

Illinois Times



Barely a trace

What's left of the Old Indian Trail (page 8)

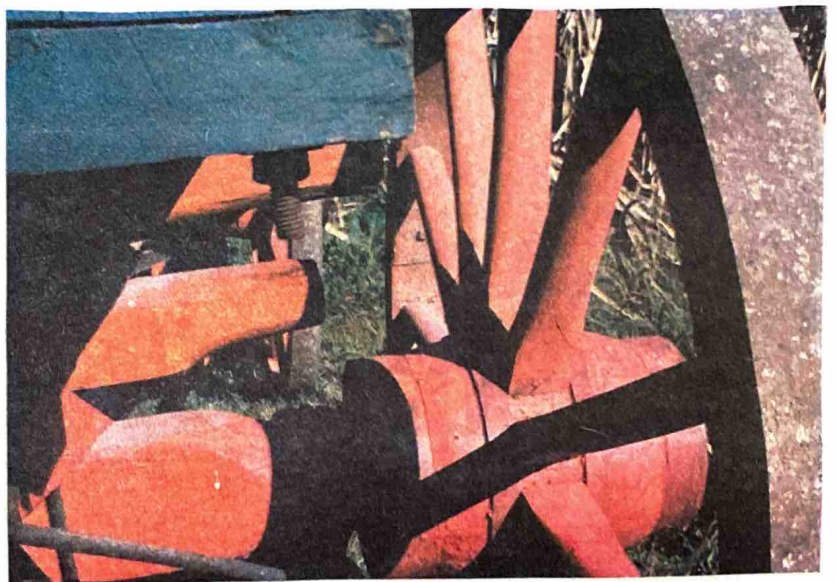


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Barely a trace

What's left of the Old Indian Trail known as Edwards Trace

BY WILLIAM FURRY

Traffic is brisk on East Lake Drive this Sunday morning. SUVs pulling sleek outboards flirt with the 45mph speed limit, hoping to steal seconds from a season fading faster than the morning mist. Nearby, a white CWLP utility truck dutifully traverses Lake Park, its crew pausing only long enough to empty the overflowing trash bins before the day's activities fill them again. Even the squirrels are busy at this hour, racing to get their acorns stored before the first frost.

Yet, not twenty-five yards away, time stands still on a high ridge overlooking the watershed of what once was Sugar Creek. Here, beneath behemoth oaks and hickory trees, unassuming in the timid morning sunlight, stretches what several central Illinoisans believe is the oldest human construction in Sangamon County: a 200-foot remnant of the historic Edwards Trace.

Named for Illinois Territorial Governor Ninian Edwards soon after the War of 1812, this former Native-American footpath and later military road was once the only "highway" between Kaskaskia and Peoria, the trail that brought Springfield's earliest settlers to the Sangamon River valley.

For all practical purposes, however, it doesn't exist. You won't find it on any twentieth century Illinois map, and most history books ignore the Edwards Trace. Only a handful of Illinois historians and archaeologists have studied or followed it, and other than the fading remnants of the trail itself, there are no signs, no markers, no dramatic artifacts to inform the casual observer of its significance.

Local historian David Brady wants to change that before there's no trace of the trace left in Sangamon County. Of course, that could be years from now. Lake Park is on city property and in no immediate danger of being developed or altered. But given the city's poor track record for historic preservation, and the impending construction of Hunter Lake, which will forever submerge a great deal of Sangamon County's pioneer history, Brady's not taking any chances.

Prairie sleuthing

History, especially state and local history, is the never-ending topic of conversation at Prairie Archives, the antiquarian bookstore on the Old Capitol Plaza in downtown Springfield. Amidst the dusty, **ILLINOIS TIMES** ♦ OCTOBER 4-10, 2001



PHOTOGRAPHER DOUG CARR

leather-bound volumes of forgotten Illinois lore are stacks of century old newspapers, obsolete maps, and photographs of things and places that are no more. It's a good working environment for David Brady, who loves to talk history, especially about Sangamon County and its early settlers. But Brady doesn't just sell books and chat about the past. Sometimes he bakes pies. Last week it was peach, this week it was cherry. Nobody complained.

He also gets his hands dirty. Last year the forty-six-year-old amateur historian self-published a handsome centennial history of Divernon, his hometown. The book sold out even before the anniversary bonfires had cooled. Folks who want to know the history of that colorful community don't go to the Divernon public library anymore, they call Brady.

With grizzled beard and ball cap, Brady's been a fixture at Prairie Archives for eight years now, almost as long as he's been on the trail of the Edwards Trace.

"I've been looking for the trace for about nine years," Brady told *Illinois Times*. The historic highway ran from Kaskaskia to Edwardsville to Peoria, Brady noted, "but the section from Edwardsville to Peoria was the more significant to me."

