

Stories from the Medinah Wetlands

Natalie Ray
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For the last twenty years of my life, I have lived in the same little red brick house, on the same little hill, overlooking the same little wetlands. I came to know those wetlands as “the swamp.” I spent my youth playing, adventuring, and talking to that land. Yet only now am I beginning to take the time to listen to the stories and adventures “the swamp” whispered to me for all these years. The place I call home is a tiny suburb of Chicago called Medinah. It’s a small town with less than 2000 inhabitants and just two stop lights. Needless to say, Medinah does not have a strong industrial future, currently there are a handful of businesses that are struggling to survive. Not much can be said for Medinah, but much can be said for my little red brick house surrounded by the swamp. For me, this is where the mystery begins. Why would anyone build a house, or a town for that matter, in the middle of a swamp? Common sense would imply that the possibility of floods, large quantities of mosquitoes and many bothersome critters would keep people away. Yet that is not the case. There must be some reason people settled in this land. By revisiting my stories of “the swamp” and listening to the stories “the swamp” has to tell, I hope to uncover the answer to my question and find out if it is the best place for a house.

Before uncovering the stories of “the swamp,” I thought it best to classify and define the area in which I grew up. I remember how I categorized it long ago, but much has changed since then. As a child I knew every in and out of my swamp; no respectable ten year old who spent every possible moment of daylight in the same area wouldn’t. I knew how long it took to run from the massive willow tree through the soggy waters to the cattails. I knew that after a full night of rain, I could bring a raft and paddle through the marsh. I even knew that the broken and matted vegetation in the middle of grasses

meant that a family of deer rested there earlier. What I did not know though, is the definition of swamp. I really played in a marsh. When comparing the two, a swamp is more wooded. Marsh community species prefer standing water for long periods of time and are less than 30% woody vegetation. The cattail is often the most common plant, with irises and other water loving grasses growing freely.¹ I regularly saw cottontail rabbits, white-tailed deer, red foxes, Canadian geese, herons and pheasant. At one time, the marsh contained beavers, egrets, and wild turkeys.² Unfortunately, human inhabitation of the area drove out the beavers, egrets, and wild turkeys. I doubt that the first human inhabitants, the Native Americans, caused those animals to leave the area.

My first encounters with Native Americans, or their past, occurred in “the swamp,” and I later discovered the effects these people had on the lands. It began with my neighbor, who went on walks everyday at dusk. The old man and his dog would go out into the marshes, returning just before dark. One night he came back clutching something, which turned out to be asparagus and Indian arrowheads. He was either very lucky or knew exactly where to look, because for weeks after he came back I searched for asparagus and arrowheads. I found neither. I later learned¹ that the old man made sure to leave his house with full pockets. Even after learning his secret, I still wondered if Native Americans ever inhabited the marshes of Medinah. It is unlikely that any Native Americans made their homes in the marshes, but instead made camp in the surrounding higher grounds. The Algonkians lived in mat-covered huts that could easily be taken down and reassembled when they moved to hunt the buffalo and return to harvest their

¹ Illinois Department of Natural Resources, Field Guide to the Wetlands of Illinois (Illinois: State of Illinois, 2000) 92.

² Debbie Scott Newman, Creating Habitats and Homes for Illinois Wildlife (Springfield: University of Illinois, 2003) 15.

crops. The border between the marsh and grassland provided fertile soil that yielded enormous corn crops.³ Although farming may have caused minor erosion, I doubt that the Algonkians made any significant changes to the marshlands. A semi-nomadic group of people such as the Algonkians had little motive to engineer something as large as changing the drainage to the marshlands. The Native Americans lived in relative harmony in the marshlands for hundreds of years until the mid-1800s, when American farmers began to settle. Skirmishes broke out between Native Americans and settlers over land rights. The fights ended in 1833, when seventy-seven Native American chiefs signed a treaty in Chicago exchanging the present-day Illinois lands for lands in Iowa.⁴ That moment changed the marshlands and the surrounding area forever. The Native Americans left and the American settlers came.

