Hiking Thro

For the Potawatomi, the term Midewin denoted healing. Today it signifies the healing effects of restoration at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie.

Story By Jeanne Townsend Handy
Photos By Adele Hodde

There is a piece of land located 40 miles southwest of downtown Chicago that retains remnants of American history like pages ripped from a textbook. These pages hint at a story that tells of native peoples and European settlers, war efforts and contamination of land and water in the name of national security, healing and restoration, new visions and shifting values. This land's most recent names and intentions seem to collide in startling contradiction as the Joliet Army Ammunition Plant, the site of the world's largest TNT factory, continues its transformation into the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie.

Midewin (mih-DAY-win) is the nation's first nationally designated tallgrass preserve, and it is no small parcel tucked into an out-of-the-way corner. It encompasses 18,094 acres, 7,200 of which are now open to the public, and choosing a starting point for exploration from the 22 miles of trails can be daunting. The site map identifies trail names that jar perception and

Untouched and isolated for more than 60 years, buffer areas around the ammunition plant retain their natural character.

ugh History

(Photo by Tom Handy.)

(Photo by Tom Handy.)

The frames of the ammunition plant warehouses—slated for dismantling as the restoration proceeds—recall Midewin's former wartime mission.

pull in disparate directions. Which way to go? To the Explosives Road Trailhead or the Twin Oaks Trail? The Bunker Field Trail or the Prairie Creek Woods Trail? The wartime and peaceful purposes of this site are equally intriguing, yet it is difficult not to be drawn first to the vestiges of the military-related activities that have taken place there.

Gearing up for entry into World War II, the United States government determined that the heartland was the perfect site for a chemical works/bomb assembly plant, lying beyond the reach of the Luftwaffe and the Imperial Japanese Air Force. In July 1940, the government purchased 150 Joliet-area farms and within 14 months was turning out blocks of TNT. The landscape was quickly and dramatically altered by 1,000 buildings, 200 miles of roads, 166 miles of railroad tracks, and 329 earth-covered concrete bunkers used for the storage of ammunition and explosives.

Settling on the Bunker Field Trail to begin exploration, I made my way down paths now lined with native plants that teemed with butterflies. Knowledge of the urgent and secretive nature of what had taken place here

Sod-covered storage bunkers, or "igloos," remind visitors of the wartime significance of Midewin.

Each fall, school groups and visitors assist in the seed production gardens, harvesting seeds for use in the horticultural program.

made me feel as though I were violating national security, and this eerie feeling strengthened upon spotting the silhouettes of the storage bunkers, or "igloos," that appeared to rise organically from the earth. Covered with grass to keep them hidden from aerial view, these bunkers are a centerpiece of one of the many guided tours offered at Midewin.

As I drew near the skeletal shells of warehouses now filled with vegetation and rising starkly skyward, it became easy to imagine the tumult of activity performed by the former employees—10,425 of whom worked at the ammunition plant during peak production. These employees would load more than 926,000,000 bombs, shells, mines, detonators, fuses and boosters, and set a national record for the production of more than one billion pounds of TNT. Production was maintained until the end of the war when the arsenal was placed on standby. Reactivation came during the Korean War, from 1952 to 1957, and again during the Vietnam War. By the late 1970s, most operations at the Joliet Army Ammunitions Plant had finally ceased. But not before a toxic legacy had been left behind.

Intermittently, from the early 1940s until the 1970s, toxic byproducts from the manufacture of bombs, artillery shells and high explosives had found their way into the soil and groundwater. How then, despite the massive cleanup that has taken place, could thoughts have turned so improbably from TNT production to flora and fauna? What could have sparked such an incongruent vision for the future of this land? The answer may lie partly in the ammunition plant's need for seclusion.

For both safety and security reasons, this plant and 77 others like it in the nation required the isolation offered by surrounding buffer lands. At Joliet, the factories were so enormous, thousands of acres of open land were necessary to insulate the ammunition plant—acres that included fields, pastures, prairie remnants, woods, wetlands and streams—acres that the public would not see or touch for nearly 60 years.

Eventually, the site's potential as much-needed wildlife habitat was realized, documented, and fought for by proponents from the Department of Natural Resources and through grassroots efforts. On March 10, 1997, the Army transferred the first 15,080 acres of arsenal holdings to the U.S. Forest Service, and a new life for this land began. The Indian name "Midewin" was chosen with the permission of the Potawatomi people, a tribe known to have occupied the area from the late 1600s through the early 1800s. Midewin was the name for the Potawatomi's "Grand Healing Society"—and it is a name representing the desire for the healing effects of restoration.