And he looked hardest in his own backyard.

"I always thought there would be something left along the timber margin where you would enter or exit a creek—something that hadn't been tilled yet," he explained. "But I've always looked further south. If you read early accounts of the trace, settlers mention turning north at what today would be Farmersville—the headwaters of Macoupin Creek, which would have put the trace in Divernon township."

Reading about the trace is one thing, finding it is quite another. The trail, for instance, was never paved. And as the state was settled, much of it became private property. What wasn't developed was

plowed under; what was abandoned eroded quickly from the landscape.

But before 1830, the Edwards Trace was the only way to get from southern to northern Illinois, the most direct route from Fort de Chartres and other southern settlements to Fort Russell (near present-day Edwardsville) and Fort Clark (Peoria). These sites featured significantly during and after the War of 1812, when territorial governor Ninian Edwards raised an army to suppress warring Kickapoos, who had massacred settlers at Fort Dearborn (present-day Chicago). According to one account, Edwards and his army "stumbled into the splendors of Sangamon County" while on their way to Fort Clark.

Long before Ninian Edwards, however, the trace had a history, though not so well documented.

"The Indians used it and before that it was probably used by herd animals—bison."

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elk, etc.—to get from water source to water source, and to the salt licks,” Brady explained. “There were probably several trails that eventually were connected into a single continuous trail that followed the timber line.”

The oldest tribes associated with the trace are those within the Illini federation, Native Americans who allied themselves with the French. After the French were forced out of the territory, northern and eastern tribes that had fought with the English—Kickapoo, Potawatomi, and the Sauk and Fox—moved in. Then came the War of 1812. Those tribes who stood with the British now found themselves at war with the Americans, and that alliance eventually resulted in the removal of all native tribes from within the boundaries of the state.

Tracing roots

Though now archaic, the word “trace” as a noun meaning “a beaten path through a wild or enclosed region made by the passage of men or beasts” has a curious derivation. The Oxford English Dictionary ascribes such usage as exclusively American, nevertheless citing possible roots from the French (“tracer”), Provençal (“trassa”), Italian (“traccia”), Old French (“tracier”), and Spanish (“trasa”). Such mixed linguistic blood is indicative of the Edwards Trace, which has been used by a variety of ethnic and cultural populations in its long history.

Certainly the word was common American vernacular in the nineteenth century, as revealed in this passage from Springfield “founder” Elijah Iles’ memoirs, *Early Life and Times in Kentucky, Missouri, and Illinois*, first published in 1883. Referring to his first trip into the Sangamon country, Iles recalled: “From Vandalia we followed the stakes and struck Gov. Edwards’ war trace, now dim, thirty miles south of the Sangamon river. From this point we could see the timber of Sugar and Horse creeks, on the head waters of the Sangamon.”

Another Springfield pioneer, Zimri A. Enos, was dead four years before his article, “The Old Indian Trail, Sangamon County, Illinois,” appeared in the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (1911). Son of another city founder, Pascal P. Enos, Zimri was himself a patriarch and an old man before he committed his memories of early Sangamon County to paper. His reason for writing at the time was to encourage others to share their memories of the trace, which by then had faded from the public memory. “This trail or trace should, as an interesting matter of history, be definitely established, before all evidence of its location is gone,” Enos wrote.

