The Early Illinois Prairie

By

William Roger Harshbarger

Presented to the Douglas County Historical Society as part of their collection to define the history of the county.

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Prologue

Illinois is known as the "prairie state." The first writers and travelers who explored the state in the late 1700s and early 1800s were amazed at the contrast between the Illinois grasslands and the dense, dark forests they left behind in the East.

This account captures some of their reactions when writers first saw the prairie. The information comes from travelers, from emigrant guides, and from "boomers"—land owners who promoted the beneficial qualities of the land in order to attract settlers. Their first-hand reports provide a vivid, contemporary impression of their first encounter, giving us a snapshot of how the prairie looked and how it affected them.

This account also explores how the prairie provided important benefits for pioneers, and, also, how it imposed impediments that delayed settlement. While avoiding a detailed, scientific analysis of the prairie flora and fauna, it reveals important aspects of the prairie culture and it should help readers visualize the historical realities that defined the prairie. It draws from several works, each of which would be rewarding for the curious student.

This essay is divided into four parts—the first sighting of the prairie; the intimidating aspects of the prairie; the obstacles that delayed rapid settlement; and the animals that lived on the early prairie. Each part was written to be published separately as a newspaper account. Hence the focus is on facts and stories that that might have high interest to the general public. The pioneer prairie story is far more complex and has much more detail that would enrich the lives of readers and humble those who remain unaware of the extraordinary achievements of early settlers.

Finally, this account attempts to promote an interest in Illinois and Douglas County history. Perhaps, re-telling the story and popularizing the experience of early settlers will stimulate an appreciation for the past and a determination to improve the future.

William R. Harshbarger
December 2016.

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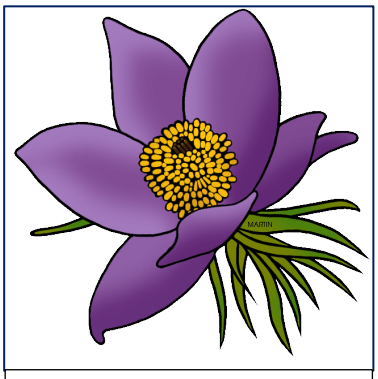
By Bill Harshbarger

The prairie has its own story. Over the years the story has changed. Today visitors see the prairie from speeding vehicles on paved roads, looking at neatly trimmed roadsides, uniform patches of strong plants, flat-land farms, and small towns. The farmers today see the rich, productive soil from the platform of monstrous equipment that transforms the black dirt into a green, quilt-patch carpet of hybrid corn and soybeans. But that's not how the story started.

When the first European visitors and American settlers encounter the original "Grand Prairie," they saw something entirely different. They came from the east, where everyone lived in the forest. When they first walked onto the prairie, emerging with scratches and bruises inflicted by the dark, thick forests, they were awestruck by the sunlight, the endless horizon, the open sky, and the texture and variety of plants. They wrote about the color and beauty of the flowers. Then, later, as they explored the area, they encountered obstacles.



"Pasque flower," Phillip Martin Clip Art, Retrieved on December 17, 2016 from http://flowers.phillipmartin.info/pasque_flower.htm

The first writers expressed their delight in different ways.

"A more beautiful or fruitful region is not to be found in the whole earth than the great Central Prairies of Illinois."[1] –M. L. Dunlap, 1864.

In 1817, one author described the April surface as a "delicious green," like a smooth carpet or well-worn lawn.[2] He and others in 1838 described the "unforgettable sight" of the spring-time Alexanders and pink shooting stars and the summer time "blue Pasque flowers," and yellow rosinweed, scarlet lilies, purple violets and other blooms. They raved about the big bluestem grass "bedecked with asters, golden rods and gentians that asserted themselves in the fall.[3] When populated with horses and cows, one called it "a fairy-like scene on which the eye delights to dwell, a perfect picture of rural felicity and peace."[4] In 1819, when a German traveler crossed the Wabash river and came upon the prairie. he wrote: "The nearer one comes, however, to Kaskaskia the more the grass lands with alternating forests increase, which often form the most lovely views. If there

[1] Urban, Michael A., "An Uninhabited waste: Transforming the Grand Prairie in Nineteenth Century Illinois, USA," *Journal of Historical Geography*, 31 (2005) 661; see footnote 116, M.L. Dunlap, Central Illinois, The Illinois Farmer 9 (1864) 231.
[2] Flower, George, *History of the English Settlement in Edwards County Illinois founded in 1817 and 1818 by Morris Birkbeck and George Flower*. Chicago: Fergus Printing Company, 1882, pp. 179-181.
[3] *Op. Cit*.. Flower, History, 179-181; Korling, Torkel, (1972) *The Prairie Swell and Swale, What is a Prairie?* By Robert F. Betz, Dundee, Illinois, 1972. Retrieved on November 4, 2016 from http://plantconservation.us/Betz1972.pdf, 5.
[4] Flower, George, *History of the English Settlement in Edwards County Illinois founded in 1817 and 1818 by Morris Birkbeck and George Flower*. Chicago: Fergus Printing Company, 1882, 179-181.

were not too great lack of water here, then these regions could be considered among the most beautiful and pleasing."[5]

George Flower, the co-founder of the English colony in Albion, Illinois in 1817, after traveling through the dark and shaded forests of the East, described his first view of the prairie:

"Bruised by the brushwood and exhausted by the extreme heat we almost despaired, when a small cabin and a low fence greeted our eyes. A few steps more and a beautiful prairie suddenly opened to our view.

"At first, we only received the impressions of its general beauty. With longer gaze, all its distinctive features were revealed, lying in profound repose under the warm light of an afternoon's summer sun. Its indented and irregular outline of wood, its varied surface interspersed with clumps of oaks of centuries' growth, its tall grass, with seed stalks from six to ten feet high, like tall and slender reeds waving in a gentle breeze, the whole presenting a magnificence of park-scenery, complete from the hand of Nature, and unrivalled by the same sort of scenery by European art. For once, the reality came up to the picture of imagination.

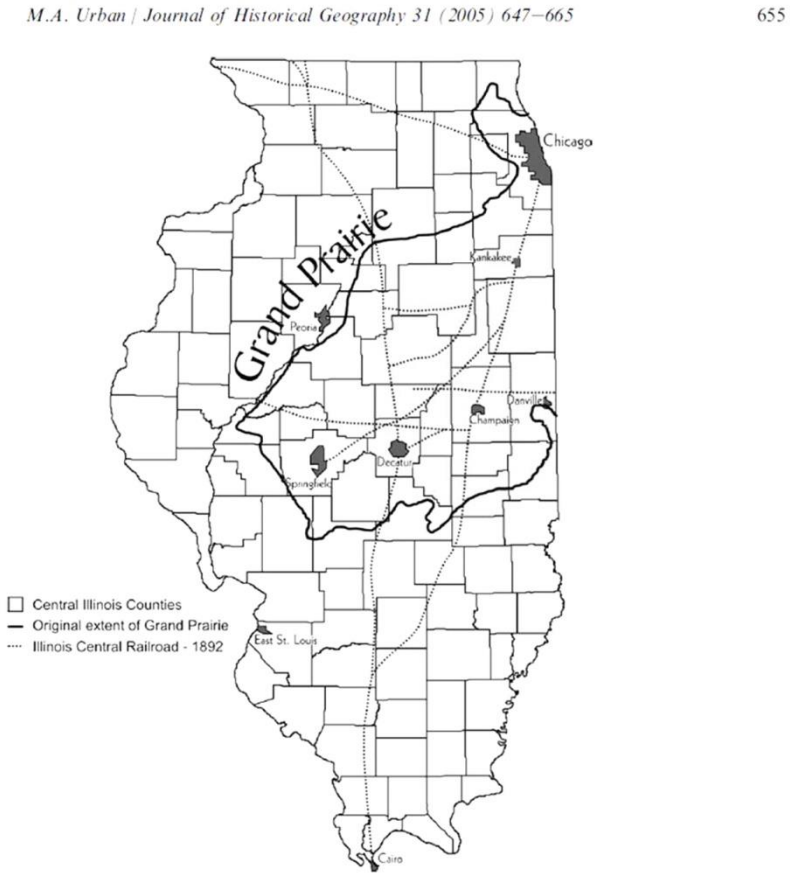


Fig. 1. The Grand Prairie, a vast mosaic of tallgrass prairie interspersed with pockets of wet prairie and marshland, was the last area in the state of Illinois to be settled.

"Our station was in the wood, on rising ground; from it, a descent of about a hundred yards to the valley of the prairie, about a-quarter of a mile wide, extending to the base of a majestic slope, rising upward for a full half-mile, crowned by groves of noble oaks. A little to the left, the eye wandered up a long stretch of prairie for three miles, into which projected hills and slopes, covered with rich grass and decorated with compact clumps of full-grown trees, from four to eight in each clump.

[5] ERNST, FERDINAND. *Travels in Illinois in 1819. Translation from the German Original.* In *Pub. No. 8 of the Ill. Hist. Lib.* pp. 150-65. *Springfield, Ill.: Phillips Bros.*, 1904, 152.

