Vern LaGesse and the Friends of the Sangamon Valley work to retain the habitats and history of central Illinois.

Friends Indeed

Story By Jeanne Townsend Handy
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If suddenly dropped into the midst of many of the sites that Vern LaGesse strives to protect, it would be easy to become disoriented, to believe that you had landed somewhere other than in Illinois. Such disorientation would arise precisely because these sites *are* unlike most Illinois landscapes or, more specifically, the Illinois landscapes we know today.

Following behind LaGesse as he clambered up the windswept slopes of the Revis Hill Prairie, I tried to define the role of the man who is the founder and president of the volunteer group known as the Friends of the Sangamon Valley. Ecosystem manager? Natural historian? Liaison between the landscapes of our past and those of our future?

Although he asserts that he is not a "tree-hugger" or anti-development, without a doubt LaGesse and his organization believe that the extinction of already-rare habitats and species would leave Illinois bereft of a crucial part of its history. And in a state that has lost the overwhelming majority of its original landscape, there is little natural history left to behold. Yet efforts to characterize "The Friends" or to pin down the role of its founder are, for the most part, futile.

Vern LaGesse, the first two-time winner of the Springfield State Journal-Register's "Prairie and People" conservation award, during exotic honeysuckle eradication at the Wolf Preserve in Menard County.

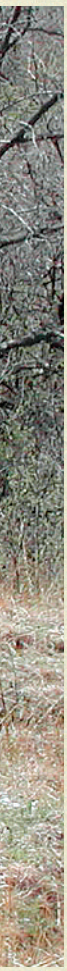
Once referred to as a "rag-tag gang of about a dozen nature lovers," The Friends now number 215, volunteers

all, and places such as Washington Park, the South Fork Nature Reserve, Carpenter Park, the Knuppel Wildlife Sanctuary, Carver Yocum Homestead Park as well as the Revis Hill Prairie have benefited from their dedication. But there is no encapsulating the group's shape and scope as it shifts and moves, independent yet weaving into and out of other organizations. They have provided support for and partnered with government agencies, park districts, universities, landowners and bird societies. Collaboration and symbiotic relationships are as fundamental to the Friends of the Sangamon Valley as they are for the ecologically significant lands they hope to protect.

At Revis, rising high above the Sangamon River bottomland, collaborations and symbioses were readily in evidence. This rare Mason County hill prairie was brought into tenuous existence by geography, topography, and localized exposure to sun and wind. It was created when the last glacier retreated, dropping a load of fine silt that would later be dried in periods of drought and blown onto adjacent uplands. Nearby prairie species moved in to occupy the bluffs, and the steepness of its slopes allowed it to remain, for now, what has been called one of the "last living windows into presettlement Illinois ecology."

Because of the site's significance, it is owned by Department of Natural Resources, which is assisted by LaGesse and his group in its maintenance and protection. On this day, members of The Friends had come to Revis to conduct a survey of the prairie dandelion, a state-listed endangered species that is known to occur in only six other locations in Illinois. LaGesse explained that monitoring endangered species—that, at Revis, also include the regal fritillary butterfly, the ottoe skipper butterfly and the bent-leafed milk vetch, among others—helps the group determine the areas in which their work is most crucial.

Arriving atop a hill with spectacular views and buffeting wind, LaGesse paused as if standing upon the ultimate podium to regale us with the story of Revis. After first pointing out a turkey vulture soaring below us, he directed our attention to the Bloomington moraine that had been left behind by the glacier, and he talked of the loess "which is finer than sand—like talcum," which can be found in deposits that are more than 200 feet deep in some areas. Moving to Revis's more recent history, he pointed out the remnants of historic wagon ruts, still evident in the loess.



Several of the oaks of the Wolf Preserve have been in existence for hundreds of years. Brush removal and controlled burns at the Wolf Preserve are allowing species diversity and natural function to return.

The Friends of the Sangamon Valley are endeavoring to return Wolf Preserve to its historical state as a savanna setting.

"These box canyons were used in the early cattle drives to overnight cattle on their way into or out of Springfield," he explained.

As he continued his tale, it became obvious that LaGesse finds no disconnect between human and natural history. Natural history has dictated much of where and how our society has settled and grown—and now we may dictate whether some of the features that accompanied our past will accompany our future as well. Without the type of intervention that the Friends of the Sangamon Valley supply at Revis to halt the invasion of woody species, this rare habitat will likely disappear.

