

Nine-Mile Prairie celebrates 25th year in UNL hands

By ALGIS J. LAUKAITIS / Lincoln Journal Star | Posted: Saturday, October 17, 2009 9:00 am

Nine-Mile Prairie, one of the rare tracts of virgin prairie in eastern Nebraska, celebrated its 25th anniversary under University of Nebraska-Lincoln management on Friday.

UNL invited about 50 people to the event, which also commemorated the 100th anniversary of John Weaver, the "father" of prairie ecology who did important research at Nine-Mile Prairie. Weaver received his undergraduate degree from the University of Nebraska in 1909.

"Nine-Mile Prairie needs to be better appreciated both by the university and the community," said the prairie's director, UNL Professor David Wedin.

Certain individuals and such groups as Wachiska Audubon have been passionate about the prairie, which attracts hundreds of visitors, he said.

Wedin said the university is trying to raise awareness of the prairie and its importance as a research facility and as a refuge for people who walk its trails, enjoy the quiet and watch butterflies and birds.

"Development will come to that corner of Lincoln. We need to have support and partnerships in place so we can work with neighbors and agencies and have a plan to protect that area," said Wedin, who has been prairie director for three years.

Ernie Rousek, 82, is among the many volunteers who have worked to preserve the 230-acre tract of virgin prairie. As chairman of the Wachiska Audubon, Rousek even tried to buy it from the Lincoln Airport Authority at one time but said they wanted too much money.

But Marguerite Hall provided half of the \$136,818 that allowed the University of Nebraska Foundation to buy the land, and the tract was preserved for future generations.

A memorial marker near the entrance to the prairie a mile west of Northwest 48th Street and Fletcher Avenue bears her name and that of her late husband, Neil, who was a volunteer manager at the prairie after he retired.

"A memorial to the Past, a joy to the Present, a heritage for the Future," reads the marker, which was dedicated in 1984 by the University of Nebraska Foundation and Nebraska State Historical Society.

Today, the prairie -- named because of its distance from the city's downtown -- is used by the university to study the conservation, management and restoration of tallgrass prairie.

"It has considerable value from a historic standpoint because all of the country around here was tallgrass prairie."

Old photographs taken from the top of the state Capitol show a sea of grass as far as the eye could see, he said -- "not a single tree and not even a shrub, just tallgrass prairie in all four directions."

Tallgrass prairie once covered 140 million acres of North America, but most of it was plowed under for agriculture and development. Today, less than 4 percent remains, according to the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve near the Kansas Flint Hills, where a large remnant of the original prairie can be found.

In addition to Nine-Mile, Lancaster County has the much larger, Spring Creek Prairie about three miles south of Denton. Spring Creek has an education center run by National Audubon. There are also smaller tracts of prairie like the one in Pioneers Park.

Rousek said Nine-Mile Prairie originally covered about 640 acres, but has been reduced in size over the years.

Researchers have found about 345 species of plants there, including the rare prairie white-fringed orchid. Numerous bird species also inhabit the prairie.

Among the changes Nine-Mile Prairie has undergone in the past 25 years is the view. What used to be a mostly unobstructed view to the south is now filled in part with a high-voltage power line approved by the Lincoln Electric System in 2005.

Wedin said the power line might have turned out differently if the university had sought broader support and given the prairie more attention.

The university is trying to change that. With the support of the Lincoln Airport Authority, it moved a fence and made a new entrance to the prairie. Plans call for moving two historical markers to a more prominent vista nearby and erecting a new sign near the entrance.

And, two years ago, Wedin started working with the Campus Recreation Center, which owns 80 acres south of the prairie. Now, both are involved in maintaining the five miles of trails that serve as fire breaks when sections of the prairie are burned each spring.

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