

Springtime once meant return of prairie flowers

Novelist, poet, essayist and farmer Wendell Berry has said that we live in a time of “punishment and ruins.” This is certainly true when one considers the lost landscape of the tallgrass prairie in Central Illinois.

In McLean County alone, some 670,000 acres of prairie—an area roughly the size of Rhode Island—has been lost to agriculture and urbanization. All that’s left of this indescribably magnificent landscape is a five acre vestige in northern McLean County, as well as a few tiny, scattered strips found along old railroad right-of-ways and similarly neglected ground far removed from the rapacious commercialization and commodification of our age.

The story is much the same—or even bleaker—in other agriculture intensive counties of Central Illinois, including Champaign, DeWitt, Livingston and Logan. Statewide, of some 22 million acres of original “virgin” prairie, only 2,300 acres remain. That’s about 100th of 1 percent, which means that, on one level at least, calling Illinois the Prairie State is little more than a cruel joke.

This forever lost world featured uninterrupted miles of big and little blue stem, blue-eyed drop seed, yellow star and other grasses, blowing in the wind, it was said, like waves upon a shoreless sea. But interwoven among this yellow, green and brown palate was a riot of color. From April to the autumn freeze, the Grand Prairie of Central Illinois was dotted—sometime carpeted—with a seemingly infinite profusion of multihued perennial flowers.

One can get a glimpse—albeit a faint glimpse—of this vanished landscape at Weston Prairie Cemetery Nature Preserve, a 5.24 acre stand of tallgrass prairie in northern McLean County, along U.S. Route 24 between Chenoa and Fairbury.

Beginning in mid-April and into May, the first prairie plants that flower begin show their colors on the old pioneer cemetery grounds. The early arrivals include prairie violet (*Viola pedatifida*), white blue-eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium albidum*), golden Alexander (*Zizia aurea*), hoary puccoon (*Lithospermum canescens*), lousewort (*Pedicularis Canadensis*), violet wood sorrel (*Oxalis violacea*), shooting star (*Dodecatheon meadia*), wild strawberry (*Fragaria virginiana*) and others.

By Roger Anderson’s count, distinguished professor emeritus, Illinois State University School of Biological Sciences, Weston Cemetery Prairie contains no less than 71 native prairie plant species—all on little more than five acres!

As these prairie forbs (non-grass species) have their “day in the sun,” so to speak, they give way to other flowering plants, so the prairie remains in perpetual bloom into the late autumn. “Prairie plants tend to stagger their flowering times so that competition for pollinators can be reduced,” noted Anderson and biologist Stephen Schelfhout of Illinois Wesleyan University in a 1980 paper.

Weston Cemetery Prairie is owned by Yates Township and managed by ParkLands Foundation. This past Tuesday, ParkLands staff and volunteers staged a controlled burn on the eastern half of the prairie (one-half of the preserve is burned every year on a rotating basis.) Prairie fires release nutrients into the soil, and the blackened earth warms more quickly than undisturbed prairie, furthering new growth. Today, the eastern half, at least to the untrained eye, looks like a wasteland of soot and ash. Yet the deep fibrous roots survive and thrive after fire, and so by summertime, the scorched acreage will be thriving once more with a great profusion of grasses, flowers, insect life, small mammals and other wild things.

Throughout the latter half of the 19th century, there still remained a fair amount of unplowed, relatively undisturbed prairie in Mclean County, from the edges of lightly traveled county roads to soggy, hard-to-drain acreage. “The native wild prairie flowers are very plentiful and beautiful in this neighborhood at present,” noted the Sept. 25, 1895 Pantagraph, “neighborhood” in this instance meaning Bloomington and the surrounding environs. “The seasonable weather has made a larger bloom than has been seen here for many years. Many persons who drive in the country load their vehicles with them and bring them to their homes.”

Yet such scenes became increasingly rare into the 20th century, especially with the mechanization and industrialization of the Corn Belt and the introduction of commercial fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides.

In the late 1930s, Dr. Blanche McAvoy, assistant professor of biological science education at Illinois State Normal University, began taking her students out to a stretch of Illinois Central Railroad right-of-way just south of Kerrick, a grain elevator siding between Normal and Hudson. They trekked out there, some two-plus miles north of campus, to check out a small strip of original tallgrass prairie. In 1944, this acreage, described as a half a mile long and 100 feet wide on both the east and west sides of the IC tracks, as well as some buffer farmland, were set aside as a “prairie preserve.”

Unfortunately, it appears that plans to formally protect this preserve through legal agreements, statutory provisions or other protective measures never materialized. Nonetheless, despite the onslaught of 20th century indifference and neglect, remnant prairie plants containing irreplaceable original genetic material from this preserve survive into the present. And because

the Illinois Central rail bed is now the main branch of Constitution Trail, the area is much more accessible than it was eight decades earlier for Dr. McAvoy and her biology teachers-in-training.

R. Given Harper, the George C. and Ella Beach Lewis Endowed Chair of Biology at Illinois Wesleyan University, tells us that today prairie plants can still be seen on the east side of Constitution Trail north of Northtown Road to the Kerrick parking lot and trail access point. At one time, there was signage indicating restored prairie along this stretch, though knowing its earlier history, it's likely "virgin" or "remnant" would have been more accurate and biologically significant than "restored."

There are other such glimpses of the lost prairie in the immediate area. The west side leg of Constitution Trail known as the Interurban Branch, for instance, features remnant prairie plants from the Route 9 wayside to the Interstate 55 / 74 bridge over West Washington Street.

We should be grateful for such gifts; treasure them for the pleasures they give and the lessons they offer. Such remnants also stand witness to nearly two centuries of wanton destruction and irreparable loss.

In 1831, Abraham W. and Mary Goodpasture Carlock settled in White Oak Grove in present day Woodford County. When the Carlocks arrived, "there was not a fence or house or building of any kind" on the prairie stretching approximately twelve miles between their place and Bloomington, the seat of newly formed McLean County.

Abraham and Mary's son William B. Carlock, born in 1842, wistfully brought to mind this lost landscape in 1926, two years before his death. "The virgin prairies throughout the state during the months of June, July and August presented a most beautiful and delightful appearance," he recalled. "A sunrise in the morning when the grass and flowers covered with a heavy dew or light rain reflected the prismatic colors, mingled with such beauty as no human tongue could describe."

"One's imagination of paradise," he concluded, "could not be more glorious than these prairie scenes."