"Revis is one of the biggest and best examples of loess hill prairie in the state, and we're losing it," stated LaGesse. "We have lost 80 percent of this historic prairie in the past 70 years." And he worries that volunteers alone cannot maintain the entire 410-acre site. Yet they see this as no excuse for giving up.

In fact, the excuses often underlying habitat loss have never sat well with LaGesse. Following the loss of a small but significant parcel of old-growth timber within Springfield's city limits, LaGesse decided that it should "never again" be possible for government officials and developers to use the excuse that "We didn't know." He embarked on a three-year project to map every inch of forest, prairie and wetland in Sangamon County. Completed in 2004, the project resulted in the most comprehensive inventory of natural areas ever compiled in central Illinois. It was LaGesse's hope that greater knowledge would lead to better choices and creative solutions. And when consultation of LaGesse's maps resulted in relocation of Springfield's power plant to a site that was just as suitable but less ecologically significant, this hope was realized.

"Bow saw or loppers?" LaGesse asked, reaching into the back of a pickup truck to extract our tool of choice. Several of The Friends had gathered at the Wolf Preserve in Menard County to clear exotic honeysuckle, a restorative measure from the group's bag of tricks that includes the most important tool—the reintroduction of fire.

"Fires helped create our natural communities," claimed LaGesse.

The Wolf Preserve is a 68-acre old growth woodland donated to the Friends of the Sangamon Valley in 2005. In an effort to return it to its historical state as a savanna setting of open oak woodlands with a mix of trees and wildflowers, they first conducted surveys to create a list of understory and tree species and, through core extraction, they determined the ages of large trees. Restoration efforts have since included brush removal, controlled burns, and the planting of 9 acres of hardwood trees along with 8 acres of prairie in what had once been a farm field.

With a running commentary and infectious laughter, LaGesse eased the arduous chore of trudging through dense brush across uneven terrain to locate and eliminate the understory's nemesis, the exotic honeysuckle. Like the curator of a living museum or the proud architect of an organic tour de force, he continually drew our attention to the site's most advantageous features such as the oaks and the waterfalls. Here his history lesson included Native Americans of the late Woodland era, the grazing of cattle, 15 year-old signs of logging, and an historic fire scar.

An historic fire scar helps convey the history of the Wolf Preserve.

Rising high above the Sangamon River bottomland, Revis Hill Prairie is a rare Illinois landscape.

Again, it became obvious that LaGesse realizes human history is a mere footnote in the grand story told by the land he helps to protect. And here, at Wolf Preserve, some of the participants in this grand story remain. LaGesse brought our attention to white oaks of amazing ages—278 years old, 400 years old, 171 years old. And pointing to a 310-year-old white oak possessing a massive horizontal limb within easy reach he stated, "There's my park bench."

Although in 2009 the Friends of the Sangamon Valley celebrated their first purchase, a 50-acre combination of rare, high-quality sand and mesic upland forest in Cass County, called Boyle Woods, not all sites where The Friends can be found working are of the highest quality. LaGesse admits that at the Adams Wildlife Sanctuary, a 40-acre preserve where they are now assisting the Illinois Audubon Society with restoration efforts, one can find "every exotic species you could imagine."

But given the location of this site on Springfield's east side, LaGesse sees greater opportunity for the community to become involved and inspired. For many people outdoors means danger," he stated. "No one has brought them out and given them a good experience outdoors. And if no one enjoys this, we won't be able to save anything."

And who inspired LaGesse? Was it John Muir? Aldo Leopold? As it turns out, LaGesse's inspiration came locally—from retired DNR biologist, Bill McClain.

He inspired me to go into conservation," claimed LaGesse. "It is so important to have someone help you learn. He is one of the few people who took me under his wing and gave me an opportunity, even though I had no academic background. To me, the whole native/non-native thing was mind-boggling. I didn't know plants—that was my biggest challenge."

And now, for Vern LaGesse and the Friends of the Sangamon Valley, the greatest challenge may be to provide such education and opportunity for others.

Stated LaGesse, "We have to inspire the next generation of people."

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LaGesse leads a tour at the Wolf Preserve as part of the Friends of the Sangamon Valley's ongoing community outreach.