



The origins of the Illinois Prairie Path (1963-1966)

Turning a dream into a reality

Explained by four of the founders of the Illinois Prairie Path

May Watts, Helen Turner, Samuel and Elizabeth Holmes

In just 953 days or 2.6 years, a small dedicated group of volunteers (May Theilgaard Watts, Gunnar Peterson, Helen Turner, Elizabeth Holmes, Phoebe Ryerson, Jane Sindt, Lillian Lasch, and the first board members of the Illinois Prairie Path not-for-profit corporation) accomplished a remarkable achievement - they secured a lease to develop 27 miles of linear land - prime real estate - for a public path in DuPage County, Illinois.

The founders had to move very fast in multiple directions to achieve their goal. They faced monumental challenges. They inspired and gained the respect and support of thousands of people in communities along the Path, and county, state and federal government decisionmakers. They turned a vision, proposed by May Watts, into a reality. They inspired the rails-to-trails movement in the United States and throughout the world. Here are excerpts from their stories.

May Theilgaard Watts

Watts, May Theilgaard. 1968. *The Illinois Prairie Path. Landscape* - Spring 1968 issue (Pages 11-14)

*This document is part of the Illinois Prairie Path archives in the **Sterling Morton Library at The Morton Arboretum.***

Helen Turner

Turner, Helen. Notes on: The early days of the Illinois Prairie Path 1963-'64-'65 (Pages 1-4)

*This document is part of the Illinois Prairie Path archives in the **DuPage County Historical Museum.***

Samuel and Elizabeth Holmes

Holmes, Samuel S. and Elizabeth R. Presentation titled *Illinois Prairie Path - Trials and Triumphs* (Pages 1-34)

Delivered at The Mill Race Inn, Geneva, IL on April 12, 1979

*This document is part of the Illinois Prairie Path archives in the **Sterling Morton Library at The Morton Arboretum.***

The Chicago Tribune

The *Chicago Tribune* published Mrs. Watts' historic *Letter to the Editor* and continued to follow the efforts to establish a public trail with great interest. **Special thanks to the *Chicago Tribune*** for granting limited use of the articles that captured the early history of the Illinois Prairie Path.

The Paul and Jean Mooring Archives

Paul and Jean Mooring participated with May Watts and others on the *very first* field trip on October 19, 1963.

Two years later they became volunteers. Over the decades, they became Path leaders.

The Moorings took numerous photos as they and others helped build the trail.

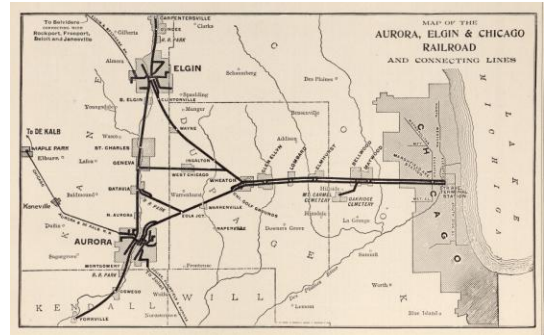
Many of the photos used in this history are from The Paul and Jean Mooring Archives.

AN IDEA FOR A PUBLIC PATH

Source: **Watts** / Page 11

"I did find some places for pleasant functional walking...**One day I discovered that ...there was the right of way of the former Chicago, Aurora and Elgin Electric Railway**, which had ceased operation about five years previously.

There are fifty-three miles of this right of way. Twenty-seven of them lie in our county. The rails and ties have been removed. Prairie plants are surging back. ...



Courtesy of The Morton Arboretum

May Theilgaard Watts

Here was a place to walk, leading from town to town, interrupted by a minimum of roads, well-drained, level, with open views across the Illinois countryside."

A LETTER TO THE EDITOR BEGINS A LOCAL AND NATIONAL MOVEMENT

• VOICE OF THE PEOPLE •

Writers should confine themselves to 200 or 300 words. Give full names and addresses. No manuscripts can be returned. Space for letters is obviously limited. Incoming mail for exceeds it. The right to condense letters is reserved. Address letters to Voice of the People, THE TRIBUNE.

DON'T REGURDANCE TAXES
Chicago, Sept. 22.—For many years now, it has been my personal pleasure to be a devoted reader of your brilliantly composed newspaper. I've enjoyed your funny combs, lovely pictures, clever editorials, and the best of other fine articles embellishing each and every copy. However, I feel your constant complaints about taxes and the federal expenditures are a little drawn out and overdone. Personally I don't object to paying taxes. My tax dollar buys more goods and services than I could possibly purchase with any other dollar. It protects me from foreign aggression, it inspects my groceries, drugs, water, and air. It does all sorts of things which no dollar in private efforts could do so well, or so cheaply. Above and beyond these aspects, it provides that nation to which I owe my loyalties (including financial responsibilities) with the steadfast foundation the needs in order to continue to exercise all of her functions effectively. It's great to get the services American government provides. Let's not begrudge the price we pay for the welfare of our people.

ALFRED A. KOZMEL, JR.

Guest Editorials

SHAKEDOWN SCHEME
Headed seems that Baltimore, shippers and consumers should join forces in fighting the scheme of the Teamsters union to require shippers to pay locals of the union \$5 for each truck trailer moved by rail. It was made clear at a meeting of the Central Conference of Teamsters in Chicago the other day that the union will press for the payments despite state laws barring such practices.

John T. O'Brien, first vice president of the Teamsters union and secretary-treasurer of Chicago local 710, vowed to crack down on truckers who have failed to pay the union \$5 for each truck trailer shipped "piggyback" on the railroads. The union is insisting on inclusion of a provision for the charge in contracts with haulers. It was reported at the meeting that the union has more than \$100,000 in such payments.

The teamsters action flouts a 1961 Illinois law prohibiting the union from collecting funds from companies which ship freight by railroad "piggyback" service. Under the law, union contracts are void if they call for payments that are not part of the direct cost of transportation. The law should be enforced.

The "piggyback" system aids shippers, consumers and the traveling public, as well as the railroads. The plan reduces hundreds of trucks on the highways. The teamsters are receiving a feudal era shakedown by demanding payments for work not done. The scheme affects every consumer. Shipping costs are passed on to the consumer.

