

# The Elmhurst Great Western Prairie

## A Piece of the Past... A Part of the Future

### History

What's the oldest thing in Elmhurst? It's not a home, a building, or even a majestic elm tree. It's a long strip of prairie, saved by accident and circumstance.

Prairies are an important part of Illinois heritage, but more and more of them disappear every year because of development, farming, and cattle ranching. Prior to settlement of North America, more than 60% of Illinois, approximately 22 million acres, was covered with prairie. Today, just over 2,000 acres remain, less than one hundredth of one percent.

The Prairie Path exists on the former route of a railroad. This strip of land running along the tracks was mowed on a regular basis, but otherwise left undeveloped. Later when the railroad tracks were removed and the Prairie Path was established, the native prairie plants grew up again. The land was too narrow to develop, leaving Elmhurst with a rare and unique opportunity to preserve a part of Illinois history.

The Elmhurst Great Western Prairie is one of only a few original prairies remaining along the entire length of the Illinois State Prairie Path. The prairie exists as a living museum, a remnant of the pre-settlement landscape. Its distinctive landscape includes some 150 species of plants, including shooting star, spiderwort, asters, coneflowers, and large bluestem and Indian grasses. This example of a true prairie is a complex mixture of native perennial plants well suited to the extremes of wet, dry, heat, and cold typical of our climate.

### Prairie Preservation in Elmhurst

Interest in preserving the Elmhurst Great Western Prairie has been increasing in recent years thanks to a growing number of local conservationists volunteering their time and expertise.

The Elmhurst Park District established the Prairie Management Advisory Committee to oversee all matters concerning the management and restoration of the prairie. Commission members also act as volunteers and supervisors for projects such as woody growth removal, clean-ups, prairie burns, seed collection and establishment of prairie plants.

The Elmhurst Great Western Prairie is considered a "jewel of the Elmhurst Park District." To preserve this local treasure and ensure its future existence, a comprehensive management plan is followed to guide preservation and restoration efforts, to increase public awareness, and to ensure continued progress toward re-establishment of the historic appearance of the prairie.

### Prairie Burns and Other Management Tools

As a means of management, the Elmhurst Prairie was first burned in 1977 and almost every year since. The Advisory Committee plans the burn with the assistance of the Elmhurst Fire Department.

Long ago fires set by Native Americans, or by natural lightning strikes primarily maintained the



prairie ecosystem. Prairie fires, which sweep quickly over the ground, do not harm the deeply rooted prairie plants, but they destroy the bark and wood of other trees and shrubs that are not part of the prairie ecosystem. Fire renews the soil by returning nutrients in the form of ash. Prairie animals escape the fire by running, flying or retreating to their burrows. Within a few weeks after the burn, the well-established prairie plants begin to emerge from the ground once more.

Other prairie management practices include cutting wood growth and spreading high quality native seeds. Seedlings started in the Elmhurst Park District greenhouse are planted each year to expand and enhance the native species already growing. Prairie plant growth and brush removal are also monitored.



### **Prairie Public Awareness Programs**

To increase public understanding and knowledge of the prairie, the Elmhurst Park District and the Prairie Management Advisory Commission provide a number of on-going informational programs. In addition to this brochure and other written materials, tours, slide presentations, a public display case at Berkley Avenue and Prairie Path, and programs for school children in the classrooms are available.

For a good introduction to the Elmhurst Great Western Prairie, stop by the Interpretive Garden, located at Berkley and the Prairie Path. The attractively labeled plants in the Interpretive Garden are the same as those found throughout the Elmhurst prairie.

### **Get Involved!**

Managing and maintaining the Elmhurst Great Western Prairie involves the time of many dedicated volunteers. We need your help to keep this part of Illinois history alive. Just a few hours a month can really make a difference. For more information on volunteering, call the Elmhurst Park District's Marketing Assistant at (630) 993-8924 or contact us by e-mail at [volunteer@epd.org](mailto:volunteer@epd.org).



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