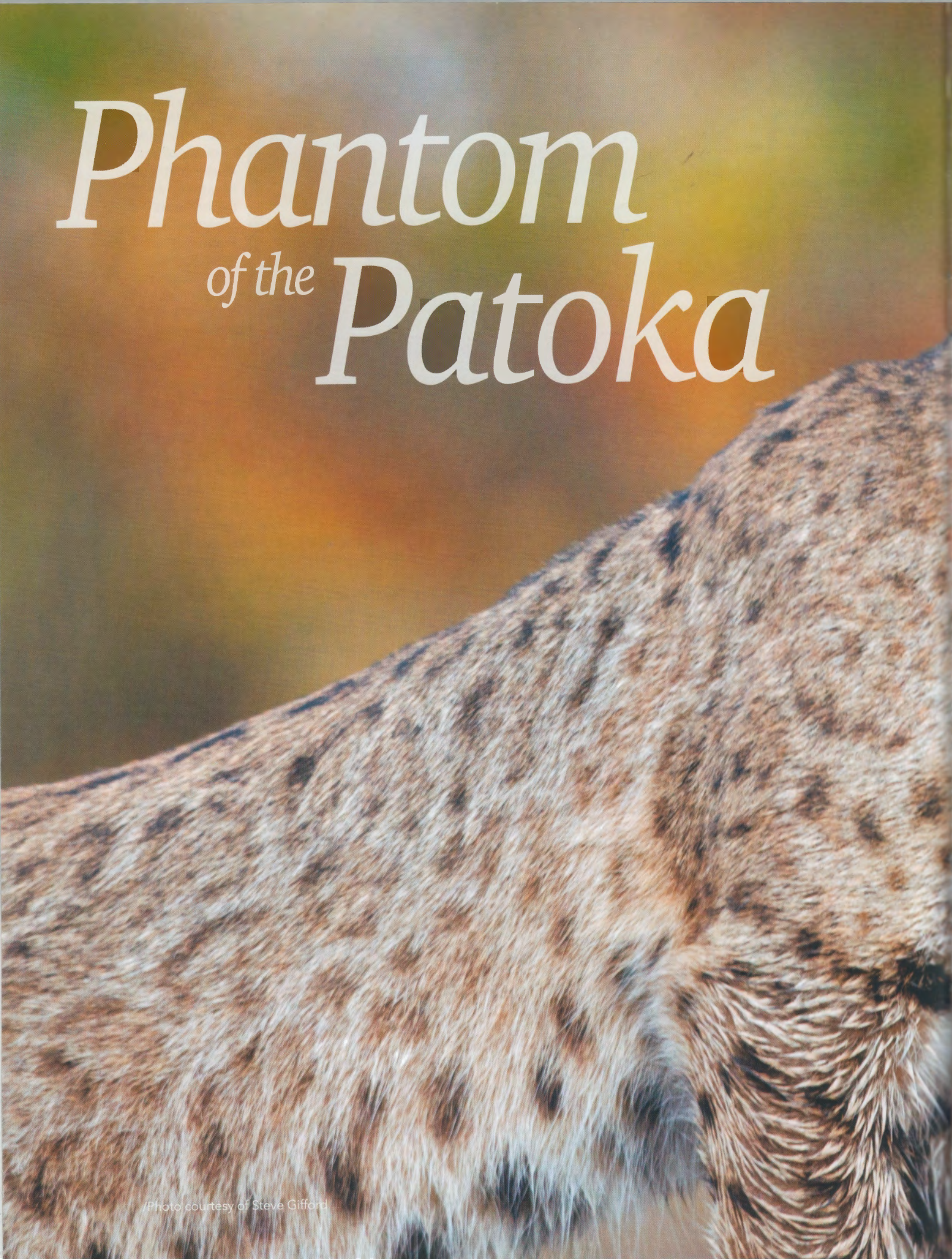
Phantom of the Patoka



/Photo courtesy of Steve Gifford

An abandoned coal mine is the unlikely key to the return of Indiana's most elusive predator: ***the bobcat.***

By Kurt Christian
and Hong-Ah Do

By the time I slow down for the off-ramp, it's apparent that Oakland City will never be more than a blur to most I-69 drivers. Houses sit far back from the road. A benevolent restaurant boasts its country-fried steak special. And with each building I pass, I seem to be traveling back to a time where the idea of neighbors would have to extend 10 miles before there's anyone to borrow an axe from. Even Heath Hamilton, the assistant manager of the Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge, assures me there isn't much to do in town while I wait, other than hiking the refuge's trails. And so, I ready myself for a search wildlife lovers have been conducting since 1969. Past a set of railroad tracks, in between mirrored lakes, nestled in in the belly of a fallen tree, somewhere, there lives a bobcat.