From beneath the broken shade of the wood, with our arms raised above our brows, we gazed long and steadily, drinking in the beauties of the scene which had been so long the object of our search."[6]

Most early travelers wrote about the tall grass—the autumn bluestem and the less-green, turkey-foot grasses that could hide a man riding on a horse.[7] A modern writer disputes this claim, saying that "more reliable historical accounts" and observation of prairie remnants show the height of the tall grasses to be little more than six feet. He asserts that in late summer the "prairie reaches the peak of its development, with most of the plants in flower standing three or four feet tall."[8]

The first vision of the prairie often caused travelers to compare it to a sea—a sea of grass that waved to a summer's breeze. One wrote that "A feeling of awe came over me, that feeling which always comes upon beholding Nature's great handiwork."[9] An 1819 traveler was struck with "wonder and amazement" that he could travel "from rising sun to setting sun without seeing a hillock or tree—nothing but grass of a luxuriant growth waving in the breeze."[10] First settlers enlarged the image of the sea when they described the "movers" in white-canvass-covered wagons pushing through the grass. From a distance of eight or ten miles they could see the white-topped wagons moving, suggesting the appearance of a sail at sea. They called these wagons "prairie schooners," named after the commercial, coastal sailing vessels that were invented in the early 1700s.[11]

In1899, Harvey Lee Ross, citing writers from the 1770s, said that the prairies of Fulton, Schuyler, and Mason counties were a "perfect paradise" for the Indians who lived there. He noted that deer lived there by the thousands. "It is not an exaggeration to say that I have seen 500 deer in the woods and prairies in a single day." The land housed every other kind of fowl, the rivers and streams were

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[6] *Op. Cit.,* Flower, *History*, 64-65.

[7] *Ibid.*, Flower, *History*, 179-181; Gresham, John M., *Historical and Biographical record of Douglas county*, Logansport, Indiana: Wilson, Humphreys & Co., 1900, pp. 21-22. There are several references to grass tall enough to hide a man on horseback-- Breeden, M. F., "Historical Letter to Homecoming Committee," "Oldest Resident Writes of Early Days in the Vicinity of Arcola," *The Weekly Arcolian*, Vol 11, no. 33 July 29, 1909, p. 6; See Cain, Angelique and Brandi Hymer, *Murder and Mayhem in Old Arcola,* United States of America: United Graphics, 1956, p. 5, for the story of Isaac Ellis's 1853 experience trying to keep track of cattle in the tall grass; See also, *Redmon On the Edge of the Prairie*, The Redmond Historical Committee, comp., Potomac, Illinois: Blue Printing, 1974, pp. 1-2; Tillson, Christina Holmes, *A Woman's Story of Pioneer Illinois,* Milo Milton Quaife, Chicago: R.R. Donnelly and Sons Company, 1919, pp. 65-66; see also, Niles, Henry C., *History of Douglas County Illinois*, Tuscola, IL: Converse & Parks, Printers, 1876. (Centennial edition), 32-33.

[8] Korling, Torkel, (1972) *The Prairie Swell and Swale* , What is a Prairie? By Robert F. Betz, Dundee, Illinois, retrieved on November 4, 2016 from http://plantconservation.us/Betz1972.pdf, 7.

[9] Piatt, Emma, *History of Piatt County: together with a Brief History of Illinois from the Discovery of the Upper Mississippi to the Present Time*, Chicago: Shepard & Johnston Printers, No Date, 11.

[10] Harding, Benjamin, *A Tour through the Western country Published for the use of Emigrants.* London: British Library, Historical Print Edition, 1819, 8. For more on the "sea of grass" see Blane, Capt. William N. ,*An Excursion through the United States and Canada During the Years 1822-23 by an English Gentleman*, London: Baldwin, Craddock, and Joy, 1824, 182.

[11] Niles, Henry C., *History of Douglas County Illinois*, Tuscola, IL: Converse & Parks, Printers, 1876. (Centennial edition), 32-33.

full of fish. Bee trees were numerous. Sugar trees provided sugar.[12] Capt. Phillip Pittman noted in 1770 that the soil was rich and luxuriant, producing many European grains—hops, hemp, flax, cotton, and tobacco, as well as European fruits including grapes that in color and taste rivaled the red wine of *Provence.* There was no limit to the wild fruit—plums, crabapples, grapes, black and redhaws, gooseberries, blackberries, dewberries, and strawberries. In 1796, Victor Collot wrote about prairie land that would produce 100 bushels of corn per acre and recorded his observation of the "delightful" valley of the Mississippi and the "woods and natural meadows, strewed with medicinal and odoriferous plants" along with the romantic spots where the numerous rivulets flow beneath the flowers of the meadows.[13]

The woods that bordered the prairies provided acres of wild onions. Wild potatoes grew in such abundance south of Spoon river that residents who gathered the staple food even during the hard winters promptly named the small creek "Potato Creek." They also harvested the ginseng that grew in the woods, sacked it, and sent it to merchants in St Louis who used it for medicinal purposes.[14]

In 1779, during their military foray into Mississippi Valley against the British to establish the American claim to all of the land east of the river, George Rogers Clark and his soldiers took note of the prairie. Clark wrote: "This you may take for granted that it's more Beautiful than any idea I could have formed of a Country almost in a state of Nature. Everything you behold is an Additional Beauty. On the [Mississippi] River You'll find the finest Lands the Sun ever shone on; in the High Country You'll find a variety of poor and Rich Lands with large Meadows extending beyond the reach of your Eyes Variegated with groves of Trees appearing like Islands in the Seas covered with Buffaloes and other Game; in many Places with a good Glass You may see all those that is on their feet in half a Million Acres; so level is the Country which some future day will excel in Cattle."[15]

Harvey Lee Ross noted that the pioneers in Fulton County named their prairie areas after the first settlers. When traveling through the sea of grass, they used distant tree groves as guide posts. He wrote that "Smith's Prairie," named after Jeremiah Smith, "was one of the most beautiful prairies mortal eyes ever beheld. It was covered with what was called blue-stemmed grass, a most excellent

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[12] Ross, Harvey Lee. *The Early Pioneers and Pioneer Events of the State of Illinois,* Chicago: Eastman Brothers, 1899; Also reprinted by Ruth M. Davis, Avon, Illinois, 1970: Astoria, IL: Stevens Publishing Company, 61.

[13] Pittman, Capt. Phillip, *The Present State of the European Settlements on the Mississippi With a Geographical description of the River,* London: J. Nourse, 1770, p. 51; *Op. Cit.,* Ross, *Early Pioneers,* 61-62; Collot, Victor. *A Journey in North America, containing a Survey of the Countries watered by the Mississippi, Ohio, Missouri, and other affluing Rivers ... Illustrated by 36 Maps, Plans, Views, and divers Cuts. Paris: Arthus Bertrand*, 1826, Chapter XVI is about Illinois. Journey in Illinois in 1796, 233-234; also cited by Boggess, Arthur Clinton, *The Settlement of Illinois, 1778-1830*, Chicago: Chicago Historical Society's Collection, Vol. V, 1908, 9.

[14] *Op.Cit.,* Ross, *Early Pioneers,* 61-62.

[15] Davis, James E. *Frontier Illinois*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998, 80-82. Note 7, on p. 82 from Chapter 5, "A Tenuous Conquest": James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781,* 154 states: "Although Clark saw meadows 'covered with Buffaloes,' the days of buffalo in Illinois were numbered. Buffalo in Illinois suffered greatly during the winter of 1790, when they froze or starved in deep snow, died at the hands of Indians, and fell victim of roving predators. They never recovered from these severe loses. See Alfred H. Meyer, "Circulation and Settlement Patters of the Calumet Region of Northwest Indiana and Northeast Illinois," *AAAG,* September 1954, 268.

grass for hay. It grew from three to four feet high, and afforded hay enough for all the people of Lewistown and the settlers for many miles in all directions."[16]

Looking through the lens of the twenty-first century it is nearly impossible to imagine the beauty of the early prairie. Today we see roadsides with red clover blossoms, blue chicory flowers, and delicate, white Queen Anne's lace. We see cattails and tall, goldenrod, growing in places where old railroads once ran. And, here-and-there, we discover a small row of tall pampas grass growing along the interstate highways, evoking a brief cry of surprise and delight. Under the unobstructed sky that is scratched on the horizon by the rare, small silhouettes of prairie trees, we now see vast carpets of uniform corn and soy-bean plants that feed the world. Beside the self-sustaining Amish farms we can still see occasional pastures of timothy, alfalfa, and clover and small grain plants of oats, barley, and wheat.

While each era has its own beauty and the enormous prairie farms of today can still inspire awe among visitors who have never seen them, we might stop now-and-then to evoke in our imagination the beauty of the vast, unsettled prairie of two hundred years ago.

Yet, for all of its beauty and abundance, the raw, vacant prairie was not a hospitable place, and the first settlers, for the most part, avoided it. Part II explains some of these obstacles.

