

# THE ILLINOIS PRAIRIE PATH NEWSLETTER

FALL, 1988

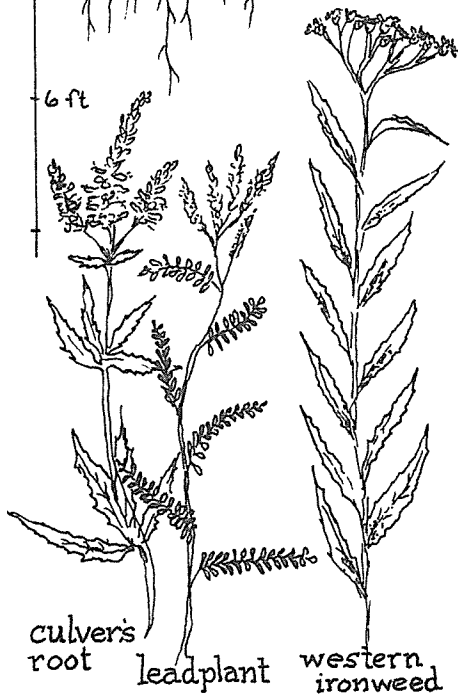
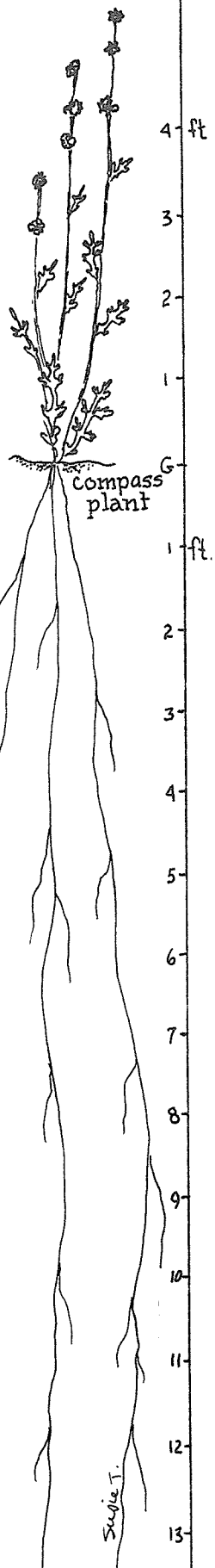
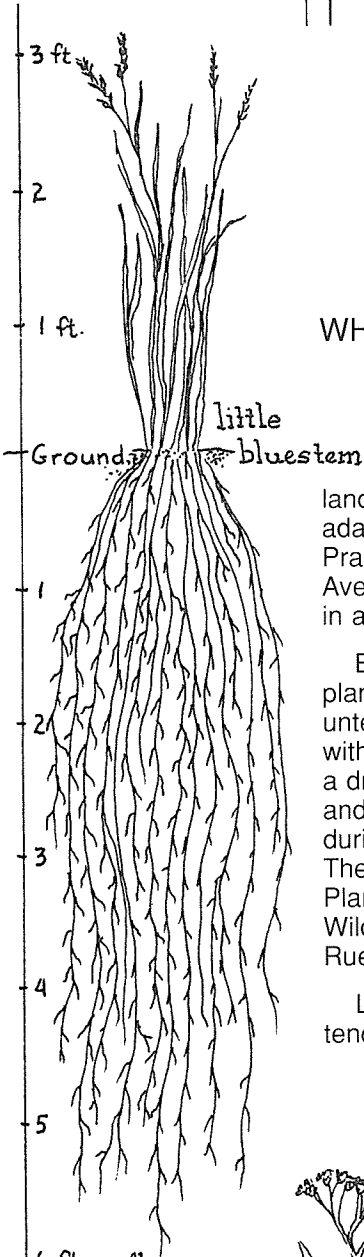
## WHAT TO LOOK FOR: Survivors

Prairie plants are tough. Over more than ten thousand years these forbs and grasses have evolved deep root systems that enable them to endure fire, drought, and the extreme temperatures of America's heartland. Along the Illinois Prairie Path are found good examples of successful adaptation to a harsh environment, such as Yellow Coneflower, Compass Plant, Prairie Dock and Rosin Weed, standing tall, green and beautiful in the Taylor Avenue prairie demonstration area, Glen Ellyn, while shallow-rooted alien plants in adjoining yards wilt under the searing sun.

Even more remarkable are the plants, primarily forbs (broad-leaved flowering plants as opposed to grasses), at the south end of the prairie restoration in Volunteer Park, Wheaton, near Liberty Street. This year these herbal heroes have withstood not only fire (the annual spring burn) and the terrible drought, but also a drastic lowering of the water table when a new drainage system was put in and, as a final blow, the inadvertent bulldozing of several inches of topsoil during the installation of the Helen Turner Memorial Fountain improvements. The honor roll of spunky survivors includes: Butterfly Weed, Compass Plant, Culver's Root, Iron Weed, Lead Plant, Little Bluestem, Nodding Wild Onion, Prairie Dock, Purple Prairie Clover, Rattlesnake Master, Ruellia or Wild Petunia, White Baptisia (False Indigo), and Wild Quinine.

