

By Mark Wyman



Loring Merwin, whose vision and leadership created the ParkLands Foundation and carried it through its formative years, is remembered by designation of the major ParkLands landholding as the Merwin Nature Preserve and by this plaque near the preserve's main entrance. His successor as publisher of the *Pantagraph*, Davis U. Merwin, took on major leadership tasks for ParkLands on several occasions and is also cited on the plaque. Both men continued the tradition of their ancestor Jesse W. Fell in providing the driving force for projects that benefit the entire community—in this case, the broad community of McLean County and Central Illinois. In the portrait, Loring Merwin, *right*, and John Hodge, second president of ParkLands Foundation, look on as William Rutherford of Peoria examines a new ParkLands brochure after his December 1, 1970, talk to a group of McLean County employers on the need for an organization such as ParkLands.



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PARKLANDS **A History**

By Mark Wyman

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CONTENTS



Introduction	3
Chapter One Before ParkLands: A Battleground of Nature	5
Chapter Two New Concern for the Natural Environment	11
Chapter Three The Local Movement Under Way	14
Chapter Four The New Organization in Action	20
Chapter Five Creating the Merwin Nature Preserve	27
Chapter Six New Trends in the Nineties and a 'Green Necklace'	32
Chapter Seven 'Lots of Land and a Noble Cause'	41
ParkLands Properties	44
Maps	45-47

INTRODUCTION

ParkLands Foundation was created in 1967 by Loring Merwin, following many months of meetings with different groups in McLean County. While local conditions hurried its birth, the environmental awareness that stimulated citizens to action was part of a national movement whose roots reach back a century or more.

Over the years the organization had a continuing run of successes acquiring natural areas in farm-rich Central Illinois, often surprising critics and doubters and—if truth be told—its own members. But there were failures and frustrations as well, and one of the chief characteristics of ParkLands's leaders was that they were not driven to despair over these setbacks.

The following is an attempt to tell the history of ParkLands from 1967 to 2000, fitting it into national environmental currents as well as the prehistory and history of this region. Thus, the world of the receding glaciers 15,000 years ago is treated, as are the 1990s land acquisitions along the Mackinaw; destruction of prairies for agriculture in the 1870s must be examined, as well as the effort to replant a tract of land with prairie seeds a century later.

It is a complex story, and only the highlights will be touched upon in these chapters. It is also an incomplete story, bound to continue as long as residents of Central Illinois desire to experience the world of prairie and forest that existed before the settlers came, as long as they feel the need—as Henry David Thoreau put it in 1837—“to range this widespread garden.” As with everything in nature, ParkLands's labor is still unfinished. It is a work in progress.





CHAPTER ONE

Before ParkLands: A Battleground of Nature

Surveyors slogged on through the autumn woods of 1833, running boundary lines across the terrain of Central Illinois, crossing savannas and woods in what would become ParkLands tracts more than a century and a half later. On the open prairies they erected posts, or marked trees, where section lines crossed, located “witness trees” at section and quarter section points in the forests, and ran their chains uphill and downhill through briars and swamps while charting characteristics along the way. Rivers and creeks were recorded, and along the Mackinaw River the surveyors noted “Kickapoo town” and nearby “Delaware town,” both southeast of the later site of Lexington.

But generally they commented on the status of the land, for these were men from a farming culture, preparing the way for farmer-settlers as they marked section lines and filled in information to expand the earlier, less detailed 1822 township line survey. Settlers needed timber: “Land this mile broken thin oakland,” wrote Beal Grenup, the deputy surveyor, as he moved north between sections 4 and 5 in what would later be called Money Creek Township. “Timber on the last 1/2 scattering scrub oaks, & first 1/2 good oak timber.” But over and over, he encountered what would soon be the major attraction: “This mile very gentle rolling rich prairie,” and “land fit for cultivation.”

It was definitely “land fit for cultivation,” and it would eventually draw to Central Illinois a variety of people—farmers, railroad builders, eager developers of town sites, men and women originating in the South and East and even in Europe—who saw a bountiful future in such terrain. Because of their backgrounds there would be heated competition at times, based on the groups’ varied religious beliefs, acceptance or rejection of slavery, political loyalties, or even on the proper way to spend a Sunday afternoon.

Struggles between Native American tribes had long been a fixture of North American life, and Illinois had earlier been a battle ground between Illiniwek and

Iroquois, Kickapoo and Fox, among others. But the Kickapoos and Delawares encountered by the surveyors would not be part of the new competition shaping up in the 19th century, however. The incoming white settlers’ challenge to these Native American groups would climax in the late 1820s and early 1830s as the government succeeded in moving the tribes west of the Mississippi. Illinois was cleared of organized resistance from Native Americans.

Competition of a different sort, linked to the region’s distant past, would continue, however. For Central Illinois had a long record as the site of competition in the natural world, a veritable biological battleground between trees and grasses, birds and animals, fought at times amid ice and fire.

Plant life was always on the move, followed in its migrations by birds and animals. One early ecologist wrote that the history of the Midwest’s vegetation “is a history of repeated migrations of diverse floristic elements, arriving in the region from various directions,” then usually retreating, adapting, or dying out. Although the region is referred to today simply as “prairie,” in truth it has been prairie only recently in geologic time and teeters on the brink of changing again. Changes in climate and topography, as well as the arrival of fire, have been the instigators of each transformation. When Native American tribes clashed and later when white settlers competed in the 19th century, human struggles were often linked to these shifts in the natural world. The natural world still governed.

And a century or more later, beginning in the 1960s, a later generation of Americans would reexamine competitions of centuries past and look on the prairies and streams from perspectives other than those of their ancestors. This group would attempt to go backward in biological time—to restore parts of Central Illinois to conditions encountered by the surveyors of the 1820s and 1830s. The men and women

of the 1960s would try to understand just what the surveyors were observing when they wrote: "This mile very gentle rolling, rich soil. Timber W & S Oak Walnut &c. Under - Hazle &c."

One starting point in examining the region's natural history is the time of the glaciers. Four major glaciers are known to have spread frozen layers over Illinois in its geologic past; the third (aptly named the "Illinoisan") nearly reaching to the state's southern tip, farther south than any other North American glacier. Part of that was overlain by the most recent, the Wisconsinan glacier, which finally retreated irregularly and sporadically from 10,000 to 15,000 years ago after reaching the area of Shelbyville in southern Illinois, and leaving behind hilly deposits called the Shelbyville Moraine. The Wisconsinan played havoc with the Great Lakes, blocking escape channels (even sending Lake Michigan's outflow south through the Illinois and Mississippi rivers for a time) and alternately raising and lowering water levels drastically. But this final glacier's main legacy to the Midwest today is a predominantly flat surface covered with a thick layer of deep soil, mainly glacial till. Overlain with loess, a wind-blown silt originating as glacial deposits in major waterways, till helped create the base for the region's rich agriculture. The retreating glacier also left other residues, in the form of recessional moraines such as the Bloomington Moraine, made up of soil, gravel, and rocks deposited as the last glacier melted and disappeared to the north.

Spruce forests sprang up along the glacier's retreating edges, but with the shrinking of the glacial cover came hardwoods, their growth encouraged by the wet conditions. Pollen data from a bog near Chatsworth in Livingston County revealed that such deciduous trees as ash, elm, oak, hickory, and hazel were replacing the spruce forest by 13,800 years ago, spreading northward from the Gulf Coast into the glacier-free areas. This struggle of competing forests was later overwhelmed by another change: Now a warm, dry period from a southerly wind pattern began to envelope the Midwest, beginning some 10,000 years ago, and hickory became the dominant tree in Illinois.

With the weather warming, the state was set for another competition in nature, some 6,000 to 8,000 years ago. Prairie grasses began to enter Illinois from the west, succeeding in the semi-arid climate and overwhelming the fading forests, large parts of which were unable to persist amid the dry conditions. The prairies won, eventually covering 60 percent of Illinois and 90 percent of McLean County.

As these prairies spread from western Kansas and

Nebraska and eastern Colorado, their push eastward eventually formed a long, broad arm of prairie between the cooler, wetter forests to the north and the moist forests and plant life in the Ozarks and other areas to the south. This warm, dry period encouraged the prairies to spread across much of the Midwest in the form of a spearhead that eventually reached into Ohio, where its advance was blocked by a more humid climate that favored forest.

But climate change again produced another competition as rains started to increase, some 5,000 years ago. This moister climate helped draw grasses from the east which competed with the earlier western grasses. Prairie and savanna became extensive across much of Illinois, with eastern grasses increasingly dominant. They formed the basis for what would become the tall-grass prairie, although Illinois' botanical makeup at the time of settlement contained elements from many areas—Great Plains as well as the Appalachians, Ozarks as well as Gulf Coast. All were migrants into Illinois.

But forest species were also present—such as sugar maple, ash, beech, basswood, ironwood—spreading principally out of southern areas some 10,000 years ago. These were generally restricted to protected sites. But as the climate began to cool and moisture increased, these species broadened their distribution. They might conceivably have turned the Midwest into an extensive forest, something akin to that covering much of the East. This might have happened but for one other factor: fire.

Despite the wetter conditions, droughts still hit sporadically, devastating to many tree species. During the earlier warm centuries following the glacier's retreat, the tallgrass and short-grass prairies annually created perfectly combustible materials as dry winds streamed through. These conditions remained during the regimes of wet weather that began to appear from 5,000 to 3,500 years ago, for grasses dried sufficiently in summer and fall to provide abundant fuel for new rounds of prairie fires. The repeated conflagrations discouraged development of extensive areas of forest.

Some trees persisted, however, largely confined to ravines and creek beds which offered protection from the surrounding prairie fires. Because these blazes generally travelled west to east, goaded by the prevailing winds, the eastern sides of midwestern river systems and valleys generally became the most heavily forested. But survival was difficult and these forests were mainly found amid rough terrain and along streams and rivers.

Lightning set off many of the fires, but scientists today conclude that most were started deliberately by the region's earliest human residents, the Native



Early tree planting was carried out by, from left, H. Clay Tate, T. A. Hafer, Kenneth Benjamin, and tractor driver Wally Yoder. The site is the Hall property southeast of Bloomington.

Americans. When French missionary Louis Hennepin began his autumn trip downriver to the new Fort Crevecoeur at Lake Peoria in 1680, he noted along the way how the Indians used fire to hunt on the prairies:

Our provisions ran out and we could find no game after passing these marshes, as we hoped to do, because there are only great open plains, where nothing grows except tall grass, which is dry at this season, and which the Miamis had burned while hunting buffalo.... If our canoe men had found a chance, they would infallibly have all abandoned us, to strike inland and join the Indians whom we discerned by the flames of the prairies to which they had set fire in order to kill the buffalo more easily.

The Miamis' hunting system involved setting fires around the herd with only a small area left unburned: "The buffalo, seeking to escape the fire, are thus compelled to pass near these Indians, who sometimes kill as many as a hundred and twenty in a day...."

Whether set by Indians or lightning, these fires burned best on open prairie. (Recent studies have shown that fires actually help big bluestem, encouraging earlier growth and allowing more light to reach the young shoots.) In the ravines, river bottoms, and steep hillsides, which were only occasionally touched by fire, the maples, elms, and ashes were able to thrive, occasionally joined by cottonwoods and sycamores. Only one tree species, the oak, could thrive outside these shady stretches; it needed open sun and its bark was not easily damaged by wildfires. The bur oak became the prime occupant of open areas, occasionally joined by its cousins, the white oak and black oak. Bur oaks created what the incoming settlers called "oak openings"—or savannas, characterized by open grassy areas holding scattered large trees, a sort of transition stage between prairie and forest. (One modern definition of savanna specifies that the area must have from 10 to no more than 30 percent tree canopy cover.)

As prairie fires swept through these oak openings, they cleared out the underbrush, singeing but not killing the bur oaks. White and black oaks were not as

fortunate: They usually became “grubs,” trees having little or nothing showing above ground but whose roots remained alive beneath the surface, protected from the fires. Over the years many of these white and black oaks developed massive root systems, surviving for years below ground as “grubs.” Their annual “shoots,” however, were killed off with each fire.

The diverse ground coverings of Central Illinois—prairies, oak openings, river valleys marked by narrow gulches and floodplains—provided homes for a wide variety of birds and animals. Father Hennepin noted the abundance of buffalos even before he saw the living animals: They were “ordinarily in great numbers there” along the rivers, he wrote, “as it is easy to judge by the bones, the horns and skulls that we saw on all sides.” Out on the prairies the bobolinks, meadowlarks, short-eared owls, and prairie chickens were numerous, while savannas were preferred by such birds as the sharp-tailed grouse, red-headed woodpecker, eastern kingbird, eastern bluebird, and Baltimore oriole. The whip-poorwill, Cooper’s hawk, ovenbird, and red-eyed vireo were at home in the forest.

At this geological and biological moment, when the moist climate opened the way to both Tallgrass Prairie and forest, the latter kept in check by perennial prairie fires, settlers began to arrive in numbers in Central Illinois. They sought out land adjacent to a grove of trees, for wood was crucial in building house and barn, and eventually for fencing. They may not have realized that the prairies they were beginning to farm would have been massive forests if it were not for the frequent fires.

The raging prairie fires were not eliminated as annual events until almost 1860, but until then they inspired both fear and wonder among the Americans and Europeans taking up homes across the region. A Methodist circuit rider crossing through Princeton, Illinois, with a group on horseback in 1835 found that even after the sun had set they were able to travel

by fire light over prairie, it being on fire. This was the grandest scene I ever saw, the wind blew a gale all day, the grass was dry, & the fire being in the prairie, at a distance, where we entered it some men were kindling fire to burn it away from their fences & then let it run—no odds who burnt up.... We passed 3 different fires in this 12 miles, having to turn out & get round them when they reached the road.... [W]e had in view at one time from one to 5 miles of fire in a streak, burning from 2 to 6 feet high. In high grass it sometimes burns 30 feet high, if driven by fierce winds. By the

light of this fire we could read fine print for 1/2 a mile or more....

By day the cloud was often so dense & so great, as to hide the sun from the view of the traveler, but by night this same cloud would reflect the light which shone on it from below, so as to enlighten [sic] the country for miles around it.

Another witness to the fires was Eliza W. Farnham, who moved west from New York in 1835 to the area of Groveland in Tazewell County, where she lived for four and a half years. That was long enough to provide abundant material for her novel, *Life in Prairie Land*. In it Farnham depicted the prairie wife, left alone while her husband and son took the wagon on a trip of several days to obtain winter supplies. As she watched for their return one evening she suddenly saw the dark sky becoming light, then fading, then exploding in light again: “The prairie is on fire!” She recalled hearing talk of the fires, how everyone expected “much pleasure” when they would finally see one—“But she never dreamed of the red demon as an enemy, and one to be encountered in this dreadful solitude.”

The woman looked about her, fearing for her two sleeping children and their dog. There was little time to lose—“The wind is bearing the fire almost with its own speed across the immense savannah.” Around the cabin, “It is all one sea of dry combustibles.... Grass, dry grass everywhere!” Finally she and the children escaped to a plowed field just before the fire reached and destroyed their cabin. In the morning she gazed across the charred plain, which now “seemed more boundless than ever, and the blackness of desolation brooded over every foot of it. It was clean shorn of every blade of vegetation.”

But usually incoming settlers exulted in the prairies, especially the abundance of plant life. A German immigrant wrote home from Carmi in 1828 that he was finding wild cherries, mulberries, sassafras, crab apples, plums, hickory, and oak trees. Picking up on this theme several years later, an Irish priest traveling through the Mississippi Valley penned in his diary, “Saw in Illinois-Iowa wild gooseberry current and cherry apple plum trees everywhere and prairie covered wild strawberry blossoms and several nice flowers.” Albert Herre, who lived on a farm near Delavan in the 1870s, recalled the lilies, yellow and white lady slippers, bluebells, and “a showy flower called ‘flies’ by the pioneers, but which I learned in later years was Dutchman’s breeches....” Others were amazed at the animal life—prairie hens, squirrels, hawks, rattlesnakes,

deer, quails, "paroquets," gophers, bees, even wolves and bears.

The newcomers groped for words to describe these massive prairies whose grasses often reached to the head of a man on horseback. "I could compare it to nothing but the sea," one visitor wrote home to his brother in Scotland, and the sea became a much-used point of reference. A Boston newspaper man touring the region wrote: "For miles and miles we saw nothing but a vast expanse of what I can compare to nothing else but the ocean itself.... [I]t seemed as if we were out of sight of land, for no horse, no barn, no tree was visible, and the horizon presented the rolling of the waves in the far-off distance.... We saw at intervals, groves of trees, which looked like islands in the ocean."

Placing their homes at the edge of the timber, the settlers began nibbling at the prairie, finding the grubs and the prairie plants' interlocking roots a nearly impossible challenge that often forced them to use an axe to cut open space to plant a seed. The development of a new self-scouring plow by John Deere in 1836 encouraged further advances onto the prairies, but not until the arrival of the railroads in the early 1850s did farmers begin extensive plantings; even so, the prairies were wet enough that large-scale agriculture and settlement awaited the development of tiling for drainage in the decades following the Civil War.

Albert Herre witnessed opening the prairies to farming:

The destruction of the prairie flora and fauna began when a great machine started to eat its way through the prairie, leaving behind it a stream of water on which it floated. As the "Big Ditch" was made, illiterate English and Irish day laborers dug lateral ditches by hand. This drainage made it possible to plow the prairie fauna for the first time, and I well remember when my great uncle broke up his first piece of prairie, an eighty-acre field.

The farmer's plow effectively stopped the perennial burning of the prairie. This, in turn, cleared the way for the root "grubs" to develop into trees. The editor of the *Illinois Monthly Magazine* wrote in 1831 that "[i]t is a well known fact, that from the first settlement of this country, the timber has been increasing with great rapidity...." In 1844, the editors of the *Prairie Farmer* traveled through Central Illinois and noted a forest of half-grown trees in Sangamon and Morgan Counties, thriving on land formerly known as barrens; their opinion was "that by far the great half of the timber in these two counties has grown since the country was settled."

An 1856 McLean County map showed that some forested areas were larger than noted by the surveyors in 1822. Many savannas now came to include smaller trees as well as the dominant bur oaks, although sometimes the understory was kept clear by grazing cattle.

There is evidence that the early farmers saw the scattered groves and savannas as crucial to their existence; some even began planting more trees. Without trees, existence on the prairies was impossible or nearly so, for no alternative fuels, building or fencing materials were yet available. Maps of early farming reveal that pioneer settlers usually established their fields and homes on the edge of timber. But while stopping the prairie fires may have helped these early American residents by expanding wooded areas, their arrival ultimately meant that Central Illinois would not become forestland.