NEW PAL FOR ROCKY
New Pal Don had out of a clear sky, teamster union boss James R. Hoffa has endorsed Nelson Rockefeller for the 1964 G. O. P. Presidential nomination. It has been said that if you've

POLITICAL CHOICE
Chicago, Sept. 16.—President Kennedy's politically motivated choice for postmaster general of a politician with an expertise in the vast postal administration with its nearly 3.0 billion employees, while a gesture to the Polish segment of the population does not have public approval.

Doubtless there are a score of men in the postal ranks with years of experience who have an extensive knowledge of the manifold functions of that huge utility. The President's selection of one of these would reward faithful service and be an incentive to others.

There will be a new administration in Washington in 1965 leaving barely enough time for Mr. Gronouski to become acquainted with varied operations of his department. I have talked with 100 voters who regret helping elect the Kennedy's their awesome power.

R. A. LAVERN

WHY DARK GLOVES ARE USED
Niles, Sept. 23.—In reply to the letter, "White Gloves for Dixie," in the Voice of the People, Sept. 23, let me say that while I've never tried out in Chicago in 1928 upon the date of the Illinois Athletic commission. The reason was to prevent glove dye poisoning.

Two very good boxers were matched for the experiment. Jack McCarthy of Chicago and a boy from California. After the 10 rounds, both boxers made the same report that they had to change their style of defense and most of the time were bewildered from the reflection of the lights on the white gloves. That's why dark gloves are used.

H. F. MYERS

PUBLIC OPINION POLL
BY BALLOT
Elgin, Sept. 27.—The great majority of voters at the polls are very much about the candidates. But they do know what they want in regard to major domestic issues, such as more government at Washington versus preservation of state rights, or right to work versus compulsory unionism, and a few others that could be counted on the fingers of one hand.

In this modern age of missiles and computers it seems archaic to rely on secret ballot and letters to congressmen and senators to ascertain what the majority wants, when this could be authentically determined by furnishing the voters a simple ballot at election time listing these issues for a "yes" or "no." The results would practically give our elected representatives mandate to go by and put a brake on political arm-twisting, minority group pressure, and roving movie-actor like candidates promising all things to all men.

Source: **Chicago Tribune**, September 30, 1963. Section 1, Page 20. **Voice of the People. Future Footpath?** (The letter from May Theilgaard Watts is in the far right column.)

Source: **Watts** / Page 11

"I wrote a letter to the editor of the **Chicago Tribune**. A few days later, a reporter phoned to say that he had been assigned to investigate the feasibility of the idea; that he had talked to various owners and managers, and decided that the project was feasible enough to justify publishing the letter..."

Source: **Watts** / Page 12

"Following the publication of this letter, many others favoring the footpath were published."

Source: **Holmes** / Page 3

"Public response to her letter was immediate --- and enthusiastic. Mrs. Watts and the **Tribune** were deluged with encouraging letters and phone calls. Residents in the towns along the right of way, conservationists in Chicago, friends north to Lake Forest and west to the Fox Valley rallied to her call. Devoted students in her Arboretum classes met with her and talked and consulted. Those here tonight who did not know Mrs. Watts must remember that she generated the deepest kind of admiration and loyalty. She possessed some special magic to arouse in all of us who studied with her a vivid AWARENESS. We looked at a dandelion differently, or an oak or an old farmhouse."

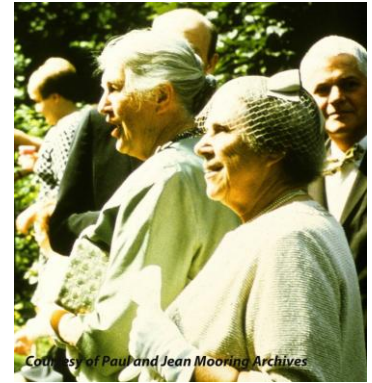


Photo of Elizabeth and Sam Holmes with May Watts (center)

“...LET’S GO SEE WHAT I AM ASKING FOR ...”

Source: **Turner** / Page 1

“..the letter in *The Voice of the People* in the *Chicago Tribune* was printed. That morning May Watts showed it to me --- an “over the fence gate” chat-- and said, “Let’s go see what I am asking for.” That started it. We drove out to look at the old right-of-way and to walk on it where possible. There were several events that I recall that took place before there was an organized committee (or board) established. One was a **field trip at Wayne** -- starting at the old depot walking along a low area on the NE side of the right-of-way to the rail road, then climbing up onto what is now the Path and returning to the depot. I think about 50 people came.”



May Watts (left) and Helen Turner (right)

THE FIRST FIELD TRIP

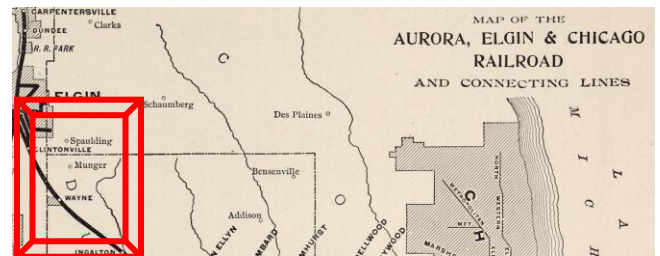
Hikers to Explore Old Du Page Tracks
Chicago Tribune Photo - October 19, 1963
Postcard Historical Newspapers - Chicago Library 1846-1951
p. 55

Hikers to Explore Old Du Page Tracks

Source: **Chicago Tribune**, October 19, 1963.

pg. N5. **Hikers to Explore Old Du Page Tracks**

Fifty naturalists will survey the abandoned right of way of the Chicago, Aurora & Elgin railroad today to study its possibilities as a nature footpath...Mrs. Watts, a retired naturalist of Morton arboretum in Lisle, believes the footpath would rival public footpaths in the Appalachian mountains and in Britain.



A COMMITTEE OF EXPLORATION AND THEIR PRIMROSE PATH

Source: **Holmes** / Pages 3 and 4

“**Later that winter**, in a lecture to the **Wayne Garden Club**, Mrs. Watts spoke at some length about her footpath “dream”. Afterwards, she and her close friend, Helen Turner, and our neighbor, Phoebe Ryerson, came back to our house on Dunham Road for more discussion. Phoebe came because she was fascinated by her first exposure to Mrs. Watts, AND - Phoebe loves projects.

