

THE ILLINOIS PRAIRIE PATH NEWSLETTER

Winter, 1996

What To Look For:

A Historic Well in Winfield Mounds Forest Preserve

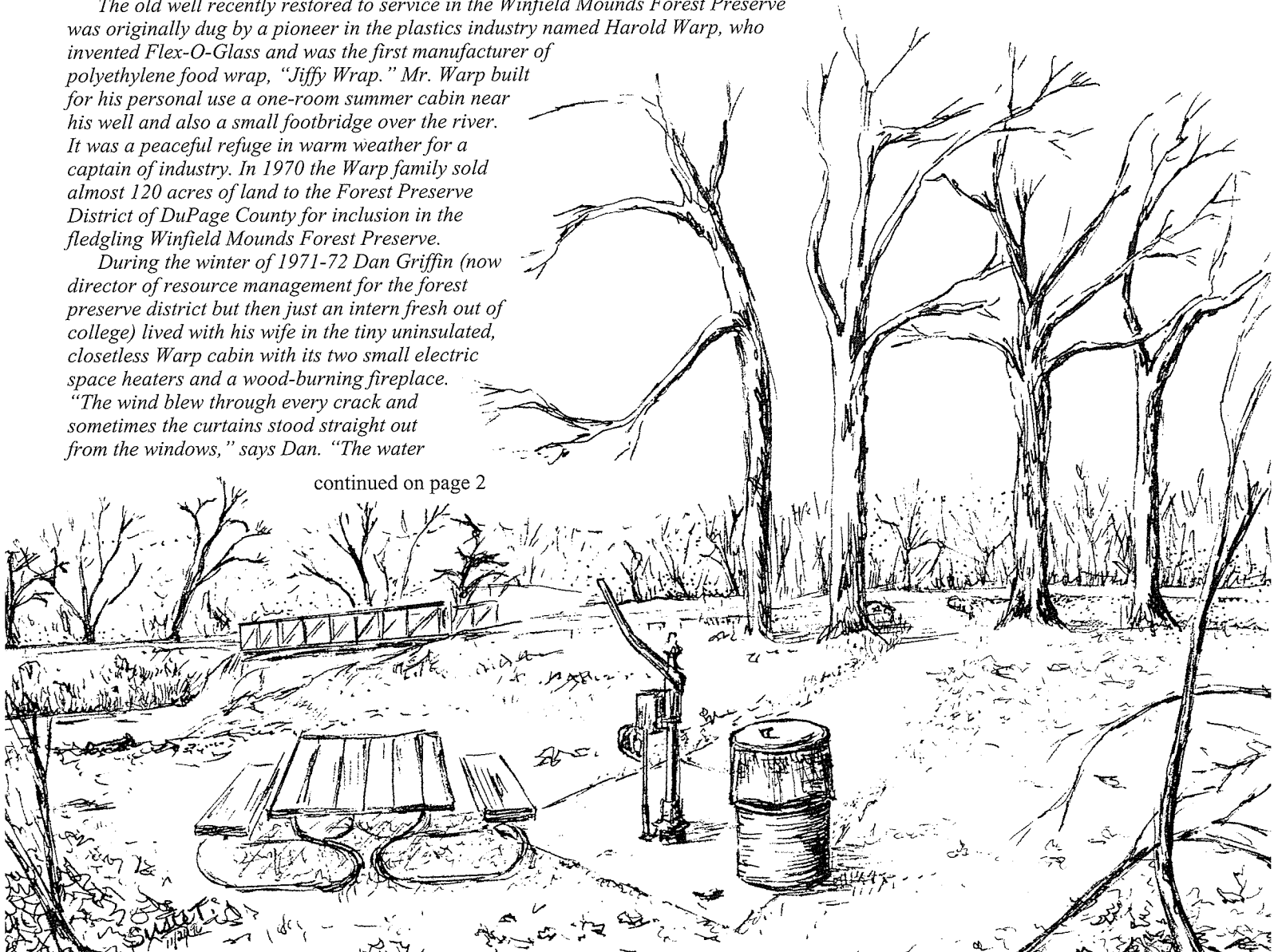
Thirsty travelers on the Illinois Prairie Path Geneva Spur can now find drinking water at a new pump beside the trail east of the West Branch of the DuPage River. There was plenty of good, clean water at this site when Native American people of the Middle Woodland, (300 B.C. to 800 A.D.), and Late Woodland, (800 to 1600 A.D.), cultures fished, hunted and probably farmed living in small settlements beside the river. Only a few arrowheads and pieces of pottery in long-forgotten mounds now remain to mark their passing. After the defeat of Chief Black Hawk in 1832, the next inhabitants were white settlers who began to farm in the Winfield area in the mid-1800s. With their coming the river water gradually became polluted and insufficient in quantity to satisfy the needs of a rapidly-growing population, so wells had to be dug by the new landowners and by the Village of Winfield. These wells sufficed until this year when the village began to receive water via pipeline from Lake Michigan. Most of the wells have now been capped.

