The Acorn Year

By Thomas V. Lerczak

The day I moved into the first house I ever owned in rural central Illinois, I planted a few bur oak acorns and three small seedlings. Much of the 3.7-acre property was mowed lawn. But there were some woods around the edges and several large trees, including the biggest, most massive hickory I had ever seen. I arrived with my final few possessions in the back of my car and the bur oaks. I remember a new feeling of satisfaction at owning my own home and land, the fulfillment, I believe, of a natural human desire.

Immediately, though, I saw the need for brushy vegetation around the property's boundaries; for I could see without obstruction to the neighbor's house across the road. If that was what I had wanted, I never would have left the Chicago area many years before. So I planted the acorns and seedlings, collected from near my former rental house on the Illinois River bluffs, toward the front edge of the property. With each year, they grew almost imperceptibly in height and width, struggling in the sandy, nutrient- and water-poor soils. But after seven years, they had far exceeded my height; and one of the oaks, originally planted as a seedling, even provided a fine photo backdrop on my wedding day.

The bur oaks, in fact, have become a benchmark in time, never failing to bring me back to that first day when I became a landowner at age forty-two: from a renter, subject to the rules of others, to the owner and decision maker. I recall standing beneath the big hickory, thinking that it was likely to have been a contemporary of Lincoln, and now it was my tree. And it did not escape from me that I was privileged to live in a nation of freedom, where anyone could own their land and home if they chose to do so and work hard toward achieving that goal. At that moment I finally understood and felt in sympathy with the emotion behind private property rights and the right to live my life as I saw fit.

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On about one acre surrounding the oaks I have set up conditions for a competition of sorts. It is not a commercial or sporting event, but rather, may be viewed as a natural interplay between one particular assemblage of plants (prairie) and another (forest). A few years after planting the oaks, following a time of "letting nature take its course," I cleared most of the area, leaving only a few oaks, hickories, and red cedars; then I burned off the area and scattered thousands of seeds from a variety of native prairie wildflowers (forbs) and grasses, along with nuts from black oaks and American hazelnut shrubs. With germination, the competition began.

As the vegetation has grown, the habitat has become more diversified. So where once the buzz cut land appealed to few bird species, it increasingly has provided a more complex structure, and more species find what they need to survive. Robins, for example, still prefer the mowed lawn around the house for foraging, but large saplings now provide a proper structure for nesting. The taller prairie grasses and low shrubs appeal to nesting field sparrows and song sparrows. Foraging lark sparrows use the bare sand between bunches of little bluestem grass and sand love grass. And red cedars, growing from seed that I had haphazardly thrown in the air years before, contribute structural diversity to the habitat, with at least one suitable for a brown thrasher's nest. Gray catbirds, northern mockingbirds, indigo buntings,

bobwhite quail, and eastern towhees all find the shrubby landscape more appealing for nesting habitat than its crew-cut past. There are more birds around over the winter too; my record keeping shows that the number of species observed each year is on an upward trend. In addition to the birds, I have been astounded by the different types of bees and butterflies drawn to the prairie wildflowers, with different species blooming at different periods throughout the growing season, following a natural cycle.

The lesson of diversity is clear and needs little elaboration on my part. Still I know that at first glance, many would continue to think I have simply let the property go. The former owners once asked if they could dig up and remove some of the flower bulbs they had left behind, concluding that I "didn't care for flowers." One neighbor from far down the road once belligerently asked, "Hey! When are you going to cut your grass?" I simply answered that it was not in the management plan. I had no idea where to begin to offer a real explanation. My newlywed wife initially smiled politely as I proudly showed her around the property. She, knowing me quite well, needed no explanation. Since then, with an artist's and Master Gardener's touch, she has taught me how to maintain a neater, more orderly appearance immediately around our house, while at the same time not diminishing the wildlife values elsewhere. She maintains, however, that it is a work in progress. And the sand prairie and savanna, shrub thickets, and woods along the property boundaries continue to reflect a certain natural randomness, controlled by the laws of nature, where competition is a driving force; it is this aspect, in fact, that I find most appealing.

If I did nothing at all but watch the plants grow, given the present Illinois climate, without a doubt, forest would win the competition over prairie; because for the longest time, perhaps thousands of years, temperature and precipitation cycles in Illinois have strongly tipped the environmental "balance," for want of a better term, in favor of forest, even on rather dry, nutrient-poor, sandy soils. To push the balance on my land in the direction toward prairie, I have used fire as a tool. And once prairie grasses became established, fires have burned more intensely, further pushing the community toward prairie. The controlled fires burn off all of the prairie plants above ground, and tree saplings that are always encroaching are top killed. Although during the following growing seasons, all will re-sprout, I am confident that repeated fires over many years will greatly discourage the trees, which have to expend much of their stored energy reserves from the previous year to completely regrow from their undamaged root systems. The more fire-tolerant oaks and hickories, especially the larger, more established individuals, usually survive the fires little worse off for the experience.

