



PRAIRIE PROJECTIONS

North Branch Prairie Project

Volume VI, Number 1

February 1993

The Human Beings of the North Branch A New Chapter to an Old, Old Story

By Gerould Wilhelm

(Adapted from a September 17, 1992 speech for the North Branch Prairie Project 15 Year Anniversary Celebration by Susanne Masi.)

To begin the story of the Human Beings of the North Branch, we must go back to a time and place where the ecosystem in which they live had its origin.

Today, most of the land of the North Branch region has been obliterated either by modern agriculture or development and is dominated by a small number of plants adapted to such conditions. What little remains of the natural landscape contains within it those native species adapted to sustain self-replicating ecosystems, wherein our future lies. This is a story of these two floras and the people with whom they co-evolved. It is an old, old story,

but it wasn't until recently that we began to rediscover and tell this story.

The co-evolution of civilized man and associated species is believed to have begun about 10,000 years ago, but it did not begin in an ecological void. The principal elements of this association are contained within the genes of those organisms, the collective memory of an even older time.

Long ago the earth's terrain was far less complicated than it is today. About 350 million years ago, the climate of Pangaea, the original unbroken land mass, was subtropical with few vascular plant species growing in a land of shallow seas and low swamps. These gathered in the abundant atmospheric carbon and fixed it through photosynthesis at a rate far greater

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David Brower Visits Chicago

Last November David Brower, first executive director of the Sierra Club, founder of Friends of the Earth, present Chairman of the Earth Island Institute, environmentalist extraordinaire, gave the keynote address for the Field Museum's opening of the *Messages from the Wilderness* exhibit. While in town, he toured Bunker Hill Prairie with North Branchers after a Sunday workday.

The following is an excerpt from an article entitled *Restoring the Environment: A Conversation with David Brower*. It was published in the December 1992 issue of Chicago Audubon Society's *Compass* newsletter and is reprinted with permission from editor David Cohen. The interviewer and author was *Compass* editor Marilyn Hawkins.

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Photo by Karen Holland

David Brower, Gerould Wilhelm, and Stephen Packard at Bunker Hill

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than could be unfixed by decomposition. It was as if nature was dotting upon those early land plants. They accumulated carbon in excessive amounts and grew until they fell over of their own weight, only partially decaying, destined to form the massive coal beds characterized by the Carboniferous period. About 125 million years ago, the concentration of atmospheric carbon had fallen to near the level at which carbon fixation/decomposition rates were about equal, and the formation of coal essentially ceased.

As carbon was being mined from the atmosphere, contributing to the cooling of the earth, the continents were being formed by the breakup of Pangaea. An extensive system of mountain ranges began to form. The Rockies burgeoned. The continents drifted apart and further north. As land masses shifted, rippled, buckled, and broke into pieces, potential habitats became more numerous. Temperate climates began to become superimposed on high plains. The world, once characterized by large, woody, evergreen plants growing in a warm, humid, carbon dioxide-rich environment, was giving over in many areas to deciduous trees, with perennial and annual associates adapted to drier climate mediated by a change of seasons. A new diversity of plants and animals began to inhabit the developing arrays of nooks, crannies, and climates. As dry air developed and complex weather patterns evolved, lightning began to occur when there was no rain. Scarcely 10 million years ago, the early grazing animals and grass-like plants were beginning to develop.

The new grasses and sedges had two key features. Their growing tissues were at the base of the plant rather than at the top, which adapted them to grazing. Their dry autumnal foliage provided an

excellent fuel through which spontaneous lightning fires could race. By about two million years ago, it is likely that the vegetation in whole regions of the earth was subject to regular fires.

Carbon was still being fixed annually both above and below the ground; it could not quickly decompose in the drier climate. That which the grazing animals did not unfix through digestion was frequently unfixed by fire. The carbon fixed in the deep fibrous root systems either remained unoxidized or was unfixed through microbic digestion, contributing to the development of organic-rich soils. For the first time in over 100 million years, atmospheric carbon was being extracted in net amounts.