The Prairie Part II, The Formidable Prairie

The early Illinois pioneers discovered a beautiful sea of grass that stubbornly resisted their determined efforts to subdue it. Bugs, the wetlands, and the prairie sod, itself, presented substantial challenges.

In August of 1865, thirty years after the first farmers built their log cabins in the Kaskaskia woodlands, after Fillmore had sprung into life and already disappeared, and when the town of Bourbon was only twelve years old, H. H. Moore first saw the little, ten-year-old railroad town that originally called itself "Okaw," and, then, changed its name to "Arcola." Moore said, " I first saw Arcola: two rows of one-story houses, with a few exceptions strung along opposite sides of the Illinois Central railroad track in the center of an apparently boundless prairie stretching out in all directions to the horizon."—H. H. Moore[17]

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[16] Ross, Harvey Lee. *The Early Pioneers and Pioneer Events of the State of Illinois,* Chicago: Eastman Brothers, 1899; Also reprinted by Ruth M. Davis, Avon, Illinois, 1970: Astoria, IL: Stevens Publishing Company, 64.

[17] Cain, Angelique and Brandi Hymer, *Murder and Mayhem in Old Arcola,* United States of America: United Graphics, 1956, 11-15.

The railroad helped farmers conquer the prairie. Before that time, however, the prairie remained a formidable, intimidating opponent that slowly yielded to the settlers' solutions.

Early visitors misjudged the significance of the inexplicable lack of trees. Many thought that any soil, which could not support trees, could not support crops.[18] This common, anti-prairie—and farfetched—bias began early, as recorded in a 1786 letter from James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson concerning the Northwest Territory which was being organized for settlement:

"A great part of the territory is miserably poor, especially that near Lakes Michigan and Erie, and that upon the Mississippi and the Illinois consists of extensive plains which have not had, from appearances, and will not have, a single bush on them for ages. The districts, therefore, within which these fall, will never contain a sufficient number of inhabitants to entitle them to membership in the confederacy."[19]

Early settlers needed wood; the lack of wood was critical.[20] Before the discovery of coal and before the building of the railroads starting in the 1850s, wood provided fuel and raw materials for constructing homes, barns, and fences. During the winter, it protected settlers from the harsh prairie winds. The woodland also housed many animals and plants needed for survival.[21] The first settlers built cabins in the forests that straddled the prairie rivers and planted their first crops among the stumps, as they had done back east.[22] "Many an old settler toiled and labored almost incessantly, day and night, for months, to prepare a few acres of woodland for cultivation, when, within a stone's throw of his cabin, lay the rich, fertile prairie, inviting him to reap a rich harvest for the mere sowing."[23] Very few pioneers aspired to live on the prairie. Most clung to the protection and familiarity of the woods.

Up through the mid-nineteenth century, the unexpected, hidden wetlands caused an exaggerated fear of the prairie as a dangerous place to be avoided. The fear was overstated,[24] but the location of these unpleasant places was difficult to detect in the prairie-grass sea. Charles Dickens, while traveling in the prairie area in 1842, realized that prairie promoters had misled the public. To balance the account, he wrote a "lurid description" of the land. He called the land around Cairo,

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[18] Urban, Michael A., "An Uninhabited waste: Transforming the Grand Prairie in Nineteenth Century Illinois, USA," *Journal of Historical Geography,* 31 (2005) 662; Ernst, Ferdinand. *Travels in Illinois in 1819. Translation from the German Original.* In *Pub. No. 8 of the Ill. Hist. Lib.* pp. 150-65. *Springfield, Ill.: Phillips Bros.*, 1904, 162.

[19] Boggess, Arthur Clinton, *The Settlement of Illinois, 1778-1830,* Chicago: Chicago Historical Society's Collection, Vol. V, 1908, 87-88; note 224, p. 87, Hamilton, "Writings of James Monroe," 1786 letter from Monroe to Jefferson. I., 117.

[20] Pooley, William Vipond. *The Settlement of Illinois from 1830 to 1850.* Ann Arbor, MI, 1968, originally published Madison, (Reprinted from the Bulletin of the University of Wisconsin History Series, Vol. I, pp. 287-595) Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, May 1908, 540, Note 3 on p. 540, Henderson, *History of the Sangamon Country,* 174.

[21] Gresham, John. *Historical and Biographical Record of Douglas County, Illinois*. Logansport, IN: Wilson, Humphreys & Co., 1900, 40; Korling, Torkel, *The Prairie Swell and Swale , What is a Prairie?* By Robert F. Betz, Dundee, Illinois, 1972. http://plantconservation.us/Betz1972.pdf , 5; Harding, Benjamin, *A Tour through the Western country Published for the use of Emigrants.* London: British Library, Historical Print Edition, 1819, 8-9.

[22] *Op. Cit.,* Bogess, *Settlement of Illinois*, 154.

[23] Le Baron's, *History of Coles County,* Chicago: Wm. Le Baron, Jr. & Co., 1879, 491.

[24] Prince, Hugh, *Wetlands of the American Midwest: A Historical Geography of Changing Attitudes.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Ltd. 1997, 119-133.

Illinois as "a hotbed of disease, an ugly sepulcher, a grave un-cheered by any gleam of promise…."[25] The wetlands were not as widespread as some feared; but, those who blundered into the wetlands found their horses mired in muck. In time, prairie travelers left traces in the grass to guide others around the swamps.

Before it was a town, Arcola was a swamp. According to M. F. Breeden, one of the first settlers in Douglas County, who arrived in 1856, much of the county was a swamp. In 1909 he wrote his account of first seeing the land:

"On the 17th day of August 1856, I first saw the light of day in Douglas County. On that Wednesday morning, as well as I can recollect, everything looked new to me…. What was Douglas County 53 years ago? It was a swamp. In those days, it was called by travelers, "God's forsaken country," and they thought that the Almighty had set apart this country for the wild geese and ducks, and for the crawfish, where they could convert their little mounds of sand into towers where the frogs could climb up on them in the bright moonlight and sing their sweet songs."[26]

Crawfish mound. Found in the wetlands of the early prairie.

The wetlands were not just inconvenient; they also brought disease. Because malaria, or the dreaded shaking disease they called "ague," sprung from the wetlands, the prairie earned a reputation for being dangerous and unhealthy.[27] Sickness was common among the new arrivals. A noxious gas called "miasma" emerged from deteriorating plants in the wetlands. Many blamed the gas for the flu-like or malarial symptoms that sapped the strength of whole families. The sickness prevented families from being properly prepared for fall and winter. "Pioneers joked that newcomers weren't really settled until they had suffered their first case of swamp flu."[28] Writing in 1900, John Gresham said, "To have a severe case of malarial fever or several season's run of the ague was expected by each new-comer, and none were considered as having been fully inducted into all the mysteries of citizenship until they had had the regular malarial experience."[29]

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[25] *Ibid.,* Prince, *Wetlands,* 121; note 20, Charles Dickens, *American notes for general circulation,* ed., John S. Whitley and Arnold Goldman (1842); Penquin Classics, Hamondsworth (1985), 215-16.
[26] Breeden, M. F., "Historical Letter from M. F. Breeden," Letter from Los Angeles, California, July 25, 1909. "Oldest Resident Writes of Early Days in the Vicinity of Arcola," *The Weekly Arcolian*, Vol 11, no. 33 July 29, 1909, p. 6
[27] *Op. Cit.,* Urban, "Uninhabited waste," 661-662; Ernst, Ferdinand. *Travels in Illinois in 1819. Translation from the German Original.* In *Pub. No. 8 of the Ill. Hist. Lib.* pp. 150-65. Springfield, Ill.*: Phillips Bros.*, 1904, 158;
[28] *Op. Cit.,* Cain, *Murder and Mayhem*, 5.
[29] Gresham, John, *Historical and Biographical Record of Douglas County, IL* Logansport, IN: Wilson, Humphreys and Company, 1900, 17-18.

According to Michael Urban, malaria was the number one killer in Illinois until the 1850s.[30] One physician termed the Grand Prairie in the 1840s "a giant emporium of malaria," and settlers were often "preoccupied with malaria as the primary characteristic associated with the area".[31] J. H. Battle gave the following description of the situation in Douglas County on the Embarrass River: "During a considerable part of the year, the almost stagnant water of the sluggish streams filled the air with a miasmatic poison that hung in dense fog over stream and grove like a destroying spirit. The difficulty experienced in securing good water often rendered it necessary for the farmers to drink from stagnant pools, frequently blowing off the scum and straining the wigglers from the sickening, almost boiling, fluid through the teeth."[32]

Drawing from Kristina Blatchford, "Pioneer Women on the Illinois Frontier," *Illinois History,* December 1992. The ague or malaria severely limited women's work—a wide variety of unending chores—causing hardship for the whole family.

