







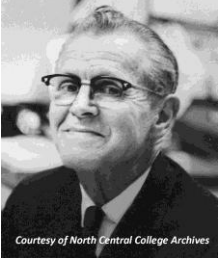





MEET THE FOUNDERS OF THE ILLINOIS PRAIRIE PATH

	<p>1963. In the western suburbs of Chicago, a long, narrow strip of land where the trains used to run was quickly turning into a dumping ground. Plans were underway to <i>use</i> that land to build roads, parking lots, and shopping areas. All of that changed with one letter to the editor.</p>
 <p><small>Courtesy of Paul and Jean Hoarney Holmes</small></p>	<p>May Theilgaard Watts, from Naperville, wrote up a different plan. Her idea was to use that long ribbon of land to create a public footpath. She helped people imagine a winding trail through prairies and forests, through cities and villages. A small group of very talented people began working with Mrs. Watts on her idea.</p>
 <p><small>Courtesy of Openlands</small></p>	<p>Gunnar Peterson, from Chicago, was an advisor to Mrs. Watts and her supporters. He was the leader of a new organization called Openlands. Their first project was to acquire all of the abandoned railroad land for a public path. With humor, wisdom and enthusiasm, he eventually won the support of officials in DuPage, Kane and Cook Counties, in Springfield, and in Washington D.C.</p>
 <p><small>Photo courtesy of the Peg and John Manning families</small></p>	<p>Helen Turner, from Naperville, and Mrs. Watts were neighbors, friends and fellow educators. Helen was the Communicator. Through her words, she became the “heart” of the Path. She wrote and illustrated maps, flyers, newsletters, and a popular booklet called <i>The Illinois Prairie Path Guide</i> that is still in print today.</p>
 <p><small>Photo Courtesy of Holmes Family Archives</small></p>	<p>Elizabeth and Sam Holmes were from Wayne. Elizabeth was the Secretary. She eloquently responded to thousands of requests for information, and wrote compelling letters to officials throughout the country. Sam was an attorney. He helped the board develop its first mission statement, by-laws, and articles of incorporation. He reviewed every agreement, contract and lease. Later, Elizabeth and Sam wrote a history of the <i>The Illinois Prairie Path</i> that continues to be an important record of the early years.</p>
 <p><small>Courtesy of Ryerson Family Archives</small></p>	<p>Phoebe and George Ryerson were from Wayne. Phoebe managed Public Relations. She met frequently with government officials in Kane County and in cities near the Aurora and Elgin railroad lines. She firmly believed that a natural path through any community would benefit everyone. Phoebe’s work helped expand the path westward. George Ryerson was a utility company executive. He helped the board understand how a license or an agreement could give the Illinois Prairie Path the right to pass over or under utility infrastructure.</p>
 <p><small>Photo courtesy of Bjornson Family Archives</small></p>	<p>Lillian Lasch, from Morton Grove, loved being outdoors, and her passion for travel and adventure made her an early supporter of Mrs. Watts’ vision. She was in charge of Membership. She recruited and retained hundreds of loyal Path members and volunteers. She led canoe trips down the Fox River, explaining that someday, a large system of trails could link rivers, forests and footpaths.</p>

 <p>Photo courtesy of the Sindt Family Archives</p>	<p>Jane and August Sindt from Naperville, both strongly believed in the importance of preserving natural settings. Jane, an actress and preservationist, travelled throughout Illinois and other states, showing a narrated film about the need for a public path. Her enthusiasm generated statewide support for the project. August became the first chairperson of the board, and when Mrs. Watts stepped down, he took over as president. He guided the board through a mountain of decisions.</p>
 <p>Courtesy of North Central College Archives</p>	<p>Dr. Warren Keck, from Naperville, was professor of biology emeritus at North Central College and attended the first meeting in the home of Mrs. Watts. He hosted many of the early board meetings at the Student Union at North Central College and led many field trips on the Path.</p>
 <p>Photo courtesy of the Nemeč Family Archives</p>	<p>Bill and Betty Nemeč were from St. Charles. As an experienced airline pilot, Bill Nemeč became Mrs. Watt's right-hand man. Bill was able to take charge and navigate the obstacles facing the organization. Betty served as the Path historian. She collected and preserved important documents, photos and news clippings to share with future generations. Bill and Betty led numerous field trips to help increase public support for a Path.</p>
 <p>Photo courtesy of the Village of Glen Ellyn</p>	<p>John Heddens was the former President of the Village of Glen Ellyn. He helped the board understand the jurisdiction issues of cities and villages along the Path.</p>
 <p>Courtesy of the Paul and Jean Mooring Archives</p>	<p>1966. In just 953 days or 2.6 years these 14 founders inspired a wellspring of citizen support that defied powerful opposition. They turned a <i>letter</i> from Mrs. Watts into a 12 year <i>lease</i> with DuPage County to develop the Illinois Prairie Path. Over the next 20 years, legacy volunteers proceeded to build the path by hand and heart, guided by the work, passion and resilience of these founders.</p>

More detailed information about each of the founders, along with family memories (when available) is being collected and will be available in the archives of the Illinois Prairie Path.

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