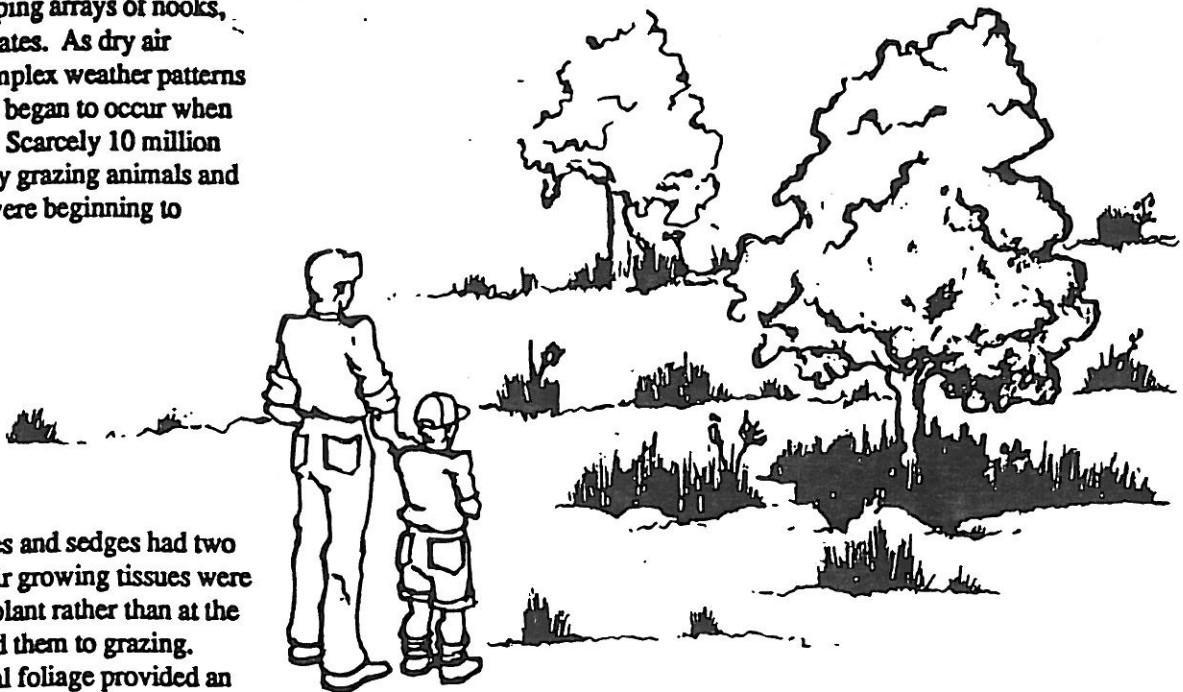
By the advent of the Ice Age, the co-evolution of human beings, grasslands, and grazing animals was well underway, and a new pattern of carbon cycling was established. Large fertile plains and bottomlands were created in the wake of the last glacier. The soils were nutrient-rich and the grassland quickly re-inhabited recently glaciated regions. These lands contained all the elements necessary to sustain early Human Beings: cereals and huge herds of slow-moving grazers, replete with their big bones, hides, furs, and meat. The Human Being began to manage the land to optimize these resources, and began to become a profound factor in the evolution of life on

earth. The well-being of the Earth and the Human became inextricably linked in what Father Thomas Berry has called the "Ecozoic."

Some agriculturally-oriented cultures, instead of hunting the grazing animals, corralled them near settlements. Instead of seeking nuts, berries, and grains, they cultivated them. With the advent of agricultural, sedentary people, a small group of plant species evolved and adapted to activities characteristic of such people; routine soil mixing, soil compaction, concentration of nutrients, and heavy grazing. As these activities intensified and civilization spread across the arable lands of the earth, so also did this group of plants. All organisms carry within their genes the physiological, morphological, and behavioral factors necessary to survive in the ecological context wherein they have evolved.

