

Vestiges of Virgin Prairie Offer Glimpse at Lost Landscape



Undated photo of Weston Cemetery Prairie, a designated Illinois Nature Preserve in Yates Township.

In the 1830s, Abraham Carlock brought his family to White Oak Grove on the border of McLean and Woodford counties. “At the time,” his son William B. recalled much later, “there was not a fence or house or building of any kind to be seen on the prairie between his home and the village of Bloomington . . . the distance being about twelve miles.”

For early settlers like Abraham Carlock, who were accustomed to the heavy timber of the upland south or the eastern woodlands, the prairie presented a bewildering spectacle. Central Illinois offered these newcomers mile upon mile of perennial flowers and grasses reaching, at times, the height of a man on horseback, a nearly uninterrupted landscape, broken only by the occasional wooded grove.

It is a world lost, never to return.

In the end, the deep, fibrous roots of the prairie proved no match for the pioneer’s livestock, self-scouring steel plow, and clay drainage tile. Today, the Grand Prairie is a monoculture landscape of genetically modified corn and soybean fields, subdivisions, office parks, interstate highways, and all the creations of our restless age.

Prior to the arrival of white settlers in the 1820s, prairie covered around 90 percent of McLean County, or almost 670,000 acres. Though it seems an unpardonable crime, all

that remains are a handful of acres. Statewide, the story is just as bleak. Of an estimated 22 million acres of tallgrass prairie in the “Prairie State,” only about 2,300 acres remain.

In McLean County, the largest remaining tract of relatively undisturbed virgin prairie is Weston Cemetery. Located about one-half mile east of unincorporated Weston on Highway 24, the five-acre plot is home to almost 100 native plant species, such as little bluestem, with its silvery hair-like seeds carried by the wind, and the compass plant, which to the untrained eye resembles the sunflower.

Oftentimes, pioneer cemeteries, much like old railroad right-a-ways, were spared the plow, and though they were mowed from time to time, the prairie plants were never uprooted and destroyed, as was the case nearly everywhere else.

Weston Cemetery Prairie, a designated Illinois Nature Preserve which is owned by Yates Township and managed by Illinois State University, serves as a valuable seed bank for current and future prairie restoration projects. Vestiges of original prairie—“arks” of botanical diversity in this monoculture age—can be managed through controlled burns and the removal of invasive, non-indigenous species.

Although Weston Cemetery and other remnant prairie plots play a vital role in the reclamation of lost biodiversity, from an aesthetic perspective, they offer only the faintest glimpse of that past. After all, a defining feature of the tallgrass prairie was its vastness. For early travelers and settlers, the waving grasses inevitably led to the metaphor of the prairie as an ocean, and the groves as distant islands. The prairie was something apart from, and larger than, mankind.

Today, nowhere in Illinois is there a surviving or restored tallgrass prairie of sufficient immensity to summon in our mind’s eye the natural world of the Native American or early settler.

Hamlin Garland, a novelist and essayist who spent his formative years on several “Middle Border” farms, was witness to “breaking seasons” that doomed the prairie. He remembered an eighteen-inch plow “ripping and snarling” through hazel thickets and the matted prairie sod, as “foot by foot and rod by rod” all the “wild things died or hurried away, never to return.” It was a one-sided “wrestling match” between man and his domesticated beasts on one side and, on the other, the flora and fauna of the virgin prairie.

“At last the wide ‘quarter section’ lay upturned, black to the sun,” wrote Garland. “The tender plants, the sweet flowers, the fragrant fruits, the busy insects, all the swarming lives which had been native here for untold centuries were utterly destroyed.”

In 1926, William B. Carlock, near the end of his long life, penned a wistful reminiscence on the lost prairies of his youth. “Such beauty as no human tongue could describe,” he wrote. In summer mornings, “a heavy dew or light rain reflected the prismatic colors . . .

appearing like tiny rainbows.” For this old pioneer, “One’s imagination of paradise could not be more glorious than these prairie scenes.”

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