In the center of Oakland City in a nondescript tan building, the refuge's main office is a bridge between the world of man and nature. Today, I've done my part. I'm tracking dirt from a thousand acres of refuge into the office; the Patoka mud caking my slacks is ornamented with leaves and twigs. Heath sees me and lets out a hearty, easy-going laugh. Dressed in weathered boots, a khaki work shirt and wraparound shades, he is more ready for the excursion than I could ever be.

After a short truck ride, Heath dips and weaves through the branches as I struggle to keep up. It's hard to imagine that woods so intent on keeping me out are what Indiana's greatest predators call home. But in this preserve, the land needs the bobcats as much as the bobcats need the land.

As spring creeps in, the quiet land is met with a series of resounding, chirping yowls. Sharp and strident, the calls travel through the brush and over rivers, announcing the bobcats' presence. Males travel their 25-30 square mile territory, calling and leaving scent markers for eligible bachelorettes. Females leave their own markers behind, the warming sun a nagging instinct to produce the next generation of predators.

Following a courtship ritual of purring, games of cat-and-mouse and persistent advances, the female gives birth mid-spring to an average of three kittens. After 10 weeks of mother's milk, the kittens begin to eat solid food. At five months, they practice stalking and hunting with live rabbits and small prey brought to them by their mother.

Predators are critical to a healthy ecosystem. Those at the top keep the rest of the food chain balanced, preventing overpopulation and resource depletion. In nearly all Indiana ecosystems, this task falls to the bobcat. After about a year of relying on their mother for food and shelter, the kittens are dismissed not only from their mother's den, but from her territory. They disperse, padding away and gliding through the trees, phantoms fading into the forest.

Indiana's wolves, bears and mountain lions all fell victim to this same struggle, and the bobcats seemed destined to a similar fate.

For more than 125,000 years, bobcats sustained themselves through this careful balancing act. Then settlers began cutting down trees and damming rivers. A patchwork of farmland replaced the bobcats' prime hunting grounds. They were viewed as varmints, pesky threats to livestock and pets who wandered too far from the glow of the porch light. By the 1960s, global demand for their fur pushed the cats to the brink of extinction.

Indiana's other predators — wolves, bears and mountain lions — all fell victim to this same struggle, and bobcats seemed destined to a similar fate. But partly due to their skittish nature and aversion to humans, the bobcats held onto remnants of forests and grasslands in south-central Indiana. State officials put the predator on Indiana's endangered species list in 1969. But without a home, there was little hope.

Heath never breaks stride in our conversation as coworkers approach him with baffling migratory numbers from an early-morning duck count. He lives and breathes his work. His wife, Emily, teaches high school environmental science and biology. His son, named after famous conservationist Aldo Leopold, stands on a chair at the back window and identifies birds for hours on end. He's 1 ½ years old. Without people like Heath and his family to care for the land in which our native wildlife, fish and plants thrive, these birds might only exist in books. And without the Columbia Mine property, Hoosiers might never have seen the bobcat again.

In its heyday, nearly 230 miners worked for Peabody Energy at the Columbia Mine near Princeton, harvesting nearly a million tons of coal annually. When the coal market weakened, Peabody halted all mining efforts. By the mid-'90s, the Columbia Mine was desolate, empty of man and beast alike. It was time for a revival.

Peabody refilled the hundreds of feet they'd excavated. In accordance with reclamation laws, Peabody replaced the excavated soil in the same order that it had once been removed. Workers reintroduced grasslands and planted native trees and wildflowers in homage to a long forgotten Indiana. They created wetlands and stacked rocks in towering palaces for copperbelly watersnakes. In 2000, the Interstate Mining Compact Commission praised the restoration effort.

Located nearby, the Patoka Refuge was the top contender to oversee this beautifully restored tract of land.

"My boss worked on trying to buy the tract for 10 years," Heath says. "Something would always happen. The funding would fall through, or they wouldn't be able to get their ducks in a line at the right time. So Peabody just sat there holding it. They were doing us a favor by holding it for so long."

Trouble arose when both parties refused to assume responsibility for issues like shifting soil or other problems on the 1,043 acres. For-sale signs sprouted, and Peabody began parceling out 20-30 acre portions to be sold for country housing development and hunting tracts. The promise of the reclamation was in danger as, once again, humans threatened the sanctity of the land.

Heath casually unwraps a Clif bar as he drives to the edge of the refuge. His head pivots from side to side, beckoned

Assistant Refuge Manager Heath Hamilton travels the same path the bobcats do, following a muddy riverbank under a highway in hopes of finding tracks. /Photo by Kurt Christian

by birdsong. Despite his five years in fish and wildlife services, it's as if he is seeing the reed-specked marshes and rustling grasslands for the first time. He slams on the brakes, whips out a pair of binoculars and marvels at a tiny bird half a mile away. He hands me the binoculars and points, encouraging me to take a look.

