

Conservation in and around Schamber's hometown of Austin easily can fly under the radar

By Tim Spielman
Editor

Minnesota's Mower County may not have a reputation for big bucks. And it surely isn't known for a famous chain of lakes for which fishing brings statewide acclaim. Few hunters flock there for waterfowling or duck hunting in a given fall season.

But what Mower County does have is what every other county in the state also has: a dedicated group of individuals working to make conservation a priority, to improve the area's hunting and fishing, and to create Minnesota's future outdoorsmen and women.

In Mower County – situated on the Iowa border and three counties in from the Wisconsin border – one of those individuals is Arlen Schamber, *Outdoor News*' 2018 Person of the Year. It's likely never again will such an honor be bestowed upon an individual who was instrumental in building not one, but two Spam museums.

That's just one of many accomplishments that make Schamber, 66, smile with pride at the mention. The South Dakota native and former Hormel engineer has a host of others, ranging from work with conservation groups, helping the area's youth in firearms safety, working to ensure the city of Austin (pop. 24,718) stays on high ground during periods of rising rivers, and so much more.

For 39 years he worked for Hormel, until his retirement in 2013. He's been a DNR firearms safety instructor for 27 years and counting. For the past year, he's been providing engineering oversight for an in-progress 100,000-square-foot recreation center that will keep Austin youth active and occupied.

Those who best know Schamber describe him above all else as humble and soft-spoken. But that, they say, might belie his self-confidence, and his ability to lead.

"He's what people should be like," says Jon Erichson, former Austin city engineer, who was active, as was Schamber, on the Turtle Creek Watershed District's board.

Like so many other conservationists, Schamber's journey began on a farm – his family's, a small dairy operation near the rural town of Freeman, S.D., north of Yankton. It was there he first learned the value of wildlife habitat.

Early observations

What's occurring today in the realm of a federal ag land set-aside conservation program mirrors what Schamber witnessed growing up in southeastern South Dakota. The rise and fall of Conservation Reserve Program acreage reminds him of the Soil Bank program of the mid- to late 1950s and early 1960s.

"I grew up when Soil Bank acres were still in play," he says. "Pheasants were running around all over the place."

But that changed in the mid-1960s, due in part to U.S. secretary of the Agriculture Department Earl Butz (who served under Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford), who "promoted farming fence row to fence row," Schamber said. Eventually, the pheasant population "just



Outdoor News Person of the Year Arlen Schamber took this mule deer last fall in Montana.
Photo courtesy of Arlen Schamber

Arlen Schamber MINNESOTA Outdoor News Person of the Year



Arlen Schamber (with plaque) invited family to join him as he accepted the 2018 *Outdoor News* Person of the Year Award. Joining him were (l to r): daughter, Gretchen Reetz, granddaughter, Anne Marie Reetz, wife, Mary, grandson, Benedict Reetz, and daughter, Rachel Minerich.
Photo by Rob Drieslein

plummeted."

There weren't many deer in the area of his South Dakota home, but later, Schamber hunted near the Black Hills with a friend he met while attending the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology in Rapid City.

Schamber entertained a number of job offers upon graduation, eventually choosing Hormel Foods Corp. for, among other reasons, its focus on food products: "Being a farm kid, I knew about eating ya know."

On to Hormel

His career began in Fremont, Neb., before he moved to Coon Rapids, Minn., to work in a division of Hormel focused on wastewater and pollution equipment design. Once the com-

pany sold that division, he moved to Austin in 1980, where he remained until retirement.

For most of his career, Schamber says, he used his engineering skills to build and remodel company plants, along the way also working on environmental issues.

Beyond the job

Today – as he was during his working years – Schamber is involved in an array of activities that included being active in conservation organizations, watershed districts, committees, the Hormel Nature Center, and things that are just plain good for the kids of Mower County and Austin, such as high school trap shooting, firearms safety, and the current recreation center project.

"If it weren't for all the kids in town, I'd probably stay retired," he says with a laugh.

Schamber doesn't rank the At left, Schamber (l) and Marty Lienau, past officer for the local PF chapter.

Photo courtesy of Mower County Habitat and Pheasants Forever Chapter



A firm believer in doing things that benefit area youth, Schamber presents a scholarship to Aaron Jaenger in 2010.
Photo courtesy of Mower County Habitat and Pheasants Forever Chapter



Schamber (front row, left) used his position on the Turtle Creek Watershed District board to help slow water flow that occasionally caused flooding in his hometown of Austin.
Photo courtesy of Turtle Creek Watershed District

importance of the ventures in which he's been involved, most likely because he believes they're all important in their own unique ways. But it's clear the Mower County Habitat and Pheasants Forever Chapter has been a particular passion for one of two founding members of the chapter (the other was David Hagen), which just a few weeks ago held its 18th annual banquet.

He was the chapter's first treasurer – he likes to point out he's been the treasurer of various organizations – for more than a decade, then served as its president for a couple more years.

And, he admits, creating habitat and places for people to hunt in Mower County always has been a challenge. The USDA states that in 2012, about 94 percent of land use in the county was in agriculture.

"We've done some good things in Mower County even though it's basically a farming community," he says. Among them: working with other groups and agencies to acquire 160 acres from Edward and Lucy Schottler – what is now the Schottler Wildlife Management Area, complete with wetlands and grassland habitat.

In doing so, Schamber says, "There were a lot of hoops to jump through," but the owners wished for conservation of the land. It's now open to public hunting.

Justin Hanson, district manager for the Mower County Soil and Water Conservation District and a member of the Mower County PF chapter, says Schamber also was involved in the creation of the 500-acre Ramsey Mill Pond WMA in that county. It's one of many projects in which Hanson worked with Schamber.

