

The Prairie Wind

Midewin Heritage Association's Source for News



Spring 2009

Boys Build Bench at Bailey Bridge

On May 30th Nathaniel Hunnewell and members of his Morris Boy Scout Troop 471 will complete an Eagle Scout project, 2 years in the making. It will provide not only an opportunity to rest along one of Midewin's trails, but also a chance to learn more about a WW II vintage bridge that spans one of Midewin's creeks.

Linking the trail system across Midewin from east to west requires crossing Prairie Creek several times. The Forest Service (FS) was looking into what options they had to install a bridge that could be relocated if the trail system was adjusted in the future. They found a clue to solving that problem, in an old rusting Bailey Bridge that had been installed at the arsenal many years before.

The modular bridge, born of necessity during WWII, was the brainchild of Donald Bailey a civil servant in the British War Office. The bridge was designed so that it could be assembled and disassembled like parts of a giant Erector set. Used during that war and also during the Korean and Vietnam wars, they were the solution to spanning rivers or gorges quickly and with the use of little heavy equipment. By the end of WWII, the British and American armies had built thousands of Bailey Bridges, yet there was still enough parts on hand to build a 200 mile long bridge, had they desired to do so.

The FS found that the Bailey Bridge Company was still in operation and materials were available for purchase. Encouraged by our Association (MHA), the FS saw a chance to get the project

completed by giving volunteers a once in a lifetime opportunity to help build such a bridge. In the fall of 2006 letters were sent to folks who had worked on previous Midewin Passport in Time projects and to local military service organizations. Soon an energetic and excited workforce, including some folks who assembled Bailey Bridges while in the military, was formed.

Although touted, as requiring only a "small number of men" to move the pieces, the teams found moving 10-foot long panels, weighing 560 pounds each, was best done by cable rigged Bobcats. The panels were joined with 6-inch long, 1 7/8-inch diameter panel pins and nuts. The technical advisor from the Bailey Bridge Company said that it was likely that some of the parts being used were part of the WWII overproduction. Just five days on the project and the team cantilevered the 140-foot bridge out over Prairie Creek, then pushed it across to the opposite bank. Decking and other details were completed the following summer.

Starting in 2007 Nathaniel worked with Midewin staff to develop a concept for improvements around the Bailey Bridge, including some brush clearing and rock work. The final design included a sitting bench overlooking Prairie Creek and an interpretive sign explaining the history of the Bailey Bridge and how volunteers erected the one at Midewin. Nathaniel initiated a fund raising effort that netted sufficient money to purchase the building supplies for the bench and for the production of two copies of the interpretive sign. Using Forest Service standards and the design parameters the MHA had developed for interpretive

signage, Nathaniel worked with Brant Printing and I-Zone to produce a 2x3 foot high pressure laminate sign, made up of 13% plastic resin and 87% paper. The sign will be mounted on a metal pedestal and erected near the bridge on the bank of Prairie Creek. The MHA May workday is also scheduled for the 30th and we hope to visit Nathaniel and his fellow Scouts as they complete their project.

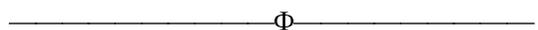
Interpretive Development

The MHA continues to work with Midewin staff on interpretive signage for Midewin.

As more and more of Midewin is opened to the public and folks explore more than 6000 acres on their own, they may not understand the connection between what they see and what has, or is happening at Midewin. That is where interpretive signage can help.

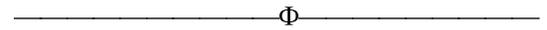
The Iron Bridge Trailhead is located at two historic farmsteads, owned at one time by the Morgan and Rodgers families. Today nothing is left of the farm buildings except their foundations. These sites have been the subject of archeological investigations and have been found eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. To help the public better understand the significance of these sites; the Forest Service plans to place interpretive signage nearby.

A large tract of land just south of the trailhead is now undergoing prairie restoration. In the future the public will be able to get a sense of what the prairie pioneers first saw when they settled this area in the 1830s. We are looking at the potential for signage at additional locations such as a historic cemetery and ammo bunker, where we have the opportunity to tell more about the history of this place we call Midewin.



New Address for MHA

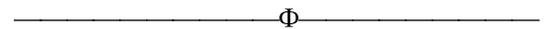
We've had a change in our mailbox number at the Wilmington Post Office. Please make a note in your records that our box number has changed to "54". If you have recently sent correspondence to our old box number don't worry as the Post Office is forwarding it, at least for the time being, to our new box: 54.



