



Philosophy, Philanthropy and Fishin’

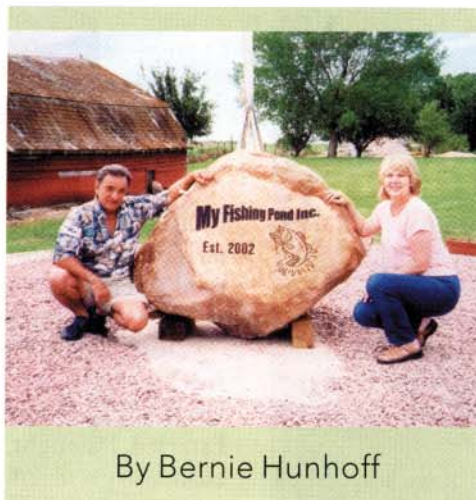
~ From the pond by Bridgewater ~

SUPPOSE WE went fishing in a pond surrounded by old trees and red barns, with a big friendly golden retriever named Copper. The fish are hungry and a friendly fellow on a golf cart says he’ll fry some burgers on his grill whenever we get hungry. Tall cattails and flat water lilies with yellow blooms border the shoreline. Sounds of happy children float across the blue surface.

Not a bad day, right?

Then suppose you live with certain restrictions — maybe you’ve been wheelchair bound or confined to a nursing home, or you have some other physical or mental challenge that keeps you from fishing. Maybe you don’t have much variety in the people you talk to — and many days you don’t do very much that’s exciting enough to talk of anyway.

John Alvarez knows all those feelings. The Arizona copper miner was seriously injured in a car accident near Tucson in 1994. As he lay in the hospital, his wife, Dee Ann,



By Bernie Hunhoff

and their young son, Trevor, got good news. John would live. The bad news? He suffered serious head damage, as if a bowl of Jell-O had been thrown onto cement.

“I was unconscious. I woke up in the hospital. I couldn’t speak at first,” John recalls. Three months later, words returned to mind. As soon as he could voice them, he told his doctor, “I’m ready to go back to work.”

The doctor raised an eyebrow and said, “Really? Where is it that you work?”

Alvarez couldn’t remember. And that’s when he realized his

dilemma. He was a brain injury survivor.

He relearned the alphabet and basic skills like using the telephone and running a television. He knew he’d never return to mining. He also found urban life too frustrating and stressful. “Noise made me angry,” he says.

He and Dee Ann decided to buy a rural acreage near her quiet hometown of Bridgewater, between Mitchell and Sioux Falls. Wolf Creek ripples through the grassy prairie

Photo: John and Dee Ann Alvarez welcome the anglers.



If people concentrated on the really important things in life, there'd be a shortage of fishing poles.

— Doug Larson

hills just north of their big, square farmhouse west of town.

Alvarez didn't fish in Arizona but, with Wolf Creek just a short walk from his front yard, he and Trevor decided to try their luck. They caught more than bullheads; Alvarez also discovered that fishing was good therapy and it fostered companionship. That's when he had the best idea since his accident. Why not build a pond so others could enjoy the benefits of a day by the water?

He and Trevor started in 1998. They dug a hole, filled it with water and stocked it with minnows from a Brookings fish farm. But the ex-miner and his teenage son soon encountered complications. Their fish died when they added water that was too warm for winter. "That really confuses the fish because they are accustomed to the cold," John says. "We had to learn."

Soon, word about the fishing pond spread through southeast South Dakota. The Freeman Jaycees helped with landscaping. Neighboring farmers brought heavy equipment. Local 4-H clubs, major corporations and non-profit foundations became involved.

Beginning in 2002, want-to-be anglers began coming

from nursing homes, assisted living centers, training centers, children's hospitals and schools, and other institutions throughout the region. Individuals and families also come to the pretty place called My Fishing Pond.

"I had a lady yell and scream when she caught her first fish," says Alvarez. "That made me feel like a million dollars. But it isn't even catching fish that's important. When I started, I thought, 'Well, there are people who need a chance to get together and talk.'"