Some of these peoples in areas the world over became wealthy in their accumulation and storage of food and supplies. It seems that the more wealth they amassed and the more they felt free to waste correlated with the extent to which they regarded themselves "civilized."

When the people of the Old World began migrating to the New World, the inevitable clash of cultures began, each characterized by a radically different land ethic. The extent to which the struggle for



land occupation and natural resources took place between the two cultures mirrored the competition between the Old World and the New World floras.

The flora and fauna which co-evolved with the aboriginal people in the Chicago region were adapted to a people who defined themselves in relation to their land.

The ancients from early western civilization had the idea that every place had a *Genius*. A *Genius*, in the early sense of the word, was a tutelary deity, a spirit guardian of a place. There was a recognition that every place was unique unto itself, quite apart and different from all other places on the earth, and that the way the world worked in that place was governed by its guardian.

Some people seemed to understand that places were different everywhere they went, and that they had to be attentive to how things were there and acknowledge the *Genius*. Other people became hubristic with their own influence on the land and ever less respectful of the realities. And when they ignored the realities, the *Genius* became disappointed and no longer provided them locally with the bounty of the earth. So the land became depleted and they moved on or developed technologies which brought in resources from remote areas, deferring accountability for their actions.

In the Chicago region at the time of settlement, there was still an abundance of living things in this special place west of Lake Michigan. There were plenty of grazing animals, plenty of meat, plenty of

the deep-rooted prairie species, and seeped clear and mineral-rich into the prairie swales and streams at a metered rate during the growing season. The land was full of water and the streams ran fresh and were full of fish. On the average, about 35 inches of precipitation falls each year over every square inch of this watershed; 35 inches per year can evaporate off of every square inch. Since the landscape was able to hold the water until it could evaporate or be transpired, the Illinois River had a negligible discharge into the Mississippi at its mouth, even though it drained more than half the state of Illinois.

As a result of the past 150 years of civilization, this bountiful land has been transformed into row-cropped agriculture, cities with multi-story buildings, and sprawling suburbs.

The remaining vegetation resides in highly managed parks or sidewalk planters. Little of the land can hold water. "Nature," now consists of hedgerows, vacant lots, golf courses, and parks.

Perhaps one of the landscapes most illustrative of this disconnection from the natural world is the "corporate campus" as it has developed in the last half of this century. It is typified in the Chicago region by vast, but otherwise lifeless tracts of closely mowed Kentucky blue grass, "installed" as one might a carpet, over clayey subsoil. The once deep topsoil is first scraped away and stockpiled, the intricate connection with the lower horizons destroyed. The "soil" is then spread back thinly over the compacted clay. Kentucky blue grass, with its fine, densely matted, shallow root system, cannot penetrate the clay subsurface and so runs

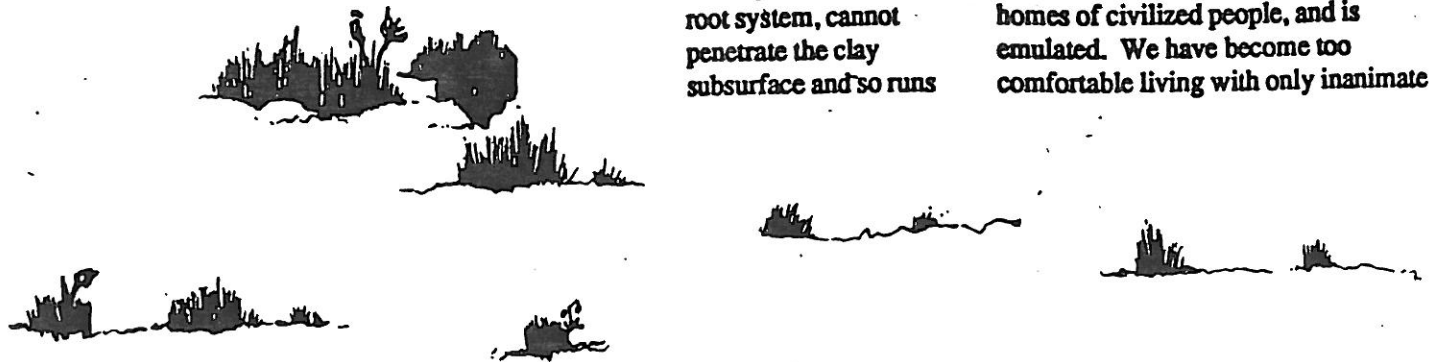
pesticides, and fertilizers, to detention basins. The filthy water then is metered into our streams and rivers acting as a lethal injection into the life's blood of the continent.