Several reasons lay behind this fact. Plowing more and more of the savannas and grasslands tore up the grubs and blocked the re-emergence of trees. And then the coming of the railroad lines in the 1850s, connecting with the eastern rail network and markets, set off the rush to open the prairies to large-scale agriculture. Previously, the slow pace of horse-drawn wagons, the impossible condition of roads, and the long distance to markets had held back the growth of farming. But the coming of the railroad meant that corn, wheat, and other crops could be hauled away in boxcars. And the railroad's return trips carried fuel and white pine for housing, lessening the importance of the farmer's woodlot. In addition, the railroad itself devoured vast amounts of timber—initially for fuel, until coal deposits were opened, but increasingly for ties: An 1852 contract in Bloomington called for delivery of 20,000 ties "of good white or bur oak" for the oncoming Illinois Central.



Annual nature walks and annual meeting presentations draw large numbers of environmental enthusiasts to Parklands properties, as shown in this undated photo on the Ridgetop Prairie.

The line was completed to the city the following year, 1853, and after several other railroads had crisscrossed the area, the Bloomington *Pantagraph* editor reported, "Whole forests of timber were destroyed to feed the burning maw of the iron horse." Markets enlarged greatly with the rise of the steamship, dominant in the trade with Europe soon after the Civil War. The Illinois farmer was now connected to a world market.

This revolution in transportation set off new competition for prairie soil. It fed Americans' long-held belief in unending abundance, and now the fertile prairies, enriched for centuries by prairie grasses, were hailed as yet another "inexhaustible resource" for a growing population. It was like the northern forests, the massive flocks of passenger pigeons, the buffalo herds on the plains—all so abundant they seemed endless. On came the conestoga wagons with their white canvas covers, carrying migrants from Indiana and other nearby states south and southeast, rumbling into Illinois along primitive traces and meeting there the narrow, low-boxed wagons of the New Englanders who were part of the influx. Illinois, initially settled from the South, now had newcomers from the mid-Atlantic states as well as Yankees and "York Staters." And they were joined by rising throngs of European immigrants, helping push Illinois' population past the one million mark by the early 1850s. Many of these travelers brought plants with them—roots carefully packed in shoes, seeds lovingly wrapped in cloth, all to preserve some memory of their past lives as well as to help their start in a new home. Thus the prairie's native plants soon competed with neighbors brought from afar. And signs along the roadways in this fast-developing agricultural empire pointed to settlements with such names as New Dublin, New Baden, New Boston, New Pennsylvania, Virginia, Germantown, and Bunker Hill. Distant homelands would live on across the Illinois prairies, in town names as well as in plant life.

After more than a century of intensive agriculture, the Central Illinois natural environment has changed sharply. Man has achieved a transformation approaching what occurred during eons of climatic and topographical disruptions. Only some 2,300 acres of high-quality tallgrass prairie remain in Illinois, out of some 22 million acres before settlement began. Occasional hill prairies can still be found in areas unsuited to farming, while rural graveyards and railroad rights-of-way also have protected some swaths of original prairie. But a 1979 study of McLean County concluded, "There are almost no prairie remnants in the county." Savannas also faced survival problems, for without annual fires

the grubs' shoots could thrive, and sometimes thick forests developed in former "oak openings." Many savannas, however, were simply uprooted to become cropland. Forests, which covered some 10 percent of McLean County's surface when the surveyors marched through in 1822, were found in a 1973 study to make up less than 1 percent of its area. And where forests still exist—as in Funks Grove and similar groves around the area—tree density is higher than in presettlement times, because of the lack of even occasional visits by fire; the tree varieties present have also changed in the absence of fire. If the 1822 surveyors could return they would indeed find a confused setting in the prairie-savanna-creekbed-moraine topography they once encountered. As one biologist described the changing botanical situation: "Both advancing and retreating migrations are now in progress in the states of the Middle West."

Albert Herre, who had witnessed the early transformation of the prairies to cropland around his family's farm near Delavan, came back for visits in the 1890s, "but the prairie as such had disappeared, and of course its characteristic life with it." Herre recalled the abundance of birds, snakes, and waterfowl in his childhood, as well as the "rippling sea of lavender when the 'wild sweet William'" was in flower. He was aware that he and his family were part of the destruction of that prairie, but as a grown man he could still sadly write, "What a pity that some of it could not have been preserved, so that those born later might enjoy its beauty also."

It was this lingering challenge that led to the rise of Parklands, some 70 years later, when a new wave of disappearances from nature led another generation to call for environmental action to preserve—and even to restore—what was lost from the Central Illinois landscape that the surveyors had encountered in the 1820s and 1830s.





CHAPTER TWO

New Concern for the Natural Environment

Two developments converged on Central Illinois in the 1960s which formed a major background for the eventual creation of the ParkLands Foundation. One came from afar in time and space, weaving together philosophies of reverence for wild, untrammelled nature. The other came in reaction to the rapid growth of the United States population, whose rising standard of living made it possible for families to live out their dreams of building a house in the woods. These two developments, seemingly parallel because both showed a love of nature, actually produced contradictory outcomes: Rising interest in natural beauty was encouraging its withdrawal from public use. Whether destroyed, turned into farmland, or merely put behind fences, the changing face of nature prompted concern.

Praise for untrammelled nature was not universal through the course of American history, as settlers sought to subdue all that stood in their way—whether Indians or trees, foreign mercenaries or tallgrass prairies. But there were occasional voices of admiration for the natural world, and since America's vast interior set it apart from crowded Europe, the wilderness was often hailed as a special characteristic of the new nation. One writer in the early 1780s called the Mississippi "this prince of rivers in comparison of whom the Nile is but a small rivulet, and the Danube a ditch." And Abigail Adams, accompanying her diplomat husband to London in 1786, admitted in a letter that while European fine arts, manufactures, and agriculture were more advanced, "European birds have not half the melody of ours[.] Nor is their fruit half so sweet, nor their flowers half so fragrant, nor their manners half so pure, nor their people half so virtuous." Others predicted with confidence that the boundless scale of American forests, mountains, and rivers would inspire greatness among the inhabitants.

One of the earliest voices extolling nature and criticizing its abuse was that of Henry David Thoreau,

who boldly announced: "In wildness is the preservation of the world"—in effect challenging the farmers' and industrialists' growing attacks on that wildness, attacks then underway on the farms and in the mill towns around him. Thoreau, soon the major voice of New England transcendentalism, advised his Harvard commencement audience in 1837 that man should work but one day a week, leaving the other six "in which to range this widespread garden, and drink in the soft influences and sublime revelations of nature."

The bustle of America's rapidly expanding agriculture and marketplace drowned out such philosophers for the most part through the 19th century, but in its closing decades new environmental voices began emerging that soon caught the nation's attention. The major spokesman was John Muir, born in Scotland a year after Thoreau's commencement speech, who arrived as a young immigrant to central Wisconsin in 1849. Later driven from industrial employment by an eye injury, Muir spent a week in 1867 enthusiastically "botanizing" on the northern Illinois prairies, and commented that now "all plants are more precious than before." He decided to walk to the Gulf of Mexico, studying plant life through the South, and then traveled west to California and the Sierra Nevada range, which became home base for the rest of his life.

Muir honored wilderness for its spiritual values. Forests were sacred—"God's first temples"—and nature was a "window opening into heaven, a mirror reflecting the Creator." Trees were "psalm-singing." He later ranged across the West and Alaska, and wrote that he was never lonesome on his solitary hikes through the mountains: "It seems so self-evident that one cannot be lonesome where everything is wild and beautiful and busy and steeped with God...." It was not just Muir who saw more than money in the forests. In 1894, when New York voters approved turning an upstate area larger than Connecticut into the Adirondack

Preserve, proponents' arguments over spiritual values were heard alongside utilitarian pleas that the preserve would keep rivers flowing for commerce.

Muir's nature writing began to catch on with the public, and while he failed to win the California legislature's backing for extra protections for Yosemite, he was already reaching beyond the state's borders. A national audience for the environment was beginning to rally, and this new groundswell led Congress to make Yosemite a national park in 1890. Editors of magazines and newspapers began to publish nature writings in abundance, especially those of Muir and fellow naturalist John Burroughs.

A new conservation movement was born, encouraged by the nation's first naturalist-president, Theodore Roosevelt, and eventually protecting scores of natural areas from development. All levels of government were involved; the list ran from city and county officials to Congress, and in addition to a skein of new city parks, the results included the U.S. Forest Reserve Act (1891) and a long list of national parks, starting with Yellowstone in 1872 (the world's first national park); Yosemite, Sequoia, and Kings Canyon in California in 1890; Mount Rainier in 1899 and Glacier in 1910, among others. It was an exciting period for an environmental movement that proclaimed the spiritual benefits of nature. And as author Peter Wild has noted, that turn-of-the-century movement succeeded "only because of widespread sympathy and political support from a public made aware of nature's fragility by such writers as Burroughs."

Although the environmental activism of the Progressive Era was muffled by World War I and the "normalcy" of the 1920s, the concepts of Muir, Burroughs, and others were now abroad in the land. They found a supporter in McLean County in the person of Florence Fifer Bohrer, first woman state senator in Illinois, daughter of former governor Joe Fifer. She was elected to the state legislature in 1924 and successfully pushed through a bill putting the fledgling state parks under the State Department of Public Works. The senator hoped that Illinois' state park system would be as large and beautiful as those of other states within 15 or 20 years.

The Great Depression that followed frowned on protections for wild areas unless these provided jobs, which many of them did. Civilian Conservation Corps workers planted trees and built trails and roads in Illinois, as around the nation, while other New Deal programs constructed dams. With several notable exceptions, however, the 1930s environmental move-

ment rested heavily upon job creation rather than the aesthetic values of natural areas.

Then came the postwar era. Increasing prosperity began to have an impact upon America's natural environment. New chemicals, new earthmoving machinery, high-technology logging by helicopter, an automobile-worshipping population that wanted and could afford housing outside crowded cities—all these targeted, directly or indirectly, the natural world once held sacred by Thoreau and Muir. Rivers no longer struggled with only untreated sewage; now there were polychlorinated biphenyls, dioxins, lead, and mercury that were toxic to fish and humans. One of these chemical-laden rivers in Cleveland actually caught fire. Now air was contaminated not just by smoke rising from woodstoves, but increasingly by herbicides and pesticides. Employed to kill grasshoppers and corn borers, these also destroyed robins and butterflies.

Complaints began to be heard, at first scattered and unfocused, increasingly strident and frightened. Many Americans were becoming alarmed at the plundering of their continent, the stealing of their natural heritage. Within this growing chorus of protest in the 1950s and 1960s, the voice that emerged clearest was that of a gentle woman named Rachel Carson, a marine biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Carson told of a housewife in Hinsdale, Illinois, whose yard had once teemed with bird life. But after the authorities began spraying throughout the community with DDT to combat Dutch elm disease "the town [was] almost devoid of robins and starlings. Chickadees have not been on my shelf for two years, and this year the cardinals are gone too....," the woman wrote.



John English manned the tree planter and Harry Mehl drove the tractor when planting proceeded in 1989 as ParkLands Foundation began a concentrated effort to restore forest.

Carson used examples such as this in her 1962 book *Silent Spring* to launch an attack on the indiscriminate use of sprays, dusts, and aerosols—"nonselective chemicals that have the power to kill every insect, the 'good' and the 'bad,' to still the song of birds and the leaping of fish in the streams, to coat the leaves with a deadly film, and to linger on in soil—all this though the intended target may be only a few weeds or insects." The result: "Over increasingly large areas of the United States, spring now comes unheralded by the return of the birds, and the early mornings are strangely silent where once they were filled with the beauty of bird song."

But her target was more than sprays; hers was also an attack on the attitude behind their indiscriminate use. Carson condemned the homeowner who sprayed his lawn without thinking of the impact on the neighbor's flowers, as well as the chemical company that sold new concoctions without publicizing their impact on air, water, and living things. She questioned the future for a world whose human inhabitants could think only of the immediate, narrow impact of such destructive chemical forces.

Harmony between man and land, a total ecological view, would become the contribution of another major environmental voice of the postwar era, Aldo Leopold. Leopold learned early that the traditional approach to subduing nature was self-destructive. Employed by the U.S. Forest Service in Arizona and New Mexico after his graduation from Yale's School of Forestry in 1909, Leopold accepted the traditional belief that all predators were varmints to be exterminated. He joined the crusade to "catch the last wolf or lion in New Mexico"—and then saw the resulting explosion of the deer population destroy the range from overgrazing, leading to the demise of the deer herd from starvation and disease.

Leopold later recalled his transformation: "I was young then, and full of trigger itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise." Wolfless mountains soon brought a new reality: "I have seen every edible tree defoliated to the height of a saddle horn," while piles of deer bones bleached on the barren earth with the dead sage.

Later transferred to Wisconsin, Leopold became a professor of wildlife management; equally important, he bought a used-up farm near the Wisconsin River where he and his family spent long days restoring the forest. It was there that his perception deepened of the importance of maintaining nature's diversity of plants, insects, birds, trees, and animals, as he became aware

of the crucial interlocking of it all. His environmentalism was a far cry from roadside beautification, a universe away from the cut grass of a city park. In *Sand County Almanac*, the major compilation of his writings, he argued:

Conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect....That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics.

And he continued to wonder how the public could see nature only as a source of income. Crossing Illinois on a bus, he noted, as the vehicle lumbered by cornfields and creeks and prosperous farms, that the passengers talked "about baseball, taxes, sons-in-law, movies, motors, and funerals, but never about the heaving groundswell of Illinois that washes the windows of the speeding bus. Illinois has no genesis, no history, no shoals or deeps, no tides of life and death. To them Illinois is only the sea on which they sail to ports unknown."

Illinois, however, was changing, even as Leopold was passing through. And McLean County was influenced by the same philosophies that were provoking a new environmental movement across the nation. For the ideas of Rachel Carson and Aldo Leopold were reaching sympathetic listeners and helping develop environmentalists who perhaps were yet unfamiliar with the term. The spirits of Henry David Thoreau and John Muir lived on in the minds of many Central Illinois citizens, far away in time as well as space from the New England woods and California Sierras. Now the earlier environmentalists would help influence ways in which a new generation of Americans would deal with the natural world around them.





CHAPTER THREE

The Local Movement Under Way

Rising concern over the environment, spurred by such widely reported disasters as burning rivers in Cleveland and “ozone alerts” in Los Angeles, collided in Central Illinois not only with an enlarging postwar farm economy but also with an urban population sprawling onto the surrounding prairie. Conflicts amid such conditions could be predicted, and while they did occur, the story of the development of Parklands is overall one of careful planning and persistence that skirted major battles over land use.

Farming moved fully into the modern era during the 1950s. While the 1954 agricultural census showed that more than one-tenth of McLean County’s farms were still worked with horses, by 1964 draft horses had virtually vanished and the tractor was ubiquitous; the average was nearly three tractors per farm in the latter year. And while the census-takers in 1954 also discovered that 17 percent of the county’s farms were still without electricity and 18 percent without running water, 10 years later those percentages had fallen nearly to zero. Farm families and city families were now using the same home conveniences; they were also (increasingly) sharing the same neighborhoods.

It was not the need for household appliances that drove farmers to plow more acres, but rather changes taking place outdoors, both in the fields of Illinois and in the larger world of markets and scientific research. Chickens and cows became scarce on Central Illinois farms as specialization in corn and soybeans won out. Without farm animals to care for each day, farmers could take winter vacations. But while developments emerging from the laboratories brought the potential for larger profits, they carried with them additional expenses, which pressured farmers to expand their plantings by uprooting hedgerows and attacking remaining stands of timber (which made up less than 1 percent of the county’s area by 1973). McLean County’s soil, enriched for thousands of years by the

tallgrass prairie’s annual cycles, was perfect for the new hybrids, and the county was judged the world’s largest corn producer year after year.

Tractors were soon pulling wider and wider corn planters, mechanical corn pickers, and combines that both husked and shelled the cobs. But costs for these mechanical wonders were enormous—\$90,000 to \$100,000 for a 24-row corn planter by the late 1990s, more than that for a combine. A \$100 bag of hybrid seed corn would only cover three acres, and once planted those seeds had to be protected with herbicide and encouraged with chemical fertilizers. It all cost money, so down came the hedgerows and trees as fields grew out to the roadways.

Now fences could be removed—without the danger of a neighbor’s cows encroaching on a field—and the rush to plow additional rows took on a new emphasis, almost a desperation. The traditional quarter-section farm of 160 acres was left behind in the dust of high-technology agriculture, and average farm size grew by hundreds of acres in the sixties, seventies, and eighties. By 1997, farmers interviewed for the McLean County Farm Interview Project were unequivocal: 1,000 acres were the minimum needed to survive. Fewer but larger farms produced more corn and soybeans.

Urban sprawl nipped at McLean County’s open space from the opposite direction, following national trends that saw cities devouring the countryside voraciously, as population growth combined with income growth to encourage families to move to “the country.” Better highways and speedier automobiles made greater distances from work manageable. The result: From 1970 to 1990, Illinois’ population increased by 4 percent, but its farmland and green space declined by 35 percent.

Bloomington-Normal’s population totals were undergoing a major increase in those years. Since first growing sharply with the arrival of the railroads in the

1850s and 1860s, Bloomington's population had gone up only slightly for decades; its 1900 total of 23,286 inhabitants had risen by 1940 only to 32,868, and by 1950 to 34,163. And by 1960 its 36,271 inhabitants still did not place Bloomington on the census list of Illinois urbanized areas. Normal counted only 9,772 residents in the 1950 census; this rose to just 13,357 in 1960. But more rapid growth for both cities began at that point: Bloomington went from 39,992 in 1970, to 44,189 in 1980, up to 51,972 in 1990. Totals for Normal were even more dramatic: 26,396 in 1970, 35,672 in 1980, and 40,023 in 1990. McLean County's population, already 59.2 percent urban in 1960, reached 75.1 percent urban by 1990. This meant that population pressures were increasing in Central Illinois as in many areas across the nation.

Scattered voices raised concern over rapid urban development, but while some communities across the nation managed to limit expansion outside specific boundaries, such decisions eluded McLean County. Both Illinois State University and State Farm Insurance underwent boom times starting in the 1960s, and State Farm kept constructing new centers and hiring more employees through the end of the century. A statement by Bloomington mayor Judy Markowitz in 1999 was well within the county's traditions: When a farmer is willing to sell out to a developer, she stated, "I would be very hard pressed to say to a farmer, 'Sorry, you can't sell your land.'" Aided by population growth and abetted by friendly zoning officials, real estate developers usually got their way. And so the county's two largest cities began to spread and spread—eastward to the old Highway 66 roadway by 1967, then beyond, spreading northward and southward. The Bloomington-Normal metropolitan area had 4,392 people per square mile in 1960, but this had fallen to 3,534 people per square mile by 1980. The latter year's lower figure did not reveal a declining population—only a sprawling one.

This dual attack from agriculture and urban sprawl reduced the size of natural areas rapidly. Governments also participated. Trees were chopped down in the 1960s to create the new Evergreen Lake reservoir just as they had fallen to create Lake Bloomington in the 1920s; the new interstate highways took many others. Predictably, waterways began to suffer. Runoff from fields and city streets alike brought a sharp decline in the quality of the Mackinaw River, the county's major stream. The Mackinaw basin soon had one of the highest sediment yield rates in the broader Illinois River basin. As a result, nearly a quarter of the

fish and mussels once known to the Mackinaw had disappeared as the century closed.