Look for these veterans and salute them. They remind us that persistence (and deep roots) will always triumph in the end.

Editor's Note: Just before this *Newsletter* went to press, word came that the DuPage County Division of Transportation, without a word of explanation to anyone, had mowed the entire prairie restoration at Volunteer Park from the bridge to Liberty Street ... The valiant prairie plants will survive this latest setback too, but we will have to wait until next year to see most of them bloom again.



culver's root leadplant



western ironweed



white false indigo

butterfly weed



rattlesnake master

wild quinine

purple prairie clover

Stacie T.

### Illinois Prairie Path Volunteers Win National Award

On July 26, at a ceremony on the South Lawn of the White House hosted by President Ronald Reagan, the volunteers of The Illinois Prairie Path received the Take Pride in America Award in the Civic/Citizen Organization category. *Newsletter* Editor Jean Mooring, who had submitted the nomination, accepted the award on behalf of the IPP board of directors, members and friends, volunteers all.



*Paul and Jean Mooring at White House to receive Take Pride in America Award on behalf of thousands of Illinois Prairie Path members and friends for twenty-five years of volunteer stewardship of public lands.*

The president said to the crowd of several hundred representing finalists and semifinalists from forty-three states and the District of Columbia, "...Each of you, along with your colleagues and friends at home, clearly does take pride in community and country — and for that reason, your fellow Americans take pride in you. You deserve congratulations for all you are doing to restore our natural and cultural resources, to remind the rest of us that the stewardship of these treasures is up to all of us, and to encourage citizens, organizations and communities to join... You have my heartfelt thanks." Other dignitaries at the ceremony were Secretary of the Interior Donald P. Hodel and Secretary of Agriculture Richard E. Lyng. Music was provided by the United States Marine Band from the balcony of the White House and by the Moody Brothers country-western trio, who sang "Take Pride in America", the catchy, foot-tapping tune especially commissioned as the theme song for the Take Pride program. Refreshments were served in the welcome shade of a tent set up on the lawn.

Congressman Henry J. Hyde, District 6, took note of this honor for citizens in his district and included his commendation in the Congressional Record for July 26, 1988. (See insert.) His office and especially his press secretary Sam Stratman were very helpful to Paul and Jean Mooring during their stay in Washington.

The State of Illinois has also commended the Illinois Prairie Path volunteers for their achievements. Governor James Thompson writes in a letter dated July 6, 1988:

"Congratulations on your recent selection as a national award winner in the Take Pride in America program. To have been selected from so many nominees is quite an honor. In your community and throughout the State of Illinois, this award of distinction will inspire other groups and individuals to preserve natural resources by becoming active protectors of our country's beautiful park lands and wildlife. On behalf of the citizens of Illinois, I extend my best wishes for a memorable ceremony in our nation's capital."

The Illinois Department of Conservation gives a prominent place to The Illinois Prairie Path volunteers in an article appearing in the August 1, 1988, issue of its magazine *Outdoor Highlights*. The story features a picture of Paul and Jean at Volunteer Bridge in Wheaton, and the front cover shows bicyclists riding over the scenic bridge in Warrenville, built by a contractor for The Illinois Prairie Path in 1976. These two steel bridges plus the bridge over the East Branch of the DuPage River in Lombard were all built under the direction of volunteers with donated money (no taxes) and have a total value of over \$300,000. They are now the property of DuPage County. DuPage County has been the principal governmental beneficiary of the work of the Prairie Path volunteers.

The Take Pride in America Award, made of heavy glass etched with the Take Pride in America logo on a wood base and containing a soft light glowing within, will be on display at The Illinois Prairie Path annual meeting on Sunday, November 6, at the DuPage County Historical Museum in Wheaton. (See insert for picture.)

### Full Speed Ahead in Kane County

In late June the Kane County Forest Preserve District installed two new Cor-ten steel truss-type pedestrian bridges on the IPP Elgin Branch. The bridges were fabricated by Continental Bridge Co., St. Cloud, Minnesota. One spans the Chicago Central Railroad (formerly the Illinois Central) just west of Dunham Road and the other spans Rte. 25. Each is 150 feet long. Total cost for fabrication and installation was \$200,000. Both



*New bridge over Rte. 25 erected by Kane County Forest Preserve District.*



*Trail's end. New section of Illinois Prairie Path (photographed during construction) runs beside beautiful Fox River to old CA&E parking lot north of Illinois Avenue, Aurora; developed by Fox Valley Park District.*

bridges are elevated above the railroad embankment so that considerable filling and grading still have to be done. The forest preserve district also plans to blacktop for bicyclists the section of trail between Dunham Road and Rte. 25 and provide a

# Congressional Record

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HON. HENRY J. HYDE

OF ILLINOIS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

*Tuesday, July 26, 1988*

**Mr. HYDE.** Mr. Speaker, it was 25 years ago this year that May Theilgaard Watts, a naturalist at the Morton Arboretum, suggested in a Chicago newspaper that an abandoned railroad right-of-way connecting Chicago with DuPage and Kane Counties be converted to a footpath.

