

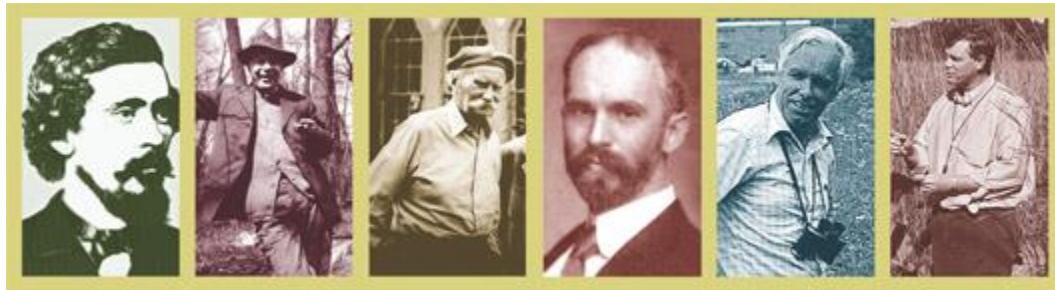
Conservation, Chicago Style

Muir protected the giant redwoods.

Roosevelt built the national parks of the West.

Who would have guessed that the city of Chicago would reimagine the very meaning of wilderness?

by Curt Meine



Chicago Conservationists (l–r): Robert Kennicott, Henry C. Cowles, Jens Jensen, Dwight Perkins, Floyd Swink, Gerould Wilhelm

Cowles Photo: Courtesy of the University of Chicago Library, Special Collections Research Center

Jensen Photo: Courtesy of Chicago Park District Special Collections

Wilhelm Photo: Photo: Jim Nachel

Who would've predicted it? That all this could happen in Chicago. Chicago! Who would have guessed that the city that played so powerful a role in laying low the pineries of Michigan and Wisconsin, in plowing under the prairies of Illinois and Iowa, in exhausting rangelands from Texas to the Dakotas—the city that reversed a river, built itself on top of marshes, and then jacked itself up above the mud—who would have guessed that Chicago would emerge as a global leader in environmental stewardship, redefining itself and conservation in the process?

Who would have guessed that here in Chicago, the city would reimagine the very meaning of wilderness? That, here, amid the megalopolis, an appreciation of wild things and open space, biological diversity and ecological health, would lead conservationists to reconsider the very place and potential of the city?

Certainly not the earlier version of myself that grew up in and around Chicago. The suburbs and city neighborhoods that I knew seemed far removed from the wild places that I craved. Wilderness, such as it was, was confined to the thinnest margins of urban life. Walking home from school along Dempster Street, I trained my eyes on the narrow ditch, all that remained of an erstwhile creek, watching for the mysterious “water rats” that swam in the shadows of Lutheran General Hospital. (Only later did I learn what a muskrat was). My “wilderness” was just a moment, a fleeting glimpse of an unknown creature in a neglected nothing of a remnant stream.

But, in retrospect, the potential was always there. It was there, not only in the persistence of water rats and other wildlife, but in the names on the landscape: the native glacier's Park Ridge, the native vegetation's Morton Grove and Des Plaines, and of course the native Miami-Illini's shikaakwa. The potential was in the nearby forest preserves where I took refuge behind the dense green wall of overgrown shrubs. The potential was there in the prairie remnants—Wentworth Prairie, [Crabtree Preserve](#)—where, even though I hadn't yet learned any native plants, I could still connect to a different, older, venerable Illinois. That potential was only available because of the past.

I didn't know it then, but I was—as all Chicagoans are—heir to a legacy of land conservation, scientific insight, and community commitment that stretched from the city's core to its outermost prairie hinterlands. Even as Chicago emerged as the epicenter of environmental upheaval in the midcontinent, it became a proving ground for new ideas about the workings of the natural world and the place of people within it. One hundred and fifty years ago, a young naturalist named Robert Kennicott helped to found the [Chicago](#)

Academy of Sciences and build it into one of the premier houses of natural history in the nation. Kennicott belonged to a passionate generation of Midwestern citizen-scientists that explored the opening West in the decades after the Civil War.

The disciplined studies of those 19th-century naturalists prepared the way for a new generation of scientists who would put that knowledge together in novel ways, and call it ecology. Ecology had varied points of origin around the world, but the Midwest's native plant communities (as well as its young universities and museums) played a disproportionately important role in its development. In the low bogs, grassy ridges, and oak woods of the Indiana dunes, Henry C. Cowles and his students at the University of Chicago made ecology dynamic, revealing patterns of vegetation change in space and over time. As we try to understand how ecosystems from the local to the global are responding to the unprecedented impacts of human beings, we carry forward a way of interpreting the world that Cowles and his colleagues began in the 1890s.

