For someone with a last name that conjures up images of menacing weather, Roger E. Storm is instead the kind of person who gets things done by leaning on subtle persuasion and the Socratic method. In other words, more like the famous persona imbued in his first name.

“It’s funny,” he says, “but just recently here at work someone referred to me as ‘Mr. Rogers,’ and that was after my time, so I never watched him on TV. But I’ve now come to learn who he was, and I take that as a very nice compliment.”

In the sometimes-wonky world of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Roger Storm is that agency’s sole state-wide staff specialist responsible for acquiring railroad right-of-ways for use as recreational trails. It’s not a stretch to consider that history may one day look back on and proclaim him as “The Johnny Appleseed of the Michigan Rails-to-Trails Movement.”

Because — and there is little room for argument — if it weren’t for Roger Storm, it’s likely there would be far fewer trails throughout the state.

“When it comes to solving issues, he’s like a dog on a bone,” says Nancy Krupiarz, former executive director of the Michigan Trails & Greenways Coalition. “He’s just very creative in trying to get answers to all of the questions, and so skillful in navigating the whole thing.”

What Krupiarz is referring to, in part, are the myriad challenges associated with transforming a railway into a public trail — no easy task given the closed culture of railroads and knowing who and what to tap in order to trigger action.

Born in the summer of 1952, Storm remembers himself as an introvert, though his older sister talked him into trying out and securing the part of 10-year-old Winthrop Paroo, the adorable lisping youngster who steals several scenes in “The Music Man.” Storm had a natural lisp at the time, so much so that he underwent speech therapy for it. He laughs: “I could probably still sing all the words to “Gary, Indiana.”

As he grew, he joined the Boy Scouts of America, embracing a love of the outdoors, though falling short of making Eagle Scout “by maybe two merit badges,” explaining that “It was the late 60s, and I was walking around in a Boy Scout uniform during what was an anti-establishment era, so I kind of let it slide.”

It was, however, likely the only task in his life he’s ever left unfinished.
In the early 1970s, he used money wrought from odd jobs to buy a new Schwinn Continental 10-speed bicycle. Though a clunker by today’s standards, he rode it across the entire U.S. and Canada. Those trips inspired a love of the open road, and paved the way for what would become a zealous desire to develop rails into trails.

His early work history as a handyman and lawn care specialist put him in front of unique employers, including a Mrs. Perry whose ancestors fought in the last Indian wars in Minnesota. Another gentleman who employed him was a Rough Rider with Teddy Roosevelt. At one point, he delivered cars to people from Michigan who were snowbirding in Florida, which gave him the chance to visit his parents and two younger sisters, who had moved south themselves. And then there was a woman doctor who successfully fled the Nazis and settled on a 100-acre farm south of Dexter who gave him room and board in exchange for work he performed. “She was very well-educated and well-read, and at the end of every day, we would have dinner and I would get a lecture every evening.”

Storm credits those brushes with older adults as stepping stones to learning how to wrangle information out of others with a mixture of patience and persistence. “And spending time with those older people I think helped me to not become a juvenile delinquent!”

After graduating from Eastern Michigan University in 1979 with a degree in biology, and then a master’s degree six years later from EMU in geography with an emphasis on land use analysis, he took his first full-time job as a planner with the Monroe County Planning Commission, in 1985.

A year later, he moved across the state to become senior transportation planner with the West Michigan Shoreline Regional Development Commission. During his two years with them, while “renting an old fishing shack across from a railroad line” in Whitehall, he rode his beloved Continental along what would become the Hart-Montague Trail north of Muskegon. “That’s where I got bitten, for sure,” he says, and I did a lot of research about where abandoned railway corridors were.”

After a short stint teaching geography at Muskegon Community College, and then as a resource manager for Ingham County, he signed on in 1989 as state director of the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, Michigan chapter. He was hired by its co-founder, Peter Harnik, and it served as a pivotal point in his life, as Storm would go on to make his mark in a profound way in the development of what now are some 13,000 miles of trails that wind throughout Michigan.

Since 2000, Storm has served as the DNR’s sole, state-wide “Trailway Acquisition Specialist” responsible for assessing and

WHAT WAS YOUR MOST DIFFICULT OR COMPLEX RAIL-TRAIL ACQUISITION?
The Ironwood to Bessemer railroad corridor. This abandoned section of the Soo Line Railroad was acquired through a broad range of private and public entities, buyers, sellers, gifts and property exchanges. It has since been developed into the Iron Belle Western Gateway Trail.