People settle new lands all the time, each movement slightly changing the land and cementing a story in time. I have lived next to the marshes my entire life and do not know what it is like to move and start from scratch. Only a few neighborhood kids moved away and only a few moved in. My “swamp” stayed constant while the people slowly changed around it. “The swamp’s” history followed this pattern too. The Native Americans left and the first settlers filled in their spots. The Meacham family first settled the Medinah wetlands area. The Meachams claimed about 1,200 acres, much of which was heavily wooded.⁵ The wood provided posts for fencing and lumber for building houses. The John Deere plow easily tore through the deforested land in the late 1870’s, making Medinah a small farming community. There is little evidence of the woods

³ John Fridlund, The History of Itasca (Itasca: Itasca Historical Society, 1990) 3.

⁴ Fridlund 7.

⁵ Thompson 118.

today. The only clue to the wooded landscape is found in the street names of the surrounding area. With street names such as Poplar, Linden, Plum Grove and Sycamore, I can only imagine what the surrounding areas looked like. Newly plowed lands drastically changed the marshland landscape, causing soil erosion and introducing of foreign vegetation. In the late 1870's, drainage districts formed, changing the floodplains and drying out the wetlands.⁶ At this time the lands began to shrink and continued to get smaller with the oncoming growth of the railroad.

As argued in William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis*, the railroad played an important part in the development of Chicago. My younger self never saw the relationship trains had to my "swamp," but as I grew older the connection became more evident. Growing up, it felt like the same thing happened every summer night. I woke up in the middle of the night, sweating from the heat and humidity, and went to my windows. I pushed my windows open as far as they could go and stared out across the street. I stared into "the swamp" waiting for the train to pass through town. I saw the lights in the distance, heard the horn, and lay back down, trying to fall asleep again. The train failed to excite. To me, the train never changed; the Elgin/Big Timber line always went straight to Union Station. The train connected us to Chicago, just as intended. At first the railroad company named the line, "Chicago & Pacific," but it soon changed to "Milwaukee Road."⁷ The line connected Chicago, Medinah, and Elgin with the western United States. Initially, the plan called for the line to go through a neighboring town about five miles south of Medinah. Roselle Hough, founder of Roselle, another neighboring community, supposedly paid \$10,000 to have the stop moved from

⁶ Newman 16.

⁷ Thompson 45.

Bloomington to Roselle and Medinah. Hough predicted that the train would bring people and business to the small towns. He guessed correctly. The trains encouraged local dairy farmers to expand. The train conveniently brought dairy products from Medinah to Chicago to sell at the markets. Cows needed land to graze on. This demand caused the borders between the marshlands and the grasses to creep in on the marshes. By the turn of the century, people poured in from the city. In the 1920's, the Chicago Shriners, a group of wealthy Chicago business men, chose Medinah as the appropriate place to build their ultimate golf course and country escape. The trains caused the population to slowly grow; each family converted a small share of the natural, wild terrain into livable and farmable land. The population of Medinah and the surrounding areas boomed in the post-World War II era and eventually brought my family out from the city to "the swamp."

The best way to examine the effects of suburbanization on the wetlands is to closely examine my family's relationship with the swamp. As a child, it took me a long time to understand that my red brick house could have anything to do with the marshlands. During my favorite summer in "the swamp," it stormed for an entire night. The next morning I woke to find "the swamp" and my basement flooded. Naturally I did not care about the basement, but instead ran to get a pool raft. I proceeded to paddle and float my way through the flooded swamp. When I floated to the middle of "the swamp" I looked back at my house and realized what had happened. I recognized that my "swamp" had caused my house to flood. For the first time, I made the correlation between the type of land we live on and its effects on my house and my family. According to my grandmother, my grandfather built our house in 1961. The land needed to be built up, to

