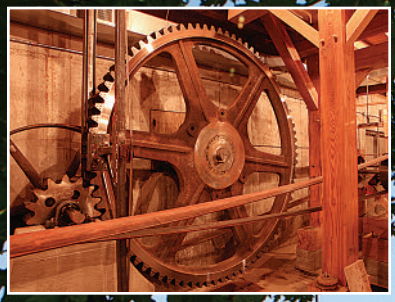
For more than 30 years, volunteers have helped shape Franklin Cr

Volunteers Power Lee Cou



Story By Kathy Andrews
Photos By Adele Hodde

When it comes to the will of volunteers, one of Illinois' finest examples exists at Franklin Creek State Natural Area.

Celebrating their 30th anniversary next year, the Franklin Creek Area Preservation Committee secured donations of money and labor, along with assistance from the Franklin Grove Future Farmers of America, to construct roads, shelters, picnic tables, restrooms, run underground electric lines, drill wells and clear hiking trails for a new state facility in Lee County. Thanks to the efforts of the volunteers, Franklin Creek State Natural Area was officially dedicated on August 28, 1982.

The community spirit didn't wane, but continued for another decade as volunteers raised funds, and contributed thousands of hours of labor, to reconstruct an 1847 water-driven grist mill originally built by Reverend Joseph Emmert and his son-in-law Christian Lahman.

For nearly 30 years the volunteer effort has remained true to their original purpose: to preserve the area's history. Today, volunteers staff the Franklin Creek Grist Mill, providing visitors a first-hand tour of a 19th century timber-frame mill, discussing construction techniques and demonstrating how corn meal and wheat flour were produced on the American frontier.

The committee recently acquired the Franklin Creek Headwaters property, an 80-acre tract named for the three streams that converge to help form

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Volunteers provide guided tours of the reconstructed 1847 water-driven grist mill at Franklin Creek State Natural Area.

Franklin Creek. Among the primary funders were individuals, the local bank, the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation and the John Husar Memorial fund.

(Photo by Elmer Stauffer.)

Franklin Creek volunteers include a local school who enhanced a prairie restoration area as a part of the Earth Day in the Parks program.

A historic, stone railroad bridge spans a stream within the newly acquired Franklin Creek Headwaters property.

Established in 1999, the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation invests in clean energy development and land preservation efforts, working with communities and residents to improve environmental quality in Illinois. Using a $225 million endowment provided by Commonwealth Edison, the foundation has funded more than 3,000 grants in three program areas: improving energy efficiency, developing renewable energy resources, and preserving and enhancing natural areas and wildlife habitat throughout Illinois. To date, Foundation Natural Area grants have helped to protect more than 14,500 acres throughout the state.

"The headwaters project combines the best of multiple worlds," explained Jolie Krasinski, foundation program officer. "It is the coming together of public and private efforts to make something happen during what has been a relatively challenging time for land conservation in the state. The foundation was, and is, most impressed by the group's work to build a public and privately owned, but publicly accessible, trail from the town of Franklin Grove to Nachusa Grasslands. This group sees beyond the boundaries of their preserve and tries to not only make it relevant to the local citizens (though connections with the history and culture of the area), but of interest and enjoyment to the larger region by working to connect Franklin Creek State Natural Area to another significant natural area of the state."

Seeking a quiet retreat from their busy lives in the Chicago suburbs, and planning for their retirement years, John and Louise Husar purchased property bordered on two sides by Franklin Creek SNA. John, an award-winning sportswriter, columnist for the Chicago Tribune and advocate for wildlife restoration, hunting and fishing access in Illinois, found much of his inspiration while at the Franklin Creek cabin.

After John's untimely death in 2000, Louise proceeded with the plan to retire to Lee County, enjoying the can-do attitude of the local folk and peacefulness of the park. When the need arose to quickly acquire a critical tract of land, Louise offered to loan the committee money raised for a memorial to her late husband. The memorial money was combined with other resources to make the land purchase possible.

Louise Husar

"I couldn't think of a more fitting tribute to John than assisting with the expansion of the park he considered

Remnant and restored prairies recall the landscape that attracted pioneering families settling the Franklin Creek area in the 1830s.

one of Illinois' hidden gems," Louise said. "John was a very spiritual man and I plan to eventually use the memorial funds to enhance this park as a spiritual retreat."

In addition to commemorating settlement of the region, preserving the land known as Franklin Creek State Natural Area also recognizes an area with rich geologic and natural resources.

The same features that drew pioneer families in the 1830s—large, cool springs, hardwood forests, a picturesque creek and deep valleys protected from winter winds—are what led to the 1970 designation of 198 acres as Illinois' 24th nature preserve.

Flowing through the site for thousands of years, Franklin Creek has carved a scenic valley and exposed three distinct rock strata, including New Richmond sandstone. Dating back 500 million years, this is the oldest exposed rock formation in Illinois, and is found only at Franklin Creek and one other location.

On a hill prairie remnant grow Indian grass, tall dropseed, false toadflax, flowering spurge and hoary puccoon. Canada yew, an evergreen shrub of more northern woods, grows on an undisturbed cliff community, along with bladdernut, bishop's cap, shooting star and several species of ferns. Seeps and springs within the forest support moist-soil plants such as skunk cabbage, wild black currant and swamp rose.