Since water is not compressible and flows downhill, its volume increases in areas remote from its source. There often isn't room, so engineers and scientists recommend a hole, referred to either as a detention or a retention basin. The water is released at a "scientifically" calculated rate, and accumulates with other such waters from throughout the watershed to become roiling surfeits of floodwater. It empties finally into the Gulf of Mexico, where it contributes to a whole array of degradations to that once bounteous sea.

Except in the rare stream, tumor-ridden carp and goldfish are the principal inhabitants of our waterways. Few of our native fish can be sustained in such waters. To us a river is a straight, steep-banked, mud-sided thing that has grocery carts and doll baby heads in it when it's dry and is a muddy, frothy torrent with carp roiling in it when it's full. It has become nothing more or less than a running sewer.

Even among modern civilized people, there appears to be a vestige of acceptance for trees. But trees have become more like living room decorations. They are planted in rows, trimmed to have lollipop-like crowns, and rarely planted in landscapes as seedlings. Such trees live a concentration camp existence for a few years, then die. They are replaced with more from the nursery. There are many nurseries.

The corporate campus "look" has also become the sought-after ideal for the homes of civilized people, and is emulated. We have become too comfortable living with only inanimate



robes, plenty of bones for tools. Precipitation percolated deep into the soil along the many root channels formed by

water off nearly as efficiently as concrete during rain storms. Such landscapes drain rainwater quickly, causing it to leave laden with herbicides,

Illustration by Robert Greer

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things, and tragically uncomfortable living with life. In the suburbs, when the lollipop trees drop their autumnal leaves on the grass, people immediately deploy their "leaf blowers" as if the trees had done something dirty on their yards. Leaves are gathered quickly, stuffed into plastic bags, and sent off to a landfill. But now landfills are getting too full and people are being advised, reluctantly, to keep their grass clippings and leaves. There is no longer room for "yard waste." People are becoming confused. There seems to be no acceptable alternative to a life without life.

Perhaps it is as old Chief Lodgeskins mused: "The white man doesn't seem to know where the center of the earth is. Only the Human Beings know, and there aren't many Human Beings."

An elder once admonished a people who were becoming distant, who were no longer attentive, if you will, to the *Genius*: *The God gave your fathers and their children a land that flows with milk and honey. For the land is not where you sow seed, as a garden of herbs, but a land of hills and valleys which drinks rain water from the heavens. It is a land which the eyes of God are always upon, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived and you turn aside. The God will shut up the heavens, and there will be no more rain, and the land will no longer produce fruit, and the land of milk and honey will dry up.* Well, civilized people have been quite oblivious to the way the world works and have turned aside. The land is no longer able to drink. The land of milk and honey is drying up.

It's a profound metaphor, but civilized people feel they have risen above metaphors. These metaphors were the stories the elders told the young ones, so that they might understand the strictures of the *Genius*. When the Shawnee elder put his careworn hand on the shoulder of the young one and said: *The world is riding on the back of a turtle . . . If you endanger the turtle, you endanger the world.* The

youth could understand that the turtle lives in the river. If the water becomes dirty or dries up, the turtle's life is in danger. So goes the turtle, so go the people.

