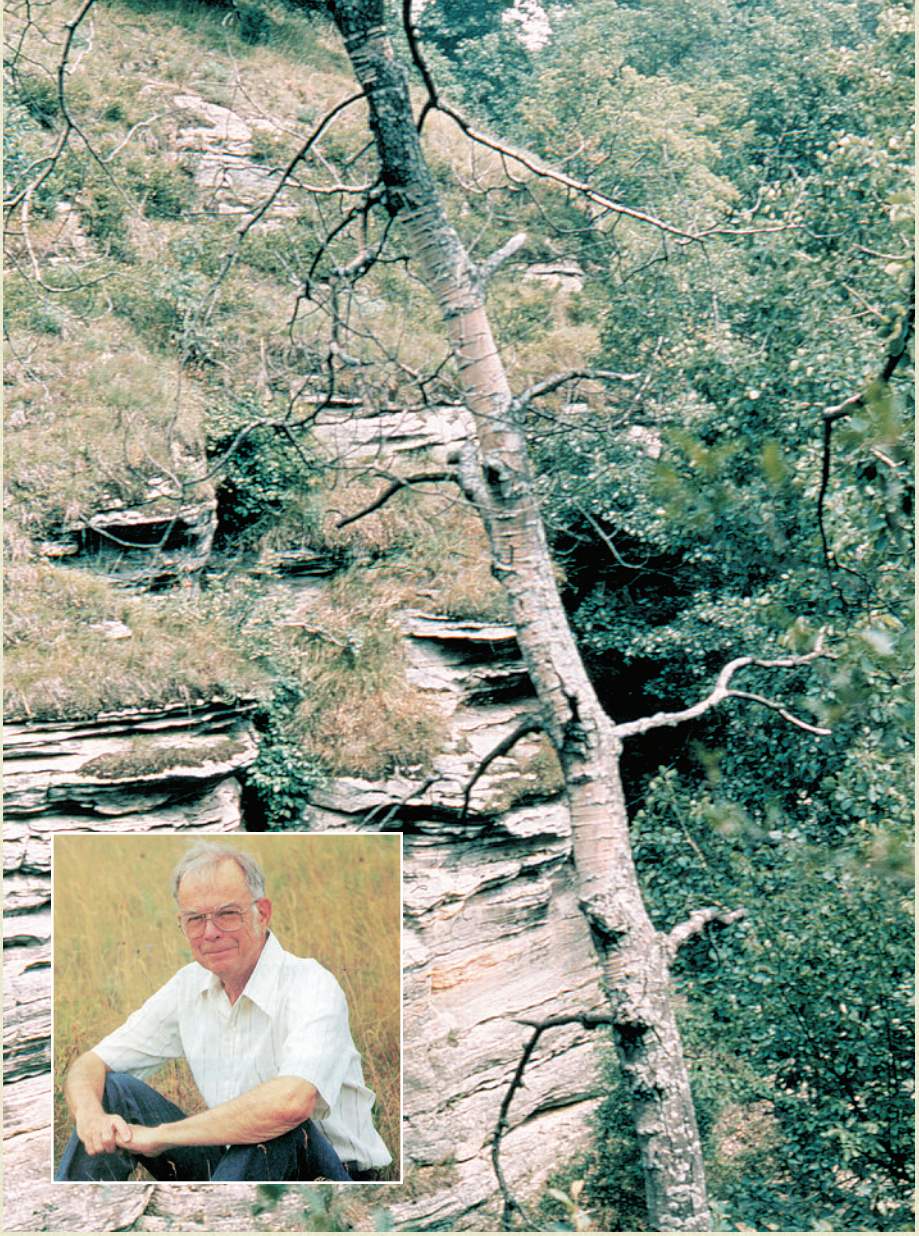
The Natural Land Institute

A half century at the forefront of preserving natural areas

Story by Arthur Melville Pearson
Photos By Natural Land Institute



George B. Fell (standing right, below) and William T. Lodge witnessed Governor Otto Kerner sign the Nature Preserves Act in 1963. Fell (inset above) was instrumental in the creation of Castle Rock State Park.

In 1958, Rockford native George B. Fell spent Christmas Eve by holding the inaugural meeting of the Natural Land Institute. That he would launch a new conservation organization while most other people finished up last-minute shopping or gathered with friends and family to celebrate the holiday underscores Fell's particular passion and tenacity—he stopped at nothing in his quest to preserve natural areas.

Trout lily

Fell established NLI on the heels of starting up another nonprofit conservation organization. In 1950, he and his wife, Barbara, moved to Washington, D.C. to organize a loose union of ecologists into The Nature Conservancy. With Fell as a driving force, TNC laid a strong foundation toward becoming the largest conservation organization in the world. He and Barbara returned to Rockford in 1958 and immediately began drafting articles of incorporation for NLI.

In establishing NLI, Fell's goal was to breathe life into an earlier idea he had to establish a statewide system of dedicated nature preserves. Through NLI, he championed legislation that would endow a new state government commission with an unprecedented degree of autonomy to acquire land, establish and maintain nature preserves, hire staff, and administer its own affairs.

Unsuccessful in his first legislative attempt, Fell redoubled his efforts but came up short the second time, too. However, after three years of intensive advocacy, he had convinced enough people of the need for a systematic means to preserve the state's rapidly disappearing native ecosystems. In August 1963, Governor Otto Kerner signed into law the Nature Preserves Act. Drafted by the Department of Conservation (forerunner of the Department of Natural Resources) it all but replicated Fell's bill save that it placed the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission squarely under the administrative umbrella of the DOC.