The McLean County Board reported that there were still 17,000 acres of timberland in the county in 1957, but this was being reduced by 1,000 acres a year—down to 7,000 acres by 1967. Soon after, the U.S. Soil Conservation Service gave out the opinion that the county's woodlands would all be gone in another six years. Most forested plots were in private hands. A study in 1967 found that of the county's 1,173 square miles, only three square miles were in public parks, and lake areas within those three square miles reduced the total to basically a single square mile for hiking, picnicking, etc. Of course, the public hiked as well in Funks Grove, a privately held forest.

It all meant that there were few places for an increasingly urban population to go if they wanted to hike in natural areas, "to range this widespread garden," as Henry David Thoreau suggested. Illinois' ratio of public recreational land per 1,000 people was lowest in the nation, and the 27-county east-central region had the lowest percentage of total public recreation land of any region in Illinois. There was widespread belief that McLean County's scarcity of public recreational lands was the state's worst.

What existed in the county for public use outside city parks were: Dawson Lake, a 760-acre county recreation area; three public areas (80 acres, 150 acres, and 37 acres) at Lake Bloomington; West Park, a county-run park between LeRoy and Ellsworth (20 acres); and land around 600-acre Lake Evergreen, still undeveloped as the reservoir was being created in the late 1960s.

Goaded by these facts, some residents began to discuss changes. The Bloomington Planning Department, with financial aid from the *Pantagraph*, surveyed area needs for recreation in 1965. The resulting Bartholomew Report found that the county needed 5,000 acres for outdoor recreation. The McLean County Board followed this up by commissioning a similar study in 1967 which saw an urgent need for expanded recreational areas. In early 1967, the League of Women Voters organized a roundtable discussion in Bloomington, during which 19 panelists discussed the growing needs for a park and recreation system. Although the panelists urged the county board to act, several expressed doubts that county supervisors could or would provide the needed leadership. Many left the meeting still holding the belief that McLean County voters would not vote to tax themselves for county parks and recreation areas without a "real selling job."



The changing greens of spring lure many hikers along ParkLands pathways.

There was abundant evidence that residents were “tax shy.” McLean County was known as a bastion of antitax conservatism. Starting in 1954, voters in several communities faced proposals to set up park districts, but over the next 13 years the plans were blocked everywhere but in Lexington. In Bloomington-Normal, voters rejected such a plan in 1954 by 3,347 to 2,073; in 1962, park districts lost narrowly in LeRoy, 359 to 324, and Downs, 258 to 163. Chenoa voted down a park district in 1965 by 258 to 163. In 1967, however, Lexington said “Yes” to a local park district by 281-123, although its main purpose was to provide funds for a swimming pool.

Later, in 1985, the issue was put squarely to county voters, asking them to decide on forming a county conservation district, with power to levy taxes up to 10 cents per \$100 of assessed valuation without voter approval. Care of the newly created Comlara Park at Lake Evergreen—leased by Bloomington to the county—was at the center of the debate, and opponents contended that the state was going to take it over, removing the need for more local taxes.

“Records show that only 50 percent of the [Comlara] park users are from McLean County,” stated one letter-writer to the *Pantagraph*. “Why burden the whole county for the recreation of a few...? I can see no dire consequences in turning Comlara over to the state.” Another wrote that the park’s \$250,000 annual maintenance cost should be “spread out among the taxpayers of the entire 102 counties” of Illinois; why ask the county’s taxpayers “to support a park that may soon be abandoned for lack of attendance.”

The issue of elitism surfaced also. Only a few people wanted to get out and hike, it was argued in the Letters columns: Why raise taxes to keep Comlara “as a place where a relatively small number of residents can go to get away from it all”? Another called Evergreen a “private sailing lake at everyone’s expense.”

Supporters of the plan were unable to overcome such arguments, and the proposal went down to defeat on November 5, 1985, by a vote of 6,967 to 4,906.

Neighboring counties to the east and west—Champaign County and the tri-county group of Peoria, Woodford, and Tazewell Counties—had earlier moved in different ways to meet the need for open space. Champaign County launched its project soon after World War II, creating Lake of the Woods near Mahomet as a large, and growing, county park in 1948. Combining a swimming area with gardens, savanna, and forest, within 20 years it was so successful that half its maintenance funds came from park users. Its tax rate was only 2.4 cents per \$100—far below the 10 cents that worried writers of letters to the editor in McLean County in 1985.

To the west, the Forest Park Foundation—established in 1938 in Peoria by a \$2.5 million gift from the president of the Keystone Steel & Wire Co.—had started purchasing open space land throughout the tri-county region, its holdings growing to 12,000 acres in the 1960s. The foundation had also stimulated the Peoria Park District to expand by providing the district with “seed money” for land acquisition. The Forest Park Foundation’s spokesman by the mid-1960s was William Rutherford, administrative vice president. There were state and national models for both the Champaign County and Forest Park Foundation approaches, such as the Cook County Forest Preserve system launched at the turn of the century, and the private Nature Conservancy, organized in 1957 to acquire ecologically important land and protect it from development. In Iowa, meanwhile, there were 91 county conservation boards among the state’s 99 counties, which set aside more than 27,000 acres of land for public use.

All this—declining open space, successes nearby and nationally in efforts to preserve natural areas—formed the world that Central Illinois looked out on in the decade of the 1960s. It put mounting pressure on the McLean County Board, which in 1967 authorized a far-reaching recreation plan study, which concluded in its report two years later:

We in McLean County must decide whether to entrust our diminishing recreation sources to chance and haphazard development or to use them in a fashion that recognizes their full potential to society. To derive most benefit from them, we must adopt a planned program of development and preservation. Now is the time.

The county's shortcomings, its antitax history, and the attitudes stirred by the growing environmental movement formed important parts of the background when Loring Merwin, publisher of the *Pantagraph*, mentioned at the League of Women Voters panel discussion in January 1967 that "a group of interested persons had been meeting informally to discuss the park question for some months." Next day's article on the panel in Merwin's newspaper added that the informal sessions referred to had come to the "tentative conclusion" that it might be best for a nonprofit group to begin acquiring land which could someday become park sites.

All this was part of the developing dream of Loring Merwin, great-grandson of Jesse W. Fell and longtime advocate of many community causes. Just as Fell is remembered for establishing Illinois State Normal University, founding the town of Normal, planting trees throughout campus and town, and establishing the *Pantagraph* and two predecessor newspapers—so, too, Merwin labored long and hard for the betterment of the Bloomington-Normal area. There are many monuments as part of his legacy. Close friends and family members agree that Merwin was conscious of the Fell heritage of working on projects to benefit the whole community. "Within our family, he was the one who was most interested in family history," his nephew Davis Merwin would later recall. Upon Loring Merwin's death in 1972, a *Pantagraph* editorial emphasized his work for "Downtown development, long-range planning, recreation, preservation of natural resources, United Community Services, art, literature, music, scholarship, history.... Probably no man in the history of McLean County had exercised so much influence over so many constructive projects as Mr. Merwin." And in Palm Springs, California, where he

and his wife, Marjorie, maintained a home, he was a trustee of the Living Desert Museum, a preserved slice of the desert Southwest.

There is a lack of agreement as to exactly when Loring Merwin began bringing groups of people together to discuss the area's lack of recreational land. Some say it started in 1964; others mention later times. Louise Bosworth, his secretary for 30 years, recalled, "The first I knew of his work, he got a group of people together, invited them to lunch at the YWCA cafeteria" in downtown Bloomington. Two of the earliest persons asked to take formal roles in the organization Merwin was building were Guy Fraker and Dorothy Sands. Both had substantial records in local volunteer activities, and both had needed skills—Fraker was a young lawyer able to handle land titles, and Sands was a certified public accountant. Sands had arrived in the community in 1950, Fraker in 1962; neither had been involved in environmental work although both considered themselves lovers of the outdoors. Some of the others who joined these early meetings included Stanley Lantz, the *Pantagraph's* farm reporter; county board member Ron Smith; Bill Brown, Illinois Farm Bureau secretary for natural resources; H. Clay Tate, *Pantagraph* editor; Paige Proctor; Timothy Ives, radio station WJBC president and also a descendant of Jesse W. Fell; Ray Danielson, regional vice president of State Farm Insurance; and Ted Hafer.

Records of Merwin's comments at these early meetings reveal his concern for vanishing wild lands. He told one session: "Two things are obvious: Potential outdoor recreation land here is disappearing under the plow and under plans for residential subdivision; and the taxpaying public is not yet ready to act."

There are no dissenting votes to the proposition that Loring Merwin deserves full recognition as founder of ParkLands. Guy Fraker, brought on board by Merwin at the organization's birth and still one of its most active members, called Merwin "the driving force" in the endeavor: "He was a visionary, and he had the presence in the community required to launch such an effort." Everyone interviewed for this project echoed a statement by Elmo Franklin, a member of the first ParkLands Board of Directors. Merwin, he said, "was the key.... I wouldn't think it would have happened without his leadership. He got the community involved."

Just as the creation of most national parks and monuments came from the work of one or two individuals (for example, Yosemite, Starr King and John Muir; Grand Canyon, John Wesley Powell and Clarence Edward Dutton; Glacier, George Bird Grinnell; Rocky

Mountain, Enos Mills; Colorado National Monument, John Otto) so ParkLands must stand forever as the product of both the dream and the persistence of Loring Merwin. His former *Pantagraph* editor H. Clay Tate recalled that he had advised Merwin that the idea for ParkLands “was impossibly good.... The results couldn’t justify the effort.” It was reported that Merwin’s friends told him “he would be expending his energies on a hopeless cause.” But he labored on, and when the organization honored Loring Merwin in 1971 as he stepped down as vice president, it noted that he was both “instigator and driving force” behind ParkLands. John W. Yoder, an early director, said that the new title decided on for him was “‘founder’ instead of simply emeritus so Mr. Merwin’s role will be better understood in future years.”

It is also widely accepted that a major influence on Merwin in his quest to save recreational space was William Rutherford, leader of the privately held Forest Park Foundation in Peoria, later Illinois director of conservation, and founder in 1978 of Wildlife Prairie Park. Davis Merwin called Rutherford “a very great influence” on Loring Merwin. “He got him started thinking about ParkLands.”

Rutherford, a compelling speaker who regards protecting natural areas as “a compact between the dead and the living and the unborn,” was a friend of Merwin, and the two sometimes went aloft in Rutherford’s light plane to survey Central Illinois from on high, checking likely recreational sites in a platbook held in Merwin’s lap. The Peoria attorney’s view of the land was far-ranging. He saw the outdoors as a museum for people to become personally involved in their area’s history, geology, and ecology; as areas for hunters, fishermen, picnickers, horseback riders, and others; to make the area a more pleasant place to live as an attraction for both employees and employers; and to relieve social pressures in the cities.

The Forest Park Foundation in Peoria had been involved for years acquiring land along the Illinois River for recreational purposes, usually turning it over to communities and counties. Merwin “was interested in forming an organization like ours in Bloomington to help preserve land,” Rutherford recalled. And Merwin began inviting the Peorian to meet with some of the McLean County residents he was recruiting for the developing ParkLands project.

At the first ParkLands annual meeting, Rutherford showed slides that contrasted scenes in Europe with those around Peoria: “Those poor Germans don’t pave over their parks,” he commented facetiously as he showed a slide of a flowered lakeside. “They’re putting

parking for 2,000 cars under that lake you see.” He also observed that “[o]nce land is put to some other use, it will be the next ice age before we can get it back.... Not every child can go to a cabin in Michigan or to a cottage in Florida to enjoy space and clean water. Why in heaven’s name don’t we have them here?”

And he announced to the ParkLands group: “I’d be very much surprised—if you can believe this dream Loring Merwin has—if you don’t succeed.”

Merwin planned the opening steps carefully. Aware of the history of rural opposition to governmental acquisition of land, he turned for much of the leadership to people from rural areas. Dorothy Sands recalls of those early months, “He devised the structure of a large board of directors that included at least one outstanding citizen from each township of the county. And he persuaded successful farmer Clarence Ropp, who was widely known and admired and was politically active at that time, to accept the presidency.” As Stanley Lantz would later conclude in discussing Merwin’s early selection moves, “They squelched farm opposition.”

After the certificate of incorporation was issued by the state on June 28, 1967, Merwin brought together Ropp, Arlo Bane, Adlai Rust, and Lafayette Funk, for the board of directors’ first meeting. (Funk, whose roots also reached back to early McLean County and whose family had long protected the massive forest known as Funks Grove, provided another link with rural areas and remained a strong influence within the organization, receiving an honorary lifetime membership at the ParkLands annual meeting in 1984.) A nominating committee for trustees was set up, made up of Dorothy Sands, Stanley Lantz, and Merwin; a nominating committee for the board of directors was also named: Ray Danielson, Guy Fraker, Dorothy Sands, Stanley Lantz, Elmo Franklin, Tom Hilligoss, and Merwin. In addition to those who attended the June 28 session, others picked for the first board of directors were Floyd Bossingham, Parker Kemp, Karl Mays, Paul Snow, Dwight Stephens, and Mrs. A. W. Tompkins Sr. Sixty-nine trustees were named, from Bloomington and Normal and all parts of the county—Stanford and Bellflower as well as Cropsey and Gridley, Saybrook and Lexington as well as Danvers and Chenoa. Four committees were set up: finance, land acquisition, legal, and publicity.

Participants in those early meetings recall one of Loring Merwin’s special abilities: He knew where money was in the community, and whom to “touch.” Interviews brought out recollections of Merwin’s

knowledge and skills in this category, and ParkLands minutes have such revealing items as this, from December 8, 1970, referring to a luncheon given by the *Pantagraph* at Bloomington Country Club for some 40 local business leaders: "Mr. Merwin also reported that he had received no response from Mr. Harper of Northern Illinois Gas Co., but that he had had lunch with the President, Mr. Gauthier, the day before and expected to hear from him on the possible gift of the 57 acres."

The first ParkLands meeting for directors and trustees, at East Bay Camp on July 19, 1967, was presented with a challenge grant: The group would be given \$25,000 if it could raise \$75,000 by July 1, 1968. At a board meeting the following January it was revealed that the challenge came from the Forest Park Foundation's William L. Rutherford. Fund-raising efforts met a rapid response, and when the board met on July 15, 1968, it was announced that gifts totalling \$80,600 had been received, assuring that the \$25,000 would be awarded and ratifying Rutherford's great expectations.

The organization's fund-raising aimed at its broader goal: acquiring forested land that would in turn be given to the state or county governments. As the *Pantagraph* explained: "The foundation does not develop parks and recreational areas. It is an acquisition body which in turn makes the land available to the proper public body for development and use." And the newspaper revealed the basic reason behind Merwin's decision to form the group: "Other efforts to get a park and recreational program off the ground in this area have failed, primarily because people feared the property tax involved. Here is a way to get a good start on such a program without a direct tax and without financial difficulties for anyone."

As explained later by Guy Fraker—who since 1967 has handled the legal end of ParkLands land acquisitions—the organization saw itself as a conduit for land, taking it from willing donors and sellers and conveying it to the county or state for ownership and management. Locating potential sites to be drawn into this conduit drove the early months of the organization. Land possibilities were discussed at the September 20, 1967, directors' meeting, and "[e]ach person present was asked to make a written list of suggestions as to land suitable for recreation which is owned by persons who might be willing to either donate or sell such land to the Foundation." Soon a specific target emerged, as the directors voted unanimously to set a goal of 5,000 acres in three years. (Dorothy Sands recalled that the

figure of 5,000 was "just picked...out of the air, to show we meant business. This was not going to be a dribble here, a dribble there.")

The directors also heard Rutherford, again, at the September 20 meeting, offering advice on seeking land donations—advice based on the Forest Park Foundation's experiences as it sought 23,000 acres of new parkland for Peoria in a 10-year campaign. His advice included:

- "In soliciting donations, the unique nature of this [ParkLands] should be emphasized. The gift has real identity and is of a permanent nature. Always suggest naming any donated area for the donor.
- "In looking at a prospective tract, traditional approaches to evaluation should be forgotten as any piece of land could be valuable for park purposes.
- "We should not become bogged down with the operation of parks but rather should exist solely for the purpose of acquisition and preserving the land for the time there is a suitable government unit for this purpose."

Also at that early fall meeting of 1967, ParkLands received its first land, as recorded in the minutes: "It was announced by Mr. Ropp that Elisabeth Stubblefield and her sister, Louise Stubblefield, had tentatively offered to the Foundation a five-acre tract of land in the vicinity of Funks Grove."

The young organization was on the move, in touch with McLean County's past—through the Stubblefield-Funk and Merwin's Jesse W. Fell connections—as well as its future. But Loring Merwin's dream would have some difficult encounters, even some nightmares, in its early years.





CHAPTER FOUR

The New Organization in Action

If we want to see bluebells, we've got to grab land because it is disappearing so fast," ParkLands Director Stanley Lantz, the *Pantagraph's* farm editor, warned the Bloomington Young Men's Club at their meeting at the Illinois House on May 6, 1969.

Lantz's appearance before the Young Men was part of a multipronged campaign that dispatched ParkLands leaders to the clubs, troops, neighborhood groups, and other gatherings of McLean County citizens, in a flurry of activity that extended through the first years after its 1967 founding. Leaders spread the word far and near about the developing environmental crisis while plugging the new organization's aims: raising money, then acquiring forested areas by gift or purchase. If the main aims were general, two initial goals were specific: raising \$75,000 in one year to meet the Forest Park Foundation's challenge grant, and acquiring 5,000 forested acres in three years. As Clarence Ropp, the group's first president, emphasized, "Obtaining this minimum goal will demonstrate that people are willing to provide recreational opportunity for themselves and their children on a voluntary basis."

Publicity and land-seeking went hand in hand and frequently had a multiplying effect. Presentations before groups of citizens to explain ParkLands's goals sometimes led to others learning of the project, either through word of mouth or newspaper coverage. Not infrequently this brought a donation of money or land. For while Loring Merwin's ability to ferret out potential donors won considerable praise from those who saw him in action, board members were increasingly impressed with the numbers of people who came forward on their own with unsolicited gifts. And those numbers would grow over the years.

Publicity was needed because of the nontraditional nature, the novelty, of the concept. "It was a new idea to the public here," Dorothy Sands recalled, "that land that had been in a family for generations could be protected from developers, real estate people, or logging." The remaining hardwood forests of Central Illinois were highly prized, and it was assumed that owners would not part with them easily. They were

valuable for lumber, even beyond their potential for becoming farmland, Sands noted. (During ParkLands's incubation period a large walnut tree was rustled from Funks Grove.) But once the word got out regarding what ParkLands was about, "[p]eople responded to the concept, landowners responded, of keeping land for our kids," Sands said, "and many who didn't own land were interested, so they gave money." Dale Birkenholz, who joined the board in 1970, saw part of the reason for the group's success in the fact that "[i]t went along with the conservatism of the area, private initiative. This was one reason it was so popular around here."

