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Prairie Reverie: What Does the Word Prairie Mean in Postprairie Illinois?

JACK SHOUBA

ABSTRACT The meaning of the word “prairie” seems to have changed in recent years, as the Silicon Prairie replaced the *Silphium* prairie. There are bewildering uses of prairie that have nothing to do with native grasslands. The word is often used in a generic way, such as calling farmland, a vacant lot, or other open space a prairie. It is frequently used evocatively, as in Lakewood Prairie, a subdivision without a lake, a wood, or a prairie; a shopping center with no prairie for miles around is called Prairie View. Oxymorons like prairie golf or prairie fishing are common. Prairie reverie is a thoughtful meditation on the disappearance of the tallgrass prairie.

KEY WORDS oxymoron, prairie

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee, One clover, and a bee. And revery. The revery alone will do, If bees are few. —Emily Dickinson (1755)

Emily Dickinson would not have seen an Illinois prairie. She uses the word prairie symbolically, not literally. Most Illinois residents of today know little of the prairie ecosystem, yet the word prairie is commonly used. This paper explores some of those uses.

The relationship of people to prairie has undergone a series of changes over the years. Native Americans felt that they were a part of nature; they knew the plants and their uses, and did not feel the land was theirs to own. Explorers marveled at the wildflowers and the animal life. Settlers began buying and selling land. Though they often faced hardships on the prairie, they celebrated the beauty of the land and soon recognized the richness of prairie soil. After the invention of “the plow that broke the prairie,” farmers converted almost all of the prairie land to agriculture. Now farmland is being turned into subdivisions and shopping centers.

By the 1960s, virtually all of the Illinois prairie had been lost and the word prairie was seldom heard. If prairie was part of the name of a place, like Prairie du Rocher (1722), Garden Prairie (1853), Seven Mile Prairie (1830s), Fancy Prairie (~1850), Prairie Center (1854), Prairie Repose Cemetery (1859), or Prairie Township, it was usually because there really were prairies in the area when the places were named.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the first prairie restorations in Illinois were begun, and the state of Illinois purchased Goose Lake Prairie for a state park. Citizen groups formed to save or restore prairies. I was involved in starting a group called “Save the Prairie Society” whose goal was to preserve Wolf Road Prairie in Westchester, Illinois. We found that people did not know what a prairie was, but were eager to learn, so we presented programs and held field trips and educational events to fill that need.

As I visited prairie remnants over the years, I started to see the word prairie used more and more, usually in a context that did not involve actual prairies. Fascinated with this change in the relationship of people and the land that was happening before my eyes, I started photographing things named prairie that were not prairies. I call them prairie oxymorons.

As my collection grew, I decided to arrange them in groups as if we were following a person’s life on the prairie. Nearly all of the following prairies are from Illinois; most are from the northeastern part of the state. Similar examples can be found in several other midwestern states.

BIRTH

Prairie Point Obstetrics and Gynecology.

SCHOOLS

Miscellaneous

Indian Prairie School District, Grand Prairie Transit (school buses).

Preschools

Prairie Pals, Prairie View Montessori.

Elementary Schools

Lincoln Prairie Elementary, South Prairie Elementary, Prairie Grove Elementary, Prairie View Grade School (which does have a view of a prairie reconstruction).

Middle Schools

Prairie Trail School, Prairie Knolls Middle School.

Junior High Schools

Prairie Central, Prairie Grove, Oak Prairie.

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High Schools

Prairie Central, Prairie Ridge.

College

Prairie State University.

VEHICLES

Prairie Ford, Prairie Used Truck Center, Kawasaki Prairie (ATV).

BUSINESS PARKS

Prairie Center, Prairie Professional Center, Sycamore Prairie Business Park.

BUSINESS RELATED

Silicon Prairie, E*Prairie, Prairie Web, Prairie Capital Advisors, Prairie Dogs (stocks).

SUBDIVISIONS

The Prairie, Hampshire Prairie, Native Prairie, Stone Prairie, Sunset Prairie; Prairie Creek, Prairie Crossings, Prairie Glen, Prairie Highlands, Prairie Knoll, Prairie Lakes, Prairie Lane, Prairie Meadows, Prairie Pointe, Prairie Ponds, Prairie Ridge, Prairie Trail, Prairie Villas, Prairie View, Prairie View Estates, Prairie Views.

HOUSING

Prairie View Apartments, Prairie Cape Cod, Prairie Shores, Prairie Springs, Prairie Star; advertisements for “a prairie community,” “little house on the prairie,” “big houses on the prairie.”

BUILDING A HOUSE

Prairie Blueprint, Prairie Business Credit, Prairie Cement, Prairie Community Bank, Prairie Forge Group, Prairie Land Realty, Prairie Steel Construction, Prairie Structures, “prairie kitchen,” “Prairie Flowers” bathroom, Prairie’s Hardscape, Prairie Fox Farm (greenhouse and nursery), Prairie Acres Tree Farm.

FURNISHING A HOME

Stores

Prairie Gourmet, Prairie Loft, Prairie Sampler, Prairie Shop Quilts, Prairie Vacuum.