To experience the scenic beauty of the linear, 882-acre park, head out on Pioneer Pass, a 1.85 mile trail that connects two day use areas located on each end of the park. Each day-use area has a loop trail (the popular Mill Springs Trail is a 1/3-mile concrete-surfaced trail suitable for people of all mobility levels) which also connects to Pioneer Pass. A total of 4.5 miles of marked hiking trails exist here.

Thanks to the efforts of another partner, the Rock River Trail and Horseman Association, an extensive, 12-mile equestrian trail system was developed, which riders find interesting for the variety of terrains and vegetation. After the hunting season (white-tailed deer and wild

At a glance

Franklin Creek State Natural Area, 1872 Twist Road, Franklin Grove, IL 61031
Telephone: (815) 456-2878
Web site: dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/parks/r1/franklin.htm
Directions: Franklin Creek SNA is located between Rochelle and Dixon. Traveling on Illinois Route 38, turn north on Daysville Road, on the west side of the small town of Franklin Grove, and go one block to Old Mill Road. Turn left (west) on Old Mill Road and proceed 1 mile to the site.

(Photo by Elmer Stauffer.)

Site amenities include volunteer-led youth bow hunting workshops and accessible fishing opportunities.

An extensive equestrian program exists at Franklin Creek thanks to the efforts of the Rock River Trail and Horseman Association.

turkey), and when conditions permit, a portion of the trail sees use by snowmobilers and cross-country skiers. The association also developed an outdoor show area and welcomes riders and observers to their two annual horse shows.

"The June show is a formal event, with a large crowd of horses and variety of rider skill levels," Joyce O'Brien, association president, said. "Timed events take place on Saturday, followed by horsemanship classes on Sunday."

The September weekend is marketed as a Fun Show and includes a poker run and events for the entire family. For further information on the events, visit rrtha.tripod.com/rrtha.html.

Tempted by the cool, clear waters in Franklin Creek? Fishing is permitted on state-owned land, so be sure to pick up a park map to verify that you are on park property. The map depicts three ponds, Dysart, Senger and Black Bass, which actually are wide spots in the creek made popular by early settler families. Carry on a tradition dating back more than 165 years. Gather your fishing equipment and the family for a Sunday picnic at one of the "ponds" and try for a limit of smallmouth bass, channel catfish, carp, redhorse and, when stocked, rock bass that reside in the creek.

The Mill Pond provides a more accessible fishing spot and supports a population of largemouth and smallmouth bass, bluegill, green sunfish and bullhead.

For a more formal picnic setting, select one of the five shelters located in Norwegian Hill and Mill Springs Day Use Areas, each supplied with electricity, cooking grills, picnic tables, restrooms and drinking water. Four of the shelters may be reserved through reserveamerica.com. The parking lot at Sunday's Bridge—named for the 1800s-era family residing there—provides access to four walk-in picnic facilities.

Franklin Creek SNA is an area rich in history and bounding with local pride for the power of volunteers. Plan a visit this year, and let them show you what the excitement is all about.

The purpose of the Rock River Trail & Horseman Association, established in 1940 and Illinois' oldest horse club, is to promote horsemanship and horseback riding for pleasure, and stimulate and maintain interest in riding horses. For information on upcoming events, visit http://rrtha.tripod.com/rrtha.html, e-mail rrthapresident@gmail.com or call (815) 973-1371 or (815) 541-9522. Events are at Franklin Creek State Natural Area unless otherwise noted.

Sept. 18, 2 p.m., Poker Run
Sept. 19, 10 a.m., Fun Show, canter lope84@yahoo.com or (815) 501-6874
Oct. 9, 10 a.m., St. Jude's Benefit Ride & Chili Dump, location TBA
Oct. 10, 2 p.m. St. Jude's Benefit Poker Run, location TBA

Area attractions

The newly acquired Franklin Creek Headwaters property straddles Illinois Route 38, providing the opportunity to develop the highly visible site as a model for best-use land management practices and erect an informational kiosk promoting area attractions. In addition, creation of a 5.5-mile public access trail is proposed, beginning at the west edge of Franklin Grove, passing through the Headwaters property and connecting to existing trails at Franklin Creek SNA and Nachusa Grasslands.

Lincoln Highway

The Lincoln Highway Association was created in 1913 and resulted in a 3,400 mile coast-to-coast highway which enters Illinois at Chicago Heights and exits near Fulton. The association's national headquarters is located at Franklin Grove in a dry goods store built in 1860 by Henry Isaac Lincoln. For further information see lincolnhighwayassoc.org.

Chapin Creek Historic Village

The Franklin Grove Area Historical Society has created Chaplin Creek Historic Village, an evolving prairie settlement typical of the middle 19th century. Among the buildings are a forge, saltbox house, school house, village jail, an early settler's cabin and English-style barn. Several special events occur during the year including the Summer Harvest Festival. The village is open Saturdays from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. and Sundays noon-4 p.m. from mid April to mid October. For information call (815) 456-2382 or visit franklingroveil.org/testt.htm.

Nachusa Grasslands

With more than 3,000 acres of land under protection, Nachusa Grasslands is one of Illinois' largest prairies. Located 4 miles northwest of Franklin Grove on Lowden Road, the grassland serves as a living model for land management techniques and natural areas restoration. For further information, contact The Nature Conservancy at (815) 973-0245.