Early land-seeking meetings provided something of an arena for making an inventory of remaining woodlands. A typical gathering occurred February 8, 1968, in the Danvers home of Director (later ParkLands president) John Hodge, area superintendent of the Agriculture Stabilization and Conservation Service, as related by Hodge at the next ParkLands board meeting:

Mr. Hodge reported on the general format of the meeting, the purpose of which was to acquaint people from that area with the purposes of ParkLands and to make a meaningful inventory of possible acquisition sites in that area. This is a new approach to the acquisition problem. It was hoped that the more eminent and informal atmosphere would be conducive to fruitful discussion. A substantial number of prospective tracts were uncovered by this means and the consensus of those listening to the report in attendance at the meeting is that this format has great potential as a means of acquiring sites for the purpose of ParkLands.

Floyd Bossingham of Stanford also reported on contacts he and Dan Laesch of Bloomington had made, and after further discussion, the minutes recorded that "it was suggested that meetings of this type should be held by the members."

Similar gatherings were reported during the months following Hodge's and Bossingham's reports. A typical session at Elmo Franklin's house in

Lexington in February 1969 was reported in the minutes. It was

attended by the P. M. Kellers, the Ed Cooks, the Ollie Meyerses, the Glenn Kemps, and Mrs. Mattie Woodard. The group discussed land owners in the area who might make gifts to ParkLands. Also Parker Kemp is to inventory the land along the Mackinaw up to the Gregory Church; it is to be sold, and Glenn Kemp felt that perhaps ParkLands could secure some of it by purchase or gift. The meeting at Ted Hafer's house has been postponed until Feb. 28, and Mr. Hodge and Mr. Lantz will attend to that. The meetings still to be held at the homes of Lowell Risser, Charles Beeler, Karl Mays and Dwight Stephens have not yet had a date set.

Merwin's crew was scouring the region to locate forested sites for acquisition. Every directors' meeting brought references to specific tracts, such as the April 30, 1968, session, where "John Hodge mentioned two tracts on the Mackinaw near that given previously by Mr. Merwin.... Mr. Bane indicated that Elisabeth Stubblefield knew of a prospect in Gridley. It was suggested that she and Ray Danielson follow up on this. Mr. Lantz reported on other acquisition possibilities in the area of Mr. Merwin's Tazewell County tract and Mr. Funk then discussed the possibility of certain donations in his family."

The list of acquisitions began to lengthen. ParkLands seemed to be catching on. As noted in chapter three, the Stubblefield property was first—some five acres of second-growth maple, known as the Hougham property and once owned by Mrs. Sue Hougham Stubblefield, mother of donors Elisabeth and Louise Stubblefield. Loring Merwin himself gave the second piece of timbered property, 20 acres in Tazewell County, the "Lilly tract" (discussed below), reported on October 24, 1967. One month later announcement was made of the gift of 10 acres adjoining East Bay Camp at Lake Bloomington, from Mrs. Frank Breen, librarian at Withers Public Library. The Breen acreage was part of an old oak stand once known as the Gildersleeve Timber, started as a tree farm by the late Frank Breen, founder and director of East Bay Camp. The Merwin family then gave an additional two acres, located in the Twin Grove area on Highway 9. In less than two years, ParkLands received eight gifts of less than 100 acres and some \$50,000 for acquisition.

Meanwhile, the presentations continued, and few groups were immune from being asked to serve as hosts

for a talk and slide show on ParkLands. By late November of 1969, Stanley Lantz informed his fellow directors that ParkLands slides were being shown almost weekly to interested groups. One early audience, the Bloomington Kiwanis Club, responded quickly and decided they would purchase and plant trees. By mid-May of 1970, the minutes reported that the Kiwanians had planted 5,500 black walnut and pine trees on the Hall property, a 13-acre tract within Bloomington which had been donated by the family of the late Judge Homer Hall.

Lantz later recalled that aid from county groups in both money and muscle was extensive. "Bloomington Kiwanis was first in order, both in size of cash and volunteer work," he said. "Kiwanis rented a tree planter, actually planted thousands of trees at their expense." Other help in the early months came from the John Wesley Powell Audubon Society, Rotary Club, Exchange Club, PEO, Daughters of the American Revolution, and numerous Boy Scout and Cub Scout troops as well as school groups. Later local garden clubs helped propagate trees and shrubs for replanting. Also, gifts began to be included in wills, newly redrawn as word of the organization spread. A clue as to the effectiveness of ParkLands's outreach effort was contained in the minutes of the September 21, 1971, meeting, when discussion centered on the need for a tree planter: "It was suggested that \$200 coming from Phi Kappa Delta also go toward this project." (The Illinois State University professional fraternity voted the gift after hearing John Hodge present the ParkLands story.)

ParkLands strove to keep one issue before the public: collecting the forested areas as an eventual gift to a governmental agency. As the Pantagraph noted in reporting Stanley Lantz's 1969 talk to the Young Men's Club, "Tracts donated to ParkLands will be turned over to the county, towns or other public bodies, Mr. Lantz told club members."

That the County Board was the presumed recipient-to-be was often implied. ParkLands Director John English also served on the County Board's Parks and Recreation Committee, and he informed the ParkLands board in late 1968 that the county committee was recommending creation of a Department of Parks for McLean County, funded through the county budget with an appointed parks commissioner.

In early 1970 ParkLands directors met with the County Board's Recreation Committee and countered the committee's worries about financial problems that would accompany acquisition of any additional recreational land. Chairman Everett Yoder told ParkLands representatives that money appropriated for the county's planning and development at Lake Bloomington

could not be used for acquiring land. Further, the possibility of securing federal funds was very slight, and there was a “big expense” on county properties. To Hodge’s suggestion that the county highway department work with the Recreation Committee on a part-time basis, Yoder replied that the department was too busy to help that year. Creation of a County Parks and Recreation Department was a long-term goal, Yoder added, but “this was not something that could be done in a hurry.”

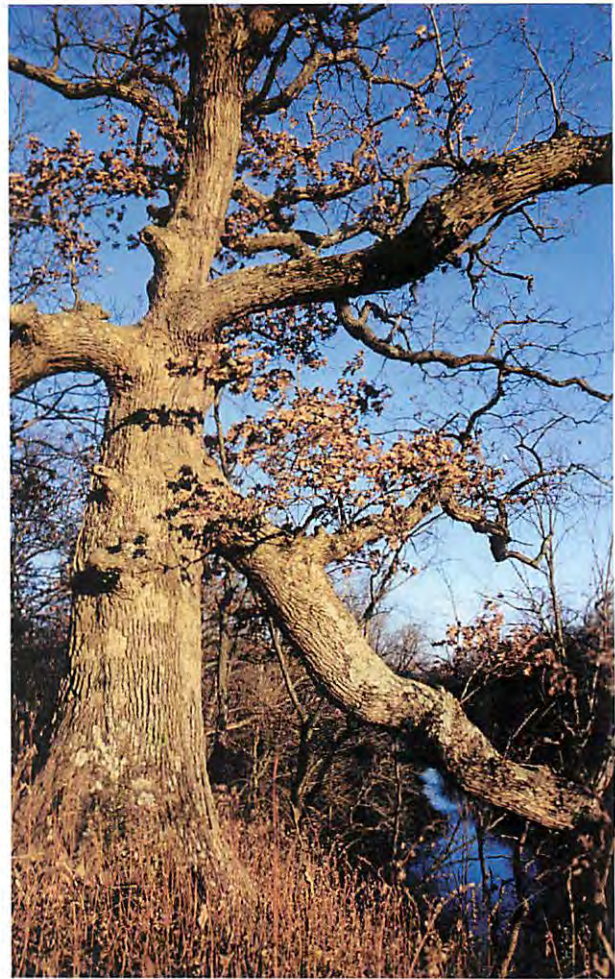
(As Stanley Lantz would later explain, “At the beginning, we had hoped to turn [land] over to the county. They didn’t have funds to staff it. Still do not.”)

Despite discouragement over their lack of success with the County Board, the ParkLands directors could take heart from the growing enthusiasm for their project among the general public as well as the swelling acreage of donated properties. The list of initial land gifts included the Stubblefield, Merwin, Breen, and Hall holdings, already noted, plus other gifts of land from Frank Hubert, Robert Parker, the George White family, the daughters of Carleton Howe (Patricia Page and Martha Gogel), Frieda Frey and son Carl, Vic Armstrong, Bill Ohlendorf, Northern Illinois Gas Company, Olive Stubblefield, the Charles Brennan estate, and Edward Shelley—all in the organization’s opening months of operation. In addition, the second annual meeting in July 1968 learned that the Forest Park challenge had been met: ParkLands had raised \$75,000 and so could receive the Peoria foundation’s \$25,000—meaning that the first-year goal of \$100,000 had been reached.

After the frenetic activity during ParkLands’s first year perhaps a slowdown could have been predicted. Celebrations over those initial victories revealed a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment settling over the membership. Efforts began to lag. John Hodge, who had succeeded Clarence Ropp as president in 1968, noted the falloff in activity as the group approached its second annual meeting in 1969:

Mr. Hodge stated, and the [d]irectors agreed, that the big problem facing ParkLands at this time was to find a suitable project to spark a drive that would culminate at the Annual Meeting. The president noted that, except for the [Robert J.] Parker gift, no land has been acquired since the last annual meeting. Several possibilities were discussed, but no conclusion was reached, and members agreed to think further and advise the president of their ideas.

A new “spark” soon appeared, and its name was Lilly.



A popular landmark in the Merwin Nature Preserve, this ancient white oak stands watch over the flowing Mackinaw River below. White oaks could often survive the prairie fires that were perennial occurrences before settlement.

The Merwin gift of 20 heavily wooded acres west of Danvers, some 18 miles from Bloomington, north of the town of Lilly in Tazewell County, had been one of the early ParkLands acquisitions. As early as May 1969 the directors discussed lands along the Mackinaw in “what might be called Mackinaw Bluff Park (lands of Merwin, Lee Pray, Harry Mehl and the George White family)....” The fact that William Rutherford had just come into office as director of conservation for the State of Illinois, appointed by incoming governor Richard Ogilvie, was another favorable factor in the background as these plans were developing. Rutherford had inspected the Lilly area in 1969 and suggested that ParkLands try to put together enough land there to create a state park; he had aided in those efforts, too. And now that same Rutherford—whose fiery oratory had whipped up early enthusiasm in the organization—was the driving force behind a new state

government campaign to acquire recreational lands for more state parks. It seemed an ideal combination, fitting in perfectly with ParkLands's goals.

Soon a tract near Lilly with a potential for 2,000 acres or more was taking shape, partly donated, partly purchased, partly only long-term dream. Tim G. Soldwedel, chairman of both the Pekin Park District and the state's Environmental Advisory Board, labored extensively in seeking land gifts and options for ParkLands to make the first stage of the project a reality. Some ParkLands members even talked of something more grandiose: a band of forest for public hiking, biking, and fishing stretching along the Mackinaw River from its origins in eastern McLean County, across the tip of Woodford County, and ultimately connecting with this planned state park in Tazewell County.

By May 1970, ParkLands's Lilly acquisitions had grown to include the donated Merwin tract, 20 acres; the donated White tract, 80 acres; the Long tract of 86 acres, purchased for \$21,500; and the Howe tract of 244 acres, from a combination gift and \$19,000 purchase. The total was 430 acres, with options for the 274-acre Nehmelman tract, an additional 182-acre Long tract, a Holtzman tract of 40 acres, and a Knuppel tract of 40 acres; an additional 120 acres was also listed as a possibility.

The ParkLands board then moved to offer to the state "our entire holdings in the Lilly Orchard area of Tazewell County," including optioned lands, with repayment covering only ParkLands's direct costs. Three conditions were specified:

1. "That it would be entitled PARKLANDS CONSERVATION AREA."
2. "That it would memorialize the donors of the various tracts in some fashion."
3. "That it would be developed within [10] years."

The successful drive for Tazewell County lands helped turn out an enthusiastic crowd of 111 people who met at Baumgart Chapel on July 13, 1970, for the ParkLands annual meeting. The organization was only three years old and had already accomplished its major goal: acquiring forested land and presenting it to the state for use as a public recreational area. It was with understandable pride that President John Hodge called the previous 12 months "a 'vintage' year," as he hailed the Lilly tract achievement and stressed that "the park would be impossible without ParkLands."

The organization then turned its attention to acquisitions in other areas, such as the eventual Merwin Nature Preserve (see chapter five), while it waited for the state to act on the Lilly tract. Anxieties and frustrations began to develop within the leadership, which

had expected ParkLands's early momentum and can-do spirit to carry over to the Illinois Department of Conservation. But nothing happened. Three years after that gift to the state, at the directors' meeting in March 1973, concerns were raised about the state's inaction, and at the November 1973 meeting the board "discussed at some length" the Lilly tract gift "and the failure of the state to carry through on this matter." Two months later, in January 1974, Director Dale Birkenholz delivered a report on the Department of Conservation's torpor.

But perhaps the final blow, and the ultimate signal that something was seriously wrong, came when ParkLands president Stanley Lantz met with top Conservation Department officials. As he later described the event to the board on November 8, 1977: "Lantz reported escorting Illinois Conservation Director Dr. David Kenney and [the] assistant director of planning for the department on a tour of the nature trails. Neither was aware of the Lilly area tract." Birkenholz, however, said that some lower-ranking employees in the department were aware and were even planning public access and use. And then a report reached ParkLands that the state planned to build a fish hatchery on the site.

Some members were furious. "We were 'badly burned,'" Dorothy Sands recalled. "The state said they would put in trails, would protect it. They blew the whole project.... They never had anything planned. They were cavalierly careless."

Stanley Lantz blamed it on the change in state administrations, which brought into office men and women who had not been part of the original agreement. "The governor at the time—Olgive—gave us his promise, on paper, that there would be no hunting on it. But different governors come, and different legislatures, so you can never count on anything like that."

Chicago Tribune outdoor columnist John Husar would later write that without funds to develop the property properly "the state waffled badly in its management, allowing local folks to do pretty much what they pleased. Part of it became a dump ground." In reality, the *Tribune* writer pointed out, the tract had much wildlife, "including a trickle of endangered plants and one rare thrush, the veery." But there was also "rampant erosion" that needed to be corrected.

Not until 1980—10 years after having presented the Lilly tract to the state—did ParkLands finally receive some assurances of action. At the annual meeting that September at Funks Grove Church, a representative of the Illinois Department of Conservation told the group that the new state budget had funds for "low-level development of the Lilly tract—a parking lot, service

building, and someone to be present to answer visitors' questions." Two years later, in 1982, the state invested \$650,000 to purchase additional acreage, enlarging the Lilly tract to 1,185 acres with plans to expand it to 2,000 acres. Action now seemed assured.

But frustration began to build again within ParkLands as months went by without any more state activity. Dale Birkenholz met from time to time with Department of Conservation employees, but by late 1983 he told the board there was still "no progress...on the installation of the trail" at Lilly. In a December 1983 visit, Birkenholz found the DOC's Woodford County headquarters in "dire straits," its inadequate staff even lacking transportation to haul their tractor to the site. "I believe that the chance for development at the Lilly area at the present time is bleak," he stated.

Problems began to crop up. As 1984 progressed, the state announced squirrel hunting would be permitted at Lilly, and the Mackinaw Valley Riding Club requested riding privileges there. Such actions disturbed the ParkLands board, and Director Ron MacPherson called for a directive to the state that there be "no intensive use, including hunting or riding." The state's plans would conflict with ParkLands's "original intent," he stressed.

But further inaction by the state, and the realization that other pressures were building and would likely force a compromise, led ParkLands in 1986 to set up a meeting with the Department of Conservation to

have each side lay out its position. Moved to act, the state had prepared a new plan by late 1987, but the two DOC representatives who met with the ParkLands board warned of the "political difficulties which may arise" in getting this new compromise plan through. Eager to assure the Lilly site some sort of state-protected status, the ParkLands board voted unanimously to support the DOC plan "even though it allowed hunting." The minutes added: "While some of the Board are basically opposed to hunting, it was agreed that a spirit of compromise was necessary in order to have a decent plan adopted." Meanwhile, donors of some of the tracts at Lilly would need to be consulted.

The compromise called for reforestation of some areas to create a "solid 600 acres of timber," moving dove hunting fields to the western portion, and setting aside 60 acres along the Mackinaw as a dedicated nature preserve. All this would be laid out at a public hearing. "The Lilly tract is coming to a head," the ParkLands board was told in March 1988.

Many residents of the Lilly-Mackinaw area, learning of the new state plan, began to push back. Some claimed their local governments were suffering yearly property tax losses of \$17,000 because the land, once privately held, was now removed from the tax rolls. Hunters exploded with anger at the announcement that the new Mackinaw River State Fish and Wildlife Area would include a "no hunting" district made up of a 40-acre nature preserve plus another 32-acre "natural area."



Spring brings bluebells to the Merwin Nature Preserve in the Mackinaw floodplain. For many Central Illinois residents "Let's go see the bluebells at ParkLands" has become an annual spring invitation.

"There is an indication that the Department of Conservation now intends to again lock out current users (hunters) to portions of this property," a group of Mackinaw area residents charged in an open letter. The group also claimed that further state land purchases were planned. Their angry letter was backed by resolutions passed by the Tazewell County Board and the Mackinaw Township Board. State legislators were called in.

At a stormy public hearing that packed some 300 people into the Deer Creek-Mackinaw School gymnasium on April 5, 1988, demands for snowmobiling and horseback riding on the proposed fish and wildlife area were voiced, while hunters called for elimination of the entire nature preserve idea. The air in the gymnasium was "heavy with tension," the *Chicago Tribune* reported. Many of the audience's comments revealed the Lilly tract's long-standing popularity among hunters and their corresponding resentment against outsiders for taking away one of their well-hidden treasures. It was, they felt, a local territory for local people. A Mackinaw representative on the Tazewell County Board even complained about the number of people from the outside who attended the hearing. "I thought this was going to be a local meeting...if you take a consensus of the people just in the area, you [will] find that they resent that you are even here."

Several ParkLands members present countered the local residents' attacks, however. They were especially vocal in backing the nature preserve idea, where hunting would be banned. One ParkLands activist argued that instead of occupying only 3.4 percent of the tract, as in the state's proposal, the nature preserve should be enlarged to at least 20 percent of the acreage. Another ParkLands representative told the audience that he was a hunter "and I'm proud to be in favor of the nature preserve." The main biological necessity behind the preserve, the hearing was told, was the presence there of the heart-leaved plantain, an endangered species.

ParkLands directors came away generally contented with the hearing's final results, paying tribute especially to two state senators from the area, Robert Madigan and John Maitland. The Mehl tract at Lilly had been dedicated as a nature preserve, with chances for expansion. Horses would be banned. The DOC received some 90 responses on the Lilly tract hearing, most favorable.