WHAT WAS YOUR LARGEST OR LONGEST RAIL-TRAIL ACQUISITION?
A six-corridor package in the Upper Peninsula with Michigan Bell Telephone Company/Wisconsin Central LTD serves as both my largest and first acquisition. It included 88.65 miles for the six corridors and 40.85 miles of two additional corridors that were railbanked.

WHAT WAS YOUR HIGHEST COST ACQUISITION?
$2,233,500 for a 0.9-mile section of inactive railroad corridor between Leonard Street and Ann Street in Grand Rapids purchased from Central Michigan Railway to be developed as part of the Grand River Edges Trail.
negotiating the complicated acquisition of railroad right-of-ways for use as public trails.

“I can’t think of a better person whose passion for trailways has been a constant for the better part of 30 years,” says Paul Yauk, state trail coordinator for the Michigan DNR’s Parks and Recreation Division.

As much as anyone, Yauk understands the complexities in changing a railway into a public linear trail, and how Storm plays a vital role: “He’s our go-to guy who works with the DNR to acquire trails. He knows how to find the money, working with parks and forestry divisions to secure grants. Then there’s the whole process of acquiring railways, making applications to the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund, then working with the Michigan Department of Transportation for development, and on and on.”

Yauk takes a breath: “It’s a tough road, I’ll tell you. In the old days, these railroads wanted to get rid of these tracks, but just mothball them. We had to travel to Cincinnati to explore, for instance, how CSX lines were sold, how records were transferred. We were dealing with files that hadn’t seen the light of day in 100 years, a very antiquated system of record-keeping. And employees who understood the ins and out of these records were long retired.”

Yauk would hardly dispute Nancy Krupiarz’s assessment of Storm as that dog with a bone: “He’s got a lot of patience, and endurance. And he’s somebody you can depend on. Every now and then, we’ll have a little hiccup, where a younger and less-experienced person might get bummed. Not Roger. He knows the hiccup will be resolved. And he doesn’t take ‘no’ for an answer.”

Not that Storm is infallible. Indeed, he never saw something called Meniere’s disease coming. A rare disorder of the inner ear that strikes about 200,000 annually, it can cause vertigo and tinnitus. In Storm’s case, it temporarily rendered him nearly immobile. It still affects him on occasion, which can be scary for someone who enjoys biking, hiking, kayaking and more — often alongside his wife Sue. Ironically, Sue was struck with the same disease several years prior to her husband contracting it.

Together, Roger and Sue have trekked trails throughout the state, including their favorite spot — Isle Royale — where he proposed to her while they were hiking the Minong Ridge Trail.

As a lifelong biologist, Storm has worked to earn status as a certified Michigan Conservation Steward, as Michigan Master Composter, Master Rain Gardener, and Beekeeper.

He’s also the author of two books — “40 Great Rail-Trails in Michigan, Illinois and Indiana” and “Hiking Michigan.” The former includes 25 of Michigan’s best trails with detailed descriptions. The latter features descriptions of prime hikes in the state, complete with excerpts dedicated to history, topography, flora and fauna.

He also owns the following credentials:

• Established the first office of of the Michigan Chapter of the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, which has grown into the independent Michigan Trails and Greenway Alliance;
• Successfully organized and conducted the first Michigander Bicycle Tour, recently named one of Bicycling magazine’s Top 10 favorite multi-day rides nationwide;
• Attained “Competent Communicator” status from Toastmasters International;
• Served as newsletter editor for the Michigan Chapter of the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy and the League of Michigan Bicyclists.

In recognition of his innovative contributions to Michigan’s trailways and greenways, Storm was presented the Pioneer in Statewide Leadership Award by the Michigan Chapter of the RTC, and also recognized as a “Pillar of RTC” by its national office.

Storm has conveyed that he plans to retire in 2022, when he turns 70. That concerns no small number of people who wonder how his shoes might be filled.

Yauk doesn’t mince words: “We’re in trouble.”

Krupiarz laughs haltingly: “I don’t know if there’s another person who knows enough about the railroad corridors. Replacing him will be difficult.”

