

Bluffviews

a quarterly newsletter by Clifftop

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A Chicken Farm...In a Mine?

by Joann Fricke

When Clifftop and Southwestern Illinois Resource Conservation and Development (now HeartLands Conservancy) purchased the White Rock property, the remains of what we were told was a chicken farm were discovered in the mine where limestone had been quarried in the 1930's. A recent Republic-Times NEWS FLASH email included a 1950's image of Glenn Luhr in a chicken mine (see below). This had to be the mine at White Rock, for how many chicken mines could there have been in Monroe County?



Photos by Bob Voris, courtesy of the Republic-Times.

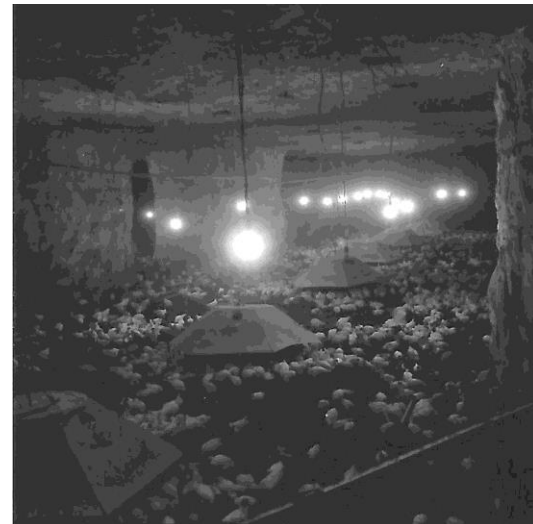
The Republic-Times staff was able to locate the original, in-depth article regarding the unusual enterprise. The newspaper was dated January 23, 1957 and following is information gleaned from the article.

Two great enemies of a chicken farm are disease and extreme temperatures. Disease can decimate a whole flock in a short amount of time and a heat wave can kill hundreds of chickens in a single day. Glenn Luhr, of New Hanover, considered the abandoned limestone mine the ideal place to raise chickens. The isolation of the mine helped ward off disease and the constant temperatures suited the chickens to a tee. Mr. Luhr stated that in the two years he had been in operation, he had never marketed less than 97 percent of the flock from which he started.

The biggest problems with an underground chicken farm were moisture and the penetrating ammonia smell created by the droppings. In summer the air was so humid that water constantly dripped from the ceiling and a fan had to be run occasionally to dissipate the ammonia odor.

After clearing out the manure from the recently sold flock, Glenn would haul in 10 truckloads of fresh sawdust and disperse it throughout the mine. Ten thousand chickens drank a lot of water and ate a lot of feed each day—1,000 gallons of water and a ton of feed—as they approached maturity (see photo at right).

Mr. Luhr was an experienced chicken farmer, having been raised in the business. We have no idea how long after 1957 chickens were raised in the former mine, but Glenn was not the original chicken miner. He took over the enterprise from Gus Ritzel in 1955. Mature adults, like myself, from the Valmeyer area, remember Mr. Ritzel as being in the construction business. His company built a home for my parents that was completed in 1963.



Before opening the White Rock Nature Preserve to the public, Clifftop

volunteers closed the main mine opening with various sized boulders found on the preserve. The work was performed in the summer, but the cool air emanating from the mine kept the volunteers comfortable.



Photo courtesy Tom Rollins Photography



Photos courtesy Joann Fricke.



In the photo above, left, the main mine opening is shown before volunteers started work to close it. In the center photo, a skid steer was used to lift large boulders into place after which volunteers mortared around them. Fortunately, one of the volunteers, Paul Feldker, partially visible to the right of the skid steer, had masonry experience. Paul’s father was a local mason. In the newspaper clipping of the original chicken mine article provided by the Republic-Times, the article was immediately followed by an ad promoting the services of Paul’s father, Clemens Feldker. I found this to be quite a coincidence. The photo on the right displays the shuttered mine opening as it looks today. The plants surrounding the opening are wild hydrangea, whose blooming period occurs from early to mid-summer.

You never know when or how you might learn something new about local nature preserves.

Guestviews...



Mike removing Eastern red cedars from one of his hill prairies. Photo courtesy Joann Fricke

My Conservation Soapbox
By Mike Fricke

Life has many twists and turns—you never know where you might end up. I never saw myself becoming a conservation warrior/advocate, but, buying a house on 40 acres of bluff land in 2007 turned me into one.

I was clueless about native plants vs. foreign invasives. Sure, I had seen bush honeysuckle here and there, but I had no idea what it was doing to our native woodlands. A new neighbor suggested my wife and I meet Debbie Newman with the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission. (Twenty acres of our property had already been designated as a land and water reserve.) Meeting Debbie really opened my eyes to the bush honeysuckle problem, especially after she showed us an aerial photo of our property from late fall. All that was green in the photo was bush honeysuckle!

After some instruction on eradication and control from Debbie and attending Clifftop workdays and seminars, Joann and I began to tackle our bush honeysuckle. Many days we felt like mountain goats, climbing the bluffs with our loppers and herbicide hanging from our tool belts and little by little, the impact we were making was evident. I consider bush honeysuckle to be the largest ecological disaster in the United States. Eradicating it doesn’t get the press it deserves. If more isn’t done, hardwood forests in the Midwest will disappear and we will be left with soft woods like maple, paw paw, rough dogwood and bush honeysuckle.

