WHY THE ILLINOIS SETTLERS CHOSE FOREST LANDS

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In some accounts of the gradual conversion of most of central and northern Illinois into farm lands, the early farmers are made to appear simple-minded because they occupied forested areas instead of the more fertile prairies. The two first-occupied southern districts, near the Mississippi and the Wabash, were well settled before 1818. From this beginning, "the frontier line of settlement moved steadily northward, more rapidly along the streams and forested belts than in the prairie" (Ridgley, 1921, Geography of Illinois, p. 144). Ridgley quotes H. H. Barrows (1910, Geography of the Middle Illinois Valley): "The prairies of Illinois aroused the wonder of all early travelers. They were generally shunned by the first comers for several reasons:

(1) Absence of trees was thought to mean that they were infertile.

(2) Timber was imperatively needed for buildings, fences, and fuel.

(3) They did not afford running water for stock or mills.

(4) There was no protection from the bitter winds of winter, which, above all else, made that season disagreeable.

(5) To the farmer, the prairies, with their tough sod and matted roots constituted a new and altogether unknown problem."

Barrows then proceeds: "With the growth of population all the woodland was presently occupied, and newcomers were crowded out upon the prairie. The small prairies were presently encircled by a belt of farms. Later, another ring was established inside the first, and farther out on the prairie, and by a continuation of the process the entire prairie was finally occupied."

Two sets of conditions have changed so gradually as the result of this occupation that we have quite failed to grasp how profound the changes have been. It is almost impossible for us to visualize first, how few and how primitive were the facilities and resources available to farmers of the period between 1820 and 1850, and second, how greatly different from the present condition of prairie lands was that which the early farmers experienced. The difficulties of attempting to farm prairie lands were real and formidable. First place among them may be assigned to the generally poor drainage of the flat or gently rolling prairie uplands. Poor drainage was emphasized in 1932 by E. A. Norton and R. S. Smith as the foremost condition contributing to both absence of trees and tardiness of occupation. Artificial drainage was begun tardily, and took many years to accomplish. Though it has gone too far in many areas, and though resulting changes have been profound, the more extensive prairie flats are still flooded several feet deep after heavy rains. Putting those flats under cultivation amounted to actual reclamation

projects, entirely beyond the reach of small communities of pioneer farmers. Some of them were carried out only after surrounding areas had been farmed for sixty years. One quotation from a history of Cumberland County (J. H. Battle, 1884, p. 114) will illustrate the drainage problem. "The early settlements were all made in some point of timber, as Muddy Point, Spence's Bend, Neal's Ford, Greenup, Woodbury and Hear Creek; thus encircling the central part of the county, which for years was almost a marsh, water standing all over the prairie portion until August . . . There was little natural drainage, and the rain fell upon the ground, after saturating the soil, until the whole prairie area was one great swale." The statement is probably exaggerated, but poor drainage may well have been the basis of the feeling by some settlers and by later historians that prairie lands were infertile. The next sentence in Battle's description: "Accustomed to a timbered and rolling country, the first settlers could not believe that the open land could ever be tilled; and it was practically impossible for the pioneers, few in number and limited in resources, to cultivate it." I believe we can readily credit at least some of the farmers with enough common sense to recognize it as a problem of drainage, even though in places it remained for years an insoluble problem.

An article, "The Prairie State" (Atlantic Monthly 7:579-595, 1861) includes an account of the railroad begun in 1845 to run from Chicago to Galena. The first part was built as far west as Des Plaines river. "These twelve miles of road between the Des Plaines and Chicago had always been the terror of travelers. It was a low, wet prairie, without drainage, and in the spring and fall almost impassable. At such seasons one might trace the road by the broken wagons and dead horses that lay strewn along it."

The solution of the drainage problem probably came about automatically and simply. Not all prairie areas were so flat and wet, nor did everyone regard them as useless. Even in 1818 many prospective settlers had an ambition to find quarter-sections including "a proper proportion" of forest and prairie. Such pioneers as Richard Flower and Morris Birkbeck recognized from the first that the prairies could be highly productive. The early settlements were more commonly at the border of forest and prairie rather than well within extensive forests, and the ordinary early use of prairie lands was for grazing. Increasing demand for new areas to farm led to conversion of the higher parts of rolling prairie pastures into plowland, in spite of primitive plows and limited animal power.

Development of steel plows in the 1830's accelerated further breaking up of prairie sod, solving difficulty No. 5 of Harrows' account, and extending cultivated fields into flatter and lower areas. In turn this concentrated attention squarely upon the drainage problem. Open ditching, land-furrow plowing, shortening and deepening stream-channels by dredging, and tile drains, were the expedients tried. The last two were truly effective. These and other changes worked by man had a cumulative effect in accelerating run-off and erosion, thus further deepening channels and lowering ground-water levels.

The water-supply problem, the windbreak and hedge problem, the fencing and fuel problems, and the hazards of prairie roads, were other difficulties in prairie farming which likewise have gradually been solved, each a story in itself in which Illinois farmers played a major part.

What at first would seem a mere annoyance to prairie pioneers was another serious problem, which is nearly forgotten today. Another quotation from Battle (p. 332) will make it clear: ". . . the swarms of "green-headed flies" which infested the prairie practically disbarred the traveler from using the larger part of the day in prosecuting his journey. The unfortunate animal exposed to their attack would be covered with these vicacious insects . . . and such was the vigor and effectiveness of their attacks that no animal could sustain it long . . . work and travel were practically suspended from nine o'clock until evening. The timber was free from these pests and the early trails led along its border, but even those trails were abandoned in the heat of the day. Traveling was consequently done principally at night, which gave rise to very serious experiences."

In the Illinois Monthly Magazine for July, 1851, an unnamed writer, probably James Hall, the "conductor" of the magazine, describes the "buffalo paths" resulting from migrations between the alluvions of the larger rivers and the upland plains. "In the heat of the summer they would be driven from the latter by prairie flies."

Lively accounts of the greenheads are found in several papers, notably that of C. W. Short (1846) and reminiscences of F. M. Perryman (1908), describing conditions in 1842. These flies are small tabanids (horseflies and deerflies) of one or several species probably in the genus Chrysops. Their more or less amphibious larvae presumably developed in the prairie sloughs and mudholes. Such wet areas were reduced in number and extent as the settlers gradually were able to drain the prairies, and in consequence the fly problem was solved.

The difficulties and hazards of early occupation of prairie lands are thus seen to be numerous, definite and formidable. Psychological reasons for avoiding prairie were probably eliminated before the physical handicaps were overcome. A summary listing of the difficulties, with emphasis on the first two as most important, might be as follows:

Poor drainage; Lack of timber for buildings, fences and fuel; Difficulties of tillage; Lack of protection from wind, especially in winter; Difficulties of travel and transport; Water-supply difficulties; Prairie flies.