

A Path Through Owen Park

In a 1992 article, William Wineke of the Wisconsin State Journal wrote “Owen Park is a civilized place for civilized people who want to enjoy the beauty of summer, dream of nature and be disturbed only by the singing of finches.”

On an early autumn day 12 years after this statement was published, I set out in Owen Park to do exactly as recommended – enjoy beauty and undisturbed dreams of nature. A sign at the entrance carefully denoted the prairie and oak savannah sections of the park, and reminded me to please not stray from the trails that divided them. It was while appreciating the vivid contrast between prairie and savannah further along one of these trails, however, when I was suddenly struck with a rebellious urge. Checking for my fellow park enjoyers left and right, I snuck off into the savannah and hid behind a large oak tree.

Sitting very still in my secret spot, I watched old and young couples, children and parents, stroll past me and admire their surroundings. A vole took advantage of my distraction to check out the contents of my bag, and a chipmunk ran up to sniff my leg as if to ask, “What are you doing here?” Looking out across the trail into the prairie next door, my perspective became jumbled. Was my presence soiling my environment? It seemed a double-division was taking place – this path was separating both me from the ecosystems and the two types of ecosystems from each other. Why was it there?

Owen Park, situated on the west side of Madison, Wisconsin, offers a glimpse into changing American relationships to the landscape. Once outside the reaches of Euro-American settlement, this small area has transitioned from oak savannah to agricultural fields to a 'restored' nature conservancy that now consists mostly of prairie (Albert 1994). Owen Park has quickly come to represent a haven of nature for the appreciative (civilized?) visitor. Yet, the paths that define the composition of the park today follow the same lines which once divided the agricultural uses of the land (Visitor Information Board, Owen Park). This division represents the complexity of our cultural and material connections to the landscape, and the paradox of what we consider nature.

The paths of Owen Park have a long history. A French language and literature professor at the University of Wisconsin, Edward T. Owen, owned a farm on the land in the late 19th century (Thwaites 2004). Owen was likely well-off, as he owned several other parcels of land in the Madison area and is rumored to have been a member of a highly secret society based at Yale University. He used this land as his personal retreat, though it was foremost a farm (Wineke 1992). The area is thought to have been intensively farmed since settlement (Albert 1994). Just off the trails in the park, the old stone walls separating field and pasture can still be found, overgrown by newer vegetation. Relaxing at his farm in the country, Owen probably walked along these same stone walls from time to time, leaving his scholarly work for a break of fresh air and peaceful surroundings.

The ecosystems contained by those paths, however, have a much shorter history. The city of Madison bought the farmland in 1972, and it lay fallow for several years. In 1976, the city decided that the land should be reserved for a conservation park, and made

plans to restore the vegetation to a more ‘natural’ state. A year later, restoration work began, and continues today (Visitor Information Board). Now, several sections of prairie and oak savannah exist, each with noticeably varied species compositions. The paths for visitors are also highly managed – they are planted with short grasses and frequently mowed to contain the surrounding vegetation.

The City of Madison decided to designate the Edward T. Owen’s old farm as a conservation area in the height of the environmental movement of the 1970s. The land was named after its old owner, as a tribute to Owen’s fondness for city green spaces (Wineke 1992). The relatively new idea to restore an ecosystem to a particular state underscored the concept of the environment as something separate from everyday urban life (Andrews 1999).

As the land inside of Owen Conservation became increasingly more ‘natural’, the area outside of it became progressively more urban. In a comparison between an air photo taken in 1937 and one taken in 1976, the development of suburban housing around Owen Park during that time is vivid. Owen’s land goes from being one farm amongst many in an agricultural landscape to a starkly empty rectangle surrounded by suburbia. In the 28 years since that last aerial, development around the area has only intensified. This creates a widening visual contrast between the interior of Owen Park and the exterior landscape, and promotes a clearer dichotomy between environments associated with the park and those with the suburb.

Increasing divisions can also be found between both sides of the path separating the new savannah and prairie. Though the topography of the two sides does not vary, an interesting blueprint of these changes exists in the soil.

According to a 1978 soil survey, the pasture to north of the path of interest rests on Pecatonica silt loam soil, or PeC2 (USDA Soil Survey 1978). This particular soil type is associated 6 to 12 percent slopes in glaciated uplands, which fits the geography of the area perfectly (Mickelson 1979 and US Dept. of Interior 1983). Pecatonica silt loam soils have a very high fertility and are associated with mixed hardwood trees (USDA Soil Survey 1978). The suitability of the soil type to the vegetation and geologic history of this place demonstrates that the soil is probably not a happenstance product of recent disturbances, but rather the direct result of millenia of local processes. This is important when considering clues in the soil to more recent changes in the landscape.