prevent any flooding that could result from living next to a swamp. My little red brick house stands on a little man-made hill. My grandmother also said that the county paved and widened the small gravel road, taking away about twenty-five feet from the marshes. My mother told me stories of her father hunting in the marshes and coming back with pheasants, rabbits, and deer. Those animals always managed to become the family's dinner for the following weeks. My grandfather took the rich topsoil from the marshes and moved it to the backyard. He used the fertile soil to grow a small garden filled with corn, squash, tomatoes, potatoes, apples, and pears. Other families bought land and built houses across the street, taking additional acres away from the marshes. When my mother and father moved in, my father cut down over a hundred of the trees my grandfather planted. My father turned most of the wood into woodchips for the landscaping. Not everything went into the chipper; some branches were dragged across the street and dumped into the marshes. From my bedroom windows, I can still see the piles of branches made twenty years ago that just won't decompose. Every human decision and action took land away from the wetlands. My family, along with my neighbors, all contributed to the quiet destruction of the marshlands. The wetlands continued to shrink well into the mid-nineties and reached a peak with the building of an expressway in 1995.

Suburbanization continued to affect the marshlands, through the need for better transportation routes. As a young girl, I concerned myself only with transportation issues that involved my bike. I rode my bike to the top of my street and looked on as they built an expressway behind my house. Most importantly, I watched them build an expressway on my "swamp." Outraged, I rode home. I returned a few weeks later to find the

expressway finished but not yet open. I made my way through the marshes and eventually put my bike on the road. I soon forgot my outrage as I peddled down the open road, the first to ride on the expressway. In the early nineties, some government official expressed concern about the growing Chicago suburbs and travel between them. The solution resulted in the building of the Elgin-O'Hare Expressway only hundreds of feet away from my house. The expressway cut through old farmland and parts of Medinah's wetlands. Its completion in 1995 angered many surrounding communities. Many felt that the suburbs did not need the expressway, especially since it did not connect Elgin to the O'Hare Airport as the name implies. Environmentalists protested the destruction of the natural wetlands. In 1996, the owner of the lands donated the 16 acres to the Medinah Park District in response to this concern.⁸ The park district still did not protect the lands. In the late 1990's the Medinah Park District almost sold the marshes. The buyer wanted to convert the land into ostrich farms. Again the environmentalists protested and, with homeowner help, defeated the sale. Luckily, in 2000, legislation was passed in the Illinois Senate giving communities grant money to purchase and restore wetlands. The Medinah Park District was given \$157,000 to acquire 23 acres of wetlands and coordinate activity between homeowners and environmental groups to preserve the habitats.⁹ Finally, after a hundred and fifty years of serious destruction, the Medinah Wetlands will stop getting smaller.

I look at the marshlands differently than I did as a child. It's no longer my playground and source of entertainment. I don't go on adventures wading through the

⁸ The Conservation Foundation, "List of Lands Protected," Land Preservation, Summer 2005, 20 Nov. 2005, www.theconservationfoundation.org.

⁹ The Illinois Department of Natural Resources, "Governor Blagojevich announces \$4.3 million in Conservation 2000 Grants to protect Illinois environment," 2003, 20 Nov. 2005, www.dnr.state.il.us.

waters and pushing aside cattails. Lately, I take the time to stop and listen to “the swamp,” and hear the water levels receding and the vegetation dying. Yet the shrinking wetlands are still there, and my question still must be answered. Why build a house next to a swamp? History demonstrates the two can coexist; they have for the last hundred and fifty years. There are many reasons connected in various ways: exploring the frontiers, transportation, and urban sprawl. I could even claim fate as a reason. Either way, a house by a swamp seems to be working; people are making it work. Yet over 90% of Illinois’ wetlands disappeared in the last hundred and fifty years, so should people keep letting the system work? Hopefully the Medinah Wetlands will not shrink again, but survive with the hope of expanding in the future. Decades ago, a house and a swamp could co-exist and even made people happy. In the present day, environmental restrictions would prevent the pair. It is impossible to change the past; we can only hope to change the future. For it is the future that decides if people can keep making it work or if one day the little red brick house on the little hill overlooking the little wetlands will become another story hidden in a swamp.

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