To date, the Natural Land Institute has received 24 Conservation 2000 grants from the Department of Natural Resources, totaling $2,516,872. Combined with a match from NLI of $2,822.984, these funds have resulted in significant preservation and protection of the Illinois landscape.

In the early years of the Commission, of which Fell was elected secretary, there was no state funding. Faced with this challenge, Fell turned to NLI to provide support for the Commission's activities. At first, NLI funded basic operating expenses. Eventually, NLI hired field representatives to serve as the staff of the Commission. Even after the state began allocating a budget to the Commission, NLI continued to provide significant staff and financial support for nearly 20 years.

This extraordinary public-private partnership allowed the Commission to hit the ground running from day one. In its first year, it designated 12 nature preserves, including an 829-acre portion of Illinois Beach State Park and 11 sites within the Forest Preserve District of Cook County.

Even more impressive were the natural areas both acquired and dedicated, often with the assistance of NLI. Beginning in 1963, Fell began acquiring parcels within an area of wooded sandstone bluffs known for its namesake natural feature, Castle Rock. Located along the Rock River near Oregon, Fell knew the area well from identifying plants there with his father, a noted amateur botanist who wrote "The Flora of Winnebago County, Illinois". Encouraged by NLI's success, the state contracted with Fell to assemble at least 1,000 contiguous acres in the Castle Rock area to anchor a new state park. By the time Castle Rock State Park was dedicated in 1978, NLI had acquired 440 acres, which it sold to the state at cost, and negotiated the purchase of 600 additional acres, which the state bought outright. Since then, the park's boundaries have expanded to more than 2,000 acres, 685 of which are designated as the George B. Fell Nature Preserve.

In 1969, NLI acquired Heron Pond and a portion of Wildcat Bluff in the heart of southern Illinois' Cache River area in southern Illinois. Today, this keystone parcel anchors the Heron Pond-Little Black Slough Nature Preserve. At 1,861 acres, it is the state's largest nature preserve and part of a 60,000-acre wetland corridor along the Cache River being protected and restored by a broad array of public and private entities, including the Department of Natural Resources.

Volunteers at Howard D. Colman Dells Preserve (left) and Nygren Wetland Preserve (right) assist NLI with reforestation.

In 1978, NLI staff, working under a contract awarded to the University of Illinois, helped to complete the Natural Areas Inventory, the first inventory project of such magnitude in the country. It revealed that there remained only 25,700 acres of original natural areas, or seven hundredths of one percent of Illinois' total land and water area. Since much of this land was in private ownership, NLI developed the private landowner contact program, in which its staff traveled 95,000 miles to help people understand the importance of preserving the natural areas on their properties. To this day, Commission staff receive the occasional call from one of the contacted landowners: "You said to get in touch with you if I ever considered selling my land. Well, I'm considering it."

During the 18 years that NLI and the Commission worked hand-in-glove, 80 nature preserves, comprising 18,559

A conservation easement held by NLI protects land along the Pecatonica River, shown left with a dazzling display of Virginia bluebells. False sunflowers and wild bergamot at Nygren Wetland Preserve (below).

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acres, were dedicated, affording them the highest degree of legal protection in the state. In 1982 the Commission opted to assume responsibility for all funding and staffing matters, thereby ending its formal relationship with NLI.

In the ensuing years, NLI continued to manage several state nature preserves and explore ever new and innovative means to preserve natural areas. Among them was the nurturing of the Natural Areas Association whose purpose is to provide information services primarily to those working within the natural areas preservation field.

Fell passed away in 1994, but NLI lives on, preserving natural areas through acquisition, conservation easements, advocacy and hands-on stewardship. Over the course of its 50-year history, NLI has acquired or negotiated the purchase of about 175 tracts of land, totaling 10,793 acres. It holds 39 conservation easements on more than 2,500 acres, spread across 13 different counties. Through the Mississippi River Blufflands Alliance, NLI works with a diversity of stakeholders to protect the rare and endangered landscapes along the Illinois side of the river from Moline to Hanover. NLI also is an active partner in six Ecosystem Partnerships. With funding from the DNR's Conservation 2000 program, the Kishwaukee River Ecosystem Partnership recently completed a GIS-based natural resource inventory and developed a strategic plan to protect the river and restore critical fish and wildlife habitat.

Bald eagles at Hanover Bluffs in Jo Daviess County (right). Painted turtles on Raccoon Creek at Nygren Wetland Preserve (below).

Permanently protected by a conservation easement held by NLI are 140 acres of privately owned hills and bluffs along the Mississippi River.

When, in 2000, NLI purchased the 721-acre Nygren Wetland Preserve, located near Rockton, very little natural vegetation remained. Raccoon Creek, which ran through the property, had been straightened and ditched. Fueled by more than 20,000 hours of volunteer time, NLI has largely restored the site to its native state—100 acres of prairie, 150 acres of woodland and 450 acres of wetlands through which Raccoon Creek once again meanders in its original channel. Among the many bird and animal species that have returned to the site are sandhill cranes, river otters and Blanding's turtles.

Coinciding with NLI's 50th anniversary, in February 2008, George B. Fell was inducted into the Illinois Outdoor Hall of Fame. Never one to seek the limelight, no doubt he would have used the occasion to call attention to the fact that there remain many natural areas at risk and that it was time for NLI—and everyone else—to start planning preservation strategies for the next 50 years.

Arthur Melville Pearson is a freelance writer living in Chicago. He recently completed a biography of George Fell and is currently at work on a biography of Robert Todd Lincoln.