

Category: [Vol. 3, 2009](#)

The Historical Roots of The Nature Conservancy in the Northwest Indiana/Chicagoland Region: From Science to Preservation

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Hits: 10184

The South Shore Journal, Vol. 3, 2009, pp.1-10.

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Abstract

The present article highlights the impact that scientists, educators, and activists of the Northwest Indiana/Chicagoland area had on the conservation of land. The habitat and ecosystems of the Indiana Dunes were deemed to be of scientific interest by Henry Cowles, who led an international group of ecologists to visit the area in 1913. This meeting resulted in the formation of the Ecological Society of America, an offshoot of which eventually became The Nature Conservancy. It was only when preservation efforts expanded their focus from scientists attempting to prove that habitats were worthy of preservation to include contributions by people from all walks of life, did conservation take off.

Keywords: The Nature Conservancy, Ecologists Union, Volo Bog

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...There is not a sufficient number of scientific people as voters to enthuse the politicians... ..
(Garland, 1954).

In the late 1890's and early 1900's, Henry Chandler Cowles, a botanist at the University of Chicago, published a number of scientific papers on ecological succession from research conducted in the sand dunes of northwestern Indiana (e.g., Cowles, 1899; Cowles, 1901). This research earned him an international reputation as an ecologist (e.g., Cassidy, 2007; Fuller, 1939). Cowles traveled to sand dunes around the world, but he proclaimed the dunes of the southern coast of Lake Michigan to be the "grandest" (Mather, 1917). Throughout his career, Cowles continued to visit the natural areas of northwestern Indiana, often accompanied by students and fellow scientists (e.g., Cook, 1980).

In 1911 and 1913, Cowles participated in the International Phytogeographical Excursions that allowed

ecologists to observe plants in their native habitats in a variety of locales in Great Britain (1911), and the United States (1913). In 1913, Cowles led the excursion to the sand dunes of Lake Michigan (Cook, 1980). The scientific members of the expedition were much impressed with the dunes, and regarded them as one of the wonders of the United States (e.g., Mather, 1917). British scientist A.J. Tansley later wrote of the great ecological value of the region (Tansley, 1913).

Victor Shelford, a member of the 1913 International Phytogeographical Excursion to the Indiana Dunes, was a former student of Cowles. It should be noted that many of Henry Cowles' students went on to make substantial contributions to ecology and to conservation, as well as other fields (e.g., Cook, 1980). Notable Cowles students included William Cooper, George Fuller, W.C. Allee, Stanley A. Cain, and O.D. Frank (e.g., Engel, 1983; Mark, 2004). An early student of Cowles, Victor Shelford obtained his PhD in zoology from the University of Chicago in 1907, where he remained as a faculty member until 1914 (e.g., Croker, 1991). During Shelford's time there, he made many field excursions to the habitats in the Northwest Indiana/Chicagoland area with Cowles (Croker), and arranged field trips for his students to visit special habitats in the area. For example, as early as 1909, Shelford visited Volo Bog with his students (e.g., Mark, 1959).

The Ecological Society of America and the Ecologists Union

In 1915, the Ecological Society of America was formed. The formation of this society of ecologists came about through a series of communications between Shelford, Cowles, and Robert Wolcott (e.g., Coker, 1991). Shelford was chosen as the first president of ESA, with Cowles and Wolcott serving as members of the board. One area of interest to the members was the preservation of natural areas, and in 1917 the Committee on Preservation of Natural Conditions was formed with Shelford serving as chair. From 1917 through 1929, Shelford served as chair of the preservation committee, and continued to work within the ESA until 1945 (e.g., Coker, 1991).

The members of the Committee on Preservation of Natural Conditions quickly realized that the preservation of natural areas needed cooperation between many agencies and organizations including federal and state agencies, private agencies, and politicians. Over the years, the committee prepared report after report on the scientific merit of the natural areas, and justifications for saving the areas. The goal of this ecological information was to affect the management plans of the agencies. Yet, the committee only had limited success in influencing preservation through discussions with the various agencies, and lobbying. It became clear that to progress with conservation, the committee needed financing that it did not have (e.g., Coker, 1991).

For years, the members of the Ecological Society of America disagreed on the role of the society in preservation. Many of the members regarded the Society as a scientific body, rather than an activist society. As such, this faction did not deem it proper for a scientific body to get involved in politics, or pressuring for a cause. This can be seen in 1937 when the ESA rejected a proposal to allocate 35 cents

from each member's dues to support preservation (Croker, 1991). The dissent came to a head in 1945 when the ESA recommended amending its bylaws to preclude the ESA taking direct action to influence legislation, thereby relegating the organization to an advisory capacity (Croker).

In 1946, a group of ecologists, including Shelford, formed the Ecologists Union to preserve natural areas and encourage scientific work in those areas. The activities of the EU included vigorous lobbying. Membership increased rapidly with the addition of scientists who were not trained in ecology. Vice-President of the Ecologists Union George Fell (a botanist who had taken courses from Shelford) and other members of the EU board further widened the scope of the Ecologists Union by inviting membership by nonscientists from various walks of life with talents and skills that would aid preservation efforts (Coker, 1991). The inclusion of all people from tycoons, to business people, to housewives proved to be a turning point in the conservation movement.