Others had differing interpretations of the noisy Mackinaw-Deer Creek gathering. The *Tribune's* John Husar saw the angry pro- and antihunting confrontation as "another degrading example of how this state's beleaguered conservation movement has been fragmented." Husar wrote that the Deer Creek-Mackinaw hearing was saved from disaster only by the comments of a rural Hanna City man who argued that hunters were not



Winter is a popular hiking season at ParkLands, when animal tracks mark veritable freeways through the snow and the calls of blue jays announce the visitors.

opposed to nature preserves, but they "have not been leveled with." Confusing, changing proposals for the nonhunting preserve section had been advanced, Fred Kirkpatrick added, but "[i]f things had been approached differently, with better understanding by all parties, we would have fewer problems in making a decision today."

Facing vociferous hostility at the Deer Creek-Mackinaw hearings was something new for ParkLands members, who thus far had basked in community praise for their actions and encountered only occasional, scattered opposition. The outbursts at Deer Creek-Mackinaw turned out to be the prelude to another blast five days later, when the outdoor columnist for the *Pantagraph* showered scorn on the organization over the Lilly tract. This new attack came from the same newspaper—though now owned by the *San Francisco Chronicle* rather than the Merwin and Stevenson families—that had been crucial in preparing the way for ParkLands and building public support during its formative years.

Pantagraph columnist Philip Wright seemed unaware of either ParkLands's history or its organizing philosophy as he prepared his April 10, 1988, column. In 1970, he wrote, the organization had asked the state to take over the Lilly tract "that they had received as a gift." But, Wright noted, "ParkLands wasn't out any money; they got the land free." He added that problems arose "because ParkLands made promises to the original donors of the land to keep it in a natural state. For whatever reasons, ParkLands decided they didn't want to manage the land. So they got the state to take it."

Wright added that ParkLands "wasn't happy just getting rid of the land," but now "wanted to maintain control over how it was to be used. Surely they must have known that giving up ownership, and therefore responsibility, of the land was also giving up control of it." This may have meant that the organization was not

following “wishes of the original donors,” he wrote—“But that is ParkLands’s problem; it shouldn’t be the DOC’s problem 18 years later.” Hunters would not damage the rare heart-leaved plantain, the major endangered plant on the tract, he argued, but since “the ParkLands Foundation must be appeased,” the state had now decided to create a nature preserve, all the while making sportsmen “look like bloodthirsty morons” for opposing it. Throughout Wright’s slashing column, ParkLands members were held up as hypocrites for claiming they were neither antihunting nor an activist group. “They are active, but they aren’t activists,” Wright wrote dismissively.

The Lilly site eventually was left as a partly developed state recreational area, its small nature preserve closed to hunting, with several trails heading out from a main parking lot. “At least it is used by the public somewhat like a state park,” Stanley Lantz would later concede. Dale Birkenholz looked back on the incident as a turning point: “Then on the board, we said: ‘Perhaps we can’t trust public agencies to manage land the way we want to. We’ll have to do it.’”

Part of the reason for the state’s inaction and the organization’s discouragement may have stemmed from William Rutherford’s exit from state government. As noted, the man who had done much to stimulate and encourage ParkLands’s early efforts had been named to newly elected governor Richard Olgiwie’s team in 1969 as director of the Illinois Department of Conservation, just as ParkLands was putting together the Lilly tract. But before the Lilly project had gone very far, Rutherford abruptly resigned his state directorship over the political patronage demands being forced upon his department, including the use of public funds to support a private hunting lodge in Southern Illinois for politicians and their friends. As he later told the *Chicago Tribune*, “I wasn’t going to have taxpayers paying for the entertainment of politicians and the white Cadillac crowd.” He also rejected a personal hunting license request from a state Supreme Court justice. “Promoted” by Olgiwie to another position with a title but no staff, Rutherford quit.

Rutherford’s leave-taking figured in another incident that had also left a sour taste in ParkLands’s collective mouth. “We had planned, with the Funk family, a preserved area,” board member John English recalled. “This would have short trails...it was not going to be big on public use.” But after William Rutherford’s resignation, incoming Conservation Department leaders announced plans for a camping area, never part of the project and one which the Funk family rejected. The project was abruptly canceled.

English’s discouragement was part of the spirit of dejection that ran through ParkLands’s ranks in the 1970s and 1980s after the Lilly and Funks Grove experiences. “I didn’t expect much from the state of Illinois,” English admitted. Neither did others in the organization.

(Nearly two decades later, however, another state commission brought some positive news about ParkLands’s holdings in the Funks Grove area. The State Nature Preserve Commission, increasingly an ally for conservationists, in 1987 dedicated what had been ParkLands’s first land donation as the Stubblefield Wood Lots Nature Preserve, a total of five acres just north of the town of Funks Grove. The commission also voted to designate another land donation there, the 2.5-acre Parker tract, as a National Heritage Landmark to be known as “ParkLands Funks Grove.”)

The experiences with the state of Illinois over the Lilly tracts confronted the organization with a need once again to think deeply about its goals. Only now the deliberations would be conducted with an awareness of the realities of the political—as well as natural—environment. As early as 1972, when nagging doubts had begun cropping up about the Lilly tract, the minutes recorded that “[t]he question, again, was raised as to the use of the land we presently own.” When President Stanley Lantz called for a “Decade of Daring” to be launched by the group at its 1976 annual meeting, the minutes noted his comment: “He also warned against premature granting of the ground to the government.”

But even as members were debating anew the organization’s fundamental goals, the growing popularity of a new tract being put together along the Mackinaw, downstream from Lexington, was leading some to wonder whether ParkLands itself might manage recreational properties.





CHAPTER FIVE

Creating the Merwin Nature Preserve

Even as the Lilly tract was taking shape, ParkLands directors were scouring the countryside for other possibilities. Much of the discussion took place during the long winter months, when McLean County farmers were apt to ponder the future as they scrutinized production, profits, and losses of the previous year. The concept of preserving land for future generations—saving it from the developers, leaving a tangible legacy—began to have appeal as arguments by ParkLands's busy leaders and sympathetic articles in the *Pantagraph* began to lay out the alternative futures for Central Illinois, with or without preservation of natural areas.

In the spring of 1969, discussions held in the Lexington area began to generate some ideas. At a February 17, 1969, gathering in the home of Elmo Franklin, there was talk of some land along the Mackinaw River that was going to be sold. Then ParkLands President John Hodge met with Franklin and area residents Glenn Kemp, Parker Kemp, and Louis Rediger to go over potential sites. Their focus soon centered on some properties in Money Creek Township, downstream and five miles west of Lexington, tracts just north of the Keller Memorial Highway as it made a swing eastward from Lake Bloomington. The group had learned that the owners of one of the tracts there had put their affairs in the hands of a conservator.

The land in question, east of the Gridley Blacktop, was too rugged for raising crops and much had been used as cattle pasture. Long a popular hunting spot, the surrounding woods had also attracted hikers, scout groups, picnickers and others over the years.

Just as ParkLands directors were beginning to examine details of possible moves, a Lexington-area farmer stepped forward. He was Emile Rediger, father of ParkLands Director Louis Rediger.

Emile Rediger and his wife, Viola, owned 107 acres of the broad woods that had been the focus of desire during discussions at Elmo Franklin's house. Emile and Viola, farmers, were also avid hikers who loved the outdoors, filling their free time with rock collecting,

taking Boy Scouts on outings, even setting up an archery range.

Perhaps Emile Rediger's feeling for the freedom and beauty of nature was a reaction against his experiences in the excrescence of the First World War, when he had lied about his age to enlist in the army of his native France. Getting around the age restriction, 17-year-old Emile served in the French cavalry during the closing months of the Great War, before it was finally quiet on the Western front and the decimated French troops returned home to their scarred, shattered nation.

Then a visitor to postwar France named Viola Sommer suddenly entered Emile's life. Viola, from the Lexington area, had French relatives and had gone over to help her grandfather. When she recrossed the Atlantic, two years later, she was followed by Emile, and the two were married in Lexington on June 3, 1925.

The new American threw himself into life in Illinois and McLean County. Emile became a highly successful agriculturist, active in that era's crop experimentation through the University of Illinois Agriculture Department as well as the Seed Corn Producers Board. Gaining U.S. citizenship in the 1930s, Rediger became an active citizen, volunteering for a wide variety of activities in Lexington and around the area. He became president of the Lexington Fire District, was an election judge and active Boy Scout leader, and served on the Lexington School Board as well as the board of directors of the Red Cross and the First United Methodist Church. His Masonic activities were numerous, and he also was active in both the Corn Belt Lapidary and Geological Society, and the Corn Belt Philatelic Society. And he was an early ParkLands enthusiast.

ParkLands was, in fact, a predictable activity for the Redigers. "He liked to get out and walk in the woods," Elmo Franklin noted. Another good Lexington friend of the couple, Mrs. Arlene Winterland, recalled how she and her husband would practice archery with Emile and Viola, on occasion even heading up to Michigan's Upper Peninsula for bow-hunting. Emile



Cross-country skiing quickly became a popular winter activity at ParkLands after the extensive trail system was developed for hikers.

made his own bow and his own arrows, she said, using wood from an Osage orange hedge on his farm: "When he went into anything he did it big."

This spirit led him to become a Boy Scout leader when his son Louis became active in the organization, as well as taking up rock collecting and other outdoor activities in later life. The Redigers purchased the land along the Mackinaw and rented it out for pasture, dredging out a large area to create a pond. Emile and Viola enjoyed floating in their boat on the pond as well as hiking, hunting, and just being in the woods.

"He was interesting," Mrs. Winterland remembered as she thought back on Emile Rediger. It was an evaluation shared by others who were interviewed, with frequent comments on his sense of humor, his love for America.

Helping draw Emile Rediger into ParkLands were his rockhound friend LaFayette Funk and his Lexington neighbor Elmo Franklin—all three (Louis, LaFayette, and Elmo) serving on the first ParkLands Board of Directors. Emile and Viola, in fact, actively recruited new members for the organization.

This background may help explain Emile's refusal when a developer tried to purchase the forested land along the Mackinaw, planning to carve it up for housing plots. The land was appraised at \$58,000.

"They had a very big offer in hand," Stanley Lantz said, but he recalled that Emile and Viola responded that "a pile of money wouldn't change their lives in any way—they'd keep on doing what they're doing, and living where they're living. But mostly it was their devotion to the ParkLands cause." The couple decided instead to sell the 107 acres to ParkLands at a bargain price of \$21,400, less than half the appraised value. It was a purchase on contract, which meant that "[the deal was] financed by the owners," ParkLands official Guy Fraker would later note. At the annual meeting in July 1970, the Redigers were presented to the membership as a couple "who sold property from the

Lexington Blacktop to the Mackinaw River to the Foundation much below market value."

This action signified that Emile and Viola Rediger were the persons responsible for the organization acquiring its first land in the key area that would eventually be visited by thousands of nature lovers. The entire tract would soon be designated as the Merwin Nature Preserve, but would be better known by multitudes of hikers simply as "ParkLands." That remains its everyday identity.

Originally retaining rights to use the pond, the Lexington area couple in late 1976 gave up those rights, and ParkLands directors voted a resolution stating "that the pond shall be known as Rediger Pond, and that at some appropriate time a sign or marker be erected naming the site in honor of the Emile Rediger Family."

The Redigers' action was crucial. It marked the first "toehold" for ParkLands in what would become its most popular area. Emile Rediger probably would have appreciated the letter that Stanley Lantz wrote to the *Pantagraph* soon after Emile's death in 1982:

At the very moment of his death, Feb. 14, several carloads of cross-country skiers and several carloads of hikers were enjoying "Rediger" woods and snow-covered trails east of Lake Bloomington. Twenty of us were walking through a pine woods he planted years ago.

It was said again that the Rediger family gift—a bargain sale of 107 acres—was the beginning of what is now a nature area of more than 500 acres. Hundreds of children, high school and college students, and adult members of the foundation use this area for recreation and nature study. The Rediger legacy will serve the future for generations.

The Rediger acquisition stimulated a rush of activity as board members chased down other reports and rumors, and within months a second sale appeared possible along the Mackinaw. The September 17, 1970, directors' meeting heard the good news:

[John] Hodge and [Wilbur] Boies reported on the possibility of a tract for acquisition by purchase known as the Thatcher Tract containing 119 acres and located across the Mackinaw to the north from the Rediger [t]ract. There is an additional 40 acres owned by Illinois Wesleyan nearby and an additional 36 acres in the Harold Gregory Estate.... [A]uthority was given to Boies, Hodge and [Glenn] Kemp to negotiate an option for the purchase of the Thatcher Tract.

In fact, the tract when surveyed contained 130 acres, and meetings with Mrs. Lela May Thatcher, of Decatur, produced a final sale price of \$36,000—as with the Rediger tract, far below what a developer would have paid. Little information on Mrs. Thatcher survives in the records; Stanley Lantz recalls that “[s]he already knew about ParkLands and was inclined to support the cause,” and board members met with her after learning of her interest.

These proved to be the last “bargain sales” in putting together the Merwin Nature Preserve, however, and the directors knew that they could not count on receiving such gifts forever. In late 1970 they launched a fund drive to raise \$75,000 by the following May 31, a follow-up to the successful campaign two years earlier that raised a like amount and had thereby earned the Forest Park Foundation’s \$25,000 challenge grant.

Next came one of the most dramatic episodes in ParkLands history: the April 2, 1971, auction that brought the 40-acre Gregory tract into the Merwin Nature Preserve.

The Harold Gregory estate property had been spotted earlier when the organization’s leaders were beginning to seek out potential lands downstream from Lexington. The estate was a natural fit, straddling the Mackinaw, adjacent to both the Rediger and Thatcher acquisitions. But its purchase was increasingly fraught with uncertainty from the fact that developers were now alert to the fact that ParkLands was a threat to their continued easy purchases of forested, rural properties. Accordingly, the developers moved to squelch the fledgling organization by outbidding it for the Gregory tract.

Loring Merwin, keenly aware of the developers’ growing opposition, laid his plans carefully. He contacted Russell Shirk, an old friend and trustee of the Beer Nuts Foundation, and convinced Shirk that the tract was a crucial piece of land for the new area ParkLands was putting together along the Mackinaw.

Their D-Day was April 2, 1971, the auction of the Gregory Estate. It found Merwin, Hodge, and other ParkLands leaders primed for action in the auction hall, carefully keeping the telephone line open to Shirk at his Sun City, Arizona, home. Stanley Lantz recalled the scene as Sale Barn auctioneer Harold Kindred waved his hat and cane and the bidding began:

The proceeding was wonderful. John Hodge maintained constant contact by telephone. There were many kibitzers. It soon became obvious that whoever Hodge had on the phone was a serious bidder. Loring helped the mystery along by occasionally putting in a bid

himself. Kindred worked in \$50 per acre bids. After each bid, he would chant, “Do I hear \$300?” etc. The developers finally decided the guy on the phone was going to get it at any price. As soon as the last one shook his head, Kindred banged his cane and shouted, “Sold—to Mr. Hodge!”

The final purchase price was \$35,000, or \$957.50 an acre—far above the going price for land in the area. The Shirk Foundation then transferred ownership to ParkLands, raising the organization’s total holdings there to 277 acres.

Hodge was ecstatic, calling the Gregory tract a “key point” in the new ParkLands goal of a major public outdoor area on the Mackinaw River within McLean County. It provided ParkLands with its only access to the river from a paved road: “...now we have the possibility of easy access to water for canoeing as well as hiking.”

The auction victory put members in a jubilant mood at the annual fall outing in October 1971, when they hiked over the Rediger, Thatcher, and Gregory acres and then learned that another nearby farmer, Herschel Vandegraft, was offering to sell ParkLands 37 acres adjoining the Rediger tract. This sale was completed in time for announcement at the 1972 annual meeting in July. The three acres retained by the Vandegrifts—site of their house and barn—were later sold to ParkLands following Herschel Vandegraft’s death. This meant that ParkLands gained 40 more acres for the Merwin tract. Yet another 40-acre tract within the preserve owned by Illinois Wesleyan was already counted as a natural area; the fact that IWU teachers and classes had used ParkLands—and many connected with IWU were longtime ParkLands activists—helped bring about its acquisition by the foundation in 1994.

ParkLands was on a roll. It was buoyed by the success of its second fund drive, which again topped \$100,000, matching the previous campaign. Confident of growing public support, the directors had proceeded with the Rediger and Thatcher bargain sales even though they lacked enough funds at the time. “The opportunity was there,” noted President Hodge when questioned by the *Pantagraph*, “so we went ahead on faith that the community would back us up.”

Hodge’s optimism was ratified in that second fund drive, which employed an unusual approach: ParkLands sold “good deeds” at \$300 per acre, with a large number of local businesses “purchasing” one, two, or three acres. Several bought more, much more: The Paul Funk Foundation “bought” 66.67 acres to become the major donor; other contributions exceed-

ing \$1,000 came from the *Pantagraph*, Bloomington Federal Savings and Loan, General Telephone, Pantagraph Printing and Stationery, Illinois Power, Deluxe Check Printers, FS Services, Country Mutual, Country Life, Rotary Club, Funk Seeds, and six individuals. More than anything else, the 1970-71 fund drive demonstrated the breadth of the commitment to ParkLands among the county's business community.

This sudden expansion west of Lexington served to keep members' spirits high despite the frustrations then deepening over the Department of Conservation's lethargy in dealing with the Lilly tract west of Normal. Now there was a nearby area of decidedly natural beauty, carrying the name "ParkLands," and easily reachable by large numbers of county residents. But the Merwin Nature Preserve successes also forced the young organization to again reconsider some basic questions: Which course was ParkLands to pursue—serving as a conduit to pass recreational lands along to county or state governments, or acquiring lands to manage on its own in a way that would serve the public?

The original concept for the foundation retained its hold on the leadership. As the second fund drive was starting to roll and the Merwin Nature Preserve was taking shape, President John Hodge told the *Pantagraph*, "It is not known how soon, or exactly in what way, the land will be made accessible to the public." He still saw possibilities for the new area downstream from Lexington to be turned into a county park or state conservation area. The directors tossed this question around during their session in March 1972, and at the annual meeting in July Hodge summarized five years of progress as "acquiring, preserving and improving lands to be held in trust for future use as public outdoor recreation and environmental education lands." He went on to describe the growing tract along the Mackinaw as the "nucleus of a future county park."

But such comments in 1972 must be interpreted against the backdrop of the state's inaction on the Lilly tract. The Conservation Department's irresponsibility would eventually dampen such thoughts as those expressed by Hodge and would cause a slow philosophical evolution in ParkLands's collective thinking. In the end, only one concept was viewed as acceptable for the Merwin Nature Preserve: ParkLands would hold on to the new tract, managing it and using it as an example of types of natural growth. Mention of its takeover by the state or county government grew feebler and less frequent, and finally vanished from the organization's record books.

As it grew, the organization was never free from criticism, never immune to outside verbal, or even

physical, attacks. ParkLands's entry into the Lexington area stirred up hostility from more than envious Bloomington-Normal developers. As was seen in the Lilly area, local people who had become accustomed to unrestricted use of the area for hunting now felt threatened by the prospect for change. They considered it their own, for their own exclusive use. Others feared that loss of taxable property would cause their own property taxes to rise.

