

Category: [Vol. 1, 2006](#)

Alice Gray, Dorothy Buell, and Naomi Svihla: Preservationists of Ogden Dunes

Written by Stephanie Smith and Steve Mark

Hits: 8244

The South Shore Journal, Vol. 1, 2006, pp. 15-21.



Ogden Dunes circa 1943, courtesy of the IU Northwest Calumet Regional Archives.

The present article describes the contributions of three preservationists – Alice Mabel Gray, Dorothy Richardson Buell, and Naomi Ireland Svihla. Each of these women resided in Ogden Dunes at some point in their lives, loved the natural beauty of the area, and contributed to the preservation of the sand dunes of Northwest Indiana. Alice Gray did so by bringing attention to the Dunes at a time when critical efforts were being made to preserve them as part of the Indiana Dunes State Park. Dorothy Buell founded the Save the Dunes Council that successfully preserved parts of the dunes in the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, and Naomi Svihla added her efforts to the Save the Dunes Council in forming the National Lakeshore. She also served as an early board member and president of the Historical Society of Ogden Dunes, an organization dedicated to preserving the cultural history of Ogden Dunes.

...we were in the grip of an almost irreversible force, which would overrun those who loved the dunes and sweep on to Michigan City and beyond. Then we would have a continuous jungle of asphalt and steel, with pollution of air and water, with no place for the millions of pent-up city folk to seek refuge, quiet and renewal. It seemed impossible to stop this movement.... (Douglas, 1971, pp. 76-77).

Alice Mabel Gray, Dorothy Richardson Buell, and Naomi Ireland Svihla, residents of Ogden Dunes, shared a deep appreciation of the sand dunes of Northwest Indiana. Each made significant contributions to the preservation of the sand dunes and/or the preservation of the historical records of the community of Ogden Dunes. These women wrote and spoke of their love of the dunes of

Northwest Indiana. All three, in different ways, joined the struggle to preserve them as public lands for all to enjoy.

Alice Mabel Gray

Alice Gray was born in 1881 in Chicago (e.g., Hoppe, 1997). She entered the University of Chicago in 1897 at the age of sixteen and graduated in 1903, with an A.B. degree and honorable mentions in Greek, Latin, astronomy, and mathematics. For the next nine years she attended graduate programs at the University of Chicago at various times (e.g., Moore, 1959). Throughout this period she frequently visited the dunes of Northwest Indiana, developing a deep appreciation for their beauty and an understanding of the necessity of preserving them.

Events in the region jeopardized the Dunes that Gray loved. In 1905, U.S. Steel purchased land in the Dunes and began to construct a plant. Gary developed as a community alongside the new plant. This development necessitated the eradication of swamps, dunes, and woodlands. Many preservationists recognized the need to act immediately to preserve what remained of the natural area.

In October of 1915, Gray moved to the Indiana Dunes at the age of 34 (e.g., Lane, 1978). She claimed that she was fed up with city life and wanted to live a free life. She did so by picking a remote section of the Dunes, inaccessible by automobiles, in which to live. She proceeded to live for the next five years in the most primitive manner she could. At first she slept outside, but then she found a derailed boxcar and an abandoned hut in which to set up house. She only used furniture made of driftwood, and she primarily ate berries and fish. Her intellectual development continued, as she spent considerable time reading (borrowing books from the Miller Public Library) and writing about the ecology and history of the Dunes (e.g., Lane, 1978). Gray wrote about the Dunes, both in terms of the necessity of preserving them, and also about her experiences living there.

Gray attracted much notoriety during this period. It was unusual for a single woman to live alone in such primitive, isolated conditions. Newspapers ran stories about her, and she was dubbed “Diana” by the press (e.g., Moore, 1959). Many sightseers would try to catch a glimpse of her, and this bothered her attempts to live an isolated life and interrupted her quest for solitude.