The Nature Conservancy

The newly formed Ecologists Union also suffered from a lack of funding in their preservation efforts. After identifying many natural areas in the Chicagoland area in need of preservation, Vice-President of the EU George Fell temporarily relocated to Washington, D.C. in 1949 where he helped the EU set up an office. Fell had no salary from the EU, and his wife supported them both as a medical technician (Scobell, 1992). It was there that the Ecologists Union transitioned to become The Nature Conservancy, incorporated in 1951 (e.g., Iwanicki, 2007), with Fell as its Executive Director. Fell was initially the only paid employee of The Nature Conservancy (Birchard, 2005).

While, the Ecologists Union focused on campaigning to preserve natural areas, The Nature Conservancy credits Fell for changing its focus to protecting land through purchase (e.g., Scobell, 1992). To achieve this, Fell was a proponent of using the talents of people from a variety of backgrounds, rather than just scientists (e.g., Iwanicki, 2007; Scobell, 1992). His aim was to create a national organization that would train and organize people in fund raising efforts. Until the emergence of the Nature Conservancy, the focus of conservation had been primarily on preserving large, scenic lands (Birchard, 2005). Fell helped change the direction of conservation to include all kinds of wild habitats – from deserts to swamps to bogs. He believed that samples of each type of natural habitat needed to be preserved (Birchard). It took several years of growing pains before The Nature Conservancy made its first land acquisition.

Among the first few purchases was Volo Bog, the first Nature Conservancy acquisition in the Northwest Indiana/Chicagoland region (Iwanicki, 2007). Volo Bog, located in northeastern Illinois, is one of the few local bogs that manifests all of the stages of bog succession (Sheviak & Haney, 1973). Volo Bog has been much celebrated and studied by scientists (Greenberg, 2002). Beginning with visits by Shelford and his students in 1909 (Mark, 1958), educators and scientists have been conducting field trips to Volo Bog. For example, a field trip conducted by former Shelford student S.C. Kendeigh

brought 50 students in seven station wagons to study the plant and animal ecology (Mark, 1959). In 1923, Waterman, a former Cowles' student, produced the first scientific publication on Volo Bog (Waterman, 1921). Since then, the bog has been a source of inspiration for nature lovers, educators, and scientists as a "living laboratory" (Mark, 1959). For these reasons, Fell prepared the documentation justifying the acquisition of Volo Bog by The Nature Conservancy (Iwanicki).

In 1957, George Fell conducted a number of meetings in the Chicagoland area with Cyrus Mark, the first Executive Director of the Illinois chapter of The Nature Conservancy (Iwanicki, 2007) regarding the purchase of Volo Bog. Through a series of negotiations with the owner of Volo Bog, Claude Garland, and many other interested parties, both Volo Bog and neighboring Wauconda Bog were purchased by The Nature Conservancy in 1958, and both areas are preserved to this day (Iwanicki).

Credit is due George Fell for creating the plan initiated in the State of Illinois, but then adopted in Indiana and other states, to dedicate nature preserves, and shepherd them in to the hands of the state government (e.g., Greenberg, 2002; Scobell, 1992). The acquisition of Volo Bog was the model for this process. After its purchase by the Nature Conservancy, Volo Bog was first conveyed to the University of Illinois (e.g., Greenberg, 2002) and then to the State of Illinois for protection (e.g., Iwanicki, 2007).

The preservation of Volo Bog can be seen as an example of the importance of people from all walks of life getting involved in conservation. Cyrus Mark, Executive Director of the Illinois chapter of The Nature Conservancy, was a businessman with a keen interest in preservation, who successfully raised the funds for the acquisition of Volo Bog. Cyrus Mark employed many successful strategies in his fund-raising efforts from emphasizing the scientific and educational values of the land, to pointing out that contributions were tax-deductible (Mark, 1958). This was the first time in the chapter's history that there was an appeal to the public for help in raising funds (e.g., Greenberg, 2002). Many people were instrumental in the success of the fund-raising. One of note was local botanist Dr. Margery Carlson, the secretary of the Illinois chapter of The Nature Conservancy (e.g., Greenberg, 2002). It took almost 1300 contributions from organizations and individuals (including teachers and students) to cover the cost of the acquisition (Mark, 1959).

It is interesting to note that a similar expansion from predominately scientists to the inclusion of people from all walks of life was occurring in other preservation movements. Most famously in the region was the formation of the Save the Dunes Council in 1952 to protect the habitat of the sand dunes along the shores of Lake Michigan. The organization had at its helm Dorothy Buell, a housewife, and the efforts of the Council culminated in the establishment of the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore (e.g., Engel, 1983). Within the first year of its existence the Council had the opportunity to purchase Cowles Bog for the price of back taxes. The Council did so with funds from a number of organizations and individuals, and both Cowles Bog and Pinhook bog became National Landmarks in 1966. It is noteworthy that the dedication of these bogs was conducted by Stanley A.

Cain, a student of Henry Chandler Cowles, the first president of The Nature Conservancy, and the first ecologist to serve in a subcabinet position in the federal government (e.g., Engel).

Today, The Nature Conservancy is the largest environmental organization in the world with offices in each of the 50 states in the United States, and numerous countries worldwide. Each year more than a million acres are acquired for protection, with more than 120 million acres being conserved to date (Birchard, 2005). This is the organization that began over 50 years ago with just one paid employee. It is important to recognize the role that the habitat and the people of the Northwest Indiana/Chicagoland region played in creating this successful organization. The natural areas of the region have been a "... well-spring of inspiration and understanding...", and this "...section of Lake Michigan shoreland has made and can make numerous significant ripples on the thought, understanding, and life in the United States...". (Willard, 1975).

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