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THE ILLINOIS DUNESLAND PRESERVATION SOCIETY

Reminiscing About the Early Years

(Condensed)

By Ogden H. Poole

I have been interested in this organization ever since I came to Waukegan High School as a teacher. I taught biology there for 35 years.

Mrs. Jannette Black was the first person who contacted me. She called me on the phone and asked if I was the biology teacher at Waukegan High School. She said she had never seen any students up in the dunes and she asked if I would be willing to attend a meeting at her house.

I agreed to go to the meeting and it was there that I met Dr. L. F. and Mrs. Jean Yntema. I think Dr. Elizabeth Lunn was there too. I brought along another colleague who contributed a great deal to the working of the Society, Miss Hazel Hurlbutt. Miss Hurlbutt taught English but she was very interested in wild flowers and birds. I joined the organization, but I did not participate other than to take my students on field trips to the park and I walked out there frequently.

There were some very prominent people in the organization in 1949. Mrs. Black, Mrs. Evangeline Folvary, the secretary, Fred Helgren who became president, all people who had the courage and the vision to become concerned about the condition of the park. Dr. Bruce Lineberg of Lake Forest College had been interested in the park since 1924. Another prominent person and leader was the Rev. Dean Ganster of the Episcopal Church. He spent a lot of time in the park and wanted it preserved. Harold MacArthur, who was so interested in ornithology, took us on bird hikes. Mrs. Paul LaRose has been with the organization since 1947 and continued to be on the board serving in many official positions and as historian. She dug out facts that the Potawatomi Indians came through the park in 1600 in their migration north.

To interest young people, two groups were formed. Jack Bicket organized a group of high school boys and formed the "Northern Illinois Dunes Society." They prepared an exhibit and went to different organizations describing the flora and fauna of the park with slides as well as some of the specimens.

At Waukegan High School, Miss Hurlbutt and I organized the "Waukegan Junior Dunesland Preservation Society." We published a newspaper called Dunesland Sketches. Jack Bicket published another newspaper called Sand Scripts.

About 30 years ago where the interdunal ponds are, up in the dunes area, there were a lot of bottled gentian. I remember taking the students up there and they said that they looked like Coke bottles. They are no longer there; it wasn't a question of people picking them because they were isolated and such a number.

Dr. Margery Carlson used to bring her classes up from Northwestern University. She said that as a result of those trips, to what she called the "Waukegan flats," four of her students became outstanding naturalists.

We also had a very good park superintendent, Steve Hotham. He was there for years but he didn't have any help.

We became a non-profit organization, tax-exempt and incorporated by the Secretary of State in 1950.

We had to fight for land. We found that there was privately owned acreage running into the prairie. Also, property around the park was privately owned. There was a gravel pit right near the entrance to the park owned by a Waukegan man. Getting the State to buy land was one of the prime objectives of the Society.

Thirty-five years ago cars could drive anywhere. The road that runs through the nature area was a regular racetrack for motorcycles. Cars parked any place.

We were amazed at how many people were interested in our nature area. There were no trails in the nature area, just foot-paths formed by people walking through. Now we have trails, very well defined, largely through the work of Dr. Carlson.

Hunters entered the south end of the park; that was a real problem. They started fires to flush out the pheasants. It was almost impossible to keep the hunters out. Eventually, the south entrance was closed to curb vandalism and the hunters' access.

We wanted to cooperate with the State Park Superintendent as well as the Department of Conservation. I got into an exchange with the director, William T. Lodge, when he accused me of confusing recreation and conservation. He said the park was for the use of the general public and therefore we needed the recreational facilities.

The construction of the lodge brought up problems. We wanted it to be more like the log lodge at Starved Rock. The State did not agree; they built the present lodge with 108 rooms. They promised they would not construct anything south of it and it would be landscaped with creeping juniper because they dug up a lot of it when they were putting in the foundation. There were

campers and the need for large parking areas for the beach, improvement of the beach house, and so forth, so we cooperated with that.