In 1825, Henry Schoolcraft described the unhealthy appearance of residents of central Illinois: They displayed "pale and emaciated countenances; females shivering with ague, or burning with intermittent fever, unable to minister to their children, and sometimes, every member of a numerous family suffering from the prevailing malady at the same time."[33] John Reynolds, governor of Illinois during the 1830s complained that sickness was so connected to the state that

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[30] Urban, Michael A., "An Uninhabited waste: Transforming the Grand Prairie in Nineteenth Century Illinois, USA," *Journal of Historical Geography,* 31 (2005) 653; See note 55 p. 654, Rawlings, *Rise and Fall of Disease in Illinois*, 35.

[31] *Ob. Cit.*. Urban, "Uninhabited Waste," 653; see note 56 on p. 654: C. Lindsay, Excerpts from 'The prairies of the Western States their advantages', *The Illinois Farmer* 5 (1860) 208; Winsor, Environmental Imagery, 394.; The remarkable Christina Tillson relays her husband's experience with the ague in Tillson, Christina Holmes, *A Woman's Story of Pioneer Illinois*, Milo Milton Quaife, Chicago: R. R. Donnelly and Sons Company, 1919, 27-28; See also, Piatt, Emma, *History of Piatt County: together with a Brief History of Illinois from the Discovery of the Upper Mississippi to the Present Time,* Chicago: Shepard & Johnston Printers, No Date, pp. 127-128.

[32] *Op. Cit.*, Urban, "Uninhabited Waste," 653; See note 57 on p. 654: J.H. Battle, *County of Douglas, Illinois*, Chicago, 1884, np; See also, Buck, Solon Justice, *Illinois in 1818.* 2nd. Ed., revised. Illinois Centennial Commission, Clarence Walworth Alvord, ed., Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1918, pp. 160-161; See also, Flower, George, *History of the English Settlement in Edwards County Illinois founded in 1817 and 1818 by Morris Birkbeck and George Flower*. Chicago: Fergus Printing Company, 1882, 122-123; For more on disease see: Reynolds, John, *The Pioneer History of Illinois*: *Containing the Discovery in 1673, and the History of the Country to the year 1818.* Chicago: Fergus Printing Co., 1887, pp. 313-314; for the Piatt County area see, McIntosh, Charles, associate Editor, *Past and Present of Piatt County, Illinois, together with Biographical Sketches of Many Prominent and Influential Citizens*., Chicago: S. J. Clark Publishing Co. 1903, 13.

[33] *Op. Cit.*, Urban, "Uninhabited waste," 653; note 58 p. 654,H.R. Schoolcraft, *Travels in the Central Portion of the Mississippi Valley,* New York, NY, 1825, 300.

many—including newspaper men and writers of emigrant guide books—had the idea that "Illinois was a graveyard." [34] So common was the mosquito related illness among locals that they said of newcomers who displayed the chills and intermittent fever that "He's not sick, he's only got the ager."[35] As farmers expanded and improved their techniques to drain the land, the incidence of ague declined.

Bugs

Large, green-headed bugs inhibited settlement. In 1822-1823, Capt. William Blane, an Englishman, traveling on the prairie, recorded that the horse flies were "larger than a hornet." The flies forced the riders to dismount, light a fire, and stand in the smoke for hours. Even then, the apprehensive horses strongly resisted being moved. During the day, the flies covered the horses, got into their nostrils, and tormented them. Capt. Blane wondered how long it might take for the loss of blood to lead to death. In fact, the flies killed some horses.[36] In 1879, W. H. Perrin and others, who wrote the History of Coles County, told the story of a pioneer named Poorman who, like others, would take his wheat grain to a mill owned by a man named True. They had to travel across the twelve miles of prairie at night in order to avoid the "annoyance of the flies."[37] In 1821, Samuel Burton recounted stories about flies covering horses so completely that they had to be "skinned off with a knife" leaving the horses covered in blood.[38]

In 1824, Mr. Heline claimed 160 acres and built a cabin near Coon's Spring north of Monticello, Illinois. During that first year, they successfully cleared and planted 20 acres of corn, but, then, the flies struck. "All but one of the five horses they brought with them died from the effects of fly and mosquito bites. They tried everything within their environment to destroy or keep off these dreaded insects. Fires were built, near the horses with the hopes that the smoke would keep them away, and the horses were sometimes seen to roll in the very midst of the coals of fire. After the loss of the horses, oxen were used instead."[39]

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[34] *Op. Cit.,* Urban, "Uninhabited waste," 653-654; note 59 on p. 654; J. Duffy, *The Sanitarians: A History of American Public Health*, Urbana, IL, 1990, 63; Pooley, William Vipond. *The Settlement of Illinois from 1830 to 1850.* Ann Arbor, MI, 1968, originally published Madison, (Reprinted from the Bulletin of the University of Wisconsin History Series, Vol. I, pp. 287-595) Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, May 1908, pp. 542-543.

[35] *Op. Cit.,* Urban, "Uninhabited waste," 654; see note 63 on p. 654, M.E. Pickard and R.C. Buley, *The Midwest Pioneer, His Ills, Cures and Doctors*, Crawfordsville, IN, 1945, 16.

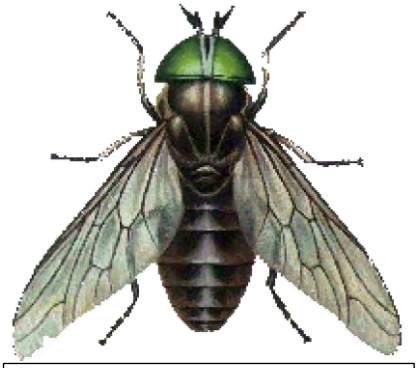
[36] Blane, Capt. William N. *,An Excursion through the United States and Canada During the Years 1822-23 by an English Gentleman*, London: Baldwin, Craddock, and Joy, 1824, 185-186; see also Wilson, Charles Edward, *History of Coles County, Illinois, Chapter I*, Township History, 1905, transcribed by Judy Anderson for Illinois Genealogy Trails, no page; For killing horses see also: McIntosh, Charles, associate Editor, *Past and Present of Piatt County, Illinois, together with Biographical Sketches of Many Prominent and Influential Citizens*., Chicago: S. J. Clark Publishing Co. 1903, 13.

[37] Perrin, W. H., A. A. Graham and D. M. Blair, and Judge William E. Adams., *History of Coles County,* Chicago: Wm. Le Baron, Jr. & Co., 1879, 472; See also, *Op. Cit.,* McIntosh, *Piatt County*, 13.

[38] *Op. Cit.,* Urban, "Uninhabited waste," 651; citing in note 37, D. R. McManis, *The Initial Evaluation and Utilization of the Illinois Prairie, 1815-1840,* Chicago, 1964, 59.

[39] *Op. Cit.,* Piatt, *History of Piatt County,* 217.

Harvey Lee Ross wrote about one episode with horseflies when he was about eight years old and responsible for cutting hay from the "Smith's Prairie," raking it with a wooden hand-rake and pitchfork, and stacking it on a brush sled. "A small bushy tree would be cut down and some of the limbs cut off so as to make a sort of flat surface; and the hay would then be piled on top; a horse would be hitched to the contrivance by a chain or rope, and so the hay would be hauled to the place where it was to be stacked. And that was what we called a "brush sled." Many a hot summer day I have rode the old horse to haul hay on the Smith Prairie, where the Rices, W. W. Smith, Samuel Campbell, J. Wertman, W. C. Harrison, the Lawses, Rileys and Chapins now live.



Green-headed Horse Fly. Common in the wet areas of the prairie before settlement.

"One time the green-head flies attacked my old horse so bad that he ran away. My strength was not sufficient to hold him; after he had run about half a mile I jumped off but did not jump far enough to miss the brush top that he was dragging, so I was caught under the brush sled, and was so badly bruised that I was laid up for repairs for several days. The old horse never stopped running until he got home."[40]

Solon Justice Buck, writing in 1818, confirmed the dreadful effects of flies. Cattle and horses, he wrote, did very well by the middle of June. But after that, the swarms of flies prevented them from feeding in the heat of the day. The flies made it impossible to travel from the middle of June until the first of September unless the horses were covered with blankets. "I have seen white horses red with blood…." He also noted that as the country became settled the flies disappeared.[41]

Mosquito bites also intimidated surveyors. Surveyors in Michigan in 1821 recalled that both men and horses were weak from loss of blood and want of sleep.[42] John Tipton worked with a group surveying the Illinois-Indiana state line in 1821. He wrote that in a "dreadful swamp" bordering the Kankakee River the "muscheteer" attack almost darkened the sky.[43]

Early Illinois explorers discovered the beauty of the prairie—a delightful rose—but, they also discovered the thorn. The wetlands, the disease, the mosquitoes, and the horseflies chastised the first, brave pioneers, making them pay a price for daring to carve out a future in the untamed grasslands. When they began to farm the prairie, they discovered other obstacles.

