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## Iowa's First Prairie Preserve

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*Iowa State Conservation Commission*

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## IOWA'S FIRST PRAIRIE PRESERVE

MRS. ADDISON PARKER

The State Conservation Commission is honored today to participate in this Centennial Program of the Iowa Academy of Science. It was a quarter of a century ago that the vision of such men of science as Dr. Macbride, Professor Shimek, Dean Nagler and Professor Pammel gave inspiration and direction to the creation of a State Board of Conservation.

Later, in the early 30's, this Board was merged with the Fish and Game Commission, together forming the present Conservation Commission.

Under the leadership of Mr. Jay Darling, a member of the former State Fish and Game Commission, the Iowa 25-year Conservation Plan was conceived, and under State legislation made available. It is this Plan which first recommended the preservation of a large prairie area.

Going back 100 years to the Journals, Reports, and diaries of the early fur traders, cartographers, adventurers, Government surveyors, militia, and pioneer settlers, we find that all wrote of the great beauty of the prairie.

It was in 1835 that Lt. Albert M. Lea of Tennessee and of the 1st U. S. Dragoons, traveling through the territory, wrote his "Notes on the Iowa district of Wisconsin Territory," as follows:

"The general appearance of the country is one of great beauty. It may be represented as one grand rolling prairie along one side of which flows the mightiest river in the world, and through which numerous navigable streams pursue their devious ways toward the ocean. In every part of this whole district beautiful rivers and creeks are to be found whose transparent waters are perpetually renewed by the springs from which they flow. Taking this District all in all, for convenience of navigation, water, fuel, and timber, for richness of soil, for beauty of appearance, it surpasses any portion of the United States with which I am acquainted."

Willa Cather wrote, "As I looked about me I felt that the grass was the country, as the water is the sea. The red of the grass made all the prairie the color of winestains or of certain seaweeds when they are first washed up and there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed somehow to be running. . ."

Hardly any native grasses now remain on American farms. According to Miss Hayden's very fine prairie survey, there are now very few native prairie areas, unplowed and ungrazed. Many of these remaining are in estates. That was true of the Howard County area, the State's first prairie purchase. This land in the northeastern part of the State is a few miles northwest of the town of Cresco. The story of the ownership is interesting. The grant of the government patent was dated 1857. There were only two transfers of the land before 1868 when it was conveyed to William Knabe, Ernest Knabe

and Charles Keidel, the latter a brother-in-law of the Knabe brothers. Their last wills were probated in 1924. Through these wills the title descended to certain heirs and to the Safe Deposit and Trust Co. of Baltimore, as trustee. In 1944 these latter conveyed ownership. From this purchaser the State procured ownership. Thus for 78 years the Knabe family of piano fame, held this land. There are 160 acres in one tract and 39 contiguous. The land is quite level, has no improvements, nor are there many in close proximity. Also, there are few trees nearby so that one has a free perspective of the distant horizon. The soil is Carrington Clyde type. Birds of field and meadow are abundant. The vegetative cover comprises: at least.

5 species of violet and

25 species (approximately) of prairie grasses.

In the spring: prairie smoke, shooting star, bird-foot violet and paint-brush are the most colorful plants.

In July the orange tiger lilies, rose blazing star, and lead plant are most conspicuous.

There are also sedges, iris, blue-eyed grass, plants of the crowfoot family, the rose family, the bean family, the violet family, loose-strife, evening primrose, carrot family, primrose, gentian, milkweed, phlox, borage mint, figwort, sunflower, aster and many others.

In his recent autobiography William Allen White writes:

"As a little child I remember the delight of the prairies in the spring and summer when the grass was green and the wild flowers grew everywhere. I used to bring them in little sweaty handfuls to my mother with much delight. . . The land has changed. The white man has come. . . The primeval fairyland has gone—fled before the grim reality of man's harrow and his plow . . . and all the ugly realities of man's fight to live by the sweat of his brow."

Aldo Leopold of Wisconsin says, "The outstanding scientific discovery of the 20th century is not television, nor radio, nor the atom bomb, but rather the complexity of the land organism. Only those who know most about it can appreciate how little we know about it. . . What is the most valuable part of the Prairie? The fat black soil, the chernozem . . . built by the prairie plants, a hundred distinctive species of grasses, herbs, and shrubs; by the prairie fungi, insects, and bacteria; by the prairie mammals and birds, all interlocked in one humming community of cooperations and competitions, one biota."

Iowans are prone to quote their slogan: "In all that is good Iowa affords the best," and we begin usually with a claim to one-fourth of the world's Grade A Land. A recent map enlarging the Food Bowl area to include a circular territory within 275 miles of Des Moines in all directions, contains 75 per cent of the Grade A land of the nation.

Billions of wealth! Is it not important, therefore, that we retain a pattern of the prairie to be enabled to know all of the factors which contribute to that wealth? And then what of spiritual values? Much

of the beauty which has been an inspiration to many generations has been lost.

In a beautiful prairie area like the one in Howard County, one may recapture something of the beauty of the past. It is hoped that this may be the beginning of a comprehensive State-wide prairie acquisition program.

STATE CONSERVATION COMMISSION