



**DIGGIN' IT**  
 BY PHAIDRA YUNKER  
 Green acres?

In McLean County, we know a thing or two about crops. Wheat, corn, soybeans: these are the plants that keep our economy running and our communities alive. Which is why it's more than a little unsettling to realize that America's largest irrigated "crop" isn't any of those. It's the lawn. Acres of grass we can't eat, can't sell and can't even bale for hay without getting sideeye from the neighbors.

NASA satellite imagery estimates that turfgrass covers more than 40 million acres in the United States, an area roughly the size of Texas. Unlike the crops that sustain us, lawns require substantial inputs while yielding little in return. If lawns were a real agricultural commodity, they'd be the only one we fertilize heavily, irrigate constantly and then mow down before it produces anything useful.

Americans now pour more than \$100 billion a year into lawn care (fertilizer, chemicals, mowing, irrigation), all for a crop that never pays us back. If soybeans pulled that stunt, we'd plow them under without a second thought.

Farmers understand better than anyone that land should give something back. Inputs ought to produce outputs. That's the basic equation of stewardship. Lawns break that rule spectacularly. They demand staggering amounts of water and soak up fertilizers and chemicals as if they were high-value crops. They require fuel-hungry mowers, trimmers and blowers, plus the weekly labor of keeping them trimmed to regulation height. After all that, the only thing they produce is a green rectangle. No grain, no forage, no pollinator habitat. Just a plant that needs constant attention and offers nothing in return.

Lawns drink astonishing amounts of water and rely on chemicals that wash into rivers and lakes. They offer almost no habitat for pollinators or wildlife. Ecologically speaking, they're vast monocultures maintained for appearance alone, like green shag carpeting we've inexplicably installed outdoors.

Each year, tens of millions of pounds of lawn pesticides are applied nationwide. These chemicals don't politely stay where we put them. Rain and irrigation wash them into streams and lakes, fueling algal blooms and contaminating drinking water sources. The result is nutrient overload, oxygen depletion and aquatic ecosystems that suffocate under the weight of our cosmetic preferences.

The damage doesn't stop at the water's edge. Birds, insects, amphibians and small mammals are routinely exposed to substances designed to kill. Many of these chemicals trace their lineage to wartime research and their broad toxicity reflects that heritage. Even the soil suffers, as repeated appli-

cations disrupt the microbial communities that keep landscapes resilient.

We've created what ecologists call "green deserts": expanses of manicured turf that look healthy but support almost no biodiversity. In a time of collapsing pollinator populations and rising environmental stress, this is a luxury we can't afford.

The American lawn may look natural, but its dominance is anything but. Its rise was engineered through centuries of borrowed aesthetics, technological change and relentless marketing. Lawns began as symbols of wealth in the 17th and 18th centuries Britain and France, where only the elite could afford the labor to keep grass trimmed. Early American landowners copied the look, using manicured turf to signal refinement. But the idea didn't spread widely until the 19th century, when the mechanical lawn mower made maintenance accessible to ordinary households.

The real turning point came after World War II. As suburbs expanded, developers built neighborhoods around the ideal of the single-family home framed by a tidy green yard. The lawn became part of the architecture of the American Dream, an outward sign of stability, conformity and middle-class respectability. Local ordinances soon reinforced the expectation, treating turfgrass as the default landscape.

Industry did the rest. Seed companies, fertilizer manufacturers and chemical producers spent decades selling the notion that a "perfect lawn" was a civic duty. Their marketing turned a European status symbol into a massmarket product, complete with an ever-growing list of treatments, tools and rules.

Today, lawns cover more land than any irrigated crop in the country, even in regions where turfgrass struggles to survive. The cultural momentum behind them is powerful, but it's also outdated. Water shortages, declining biodiversity and rising environmental costs make it harder to justify a landscape built for appearances rather than function.

The good news is that solutions are within reach. Homeowners can reduce fertilizer use, avoid applying chemicals before storms, and choose native plants that require fewer inputs. Prairie gardens, pollinator strips and climate-appropriate landscaping can reduce water use, support wildlife, and still look beautiful. Communities can rethink landscaping norms that prize uniformity over sustainability. Policymakers can support programs that encourage ecological lawn alternatives.

The American lawn didn't become ubiquitous by chance. It was designed, promoted and enforced into existence.