Civilized people, clever and brilliant in their hubris, blast off into space, look down on the world and see that it's not riding on the back of a turtle. *The truth is: The position of the earth is actually 93 million miles from the sun, around which it revolves, its velocity and centrifugal force maintaining the distance; and there obviously is no turtle. Our desperate search for the ultimate scientific answer is a naive attempt to contrive the ultimate, finite definition for a world that is put together with infinities. Evidently, a belief has arisen that scientists can replace elders, that knowledge equates to wisdom.*

In 1795, about half of the people of the Shawnee nation were forced to leave their homeland in Ohio. The Shawnee, like many aboriginal people, called themselves the "Human Beings," as opposed to those other people that lived over there, such as the Wyandot and the Delaware. The shamans, the elders, the keepers of the mysteries, the story tellers, carried with them the combined knowledge of all the "Shawanasee" who had lived before in Ohio. They knew where the bison watered, the elk roamed, the edible plants grew, and the salt licks were. They understood how to be obedient to the *Genius*, so that the land could drink the rain and remain rich with milk and honey. Alexander Thom, in his book *Panther in the Sky*, described the angst experienced by the Shawnee elders, who knew well the way the world worked in the forests of southern Ohio. But they knew nothing of that far and distant land, where the Illinois were the Human Beings and the Shawnee would be the others. Of course, the Shawnee dispersed along the western trails and the Human Beings of southern Ohio disappeared from the earth.

I once thought that referring to one's tribe as the Human Beings was a quaint, chauvinistic notion. Now I see that it represents one of the most profound truths of humanity.

Human Beings defined themselves in relation to the land wherein they lived.

They understood that there were limits, realities. One was not free to dirty the water and plunder the fertility of the soil. They were immediately accountable for such behavior. Human Beings did not think of themselves as gods. They were comfortable with the ancient stories, the ways of the elders, with the ones who carried incorrupt wisdom.

I believe there is a rebirth of the Human Being. Late this century, some Illinoisans began to discover that remnant patches of the ancient living earth still remained. People developed a kind of empathy for these places, a visceral sense that these places had stories to tell. The people recognized that there resided in these lands something that was worth honoring and rehabilitating. Fifteen years ago, along the North Branch of the Chicago River, there was a rebirth of the Human Being, a primitive, adolescent tribe. These Human Beings called themselves the "Land Stewards."

Initially, Land Stewards relied heavily upon expert ecologists and natural scientists to advise them on how to manage and curate these natural areas of the North Branch. But it soon became apparent that these latter-day shamans had only a limited awareness and fragmented knowledge of the realities of the place. Products themselves of modern civilization, these scientists often seemed to lack an empathy for the land, and their training had not equipped them to integrate the Human Being with the land. There was much disagreement among them and there was much dogma which seemed to conflict with what the Land Stewards observed. As years passed, the Land Stewards attended to the sacred place of the North Branch. They studied it and learned about the life there. They saw how the land responded to their care, noting what kinds of attention brought forth life and what kinds caused the lands to give up life.

The Human Beings of the North Branch began to assume a gentle dominion over the land, not a dominance or god-like rule, but a stewardship. Ever more shrewd in their observations, they began to manage the land according to their own experience. They studied the

land and its life intently. They drew from the knowledge of scientists. They drew from the stories of the native plants and animals themselves. The Stewards indexed success by the extent to which life flourished and the fecundity of the lands of the North Branch burgeoned. In areas which remained neglected, they noted the continued diminishment of native flowers and butterflies. Erosion progressed and waters ran muddy.

The Stewards also became aware that the North Branch lands were quite special. That this place really wasn't like any other place they knew. While at first similar to neighboring lands, the uniqueness of the North Branch became apparent as its biota flourished and as these Human Beings found the center of the earth. There was the recognition of a long-forgotten *Genius*. It was a land left 10,000 years ago by the last glacier, located about five miles west of a great lake in the middle of a continent, on soils developed over till derived from Niagaran dolomite. It was situated about 800 miles north of the Gulf of Mexico and exposed to dry, desiccating winds out of the west in the summer and Arctic outbreaks in the winter. The land and its living associations were unique unto themselves, and this uniqueness was being drawn from the earth by the Stewards of the North Branch.