Elmo Franklin ran into the tax argument when visiting area farmers about possible ParkLands sites. "I was talking with a farmer, and he said that he didn't want any more land taken off the tax rolls," he recalled. On another occasion, Franklin and Guy Fraker approached a landowner about selling a 20-acre plot along the Mackinaw, but were met with the same rebuff.

Some hunters were especially angered by ParkLands's arrival. "People in the area were used to hunting there," Dale Birkenholz said, "and they resented us taking it over." For several years ParkLands's ban on hunting on the new tracts was openly flaunted, and discussions of "trespassing by hunters" appears in the foundation minutes. When ParkLands members saw hunters in the Merwin Nature Preserve they sometimes alerted the sheriff, but the illegal hunters had usually fled before his arrival. One nearby landowner missed no opportunity to pour forth his venom against ParkLands.

Opposition to the acquisitions was expressed in other ways as well. Vandalism erupted from time to time, as unknown parties destroyed signs, tore apart the small bridges over gullies, and periodically wreaked extensive, costly damage to the bridge over the Mackinaw. These latter incidents contributed to the bridge's closure on more than one occasion.

The ongoing damage can be seen as a test, a challenge from those who wanted ParkLands out. Such



Hikers frequently encounter deer at ParkLands, but an overpopulation of deer was playing havoc with efforts to bring back native plants. This led to the organization's major membership controversy, which climaxed at the 1994 annual meeting with a 72-12 vote to permit limited deer hunting at Merwin Nature Preserve in an attempt to reduce the size of the herd.

opponents were likely unaware of the likelihood that, had ParkLands not acquired the properties along the Mackinaw, developers would soon have carved them all into one-, two-, and three-acre homesites where no hunting, or even hiking, would have been possible. But such thoughts were likely far from the minds of those who vandalized ParkLands projects. When the organization constructed a new canoe landing, "it was trashed," Dorothy Sands recalled. "We put a fence around the parking area, a chain link fence, and it was stolen." And when a special tree was proudly planted one morning by ParkLands volunteers, "in the evening it was gone." Looking back on the incident, those who had planted the tree felt they were being watched. "They sensed that people were in the background," Sands recalled—spying on them, waiting until the ParkLands group was gone and the tree could be uprooted.

These problems remained in the background, however, never daunting the leadership as they sought to expand the Merwin Nature Preserve. Virgil Stewart, one of the original ad hoc committee members and an original trustee, sought to sell his 93 acres at the corner of the Keller Highway and the Gridley Blacktop, adjacent to the Rediger tract, if the right steps could be taken as far as tax protection. The issue was brought up in September 1975, and two months later the board agreed that other lands should be mortgaged if needed to enable ParkLands to make the purchase. Members were called to an unusual special meeting on December 1, 1975, to approve the following:

Resolved that the Board of Directors be, and is hereby, authorized to mortgage all or substantially all of the real estate of ParkLands Foundation, in order to obtain loans in an amount necessary to complete the acquisition of approximately 80 acres owned by the Stewart Family of Lexington, which real estate is located immediately adjacent to the tract owned by ParkLands Foundation known as the Rediger tract.

The membership briefly discussed the resolution, heard a banker's proposal regarding the plan, and then unanimously voted approval—all in 35 minutes. At the next directors' meeting in January 1976, it was reported that the Stewart transaction "had been closed."

Next came two tracts—of 40 and 20 acres—purchased from Albert Kinsella. The 40-acre tract was among those examined in 1975, finally purchased for just under \$80,000; the 20-acre tract was added in early 1981 for \$49,918—by which time the *Pantagraph* reporter could add: "The foundation's purpose is to

acquire land and preserve it for public outdoor recreation and education"—without mention of the foundation serving as a conduit to transfer ownership to a governmental agency.

The Kinsella additions were soon joined by the L. D. Benedict purchase, 44 acres which had been eyed since the early 1970s. The sale was completed in late 1976, and, as explained in the *Newsletter* in March 1979, the agreement called for annual payments of \$9,000 for 10 years:

We will not receive title for 10 years. But we "own" the tract with pond and two cabins known as Fifer Rod and Gun Club. Purchase is on long-term contract with L. D. Benedict and is subject to continuing rights of the present occupants... This step plugs a hole in what is now a 500-acre contiguous tract.

The Henline addition of 170 acres came in a roundabout way. Leslie Henline, a widower, explained to his lawyer that he wished to draw up a will but was interested in leaving a continuing legacy of some sort. Since Henline was already interested in what ParkLands was doing, the attorney investigated and found ParkLands willing to be named beneficiary of his will. When he died in 1977, his 50 acres together with other effects eventually totalled \$142,166.82. These funds enabled ParkLands to obtain a 170-acre tract long coveted by the organization. Purchased from the Behrens family, ParkLands outbid another party by offering \$138,840 in 1985. And, as noted, in 1994 the foundation acquired the 40-acre Illinois Wesleyan tract within the preserve.

These actions rounded out the Merwin Nature Preserve, 730 acres of 10 separate properties, added bit by bit from 1970 through 1994. The additions came through bargain sales and an estate legacy, from straightforward purchases and auctions. Persistence paid off.





CHAPTER SIX

New Trends in the Nineties and a 'Green Necklace'

I should like some information about the ParkLands Foundation land trust," Mrs. Frances Woodrum wrote to the organization in 1989 from Oregon. "Things like: its purposes, how it operates, how land is acquired and what type of land is appropriate, who may use the property once it goes into the trust, who pays real estate taxes."

The letter from Mrs. Woodrum explained that she owned some 50 acres of the former Hidden Hills Campground in Woodford County. Recently widowed, she was rewriting her will and wished to do something lasting regarding "this land that means so much to me...." In a later letter, Mrs. Woodrum—who soon would move back to Central Illinois—wrote of her love for the area and her memories of it. She recalled the beauty of the forested terrain with its high bluff rising from Denman Creek, the wild flowers in abundance, the farm where she and her late husband had lived from 1961-77 and raised their three children. "I think the benefits of donating the property to ParkLands would be to us both—I would no longer own this remnant of my Hidden Hills, but it would stay in its natural state...." And she would later add: "God made nature so great, so gorgeous. It's not fair for one person to hold it, so others have to look over a fence to see it."

The Hidden Hills donation by Frances Woodrum was in some ways representative of ParkLands's changes and status as it began its third decade. Its reputation was spreading, and as a result its projects were increasingly drawing the interest of landowners and citizens. These were often people who were prodded by ParkLands's activities into thinking in the long term, contemplating the future of the broader Central Illinois community. Seeing what ParkLands had accomplished already, they sought to help it continue. As one Towanda couple commented, their donation was "an expression of the pleasure [we] had enjoyed in the

ParkLands tracts." This spirit buoyed ParkLands activities as the decade of the nineties began.

ParkLands's holdings at century's end totaled 1,665 acres in 19 tracts, spread across McLean County and reaching into Woodford County. Membership went from 281 in 1989 to more than 600 in 1997, and the larger membership was being asked to take on tasks that the cluster around Loring Merwin in 1967 likely never contemplated—cleaning seeds, creating canoe launch sites, gathering nuts, burning prairie grass, pulling up "exotic" invaders by the roots. It all added a new twist to the ongoing discussions over ParkLands's goals, for the organization that once sought only "forest" now was interested as well in prairies, river's edges, even in the animals along the waterways.

The struggling group which once had spread its message mainly through individual contacts and slide shows now used radio "spots" on WJBC, had booths at the Lexington "Taste of Country" fair and similar county festivals, and developed close ties with the Mackinaw Canoe Club as well as traditional allies such as the Audubon Society and Boy Scouts. Brochures were distributed in the county's schools, and the Merwin tract became a popular site for nature studies; in spring 1997 alone, pupils came from Lexington Elementary, Chenoa Grade School, and Stevenson School in Bloomington.

One of William Rutherford's arguments in the 1960s had been that nature preserves provided the community's businesses with an employee benefit that local employers should and would recognize. His prediction seemed to be coming true, for by the 1990s not only were State Farm employees pouring into the organization (the State Farm Employees' Activity Association requested 1,000 more brochures in early 1995), but real estate agents in Bloomington-Normal now asked ParkLands for speakers to inform their

agents about the nature preserves, the better to alert (and even to lure) new residents. Reflecting this spreading interest, GTE employees and St. Luke's Union Church made ParkLands the beneficiary of their recycling drives.

And in the spring of 1998 ParkLands fully entered the modern age, going on-line into the computer world with its own Internet site, www.Parklands.org, built by Tim Lindenbaum with the donated help of Dave's World, a Bloomington Internet provider. This meant that any computer user around the world hooked up to the Internet could learn about Parklands and its properties, and could even view color pictures of different spots in its domain.

Volunteers for ParkLands workdays generally came from nearby communities, rather than from other areas of the globe, and their labors often went beyond highly visible prairie burns and trash collection efforts. The Merwin Nature Preserve bridge over the Mackinaw River was repaired, again and again, as spring runoff and summer floods—often carrying large trees and branches—teamed with occasional vandalism to inflict damage. Boy Scouts built smaller bridges over the Merwin Nature Preserve's creeks, while other crews cut multiflora rose, pulled garlic mustard, or planted trees and prairie forbs (nongrass prairie plants). Such were the activities of John Whitmar of Chenoa, winner in 1993 of the organization's first "distinguished volunteer award." His 261 hours of work in 92 separate visits to the Merwin tract were cited by Director Wes Wilcox, organizer of the first meeting of ParkLands Volunteers, which drew 65 persons to the Lexington Community Center in March 1993.

ParkLands's prominence soon attracted others seeking support for their own causes. This led to debates within the organization over whether ParkLands should stand as an advocate for environmental issues, or whether its best course would be to refrain from becoming involved. The question was, of course, common to newly successful organizations. In 1979 there came a proposal to create a ParkLands bike-and-hike trail, along a rural railroad right-of-way (a similar movement succeeded within Bloomington and Normal). John Hodge, formerly ParkLands's president and a longtime board member, "questioned whether the development of bicycle trails per se was consistent with the purposes of ParkLands which are the preservation and holding of land, rather than the recreational development of it." Nothing came of the 1979 proposal, but later the directors voted to support the concept of a such a trail between several Central Illinois cities, but with no role for ParkLands. A National Guard

request to use the Merwin Nature Preserve for military exercises went down to defeat, as did Champion Federal's request that ParkLands develop a park in the Crestwicke area of south Bloomington.

ParkLands did become a leading environmental voice during the debates over the new Comlara Park around Lake Evergreen. The lake was created in the late 1960s as a second reservoir for the city of Bloomington.

As early as 1969 the ParkLands board asked Director John English to "explore the possibility of securing a few key tracts" around Lake Evergreen, to give the organization "a voice in the ultimate disposition of the land adjoining the lake." Bloomington's city manager told English that he was not sure how long the new lake's shoreline areas could be kept for the public "without substantial public support"—and ParkLands moved quickly to provide a key part of that support. ParkLands representatives met frequently with city and county officials, seeking to "protect the Evergreen Lake area from private exploitation," unlike conditions at Lake Bloomington, where officials in the 1920s had permitted private lots to ring much of the reservoir. In the 1970s the public was interested in more recreational land, however, and nearly total public access was eventually assured for the Lake Evergreen shoreline. Management of the new park was later turned over to McLean County, and trails were established which provided the region with yet more sites for hiking.

ParkLands continued to evaluate development of the new area, its directors voting (for example) a strongly worded 1977 resolution calling on the city of Bloomington to retain its commitment to bar gasoline-powered motors from Lake Evergreen for "the preservation of a more natural state...[as] an alternative to the intense use of Lake Bloomington."

There was little dissension within the board on these issues. In 1975, however, the board balked at a plan put forward for the county board to seek a government grant to purchase land for public outdoor recreation and education, targeting ParkLands's acquisitions along the Mackinaw in what would later become the Merwin Nature Preserve. "Discussion also centered around the use by the County and what would happen to the property after ParkLands conveyed it." The board chose to wait until it had finished its pending acquisitions, and nothing came of the county's project.

In 1985, however, at a time when several ParkLands members were heading the effort to win voter approval for a countywide conservation district,



Rachel Carson once wrote of the "sense of wonder" that children feel in nature. One of the Parklands Foundation's major efforts has been to provide McLean County schoolchildren with an outdoor laboratory to learn about, and from, nature.

questions were raised over whether Parklands should inject itself into the campaign. Both President Dale Birkenholz and Director Roger Anderson (who headed the citizen's committee seeking passage of the measure) urged Parklands to contribute \$3,000 to support a naturalist program at Comlara Park and surrounding natural areas, including Parklands. Their resolution argued that the purpose behind the grant was "to promote the referendum for the creation of a Conservation District," and this, they stressed, would be a "benefit, ultimately, to Parklands." During the directors' debate on March 5, 1985—in what the minutes refer to as "substantial discussion"—supporters contended that creation of the county conservation district would be "the ultimate solution for Parklands and the disposition of our properties." Therefore, Parklands had an obligation to support its passage.

Opponents countered with three arguments: As a tax-exempt organization Parklands should not be promoting creation of another taxing authority; Parklands's purposes did not include paying for naturalist programs put on elsewhere by other groups; and providing the \$3,000 would be "contrary to the purpose of the gifts recently raised in the fund drive," targeted for acquiring properties.

Proponents narrowly won the debate on the Parklands board, with a six-four vote authorizing expenditure of \$3,000 to help fund a Comlara Park naturalist program. They lost the fall election at the ballot box, however, as McLean County voters rejected the conservation district by a solid seven-five ratio.

The organization that had been launched in 1967 to acquire forested land for ultimate transfer to state or county governmental units, which had reevaluated its purposes after the Lilly controversy, again had to

rethink its goals as the nineties began. These discussions often raised basic questions about where the foundation was headed. In 1990, for example, Director Ron MacPherson "raised the question of what is protected in Parklands, such as mushrooms, fishing." The board "agreed that a committee be appointed by the president to study this difficult issue."

Membership was changing also. As the program for the 1987 annual meeting explained in its call for volunteers, "Middle age (to say nothing of 'old age') is slowing down some of the veteran ball carriers and quarterbacks." There was some turnover in leadership. Stanley Lantz, who had been Loring Merwin's right-hand man and Parklands's longtime chief publicist—as well as its president from 1972-78—left the board in 1987 after 20 years of service; the Stanley Lantz Nature Trail was established in his honor at the Merwin Nature Preserve. Dorothy Sands, recruited by Merwin at the start to handle the complex financial records, stepped down as treasurer in 1990. John Hodge, the second president, died in early 1996 after having been less active in the group in recent times. John English, present at the 1967 creation and longtime liaison with the county board because of his election to that body, bowed out in 1998. At century's end Guy Fraker remained the only board member serving continuously since 1967; a close second in terms of service was Dale Birkenholz, on the board since 1970.

By the time English retired from the board in 1998, his proposal to create a Memorial Grove to honor Parklands's major supporters was gaining adherents. Native trees such as sassafras and black gum, pawpaw and persimmon would be planted in the Merwin Nature Preserve as memorials to individuals who had helped the organization in its formative years. "We want a nice grove of specimen trees as a fitting memorial and a pleasant place worthy of a visit to renew some old memories," English explained.

These varied activities, some involving extensive research and meetings, were carried out as always without any paid staff. New ideas were examined by directors who managed hundreds of acres of land of varied topography, using only their own minds and muscles and those of occasional volunteers, without direct ties to, or assistance from, any national organization. Perhaps Parklands directors could be excused for occasionally rethinking their goals.

And by the 1990s the organization once accused of rising amid an almost "country club atmosphere"—because of the wealth and position of some early backers—now counted its membership in the many hundreds while the users of its trails included schoolchild-

ren as well as professors, farmers, and nine-to-five office workers. It all represented a sharp turn toward democratization.

There were other changes. "Once we planned to acquire land and turn it over to governmental entities," observed Roger Anderson, president from 1992 to 1995. "Now we manage our properties."

But the properties themselves, as part of ever-changing nature, were also changing. Dale Birkenholz pointed to this in his presidential report in 1983, as recorded in the minutes of the annual meeting:

He indicated that typically much of the ParkLands ground at Lexington was in a state of transition from grassland to forest.... This is a natural evolving process that will continue to take place unless there is active intervention in management. This will lead to diversity in plant life, but also diversity in wildlife. Dale indicated already that changes had occurred in the nature and diversity of the bird population. The choice facing ParkLands, at this point, is whether we wish to maintain the diversity of habitat that was represented when the initial acquisitions were made.

Maintain the diversity—or stand by while the forest became something different? And what about the growing numbers of deer whose presence delighted city-bred hikers? What to do with newly acquired acreage which formerly grew profitable corn and soybeans? What should be done, if anything, with the waterways, big and small, winding through the properties, including areas that once were wetlands? And should the focus remain on the "home base" of the Merwin Nature Preserve?

All of these questions began demanding attention by the nineties, challenging the directors and members of this enlarged, experienced, and matured organization.

Biologists had always been involved with ParkLands, and from early years high school biology teachers as well as professors from Illinois State University and Illinois Wesleyan University had brought student groups to the Merwin Nature Preserve. With the election to the board of Dale Birkenholz, Illinois State University's ornithologist, in 1970, the biologist/ecologist voice was strengthened at the organization's top levels. Birkenholz recalled that at the beginning "I felt unsure of myself on the board. I knew plants and animals, and nature trails." But, he added, he recognized that leaders "should be people who knew their way around town, who could raise money." With Merwin leading the way "[t]here wasn't much need

to consult with me in early years. I would make some suggestions. So would John English." At that point, raising money and quickly acquiring acreage was crucial, and ecological questions seldom surfaced.

The 1983 election brought to the board Roger Anderson, another Illinois State University biologist whose major specialization lay in the study of savannas and prairies. His installation moved ParkLands further along the road to becoming more closely entwined with new ecological movements. Fund-raising would continue, and questions of acquisitions and land titles would still need to be faced, but now ParkLands would deal more fundamentally with land as a changing organism.

Birkenholz became president in 1984, the first professionally trained biologist to hold the top office in the organization; he served until 1991. Anderson was elected as vice president in 1987, then was picked to lead the group from 1992-95 before going back to being a board member.

The two biologists found ready support within the organization for new directions. They brought a new language, however, as well as new concepts. It is doubtful that Loring Merwin had to deal with such notions as this, presented by Anderson to the board in 1996, although Merwin would have had no difficulty grasping its significance:

One [plan] would involve establishing a few large (sapling size) trees on some of the open grasslands adjacent to the prairie. These would serve as nursery trees and perches for birds that would disperse seeds of trees and woodland plants onto the site. It would be of interest to establish a research project to determine how effective the "perch trees" are in causing birds to disperse seeds onto the site.

New respect for using biologists' expertise within ParkLands came as restorative ecology was becoming popular nationally. Virgin prairie was dwindling everywhere, under new attacks from herbicides, bulldozers, and plows, and if prairie acreage were to enlarge it would have to be through re-creating the prairie rather than seeking out untouched remnants. Influenced by this concept, members looked just to the south of the Merwin Nature Preserve and saw new possibilities for the Stewart tract (93 acres, purchased in 1976) and the Benedict tract (44 acres, purchased in 1979). Any desire to leave these meadowlands alone, filled as they were with nonnative plant migrants from afar, faded rapidly under the board's new interest in restoration, and by the spring of 1977 some 10 acres of the Stewart

tract had been plowed under in what was now being referred to as “the prairie project.” This was enlarged to 30 acres in 1980, and that summer Birkenholz announced that “the prairie grasses [are] coming up and the stand is developing well.” Seeds and forbs were purchased with the help of the Audubon Society.

