

regulars stopping showing up, but were replaced by old customers who hadn't visited for years. Business is up 8 to 10 percent, Leszek said.

Hello, legislators. Are you paying attention?

Brace's perseverance earns admiration

Whether Waterford farmer and property-rights activist Bob Brace is entitled to compensation from the federal government is a dicey proposition that King Solomon himself might find difficult to decide. But what really stands out in this decades-old wetlands dispute are the fight and the fighter.

No matter which side you choose, you simply have to admire Brace's tenacity.

There is something rather old-fashioned about Brace's feistiness. Battling the big, bad federal government is as American as apple pie. With Brace, it evolved into a lifelong passion. Brace might not be winning, but he certainly changed some of the rules.

This issue started in May 1987, when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service initially raised a beef over Brace's seemingly innocent plan to repair an aging drainage system on a 58-acre section of his farm near Waterford.

Brace wanted to convert the watery acreage back to dry land that he could farm, and it was land that once was farmed. But the USFWS, "along with an alphabet soup of other agencies," as Erie Times-News reporter Jim Martin put it, flatly labeled the conversion a violation of the Clean Water Act, ordered Brace to halt work and fined him \$25,000 a day.

Brace had the means to make a sustained court challenge, and mostly lost. But 20 years later, this formidable advocate of property rights is still fighting. His battle with Washington created a rallying point for the property-rights movement, and Brace became a national figure in such conflicts.

In his own case, Brace signed a consent decree in 1994, avoiding a \$125,000 fine and agreeing to pay \$10,000. He also had to rip apart the drainage system that once made it possible to farm the land. Court appeals are still active.

From a safe distance, you might say Brace is fighting the wrong fight. Protecting wetlands is serious environmental business, and compensating one frustrated farmer might open an expensive and destructive Pandora's Box for the protection of wetlands.

Yet, there is something special, beyond the stubbornness, maybe even patriotic, in Brace's prolonged losing battle with Uncle Sam.

You might not agree with him, but who wouldn't want Bob Brace in the same foxhole.

Erie Times-News

JOHN J. MEAD SR., PUBLISHER 1888-1911

JOHN J. MEAD JR., GEORGE J. MEAD, CO-PUBLISHER 1911-1919

GEORGE J. MEAD, PUBLISHER 1919-1972

FRANK J. MEAD, CO-PUBLISHER 1972-1987

EDWARD M. MEAD SR., MICHAEL MEAD, CO-PUBLISHER 1987-1996

EDWARD M. MEAD SR., MICHAEL MEAD, FRANK P. MEAD, CO-PUBLISHER 1996-2003

EDWARD M. MEAD SR., MICHAEL MEAD, CO-PUBLISHER 1996-2003

MICHAEL MEAD, PUBLISHER 1996-2003