A daily presence of volunteers proved critical to Illinois' most unique prairie resources.

Fast-Acting Volu

(Photo by Kathy Andrews.)

A sculpture of two early advocates for preserving a unique Cook County prairie stands near the caboose that serves as the Santa Fe Prairie headquarters.

Story By Kathy Andrews
Photos By Don Kinnally

The metal sculpture stands as a constant reminder that persistence pays. Silhouettes of Robert Betz and Floyd Swink demonstrate to visitors and volunteers that dedication to a cause will reap benefits—even if it takes more than four decades.

As a child, Betz imagined that Chicago's vacant lots were remnants of what was once a vast prairie ecosystem. In 1959, he discovered a true prairie remnant when Swink, an educator, author and leading authority on prairie plants, introduced him to a prairie in southwest Cook County. Swink had discovered nearly 50 acres of a rare mesic gravel and dry gravel prairie in 1946. Spurred by watching development slowly nibble away at the borders of this grassland, the duo's vision to protect the site finally succeeded in 1997 when Stan Johnson, chair of the Illinois-Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor Civic Center Authority, helped lobby for protection of the last remaining 10 acres of the site as the Santa Fe Prairie Nature Preserve (NP).

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Santa Fe Nature Preserve volunteers received the President's Call to Service Award in 2004.

Santa Fe Nature Preserve

Santa Fe Prairie was dedicated as a nature preserve on Aug. 5, 1997. The prairie qualified for protection under the Illinois Natural Areas Preservation Act as a Category I Illinois Natural Areas Inventory site in recognition of its high-quality (Grade A) mesic gravel and dry-mesic gravel natural communities. These natural communities are very rare and Santa Fe Prairie is the only site in Illinois that contains examples of both of these ecological treasures. Santa Fe Prairie is the last of its kind in the state of Illinois. The Illinois Nature Preserves Commission oversees restoration, management and protection efforts at the preserve.

Following the lead of Betz and Swink, a team of Santa Fe Prairie volunteers recently continued the tradition of dedication and courage to preserve this one-of-a-kind Illinois grassland.

"When volunteers observed illegal dumping on the prairie, they stepped up and fought for the resource," Department of Natural Resources Conservation Police Officer Ron O'Neal said. "In the end, this violation raised the level of awareness the Hodgkins community has for the prairie, and showed that people can come together to do what is best for the site."

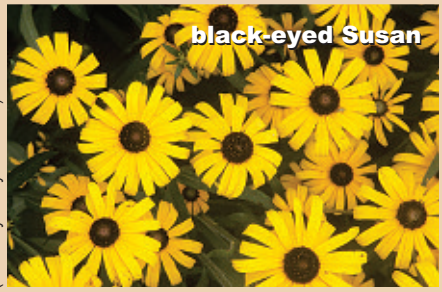
In the court ruling following the dumping incident, the Cook County States Attorney's office cited the quick actions of volunteers for identifying violations of the Illinois Environmental Protection Act and the Illinois Natural Areas Preservation Act. The settlement reached will help restore an area especially sensitive to human impacts and intolerant of pollution or changes to its natural environmental conditions.

Santa Fe Prairie NP is owned by the Illinois-Michigan Canal National Corridor Civic Center Authority, with volunteers working tirelessly to preserve the integrity of the prairie and share the resource with the community. In 2004, the group was the only Illinois organization to receive the President's Call to Service Award, recognizing their commitment to strengthen the nation and help make a difference through volunteer service.

The volunteers include Stan Johnson, a scientist at Argonne National Laboratory and past chairman for the I&M Canal National Heritage Corridor Civic Center Authority and Karen Stasky and Greg Starr, who serve as head stewards. Don Kinnally, a truck mechanic by profession, volunteers several hours a week and has gained recognition for his wildlife photographs. A chemist by trade and member of the Civic Center Authority Board, Phil Smith is restoring the outside of the CE-11 Santa Fe caboose that serves as the site headquarters, and eventually will be the site's interpretive center.

butterfly-weed

white-tailed deer


black-eyed Susan

(Photo by Kathy Andrews.)

beaver

rose hips

(Photo by Kathy Andrews.)

Santa Fe Nature Preserve is the only example of mesic gravel and dry-mesic communities in Illinois and supports a diversity of rare and common plants and animals.

High school students spend hours each school year removing exotic plants.

And local experts lend a hand. Botanists from the Chicago Botanic Gardens study the unique prairie communities. Wheaton College students conduct hydrologic studies to determine how flooding of the prairie may contribute to changes in vegetation patterns. Several commercial organizations supply advice on ecological restoration.

Nearly 200 people join together—spending a few hours here and there throughout the year—to help manage and restore the prairie and conduct educational programs.

"The volunteers are as diverse as the plants growing on the prairie," Kinnally commented. "And the visitors have equally varied backgrounds. Some come to watch the changing seasons across the prairie. Others sit on the deck in the spring to listen to the bullfrogs, then return when the water levels drop in the heat of the summer to watch the raccoons and herons feed on tadpoles. The rail yard adjacent to the prairie draws other visitors, who leave knowing a little about this unique natural site."

"We are open to visitors every Saturday of the year from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., and during the same hours on Sundays from Memorial Day through Labor Day," Starr explained. "Even on Christmas and New Year's Day there are great things to see in nature and spending a few hours on the prairie often means being with people you have a lot in common with.

"I love seeing people sit on the deck or walk the perimeter trail system, binoculars or camera in hand, studying the prairie, wildlife and trains," Starr continued. "Visitors have a chance to experience a part of Illinois relatively unchanged through the ages, and we hope they leave with a greater appreciation of nature, the area's history and the power of volunteerism."

Facts at a glance

Santa Fe Nature Preserve, located at the intersection of Leon Cook Drive (71st Street) and River Road, Hodgkins, IL 60525.
Telephone: Contact Stan Johnson, Santa Fe Prairie coordinator for the Illinois-Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor Civic Center Authority, at (708) 937-0009.
Website: www.civiccenterauthority.org.
Directions: Exit I-55 north onto LaGrange Road and turn east (left) at 67th Street. At the four-way stop, turn south (right) onto Santa Fe Drive, then left at Leon Cook Drive (71st Street) over the overpass onto River Road along the Des Plaines River. Turn right at the T-intersection toward the red caboose.