“What can we do to HELP you?” she asked Mrs. Watts.

“Just get it for me,” was the answer. So we went to work on it.



Six of us somehow evolved into a “committee of exploration”: **Mrs. Watts**, **Helen Turner** (Naperville) who had retired from teaching geology in Oak Park High School and now taught and assisted Mrs. Watts at the Arboretum; **Jane Sindt**, part-time actress, sometime antique dealer and collector, neighbor of Mrs. Watts in Naperville; **Lillian Lasch** of Morton Grove, serving her 20th year as night supervisor at Donnelley presses in Chicago, chairman of the Prairie Club Canoeing Council and an Arboretum student; plus **Phoebe (Ryerson)** and me (**Elizabeth Holmes**), keeping house and raising young sons in Wayne. Phoebe was NOT an Arboretum alumna but that was no hindrance to her -- she is loaded with what I have to call political savvy. Undaunted by our frequent corrections, she blithely continued to call our project “the Primrose Path!”

CHOOSING A NAME

Source: **Watts** / Page 12

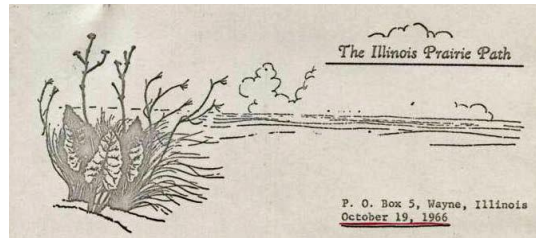
"We acquired an official name, The Illinois Prairie Path; and a seal, and stationery, and bumper stickers..."

Source: **Turner** / Page 2

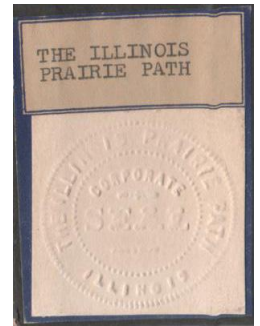
"February 11, 1964. Meeting at May's home.

The committee for the footpath met on Tuesday,

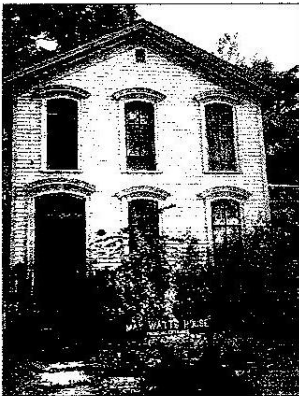
February 11, 1964. There is still nothing definite to announce. **We decided its name should be "Illinois Prairie Path."** A plan (a sample of many that will be prepared) for planting a specific area was shown. Also a sample field trip suggestion, again for a specific piece of the right-of-way and for a suggested use. **Mr. Gunnar Peterson, director of the Open Lands Project,** told us that the DuPage County Forest Preserve will endorse the foot path, also the North Eastern Illinois Metropolitan Planning Commission, also the Nature Preserves Committee."



The return address on the original letterhead was P.O. Box 5 - Wayne, IL



PATH IDEA WAS GAINING WIDE INTEREST AND SUPPORT



Raymond and May Watts hosted the first few planning meetings in their home.

Source: **Turner** / Page 2 and 3

"February 17, 1964. Meeting at May's home. **Lil Lasch** joined us at that session. The following were present: **George R. Pratt**, Wayne (Township Supervisor); **H. C. Johnson**, Forest Preserve District of DuPage County; **Roland Eisenbeis**, Forest Preserve District of Cook County; **Warren M. Keck**, North Central College, Biology Department; **Mrs. George W. Ryerson** (Phoebe); **Miss Helen Turner**; **May Theilgaard Watts**; **Mrs. Samuel S. Holmes, Jr.** (Elizabeth); **Lillian Lasch**; **Mrs. Lester L. Starrett**, Wayne; **Raymond W. Franke**, Public Ser. Co. of N. I. (Commonwealth Edison); **Don Henkel**, Villa Park (Planner); **Gunnar Peterson**, Open Lands Project.

This shows the wide interest the project was gaining. After this meeting, Gunnar Peterson and the Open Lands organization continued to work with and for us for several years - until we were so well established that we could stand alone."

GUNNAR PETERSON, THE OPEN LANDS PROJECT

Source: **Holmes** / Page 4

"We were particularly lucky in our timing: REMEMBER that urban and environmental problems were bursting into national headlines just then. Out of the blue came an important volunteer: Gunnar Peterson. He too had seen the letter in the TRIBUNE. Gunnar was the Director of the recently formed OPEN LANDS PROJECT, an organization which began under the wing of the Chicago Metropolitan Welfare Council and then rapidly developed into a valuable independent clearing house for land use problems and conservation causes. OPEN LANDS and Prairie Path grew up hand in hand, with Gunnar officiating as our Advisor and his office staff supplying enthusiastic support, broad contacts, and (Oh how we needed this) -- secretarial services!"



Courtesy of Openlands

Gunnar Peterson, Executive Director, Openlands

A CAMPAIGN FOR PUBLIC SUPPORT

A HANDOUT

THE ILLINOIS PRAIRIE PATH

along the right of way of the AURORA-ELGIN-ELECTRIC-ROAD

Elgin
Geneva
Batavia
Aurora
Wheaton
Glen Ellyn
Villa Park
Lombard
Park
Einhurst

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

FUTURE FOOTPATH

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

1963

1963

Source: *The Morton Arboretum*, Sterling Morton Library archives: "Illinois Prairie Path and Along the Prairie Path" by Louis Headen

FYI - It is assumed the handout on the cover, and this handout with the name of the new organization - The Illinois Prairie Path - were developed by May Watts and Helen Turner and distributed to gain support for developing a public trail on the abandoned CA&E right-of-way.

The Illinois Prairie Path along the right of way of the Aurora- Elgin Electric Road" includes:

- 1) A line drawing of the 54 miles of the CA&E Railroad
- 2) "Voice of the People" - A copy of May Watts' letter to the editor
- 3) An illustration of how to "enter" an area through a stile
- 4) Illustrations of ponds and prairies
- 5) A drawing at the bottom with May's original idea to have three separate paths; a footpath, a biking path, and a bridle path for equestrians.