Her preservationist efforts culminated in an invitation to attend and speak at a major public event in 1917 organized by the Prairie Club and other Dunes preservation groups (e.g., Hoppe, 1997). The purpose of the event was to create public interest in preserving the Dunes by creating a park. Many activists were concerned about the rate of development in the Dunes, including the steel mills and the city of Gary itself. Gray traveled to the Art Institute of Chicago to give her speech about the significance of the Dunes and the necessity of protecting them. She spoke about the beauty and spiritual power of the Dunes. Furthermore, she said that destroying the Dunes would be a sacrilegious sin. The Prairie Club Bulletin published a portion of Alice’s essay (Gray, 1917).

Gray returned to her life in the Dunes, where she met a fisherman, Paul Wilson. They became a couple and moved to a shack in an area of what is now Ogden Dunes where they lived from 1920 to 1925 (e.g., Lane, 1978). To this day, curiosity seekers visit Ogden Dunes with the Stephanie Smith and Steve Mark intention of trying to pinpoint the exact location of the shack called “Wren’s Nest.” Gray and Wilson were harassed by unwanted visits by the press and the public, and Gray died of uremic poisoning in 1925 (e.g., Lane, 1978).

Alice Gray is appreciated as a person who brought much attention to the Dunes at a time when the Dunes needed the help of the community to preserve them. The creation of the Indiana Dunes State Park in the 1920s was the culmination of efforts by many activists. Alice’s actions helped bring attention to the Dunes at a critical time in its preservation.

Dorothy Richardson Buell

Dorothy Buell was born in 1886 in Neenah-Menasha, Wisconsin to a large family. She was one of seven children. The family spent their summers in a cottage in what is now Ogden Dunes. Dorothy spent two years at Milwaukee-Downer College and then transferred to Lawrence College. She received a Bachelor of Oratory degree in 1911 and married James Buell in 1918. They lived in Gary, Indiana; Tulsa Oklahoma; Flossmoor, Illinois; and then moved to Ogden Dunes, Indiana where they remained until 1970 (e.g., Franklin & Schaeffer, 1983).

Buell’s call to activism resulted from an epiphany she experienced in 1949 when she and her husband vacationed in the White Sands National Monument in New Mexico. They felt that the dunes in the Monument were beautiful, but not as beautiful as the dunes surrounding their home in Ogden Dunes. Moreover, on the journey home, the Buells stopped in Gary, where they saw a poster for, and subsequently attended, a meeting of a dunes preservation group called the Indiana Dunes Preservation Council (e.g., Franklin & Schaeffer, 1983). The council used an ecological survey prepared by Jerry Olson that recommended the preservation of seven miles of lakeshore in Northwest Indiana (Olson, 1951). It was at that time that Dorothy Buell realized that she could do something to save the Dunes.

In 1952 Buell created the Save the Dunes Council (e.g., Grossman, Keating, & Reiff, 2004), which met at her home. The original meeting consisted of only twenty-some women. At that meeting, Bess Sheehan presented a history of how her efforts resulted in the formation of the Indiana Dunes State Park. Dorothy Buell became the founding president of the Save the Dunes Council and continued in that post for 17 years. The Council grew to encompass thousands of members from every state in the country (e.g., Engel, 1983).

Buell’s involvement with the Save the Dunes Council continued for decades. The activities of the Council ranged from purchasing land, educating the public, contacting newspapers, researching land ownership, and contacting other conservation groups. An early victory was the purchase of Cowles Bog. This property came up for sale due to delinquent taxes, and Buell arranged for donations to cover

the cost of it, so that it could be preserved (e.g., Engel, 1983).

The Save the Dunes Council made a significant advancement in its efforts to save the Dunes when Buell persuaded Senator Paul Douglas of Illinois to get involved. From the beginning of their collaboration in 1957, Senator Douglas and Dorothy Buell worked in tandem in an ultimately successful quest to create the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore (e.g., Franklin Alice Gray, Dorothy Buell, and Naomi Svihla: *Preservationists of Ogden Dunes & Schaeffer*, 1983). This quest took almost a decade of constant efforts on both of their parts. At many times during the struggle to save the Dunes, it looked hopeless. Yet, in 1966, the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore was created (e.g., L. Botts, personal communication, June 18, 2006; Mark, 2006).

