pastures on everybody's side of the fence!