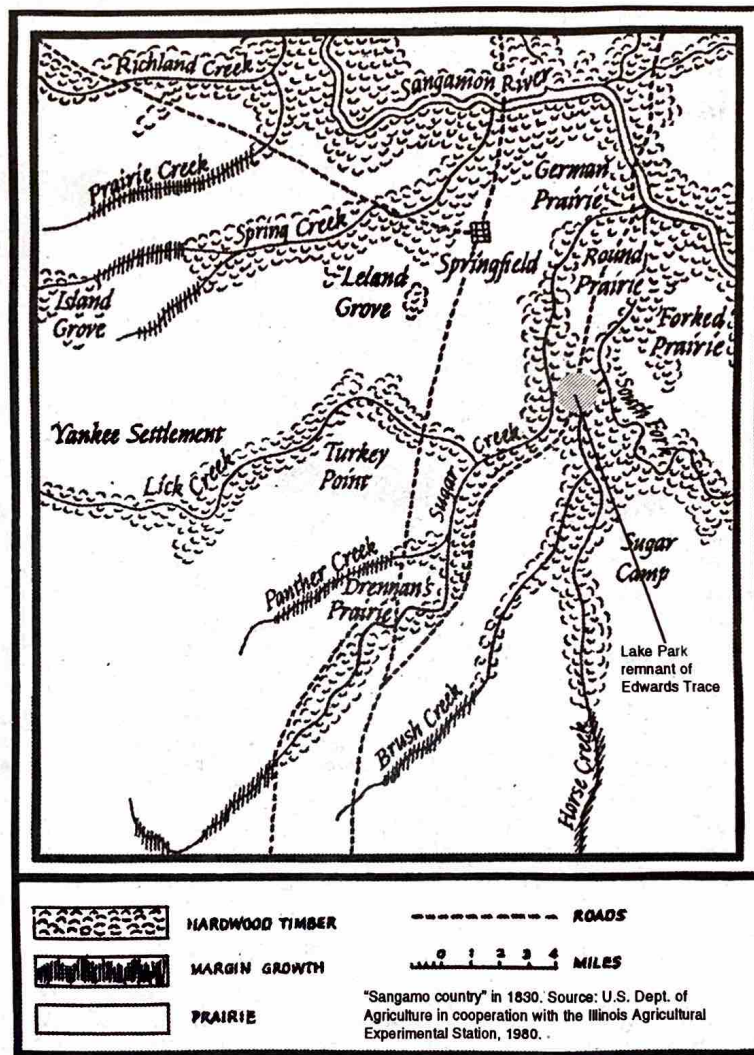
His own memory was quite lucid. A surveyor and local lawyer, Enos knew the road from Edwardsville to Elkhart Hill, traveling it several times as a youth and young man. “The line of this Old Indian Trail was the wagon route of most of the early settlers of Sangamon county, and is accurately locat-

ed in the subdivision surveys of townships 9 and 10 north range 6 west 3rd P.M. made by the U.S. Deputy Surveyor in 1818,” Enos recalled. And when his own memory failed, he relied on that of others: “Mr. Joseph Stafford informs me that when a boy riding in company with a grown brother along the road on the narrow divide between Horse Creek and Sugar Creek, his brother called his attention to and pointed

used by Illinois’ earliest settlers—who were mostly from Kentucky—are consistent with the ruts at Lake Park.”

It is possible that the trail at Lake Park owes its formation to another source, but those most likely to have created it tend to support Brady’s discovery.

“We’ve moved playground equipment in and we haul garbage out, but we didn’t make that road,” said Tom Fanale, superintendent of Lake Services Maintenance for Springfield’s City Water, Light and Power (CWLP). “About the only thing we do is mow it.” Fanale has worked for the city thirty years. To the best of his knowledge, the terrain at Lake Park has not been altered since the park was opened in 1935.



out the line of the old Indian Trail a little to the side of the road.”

The high ridge along East Lake Drive at Lake Park is still very visible, and what remains of the trace is remarkable, given the elapsed time and development nearby.

“What’s there now is an indentation, worn to a maximum depth of eighteen inches to two feet, approximately six feet wide at its base and twelve feet at the top,” Brady observes. “That’s pretty much consistent for old roads in this area, according to what I’m told. A man from Kentucky who studies wagons explained to me recently that the wheel bases of the wagons

Brady has shared his observations with experts from CWLP, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, the Illinois State Museum, and the Illinois State Historical Society. So far, no one has been able to disprove his claim. Every bit of evidence supports Brady’s findings.

Every site has its secrets

Archaeologist Robert Mazrim of Athens works for the Illinois Transportation Archaeological Research Project, a program of the University of Illinois’ Anthropology Department. Mazrim, who

helped prepare the “Cultural Inventory” of the proposed Hunter Lake site several years ago, knows the Edwards Trace perhaps better than anyone.

An expert on the frontier period in Illinois history (roughly 1750-1835), Mazrim says he’s “plotted the trace in every township from Edwardsville to Peoria” and finds the Lake Park remnant in Springfield to be one of the “best preserved.”

Mazrim, who recently excavated a sixty-foot trench wall in the historic French settlement located in heart of downtown Peoria, claims he can document European usage of the trace as early as 1711, when French priests from Cahokia traveled its length to get to Lake Peoria.

Not all historians believe the French wandered this far east from their settlements along the Illinois and Mississippi rivers, but Mazrim knows otherwise.

“The French settlements weren’t in the uplands,” Mazrim explained, “but that doesn’t mean they did not travel this far from the American Bottoms.” But the trace is hundreds—perhaps thousands of years older than the French period in Illinois history. Michael Wiant, curator of anthropology at the Illinois State Museum, was astonished and delighted when he saw what David Brady had observed on the ridge overlooking Lake Springfield. In addition to the old road bed, Wiant recognized several unusual formations that piqued his interest.

“I’ve been to picnics in these parks for years and never really noticed the landscape,” Wiant told *Illinois Times*. But when he and Brady toured the site together, Wiant’s eyes were focused at ground level. “My goodness,” Wiant recalled thinking, “these things don’t belong here.”

