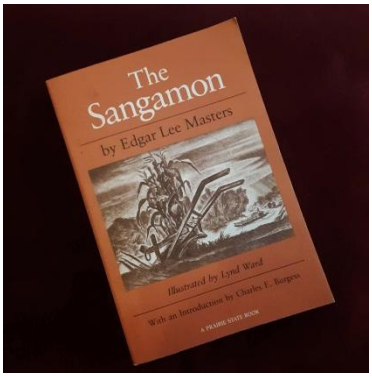
Return to a Hill Prairie

By Thomas V. Lerczak

"*When greenery goes out of the landscape in autumn, a haze of bright, ruddy color lies over most of the hills on the east side of the river…and over remnants of prairie which have resisted the plow.*"—from the book ***River World*** by Virginia S. Eifert, 1959



Attorney and writer Edgar Lee Masters' (1868-1950) relates in his book, ***The Sangamon***, published in 1942, that when his grandmother first looked northward toward the Mason County Hills in the late 1840s, she was saddened. This central Illinois landscape was wild and uncultivated, and she wanted to see a settled land with farmsteads, accented here and there with well-kept homes. The hill prairies on high bluffs over the Sangamon River valley also might have conjured up visions of a not so distant past when the land was occupied by a native race of people, a culture alien to her that embraced those same hills as home and as a source of sustenance. That same location today, though, might have her smile, as the land has become dominated by intensive row-crop agriculture, exuding prosperity; but she may also wonder why those hill prairies are still there.

In ***The Sangamon***, Masters often writes of Illinois' prairies as expansive landscape features; he even writes a poem about prairies, but fails even once to explicitly mention the comparatively small hill prairies which his grandmother as well as he would have witnessed on the steep Sangamon River bluffs. It would be 1955 before the state of Illinois would publish Robert A. Evers' landmark study, ***Hill Prairies of Illinois***. So to be fair, probably not too many people were thinking about such things with the Great Depression tenaciously holding on while another world war seemed inevitable. As far as ***The Sangamon*** is concerned, apparently more impressive to Masters than the hill prairies were certain eccentric personalities of the locality, who now seem to be of little consequence other than adding a bit of color to his narrative; and yet, he devotes considerable space in the book to such individuals. But today, as one looks toward the Sangamon River bluffs,

those hill prairies are the only original prairies left in view; it would be difficult not to notice them, even for a person uninterested in such things.

The Sangamon River, bottomlands, and distant Revis Hill Prairie Nature Preserve on the Mason County Hills, 2012.

Just over three decades ago, I first visited Revis Hill Prairie Nature Preserve (422.8 acres), north of where Salt Creek enters the Sangamon River. There were no trails that I could see, and maps were not offered; so I pushed through the brush at the prairie's edge and began a steep 200-foot climb along a narrow ridge of prairie, with woods on either side, to the top of the bluff. Here I found a place to sit and lean against the hillside, on what could only be referred to as a natural sofa, looking out upon the prairie ridges, surrounding forests, flatlands of the river bottoms, and southward toward the uplands of Menard County with modern no-nonsense farms. These prairies, I thought, had been there for a long time, an original landscape that existed from well into the deep past. The thought held my attention; I felt as if I had stepped out of a time machine, and I looked closely around me at the loess soil, little bluestem, side oats grama, big bluestem, indiangrass, lead plant, and more. A gentle breeze blew from the south, enabling turkey vultures and red-tailed hawks to soar on updrafts overhead, but sometimes at eye level. With the wind blowing through nearby oak trees, the only sound I heard was rustling leaves, the nearest highway being far removed from this preserve in a remote part of a remote county. I would return here many times over the next three decades, but that first visit will always stand out from the rest.

Revis Hill Prairie Nature Preserve, early 1990s.

Loess ridge at Revis Hill Prairie Nature Preserve, early 1990s.