Ten years later, after several trials and failures that brought ParkLands volunteers much hands-on experience, Anderson informed the board that “the prairie is coming along well but that the newly seeded areas are doing poorly.” Looking back on these endeavors later, Birkenholz called the thriving prairie project the “biggest satisfaction” of all his ParkLands activities. “I had been looking for prairie to show my classes. Now we have about 40 acres of prairie there.”

The prairie quickly became one of the most popular spots for research projects for students from universities and high schools alike. President Tom Marquardt reported at the 1980 annual meeting on four such projects: “An [Illinois State University] study of wrens involves dozens of specially constructed wren houses (for observation) placed on a grid pattern; another five-year project on breeding bird census led by Dale Birkenholz has been published; an [Illinois State] geography training project gives students basic skills in mapping rough country; and an IWU study is focusing on field mice.” Among the wide variety of other projects were vegetation management, the efficacy of prairie seedings on different soil types, long-term projects to change the tree populations of specific small tracts, and measuring the impact of deer upon wildflowers and plants.

It was the deer issue, in fact, that erupted as the major controversy of the nineties. Americans’ love of observing animals in the wild came up against the unpleasant truth that because the deer’s major natural enemy—the wolf—had been removed from Illinois a century earlier, now bucks, does, and fawns were overpopulating the remaining forests and spilling over onto cropland, lawns, and highways. Deer had become a pest species, and the result was hard for those who loved Bambi to admit: Deer were seriously harming the environment.

As early as 1984 damage from the deer was becoming serious enough to spark discussions among ParkLands directors. Deer were wiping out sunflowers and millet planted to help resident birds survive until the next growing season, and the board was told that as long as the deer found winter homes in the Merwin Nature Preserve, birds and other wildlife would lack adequate food. As the problem continued to fester, “The Chicago Urban Deer Study” was selected as the focus of the 1989 annual meeting.

At their January 1992 meeting the directors held “a lengthy discussion” on “the problem with the deer,” and in May some Department of Conservation experts were called in for consultations. A committee was formed to investigate, its members drawn not only from the ParkLands board and membership but also from the McLean County Sportsmen’s Association, the county Humane Society, and local farmers. The committee concluded, “There are too many deer” in the Merwin Nature Preserve and other ParkLands properties, with herds of 20 to 60 animals seen. This was a statewide phenomenon, members noted, made worse by the deer’s custom of congregating in timbered areas after crops were harvested in the fall. Not only were the deer destroying seedlings, wildflowers, and other plants within the Merwin Nature Preserve, but they were involved in rising numbers of collisions with automobiles and were causing excessive crop losses.

The committee saw only two feasible solutions: opening ParkLands territory to hunting, or bringing in marksmen. Both solutions held possible public relations traps, for directors were already aware of the opposition to hunting among portions of the membership. The committee stated that using marksmen “would create a somewhat different image of the deer removal process, than hunting, that might be more acceptable to some of the members.” The reason was that under that approach, ParkLands “would not be promoting sport hunting on our properties.” But it also admitted the possibility that using marksmen “might create the image of a ‘slaughter’ for some groups....”

As word got out that hunting was being considered, the annual meeting in September 1992 became the scene of “a long discussion...relative to the problem of the overpopulation of the deer,” as the minutes noted. “This lasted for a substantial period of time.” Somewhat uncertain of which course to pursue, the directors pulled back, and at their November 1992 meeting they voted to “put this on hold.”

By the summer of 1994, however, as deer damages to new plantings worsened, the board was ready to force the issue. After a lengthy discussion at their July meeting, the directors voted unanimously to accept the deer committee report “and go ahead and have the hunt during the first season in the fall.” They also voted to submit the issue to the membership at the annual meeting on September 11.

At the packed 1994 meeting in the Lexington Community Center, President Anderson distributed a report outlining major reasons for reducing the deer herds. In his remarks he pointed to the negative impact of deer on attempts to establish both prairie wildflow-

ers and many woody plants. "Success at restoring forests and prairies was limited because of deer browsing," he argued, while nearby farmers were increasingly concerned over the loss of crops through deer that found refuge within ParkLands's forests. In addition, Anderson noted, deer-vehicle collisions on roads around the Merwin Nature Preserve made up 59 percent of total automobile accidents in the area.

But his main point was that ParkLands was dedicated to "restoring a proper ecological balance"—a balance now being destroyed by the overpopulation of deer.

Several opponents were outraged, and charged that allowing hunting would betray the organization's founding principles. They described in graphic terms the rudeness and barbaric behavior exhibited by hunters. However, a letter was read from Loring Merwin's widow, Marjorie, in support of the deer hunt. And one of the most telling statements came when Anderson answered a question on the long-term results for ParkLands if nothing were done; he pointed to parks in the Chicago area, where a rising deer population had devoured all vegetation from the ground up to as high as a deer could reach. That, he warned, would be the fate of ParkLands if nothing were done.

The vote was then taken: 72 for the hunt, and 12 against.

The first deer hunt was set for November 18-20, 1994. Director Mac Arnold arranged for selected hunters for the different ParkLands properties and worked out controls to keep nonhunters away. Nine deer were killed in the Merwin Nature Preserve, two at the Bigger/Mohr tract up the Mackinaw from Merwin, and 12 others in the Lexington area tracts. Twenty-three additional deer were killed in adjacent areas. Next year, during the 1995 hunt, the 11 hunters on the Merwin tract, four on Mohr, and two at Lexington took 20 deer. By the time of the July 1, 1996, board meeting, the brief mention in the minutes revealed that the deer hunt had finally won acceptance: After Anderson reported that there was less browsing evidence in the Shooting Star area, although visiting herds in winter remained a problem, "English moved to have the deer hunt in 1996. Anderson seconded. The motion carried." Two years later county officials were allowing deer hunts in Comlara Park, for similar reasons, and one of the park managers wrote to thank ParkLands for proposing the deer hunt and successfully managing it—and, he might have mentioned, for having the courage to push the controversial idea through.

The nineties brought maturing of the ParkLands-Nature Conservancy relationship, a connection rising

from both similar aims and interlocking memberships. The conservancy was founded in 1951 to acquire wild lands deemed crucial in preserving different species—plants, trees, birds, animals, fish, even insects. It had an Illinois branch by 1957, but its membership and visibility were low for years. In 1970 ParkLands Director Dorothy Sands brought the Nature Conservancy to the attention of the board as "an organization which can finance quick purchase of conservation-type lands."

As both groups expanded during the 1970s—ParkLands in Central Illinois, the conservancy across the nation and, increasingly, around the world—common goals finally drew them together. This convergence can be seen in the career of Guy Fraker, recruited for ParkLands in 1967 by Loring Merwin. Fraker, an attorney who enjoyed the outdoors but had no previous experience as an environmental activist, continued his ParkLands activity while steadily rising through the ranks of the Nature Conservancy—as a member of its state board for several years, becoming state chairman in 1996 (when he was also president of ParkLands), and then going full time with the conservancy in 1999 as its director of land protection in Illinois.

Fraker's position within the two organizations allowed him to track, and even to encourage, the merging of interests. ParkLands's early acquisitions and activity along the Mackinaw River, he notes, helped draw the conservancy into the area. Joint activity was first discussed in October 1981, when representatives of the conservancy and the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission met with the ParkLands board to discuss the 19-acre Ridgetop Prairie in Woodford County, some 12 miles west of Kappa.

The Ridgetop Prairie had been spotted during an inventory of undisturbed prairie and forest areas, part of a state-federal survey conducted by the Illinois



ParkLands maintains birdhouses in open areas for bluebirds. Here a young volunteer checks for occupancy of the house.

Department of Conservation, the Illinois Natural History Survey, and the University of Illinois. The prairie was part of the newly platted Tall Oaks Subdivision, and buyers were already snapping up nearby lots, further goading conservationists to act to save the high-quality glacial drift hill prairie. Because of its undulating topography with steep ravines, it had never been plowed and was called one of the best examples of hilltop prairie in Central Illinois.

The Nature Conservancy proposed to the ParkLands board on October 6, 1981, that the conservancy would purchase the tract immediately, and then ParkLands would raise money to pay off the purchase price; the title would eventually be conveyed to ParkLands, which would both own and manage the site. The board authorized a go-ahead on January 5, 1982. The tract was eventually purchased by the Nature Conservancy for \$38,000; the amount was repaid by ParkLands; and in 1984 the new ParkLands property was also dedicated as an Illinois Nature Preserve, giving it state protection.

Ridgetop Prairie carried ParkLands into new territory not only in a geographical sense. Earlier tracts had usually been acquired because they were forested areas that could easily accommodate visitors on trails for low-intensity use. The Ridgetop Prairie, however, “marked the first time we bought land strictly for its environmental qualities,” noted Dale Birkenholz. Ridgetop’s relatively inaccessible location and lack of trails meant that it would probably never become a popular spot for hikers; instead, the new preserve would be nurtured for its values as a prairie, with at least 42 species of prairie plants initially, including mountain mint, coneflowers, little bluestem grass, and sideoats grama.

The Ridgetop Prairie project also had long-term importance for the Nature Conservancy as it sought an entry-point into Central Illinois. By the 1980s, after all, ParkLands had experience in scouring the region for wooded areas, talking with farmers, locating remnant natural sites. The conservancy could benefit from a working relationship with the McLean County group.

Soon there were more opportunities for joint activity. As part of its ongoing efforts, ParkLands, in 1975, learned of the availability of a large forested property, the 976-acre Bateman tract north of Congerville along the Mackinaw River-Panther Creek junction. Guy Fraker, Dorothy Sands, and Wib Boies met with Bateman heirs to discuss possible purchase by ParkLands, but the price was too steep at nearly \$1 million.

That property, part of a 1918 trust, was a naturalist’s dream. ParkLands Director Jim Bouas called it part



Collecting seeds is part of the long-term effort to restore native plant life in ParkLands prairies, savannas, and forest. Volunteers work long hours at specific times when seeds are ready to be harvested.

of “the finest conservation piece” he had ever seen. Later investigations found 12 different classifications of natural communities, habitat for four state-threatened species, and many other sensitive species of land and water plants and animals. And the potential for restoration of additional rare species was considerable. After being turned away by the price, the directors discussed “the possibility of ParkLands facilitating a way for other organizations to purchase [the] tracts....” The obvious solution was to draw in the Nature Conservancy, and at ParkLands’s urging the conservancy ultimately purchased 736 acres of the Bateman property in 1997. Bouas and Fraker from ParkLands helped with the sale. It formed a sort of environmental cluster with nearby ParkLands properties—the Hazle tract (40 acres) and Ridgetop Prairie (19 acres) to the north and west, and Woodrum (Hickory Hills, 50 acres) and Wyatt’s Ford (50 acres) on the south side of the Mackinaw.

The conservancy quickly transformed the Bateman tract—soon renamed Chiquapin Bluffs—into the linchpin of its new six-county Mackinaw River watershed project. Expanding operations rapidly within Illinois as well as globally by the 1990s, the conservancy began to focus on the Mackinaw as “a real jewel in Illinois,” one of only 24 stream segments across the state ranked of excellent quality, with 66 species of fish, 31 kinds of mussels, and nine species of crayfish.

Contacts between ParkLands and the Nature Conservancy continued to increase during the early years of the Mackinaw watershed project. The conservancy worked to help farmers adopt environmentally helpful practices, while its staff and volunteers carried

out education, training, and restoration activities. In late 1995—as they were working together on the Bateman property—the Nature Conservancy helped establish a wetland area within the Merwin Nature Preserve, and the following year ParkLands gave permission to the conservancy and the Illinois Department of Conservation to release 25 otters into the Mackinaw within the Merwin tract, putting up \$500 of the cost itself.

And soon there was another addition, growing out of the two organizations' cooperation: the Kenyon tract, just northwest of the Ridgetop Prairie along the Mackinaw, two parcels of 138 acres and 11.5 acres of rolling hills. The Nature Conservancy had been approached about acquiring the property but had brought in ParkLands as a better solution.

Owner Frank Kenyon, like Frances Woodrum with her Hidden Hills property earlier, felt a special attachment to the bluffs, steep hills, and lower plateaus at the intersection of the Mackinaw and Panther Creek and did not want it to come under the control of a land developer, even though this would have been quite profitable. Kenyon had farmed the land as a dairy farmer for almost 40 years, and his love of nature was deepened by the area's presettlement Indian record and its later importance: Kenyon's great-great-grandfather had walked west from Vermont in 1836 and family members ever since had farmed there or nearby. It once was site of the now-vanished town of Bowling Green, where congressional candidates Abraham Lincoln and Peter Cartwright debated in 1846.

"I want it preserved," Kenyon commented after completing the bargain sale with ParkLands in early 2001. "There is not much of this left, and I want to see the old home place saved."

The Nature Conservancy connection was exemplified by Tim Lindenbaum's dual roles with the two organizations. A Lexington area farmer, eventually a board member of both ParkLands and the conservancy's Mackinaw River Watershed Council, he once told a reporter that his interest in nature originated from hikes on the Merwin Nature Preserve while a youngster. From those walks came an appreciation for nature, he recalled, and when an Illinois State University biologist urged him to join ParkLands, he readily assented, became an active member, and soon was elected to its board. Signing on with the conservancy's watershed project followed naturally, as did taking a leadership position in it. In 1999 the Illinois Nature Conservancy—by then claiming 38,000 members—named him its statewide "Volunteer of the Year."

The conservancy also recognized ParkLands's pioneering role. One of its Mackinaw River watershed

publications stated that ParkLands "has carried the conservation torch in the basin for many years....[It is] dedicated to preserving open lands in the Mackinaw River Valley...." And it noted that the McLean County group had "been instrumental in securing preservation of the three nature preserves along the Mackinaw," at Mehl's Bluff, Merwin, and the Ridgetop prairie. Later the Kenyon tract nearby was added.

Cooperation between the two organizations continued to increase in the late nineties, and in 1996 Don Schmidt and Dale Birkenholz were named to the newly created positions of ParkLands liaisons with the Nature Conservancy. Later that year the conservancy provided help in transplanting shagbark hickory trees to ParkLands's Lexington tract. The Nature Conservancy also assisted in establishing two wetlands on the Merwin Nature Preserve in the late 1990s, serving in part as demonstration projects for improving management practices on the Mackinaw River watershed.

After looking westward from the Merwin Nature Preserve and launching the Ridgetop Prairie project with the conservancy's aid, and acquiring the Woodrum, Hazle, and Wyatt's Ford tracts, ParkLands began to consider other possibilities. Actually, an early dream of the organization's founders had been trails running for considerable distances along the Mackinaw, perhaps from the river's origins to its junction with the Illinois River. In the summer of 1989, the *Newsletter* mentioned the "green necklace" taking shape among the Ridgetop and other properties to the west of the Merwin tract,



Expanding from its initial goal of preserving only forestland, ParkLands in the late 1980s added another goal: restoring prairies to their natural state. This meant plowing farmland, planting native grasses and forbs, and then using fire and other means to discourage "exotics," or nonnative plants.

but soon thereafter it seemed the necklace was ready to extend eastward as well.

The new thrust originated when Guy Fraker received a note from a friend in October 1989, informing him of a 167-acre piece of land for sale next to Timber Ridge subdivision in west Lexington. ParkLands had a presence there already with a 10-acre gift on the north side of the Mackinaw from Edward Shelley in 1971, the site of a wildflower garden in memory of his wife, Dorothy Shelley. Nearby was the Soper-Hiltabrandt tract. With the new possibilities in 1989, the directors quickly showed interest in obtaining land "to complete that corridor" up to the Merwin Nature Preserve from Lexington. They formed an independent committee for that purpose, and learned that \$300,000 would be needed for land purchases.

The first acquisition for the new Mackinaw River Trail was the Peine Grain Company tract, which Fraker's friend had spotted. It was purchased in 1990, and the following year an easement to cross adjacent property was provided by longtime ParkLands member Elmo Franklin. The Mackinaw Trail was off and running, and at that point ParkLands's reputation came to its assistance when a nearby landowner told of other sale possibilities among his neighbors. Then Ben Hiltabrandt of the McLean County Title Company voluntarily prepared an extensive, detailed title search of all properties along the river from Lexington to the Merwin tract, some five miles. Committee members went to work with Hiltabrandt's map as their guide, talking with landowners, planning possible trail routes.

The next purchase was the 80-acre Chapman tract, acquired in 1991 with a testamentary gift from Albert E. and Louise Chapman. In 1992 came the 90-acre Bigger tract; in 1993 the seven-acre Bradford property. A 10-acre piece was purchased from Tom Mohr in 1994 and another of 10 acres the following year. This was followed up with the 63-acre tract of Alyce Mohr, Tom Mohr's mother. The Mohrs' cooperation on the project was cited by Fraker as crucial for its continued advancement.

Not all the river's-edge properties could be acquired or easements obtained. The rush to build houses in the country was again squeezing the drive for recreational properties, and ParkLands was sometimes blocked from expansion. Fraker noted that one landowner "resents ParkLands's use of the land, and the fact that we are taking it off the tax rolls." The man refused to deal with the organization at all and sold a key piece to a third party.

All this necessitated creative trail planning. Roger Anderson came up with ideas for a trail route that

would leave the river to go inland at several key points, and he, Dale Birkenholz, Don Schmidt, and John Franklin walked the proposed trail in the summer of 1998. The Anderson plan would require further landowner permissions, two small bridges, and a six-foot pathway for some distance along a road. The Mackinaw River Trail remained incomplete as the nineties ended and directors contemplated possible routes, but acquisitions and easements already completed marked it as a significant new step for ParkLands.





CHAPTER SEVEN

'Lots of Land and a Noble Cause'

As ParkLands worked its way through its fourth decade and approached the millennium, members could look back on the period since 1967 as an era that had combined idealism with compromise, during which the foundation had drawn on traditions of environmentalism while facing situations demanding quick decisions and a ready supply of cash. For ParkLands was two things: It was a large collection of forest and prairie tracts across Central Illinois; and it was also an organization of human beings who were heirs to Western traditions. Through these years of challenge, the original goal of acquiring natural recreational land to be turned into government parks had been gradually modified. But despite reconsiderations, despite frustrations, Loring Merwin's dream had led to accomplishments that have benefited, and will continue to benefit, thousands of people across the region.

ParkLands's empire at century's end consisted of 1,665 acres, but behind acquisition and environmental development of these tracts lay more than writing a check for the amount of purchase. To obtain and nurture those acres had meant untold hours of meeting, discussing, planning, digging, pulling up, cutting, planting, burning. Carrying out such labors and sacrifices of time, energy, and money over a lengthy period required disciplined pursuit of loftier goals than most humans generally embrace for brief moments. This was what retiring Director John English referred to when he said the organization consisted of "[l]ots of land and a noble cause." To make the noble cause a reality led men like Davis Merwin—another of Jesse Fell's descendants—to pound the pavement as a leader of the organization's successful fund drive in the early 1980s. From that and other fund drives came major additions to ParkLands's holdings.

