
THE USE OF PRAIRIE RELICS IN TEACHING

L. WALLACE MILLER

Illinois State Normal University, Normal, Illinois

The prairies of Illinois formerly occupied slightly more than 50 per cent of the total area of the State. It is a climax vegetation characterized by its tall grasses and many flowering herbaceous plants, and in Illinois occupied an eastern lobe of a narrow belt extending from Canada to Texas. Throughout the area there is little or no effort being made to preserve this distinctive vegetation. Due to the favorable topography of most of the prairie land, and particularly to the high fertility of the soil, it has become the most productive and valuable farming section in Illinois as is shown by agricultural statistics. This land, therefore, has been highly prized by the farmer and has been subjected to rather thorough cultivation during the past 70 years with the result that the prairie as a complete flora is practically non-existent and its representatives are rapidly disappearing.

Few undisturbed open areas in the prairie sections exist today. Some prairie species still occur together in isolated areas or relics along railroads, roadsides, and borders of lightly pastured woodlots where many introduced plants intermingle, unfortunately making the flora atypical. There are usually other ecological factors present somewhat different from those found in the original prairie.

It is highly desirable that these prairie remnants be preserved and enlarged. Several large tracts set aside for the

conservation of the prairie adjacent to one or more of our wooded state parks would prove highly educational and of inestimable value to the State as a whole. Some type of conservation effort is urgently needed in order that we may retain and know some of the charm of early Illinois and may provide opportunity to study many of the physiological and ecological aspects of this peculiar and hardy flora.

Science teachers in our public schools have many opportunities to draw the attention of young people to this fascinating flora. Certainly the prairie has greatly influenced the social and economic development of the State, and enough remains to merit its analysis and consideration. A study of soil profiles, root ecology, transpiration rate, relative humidity, and other ecological features of the prairie and the forest will contribute much to an understanding of the great differences in humus content and fertility of forest and prairie soils under cultivation. Although the conditions permitting the existence of the prairie may be largely buried in the past, a study of the climate, the environmental complex as a whole, and the xeric aspect of the prairie flora strongly suggest the importance of water loss in the air and water supply in the soil. Taxonomic study, gathering of specimens for school herbaria, and the making of photographic records of prairie species is fascinating and has great future value.