Photo 1. Does a clump of blazing star count as a prairie view?

Photo 2. This prairie is a common sight in the Chicago region.
PRAIRIE PLEASURES AND TREASURES

Activities

Art on the Prairie, Little House on the Prairie (book, TV series), little playhouse on the prairie, Prairie Rose (film), Prairie Fest (several), prairie fishing, Prairie Harbor Yacht Club, Prairie Flight Powered Parachutes, Prairie Winds Emporium.

Golf

Prairie Isle Golf Club, Prairie Landing Golf Club, Prairie Pines Golf Course, Prairie Land Golf Carts.

Clothing

Prairie Pants; Prairie Hunter and Prairie Trekker (boots).

Travel

Prairie Land Tours, Little House on the Prairie B&B, Prairie Inn, Prairie House Country Inn.

Antiques

Burnt Prairie Antiques and Collectibles, Prairie Peddlar (sic) Antiques, Prairie Town Antiques, Pride of the Prairie Antiques.

Music

Prairie Blues, Prairie Wind Ensemble and “prairie sketches” (classical), “Prairie Wind” (pop); prairie folk, rock, hip hop, and rap.

MEDICAL AND HEALTH

Dental

Prairie Meadows Dental, Prairie Point Dental, Prairie Valley Dental, Prairie View Orthodontics.

Food

Prairie Bran and Prairie Grain (bread), Prairie Pure Cheese, Light Prairie Honey, Illinois Prairie Corn Chowder, Prairie Hybrids corn, Prairie City Bakery, PrairieKitchen cookies, Prairie Harvest Salad (with oranges and cranberries), Prairie Blaze popcorn, Prairie Farms (dairy products).

Cookbooks

Prairie: Cuisine from the Heartland, New Prairie Kitchen, Prairie Home Bread.

Produce

“Prairie produce,” Prairie View Farm Market, Heritage Prairie Market.

Other

Prairie dishes, Prairie Cleaners, Prairie Advocate and Prairie Flame (newspapers), Prairie Hill Recycling and Disposal Facility.

SHOPPING CENTERS

Prairie Meadows, Prairie Stone, Prairie Valley Center, Prairie View, Prairiefield Center.

PARKS

Long Prairie Trail, Prairie Path, Prairie Park, Prairie Park Arboretum, Prairie Trail Park.

CHURCHES

Belle Prairie Missionary Baptist, Oswego Prairie United Methodist, Shepherd of the Prairie Lutheran, Prairie Baptist, Prairie Dell Presbyterian.

FOOD AND DRINK

Restaurants

Glen Prairie, Prairie Cafe, Prairie Grass, Prairie Inn, Prairie Peddlar (sic), Prairie Pub, Prairie Tap.

Beverages

Prairie Fume, Prairie Lager, Prairie Path Golden Ale, Prairie Rain (water), Prairie Sun, PrairieBerry Winery, Prairie Rock Brewing, Golden Prairie Microbrewery.

Photo 3. Many shopping centers and businesses use the word prairie in their name.
Other Medical

Prairie Center (hospital), Prairie Orthotic and Prosthetic, Fox Prairie Medical Group, Prairie Medical Center, Prairie Eyecare, Prairie Heart Institute, Prairie View Animal Hospital.

RETIREMENT COMMUNITIES AND ASSISTED LIVING

Prairie Garden, Prairie Gardens, Prairie Ridge, Prairie Crossing Supportive Living, Prairie View Assisted Living, Prairie View Care Center, Prairie Winds.

CEMETERIES

Prairie Cemetery, Prairie Repose Cemetery.

MISCELLANEOUS

Punctuation Prairie, Prairie Populism, vacant lot prairies in Chicago and Detroit.

“These were celebrated, American breasts, engineered by silicon to be as broad and bountiful as the prairie.” (The Economist obituary of model and television personality Anna Nicole Smith).

SPELLING

There are numerous examples of prairie being spelled “praire” or “prarie” on road signs, newspaper articles, real estate ads, and maps. GPS and internet searches should include prairie, praire, and prarie to find all prairies.

CONCLUSIONS

The word prairie has been used, abused, and misspelled in recent years in ways not related (or very indirectly related) to its biological meaning as a grassland. The word seems to mean different things to different people, but what is clear is that it is a very evocative word. Prairie is associated with beauty, freedom, rustic wild space, peace, solitude, nature, fields of wildflowers, sunshine, unplowed wilderness, and unlimited potential.

People are attracted to nature and open space, or at least the idea of nature. Naming subdivisions prairie is part of a trend in recent years to use nature words like meadow, creek, woods, lake, pond, or oak in subdivision names. In doing so, we seem to be memorializing prairie rather than conserving it. The naming of entities as prairie is empty of meaning. It is analogous to the genocide of Native Americans followed by “honoring” them with the names of sports teams.

Conservationists can build support for the preservation and restoration of prairies and other natural communities by capitalizing on this interest in prairie and all that it evokes. However, given the many uses of the word prairie, education should be an important component of preservation efforts.