The old well recently restored to service in the Winfield Mounds Forest Preserve was originally dug by a pioneer in the plastics industry named Harold Warp, who invented Flex-O-Glass and was the first manufacturer of polyethylene food wrap, "Jiffy Wrap." Mr. Warp built for his personal use a one-room summer cabin near his well and also a small footbridge over the river. It was a peaceful refuge in warm weather for a captain of industry. In 1970 the Warp family sold almost 120 acres of land to the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County for inclusion in the fledgling Winfield Mounds Forest Preserve.

During the winter of 1971-72 Dan Griffin (now director of resource management for the forest preserve district but then just an intern fresh out of college) lived with his wife in the tiny uninsulated, closetless Warp cabin with its two small electric space heaters and a wood-burning fireplace.

"The wind blew through every crack and sometimes the curtains stood straight out from the windows," says Dan. "The water

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THE ILLINOIS PRAIRIE PATH IS AMERICA'S FIRST *GREAT* RAIL-TRAIL

According to the October-December 1996 issue of the National Rails-To-Trails Conservancy newsletter, *Trailblazer*, the Illinois Prairie Path is not the nation's first rail-trail. That honor, we are told, actually belongs to a picturesque one-mile-long sandy footpath named the Cathedral Isle Trail in Aiken, South Carolina, which opened to the public in 1939. We are not surprised to read this because we know of at least one other abandoned rail line right here in Kane County which was acquired for public use in the 1940s, some twenty years before the Prairie Path. However, it wasn't until long after the Illinois Prairie Path attained national fame that the beautiful Virgil L. Gilman Trail was built on the right-of-way.

We have always said that the Illinois Prairie Path, built by volunteers, is America's first *great* rail-trail and, furthermore, that our founder, naturalist and lifelong hiker May Theilgaard Watts, *started the rail-trail movement* in the United States with her letter to the editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, published September 30, 1963. Three weeks after her letter appeared eighty people, inspired by her proposal to convert an abandoned railroad into a long multi-purpose trail, joined her for a hike on the "future footpath". This was the actual de facto public opening of the trail because we never had a formal ceremony. Today the Illinois Prairie Path is fifty-five miles long and generates more than 300,000 person-trips annually — two measures of its status as a great trail.

The national rail-trail *movement* also began right here in 1963 with Mrs. Watts' letter in the *Chicago Tribune*, a newspaper of national importance. The national spotlight shone on our trail again on February 8, 1965 when President Lyndon B. Johnson included in his Message on Natural Beauty Of Our Country (Lady Bird Johnson's favorite cause) a section on trails containing this sentence: "In Illinois an abandoned railroad right-of-way is being developed as a 'Prairie Path'." Ours was the only rail-trail recognized so early at the national level. See page 3.

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froze one day in the Christmas tree stand, but at least we did have an indoor toilet and an electric pump to bring water from the well to the cabin."

The last occupant of the cabin was George Bottoms, chief engineer of the forest preserve district, who enjoyed roughing it in that beautiful bur oak savanna by the river but did add a few amenities to the cabin, including insulation, a propane heater, and airtight windows and also a new deck to Mr. Warp's little footbridge. George burned osage orange in the fireplace, which "lit up like sparklers," and from the bridge fed corn to the schools of big goldfish (carp) in the river. "Carp is a real fighting fish," says he, "and exciting to catch." It is important to note that George Bottoms won the everlasting gratitude of The Illinois Prairie Path Board of Directors when he provided a forest preserve district crew



June 2, 1971, Washington D.C. First National Trails Symposium. IPP Founder May Theilgaard Watts (seated right) with Gunnar Peterson (standing left), executive director, Open Lands Project, Chicago, a principal sponsor of the Prairie Path. Unidentified U.S. gov't. official (center).

On June 2, 1971, during the Nixon Administration, May Watts was invited to Washington to represent the whole trails community when the first group of National Recreation Trails was designated (the Prairie Path had been first to apply for that honor). In 1976 the Illinois Prairie Path was the only rail-trail project singled out for national recognition during the Ford Administration in the Horizons on Display American Bicentennial Program; and in 1988 the volunteers of The Illinois Prairie Path were national finalists in the Take Pride in America Program during the Reagan Administration.

No other long and well-loved rail-trail, especially one begun and maintained for more than twenty years by hundreds of volunteers, has received so much national recognition. We think our claim to be the first great rail-trail which started the American rail-trail movement stands.

to build a wooden bridge over the East Branch of the DuPage River between Glen Ellyn and Lombard after our low bridge had been washed out by the Hundred Year Flood of 1972. In 1977 he rebuilt the bridge after an arsonist almost destroyed it. When the arsonist struck again The IPP installed a \$22,000 steel bridge, but George and the forest preserve district had given us five years of grace to raise the necessary money.

When George Bottoms retired about 1978 and moved to upstate New York, the old cabin was razed. Now only the well (covered by a new concrete pad to hold the new pump) and the small abutments of Mr. Warp's original bridge (hidden under the new steel bridge) remain, but both hold a lot of memories for longtime friends of the Illinois Prairie Path.