The Prairie III: Wetlands and Breaking the Prairie

Almost all of the first Illinois prairie settlers settled in the woods what straddled the rivers running to the Mississippi or to the Wabash. Very few tried to live on the prairie. But the prairie fed their cattle, provided wild game, made settlers sick, and occasionally mystified travelers who had no

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[40] Ross, Harvey Lee. *The Early Pioneers and Pioneer Events of the State of Illinois,* Chicago: Eastman Brothers, 1899; Also reprinted by Ruth M. Davis, Avon, Illinois, 1970: Astoria, IL: Stevens Publishing Company, 64-65.

[41] Buck, Solon Justice, *Illinois in 1818.* 2nd. Ed., revised. Illinois Centennial Commission, Clarence Walworth Alvord, ed., Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1918, 141-142.

[42] *Ibid.,* Urban, "Uninhabited Waste,", 652; note 38, *Op. Cit.,* Prince, *Wetlands,* 141.

[43] *Ibid.,* Urban, "Uninhabited Wates," 652, note 39, Tipton, *John Tipton Papers,* 261-262.

grove of trees, no paved roads, and no fence lines to guide them. Frequently they relied on animal traces and worn places where a neighbor had pulled a fence rail through the grass to make a path, and some navigated by the way that the wind brushed against their face.[44] In wet weather, however, travelers faced an additional obstacle on the prairie.

The wetland and the stubborn root system of the prairie sod delayed settlement.[45]

The wetlands caused problems throughout the year; but, when it rained, they were impassible. They delayed road building. Even up to the 1860s, where roads existed in central Illinois, the wet condition of the prairie turned them into "black gumbo" and caused horses to sink up to their bellies.[46] Farmers from Kentucky and Ohio hesitated to settle in the low, level land of Douglas County. During the wetter seasons, water covered a large proportion of this area, as well as a significant amount of swamp or overflow lands in central Illinois[47] M. F. Breeden said that Arcola in 1856 was a swamp. People at that time thought of it as a home for geese and ducks. Today, in those places that we call Main Street and Pine Street, he remembered the little sand towers built by crawfish and the sweet songs of frogs.[48]

On 28 September 1850, the federal government gave the swamp land—land unfit for cultivation and remaining unsold—to the state. On 2 March 1855 Illinois passed a law that, upon proof by an authorized state agent, any person who bought swamp land prior to that date would be reimbursed by the state. In 1857 the government clarified that the reimbursement money was to be paid in the state where the land was located and when the purchaser occupied the land. At the time, land owners could buy the swamp ground for $1.25 per acre.[49]

On 20 March 1850, the federal government removed from state ownership certain wetlands that had been sold by the Illinois Central Railway Company—the alternating sections of land designated by even numbers, for six sections in width on each side of the road—lands that had been sold after 1850 and prior to 3 March 1857. As a result, Tuscola and Arcola townships were not able to recover any indemnity for swamp lands. They asked several times prior to the final decision by the Interior department in 1881.[50]

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[44] Gresham, John, *Historical and Biographical Record of Douglas County, IL* Logansport, IN: Wilson, Humphreys and Company, 1900, 21-22, 72-73.

[45] Pooley, William Vipond. *The Settlement of Illinois from 1830 to 1850.* Ann Arbor, MI, 1968, originally published Madison, (Reprinted from the Bulletin of the University of Wisconsin History Series, Vol. I, pp. 287-595) Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, May 1908, 311, 321;

[46] Gresham, John M., *Historical and Biographical record of Douglas county*, Logansport, Indiana: Wilson, Humphreys & Co., 1900, 40-42; Urban, Michael A., "An Uninhabited waste: Transforming the Grand Prairie in Nineteenth Century Illinois, USA," *Journal of Historical Geography,* 31 (2005) 652; see also, Cain, Angelique and Brandi Hymer, *Murder and Mayhem in Old Arcola,* United States of America: United Graphics, 1956, 5.

[47] *Op. Cit.*. Gresham, *Record of Douglas County*, 39.

[48] Breeden, M. F. "Historical Letter from M. F. Breeden," *The Weekly Arcolian*, Vol 11, no. 33, July 29, 1909, 6.

[49] *Ibid.* Gresham, 39.

[50] *Ibid.*, Gresham, 40.

The early undesirability of the swampy land, the paucity of roads, the bugs, the ague, and other factors caused the price of prairie land to remain low. But the low price encouraged ownership. Several of the early settlers, who built their cabins on the Kaskaskia River in the 1830s with very little money in their pockets, became large land owners. Allan Campbell came from Kentucky, married Mary Ann Hoots, and moved to Bourbon township. He ran a ferry across the Kaskaskia River for three years and split rails for fifty-cents per hundred. By 1875, when he died, with hard work he had acquired thirty-six hundred acres of land in Douglas County.[51] Jacob Moore came to the Bagdad area west of present day Arcola with his wife, Amanda Rice, in 1834. He bought his first land in section 1, township 14, range 7, in April, 1835. At the time of his death on 15 July 1860, he owned over two thousand acres.[52] "The experience of the squatter who settled with four or five sows for breeders and in four years or less drove forty-two fat hogs to market and sold them for $135, with which he bought eighty acres of land and paid his debts, was not a rare one."[53]

Allan Campbell, Bourbon Township land owner.

Farmers stubbornly determined to drain the land. Eventually, with the assistance of the counties they created standardized, straightened drainage ditches. By carving out drains side-by-side with new roads and with the manufacture and deployment of field drainage tile, they mastered the wetlands. And with increased success in the breaking the prairie, the wetlands and grassy prairie yielded to the gritty determination of farmers who had almost entirely converted the prairie into arable land by 1890.[54]

The early wood-land farmers living at the edge of the prairie, began draining the prairie and finding ways to break apart the knotted tangles of the tenacious sod. Their persistence converted the land into prairie farms and also helped solve the wetland problems at the same time.

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[51] H. C. Niles, *History of Douglas County, IL, Bourbon Township,* F. A. Battey & Co, Publishers, 1884, Township Histories, Reproduced from the Originals and contributed by Larry M. Burmeister,© May 2004, 270-271; Gresham, John, *Historical and Biographical Record of Douglas County, IL* Logansport, IN: Wilson, Humphreys and Company, 1900, 227-228; Cain, Angelique and Brandi Hymer, *Murder and Mayhem in Old Arcola,* United States of America: United Graphics, 1956, 6.

[52] Niles, H. C., History of Douglas County, IL. F. A. Battey & Co., Publishers, 1884, Reproduced from originals by Larry M. Burmeister, May 2004, 271; Niles, Henry C., *History of Douglas County Illinois, Tuscola, IL*: Converse & Parks, Printers, 1876. (Centennial edition), 64; *Op Cit.*, Gresham, *Historical and Biographical*, 279; For more on Jacob Moore, see Putnam County INGenWebSite, (2008, January 19) USGenWEb Project for Putnam County, retrieved on January 10, 2014 from http://ingenweb.org/inputnam/ . See also, Black, Brenda, http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=brendablack&id=I198 .

[53] Boggess, Arthur Clinton, *The Settlement of Illinois, 1778-1830,* Chicago: Chicago Historical Society's Collection, Vol. V, 1908, 369.

[54] Perrin, W. H., A. A. Graham, and D. M. Blair, Com., *A History of Coles County Illinois: Containing a History of...* Chicago: William Le Baron, jr. and Co., 186 Dearborn St., 1879. Reproduced by Windmill Publications, Inc. Mt. Vernon, IN 1990, 163; Urban, Michael A., "An Uninhabited waste: Transforming the Grand Prairie in Nineteenth Century Illinois, USA," *Journal of Historical Geography,* 31 (2005) 660.

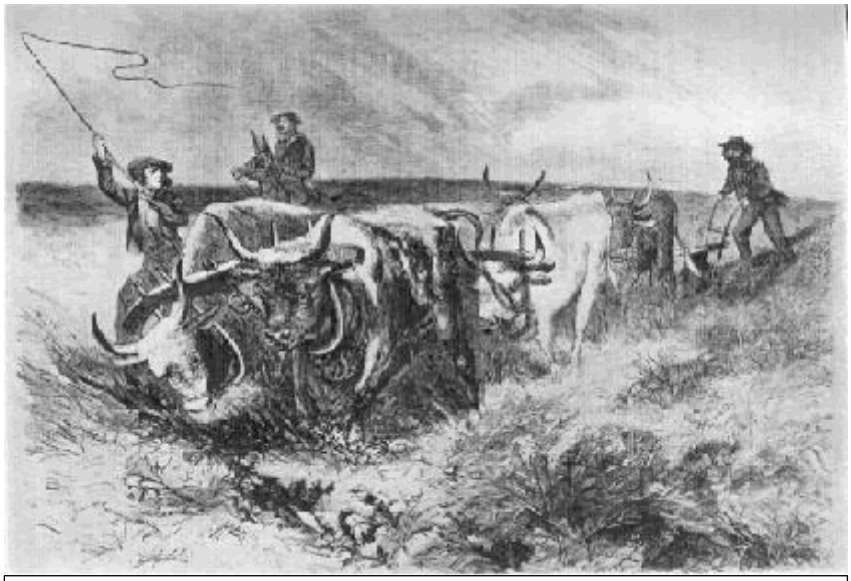
The first settlers struggled with their first prairie crops. Plows were crude affairs made of wood and iron, requiring considerable power and mechanical skill to operate. These eastern tools could not turn over the "prairie sod matted thick with grass roots as hard almost as hickory withes."[55]

The plowman commonly discovered that, when his primitive plow had turned one unbroken strip of earth, it might flop back into its original position. The rebellious leathery strip of soil forced him to stop, to walk back, and, by hand, to carefully turn it over again.[56]

He also discovered that plowing the sod disturbed the dens of rattlesnakes. As the strips of grass narrowed it was nearly impossible to avoid them. They wriggled and writhed through the grass as the plows approached. Some were six inches in diameter and six or seven feet long.