Association Membership

The purpose of the Midewin Heritage Association is to promote an understanding of the rich cultural and natural history of the land, which today is Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie; along with those surrounding areas having a historical connection. Your membership in the Midewin Heritage Association reflects your appreciation of the historical aspects of Midewin and strengthens our advocacy for historic interpretation and preservation. Membership also brings *The Prairie Wind* to you quarterly, and a 10% saving on most items at Midewin's bookstore.

For information on the Midewin Heritage Association or a membership application, write to us at PO Box 54, Wilmington, IL 60481, or contact our president, Lorin Schab at 708-349-9563 or LLSCHAB44@Yahoo.com.



April Workday Report

We had a good workday at Starr's Grove Cemetery on April 18th cleaning a number of tombstones, and cutting and piling up brush to be chipped at a later date. The shrubs we cut were primarily honeysuckle and were the last enclave of invasives inside the cemetery fence line. This 160-year old cemetery is now completely cleared of brush.

Our next workday is scheduled for May 30th at 10:00 AM. A few days before then we will e-mail specifics on what activity we will be doing. We will meet at the Midewin HQ



The Lincoln Connection

In celebration of Abraham Lincoln's 200th birthday, Midewin is featuring two special tours that highlight Lincoln's connection to the area around Midewin. The Memorial Day weekend tour; "Lincoln's Boys in Blue", will visit several historic cemeteries where the lives of Will County Civil War veterans will be discussed, as well as the military units which answered the 16th President's call to arms. The May 23rd tour, conducted at six in the evening, will include an easy ½ mile round trip walk into Starr's Grove Cemetery.

A second tour, "Midewin's Lincoln Connection" will give the public a chance to learn about Lincoln's connection to the area in and around what today is Midewin. On this tour participants will visit a number of historic sites and learn about Lincoln's part in the Black Hawk War, his advocacy for the Illinois & Michigan Canal, the local response to his call for troops during the Civil War, and where the President's funeral train passed through Midewin on his final journey to Springfield. This tour is scheduled only once, on June 27th at 10:00 AM.



Midewin Explorations 2009

The tour season for 2009 began earlier this month, but difficulties on Midewin's website may be preventing some from getting information on the tours. Although the dates and times of the tours are available, there have been problems in updating the description of the tours for 2009.

There are several new tours listed on the schedule, but not described. The "Photo Tour" will lead visitors on an auto caravan to photogenic spots in areas currently closed to the public, giving folks the opportunity to take pictures of sites that are here today, but may be gone tomorrow.

"Gardening with Prairie Plants" will show you how to use native plants to create a native garden in your own backyard. This is a walking tour on the grounds of the Midewin Headquarters compound.

The kick-off of the historical tours at Midewin is on Saturday May 23rd when the "Ghosts of the Ammunition Plant" will be conducted at 12:30 PM, and "Lincoln's Boys in Blue" tour will be at 6:00 PM. The "Ghosts of the Ammunition Plant" tour will be presented twice more, at 12:30 PM on July 18th and September 19th. The "Prairie Farmer" tour is scheduled for 12:30 PM on May 30th and again on August 20th. The special tour, "Midewin's Lincoln Connection", will be conducted once at 10:00 AM on June 27th. Two tours of Midewin's "Historic Cemeteries" will be provided, once on June 20th and once again on September 10th at 10:00 AM.

Campfire Programs are scheduled for June 6th and July 18th at 7:30 and on August 8th and September 12th at 7:00. These evening programs are held at the campfire circle located on the old Rodgers' farmstead at the Iron Bridge Trailhead. Program subjects will be announced at a later date.

All tours and campfire programs are free this year, so be sure to take advantage of these events. Check

www.fs.fed.us/mntp/ for a complete schedule of tours and programs.



Arsenal Worker Statue at Midewin?

In our summer 2008 newsletter we happily reported that in July workers cleaning up an overgrown piece of property in Braceville, just 15 miles southwest of Midewin, had uncovered a six-foot tall bronze arsenal worker. The whereabouts of that statue had been unknown since it was stolen in 2005 from near the Lincoln National Cemetery.

Following the theft, a donor stepped forward and contributed \$30,000 to have the statue recast. Today that second statue stands outside the National Cemetery, mounted on the original base, which lists the arsenal workers who lost their lives in two separate explosions at the ammunition plant.