Dr. R. M. Strong, who was from the Chicago Museum of Natural History, stressed the need for a naturalist, the need for land acquisition, and as the new lodge was in the process of construction, that the naturalist be housed in the lodge, and that a museum be set up.

In October of 1961, Dr. Andrew Furlan turned the presidency over to me. Wouldn't you know, that was the day Mayor Robert Sabonjian came with a great big poster of the annexation of 180 acres he wanted taken out of the grassland, the prairie, which is the most unique virgin prairie we have in this part of the country, or even in the nation. He wanted to build a marina and a golf course. He said this golf course would be a buffer between Johns-Manville and the nature area. He walked into a hornet's nest when he attended that meeting.

Dr. Yntema studied the nature preserve bill. If we got that passed, the dunes would be safe from annexation. Trying to get a bill intact through both the Senate and House is a real problem. We prepared lists of every organization that we felt would be interested: garden clubs, women's clubs, Sierra Clubs, Audubon societies, etc. The preparation of that list was enormous. We duplicated over 200 letters for the first mailing and sent them to these organizations, pleading for their help. Any prominent individuals that anyone knew were contacted for their support to defeat the annexation.

We gave all the facts in our letters and sent them out. We sent telegrams to the Governor. We got the motel association to send a telegram; they bought advertising space. We sent articles to all the newspapers and to WKRS.

We sent letters to all the professors in the biology departments around the area, including the University of Wisconsin. Dr. Harry Sagen and Mr. David Fields talked to Mr. Sauer, the chairman of the Governor's Advisory Committee. He said the most effective way to influence the Governor was by letters. Well, we certainly bombarded him with letters.

Mrs. Yntema wrote letters constantly in the Waukegan News Sun. We got good support because George Crawford, of the newspaper, was very concerned about the Waukegan juniper. People donated money. From the North Shore, garden club women sent money to defray the mailing expenses of our campaign to prevent the annexation. We finally got Governor Otto Kerner to sign the nature preserve bill. He dedicated the nature preserve area at the Illinois Beach Lodge. That saved us. This was the first nature preserve in Illinois.

In 1962 at the lodge, we had Dr. Hugh Iltus of the University of Wisconsin as a guest speaker. He objected very strongly to planting anything in the dunes. He pointed out that all the cottonwood trees along the beach should be removed because they were not indigenous to the park and that by all means not to interfere with what he called the natural succession that would occur in the park in spite of the fires. Fire is a part of succession.

Early last spring a fire was started in the park by vandals. There must have been some benefits because I have never seen such a mass of false foxglove. It was so thick and large as it grew all over the nature area. There were not as many fringed gentian because of the dryness. The hot weather really stimulated the prickly pear cactus. They had thick stems and they blossomed so beautifully.

The first naturalist we hired was a young man. They gave him a garage in back of the lodge. He had no money to present or prepare programs or any kind of exhibits and Mr. Robert Needham, who was park superintendent at the time, used him more as a policeman than a naturalist.

We decided to mark out trails. I had a student whose father cut wooden stakes for us. We made 50 signs to identify plants and tried to install markers for the trails. We couldn't cement anything in--the stakes were just pounded in. The stakes were not sturdy enough so they didn't last long. They were moved, vandalized and stepped on. It was a terrific disappointment.

A remarkable achievement and highlight that we will long enjoy is Dr. Lunn's book. Dr. Lunn's book is far better than the one the University of Wisconsin put out.

We have a lot of standing achievements, for example, we have a nature area and an excellent naturalist, Sue Wright. The purpose and objective of our Society was to educate people and bring them into the park. Activities like Dr. Lunn's book, the hiring of a naturalist, and the establishment of the nature center, have brought people into the park. These are important accomplishments.

This past year, three benches were installed in the nature preserve. I wish we had some more for us older people. Dr. Lunn takes us on nature hikes once a month, and we have prepared lists of flowers to observe each month.

Think of what the park was like and how it is improved! I hope you love the area as much as I do.

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November, 1988.