

THE ILLINOIS PRAIRIE PATH NEWSLETTER

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A Friendly Railroad City To Visit: Historic West Chicago

West Chicago is justly proud of its many railroads, around which the city was built. One of them was the Geneva Line of the old Chicago, Aurora and Elgin electric commuter railroad, which began service from Winfield to West Chicago, Geneva and St. Charles in 1909 and abandoned the right-of-way in 1937. The major part of the property is now the site of the newly opened Illinois Prairie Path Geneva Spur.



Chicago, Aurora and Elgin trolley car on Main Street, West Chicago, leaving for Geneva and St. Charles, circa 1930. Drawn from photo, courtesy of The West Chicago City Museum.

The CA&E was just a johnny-come-lately among West Chicago's famous railroads. The roster of names includes the Galena and Chicago Union (predecessor of the Chicago and NorthWestern), the Aurora Branch Railroad (today the Burlington Northern Santa Fe), the Elgin, Joliet and Eastern, and the Union Pacific (successor to the NorthWestern). The G&CU was the earliest built in the area and dated from 1849.

As the railroads grew so did the community. Changing times brought changing names: Junction (when the Chicago Branch Railroad joined the main line of the G&CU to go into Chicago the town was called Junction); next Turner Junction and later Village of Turner (named for the president of the G&CU); then Village of West Chicago; and finally City of West Chicago. This year the city celebrated on January 25 the centennial of its name.

West Chicago has many attractions including an outstanding park district, many charming old homes, a beautiful new library and a carefully preserved C&NW railroad station. A newly built section of the Illinois Prairie Path Geneva Spur parallels the route of the old CA&E trolley line through the heart of the city's charming historic district. All year round but especially during the annual Railroad Days festival this hospitable city welcomes visitors from near and far to remember a romantic past and look forward with confidence to an even more prosperous future.

A GREAT DAY FOR TRAILS IN ILLINOIS

National Trails Day, June 1, 1996, will long be remembered in northeastern Illinois and in Springfield for its outpouring of public support for trails and bikeways. Three local newspapers reported that an estimated 1000 people attended the Grand Celebration which climaxed the day at Reed-Keppler Park in West Chicago. Bicyclists, runners, hikers, equestrians, prairie experts, birders, camera fans, history buffs were all there to express their appreciation of our wonderful trail system to the many government officials in attendance. The message from people to government was loud and clear: "Keep building trails; we love 'em!"

The day began early, at 8:30 a.m., at First Avenue, Maywood. Mayor Freelon, on behalf of the Maywood Village Board, read a proclamation extending a warm welcome and best wishes to Mike Ulm and Kandee Haertel representing the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. The two were starting the last leg of their epic journey around the 475-mile Grand Illinois Trail, proposed by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources to cross northern Illinois



Maywood Mayor Freelon reads National Trails Day proclamation flanked by (from left) State Rep. Eugene Moore (D-7), Maywood Trustees Gary Woll and Lonzia Casteel, Kandee Haertel and her horse, Mike Ulm and IPP Pres. Paul Aeschleman. Photo by William Armstrong.

twice between Chicago and the Mississippi River. Also present to cheer on the adventurous duo and their entourage, which by then included Illinois Prairie Path President Paul Aeschleman and board members David Tate, Eric Keeley, John Kacich and many other trail fans, were most of the members of the Maywood Village Board and State Representative Eugene Moore (D-7), who expressed his enthusiastic support for the trail movement. The mayor then gallantly escorted the travelers all the way through the village to the Bellwood village limits. In Bellwood the group observed that the village had been working hard to clean up the Path and had installed Illinois Prairie Path logo

signs in anticipation of major improvements scheduled for next year by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. Then the adventurers proceeded through Hillside (where the detour at Mannheim is now well marked) and through Berkeley picking up new recruits en route to the first official stop at Spring Road in Elmhurst, where Keith Olson and the Great Western Prairie stewards had set up a table and were prepared to lead tours of their beautiful prairie. State Senator Dan Cronin (R-39) was on hand to



State Senator Dan Cronin (R-39) expresses support for trails at Elmhurst Great Western Prairie. Photo by William Armstrong.

congratulate Mike and Kandee; he promised to support projects such as the Salt Creek Trail, which will be a part of the Grand Illinois Trail System some day. In Villa Park the group noted with appreciation the two beautifully preserved Chicago, Aurora and Elgin railroad stations now on the National Register of Historic Places, and in Lombard they admired the Finley Road bridge built by the village for the Illinois Prairie Path. It was here that Mike spoke to a very young boy who had been riding his bike proudly with the group from First Avenue, Maywood. "Does your mother know you're with us?" asked Mike. "Well, no," replied the youngster, who was obviously ready to ride the whole 22 miles. "You've come a long way," said Mike, "but your mother will be worried so you had better go home now." The boy reluctantly agreed and turned around to pedal home, but his eyes were shining because he had proved he shared Mike and Kandee's adventurous spirit.

Another notable adventurer was the 19-year-old runner from Carol Stream, Glenbard North graduate Mitch Isaac, who ran all the way from First Avenue to Reed-Keppler Park, just four miles short of a marathon. "I wanted to show my support for trails," said he at the finish.

The next stop was Prairie Path Park in Glen Ellyn where the Glen Ellyn Park District had set up its portable bandshell and public address system. Joining forces to double their impact were the sponsors of two events