The prairie man

A conversation with Dr. Clair Kucera, professor emeritus of biological sciences, might range from plant geography to Stonehenge. But it is certain to lead eventually to Tucker Prairie, a plot of land east of Columbia that Kucera considers the highlight of his academic career. There, preserved as close as possible to its original condition, are the last remnants of native prairie grasses in Missouri. His tenacity brought about the preservation of plants from former geological periods and several hundred species of wild grasses and flowers.

Kucera’s 40-year-old home in Columbia is a testimony to his love for plants and flowers. He has transplanted specimens from many regions of the world to his yard, and at any time of the year flowers and grasses grow to the delight of passers-by.

“Plants are wonderful healers,” Kucera says as he points out an earth berm left over from a sewer line excavation, now barely discernible under native grasses. “They cover up man’s mistakes.”

And concerning Stonehenge, Kucera was so impressed by its majesty on seeing it, that he has recreated its astrological features at his farm outside Columbia using stakes that eventually will be replaced with stones.

“It’s fun to go there on the spring or autumn equinox and watch the sun rise over a marker you placed there,” Kucera says.

Rock of ages

Once your eyes get past the clutter that Walter D. Keller, AB ’25, MA ’26, PhD ’33, calls “my piling system,” they focus on a wall full of framed awards. This internationally known geologist is proud of the contributions he has made to the teaching and researching of geology, and the awards are a testimony to his reputation.

He is a permanent fixture on campus as is his newly painted and overhauled Volkswagen beetle. And at an age when most people would be happy to take a back seat and relax, he is busy writing for scientific journals. His advice is still sought in the areas of diaspore, a high-aluminum mineral used in the manufacture of heat-resistant products, and kaolin, a clay used in ceramics.

His conversation is peppered with aphorisms on teaching and learning. “One of the most valuable things this University can do,” Keller says, “is to emphasize learning the enjoyment of learning.”