He was looking at two small mounds gently rising out of the grass, not far from the historic roadbed.

Wiant, who has documented and studied prehistoric Native American mounds throughout Illinois and the Midwest, later returned to the site to conduct sediment probes, and shared his preliminary findings.

“The two rises appear to be incompatible with the natural landscape,” Wiant told *IT*. “The soil properties list telling differences in the stratum when you probe from one side to the other.”

Nevertheless, Wiant acknowledges, “nothing at this stage is conclusive.” Without further, more invasive probes, he said, it is impossible to tell if the rises have historic or even pre-historic characteristics. Both are possible, perhaps even probable, given other recent discoveries in Sangamon County.

Topographically speaking, the Airport Site uncovered on the bluffs above the Sangamon River in the early 1960s was an unremarkable mound, Wiant noted, yet it turned out to be a remarkable mortuary site from the Archaic Period (roughly 4,000 years ago). Likewise, the discovery of pre-historic mounds on the South Fork of the Sangamon River near Rochester several years ago captured headlines—and stalled a housing development project. Those mounds, though definitely newer constructions, were nowhere near as significant as those found near the airport.

But not all mounds are created equal,

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and some have secrets we may never understand.

"A few of my colleagues have proposed that Native-American mounds were more than just places of internment (Dickson Mounds) or architecture (Cahokia Mounds)," Wiant said. "Some might have been used to mark trails or signify other landmarks. If archaeology has taught us anything, it's that every site has its secrets."

"Consider the (Floyd) Mansberger study of the Lincoln home," he continued. "Thousands of people have been through that house and hundreds have studied it, but when they took off the back porch they found a well that had never been documented."

"We know a great deal about the Native populations that lived in the lowlands of the Illinois and Mississippi River floodplains," Wiant concluded, "but the upland inhabitants are still a mystery to us. Every discovery raises many more questions. We have a long way to go before we understand what's happening here."

In addition to the "rises," as Wiant cautiously refers to them, there is at least one other archaeological "hotspot" at Lake Park: the outline of what appears to be the foundation of a dwelling. Whether the structure is from the **David Brady at the Lake Park remnant of the Edwards Trace, which he has spent the past nine years searching for.**

Impossible to determine without further exploration, something neither the city nor the state has committed to do. But historians know for certain that many of Sangamon County's earliest settlers "squatted" along Sugar Creek, and that many dwellings were erected alongside the Edwards Trace. An entire catalogue of these sites was published in the 1994 Hunter Lake study, a document that today is as rare as remnants of the trace itself. What little physical history is known about the area will be forever lost once construction begins on Hunter Lake.

Marking the trail

The documented history of the Edwards Trace could fill a book, if not several. Surprisingly, none has been written. But slowly and surely, the last vestiges of the trail are disappearing from the landscape. An 1882 history of Madison County recorded that "county authorities laid out and opened a road from Edwardsville to Clear Lake on the Sangamon, a distance of seventy miles, as early as 1820, surveyed by Jacob Judy, who caused mile posts to be

erected along the entire length of the said road, which is known to our readers as the 'Springfield' road." Those roadside markers, like much of the trace, are gone forever.

Sally Cadagin, president of the Sangamon County Historical Society, is hopeful that with renewed interest about the Edwards Trace, fueled by Brady's recent discoveries, the city and county will get behind efforts to mark and help preserve the site. "This site is really important to the history of our county," Cadagin said. "So much of the trace has been lost or destroyed, and we have perhaps the best example of it anywhere in the state."

"What's surprising is that there are no other markers for this historic road any-

where in Illinois," Cadagin continued. "We need to preserve what's left of the trace, not just for ourselves but for the rest of the state."

Although he has not yet seen the site, historian James E. Davis, author of *Frontier Illinois* (1998, Indiana University Press) called the Lake Park remnant of the Edwards Trace a "potential gold mine."

"If this is truly a segment of the trace, Davis said, it is an "incredibly rich storehouse of knowledge" waiting to be unlocked.

That kind of talk suits David Brady

just fine. Nevertheless, he's taking his own action toward protecting the site. Brady is working with the Illinois State Historical Society, the Sangamon County Historical Society, and CWLP to have a marker placed in Lake Park. The ISHS maintains more than 350 historic markers throughout Illinois, from Fort Massac to the Galena lead mines. This would be the first marker for the Edwards Trace in the state.

But Brady knows that raising a marker is the least that should be done. Protecting the site for future historians and archaeologists to study is far more important, and the sooner done the better. That will take time, effort, and not a few bake sales. Fortunately, Brady already makes a great cherry pie.

Former **Illinois Times** editor William Furry is the assistant director of the **Illinois State Historical Society**.