**BACK IN THE DAY**

Underwood

COMPILED BY SHELLY WALLACE

from the Files of the Central McLean News Journal

**20 years ago, Feb. 2006**

Skilled workers in McLean County aren't happy with the hiring practices of Fagen Inc. Nor with the county commission for granting a five-year tax-exempt status to Blue Flint Ethanol, the company that hired Fagen, Inc. to build the ethanol plant currently under construction between Washburn and Underwood.

Such was the message brought before the McLean County Commission during its regular meeting on Tuesday morning.

Jessica Anderson, Underwood, has been named to the All-District 10 Girls Basketball Team. She and Bethany Holm, also of Underwood, were named to the All-District 10 Tournament Team.

The Comet boys had trouble holding onto the ball in their last two outings on the hard court, dropping a pair of boys hoops games, falling to the visiting Washburn Cardinals Friday by the score of 58-36, and to a homestanding Richardton-Taylor Saturday by the score of 71-50.

The lid was closed on the girls basketball Monday night, particularly the first half, as the District 10 fourth-ranked Comets lost to District 9's top team, New Salem, by the score of 63-24.

**30 years ago, Feb. 1996**

The New Town Eagles shot the lights out, nailing 31 of 56 field goals for 55 percent, as they outgunned the Comets by a score of 72-56 in semifinal action of the District 14 Tournament at Garrison.

The All District 14 Team included a unanimous choice from Underwood, Kelly Snyder. Snyder was also named to the all-tourney team's second team.

Matt Potter, Coleharbor, has reached finalist status in the National Merit Scholarship program and received a certificate of merit. He has also been offered a \$1,500 scholarship from Jamestown College due to his performance in math competition. The test was taken locally, and Matt scored in the top 10.

**40 years ago, Feb. 1986**

The Underwood Comets narrowly fell to two-time defending Region VI champ, Newburg, at the semifinal round of the regional basketball tournament in Minot. Clint Erhardt and Shawn Auck led the Comets with 18 points each. Randy Sayler added 12, Pat Martin 9, Kelly Auck 4, and Charles Kranze, who was ill, 2. Kevin Bierman and Shannon Hett led the Eagles with 10 points each.

Martha Koenig and Karen Johannes attended a bridal show in Minot. Cynthia Johannes Klingbeil was one of the models for the show.

4-H leaders from throughout the county were honored for their years of service. Among the Underwood leaders honored were Rowena Johannes with 13 years of leadership and Char Anderson with 6 years.

**55 years ago, March 1971**

A two-month kindergarten program will begin at the Underwood School March 29. Mrs. Helen Broneske has been contracted to teach this program.

Mrs. Gary Miller and daughters, DeAnn and Laurel Miller, were in Dickinson, where DeAnn took part in the Junior Federated Music Festival at Dickinson State College. DeAnn received a superior rating for her piano selection.

**60 years ago, Feb. 1966**

Circle 4 of St. Ann's Altar Society will sponsor a pre-Lenten card party at the parish hall of the St. Bonaventure Catholic Church on Sunday evening, Feb. 20. Bridge and whist will be played.

The Hairport Beauty Salon is undergoing a remodeling and decorating project. New plumbing has been installed and the old barber back mirrors have been removed to give the beauty salon more room.

A number of local business establishments have installed new fronts and otherwise remodeled in recent months. Underwood Plumbing and Heating has a new front; the entire showroom was remodeled to enable them to display their supplies and appliances better.

**80 years ago, Feb. 1946**

Riverdale was the state's newest city as that was the winning name chosen by state officials in the dam town-naming contest which has been a topic of interest throughout the state for the past few months. The name was selected from 45 entries submitted by 24 North Dakota newspapers. Mrs. T.O. Lervick of Granville was the final winner and received the state prize of \$24. The name Riverdale had no sentiment or historical significance. It was simple and appropriate for any town that might have a river location.

The Washburn Civic Club and the Underwood Commercial Club will meet in the Washburn Memorial Hall for a return match of their inter-city basketball series. Last year the two teams played here with the proceeds divided up between the two cities.

**85 years ago, March 1941**

Four new 4-H clubs were organized in the Coleharbor community when a number of boys and girls from the Coleharbor School and some from the nearby rural school met with County Agent M.A. Tuntland, who helped organize the groups. Two agricultural clubs were formed and two home economics clubs.

Mr. and Mrs. Otho Snyder and Mrs. and Mrs. Milt Johannes were in Bismarck to attend the annual convention of the North Dakota Wool Growers Assn.

Mr. and Mrs. Reinhold Sayler have moved to the Sayler homestead southwest of Underwood. They formerly lived near Falkirk.

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