The real estate signs stood as rigid reminders of the impending loss, a stark contrast in black and white against the lush green surroundings. Then the Sycamore Land Trust stepped in. The trust decided the mine property was too important to lose and accepted the risks. Filling the gap between Sycamore's existing properties, the Columbia Mine was a missing puzzle piece that connected more than 5,000 acres of protected ground. Sycamore purchased the land and handed it over to the Patoka Refuge for management. There's still coal there, but the sound of thundering trucks has been replaced with silence. Now and then a duck squawks, a bird chirps and, in the distance, three neighborhood dogs bark as visitors approach the preserve.

To celebrate the agreement, the land trust hired wildlife photographer Steve Gifford to take pictures. Not long after, Steve captured an astonishing image of two bobcat kittens peering cautiously at him from their perch atop a tree. "That was a phenomenal experience," Steve says.

Steve immersed himself in studying the bobcat's habitat and behavior and the evidence they leave behind. Scratchings on trees, scat strewn along a hiking trail and paw prints in a muddy riverbank are all signs that a bobcat has frequented the area. Hollow logs with plenty of brush cover, preferably near a water source, make an ideal den. Much like the housecat, bobcats scratch out shallow holes in the ground to create a "bobcat toilet." Steve spent months trying to understand the boundaries and territory routes of the cats, setting up trail cameras to continue his work at night.

Of all the endangered species to repopulate the Columbia Mine Property, such as the Indiana bat and the Henslow's sparrow, the bobcat may appreciate the land's diversity the most. For bobcats, a balanced environment is key. The basic necessities of food, water and a place to raise their young require a number of different habitats. Their diet consists of small game, like rabbits, squirrels, mice and voles, but their dinner doesn't all come from the same buffet line. In the preserve, hickory and hardwood forest bump up against brushy grasslands, creating a smorgasbord for the prowling cats.

Still, the bobcat manages to evade curious eyes. They naturally tend to be private, elusive and most active at dawn or dusk, allowing them to travel undetected. Even where suburbia hugs the very edge of the bobcat's territory, these phantoms weave through vacant lots and dark yards, avoiding interaction with bipedal neighbors. This ability to hide becomes all the more important in the spring when kittens are born.

"It takes a lot of patience, prayer and persistence just to find one, let alone photograph it," Steve says. "I guess that's why I enjoy it. Once you've seen one face-to-face in the wild, it's hard not to want to find another one."

The roads are bumpy, a challenge for my compact car. Heath's diesel truck grinds the popping gravel beneath its behemoth tires. We watch as ducks take flight, birds swoop toward their nests and squirrels bound across the narrow roads. Nature is showing off for us with a dazzling array of red-breasted robins and chartreuse-headed ducks. Bright colors are okay for some wildlife, but for other animals, the only way to stay alive is to stay away. To spot a bobcat, you need luck on your side.

"You know when somebody comes into the office and they have a big grin on their face that it's one of two things: They've either seen an otter or a bobcat," Heath says. "Those two animals would be a good indicator of a place in Indiana that is still a wild place."

From a bird's-eye view, the refuge is a growing mosaic of greens and browns and blues that occasionally bumps into remaining coal mines. Heath credits the bobcats and otters with attracting visitors to otherwise quiet Oakland City. Unlike the river otters, bobcats didn't have to be transplanted into Southern Indiana. Once preserves provided new habitat, the bobcats returned on their own.

As long as current hunting and trapping restrictions remain in place, those living in what Heath calls "just outside of town" could be seeing more of their bobtailed neighbors. But for now, a sanctuary for rescued wild cats in Center Point houses one of the only opportunities for Hoosiers to guarantee a sighting.

Tika stares back at me from her perch high above my head. Crouched low, her muscles ripple under her speckled, dust-cloud coat. She stands, ready to pounce at the first sign of trouble. But there won't be any. Tika remains behind the fence of her enclosure, a few yards from her owner's home.

The center is a haven of a different sort for the bobcat. While these bobcats are here for a variety of reasons, the majority are another example of man's intrusion into their world. Exotic feline enthusiasts assume that caring for a feral cat will be the same as rearing a domestic housecat. Almost all are taken aback when the cats prove that their place is not on a windowsill pining for birds they can't reach, but in thigh-high grasslands, leaping to catch their prey. Since these bobcats are

Wildlife photographer Steve Gifford was looking for bald eagles in Gibson County when three bobcats crossed the road in front of him. / Photo courtesy of Steve Gifford

A vast moonscape, the Columbia Mine was desolate by the mid '90s, empty of man and beast alike.