This mixture of prairie and forest plants has thus taken on the characteristics of a vegetational tension zone, sometimes called a "savanna," that is capable of wavering back and forth, albeit over a period of years, toward either of the two main plant communities. An increase in fire and drought should result in the prairie assemblage thriving at the expense of tree cover; more reliable precipitation and cooler conditions with less fire may give trees an edge and allow them to encroach more successfully upon the prairie. In the old Illinois landscape, before the Europeans arrived, this was the natural dynamic equilibrium, and this is what I am trying to re-create on my little plot of ground.

On a much larger scale, topography and soils also once played more important roles on the Illinois landscape. In areas with

mature stream systems and rougher topography, fires moved less easily across the land. The result was that, in general, flat table lands and the gently rolling lands of central Illinois, once covered by ice age glaciers thousands of years ago, supported prairie, while river valleys and complex ravine and bluff systems supported forest. Savanna then existed between true forest and prairie in a complex shifting mosaic shaped by climatic conditions, which, over the long term, also changed and continue to change. In 1820, the benchmark year that ecologists use to separate pre-European-settlement times from modern, just over half of Illinois was prairie, while much of the rest was wooded, although it is unclear exactly how much of this was savanna and how much was true forest.

If it was just a matter of planting the appropriate species and setting fires frequently, restoring an Illinois savanna might be rather straightforward. But today, we must contend with a variety of plants not native to Illinois and some not even native to the Western Hemisphere. On my land, the most competitive non-native trees are white mulberry, black locust, and Siberian elm, which surround the partially restored savanna. Native black walnut, sassafras, and hackberry trees, though, can be just as invasive. With any relaxation in the controlled fire regime on my part, these trees will immediately begin taking over. In fact, even with frequent fire, it has continually become necessary for me to cut seedlings and saplings by hand and apply a strong herbicide to the cut stumps to prevent vigorous re-sprouting. So even with all of the cutting, herbicide, and fire, the prairie-savanna is only just about able to hold its own.

So one may ask some legitimate questions: With all of this manipulation, is what I have created natural or are my efforts just a different kind of backyard gardening and not really anything natural at all? Am I kidding myself by naming what I have planted, and fight to maintain, a "savanna"? If it was natural when I left the property to its own devices, have my manipulations made it less natural? I put the plants there, true; but I did not, of course, create the plants. Each one survives as an individual just as individuals of each species have always done, surviving or dying according to chance circumstances; but each also exists as a member of a plant community, where survival is moderated by some of the same types of interactions with other individuals and external influences as there always have been. Native Americans purposely set fires to manipulate the landscape, and no one called that unnatural; instead, many like to say, whether true or not, that they lived in harmony with nature. Cannot I engage in a similar activity with the addition of a few newer tools? What really is natural or unnatural after all? How much of these labels are really only in our own minds as we try to categorize and understand our world? As I saunter along the trails through this work-in-progress prairie-savanna restoration, I am at no loss for unanswered questions.

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As a child, when others were more interested in baseball or basketball, I was drawn to the far boundaries of our local city park in Chicago, a narrow strip of woods left alone by the park staff that served as a buffer between the park and railroad yard beyond. These woods and other vegetation grew according to no one's mandates. And something about that notion fascinated me. Perhaps it appealed to the natural rebelliousness of youth that I was starting to feel: a clean-cut lawn was tame and under control; the woods were wild. Later in life, I would seek out wilderness areas throughout the country, from Maine to Washington, Arizona, and the Midwest, for places that I

imagined were little touched by human hands. I found value in the idea that very specific types of plants and animals could somehow come together on their own, in a recognizable way, so that someone someday could define that assemblage, or community, and give it a name. Tallgrass prairie, floodplain forest, bur oak savanna, oak-hickory forest, and marsh are examples of such natural communities in Illinois.

Coming upon a remnant natural community is like finding gold. About thirty-five miles northeast of my home, there is a small prairie on the Illinois River bluffs in the village of Creve Coeur. This prairie is only about a half-acre or so and surrounded by dense upland oak-hickory forests, but studies have indicated that it is a true remnant of the original Illinois prairies. No one planted the Creve Coeur prairie; it has been there a long time; in fact, perhaps thousands of years, reaching backward in time to when prairie was at its maximum extent in Illinois. When I gaze upon something so old with so much history, I feel like an insignificant upstart.