In 1970 Buell and her husband were persuaded by their son to move from Ogden Dunes to California due to health concerns, but she is reported to have complained to friends that all she talked about was the Dunes, and Californians were generally not interested in hearing about them. She died in 1976 (e.g., Franklin & Schaeffer, 1983).

The United States Congress honored the memory of Dorothy Buell by directing that the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore visitor center be dedicated in her name. Buell is remembered as a tenacious activist who prevailed against overwhelming odds. She demonstrated how the passion and enthusiasm and persistence of one person can inspire others to work together to achieve major advances in the preservation of natural areas (J. Olson, personal communication, June 11, 2006). Thousands of acres are protected for future generations as a result of her actions.

Naomi Ireland Svihla

Naomi Svihla was born in 1918 in Hyde Park of Chicago. One of her family's friends, Lovella Davis, had moved a cottage by barge to Ogden Dunes, and Svihla spent summer vacations at that cottage. It was then that Svihla developed her life-long love of the Dunes. She attended George Williams College, Chicago State College, and the University of Chicago. During her time at the University of Chicago, she met Paul Ireland. They were married in 1940 and moved to Ogden Dunes in 1949. Svihla lived in Ogden Dunes for over fifty years (e.g., Tanis, 2005).

Svihla became an avid activist for the environment. She appreciated the natural aspects of the Dunes and the importance of saving them for future generations to enjoy. Over the years, she arranged and personally took many groups, ranging from school children to prisoners at Westville, to visit the Dunes (e.g., Tanis, 2005). Moreover, Svihla was thoroughly committed to the role of the political process in effecting change both as an individual and through the League of Women Voters (D. Kurtz, personal communication, June 18, 2006). Year after year, she worked the polls and made calls to people to encourage them to vote (N. Svihla, personal communication, October 24, 2004). She never hesitated to stand up for the protection of the Dunes and inspired others by her enthusiasm and actions (A. Mark, personal communication, June 15, 2006).

During the 1950s and 1960s, Svihla was a major contributor to the efforts by the Save the Dunes Council to protect the Dunes of Northwest Indiana (R. Osann, personal communication, June 18, 2006). The Save the Dunes Council tried to persuade the Porter County Commissioners to zone the North section of the county in such a way that would prevent heavy industry in the area. Svihla was tireless in her crusade to get as many signatures as possible on the petitions. Thousands of signatures were presented to the Commissioners by people asking that the natural areas be preserved. That effort was not successful, as the Porter County Commissioners zoned the North section of the county to allow heavy industry, thus allowing the steel mills in on the section of the Dunes between Ogden Dunes and Dune Acres (R. Osann, personal communication, June 18, 2006).

However, the Save the Dunes Council also used these petitions to influence Congress to save the Dunes. With the help of Senator Paul Douglas of Illinois, that effort succeeded in 1966 with the designation of the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore (L. Botts, personal communication, June 18, 2006). To aid their efforts to educate people about the beauty of the Dunes and the necessity of protecting them, the Save the Dunes Council developed a film called "The Indiana Dunes." Svihla arranged for her husband, Paul, to print the film at his company in Miller. This film was sent to schools and organizations for many years up to 1966, when the Congress designated the National Lakeshore (R. Osann, personal communication, June 18, 2006).

In 1974 she married George Svihla, also an Ogden Dunes resident (e.g., Tanis, 2005). He shared her appreciation for the beauty of the Dunes, and they also developed a passion for preserving the cultural history of the community of Ogden Dunes. In the late 1980's he joined with other members of Ogden Dunes to found the Historical Society of Ogden Dunes (D. Kurtz, personal communication, June 18, 2006). The Society was incorporated in 1991 and is now housed in the O.D. Frank House in Ogden Dunes (P. Youngman, personal communication, June 20, 2006). Naomi Svihla was an early board member and became the second president of the Society. Over the years, she served as a board member, trustee, secretary, and president of the Historical Society of Ogden Dunes at various times from the 1990's until her death in May of 2006 (D. Moore, personal communication, June 18, 2006).