COMMUNITY PRESENTATIONS CAMPAIGN

Source: *Holmes* / Pages 8 and 9



"... we put together a 9-minute film-strip to spread the word throughout the area contiguous to the right-of-way. We each dug up a few of our own color transparencies that might look like a future footpath - or that showed the current condition of the old CA&E roadbed. Next, we consulted a film company in Wheaton, ... (and we contacted) Mac Stone, President of the DuKane Corporation, manufacturers of communication equipment in St. Charles. We said we needed a projector - with sound - to help us sell our "product. "Take half a dozen of 'em, m' dears!" was his response. ...

...The narration was provided by Clint Youle, Chicago's first well-known TV weatherman. Clint lived in Wayne, and - with Mrs. Watts and Gunnar Peterson - he worked out a text and cut a record that meshed with our slides...

...Pictures of prairie dock and big bluestem grasses and blazing star showed why the Prairie Path was so named. There were pictures of gray dogwood hedges and wild plum thickets, cows in pastures and sheep in farmyards, hawthorn blossoms and scattered piles of track along the way. You caught a glimpse of hikers on a snowy winter trail and bikers enjoying a summer jaunt. It took only 9 minutes and it was FREE! (Donations were welcomed!).

Mrs. Watts and Helen Turner didn't need a film strip, they were giving splendid chalk talks and lectures out on THEIR circuit, gathering fame and fortune for the Path as they went. We three - Phoebe (Ryerson), Jane (Sindt) and I (Elizabeth Holmes), were delighted to have the machine. It was a quick way to introduce the Prairie Path and led easily into a good question period. We showed that film for two years - about 400 shows -- in Cook, DuPage and Kane counties, to garden clubs, Girl Scouts, Jaycees, Audubon Societies, civic and conservation and church groups. The PTAs and school assemblies were unusually fun -- responsive -- town meetings and county hearings were sometimes rough."

A CAMPAIGN FOR PUBLIC SUPPORT

FIELD TRIPS / WALKS CAMPAIGN

Source: *Holmes* / Page 10

“Another effective stick we used to stir up public interest and convince the supervisors to support our use of the right-of-way as a “Path” was a series of WALKS. They were planned by the Naperville group as they had scouted every foot of the right-of-way, and each WALK was led by one or more talented volunteers - from among our friends or by our own board members - a botanist or a geologist, perhaps an ornithologist or a historian or railroad buff.”

Source: *Holmes* / Page 11

“Soon, Helen (Turner) and Mrs. Watts worked up a **trail guide folder**, showing special points of interest and indicating hikes of various lengths. **We offered bird walks and spring wildflower walks for dues paying members and a big Annual Fall Walk open to the general public.**”



Helen Turner leading a field trip.

MEDIA CAMPAIGN



Source: *Holmes* / Page 12

“The Path began to be news. From Chicago to the Fox River, the press was covering DuPage County’s negotiations for the right-of-way, and the Prairie Path was regularly discussed. Mrs. Watts was now in the “big time” on TV and radio in Chicago, while Jane Sindt and Phoebe (Ryerson) and I (Elizabeth Holmes) graciously gave interviews on Elgin’s

WRMN and on Ben Oswalt’s Aurora radio station.”



Group Wants Rail Property for Nature Walks, Bicycles; PRAIRIE PATH GROUP WANTS RAIL PRO
NEGROBONA, PETER
Chicago Tribune (1963-Current file), May 14, 1964;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers, Chicago Tribune (1849-1988)
pg. W1

Group Wants Rail Property for Nature Walks, Bicycles

Source: *Chicago Tribune*, May 14, 1964, pg. W1. *Group Wants Rail Property for Nature Walks, Bicycles*
“The right-of-way of the C.A. & E. lies waiting,” says Mrs. Raymond Watts of Naperville, originator of the Illinois Prairie Path idea. “If we have the necessary courage and foresight we can turn it into a proud recreational resource for future generations.”

WHO OWNED THE CA&E RIGHT-OF-WAY?

PRAIRIE PATH GROUP TO HEAR C. A.
Chicago Tribune (1963-Current file); Jun 25, 1964;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers; Chicago Tribune (1849-1988)
pg. W3

PRAIRIE PATH GROUP TO HEAR C. A. & E. REPORT

Source: *Chicago Tribune*, June 25, 1964, pg. W3. *Prairie Path Group To Hear CA&E Report*

The Illinois Prairie Path committee, a group dedicated to obtaining the Chicago, Aurora and Elgin railroad right of way as a nature trail, will meet at 9:15 a.m. Saturday in the Morton arboretum, Lisle. A progress report will be given and discussions will be held on legal, natural, commercial, recreational, governmental, and educational problems of obtaining the land.

Source: *Watts* / Page 12

“Immediately we learned that the right of way could not be purchased by us - not even if we had the money... (though the railway representative had stated a price at the start of the project.) It belonged in part to the railway company, in part to numerous owners who had been given easement to the railway and now had the land returned to them. The Commonwealth Edison Company and the Illinois Gas Company held perpetual easements.”

WHO WAS INTERESTED IN BUYING THE RIGHT-OF-WAY?



Source: *Holmes*/ Page 5 and 6

“...the public body most seriously seeking ownership was DuPage County. Their supervisors and lawyers had already spent two years and hundreds of dollars investigating titles and land values. Like Mrs. Watts, the County Board felt it would be folly to let that good continuity be chopped up; it should be preserved “for future public multiple use.” Which to them, meant water from Lake Michigan or storm and waste sewerage - or - that perennial threat - a monorail!

Well! - the phrase “future public multiple use” gave us our clue. We would have to convince the DuPage supervisors that a FOOTPATH was compatible with sewer and water pipes, and that it, too, was a “public use”. All we would need was a lease agreement allowing us to walk on the right-of-way. We had no money and no real clout -so we would have to arouse public interest, public demand and public support (like voters, maybe?)”