"As late as 1850, W. B. Hawkins says that, in breaking one round, he killed three full-grown rattlesnakes. On one occasion, when gathering strawberries, in company with two or three others, the party killed no less than twenty-six during the day."[57]

Other venomous species, in smaller numbers, lived in the grass—"spreading" vipers, red vipers, or copperheads. Other harmless species were housed there as well—blacksnake, blue-racer, garter-snake, water-snake, grass (or green) snake, chicken-snake, house snake, bull-snake, etc. Lizards and frogs added to the mix. The breaking-up and cultivation of the prairie soon caused their extinction.



Nelson, Judy, Breaking The Prairie, from a drawing by Theodore R. Davis, Harper's Weekly, 1868, http://www.oxfordjctgenealogy.com/main/?page_id=756

Few who were bitten by the rattlesnakes died. The local remedy was to ply the patient with whiskey. When the victim felt the bite of the whiskey more than the bite of the snake, he was considered out of danger.[58]

The first crop was usually planted by cutting a gash in the inverted sod with an ax, dropping in the corn, and closing it by another blow beside the first. When plowing, the planters customarily

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[55] *The History of Livingston County, Illinois.* Chicago: Wm LeBaron, Jr. & Co., 186 Dearborn Street, 1878, 411.

[56] *Op. Cit.*, Gresham, *Historical and Biographical Record*, 19.

[57] *Op. Cit.*, Perrin, *History*, 474.

[58] Redmon Historical Committee, comp., *Redmon On the Edge of the Prairie*, Potomac, Illinois: Blue Printing, 1974, p. 28; Wilson, Charles Edward, *History of Coles County, Illinois, Chapter I*, Township History, 1905, transcribed by Judy Anderson for Illinois Genealogy Trails, no page.

dropped the corn seed in every second or third furrow where the corn would find daylight. The first corn crop was usually inferior.[59] It was needed for both man and beast. In time, prosperous farmers grew wheat. From the first year, they gathered only twenty or thirty bushels of corn to the acre. Production often did not improve even through the second and third plowing, because the rotting sod remained heavy and unproductive.[60] They could not cultivate the crop and gambled that, in addition to other challenges, it might survive the appetite of squirrels and crows. [61]

With experience and some genius, the prairie settlers developed tools to break the sod. The original, prairie plow consisted of a fifteen-foot beam, a massive plowshare, weighing from sixty to one hundred twenty-five pounds, and iron bars for a mold board. It could cut a furrow of two feet in width and three- to six-inches deep. Initially, farmers avoided deep plowing because it delayed the rotting process.[62] At first the plows did not have handles, but often operators added them to assist in starting the plow and throwing it out of the ground. Breaking the sod required either a six-horse team or three pairs of oxen simply to pull the plow.[63] Most farmers did not have the necessary draft animals.[64] The land owners often hired professional 'prairie breakers' who usually did the breaking in late Spring through July. The sod-breaking expenses—at around $1.50 per acre—often exceeded the cost of the land itself.[65]

Today, when a farmer can operate a seventeen-foot chisel plow and turn over ten acres of soil per hour or an eighty-acre field in eight hours, one has difficulty appreciating the labor expended by the first prairie farmers who tackled five-acres of untouched prairie grass. Estimates as to the amount of land which one of these large "breaking teams" could plow in a day varies from one acre[66] to two and one-fourth acres. When a team of horses was used and a smaller plow, an acre was considered an average day's work. Between eighty and one hundred acres could be plowed in a season.[67]

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[59] *Op. Cit., History of Livingston County*, 411; Prince, Hugh, *Wetlands of the American Midwest: A Historical Geography of Changing Attitudes.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997, 184, see note 63 on p. 184, David E. Schob, Sodbusting on the upper Midwestern frontier,1820-1860, Agricu*ltural History*, 47 (1973) 47-50.

[60] *Op. Cit.*. Gresham, *Historical and Biographical Record*, 19-20; *Op. Cit.*,Pooley *Settlement of Illinois*, 544, see note 22, p. 544 *American Agriculturist* (1843), 8, 15.

[61] *Ibid.*, Gresham, 19.

[62] *Op. Cit.*, Pooley, *Settlement of Illinois*, 545.

[63] *Op. Cit.*, Pooley, *Settlement of Illinois*, 544,

[64] Urban, Michael A., "An Uninhabited waste: Transforming the Grand Prairie in Nineteenth Century Illinois, USA," *Journal of Historical Geography*, 31 (2005) 656; see note 75 on p. 656, J. A. Jakle, *Images of the Ohio Valley: A Historical Geography of Travel, 1740-1860*, New York, 1977, 100.

[65] *Ibid.*, Pooley *Settlement of Illinois*, 544, see note 20, p. 544, Marshall, *Farmrs' Emigrants' Handbook*, 403, land cost one and one-quarter dollars per acre; breaking cost one and one-half dollars per acre; *Op. Cit.*, Pooley, *Settlement,*, 544, see note 21, p. 544, *The Cultivator and Farmer* (Albany), I, 80. *Op. Cit.*, Urban, "An Uninhabited waste," 656; See note 76 on p. 656, W. Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis,* New York, 1991, 99; Prince, *Wetlands*, 125.

[66] *Op. Cit.*, Pooley, *Settlement*, 545, see note 28, p. 545, *American Agriculturist* (1843), 1, 15.

[67] *Ibid.* Pooley, *Settlement*, 545, see note 29, p. 545, *Prairie Farmer*, (1847), 7, 140. *Ibid.*, see note 30, *Albany Cultivator*, (1840), 7, 80; and note 31, *Prairie Farmer*, (1847),7, 140.

In 1837 a blacksmith at Grand Detour, Illinois invented a breaking plow made from saw steel into a one-piece share and moldboard. John Deere wrote about his revolutionary invention in an advertisement: The "whole face of the mold board and share is ground smooth, so that it scours perfectly bright in any soil, and will not choke in the foulest ground. It will do more work in a day and do it much better and with less labor, to both team and holder, than the ordinary ploughs that do not scour." By 1846, Deere and his partner, Leonard Andrus, were producing about one thousand plows a year. In 1847, Deere moved his operation to Moline, Illinois and in ten years was selling over ten thousand plows annually.[68] The John Deere plow and rapid improvements in drainage ditches and field tile converted most of the original, wild prairie into cultivated farms.

Most settlers included horses and cows among the many things they brought with them. They replaced horses with oxen for heavy labor.[69] Hogs, were far less susceptible to disease than horses, cattle, or sheep. They roamed the woodlands and feasted on the "mast" that accumulated on the forest floor. The long-legged, gaunt, wild hogs grew to market size almost without attention or expense from the farmers, providing a steady source of income with very little investment.[70]

The period between 1880 and 1890 was the peak of drain tile installation on the Grand Prairie. The tile entrepreneurs improved tiling technology such as the horse-drawn Pratt Ditch Digger, Johnson's Tile Ditcher, the Rennie Elevator Ditcher and the Blickensderfer Tile Ditching Machine, which was made in Decatur, Illinois. By 1890 engineers had straightened and widened drainage ditches and most of the wetlands were drained with field tile.[71]

The cattle helped gain control over the prairie. By 1820 Illinois settlers used the grasslands as a natural pasture for their cattle, although they stayed away from the marshes. The prairie flies were driven away by burning the grass in June and allowing the cattle to graze until winter.[72] Cattle provided settlers with their first cash product. W. T. Moore reported driving 150 to 200 head of cattle to the market in Chicago, requiring a sixteen to seventeen day trip.[73]

Each generation, from the first settlers to the present, has shaped the prairie, has learned how to survive with it, and, in turn, has been influenced by it. Perhaps, with wisdom and deliberate design—or accidentally, unintentionally, or inadvertently—each prairie generation has altered the landscape. Few are wise enough to know whether such changes have made people or society better or worse. But today's generation can look back at the remarkable bravery, skill, and, for the most part, the enormous labor, which our ancestors invested into the prairie and appreciate how so much of today's prairie experience rests upon the foundation of their efforts.

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[68] *Op. Cit.,* Prince, *Wetlands,* 184; see note 64, p. 184: Wayne D. Rasmussen (ed.), *Readings in the history of American agriculture* (University of Illinois Press, Urbana 1960) 78-79, quotes *Rock River Register,* 10 March 1843.