Hundreds now come every summer for catch-and-release fishing and fellowship. The outings seem very serene, but of course the atmosphere is no accident. Alvarez, it turns out, is a tireless fishing pond administrator. With pleasant persistence, he casts nets far and wide for whatever he needs.

"He's a good promoter and he doesn't take no for an answer. He's not pushy, just suggestive," laughs Milt Nelson, a Mitchell realtor and former state senator who recognizes both adversity and success. He suffered a serious brain injury in a farm accident. "When John found out I had a head injury, he wanted me to be a part of this. Some



The founder, fundraiser and chief guide at My Fishing Pond is John Alvarez. His reward is hearing fish stories from anglers who never held a rod and reel before they arrived at his pond near Bridgewater.

of the people who come here are really knocked to their knees. Here they can get outdoors and catch some fish. They don't need to worry about cleaning them. They don't need a license. And they are never alone."

Nelson said he's known a lot of people with good ideas who couldn't get a project organized. "This is interesting to watch," he says, pointing to a poster on a storage shed that lists all the individuals and companies who donate labor, supplies and money. It reads like a "who's who" of the region's business community.

"Dad is good at making connections," agrees Trevor, who still helps at the fishing pond when he's not working at the Crippled Children's Hospital and School in Sioux Falls. "The volunteers have given him a lot of support, but it still keeps him busy. He knows how to ask the right people at the right time."

Looking around the yard on a fishing day, Trevor acknowledges that the pond has been a lot of work. "But it brings people together and that's what life is all about," he says. "The friendships you gain define your life."

That seems like a lot of wisdom for a 21-year-old, until you remember that his dad was smart enough to take him fishing at Wolf Creek when he was still a boy.



To schedule a fishing expedition at My Fishing Pond, or to offer assistance, readers can contact the Alvarezes at (605) 729-9400 or write 26331 432nd Avenue, Bridgewater, S.D. 57319.

We welcome you to the 58th annual Tabor Czech Days Celebration



Czech Days Queen
Ashley Slama



Czech Days Princess & Prince
Madisen Dangler & Anthony Walloch

Friday and Saturday, June 16 and 17, 2006

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS:

FRIDAY

Memorial Service; Giant Parade – starting at 1:00 p.m.; Dedication Ceremony; Kolace Baking Demonstration; Concerts; Polka Dance-off Contest; Polka Dance

SATURDAY

Kiddie Parade – starting at 10:30 a.m.; Clowns; Crowning of 2006 Czech Days Prince and Princess, Pedal Pull – 1:30 p.m.; Bohemian Show and Shine Exhibit; Kolace Baking Demonstration; Czech Polka Mass; Concerts; Crowning of 2006 Czech Days Queen; Coronation Polka Dance

Czech Food and Kolaches, Czech Souvenirs, Craft Show 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. daily; Quilt Show 1 to 5 p.m. daily; Blachnik Museum and Czech Pioneer Village McDermott Family Shows on Midway; Countdown to Czech Days Calendars and Special Stamp Cancellation; Tabor Cachet Envelopes \$1.50 & #10 SASE

For additional information contact:

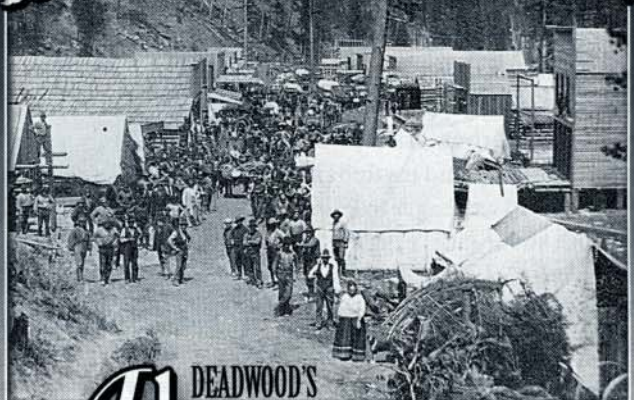
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