

THE HISTORY OF PRAIRIE PRESERVATION IN IOWA

By

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ABSTRACT

While there was early interest in conservation and preservation in Iowa, it was primarily concerned with woodlands. Not until 1933 was preservation of a prairie area mentioned in the Iowa Twenty-Five Year Conservation Plan. In 1944 the conservation committee of the Iowa Academy of Science organized a project on Conservation of Iowa Prairie. In 1946 the Iowa Conservation Commission purchased Hayden prairie, using Fish and Game funds. By 1960, Cayler prairie had been purchased with Fish and Game funds, Kalsow and Sheeder with Land and Water funds.

A subcommittee of the Iowa Academy of Science was responsible for management under a memorandum of understanding with the State Conservation Commission, but the management consisted primarily in allowing farmers to mow for hay, as in other state hunting areas. The Iowa chapter of the Nature Conservancy, formed in 1963, and the Governor's Committee on Conservation of Outdoor Resources in 1965 renewed interest in preservation. The 61st General Assembly formed the Iowa State Preserves System to develop natural, archeological, historical, and geological preserves. Now six prairies are dedicated or otherwise preserved.

Present and future needs include management plans, and action to be taken with the 50 or more prairie areas which have been located in various parts of the state.

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The concept of conservation and preservation has an early history in Iowa. In 1896 the Iowa Academy of Science, as a result of efforts of Dr. MacBride, adopted two resolutions, "one petitioning the Twenty-sixth General Assembly to take some action toward the preservation of our lakes and to maintain some of the original conditions of the State. The other was presented to the Congress of the United States calling to its attention the necessity of further legislation looking to the preservation and rational use of the remaining forests of our country." (Swisher, 1931).

The present concept of preservation was clearly included in the 1927 report of the Conservation Committee of the Iowa Academy of Science which stated "We therefore recommend that this Academy give its decided approval to the policy of setting aside certain portions of the larger parks, and other suitable smaller areas especially in the vicinity of our educational institutions, for the preservation of wildlife and natural conditions. Such areas should be undisturbed as far as possible. To this end we urge that it is necessary that in these areas the policy of making so-called improvements, and particularly the building of expensive highways...be discontinued, and that the money...should be applied to the purchase of additional areas for wildlife sanctuaries."

The major thrust of these early programs, concerned primarily with woodland, was due in part to their scarcity in the Iowa landscape.

It wasn't until the Twenty-five Year Conservation Plan in 1933 that the idea of a prairie preserve was clearly defined (Crane & Olcott, 1933). Little was done with this portion of the plan until 1944. In that year the Conservation Committee of the Iowa Academy issued a report (Hayden, et. al., 1944) on the "Present Status and Outlook of Conservation in Iowa" which formally recommended the implementation of the Twenty-five Year Plan for preservation of a prairie. A sub-committee was formed which, in 1945 and 1946, issued a series of reports and papers (Hayden and Doty, 1945; Hayden, 1946) which included a listing of twenty-two prairie sites in ten counties. In 1946 the first of the prairies was purchased by the Conservation Commission, using fish and game funds. It was named Hayden Prairie, after Ada Hayden who was primarily responsible for the acquisition.

Subsequently three additional areas were acquired as prairie sites: Kalsow Prairie in 1948, Cayler Prairie in 1960 and Sheeder Prairie in 1961. Cayler Prairie was purchased with the fish and game funds, Kalsow and Sheeder with land and water funds. Until recently all four areas have been listed as state hunting areas.

At the time of the purchase of Kalsow Prairie in 1948 the Conservation Commission requested that the Conservation Committee of the Iowa Academy appoint an advisory Committee for advice on management of the prairie areas. In 1949 a memorandum of understanding was subscribed to by the State Conservation Commission and the Iowa Academy, setting up an advisory committee of five members, the prairie project committee: a botanist, a soil scientist and a zoologist; the chief of lands and waters from the Conservation Commission, and the chairman of the Academy's Conservation Committee. (Aikman, 1955). A number of studies relating to management were carried out (Aikman, 1955; Ehrenreich, 1957; Ehrenreich and Aikman, 1963; Hayden and Aikman, 1949), but because of a lack of structured interaction between the Academy and the Conservation Commission, the actual management consisted primarily in allowing farmers to mow the areas for hay, management similar to that followed in other state hunting areas. While mowing has been used to manage prairies, and in fact most of the relic sites were preserved because they had been used as wild hay fields, it does produce some problems including soil disturbance and compaction and removal of seed stock.

The formation of the Iowa Chapter of the Nature Conservancy in 1963 and the formation of the Governor's Committee on Conservation of Outdoor Resources in 1965 brought about a renewal of interest in the idea of preservation, and as a result of recommendations of the Governor's Committee (Haugen, 1965), the 61st General Assembly formed the Iowa State Preserves System to develop natural, archeological, historical, and geological preserves.

In 1968, Hayden Prairie was formally dedicated as the first preserve in the Iowa State Preserves System. Kalsow and Sheeder followed, and the dedication of Cayler is pending. The wording of the Iowa code does not permit hunting on state parks or preserves, and while it was written long before the preserves system was developed, the new system is included under this section. Since Cayler Prairie was purchased with Pitman-Robertson Funds it must be open to hunting, and this conflict is delaying dedication. We hope to amend the code to allow the preserves board to regulate hunting in the preserves system. This would allow for dedication of Cayler Prairie and similar areas, bringing them under the protection of the System and allowing for management primarily as a preserve.

In addition to these areas, a prairie area is included in Gitchie Manitou Preserve which is primarily geological. Linn County has also preserved a sand prairie outside of Cedar Rapids. The Nature Conservancy has leased two areas to protect them from plowing while attempting to acquire the areas.

The Preserves Advisory Board is setting up specific management plans on the areas. Dr. Landers and his students at Iowa State and Dr. Christiansen at Cornell College have completed management studies on Kalsow, Sheeder, and Hayden Prairies.

Paul Kline, the State Ecologist, in consultation with the Conservation department, has written specific plans to be followed by the Conservation department in management of the prairies. The spring and summer of 1971 will allow an evaluation of their implementation by the personnel of the Conservation Department.

At present there are approximately 50 prairies which have been listed either in Hayden's early studies or in the survey taken by the Governor's Committee on Outdoor Resources (Smith and Landers), or reported to the board.

Many of these areas are known only by location; they have not been evaluated and their ownership status is unknown. Future work will require each of these areas to be visited and evaluated for possible preservation.

Since preservation by purchase by the state of all the areas does not seem likely, alternate possibilities must be developed. They could include private and county purchasing followed by dedication into the system. This seems very possible in at least some of the areas if action is taken in the near future.

There is a danger that an attempt to acquire any or all prairies with public funds could meet with opposition from the taxpayers unless a clear rationale for acquisition can be shown. Two guides for selection of areas have been published: Hayden (1944) suggested climatic and topographic regions, while Riechen (1946) modified this with a stress on soil types. Either one would serve as a good starting point in developing criteria for inclusion of areas into the preserves system.

The preserves system in Iowa--by combining protection, management and investigation of prairie--has stimulated the program proposed originally in 1933. With adequate funding for acquisition, management and interpretive studies the "Comprehensive state-wide prairie acquisition program" predicted by Parker (1946), at the time Hayden prairie was purchased, will become a reality. (See Map Section for Iowa Prairie locations.)

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