Source: *Watts* / Page 12

“We learned that the County Board of Supervisors had begun the purchase of various parcels of land and would soon, with their power of condemnation, assemble the whole. The strip was being purchased for the county for future “multiple use.” The funds being used were those of the Highway Department, gas tax money - alas! But some of the supervisors assured us that our path might well be one of the “multiple uses.”

MEETINGS WITH MANY OWNERS AND BUYERS



Source: *Holmes*/ Page 7

“In the meantime, we were learning who was President of the DuPage Forest Preserve and who chaired the Committee of Land Acquisition and so on, and Phoebe managed to maneuver us onto agendas or make dates for luncheon meetings...and ...(Phoebe)... led them to see what a terrific public relations opportunity we were offering them and what a privilege it would be for them to participate in this unique community “grass roots” project.”

CAMPAIGNS BEGIN TO GENERATE SIGNIFICANT PUBLIC SUPPORT

Prairie Path Interest Rises: Open Lands Unit Backs Proposal HIKES
MAERSCH, STEPHEN
Chicago Tribune (1963-Current file); Sep 24, 1964;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1988)
pg. W 33

Source: *Chicago Tribune*, September 24, 1964, pg.

WA3. *Prairie Path Interest Rises*

Interest in creating an Illinois Prairie Path out of the old Chicago, Aurora and Elgin railroad right of way, which began a year ago, **is now at its height.** First suggested in a letter to

Prairie Path Interest Rises

the Tribune by Mrs. Raymond Watts, ...Naperville, the prairie path has met with favorable response from persons living along the right of way and from local, state, and federal officials.

DUPAGE COUNTY DRAFTS CONTRACT TO PURCHASE RIGHT OF WAY

Showdown Nears on C.A.&E. Right of Way: Du Page Readies \$400,000 Contract
SIDDON, ARTHUR
Chicago Tribune (1963-Current file); Nov 29, 1964;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1988)
pg. W1

Source: *Chicago Tribune*, November 29, 1964, pg. W1.

Showdown Nears on C.A.&E. Right of Way

A...contract calling for the purchase of approximately 300 acres of the Chicago, Aurora and Elgin railroad right of way by DuPage

Showdown Nears on C.A.&E. Right of Way

county has been placed on file by the county board for action **December 8.** ...**Tho no mention was made of the nature trail in the contract, (the DuPage County board chairman) has said in the past that the board will consider the prairie path request, and may set aside a portion of the land for a trail.**

Source: *Watts*/ Page 12



“We continued to work towards getting a lease from our County Board. We hoped for a long lease - a hundred years, perhaps. Then one day all negotiations stopped. One town along the route had taken out an injunction against having a county-owned strip bisecting their town. They demanded the right to buy the section within their town limits, outright, to be used according to their own desires.”

CAMPAIGN FOR PUBLIC SUPPORT EARNS LOCAL RECOGNITION

Nature Path Is Goal of Women Campaigners
Chicago Tribune (1963-Current file); Feb 7, 1965.
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1993)
pg. W3

Nature Path Is Goal of Women Campaigners

Source: **Chicago Tribune**, February 7, 1965. p.W3. **Nature Path Is Goal of Women Campaigners**

Three suburban women are campaigning around the clock for a project they say would provide Chicagoland with an escape from its technological self. They - and nearly 100 others - are working for a 54-mile nature path that would stretch from Chicago thru Cook and DuPage Counties to Kane county. (Note: Jane Sindt, Phoebe Ryerson and Elizabeth Holmes are quoted in this article.)

Woman Naturalist Receives Award
Chicago Tribune (1963-Current file); Feb 14, 1965.
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1993)
pg. W7

Woman Naturalist Receives Award

Source: **Chicago Tribune**, February 14, 1965.pg.W7. **Woman Naturalist Receives Award**
May Theilgaard Watts, ...Naperville, has been named the DuPage Audubon society's "**Conservationist of the Year.**" Mrs. Watts, chairman of the Illinois Prairie Path organization, formerly was a naturalist at Morton arboretum near Lisle.

CAMPAIGN FOR PUBLIC SUPPORT EARNS STATE AND NATIONAL RECOGNITION



Springfield, Illinois, State Capitol

Source: **Holmes** / Page 10

"**Gunnar Peterson** was also travelling around with the projector, contacting Chicago foundations, North Eastern Illinois Planning Commission, consulting with the County supervisors and Commonwealth Edison. And he was so very good with people -- an optimist, a listener, and a real "communicator". The Open Lands Project had made friends among the legislators in **both Springfield and Washington, plus in the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation and the Illinois Department of Conservation. How VITAL those two authorities were to be for the Path!**"

Source: **Watts** / Page 12

"...enthusiasts for our project, acting on their own initiative, took it upon themselves to write letters to Washington. Our path received congratulatory and encouraging letters from Senator Douglas, Senator Dirksen, Secretary Udall, Representative Erlenborn and Governor Kerner. **President Johnson mentioned the Illinois Prairie Path by name in his Message on Natural Beauty in Our Country.**"



Washington D.C., United States Capitol

President Lyndon B. Johnson's Special Message to the Congress on

Conservation and Restoration of Natural Beauty

February 8, 1965

"...The forgotten outdoorsmen of today are those who like to walk, hike, ride horseback or bicycle. For them we must have trails as well as highways. Nor should motor vehicles be permitted to tyrannize the more leisurely human traffic.

Old and young alike can participate. Our doctors recommend and encourage such activity for fitness and fun.

I am requesting, therefore, that the Secretary of the Interior work with his colleagues in the federal government and with state and local leaders and recommend to me a cooperative program to encourage a national system of trails, building up the more than hundred thousand miles of trails in our National Forests and Parks.

There are many new and exciting trail projects underway across the land. In Arizona, a county has arranged for miles of irrigation canal banks to be used by riders and hikers. In Illinois, an abandoned railroad right of way is being developed as a "Prairie Path." In New Mexico utility rights of way are used as public trails.

As with so much of our quest for beauty and quality, each community has opportunities for action. We can and should have an abundance of trails for walking, cycling and horseback riding, in and close to our cities. In the back country we need to copy the great Appalachian Trail in all parts of America, and to make full use of rights of way and other public paths..."