NATURAL BEAUTY OF OUR COUNTRY

MESSAGE

FROM

THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

TRANSMITTING

A MESSAGE ON NATURAL BEAUTY OF OUR COUNTRY

February 8, 1965.— Referred to the Committee of the Whole House on the State of the Union and ordered to be printed

To the Congress of the United States:

For centuries Americans have drawn strength and inspiration from the beauty of our country. It would be a neglectful generation indeed, indifferent alike to the judgment of history and the command of principle, which failed to preserve and extend such a heritage for its descendants.

Yet the storm of modern change is threatening to blight and diminish in a few decades what has been cherished and protected for generations.

A growing population is swallowing up areas of natural beauty with its demands for living space, and is placing increased demand on our overburdened areas of recreation and pleasure. . .

The forgotten outdoorsmen of today are those who like to walk, hike, ride horseback, or bicycle. For them we must have trails as well as highways. Nor should motor vehicles be permitted to tyrannize the more leisurely human traffic.

Old and young alike can participate. Our doctors recommend and encourage such activity for fitness and fun.

I am requesting, therefore, that the Secretary of the Interior work with his colleagues in the Federal Government and with State and local leaders and recommend to me a cooperative program to encourage a national system of trails, building up the more than hundred thousand miles of trails in our national forests and parks.

There are many new and exciting trail projects underway across the land. In Arizona, a county has arranged for miles of irrigation canal banks to be used by riders and hikers. In Illinois, an abandoned railroad right-of-way is being developed as a "Prairie Path." In (New) Mexico utility rights-of-way are used as public trails.

As with so much of our quest for beauty and quality, each community has opportunities for action. We can and should have an abundance of trails for walking, cycling, and horseback riding, in and close to our cities. In the back country we need to copy the great Appalachian Trail in all parts of America, and to make full use of rights-of-way and other public paths. . .

The beauty of our land is a natural resource. Its preservation is linked to the inner prosperity of the human spirit.

The tradition of our past is equal to today's threat to that beauty. Our land will be attractive tomorrow only if we organize for action and rebuild and reclaim the beauty we inherited. Our stewardship will be judged by the foresight with which we carry out these programs. We must rescue our cities and countryside from blight with the same purpose and vigor with which, in other areas, we moved to save the forests and the soil.

LYNDON B. JOHNSON.

THE WHITE HOUSE, *February 8, 1965.*

REPORT ON ANNUAL MEETING

The Illinois Prairie Path annual meeting held on November 3, 1996 at the Abbey in Elmhurst provided a fitting climax to an eventful year for trails. About sixty attendees enjoyed the festivities.

President Paul Aeschleman mentioned the year's major volunteer projects: the annual spring cleanup, restoration work at several prairies on or near the Prairie Path, and the events of National Trails Day on June 1, including the installation of the Geneva Spur sign, which marked the Grand Opening of that nine-mile trail segment; the naming of the Jack T. Knuepfer Bridge; and the return of the Grand Illinois Trail Adventurers. He touched on projects which the board is currently planning, such as a proposed drinking fountain at the new Prairie Meadows development on the Elgin Branch south of North Avenue and the new mile markers to be made of plastic/wood composite, which is practically indestructible. He showed a model of the acrylic green-and-white mile numbers identified by the IPP logo and trail segment name; for example, Geneva Spur. The membership approved the prototype as designed by Jean Mooring and produced by Legible Signs Inc. of Rockford.

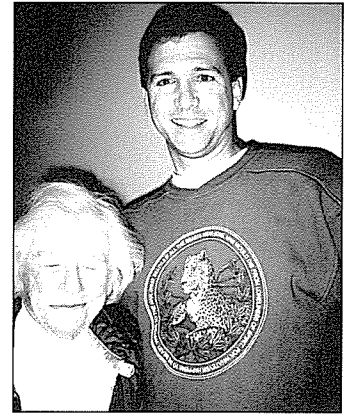
Treasurer Steve Plumb reported that this had been a good year for the Path financially and that we had ended in the black, thanks to the membership recruitment efforts of David Tate. The complete Treasurer's Report

with pie charts appears on the back cover. The most expensive items in the budget are the Office Manager at 20% and the *Newsletter* at 19%.

Membership Chair David Tate used view graphs and handouts to illustrate the fact that the support of our members is steadily increasing and that as a result our cash balance is rebounding from the low point reached in 1993.

See bar graph. As a humorous reward for their outstanding efforts, David Tate and Linda Plumb, our hardworking office manager, each received a can of "Great Stuff"

Paul Aeschleman spoke briefly about goals and objectives and proposed projects for The IPP in 1997, asking for a show of hands on each. The membership indicated varying degrees of interest in goals ranging from fundraising and increasing membership involvement to special projects like an IPP/Chicagoland Bicycle Federation safety survey of all our road crossings or an IPP/Rails-to-Trails Conservancy invitational bike ride. The results were not tallied.



IPP Board Chairman Joan Hamill with Mike Ulm at annual meeting