Directly adjacent to the Pecatonica area on the soil map lies the soil order MdC2, or McHenry silt loam, of the McHenry series. McHenry soils are nearly identical to those of Pecatonica in geographic occurrence; the only real difference being a decreased fertility and water capacity (USDA Soil Survey 1978). The line separating the two soil types on the soil map appears to closely follow the division of pasture and field on the slightly earlier aerial map (USDA Soil Survey 1978 and USDA Aerial 1976).

The difference in soil fertility between the neighboring locales is likely not a coincidence. The more intensive use of soil nutrients required for crops probably led to the field area's developed of the McHenry soils, with decreased fertility. Since the latest aerial and the soil survey were done within two years of each other in the 1970s, the area wouldn't have had time to regain fertility even though it was no longer used for agriculture at that point.

Thus, the division of land uses carries an ecological legacy. The decision to reserve the northern, more fertile soil area to savannah and the southern, less fertile area

to prairie would be logical based on these soil differences. Broadleaf, deciduous tree stands require more nutrients than do grasslands. Continued separation will likely encourage the differences in the ground nutrients cycles, as soil-plant relationships tend to form positive feedback loops.

The few oaks still present in the interior of the park today are a testament to the transformed landscape of Owen Park. The 1976 air photo shows the 8 or so large trees (one being my earlier vantage point) between the pasture and field line, just on the side of the former. The trees are also highly visible in a 1937 air photo (USDA Aerial), meaning that they likely had been there through the second half of the 19th century. Not large enough to have existed before settlement of the area, they are probably second growth. The entire area that is now Owen Park was likely cleared after the first settlement, save the woods surrounding the entrance. The oaks along the path of interest must have been planted or allowed to grow sometime after this initial settlement. The trees appear healthy in the air photos, with broad leaf coverage. Oak trees love open canopies and full sun exposure, which corroborates their suitability to the area.

The Madison conservation parks adhere to common restoration methods that center on invasive species management. In addition to mowing, Madison's conservation parks began to use fire as a management tool in 1992. In a 1998 newsletter, Russ Hefty, the Conservation Resources Supervisor of Madison, promoted the wider use of fire as a management tool in Madison parks. Now a combination of cutting, fire, and herbicide application is used to kill exotic species. Native species are encouraged through seed planting, which focuses on diversity. The return of the redheaded woodpecker to the woodlands of Owen Park has been heralded as a sign of restoration success (Hefty 1998).

In the resource management of Owen Park, a visible selectivity is taking place. The lines between vegetation regimes are strikingly clear, suggesting that ecological differences between savannah and prairie are being maintained through such species management. As these lines adhere to a much older carving of the landscape for agricultural purposes, they are reinforcing a very human design. To reiterate Wineke's words, Owen Park is quite literally a 'civilized' place.

The title of "Conservation Park" presents an interesting paradox for the use of Owen Park. Restriction of access to the mowed paths gives a feeling of preservation to the area, as though the vegetation were an artifact behind a wall of glass in a museum. On the other hand, to conserve a resource, borrowing from Gifford Pinchot, precisely implies the intent to use it.

The Parks Division of the Department of Public Works seeks to accomplish both objectives. On its website it provides a list of the values and missions of Madison city parks. Much of the list consists of commitments to public use, enjoyment, and interests, but there are also commitments to preservation of the landscapes (City of Madison 2004). Thus, conservation for use meets preservation for nonuse.

For Owen Conservation Park, the lines between the two purposes are carefully drawn. They exist in the form of restricted paths through managed ecosystems. As we respectfully navigate them to access the beauty of Owen Park, however, we must remind ourselves of their history. Our conceptions of nature are defined in these paths – they are a continuing legacy of American relationships to the landscape.

After my first visit, I was drawn to Owen Park again and again. Each time, I would sneak back to my hiding place beneath the oak tree. The more I got to know my

spot, the more it ceased to represent a retreat. The small rodents became less curious of me just as I became less impressed by them. The passing park visitors one day were suddenly no more obnoxious than the cawing and gawking of birds around me. The last time I stepped back onto the path, I didn't care about getting caught. The hierarchies of nature had disappeared.