ILLINOIS PRAIRIE PATH "ON THE MAP"

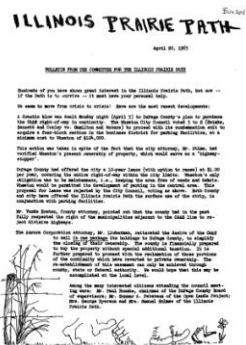
Source: *Holmes* / Page 7

"It was during that period, also, that **Helen Turner, Lil Lasch and Phoebe began their hours and days of tedious poring over CA&E records from the Chicago Title and Trust Company files**, checking titles, finding the reversionary parcels, and marking ownerships one by one on the big U.S. Geological Survey map, procured for us by **Mr. (Raymond) Watts** (bless him!)."

Source: *Holmes* / Page 12

"... early in 1965, the North Eastern Illinois Planning Commission had endorsed the Path and was drawing it on their metropolitan planning maps."

CALL TO ACTION TO SUPPORT DUPAGE COUNTY'S PURCHASE OF THE LAND



Source: *The Morton Arboretum, Sterling Morton Library archives, P. 1-3. The Illinois Prairie Path - April 20, 1965 - Bulletin from the Committee for the Illinois Prairie Path* (sent to supporters of The Path)

Hundreds of you have shown great interest in the Illinois Prairie path, but now--if the Path is to survive--it must have your personal help. We seem to move from crisis to crisis! Here are the most recent developments. A drastic blow was dealt Monday night (April 5) to DuPage County's plan to purchase the CA&E right-of-way continuity. (A) City Council voted 3 to 2... to proceed with its condemnation suit to acquire a four-block section in the business district for parking facilities...**Can we somehow, in good old barn-raising fashion, through the Illinois Prairie Path, help the county to achieve ownership to maintain valuable continuity: of the surface of the Illinois Prairie Path, possibly under Forest Preserve authority; and of the surface for future multiple utility usage... Write or call your supervisor NOW...Reaffirm our determination to achieve the Illinois Prairie Path for the benefit of all the DuPage Communities.**

FIRST ANNUAL ILLINOIS PRAIRIE PATH DAY!

Path Day to Promote Trail
JOHN ELMER
Chicago Tribune (1963-Current file); Oct 17, 1965; ProQuest Historical Newspapers Chicago Tribune (1849 - 1986)
Pg. W1

Path Day to Promote Trail

Source: *Chicago Tribune*, October 17, 1965. Pg.W1. *Path Day to Promote Trail*

the first Illinois Prairie Path day. Culminating more than two years of planning and active campaigning by a determined group of nature lovers, the event over the 54-mile trail follows a westward route from the banks of the Des Plaines river in Cook County thru the breadth of Du Page county and to the Fox River valley to Kane county.

Hundreds of outdoor enthusiasts are expected to converge on the old Chicago, Aurora and Elgin railroad right of way Saturday for

Source: *Holmes* / Pages 11 and 12

"**I HAVE to mention one more specific WALK: the one on October 23, 1965. Twenty-three special field trips were offered, to show our varied appeal. It was a cold, drizzly, windy wretched day! In spite of this, local press and radio came out to cover some of the events.** Floyd Swink led the one on prairie plants. There was one on land forms and rocks, another on nature photography, and Mrs. Watts ...was seen giving her talk on "methods of teaching nature classes" ...**Two hundred people came that day** - Boy Scouts, Pony Club riders and even canoeists - oh yes! Lil Lasch and her Prairie Club friends "put in" at South Elgin and were fairly BLOWN down the churning Fox River to St. Charles. (This last event was to demonstrate that, someday, the river could provide a connecting link for Path users between Elgin and Aurora.)"

List of the 23 Treks:

- | | | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Plants with stories | 9. Knowing Birds | 17. Trail Rid |
| 2. Land Forms and Rocks | 10. Picturing the Path | 18. Canoe Trip |
| 3. Prairie Plants | 11. First Annual Plant Count | 19. Cross Country Ride |
| 4. Bike Hike | 12. Games and Songs | 20. Investigating the Invader |
| 5. Family Afoot | 13. Sketching | 21. Walk for Parents and Children |
| 6. Homes and Habits of Wildlife | 14. Bookworm Crawl | 22. Knowing Trees and Shrubs |
| 7. Clean Streams | 15. Pony Club Ride | 23. Appreciation of Landscape |
| 8. Nature Writing | 16. Boy Scout Hike | |

TOWNS ALONG THE PATH REVIEW COUNTY LEASE AGREEMENT

Source: **Watts** / Page 12

“When this matter (an injunction by a town against having a county-owned strip bisecting their town) was resolved, the town had been **given a twelve-year lease** on the strip within their limits ... and other towns along the right of way were offered a similar lease. **It was stipulated in each such lease that ten feet must be left for the Prairie Path, if a town uses the rest of the width of the right of way for parking, parks, or other purposes.**”

TAX EXEMPTION FOR A FOOTPATH?



Source: **Holmes** / Pages 14 and 15. Note: Samuel S. Holmes, attorney, worked on IPP tax exemption.

Elizabeth Holmes - “One night I came home from a meeting and called out jubilantly - “We’ve got it! DuPage is going to buy the right of way and give us a lease!” **Samuel S. Holmes** - “Give WHOM a lease?” These people had worked so single-mindedly on acquiring the right to use

the right-of-way, that they had never asked themselves the question: What if we win? Now, they had won, and I suggested to Liz that one of the first questions the State’s Attorney who was drafting the lease was going to ask was: **Who is the lessee? There was no answer to that question at the moment. But after a number of hurried telephone conferences, it was decided to organize a not-for-profit corporation.** Looking to the future, we thought we should have a 13-member board, that there would be enough work for that many people. At the outset, however, there were so few persons actively involved with the Path that four husbands had to be recruited as board members for the time being.

...This footpath idea was a new one then, and it was hard to imagine that a privately organized group could acquire the right to use a 27-mile strip to walk on, or that having acquired it, the group would grant the public the right to use it. But beyond that, the government was not in the business of subsidizing some place for people to WALK. The “purpose” had to be “educational, religious or recreational (the bike).” Finally that block was removed by re-drafting our purpose into a lengthy series of paragraphs...Tax exemption was granted!”