Our original property contained 3 hill prairies and in 2016, we added 2 more after purchasing 80 acres of adjoining property. When we first saw the two new hill prairies, they were full of Eastern red cedars—a hundred or so by our estimate. Boy, did we underestimate! After having removed over 400 cedars, our new prairies were now cedar-free! All of the cut cedars were stacked off the prairies to be consumed in a prescribed burn, which took place in March 2017.

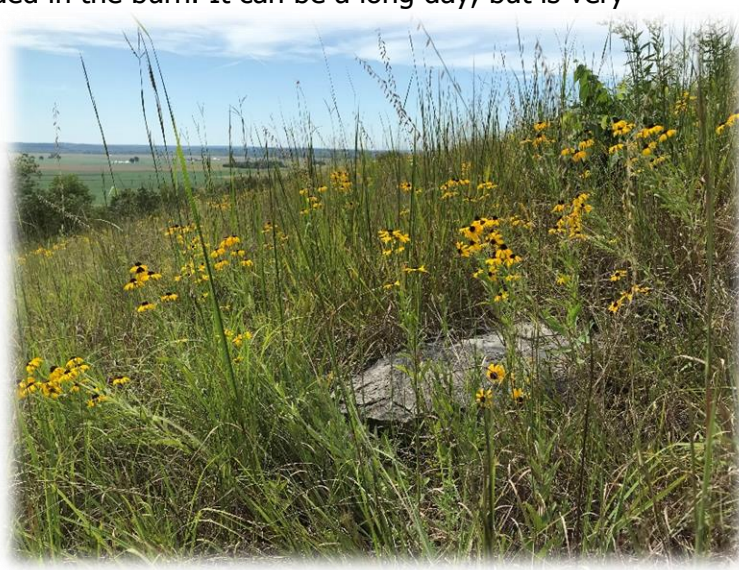


Eagle Prairie, where Mike was working in the photo on page 2, at the edge of the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River Valley, before, left and after, right, cutting cedars. Photos courtesy Joann Fricke.

Viewing the bluffs from the river valley, you can barely see where some hill prairies once flourished. I dream of the day when we can obtain permission from private landowners to steward their hill prairies by removing the Eastern red cedars and restoring them to their former glory. Without our help, they may completely disappear.

There is only .01% of prairies remaining in Illinois, the prairie state. The cedar takeover of hill prairies has been exacerbated by the suppression of fire. Native Americans and Mother Nature once routinely set fire to prairies. Cedars and other woody invasive species can be retarded and eventually eliminated by repeated prescribed burning. I enjoy volunteering on prescribed burns. You get to watch fire, see other properties and know you are enhancing the ecology of the prairies and woodlands included in the burn. It can be a long day, but is very satisfying. I strongly recommend giving it a try.

After removal of woody invasive species and a vigorous prescribed burn, healthy bluff prairies are full of grasses and forbs and offer spectacular displays of blooming flowers throughout the growing season. The beautiful yellow buds of the hoary puccoon are one of the first prairie flowers to emerge in early spring. May brings purple cone flowers. Yellow dominates the prairies in summer with blooms of rosinweed, prairie dock and gray-headed coneflower. In the photo at right, taken in August 2019, our Eagle Prairie boasts the rare (in Illinois) Missouri coneflower as well as side oats gramma grass. The color purple returns in fall with several varieties of asters and rough blazing star.



I never tire of just sitting and looking at our hill prairies, observing what's in bloom and who might be flying over them. I hope, with the help of volunteers, to open more up for future generations to enjoy.

Upcoming events...



Saturday, March 28, 2020, 11am – 1pm, *Seminar: Bobcat: Illinois' Native Cat, Monroe County Annex, 901 Illinois Avenue, Waterloo, IL.* Jennifer Kuroda, founder of the Illinois Bobcat Foundation, will present this interesting program. In her talk, Jennifer will cover every facet of the elusive cats, including history, biology, predator perception and management. She will also include information about the ongoing bobcat population study by Dr. Chris Jacques at Western Illinois University. This event is free and open to the public. Register to attend by contacting 618-935-2542 or cliffmbr@htc.net by March 26.

Saturday, April 11, 2020, 9:00 a.m. – noon, *Field Trip: Spring Wildflower Walk, Salt Lick Point Land & Water Reserve, 1309 Limestone Lane, Valmeyer, IL.* Join us for a guided hike along Johnson Trail at 9:00 a.m. or walk on your own, stopping at various points where guides will answer questions and point out what's in bloom. Co-hosted by the Salt Lick Point Stewardship NFP. This event is free and open to the public, no reservations required.



Thursday, April 16, 2020, 7:00 – 9:00 pm, *Seminar: Birding 101, SWIC Auditorium, 500 W S 4th Street, Red Bud, IL.* In conjunction with the Kaskaskia Valley Audubon Society, Debbie Newman will conduct this basic program on identifying birds by sight and sound. Then, **Saturday, April 18, 7:30 am – 9:30 am, *Field Trip: Birding 101, Paul Wightman Subterranean Nature Preserve, 3325 G Road, Fults, IL.*** Debbie will take us into the field to put into practice what we learned at the seminar. These events are free and open to the public, no reservations required.

Volunteer work at PWSNP...



Volunteer work continues throughout the year. In December, volunteers cleaned up the old Fogelpole home site (top, left), built a fire pit to burn debris at the old home site (top, right) and finished the work room in the shed (bottom, left). Hats off to all who participated in these volunteer efforts! Photos courtesy Susan Rick.