A few years ago, there were just a few hundred Land Stewards in Illinois. Now there are over 5,000. These are people who are becoming Human Beings in an ancient and time-honored sense of the word, people who are becoming connected to something real, something incorruptible. When the North Branch Stewards travel south in Cook County to that far and distant Palos Hills, where there is now another small tribe of Human Beings, they feel as guests there. With their knowledge of the uniqueness of the North Branch, they see easily and profoundly how different and unique the land of Palos Hills is.

It would be easy to conclude, when one contemplates the massive, brutish destruction of the earth all around us, that there is no hope, that we are destined to face the Four Horsemen: famine, disease, unrest, war.

But there is hope. Consider the mindset of a farmer on a sojourn to Chicago in 1830. The Sank Chiefstain Black Hawk was angry. There was no government or market. There was no plow that could even begin to turn the prairie soil, which was mostly too wet anyway. How could he have imagined that the land would be in agriculture from Chicago to Denver in a lifetime? But it was. And it was accomplished by one farmer. And another. And another, as it became perceived to be economically imperative. It was accomplished by individuals who focused on the land where they lived.

Imagine a world where Stewards curated the genetic memory of the places where they lived, where they became attentive to the *Genius*. The natural vegetation, the plants and animals of northern Illinois, would begin to express their covenant with the earth and the land would drink from the rains of the heaven. Human Beings, place by place, would focus on the rehabilitation of the only flora and fauna on the globe that has a clue how to sustain the self-replicating, living landscapes of northern Illinois, the only flora and fauna wherein the Human Beings can see the reflections of their ancestors and imagine the well-being of the seventh generation hence. The Human Beings of the North Branch, the Palos Hills, the Poplar Creek, the DesPlaines, and now many other places, would curate the germ material out of which restorationists and other Human Beings would start rebuilding, reincorporating life and water into the landscapes around them.

What if corporate campuses started taking of that seed, of that holy harvest, and sowing it back into those brutalized landscapes? More and more lands would prosper and come to life as the rivers began to freshen. Imagine if civilized people awakened to the filth and destruction with which they have surrounded themselves, and decided it was desirable to have life in the land around their homes, and that the air and water should be clean . . . that the turtle should live.

Imagine the jobs, prosperity, and capital formed, as we redesigned and

rebuilt agricultural, corporate, residential, and industrial North America intelligently, attentive to the realities with an eye toward tomorrow and our children. Instead of defining prosperity and indexing growth by the extent to which we divest the earth of its natural resources, we flip the way we view the world and start indexing prosperity by the extent to which we reinvest in the natural resources of the earth. People become again connected to the landscape, connected to something solid, something incorrupt. The metaphors, the long-forgotten stories of the elders, would again become meaningful. What if civilized people were to become Human Beings?

Can we anticipate the dawning of a new age, or must we acquiesce to the Four Horsemen? I think the answer lies in the genetic memory of what remains in northern Illinois and in the people who have dominion over it. I think people are free to make decisions which enable them to sustain the grandeur of the Human Being on earth, or choose to make decisions which render their life style and culture unsustainable. We can either write the epilogue of the time of the Human Being on earth, or we can write a new chapter to an old, old story. I think this is the beginning of the story of the Human Beings of the North Branch.

Suggested Readings:

Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee

by Dee Brown

The Cry and the Covenant

by Morton Thompson

East of Eden by John Steinbeck

The Mountain People by Colin Turnbull

Panther in the Sky

by James Alexander Thom

Gerould Wilhelm, Ph.D. is a Research Field Taxonomist at the Morton Arboretum. He coauthored the third edition of Plants of the Chicago Region in 1979. Wilhelm started working with Floyd Swink and Ray Schulenberg, two of the "grandfathers" of prairie restoration in the Chicago area, in 1974. He is currently working on a fourth edition of Plants of the Chicago Region, as well as a book on lichens of Missouri, Illinois, and the Chicago region. This is Jerry's first contribution to Prairie Projections.