Elizabeth: “It took him 18 months eventually to achieve that triumph. (NOTE - On July 15, 1968 the IPP became a non-profit organization.)...Then began the waiting and wondering period - **when would the DuPage lease come through?**”

FIRST ELECTED BOARD OF DIRECTORS - NOVEMBER 1965

NOTE: Helen Turner notes the “committee” became “the board” on **November 14, 1964**. Ms. Turner recorded the date of each meeting in 1965 and included one sentence describing where they met and what they talked about. Board minutes are available from the meeting on November 30, 1965 and beyond. **The November tradition of the IPP Annual Meeting began in 1964.**

Source: *Minutes of the first Illinois Prairie Path Board Meeting November 30, 1965 / IPPc archives*

First Board Meeting - November 30, 1965 (Officers, Directors, Term)

Chairman, **Mr. August Sindt (1 year)**

President, **Mrs. May Theilgaard Watts (3 years)**

Vice President, **Miss Helen Turner (3 years)**

Recording Secretary, **Miss Lillian Lasch (3 years)**

Corresponding Secretary, **Mrs. Elizabeth Holmes (3 years)**

Treasurer, **Mrs. Jane Sindt (3 years)**

Historian, **Mrs. Betty Nemec (2 years)**

Mr. Samuel Holmes (2 years)

Mr. William Nemec (1 year)

Mrs. Phoebe Ryerson (1 year)

Mr. George Ryerson (1 year)

Dr. Warren Keck (2 years)

Mr. Jack Heddens (2 years)

DUPAGE COUNTY ACQUIRES CA&E RIGHT OF WAY

Du Page Paces State in Open Lands Project: Additional Sites for Recreation Eyed by County
Chicago Tribune (1963-Current files): Dec 19, 1965;
Project Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1998)

*Du Page Paces State
in Open Lands Project*

Source: **Chicago Tribune**, December 19, 1965, *Du Page Paces State in Open Lands Project*. pg. W1.

The railroad right of way recently was acquired by the Du Page board of supervisors. The county soon will begin a 14-year lease agreement with Illinois Prairie Path, Inc., a group of outdoor enthusiasts from throughout the metropolitan area, who will maintain 10 feet of right of way as a nature trail.

A REMARKABLE LUNCH MEETING



Source: *Holmes* / Page 17

“We were still waiting for a lease in February 1966 when a remarkable luncheon meeting was held at the Baker Hotel in St. Charles, sponsored by the Path board. It brought together for the first time Kane and DuPage County supervisors, Commonwealth Edison and Northern Illinois Gas Real Estate Departments, and the Kane County Regional Planning Commission. Our valuable friend, Gunnar Anderson (then of the Kane County Forest Preserve), introduced us to each other, and Phoebe and State’s Attorney Vander Houten led a discussion of the Path potential in Kane County. Senator Bob Mitchler joined

representatives of the St. Charles and the Aurora Park Districts in endorsing the project. Everyone would “take the matter under advisement.”

REGIONAL SUPPORT FOR THE PATH INCREASES

Six-Mile Bike Path to Open in Geneva
Chicago Tribune (1963-Current file); May 1, 1966.
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1983)
pg. 35

Six-Mile Bike Path to Open in Geneva

Source: *Chicago Tribune*, May 1, 1966. pg.X8. *Six-Mile Bike Path to Open in Geneva*

... Mrs. Joseph L. Hart, secretary of the League of American Wheelman... said it is hoped eventually to link the bicycle path with a spur of the Illinois prairie path from West Chicago at Good Templar Park. The prairie path has its own right-of-way and 100 miles of auto-free cycling could be available, said Mrs. Hart.

NEWS IS OUT ---- THERE MAY BE A LEASE!

Old Railroad Bed May Be Carrying Travelers Again
Chicago Tribune (1963-Current file); May 5, 1966.
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1983)
pg. 12

Old Railroad Bed May Be Carrying Travelers Again

Source: *Chicago Tribune*, May 5, 1966. Pg. J2. *Old Railroad Bed May be Carrying Travelers Again.*

“After two years of negotiation, **members of the Illinois Prairie Path, Inc., expect to sign an agreement Tuesday with the DuPage county board of supervisors** to make the old Chicago, Aurora and Elgin railroad right-of-way into a foot path. The path will wind 27 miles thru the county.

Illinois Prairie Path Board Signs Lease with DuPage County

Source: *Watts* / Pages 12 and 13

“We were given a lease - for 12 years - to the entire right of way (27 miles long in our county) which varies in width from 40 feet to 100 feet. We were not concerned about the path’s narrowing for a length of three or four blocks as it passed through a town. After all, ten feet was wider than most British footpaths...**We rejoiced in our 12 year lease.”**

(FYI - Due to the complexity of the issues, all parties kept working on the lease until a final lease agreement was signed by April 4, 1967 as noted in the IPPc Board Minutes.)

Courtesy of the Paul and Jean Mooring Archives



At the signing of the lease with DuPage County on May 10, 1966 were (L to R): R.R. Rickerson, Ray W. MacDonald, May Watts, Helen Turner, Chairman Paul J. Ronske, Edward Van de Houten.

Old Tracks Leased for Nature Path
Chicago Tribune (1963-Current file); May 15, 1966.
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1983)
pg. P8

Old Tracks Leased for Nature Path

Source: *Chicago Tribune*, May 15, 1966. P8. *Old Tracks Leased for Nature Path.*

“A proposal to convert the abandoned right-of-way of the Chicago Aurora and Elgin railway into a recreational trail was approved unanimously by the DuPage county board of supervisors.

Representatives of the board and Illinois Prairie Path, Inc., a citizens group backing the project, signed a lease after Tuesday’s vote, insuring that the path will be used for recreational purposes until 1977.

KANE AND COOK COUNTY UPDATES

Cook County Detours Prairie Path: County Detours Rail Nature Path
 ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1988)
 pg. R1

Source: **Chicago Tribune**, May 22, 1966. Pg. R1. Cook County Detours Prairie Path

Cook County Detours Prairie Path

13 miles of the abandoned Chicago, Aurora and Elgin railroad right-of-way into a nature path, but Cook county officials remain pessimistic about their 14-mile stretch...But prospects for Cook county's participation are not nearly so bright.