For someone who grew up within the old neighborhoods of Chicago and Cicero—with its paved streets, concrete sidewalks, sewer systems, mowed front lawns, and blocks of bungalows, each small house separated from the next by only a few feet—a mindset was ingrained in me early on that most of what surrounded me had been put there by someone, designed and managed to look and function a certain way. That may be why at an early age I was already drawn to what I perceived as unmanaged landscapes such as the Chicago area's forest preserves, especially those along the Des Plaines River. After being free in the forest preserves for an afternoon, returning to the rectangular blocks and sidewalks of our city neighborhood felt like being put into a cage. That feeling is still with me every day, and I know that it is one of the reasons why I am still drawn to natural areas, particularly those within the Illinois Nature Preserve System.

At some point, though, I became aware that natural areas had to be managed to maintain their characteristics, which, in a way, suggests a contradiction in terms. Of course, there are many issues that require this to be necessary, including but not limited to invasive plants that can quickly overrun even a supposedly pristine area, successional changes in plant communities that evolved with frequent fire, decline of species due to habitat fragmentation, and species populations falling below some minimum viable size. When I began working for the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission several years after my first visit to Revis Hill Prairie, I had long been aware that my precious natural areas were not unmanaged as I had once thought, but actually were among some of the most managed lands in the state, with activities such as prescribed fires, brush and tree removal from prairies and savannas, seed collection and distribution, herbicide treatment of invasive plants, and, in some cases, reintroductions of rare plants and animals. Being actively involved in these activities on a professional level permanently altered the way I would view a natural area; and that became clear to me one day as I realized that instead of closely looking at a tree to

admire its beauties in shape, color, and texture, I would be thinking of the best way to drop it safely using a chain saw—where to place the initial cut, how the tree was naturally leaning, and how it would fall and on what.

Management at every natural area, though, seems to be always running behind the needs; at the same time, it is also important to monitor the effects of management or lack thereof. Part of the monitoring process is simply to visit a preserve for a close look with a critical eye. Was the natural area beginning to look the way it was originally envisioned when it was entered into the system? Were we making progress or falling behind? Were there any new challenges? Eventually, even when visiting a preserve on my own time, purely for pleasure, I found it difficult not to make mental lists of issues that needed attention. There were always issues, even at the best sites. But even so, I always took a few moments to reflect upon the meaning behind these protected natural areas and to recall why it was that I was initially drawn to them. If I had ever lost sight of that, then my tasks would have become routine and mechanical, like a musician merely playing the correct notes, but not feeling the music.

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This past September (2022), I took advantage of an opportunity to visit Revis Hill Prairie with the Friends of Illinois Nature Preserves, a new group formed to help with the management of nature preserves, especially using volunteers. It was my first visit to Revis since just after my retirement over four years before, and I was curious to see how the site had fared over the interim. There were several folks from the Friends group on the field trip and also a few former colleagues. We climbed the bluffs so well known to me and then gathered to discuss familiar management issues and the challenges of applying consistent follow-up. As in past times, it's still a matter of how to accomplish what everyone knows is necessary to preserve a natural area. I listened closely, but said little, interested more in what others, especially the new folks, had to say.

Revis Hill Prairie Nature Preserve, 26 October 2022, looking back toward the direction of the previous 1990s photograph.

A lot has happened since my first visit to Revis Hill Prairie, illustrating just how long a time it has

been: Thirty years ago, ***Seinfeld*** was a new program on network television, the Internet was not yet available to the public, George H.W. Bush was still struggling through the final years of what would be his only term as president, the Soviet Union was collapsing, the 911 terrorist attack was still a decade away and now is over two decades behind, and few spoke of the possibility of a deadly pandemic capable of touching every corner of our modern world. And I now have the benefit of the type of long-term perspective that only an older person can truly possess, appreciate, and learn from. Even three decades, though, is nothing compared to how long those prairies on the Mason County Hills have existed. I have a good feeling about them. For as Masters once wrote:

> *To contemplate the prairie is*
>
> *To fathom time, to guess at infinite space,*
>
> *To find the Earth-spirit in a dreaming mood.*

References

Evers. Robert A. 1955. Hill Prairies of Illinois. Illinois Natural History Survey Bulletin, Volume 26, Article 5.

Masters, Edgar Lee. 1988. The Sangamon. University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago.

Prairie State Conservation Coalition. I-View (arcgis.com) accessed 11 October 2022.