The Creve Coeur prairie will endure because others have placed a value in protecting these types of natural communities. In fact, it is protected "in perpetuity" within the boundaries of the Crevecoeur Nature Preserve as part of the Illinois Nature Preserves System, codified by state law in the Natural Areas Preservation Act of 1963. The System currently contains 372 dedicated Illinois Nature Preserves totaling 56,631 acres within a state of 36 million acres. It is a repository of a small portion of Illinois' original biological diversity, representing a time when all of the natural communities were thought to be fully functioning and when no species were threatened with extinction – if that concept even occurred to anyone in the early 1800s. These are special places, indeed, more than just being un-manicured landscapes. The roots of their appeal to me can be traced back to those childhood days in Chicago. And while knowing this has helped in understanding where my current perspectives and obsessions had originated, it does little to address the old and new questions that continue to occupy my thoughts as I walk through my own prairie-savanna restoration. In the end, though, perhaps the answers are not really very important.

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Occasionally I imagine myself as an old man in his late eighties, sometimes visiting the natural areas he helped maintain over the years and daily passing the bur oaks he once planted years before, knowing the personal history of each tree as friends on the landscape. Daily walks are a tradition that I began with planting the prairie-savanna, when I also laid out the trail system to the four corners of my land. Within a shaded, wooded area, I placed a bench, which has given me a final destination before heading back to the house. It is a place where I have grown accustomed to quietly sitting and observing, a place especially for contemplating meanings and connections; it is where I sometimes imagine the multiple generations that have let the big hickory tree grow, and how many more might continue this tradition and perhaps add the bur oaks and prairie-savanna to their sphere of protection…long after I am gone.

But I take no comfort in thinking about a time when I may no longer exist. Such thoughts rarely have entered my sometimes self-indulgent mind. It is only in the last several years, as I have shockingly come to realize that I have more years behind than may be ahead, that I have given much energy toward thoughts of inescapable mortality. Indeed, I'm at an age when contemplating the span of my own life is

actually possible in an understandable way. And the years seem to be passing faster than when I was young: an hour is still an hour; a day is still twenty-four hours; and yet, when in the context of over fifty years of memories, time seems shorter. It's true, as singer-songwriter John Prine once sang, that "the years flow by like a broken down dam."

Once while at the bench, a black-capped chick-a-dee called from a craggy mulberry tree. I recalled that a chick-a-dee certainly has a fleeting life, a few years at most. How many generations of chick-a-dees, I wondered, have there been during my life time? They are a successful species, and they get along well with backyard habitats; so I think there will always be chick-a-dees near my home. And what of the other bird species as short-lived as the chick-a-dees? In five to ten years I may see an entirely new set of individuals flying among the prairie and woods. Yet as long as each particular species survives, the bird community will provide continuity into the future. The same chirps and songs that surround me today, someone else will hear as well a thousand years from now, just as they were heard a thousand years ago. I find such thoughts are a way of reaching across time, touching the past and future simultaneously.

On the way to the bench, there are many sapling hickories struggling each year in the hot sun and soil, sometimes having to completely regrow from the occasional fire. But it is my desire that at least one of these will carry on after the patriarch tree eventually dies and then falls, for nothing lives forever. As for the bur oaks that I planted, they have had enough to contend with merely surviving certain recent years with extreme drought and heat; acorn production I had not expected for many years. And so, because I am usually focused on newly emergent spring wildflowers and migrating birds, I completely missed during a recent spring when two of the bur oaks, both around twenty feet tall, had briefly flowered.

Later in the same year, as I slowly made my way to the bench, I was stopped cold by a large, shaggy-capped bur oak acorn lying in my path. Soon I found several more. Two I quickly planted within the sand prairie far from any other trees; two I planted in pots to nurture them to the seedling stage every step of the way; the rest I left for wildlife or whatever fate chance might dictate.

Bur oak acorns and leaves

Now I know for certain that there will eventually be more bur oaks on the land than I originally planted, and one day I may even have to limit their numbers, lest they begin shading out the prairie vegetation. Perhaps one day folks will refer to this property as "that old farmhouse with the prairie and all those big bur oaks." But I guess it is just as likely that the mowed lawn will return with the next owners. I'll never know, of course, but it surely will be their decision.

Selected References

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