"He's a different kind of guy," he says of Schamber. "He immerses himself in these things. I've never met anybody who puts what he does into these things."

"It's his level of leadership that I'm so impressed with."

All told, in just 18 years, the PF chapter in Mower County has raised \$1 million to fund 21 projects that have impacted some 815 acres, according to the group's website.

"We've done some good things, and we're pretty proud of that," Schamber says.

And there's more ...

Schamber also has been a longtime member, as well as an officer with the Mower County Chapter of the Izaak Walton League. He's been the group's president and secretary (oddly, not its treasurer ...).

He says he joined the Ikes at the urging of a neighbor during a backyard conversation shortly after moving to Austin. It's a conservation group, he says, that makes sense and is effective at the legislative level.

"I believe in the core things (the Izaak Walton League) believes in," he says.

It was a combination of his involvement with the Ikes and his employment at Hormel that led Schamber to another interest: the Jay C. Hormel Nature Center, located on the east side of Austin.

Schamber took an active role in the construction of a new building at the 500-acre nature center which, he says, "offers all kinds of programs and nature classes."

The history of the Hormel Nature Center dates back nearly 100 years. In 1927, Jay C. Hormel planted more than 200,000 trees on the land that would become the center. It wasn't until the 1970s

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that the city of Austin acquired 123 acres of land around the Hormel estate. Land was acquired and added to the center over the years, and in 2017, a new interpretive center was opened on Earth Day.

Schamber helped build that new center, which, he says, utilizes geothermal heating and has solar panels.

High and dry

Austin, in recent history, has been plagued by periodic flooding that results when three systems that enter the city – Turtle Creek, Dobbins Creek, and the Cedar River – run high.

In 1990, Chamber was asked to serve on the Turtle Creek Watershed District's board. Someone with an engineering background, he says, was needed. He was the one representative from Mower County; the other four were from bordering Freeborn County. His priority, he says, was slowing the flow of water into the city of Austin. That may not have been the other board members' focus.

"Sometimes I felt like a lone wolf crying in the wilderness," he says.

But, in time, he worked with landowners – farmers – to create areas of water retention that would slow its arrival in Austin. Many of those retention areas were creations of natural habitat. Other projects to accomplish the same centered on tiling and culverts.

Erichson, the retired Austin city engineer who now has his own engineering company, sought out Chamber to serve on the Turtle Creek Watershed District Board.

"Arlen is kind of a go-to person," Erichson says. "If you ask him for help, he never turns anybody down."

Once Chamber is aboard, it's not as a passive observer, Erichson said.

"It's always in a leadership role," he said.

Schamber said the effort to reduce flooding in Austin eventually led to the creation of another watershed district, this one the Cedar River Watershed District.

Serving as a watershed district board member isn't always easy, Hanson, of the Mower County SWCD, says. After all, many of those people asked to allow water retention on their property were the ones who preferred to get it off their property as quickly as possible. That made for some contentious hearings from time to time.

Schamber, he said, brought a calm to such situations.

"He was always even-keel," Hanson said of Chamber. "I've never once seen him animated ... even under fire."

That wasn't always the case with other watershed district board members, he added.

"Arlen would weigh in with the exact same tone as if it was something good (being dis-

cussed), with a well thought-out statement," Hanson said. "He could kind of diffuse the situation."

About the kids

Ask Chamber about what he's done – and is doing – for youth in Mower County and, in particular, Austin – and his excitement increases.

It began, sort of, in 1991, when after his two daughters had completed firearms safety training that he became a certified firearms safety training instructor.

Later on, he was one of a few who pushed for Austin to add trap shooting as an option for high school and middle school students. It wasn't popular with all school board members, but eventually it was approved. That first year, he said, the hope was for 30 participants. There were 60 students who signed up to shoot trap.

He likes the idea that trap shooting appeals to students who aren't necessarily athletically gifted, or perhaps "don't fit" in other extra-curricular endeavors. And, he adds, it's something in which even beginning shooters eventually excel. He's seen youth start the year hitting two or three of the 25 targets – and be hitting 18 or 19 by year's end. As an instructor, he says, it's gratifying.

"You see the self-esteem go way up. It's amazing. It gives these kids something good," he says.

And, of course, there's the new rec center in the city of Austin, slated to be built this summer under the watchful

eye of Chamber, the owner project engineer. The Hormel Foundation, he said, helped fund it, and in doing so will make the facility accessible to all kids.

The center will have basketball courts, exercise rooms, a pool and water park, and much more.

"We're trying to provide a place for kids to go to so they stay occupied and out of trouble," he says.

There's more

Schamber and his wife, Mary, have two married daughters and seven grandchildren, though Arlen says the kids aren't old enough quite yet to join him on hunts or the fishing vacations he takes to places like Ontario, along with Minnesota's Lake Winnibigoshish, Leech Lake, and Lake Mille Lacs.

He also hunts deer in southeastern Minnesota and Montana – the latter with an old college buddy.

He's also the treasurer of the Cedar Valley Gun Club and a member of the National Wild Turkey Federation, Ducks Unlimited, the Minnesota

Deer Hunters Association, and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.

A monument to Spam

Hormel's Spam Museum, Chamber says, is a little bit like South Dakota's Wall Drug: a quirky but popular vacation destination.

In 2000, he says, Hormel purchased an old department store building on the north end of Main Street in Austin in which it placed the first Spam Museum, and added office space.

Fourteen years later, with Chamber one year removed from a four-decades career with the company, he was asked to work on a new Spam Museum. It seems more office space was needed, and the old museum would be used for that purpose.

That 14,000-square-foot museum opened in 2016. In the process, Chamber had become, he says "the only engineer in that world who's built two Spam museums."

Today, the second edition of the Spam Museum attracts about 100,000 visitors each year. "It is amazing," Chamber says.

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