[69] "Squire Wm. T. Moore Dies, Aged 92, Lived here Almost 88 years." *Arcola Record Herald*, June 15, 1922, 1.

[70] Graham, A. A., *History of Fairfield and Perry Counties, Ohio: Their Past and Present,* Transcribed by Timothy E. Fisher, Perry Co. Historical Society, Chicago: W. H. Beers & Co, 1883, 17, 36; Peck, John M., *New Guide for Immigrants to the West,* Rock Springs, IL: Boston: Gould, Kindall, & Lincoln, 1836, 285-286; See also, Blane, Capt. William N. ,*An Excursion through the United States and Canada During the Years 1822-23 by an English Gentleman*, London: Baldwin, Craddock, and Joy, 1824, 90, 183-184.

[71] *Op. Cit.,* Urban, "An Uninhabited Waste," 661; See note 109 p. 661, M. M. Weaver, *History of Tile Drainage: In American Prior to 1900*, Waterloo, NY, 1964, 177.

[72] *Op. Cit.,* Prince, *Wetlands,* 169

[73] *Op. Cit.,* Squire Wm T. Moore Dies, 1.

The Prairie Part IV: Prairie Animals

Today, when you drive through the tidy prairie with its well-trimmed roadsides and carefully combed fields, you see very few wild animals. Sometimes you can see a deer grazing in a corn field or moving among river trees or dashing across the road. Sometimes small animals--the opossums, raccoons, the red fox, ground hogs, and coyotes—make calculated appearances. Occasionally people report sightings of bob cats or wild cats.

But the prairie hasn't always been this way. When early writers and settlers first discovered the prairie with its remarkable beauty and its intimidating obstacles—the lack of wood, the wetlands, and the stubborn, tangled-root sod—a region that some described as a "graveyard"[74]—they also discovered an abundance of wild game—a "hunters' paradise"[75]—that would help sustain them for a time.

In 1787 the country between Vincennes and Kaskaskia "abounded in buffalo, deer, and bear."[76] The buffalo and the bear retreated during the encroachment of civilization; but the deer remained.

In 1879, W. H. Perrin reported that, in Coles County, the old settlers believed that the prairies "were made for the deer, wolves and rattlesnakes, woods and water-courses for man." [77]

In 1900, John Gresham stated that during the first settlements "[P]rairie chickens and partridges, were everywhere found in inexhaustible numbers and furnished a touch of delicacy to the early fare. Wild geese and ducks were to be had in considerable numbers, while in the rivers were found some fine, edible fish."[78]

Wolves.

Wolves lived on the high points of the prairie and presented a challenge to the pioneers.[79] The prairie wolves were small and little threat to humans;[80] but, their frequent, nightly howling was one

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[74] Urban, Michael A., "An Uninhabited waste: Transforming the Grand Prairie in Nineteenth Century Illinois, USA," *Journal of Historical Geography*, 31 (2005, 653-654; See note 59, p. 654, J. Duffy, *The Sanitarians: A History of American Public Health*, Urbana, IL, 1990, 63.

[75] Gresham, John, Historical and Biographical Record of Douglas County, IL Logansport, IN: Wilson, Humphreys and Company, 1900, 16; See also, Wolfe, E. A., transcribed by Ortman, K," Interesting Incidents in Early Crawford County History related by a Pioneer Citizen. The Argus (June 6, 1940) .

[76] Boggess, Arthur Clinton, *The Settlement of Illinois, 1778-1830,* Chicago: Chicago Historical Society's Collection, Vol. V, 1908, 9; see also, Blane, Capt. William N. ,*An Excursion through the United States and Canada During the Years 1822-23 by an English Gentleman*, London: Baldwin, Craddock, and Joy, 1824, 106.

[77] Perrin, W. H., A. A. Graham and D. M. Blair, and Judge William E. Adams., *History of Coles County,* Chicago: Wm. Le Baron, Jr. & Co., 1879, 491.

[78] *Op. Cit.,* Gresham, *Historical and Biographical*, 16-17.

[79] *Op. Cit.,* Perrin, *History*, 475; Pooley, William Vipond. *The Settlement of Illinois from 1830 to 1850.* Ann Arbor, MI, 1968, originally published Madison, (Reprinted from the Bulletin of the

of the most disagreeable sounds of the early days.[81] The wolves preyed upon sheep, chickens, and hogs.[82] Early settlers organized wolf hunts to exterminate the "varmints," but also to make money on the wolf-scalp bounty authorized by the Legislature of Illinois, giving 75 cents, and eventually $1.50 for each wolf scalp.[83] Wolf scalps were legal tender for paying taxes to the county.[84]

The Coles County historians described the wolf-hunting rendezvous. Hunters organized at a favorite place on "Blue-Grass Grove," a little southeast of where the town of Milton (now, Humboldt) stands. On the appointed day—usually in the winter and often after a snowfall—hunters, as many as a hundred,[85] came from miles around, each with his horse and dog.

"It was a grand scene to be out on the wide-spread prairie, all covered with its white carpet of beautiful snowflakes, and to see far away in the distance squads of horsemen, some standing still, others in full chase of the almost flying wolf that appeared in the distance like some dark bird, skimming the snow; some two or three miles away are two or three horsemen on the look-out."

The look-out horsemen watched as others chased the fleeing wolves toward them. The flying horsemen approached and suddenly the wolf was seen from one hundred to two hundred yards ahead. The horses, as excited as the men, dashed onward with outstretched necks and wide-spread nostrils, throwing up behind them a stream of flying snow, stretching every nerve to overtake the terrified game.

Perrin, W. H., A. A. Graham and D. M. Blair, and Judge William E. Adams., *History of Coles County*, Chicago: Wm. Le Baron, Jr. & Co., 1879, 108

The wolf was running for its life unaware that it was running toward other horsemen on fresh horses. When the wolf approached, the waiting horsemen took up the chase and within a few hundred yards ran down the poor animal. Usually the foremost horse ran over the wolf and the following horses killed it.

The historians reported that "sometimes, three or four such races are in sight at one and the same time, for the hunters from every

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University of Wisconsin History Series, Vol. I, pp. 287-595) Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, May 1908, 546-547.

[80] *Op. Cit.*, Blane, *An Excursion*, 237.

[81] Piatt, Emma, *History of Piatt County: together with a Brief History of Illinois from the Discovery of the Upper Mississippi to the Present Time*, Chicago: Shepard & Johnston Printers, No Date,, 129.

[82] *Ibid.*, Perrin, *History*, 464; *Op, Cit.*,, Gresham, *Historical and Biographical*, 17, 464.

[83] *Op. Cit.*, Perrin, *History*, 474.

[84] *Ibid.* Perrin, *History*, 460.

[85] *Ibid.*, Perrin, *History*, 464.

section are concentrating their forces, and drawing near the great rallying-point with from eight to ten wolves. Every man is at his post, while the wolves are making every effort to escape. But every avenue of escape is closed, the dogs are let loose, and now men, horses, wolves and dogs are pell-mell together, and the work of destruction goes on; the barking and yelping of the dogs, with the shouting of the hunters and running of the horses, all these combined, made an exciting scene.

"It was great fun for the hunters, but death to the poor wolves; in some instances it proved pretty dear sport to the hunter, costing him his best horse for sometimes, under the influence of the excitement, he pushed his horse too far, so that he fell dead under his rider. In the spring season, great pains were taken to find their dens, for the purpose of destroying their young. These were generally found on some high point in the wide prairie, far from the habitation of man; all that were caught were scalped, both old and young, and the scalps laid up as so much cash against tax-paying day."[86]

Prairie Chickens

The pioneers harvested poultry in great profusion. Ducks, geese, swans, and aquatic birds visited the waters in early spring. "Small lakes and sloughs are often literally covered with them." Prairie fowl are thick in the prairie grasses during the summer and a threat to the corn fields. Settlers used nets to take grouse and partridges (quail) in the winter—hundreds in a day—and sold them to eastern city markets.[87] In 1818, Morris Birkbeck described the abundance of wild turkey near his settlement at Albion. "We are now feasting on wild turkeys. We have not sat down to dinner for the last month, I believe, without a fine roast turkey. They weigh about twelve pounds, and are sold five for a dollar. Some weigh twenty-five pounds—I have heard of thirty. They are fat and tender; better, I fancy, than Norfolk turkeys; but I must not be too positive on this nice point."[88]

Illinois Prairie Chicken, now extinct. Hunters reported that they could shoot several in a short time. Photograph from by Doug Dance, September 2009, Cornell lab of Ornithology, "All About Birds," "Greater Prairie-Chicken."

Prairie chickens, now extinct and less palatable than other prairie fowl,[89] covered the prairie. Some writers reported that from 1859 to 1865 the population was so large that a startled flock would darkened the air. Hunters, including average marksmen, could walk across a field and easily bag an adequate number.[90] L. C. Rust, of Bourbon, entertained his brother, David, who brought a shot-gun with him from the East. At first the pioneers mocked the weapon; but, that changed when they hunted with David. When

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[86] *Ibid.*, Perrin, *History*, 460, 465, 474-475.