Her vision for a prairie version of the famous Appalachian Trail was motivated by a desire to save for future generations the beauty of forests and meadows untouched by commercial development.

In a ceremony today at the White House hosted by President Ronald Reagan, the heirs to Mrs. Watts' vision received public recognition for their work on the Illinois Prairie Path, a 55-mile network of trails used daily by bicyclists, walkers, joggers, and equestrians.

Sponsored by the U.S. Department of the Interior, the Take Pride in America Award was presented to F. Paul and Jean C. Mooring of Glen Ellyn, IL, who represented hundreds of contributors and volunteers that built and have maintained the path on a shoestring budget.

As many as 300,000 people a year use the Prairie Path, a testament to the foresight of our suburban pioneers in the rails-to-trails conservation movement.

I commend the leadership and the many volunteers that brought this path to fruition and suggest that my House colleagues take a moment and read an article on the Illinois Prairie Path published in a recent issue of Trailblazer, the newsletter of the Rails-To-Trails Conservancy:

### THE ILLINOIS PRAIRIE PATH

There is no rail-trail in the U.S. which has received as much tender loving care from as

many individual volunteers over a longer period of time than the Illinois Prairie Path.

Between 1963, when Morton Arboretum Naturalist May Theilgaard Watts originally proposed the concept of a rail-trail through Chicago's western suburbs, and 1986, when management of the Path was formally taken over from a non-profit citizen group by DuPage County, thousands of volunteers invested hundreds of thousands of hours and dollars in every aspect of trail work from attending public hearings to negotiating leases, hauling trash to building bridges, lobbying politicians to cajoling private corporations, purchasing crushed rock to leading nature appreciation walks.

"We are human beings. We are able to walk upright on two feet," Watts wrote in her classic letter to the editor of the Chicago Tribune. "We need a footpath. Right now there is a chance for Chicago and its suburbs to have a footpath, a long one."

A quarter century later that vision has largely come to pass. The 55-mile-long, pitchfork-shaped Prairie Path stretches from Maywood to Wheaton, then splits into four spurs which reach the Fox River in the towns of Elgin, Geneva, Batavia and Aurora.

At least 300,000 bicyclists, walkers, runners and equestrians utilize the path each year, enjoying its chunks of native prairie, the site of an Indian settlement, a mill pond that once powered a pioneer grist mill, several peaceful wetlands and numerous parks. The Prairie Path also manifests its urban roots, passing through a string of town centers and paralleling extant railroad corridors on which commuters and freight trains regularly race and rumble past.

The trail has been a massive experiment in private citizen action, replete with heartbreak and triumph. Unlike neighboring Wisconsin and Iowa which have incorporated their many rail-trails into state-run and county-run park systems, for two decades neither the state of Illinois nor the County of DuPage expressed much interest in taking a leadership role with the Prairie Path. In fact, the private group, somewhat confusingly called The Illinois Prairie Path (TIPP), would probably still be operating the trail today if it had not lost its insurance cover-

age, forcing the county to take over primary management.

The joys and tribulations of creating the Prairie Path are exemplified by the stories of two of its many bridges. Volunteer Bridge in Wheaton, a monument in name as well as structure, was an old railroad facility restored and extended over two city streets and a park entirely by volunteers under the direction of a volunteer structural engineer and fabricated by high school welding students. Valued at about \$250,000, the job cost \$25,000, all of which was donated.

In contrast is the bridge over the east branch of the DuPage River. First constructed as a high water bridge by the Illinois National Guard, it was soon dismantled by vandals. Then Sierra Club members reused the timbers in a new low water bridge - which was washed away in a flood. Rebuilt by the DuPage County Forest Preserve District, the third bridge was burned by an arsonist—as was the fourth. Finally, in 1978 TIPP paid \$22,000 for a 50-foot all-steel footbridge which was installed above the 100-year flood line and still stands today.

As the Illinois Prairie Path enters a new phase of public control—and as TIPP changes roles from developer to advocate—the verdict on the issue of "public vs. private" is not yet in. By any measure, the Prairie Path is immensely successful (real estate pages regularly promote houses as being near it), yet in some of the towns it traverses, the "park" is barely a footpath squeezed through parking lots. It has been proven that volunteers can accomplish miracles on shoestring budgets, but it is not necessarily clear that parks should be so underfunded. It is obvious that volunteers cannot carry out as much physical labor as professionals with heavy equipment, but it is equally obvious that had it not been for dedicated citizens who gave time and money there would never have been an Illinois Prairie Path.

Whatever the final verdict, the Prairie Path has irrefutably borne out May Watts' pithy observation which is cast on a stone pedestal in Wheaton: "Footpaths are defended with spirit by their users."