We announced in our last newsletter that a number of structures were being removed from Midewin's demolition list. This includes the foundations of the Group 2 Load, Assemble & Pack line (LAP2), where the 1942 explosion occurred, as it has been identified as a site worthy of historic interpretation. We felt that having the original statue located here would be very fitting, and recently we have been advised that Midewin's Leadership Team agrees. The LAP2 area is still closed to the general public. However, Midewin has indicated that the statue could be located temporarily at the Welcome Center, until an interpretive plan has been approved for the LAP2 area, a permanent spot for the statue has been identified and the area has been opened to the public.

Since last fall the MHA has been corresponding with the Statue Committee which has been responsible for the creation of the two statues. We have learned that the original statue has been offered to the Village of Elwood,

although at this time they have not made a final decision on accepting the statue. If Elwood declines the offer, the MHA is ready to work with the Statue Committee and the Forest Service to see that the statue finds a fitting home at Midewin.



Got Spar Grass? – Lorin Schab

As I wander Midewin at this time of year, I often see the distinctive green spears of asparagus coming up along the old fence lines and railroad beds. The name asparagus in fact, is Greek for shoot or stalk. The plant is a member of the lily family, and is believed to be native to the eastern Mediterranean lands and Asia Minor. It commonly grows wild over much of that area today and in many places in the United States where it has escaped from cultivation. It has been found "wild" in so many places that there's been much argument as to where it actually originated. In the fall, the mature fern-like plant produces a red berry, a possible vehicle for its wide dissemination.

Asparagus has been grown in the United States since colonial times, but commercial production didn't begin until the mid 1800s. Michigan is one of the biggest producers of the crop in the US today. The plant likes well-drained soil. Thanks to what the glaciers have left behind, we have patches of that around Midewin, so it is not so odd that this plant could be cultivated here. Midewin even has an Asparagus Road Cemetery.

Often we think of the farms around Midewin as large tracts of land, hundreds of acres in size. And certainly this was the case of many of the farms, where dairy cows grazed and corn grew. But other farms were smaller and concentrated on growing vegetables that could be sold at local markets, or peddled to neighbors. I've heard these referred to as truck farms. Maybe because their produce was often sold off the back of a truck.

Just a few miles north of Midewin was one of those small acreage farms producing a variety of vegetables, including asparagus or spar grass as it is called by some in the Midwest. Thanks to Gayle Crompton's father we have a window into rural life in the 1920s and 30s. The following is taken from the "Memoirs of William R. Glasscock, Jr."

"In 1924, my father sold an 80-acre farm". With the proceeds "He bought a 1924 Model T Ford truck...and a 20-acre piece of ground on Route 4A, which became Route 66, a direct route between Chicago and Los Angeles. He built a gas station, a garage and a barn". (This was on northeast corner of today's intersection of Laraway Road and Route 53. Route 4A became part of Route 66 in 1926) "I got to run the trucks in the field when picking up vegetables" at the age of eight. "Two years later I was driving the truck in town while my father hocked vegetables. The year 1927 was a boom year. We would load the front porch of the gas station with vegetables on a Friday night and by Sunday night it would be empty. The vegetables were bought by people from Chicago, who drove out on Saturday or Sunday for a drive".

"I can still remember August of 1929 when my father said, 'We are coming on hard times'. Two months later, people in New York were jumping out of windows. During the depression, no one had any money. Prices were ridiculous; tomatoes and cucumbers were 10 cents a bushel and the basket cost 5 cents. I can remember peddling vegetables and the women saying to my father, 'But Mr. Glasscock, I don't have any money'. He would answer, 'I didn't ask about money. How many bushels do you want?' Maybe a week later we would be peddling again and a woman would come out with a dollar and hand it to my father".

"The asparagus business had been good and brought in money while the other crops were growing. We had been putting in new patches every year and now the farm was mostly asparagus. The

spring of '37 I graduated from Junior College. My father suggested he would lend me money to buy a used truck, in which I could haul asparagus to Chicago. So for \$475, I bought a 1935 Ford 1 ½-ton truck. I would start at 11 p.m. and load our own asparagus, then the neighbor's, and would be ready to leave by about midnight. Following US 66 to Chicago and South Water Street Market, I would be unloaded by 3 a.m. I would get home about 5 or 6 o'clock, almost time to go to work".

In this down-turned economy it is reassuring to look back a few generations and see that even in those hard times folks got by.