[87] Peck, John M., *New Guide for Immigrants to the West*, Rock Springs, IL: Boston: Gould, Kindall, & Lincoln, 1836, 286.

[88] Birkbeck, Morris, *Letters from Illinois*, 3rd ed., London: Taylor and Hessey, 1818, See also: Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, 1968, 40-41.

[89] *Op. Cit.*, Perrin, *History*, 334.

[90] Niles, H. C., *History of Douglas County, IL*. F. A. Battey & Co., Publishers, 1884, Reproduced from originals by Larry M. Burmeister, May 2004, 278.

hunting, David gave his rifle-carrying companion the first shot as the frightened fowl flapped into the air. Then, satisfied that his friend was finished, David fired with the shot gun, killing all that the other fellow had missed. David and his new weapon gained a reputation. On more than one occasion, without a dog, he shot more than he could carry.[91]

The prairie chickens and gophers competed for the nutritional benefits of the corn crop. They diminished the farmers' crops sometimes by half, and caused settlers to replant two or three times. In retaliation, the whole family--Dad, Mom, the kids, and family dogs—regularly launched aggressive gopher hunts into the seed-bed, war zones.[92] Hunters such as Al Woody, John Russell, and Isaac Jewell, of Tuscola, became sure shots, and, in a very few years, helped extinguish the remarkable chicken that once made the prairie its home.[93]

Deer.

When the first pioneers arrived, deer were found in unlimited numbers, easily allaying any concern about feeding the family. Many of the pioneers told about shooting deer while standing at the door. Droves, numbering into the hundreds, moved about the prairie. Settlers routinely carried weapons on almost all occasions, including going to church. The frequent trophies in the form of a haunch or ham of venison acquired while returning from these expeditions reveals more evidence to the abundance of the animals.[94] John Peck writing in 1836 reported that deer were still found in all frontier settlements. They were valuable to the early settlements, providing food and clothing—pantaloons and hunting shirts—clothing indispensable to those traveling among shrubs and vines. At that time venison hams sold for twenty-five cents each.[95]

A writer in the early 1800s reported that two hunters had killed twenty-five deer before nine in the morning near the Illinois settlements.[96] The Coles County historians reported that, when the settlers first arrived, deer were as plentiful as cattle were in 1879—by which time citizens considered venison to be a luxury item.[97]

Hogs.

Pioneers brought hogs and cattle with them. But the woods were also filled with wild hogs that had escaped from older settlements and lived on the nuts and roots of the woodland. Captain Blane reported in 1824 that the prairie farmers and tavern keepers possessed large droves of hogs, which they seldom ever fed. They allowed the animals to run at large in the woods, where they subsisted on "mast." "Mast" was the term for beechnuts, acorns, chestnuts and other edible plants and roots on

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91 *Ibid.*, Niles, *History*, 278.
92 *Op. Cit.*, Pooley, *Settlement of Illinois*, 546.
93 *Op. Cit.*, Niles, *History*, 278.
94 *Op. Cit.* Gresham, *Historical and Biographical Record*, 17.
95 *Op. Cit.*, Peck, *Guide* 37, 279; See also Pittman, Capt. Phillip, *The Present State of the European Settlements on the Mississippi With a Geographical description of the River*, London: J. Nourse, 1770, 51.
96 Boggess, Arthur Clinton, *The Settlement of Illinois, 1778-1830*, Chicago: Chicago Historical Society's Collection, Vol. V, 1908, 9, see also note 14 and 15 on p. 9, referring to "Draper Collection, Ill, MSS, 99; and Harmar to Secretary of war from Fort Harmar, Nov. 24, 1787, in the "St. Clair Papers,", IL., 30-1.
97 *Op. Cit.*, Perrin, *History*, 334.

the floor of the forest. During winter, the owners generally tried to collect and drive the hogs up for a short time, for the purpose of marking them [usually by notching their ears]. Blane reported that "the sows just before pigging do not return home, but make a bed of leaves and grass in the hollow of a tree, or in some other sheltered spot, where they bring forth their young, and protect them as well as they are able from the wolves, bears, and their still more formidable enemies, the wild cats and catamounts."[98]

Blane said that he knew settlers who possessed several hundred hogs and never kept them at home. They lived in the woods. The owners would only bring them out the number they needed for consumption or sale. Settlers could get a good price of $5 apiece for hogs at the market in 1824.[99] When the wetlands of Coles County were selling for $1.25 per acre, a farmer who herded 50 hogs to market could easily buy eighty acres of land.[100]

The wild hogs of the woods were long-legged and gaunt and kept to the timber. They could be raised there almost without cost. Some became quite wild, sleeping during the day and feeding at night. Blane said that, while hunting in the woods, he often came upon ten or twelve hogs, asleep, collected together under leaves which they had made into a bed. Early hunters harvested them in the woods to provide a different tasting meat, relieving the monotonous taste of venison.[101]

Encounter with an unknown animal

The Grand Prairie held other animals not known to the Europeans like Captain Blane, who wrote about his encounter with an unknown species. He was about forty miles from Carmi when it happened. He was riding his horse across a small prairie, and saw coming towards him a "beautiful little animal, about two feet long, of a dark colour, with longitudinal white stripes down its back, a bushy tail and very short legs." He intended to catch it and galloped forward. But, to his astonishment, it did not move. He stopped his horse with its forelegs very close. Blane was surprised by the calm, immovable animal that simply drew up its back and looked at him. He thought about catching it; but considered that it might bite. So he paused and admired it for a moment.[102]

Then, in a "spirit of mischief," he leaned forward and struck the animal with a small whip. The animal immediately turned its back, lifted its hind-leg, and, according to Captain Blane, "discharged a Stygian liquor, the odour of which I shall recollect till my dying day. In an instant, the whole prairie seemed to be filled with a stench that is beyond all description. It was so powerful, pungent, and sickening, that at first it nearly made me faint, and I galloped away from the brute with all possible expedition.

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98 Blane, Capt. William N., *An Excursion through the United States and Canada During the Years 1822-23 by an English Gentleman*, London: Baldwin, Craddock, and Joy, 1824, 183-184.

99 *Ibid.* Blane, *Excursion*, 90.

100 *Op. Cit.*, Boggess, *Settlement of Illinois,* 369.

101 *Ibid.*, Blane, *Excursion,* 183; *Op. Cit.*, Gresham, *Historical and Biographical Record*, 17; *Op. Cit.*, Peck, *New Guide for Immigrants*, 285-286; See also, *Op. Cit.*, Piatt, *History of Piatt County*, 217.

102 Buck, Solon Justice, *Illinois in 1818.* 2nd. Ed., revised. Illinois Centennial Commission, Clarence Walworth Alvord, ed., Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1918, 131.

"I had previously supposed," he continued, "that I had, in the course of my life, smelt very bad odours; but they were all perfumes compared to this. No one who has not experienced it can form any idea of such a horrid stench. Most fortunately, from the position in which I was, my horse had received the whole of this infernal water on his breast, and none of it had touched my clothes. If it had, I should have been obliged to destroy them; for I was afterwards informed, that no process, or length of time, will remove the smell from woolen cloth.

"This adventure happened early in the morning, and made me so sick that I could not eat any breakfast. Indeed I was ashamed to go into any house, well knowing how offensive both I and my horse must be. I rode my horse into the rivers, had him washed with soap and water, etc.; but nothing would do. For a week afterwards I could never get upon him, without perceiving, in a most disagreeable degree, the stench of my little enemy.

"The man of the house, at which I stopped in the evening, immediately observed the offensive odour, with which I was infected. When I told him my adventure, and how I intended to have got off my horse to catch the animal, he laughed most heartily; and informed me that it was called the skunk."[103]

The pioneers accommodated their lives to the realities of the Grand Prairie. They lived close to nature and accepted both the challenges and the rewards of their environment. They learned to live with bugs, snakes, and an extraordinary variety of animals that provided them with game and sport. While learning to play with the cards that life dealt them, they also applied their skill and ingenuity to change the game. Over time, the wild game dwindled to insignificance and the pioneers transformed the land from stubborn, wild grass into some of the most productive farms in the world. Most Illinois pioneers created their new homes and communities in the untamed wilderness, intending to provide for their children and establish the foundation for future generations.

The pioneers would be astonished to see how their worked evolved and how the prairie changed. As descendants, living with their legacy today, we should honor the hardship, the dangers, and the sheer strain of hard labor that defined the center of their lives. Each generation owes a debt to the previous generation. It is unjustified arrogance to assert that one generation is greater than another. Each generation must live in the world as it finds it. It's appropriate for the living generation to pause and pay respect its predecessors, expecting, in turn, to rise to the challenge of making a future worthy of respect for the generation that follows.

[103] *Op. Cit.,* Blane, *Excursion,* 240-242.

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