Svihla donated countless hours to the Historical Society of Ogden Dunes to promote interest in membership and connect with members of the community about local history (S. Clouser, personal communication, June 18, 2006). She also was instrumental in setting up the O.D. Franks House as a historical museum. She arranged the acquisition of items for the archives and organized collections and events. The collections included books, records, papers, sculpture, paintings, and artifacts (D. Moore, personal communication, June 18, 2006).

Naomi Ireland Svihla was a passionate activist who devoted her life to preservation. Her contributions to the preservation of the Dunes helped the Save the Dunes Council ultimately prevail in its efforts to create the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, and her contributions to the Historical Society of Ogden Dunes helped preserve the cultural history of Ogden Dunes (D. Moore, personal communication, June

18, 2006).

In sum, all three Ogden Dunes residents, Alice Gray, Dorothy Buell, and Naomi Svihla contributed to the preservation of the sand dunes of Northwest Indiana. It is as a result of their efforts, along with many others, that the sand dunes of Northwest Indiana are preserved for all to enjoy.

References

Douglas, P. H. (1971). *In the Fullness of Time: The Memoirs of Paul H. Douglas*. Harcourt Brace, 76-77.

Engel, J. R. (1983). *Sacred Sands: The Struggle for Community in the Indiana Dunes*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Franklin, K., & Schaeffer, N.. (1983). *Duel for the Dunes: Land Use Conflict on the Shores of Lake Michigan*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Gray, A. (1917). Chicago's kinland. *In The Prairie Club Bulletin*. Chicago Historical Society.

Grossman, J. R., Keating, A. D., & Reiff, J. L. (2004). *The Encyclopedia of Chicago*. University of Chicago Press.

Hoppe, D. (1997) Child of the northwest wind: Alice Gray and Diana of the Dunes. *Traces of Indiana and Midwestern History*, 9, 22-31.

Lane, J. B. (1978). *City of the Century*. Indiana University Press.

Mark, S. (2006). Ogden dunes historical society roots. *The Hour Glass*, 14, 1-5.

Moore, P., A. (1959). *The Calumet Region: Indiana's Last Frontier*. Indiana Historical Bureau.

Olson, J. S. (1951). *Indiana Sand Dune Preservation*, 6 pp. mimeo, Chicago Historical Society.

Tanis, B. (2005). A duner you should know...Naomi Ireland Svihla. *The Hour Glass*, 13, 2-3.

Taylor, R. M., Jr., Stevens, E. W., Ponder, M. A., & Brockman, P. (1989). *Indiana: A New Historical Guide*. Indiana Historical Society.

A Short History of Ogden Dunes

Ogden Dunes is a residential community in Porter County west of the Port of Indiana and surrounded by the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. Ogden Dunes was incorporated in 1925 after 513 acres were purchased from the estate of Francis A. Ogden (e.g., Taylor, Stevens, Ponder, & Brockman, 1989). The community was named for the original owner of the land. Ogden Dunes has a total area of approximately 1.4 miles, and all commercial enterprises are prohibited. A historical marker indicates

the site of a 240 foot high ski jump that was erected in 1927. Ogden Dunes hosted international competitions until the ski jump was disassembled in 1932. Today, Ogden Dunes has approximately 1500 residents (e.g., Grossman, Keating, & Reiff, 2004).

Stephanie Smith is from the Psychology Department, Indiana University Northwest. The author may be reached at IU Northwest, Psychology Department, 3400 Broadway, Gary, Indiana 46408 or ssmith@iun.edu

Steve Mark is from Chicago, Illinois.09