Tika stares down from the wooden jungle-gym above her enclosure at the Exotic Feline Rescue Center. She is one of only 12 bobcats among the center's 200-plus felines. /Photo by Hong-Ah Do

unable to return to the lands they yearn for, the center is the next best option. There aren't expansive meadows filled with voles and mice. There's no running brook at the end of a trail muddied with paw prints, but it's the next best thing for a population in peril.

Director Joe Taft adjusts his cap and calmly ties back the neon orange tape that tells you just how far back you should stay from Tika. He stops to admire her, something that was nearly impossible to do at the peak of the cats' endangerment.

"The biggest misconception about bobcats is that they're really dangerous. Bobcats in the wild do not pose a risk to people or children or livestock, and I don't know that bobcats in the wild even pose a particular threat to your dogs and cats," he says.

The center houses 12 bobcats. Where there should be rolling hills and hollowed logs, wooden boxes and beams crisscross overhead. They are captives, refugees caught and tagged and named because of our invasion. But the center is also an oasis for those animals unable to survive in the wild.

A world away in the preserve, reports of bobcat road kill and evidence from trail cameras suggest a rise in the population. Amateur and professional trackers note paw-print frequencies, cast plaster molds and report sightings to help those monitoring the resurrection that removed the bobcats from the state's endangered list in 2005. Biologists study the cat cadavers to estimate the number of litters they've mothered.

"I feel like I've seen one from all the pictures and trail cam photos I've seen," Heath says, shaking his head. "But I can't actually tick that one off my wildlife checklist yet. People come down to the refuge for a day and see one. I'm here every day. It's all up to chance."

Heath imagines his first bobcat sighting may not occur at the Columbia Mine, but rather in his sprawling backyard. An overflow from the incubating lands of the preserve would serve as a true testament to the cats' recovery.

Patoka plans to continue fostering a return to the native naturescape by planting wildflowers within the preserve's grasslands, a measure aimed at creating diverse meadows for pollinators. Future hiking trails will string together wildlife environments in the park.

Today, otters hunt and snack on turtle meat in the tall grass that surrounds each lake. Ducks migrate and speckle ponds in boisterous gratitude. Nesting grassland birds are omnipresent, a stark contrast to the decline of the '70s.

The refuge is still acquiring property. About 250 landowners still live on the land, and as properties become available, the refuge hopes to purchase them.

Heath has seen a rise in local support for conservation efforts and awareness of wildlife, but he cautions that the work isn't done. There's always another fencerow being pulled out or a wetland being farmed over.

"Humans have become disconnected from the environment. Unfortunately, people don't see themselves as a part of the environment. They see themselves as *apart from* the environment. But there's been a renewed interest in our connection to wildlife that'll just continue to grow," Heath says. "I'm proud of this refuge. I'm proud of Southern Indiana and what we are able to do here."

On our way back to town, Heath starts to talk faster. It's as if he, like the bobcats he cares for, senses the danger we are approaching. Outside the property lines of the refuge is a world of intruders. We pass a gas station. A convenience store. When we arrive at the Patoka Refuge's office, Heath turns off the truck and sighs. The noise and bustle of civilization are here, even in such a small town as Oakland City. We're resigned to the fact that we haven't spotted a bobcat prowling the trails of its new home. It's a challenge that's eluded us for another day.

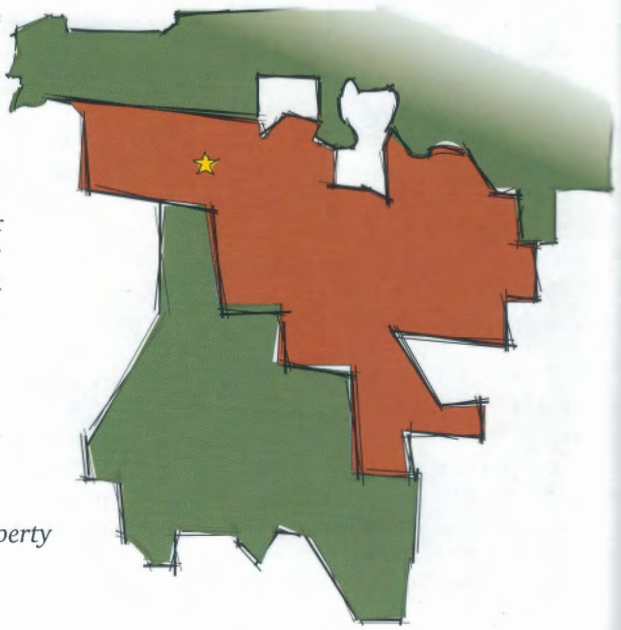



Illustration by Kurt Christian