Leaving behind the Bunker Field Trail and a history that for so long governed this landscape, I journeyed

Midewin Burnham Legacy Project

The Burnham Plan Centennial commemorating Daniel Burnham's 1909 Plan of Chicago is providing Chicago professionals with the opportunity to design a Green Legacy Project at Midewin. The innovative Legacy Project plans will incorporate cutting-edge Green technology in the creation of two open-air Prairie Learning Centers at Midewin.

Interpretive exhibits within the Midewin Welcome Center provide information on the cultural and natural history of the area.

Evidence of the scale of the native plant restoration program is evident within one of Midewin's many shade houses.

toward Midewin's present. I drove past the South Patrol Road Restoration Project, which is the site of the preserve's most enduring restoration efforts. According to Marta Witt of the USDA Forest Service, at the time of the land transfer only 3 percent of native vegetation remained in little corners of farm fields and along railroad grades.

"Very, very little," she stated, but quickly added that even before the restoration began, these acres had been the last refuge for many species. Midewin already provides a haven for numerous plants and animals in desperate need of habitat, including two species on the federal endangered species list, 20 species listed by the State of Illinois as watch list, threatened, or endangered, and 26 species recognized by the U.S. Forest Service as Regional Forester Sensitive Species.

Arriving at the Prairie Creek Woods Trail, I found an entryway constructed of intertwining branches that beckoned hikers onto the path beyond. When prairie dominated the landscape of Illinois, early visitors often likened it to a vast, rippling ocean, and the metaphor seemed fitting. The lush grasses central to the Prairie Creek Woods Trail undulated in the breeze, moving me along to its edge and into the seclusion of the adjacent Prairie Creek Woods. Stately citizens of this original woodland proudly proclaimed their longevity and their identity with signs tied to their trunks—burr oak, shagbark hickory, black ash—and suggested what could once again be.

When I asked Marta Witt if what I had read was true—that it would take 50 to 100 years to complete the restoration—she responded emphatically, "Oh, at least."

A final stop at one of the native seed production gardens along River Road acted as a reminder of the size and complexity of the largest prairie restoration east of the Mississippi River. Midewin also is a center for research, a place to attempt to piece together an ecosystem so rare—only 0.01 percent of Illinois' original 21 million acres of prairie remain—that no one knows exactly how these pieces collaborate as a system. "So much of what happens at Midewin will be an ongoing experiment, learning by trial and error how to gradually regain our natural heritage in Illinois," states one Midewin source.

As the prairie is restored and the mosaic of habitats regains health and diversity, the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie of the future will offer not only refuge for wildlife but also ever-expanding opportunities for recreation and education—and for continued journeys through history. Whether taking a tour that introduces you to the "Ghosts of the Ammunition Plant" or setting off on bicycle or foot in independent exploration, at Midewin it is possible to travel through time, to hike through history, moving from the past to the present and toward a future that recalls our prairie legacy.

At a glance

Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie, 30239 S. State Route 53, Wilmington, IL 60481
Telephone: (815) 423-6370
Web site: www.fs.fed.us/mntp
Directions to the Welcome Center: From I-55: Take exit 241 at Wilmington and at the top of the ramp turn left or east. Travel 3.5 miles on New River Road, turning left (north) on State Route 53 and proceeding 1 mile to the site.
From I-80: Take exit 132, State Route 53 and Chicago Street, and turn right, or south, at the end of the ramp. Travel south on State Route 53 approximately 15 miles to the site.
From I-57: Take exit 327 at Peotone and turn left, or west, from the northbound ramp; turn right or west from the southbound ramp. Travel approximately 15 miles on the Wilmington-Peotone Road to State Route 53, turning right (north) and traveling approximately 1.5 miles to the site.
Permitted Activities: A stop at the Welcome Center or visit to the Web site is advised for details on the following activities.

Tours and **lectures** are offered year-round on a variety of topics.

The Midewin **trail system** includes trails designated for walkers, bicyclists, horseback riders and cross-country skiers.

Opportunities abound at Midewin for **wildlife watching**, with early morning and dusk the best times to view wild turkeys, white-tailed deer, grassland birds and coyotes.

Midewin is open for spring turkey and fall deer **hunting**. Check the Web site calendar for details. Current hunting season information also is posted at trailheads.

A number of rustic (tables and portable toilets) **picnic** areas are available.

Springfield writer Jeanne Townsend Handy holds an M.A. in Environmental Studies and has been accepted into the Society of Environmental Journalists.

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