The noble cause spurred members on, for while their work may have seemed rooted in local conditions it also drew on national trends and movements. Henry David Thoreau had desired each town to preserve its

own primitive woods, where even "a stick should never be cut for fuel," and his vision of maintaining natural areas, where people could go to escape urban life, gained multitudes of followers across America as the 20th century progressed. Always one of the pillars upholding ParkLands, the dream of a forested escape was present from 1967 on, as men and women devoted hundreds and thousands of hours scrutinizing finances and deeds, ideas and rumors. And it ran through the Saturday sessions when volunteers gathered to collect seeds, to pull garlic mustard from shady copses, or to help burn the Ridgetop Prairie.

Thoreau's spiritual descendant John Muir similarly argued that "[n]one of Nature's landscapes are ugly so long as they are wild"—a thought that likely would have found agreement among weekend workers as well as the thousands of visitors. For Muir's dream was among the oldest: Humans need to surround themselves with the beauties of the natural world, and ParkLands was providing that.

Bringing Thoreau's and Muir's dreams to the late 20th century, the foundation melded fresh spirits with old traditions, as newcomers to the county shared digging tools with descendants of pioneer families, and grade school pupils planted side by side with retirees.

The quest for beauty that underlay the work of many of ParkLands's activists can be seen in a report by Dale Birkenholz on a fall hike in the Merwin Nature Preserve:

The Mackinaw River was at its autumnal best.... There was little current and the riffles barely functioned. The pools were like mirrors and the yellowed silver maple leaves floating noiselessly on the surface, created a golden aura. It was a perfect time to be there. I had just birded the Stanley Lantz trail from the west, watching flocks of newly arrived white-throated sparrows along the north side of the

woods. Towhees, field sparrows, juncos, and a white-crowned sparrow and a hermit thrush were also noted. I had returned to the west walking along the river which contains a series of quiet pools and log jams. I noticed a continuous movement in the water under a large log at one of the jams. Then I saw the head of an adult otter! Though startled by my appearance, the otter resurfaced and finished its meal—the head of a carp. After about 10 minutes I retreated, leaving the otter to finish its meal. What a perfect highlight to the morning! And it shows the Illinois DNR otter reintroduction is working.

As ParkLands became a retreat in the wilds for stressed-out urban folk it was also a classroom. Its activities paralleled national trends in ecology. Once a leader of the Massachusetts Audubon Society had warned, “What we save now is all we will ever save,” and under that philosophy vast wilderness tracts around the nation were preserved from miners, loggers, and real estate developers. Native species could then return to areas from which they had been banished by development generations earlier.

But the new movements under way in the nineties refused to confine themselves to saving pristine areas. Just as wetlands restoration was a growing endeavor around the nation, it was also taking place on ParkLands tracts. Ecological restoration—to bring back a natural environment that formerly existed—was the byword from the Shelley wild flower garden in the

shadow of I-55 on the east, to the new Kenyon tract along Panther Creek in Woodford County on the west. The Nature Conservancy itself began acquiring desolate tracts by century’s end, expecting to rehabilitate them into worthwhile preserves. Similarly for ParkLands, as Birkenholz announced, “We’ll take anything”—wasteland, parcels destroyed by gravel operations, soybean fields. “We will restore a prairie,” he added. “We will start a forest.”

Perhaps at the start in 1967 ParkLands had seemed only a small group of idealists dedicated to creating a park, but by the 1990s the foundation had strength and savvy, and was involved in much more. Its tracts had become environmental test plots, attracting those seeking to learn how environments could be restored. The organization’s learning process in the years since 1967 paralleled that of Aldo Leopold, the founder of modern wildlife ecology, who had once tried to clean Arizona and New Mexico of wolves but then realized what happened when the deer multiplied: “I have seen every edible tree defoliated to the height of a saddlehorn. Such a mountain looks as if someone had given God new pruning shears, and forbidden Him all other exercise.” ParkLands, too, had its deer episode, and learned that all living things on its properties were interlocking, whether bluebells or otters, bur oaks or tallgrass prairie.

In the future lay new challenges, new directions. A paid staff still remained a dream for some members. Others wondered about devoting more time and money to the Mackinaw Trail: Should core tracts be



The annual burns in restored ParkLands prairies require careful planning and many volunteers. But the results are worth it: prairies restored to conditions approximating those that existed before settlement.



Working on a burn requires careful attention to use of backfires and frequently hurried efforts to keep the fire in check. These workers on a ParkLands prairie burn worked to block the fire's spread away from the backfire.

acquired elsewhere? Converting meadowlands and even plowed fields into prairie or savanna was increasingly discussed. A nature center, long a dream of John English during his years on the board, also was drawing new interest, particularly after such a center was installed at Funks Grove by the Funks Cemetery Association and the Olympia School District.

New attention to removing "exotics," or nonnative plants and trees, was also a challenge. Although multi-flora rose was declining as a problem because of increased shade in the Merwin Nature Preserve, garlic mustard was thriving in shady areas, blotting out native plants; and there was also autumn olive, amur honeysuckle, and teasel to contend with.

Now a national problem loomed in the background to confront ParkLands: All-terrain vehicles (ATVs) were increasing in numbers as sales shot up in the 1990s, their eager young drivers apparently unaware of the environmental destruction they were causing. U.S. National Forests started banning the versatile vehicles, which were becoming almost ubiquitous in some areas. In January 1991, ATVs were caught on the Merwin Nature Preserve's Henline tract, their drivers providing fictitious names to the ParkLands member who challenged them. When ATVs were found using the Champion Federal tract near Lake Bloomington later that year, the board began discussing possible solutions: a fence? more surveillance?

Perhaps changes in both the abilities and attitudes of governmental bodies would enable the organization to reconsider its reluctance to turn over land to county or state. Over the years the State of Illinois had molded its Department of Conservation into a professional body that seemed worlds away from the patronage-ridden group of sluggish incompetents that William

Rutherford turned his back on in 1970. Now, the state provided protection with its "Nature Preserve" designation, as well as giving seedlings and other help to ParkLands. Meanwhile, the McLean County Board had succeeded in turning Comlara Park into a popular, much-used recreational area that included forest and prairie.

Flexibility amid determination had been ParkLands's saving grace after the Lilly fiasco. But the original vision was unchanged. Just as Jesse W. Fell had once launched projects that spurred the citizenry on toward greater things, his lineal and spiritual descendants in McLean County had anticipated long-term community needs and had acted. Thousands of Central Illinois residents had responded, a democratic movement of private citizens acting to save recreational lands for now and the future. They were part of the modern environmental movement, whose spirit was summed up by a former McLean County fellow-citizen, Adlai Stevenson, who once warned, "We, the human race, are fellow travelers on a tiny spaceship spinning through infinite space." This concept of the earth as a fragile vessel needing protection was ingrained into the very fabric of ParkLands.

Yes, the organization had changed significantly from the little band of enthusiasts brought together by Loring Merwin in 1967, who reveled over two-acre and three-acre donations and made plans to turn everything they could acquire over to the state. But in many ways it had not changed at all. Just as Henry David Thoreau had gone to the woods to "learn what it had to teach," ParkLands members had also gone with both idealism and pragmatism to the woods, to the prairies, and had learned much—about how the natural world changes, about how it can be restored, and in the end, about the ability of a small group of dedicated individuals to bring about significant improvements for the lives of many, even reaching far, far into the future.



PARKLANDS PROPERTIES

The following properties were owned by the ParkLands Foundation by early 2001. Several others have been owned since 1967 but were sold or exchanged to enable the foundation to acquire larger aggregations of tracts. They are grouped by geographic location, with acreage and date of final acquisition.

I. Merwin Nature Preserve, McLean County

The preserve has 703.5 acres in 10 separate properties:

1. Rediger tract, 107 acres (1970). Bargain purchase.
2. Thatcher tract, 130 acres (1970). Bargain purchase.
3. Gregory tract, 40 acres (1971).
4. Vandegraft tract, 40 acres (1974).
5. Stewart tract, 93 acres (1976).
6. Kinsella tract, 40 acres (1975); 20 acres (1977).
7. Benedict tract, 44 acres (1979).
8. Henline tract, 170 acres (1985).
9. Illinois Wesleyan tract, 39.5 acres (1994).

II. Money Creek-Mackinaw tracts

These properties are between Lexington and the Merwin Nature Preserve, and total 280 acres.

1. Chapman tract, 80 acres (1991).
2. Bigger tract, 90 acres (1992).
3. Bradford tract, 7 acres (1993).
4. Tom Mohr tract #1, 10 acres (1994).
5. Alyce Mohr tract, 63 acres (1995).
6. Tom Mohr tract #2, 10 acres (1995).
7. Cecelia Bunney tract, 20 acres (1996). Gift by will.

III. Lexington tracts

This collection consists of 97.5 acres, west of Lexington. It includes the Dorothy Shelley Prairie Wild Flower Garden.

1. Turner tract, 7.5 acres (1996).
2. Shelley tracts, 34 acres (20 acres, 1975; 14 acres, 1983). Gifts of Edward Shelley.
3. Frey tract, 20 acres (1971). On Henline Creek. Donated by Carl and Frieda Frey.
4. Northern Illinois Gas tract, 23 acres (1970). Gift.
5. Sweeney tract, 10 acres (early 1970s).
6. Soper-Hiltabrandt tract, 3 acres (early 1970s).

IV. Tracts near Lake Bloomington

1. Breen I tract, 10 acres (1979). Donated by Thelma Breen. Near East Bay Camp.
2. Champion Federal tract, 28 acres (1991). Gift. Near East Bay Camp.
3. Breen II tracts, in three pieces: 12 acres, 5 acres, 5 acres (1979). One mile east of Lake Bloomington dam.
4. Moon tract, 42 acres (1988). Gift of Dorothy Moon estate. Half-mile east of Carver Corner.

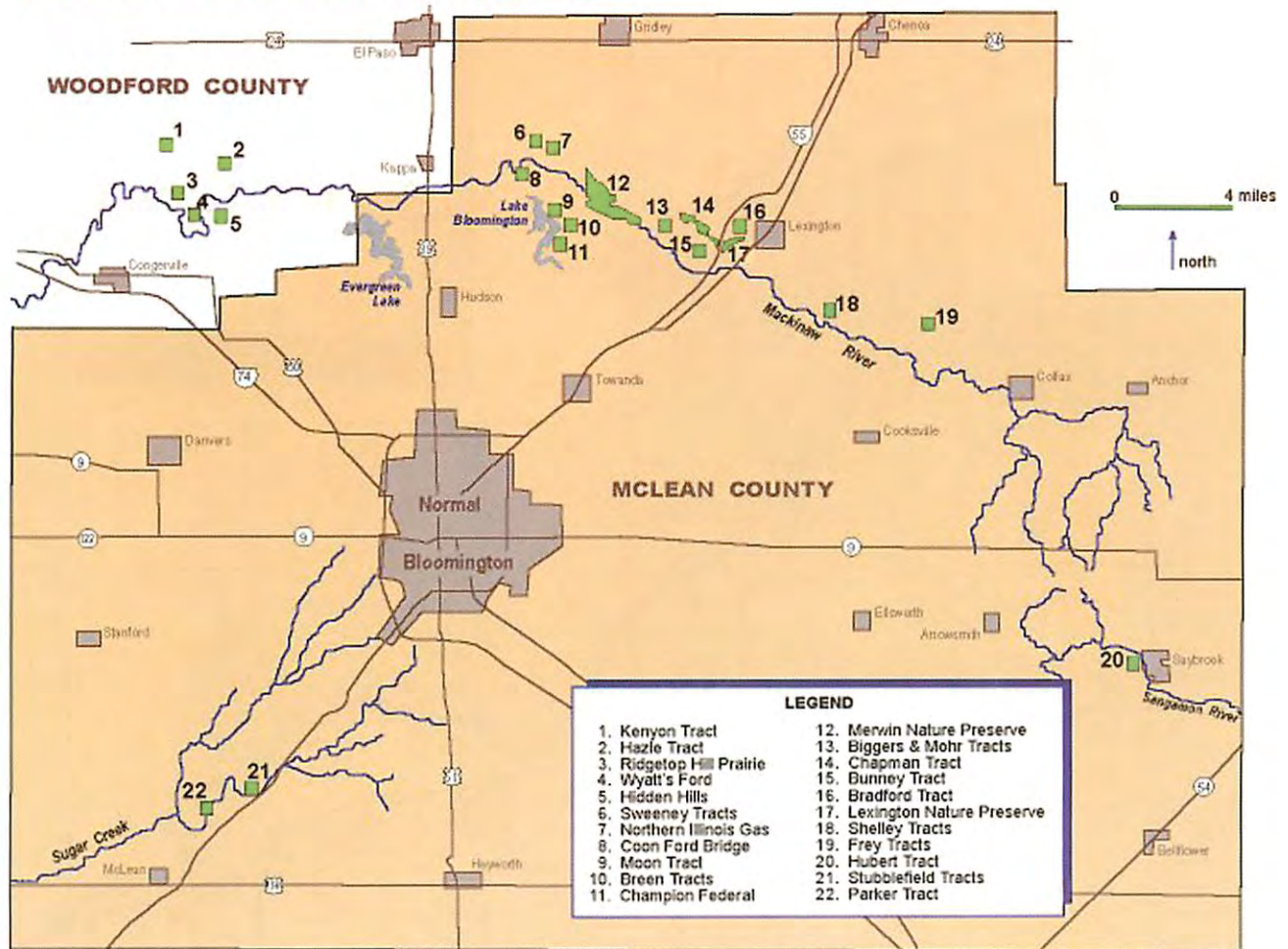
V. Other McLean County tracts

1. Stubblefield tracts, 5 acres (1967). Gift of Elizabeth and Louise Stubblefield, a state Nature Preserve. Five acres (1978). Gift of Olive Stubblefield. At Funks Grove.
2. Parker tract, 2.5 acres (1968). Gift; a National Heritage Landmark. At Funks Grove.
3. Hubert tract, 6 acres (1968). North of Saybrook.

VI. Woodford County tracts

1. Kenyon tracts, 138 acres and 11.5 acres (2001). Bargain sale from Frank Kenyon.
2. Wyatt's Ford, 64 acres on Mackinaw at Denman Creek junction (late 1970s). In addition, leasehold lot at the ford conveyed to ParkLands by Lou Fennes after death of her husband, Jim.
3. Woodrum tract, 50 acres (1989). Gift of Frances Woodrum.
4. Hazle tract, 40 acres (1987). Gift of Mildred Hazle.
5. Ridgtop Prairie, 19 acres (1984). Purchased through Nature Conservancy intervention.

Parklands Foundation Properties



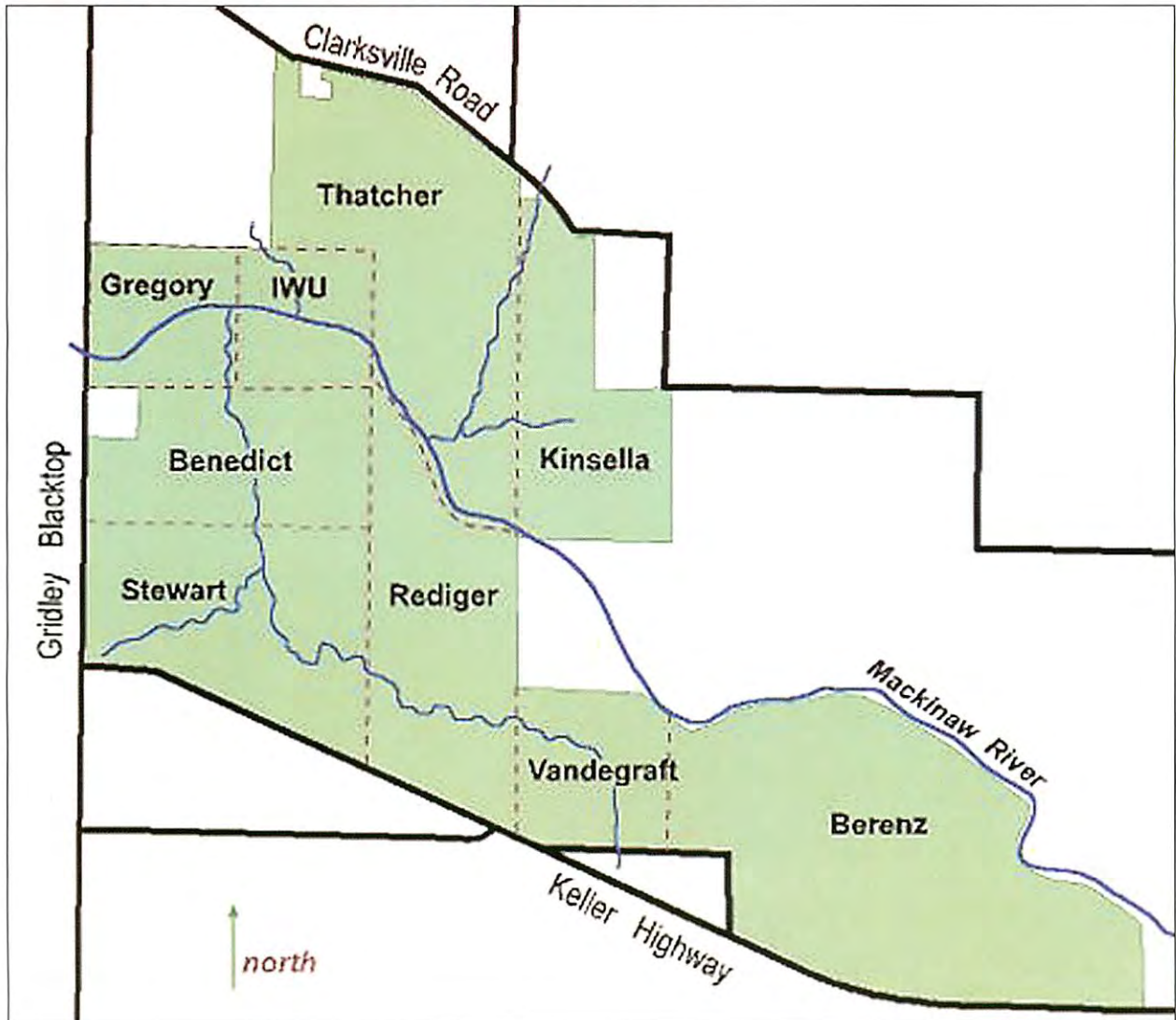
Maps by Jill Freund Thomas

Merwin Nature Preserve, Parklands Foundation



Trail maps showing changes are available at kiosks at each trailhead.

Sources of Tracts in Merwin Nature Preserve





Interested in helping ParkLands protect and improve the environment? Write to ParkLands, P.O. Box 3132, Bloomington, IL 61702-3132; call the Ecology Action Center at (309) 454-3169; or visit the Web site www.parklands.org.