As the national conservation movement emerged in the early 20th century, it in some ways left the Midwest behind. As the lumber barons exhausted the forests of the upper Great Lakes, conservationists aimed to protect the remaining extensive forests of the West. The national parks movement focused on the West's dramatic and scenic landscapes, not the topographically challenged, understated flatlands of the Midwest. The conversion of the prairies to cropland extended as far as the railroads—and as deep as the moldboard plows—could reach. Ancient redwoods inspired awe, while ancient prairie roots were simply...in the way.

But in Chicago, conservation continued to advance along a quieter path, led by citizens' groups such as the Prairie Club (founded in 1908) and Friends of the Native Landscape (1913). Both organizations helped secure protection for the vulnerable, quickly industrializing Indiana dunes. The spirit of the era's City Beautiful movement and the progressive conservation movement also found unique expression in Chicago. Daniel Burnham's 1909 Plan of Chicago, with its provisions for guided growth, accessible parklands, and protected public space, was the first comprehensive plan for any American city. Burnham's plan included a call to preserve forest lands in a green ring around the city, adding impetus to an earlier proposal by Jens Jensen, Dwight Perkins, and others to acquire and preserve a healthy proportion of "these outer areas" of the Chicago region.

The work of Jensen and Perkins came to fruition with passage in Springfield of the Forest Preserve District Act of 1913, and the approval of an enabling public referendum the following year. It was an extraordinary expression of civic responsibility. Under the act, the citizens of Cook County had committed themselves to "protecting and preserving the flora, fauna and scenic beauties" of the native landscape, and to conserving "said lands together with their flora and fauna, as nearly as may be, in their natural state and condition, for the purpose of the education, pleasure, and recreation of the public."

The 1913 Act directed the county's new Forest Preserve District to "restore, restock, protect, and preserve" the lands under its stewardship. For decades to come, the struggle to apply those verbs would reflect changing ideas in conservation. The forest preserves would serve not only as special places of renewal, but as sources for a still-expanding vision of ecological citizenship.

The full story of that growing vision remains untold and unwritten. When it is written, it will tell a story of evolving relationships between people and the land. It will reflect Aldo Leopold's revolutionary plea that we regard the land ethically, not "as a commodity belonging to us," but as "a community to which we belong." It will show how a single volume, Floyd Swink and Gerould Wilhelm's Plants of the Chicago Region, transformed the work of land restoration, and allowed new generations of stewards to see through that dense green wall that I knew as a kid in the 1970s.

Then, out of all this—Chicago Wilderness, the latest expression of the prairie's legacy and potential. With its challenging name, its continually expanding membership, its confounding of traditional assumptions about what an "environmentalist" is and does, Chicago Wilderness has for the last decade again pursued conservation in new and surprising ways, ways that indicate where conservation needs to go.

Chicago Wilderness has shown how to put cities and collaboration back on the conservation map. We can no longer afford (as if we ever could) a fragmented conservation vision that separates and segregates the fate of our remaining wildlands, working agricultural lands, small towns, suburbs, and

cities. Their fates, in the end, are connected. Either all belong to a whole and sustainable landscape, or none do. The future of conservation rests in building healthier connections across that entire spectrum of land use, and recognizing how our most vital natural assets and human needs—healthy food, water, air, climate, and communities—depend on those connections. Other cities around the world are evolving from an extractive relationship within their larger landscapes to a transformative one. Chicago Wilderness, with the epic environmental history of Chicago in its background, is providing an example to the world of a large metropolis transforming itself.

Above all, Chicago Wilderness has worked productively at the subtle interface of pragmatism and hope. It accepts its less-than-sublimely-scenic place (with its less-than-pure history), and goes about the steady work of restoration and education, stewardship and partnership. In tending the lands and waters and wild things of the Chicago region, it brings the region's people and institutions closer together. Its focus is local; its significance is global. These are essential qualities in a world that finally seems to be taking the future seriously. If the next generation is to make the hard and necessary steps toward a sustainable world, it will look to—and need—this continuing example.

Who would have predicted it? That the legacy of Kennicott and Cowles and Jensen and Perkins and Swink might stand alongside those of the timber barons and old industrialists and great merchants. That Sandburg's Hog Butcher for the World and Player with Railroads would become Restorer of Savannas and Volunteer with Kids. That the city's Big Shoulders would prove strong enough not only to have made tools and stacked wheat, but to build sustainable communities and bear the responsibilities of stewardship. I look at Chicago from across the Wisconsin border now. But I return to it differently. It is not just the traveler that has changed, but the destination.

Curt Meine is director for conservation biology and history at the Center for Humans and Nature, and senior fellow with the Aldo Leopold Foundation in Baraboo, Wisconsin. He is author of Aldo Leopold: His Life and Work (1988) and Correction Lines (2004).