WALK CELEBRATES LEASE AGREEMENTS WITH COUNTY AND UTILITY COMPANIES

Expect 500 Hikers for Wooded Walk Along Prairie Path
 Chicago Tribune (1963 Current file); May 22, 1966
 ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1988)
 pg. H5

Source: **Chicago Tribune**, June 16, 1966. Pg H5. Expect 500 Hikers for Wooded Walk Along Prairie Path

Expect 500 Hikers for Wooded Walk Along Prairie Path

The board of directors of the Illinois Prairie Path will sponsor a hike on the Du Page county segment of the path beginning at 10 a.m. Saturday at the Old Prince Crossing station on Price Crossing road, one-half mile south of Illinois highway 64, northeast of West Chicago. Tho the planned hike is five miles, Miss Helen Turner, planning chairman, said it will be divided so hikers can drop off after each mile segment if they wish."

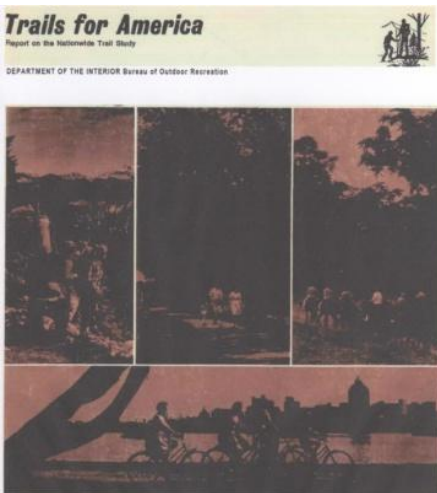
Source: **Holmes** / Page 19

"In that year (1966) activities exploded on the Path. On June 18th, 100 people joined us in a celebration Walk - which incidentally, exposed (again) our dire need to somehow improve the surface of the right-of-way. We had walked for two years on nothing more solid than Commonwealth Edison easements. Now we had our agreements and now Northern Illinois Gas had deeded their segments in DuPage to the County, stipulating that the surface was for Prairie Path use."

NATIONAL SUPPORT IS GROWING FOR TRAILS AND THE PRAIRIE PATH

Source: **Holmes** / Page 12

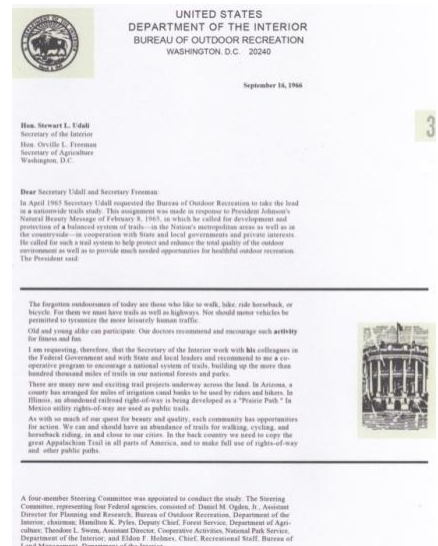
"What's more, the large impressive paperback - "Trails for America" - published by the Interior Department, carried an introductory letter by President Lyndon Johnson. We were amazed to find that he had singled out for attention the Illinois Prairie Path, calling it an example of future "green ribbons" interfacing urban areas."



Edward C. Crafts, Director of the Department of Interior Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, in his opening letter in the **Trails for America** report, quotes from **President Lyndon B. Johnson's National Beauty Message of February 8, 1965**.

ON PAGE 124 OF THE REPORT: Chicago has provided about 50 miles of bicycle paths including 17 miles along the shore of Lake Michigan. As many as 10,000 cyclists use these in a single day. Recently a bicycle path was constructed along the

North Shore channel on land leased from the sanitary district. **One excellent trail possibility exists along the abandoned right-of-way of the Chicago, Aurora, and Elgin Electric Railway. There is strong support to have the counties acquire this right-of-way and establish a "Prairie Path" for hiking, cycling, and riding.**



Letter in Trails for America, dated September 16, 1966 from Edward C. Crafts to Honorable Stewart L. Udall - Secretary of the Interior

CREATING SIGNS FOR THE NEW PRAIRIE PATH



Source: *Illinois Prairie Path not-for-profit corporation Board Meeting Minutes, December 6, 1966* - IPPc archives

Mrs. Watts asked about signs for the IPP. ...Mrs Watts then showed numerous small designs for signs. There was considerable discussion about signs. **Suggested that Mrs. Watts make up design and send out to members.** (FYI - The logo and Path designs were approved at the next board meeting on February 14, 1967.)

SEEING THIS PROJECT THROUGH

Source: *Holmes* / Pages 25 and 26

"Which reminds me - in his book called the *Last Landscape*, William H. Whyte discusses the creation of linear parks on disused railroad right-of-ways and mentions specifically the Prairie Path. Then he adds, 'It is a rare right-of-way which does not have an incredibly complicated legal and political history behind it, and unsnarling questions of title and jurisdiction is difficult under the best of circumstances. It takes a hard core of screwballs to see this kind of project through.' You'd think he knew us personally."

LOOKING BACK - A DECADE OF INSPIRED LEADERSHIP

Source: *Watts* / Page 14

"...Our discouragements are not hard to face, because of the number and the quality of the supporters of the Prairie Path, who are convinced that our big state must have room for one narrow thread of green dedicated to non-mechanized, air-breathing human beings.

We hope that other paths, in other parts of the country, may succeed because ours succeeded. We hope that some day some individual wanting to make a bequest to posterity will decide to leave Americans another footpath. We should advise him not to put the footpath within reach of a hungry road; and to make sure the width of the path will not accommodate a bulldozer; and not to overlook the possibilities of buying up some dreamy alley in an old country town; and to hurry."



Mrs. Watts in her home garden.

Source: *Turner* / Page 4

"As you think back over the first exciting years of the Prairie path, and are reminded of the many influential people who helped, you might question how we got their support. The answer, to those of us who knew her, is obvious --May Watts. Widely known as an author, lecturer, and above all as a naturalist at the Morton Arboretum, she had a great following of folks who took pride and joy in joining her in this exciting new project."