Storm acknowledges that in the formative years especially of creating trails, tempers flared within more than one community. “There was a lot of vocal opposition,” he says, citing instances where people in rural areas did not want “city” people traversing those country corridors. He even remembers an instance when someone at a meeting suggested people arm themselves for the coming fight.

Only when public and private interests merged and certain individuals surfaced to help people understand the benefits of trails (i.e. “Doc” Bill Olsen for the Betsie Valley Trail in Benzie County), did transformations finally begin to take shape. As more and more “Johnny Appleseeds” like Storm plant the ideas in people’s minds that the trails could be a boon to culture and economies, trails took root.

Storm considers himself in “real estate” now, but he harbors vivid images of those early days when he came to understand that no matter your title, you need to embrace your role as someone who is “preserving an endangered species,” meaning the corridors. Over the years, he’s always considered himself “an instigator for preserving these trails.”
Storm waves away notions that a trail might someday be named for him. “If I were to ever become a millionaire,” he says with a chuckle, “I would want to create an endowment fund for maintaining trails. I didn’t build any trails; I just had this idea and sold it to people. Others built them, and I merely played a role in helping to acquire them.”

As for the disease that could knock him off balance at any time, he manages the possibilities by adopting an attitude formally known as “stoicism,” which the ancient Greeks promoted as a way to endure hardship without complaint.

The Thanksgiving weekend two years ago he was struck down with it, “I had to use my elbows to drag myself to the bathroom. My lungs and chest hurt, and I had no idea what was wrong with me. I had no control of my lower limbs.”

Rather than seeing himself as a victim, Storm calls that Thanksgiving “the best I ever had, because I got to thinking how I’m not going to live forever.” In turning the onset of the malady into an epiphany, he now has what he calls “this constant reminder ... that if you’re going to do something, you can’t put it off.”

“Hey,” he says, “the time is now.”

The author of this profile is Tom Rademacher, a long-time former reporter and columnist with The Grand Rapids Press who now freelances. Contact him at: rademachertom@gmail.com.

**RAIL-TRAIL ACQUISITIONS**

During his career, Roger Storm was involved in the following rails-to-trails acquisitions.

- Bay County Riverwalk Trail System
- BayZil Rail Trail (Bay City to Zilwaukee)
- Bergland to Sidnaw Rail Trail
- Betsie Valley Trail
- Bill Nichols Trail (U.P.)
- Border-To-Border Trail
- Coalwood Trail (U.P.)
- Falling Waters Trail
- Felch Grade Trail (U.P.)
- Fred Meijer Berry Junction Trail
- Fred Meijer Clinton-Ionia-Shiawassee Rail Trail
- Fred Meijer Flat River Valley Rail Trail
- Fred Meijer Grand River Valley Rail Trail
- Fred Meijer Heartland Trail
- Fred Meijer White Pine Trail State Park
- Genesee Valley Trail
- Grand River Edges Trail (Grand Rapids)
- Harger Line Rail Trail
- William Field Hart-Montague Trail
- Haywire Grade Trail (U.P.)
- Houghton Waterfront Trail (U.P.)
- Houghton-Chassell Trail (U.P.)
- Huron Valley Trail
- Indiana-Michigan River Valley Trail
- Iron Belle Western Gateway Trail (U.P.)
- Iron Ore Heritage Trail (U.P.)
- Jack Stevens Hancock-Calumet Trail
- Kal-Haven Trail State Park
- Kalamazoo River Valley Trail
- Lakeside Trail
- Leelanau Trail
- Little Traverse Wheelway
- Michigan Air Line Trail
- Mike Levine Lakelands Trail State Park
- Muskegon Laketon Trail
- Musketawa Trail
- North Bank Trail
- North Central State Trail
- North Eastern State Trail
- North Western State Trail
- Paul Henry Thornapple Trail
- Pere Marquette Rail-Trail
- Pere Marquette State Trail
- Paint Creek Trail
- Poly Ann Trail
- Republic-Champion Grade Trail (U.P.)
- Saginaw Valley Rail-Trail
- Soo Strong Trail (U.P.)
- St. Ignace to Trout Lake Trail (U.P.)
- State Line Trail (U.P.)
- TART Trails
- Van Buren Trail State Park
- Wadhams to Avoca Trail
- West Bloomfield Trail

**April 20, 1993, Gov. John Engler signed into law legislation to provide for the creation of a statewide system of trailways, known as “The Michigan Trailways Initiative.” Roger pictured on far left.**