



What's In a Name?

Guest Author: Fred Delcomyn, GPF Board Member



***You all know the name of our organization – Grand Prairie Friends.
But how did it come to have that name?***

There's both a short and a long answer to this question. The shortest and most direct answer is that the name was selected to reflect the geographical roots of the organization. In 1973, Illinois was divided into 14 Natural Divisions to reflect the diverse physical and biotic features of the state. Each Division was subdivided into Sections to accentuate subtle differences within each Division. Champaign County lies in the Grand Prairie Section of the Grand Prairie Natural Division of Illinois. Hence the name, Grand Prairie. So far, so good.

But have you ever considered where the name “Grand Prairie” actually came from? This is a much more interesting question.

You might think that the name refers to a part of Illinois. You’d be right, but that’s only part of the story. You might be surprised to learn that Grand Prairie is used for the names of places and organizations far beyond the confines of our state. To be sure, there are 26 instances of the use of the name in Illinois – including two ghost communities and one defunct business. However, there are 34 places or organizations bearing the name Grand Prairie in 15 states besides Illinois. This does not even count the large number of places and organizations in the city of Grand Prairie, Texas that bear the name of the city.

Finding “Grand Prairie” as a name in Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Kansas, and Texas, might not be too surprising. After all, each of these states contained tallgrass prairie before the settlers came. But would you expect any place named “Grand Prairie” in Arkansas, Louisiana, Oregon, or South Dakota? I can tell you that I certainly did not, but there they are.

What kinds of places bear the name? The most common place is a cemetery – there are 15 “Grand Prairie” cemeteries in 10 different states. Next most popular is a community or township. There are 11 of these distributed among eight states. These include so-called ghost communities, places that were occupied once and are listed in old gazetteers, but no longer exist. They’re not called ghost towns because there are no buildings left, either. Then we get to businesses, schools, churches, retirement communities, and the like.

If nothing else, this compendium shows that “grand prairie” is surprisingly popular even outside of Illinois. But it still does not answer the question of where the name comes from. Unfortunately, if you’re looking for a single definitive answer, you’ll be disappointed because you won’t find it here.

We can trace its roots, though. The early French explorers gave us the name “prairie,” meaning meadow or open area for grazing, as a term for the enormous expanse of open grasslands they encountered in what is now the Midwest. The explorers, Jesuits, fur traders, and settlers who came later all marveled at the grand vista of the prairie. Father Antoine Silvy, in a letter back to France in 1710, expressed a typical view when he said, “The country where the Illinois live [the “Illinois” Indians] is without doubt the most beautiful I know about. ... There is prairie as far as the eye can see broken at different places with small clumps of trees and fruit trees. These are sometimes in long avenues, grown by nature it seems to make a pleasing view.”

In their communications, these men (it seems that it was always men) and those who came later talked about how magnificent the prairie was, using terms like great, grand, and big. It is clear from the text, however, that the terms are used simply as descriptors of the prairie.

By 1820, however, a significant change appears in contemporary writing. In his book *Observations Made Upon a Journey Through the Interior of the United States of North America*, Ferdinand Ernst refers to the “Big Prairie” (*sic*) and the “great prairie,” not as a descriptor, but as a name for a specific

place. Since the original is in German, it is not clear if he used what in English we would call the “grand prairie.” However, by 1823, writers who traveled through Illinois and mentioned place names frequently referred to the Grand Prairie as a specific place. The name also appears in contemporary gazetteers and geographies.

We can’t say with certainty who first used “Grand Prairie” as a name for the grasslands of central Illinois. Likely, settlers and visitors heard about the “grand” prairie that occupied the central part of what became the state of Illinois and word of mouth helped the name gradually stick.

Even if we can’t trace the origin of “Grand Prairie” with certainty, we can at least, these 200 years later, take a bit of pleasure that the name of our organization reflects this little bit of Illinois’ past.

Top #4 GPF Winter Recap and #1 Quick Look Ahead





(Top Left to Right) At GPF's 35th Anniversary event at Bluestem Hall, GPF honored Jamie Ellis for his very successful and dedicated 18-years of service as GPF President. The membership elected Dave Easter as the new President. Dave has served as Vice-President since 2015. Congratulations to both!

(Mid) Founding GPF Member, Wendy Garrison, traveled from her home in Mississippi to return to GPF's Shortline Railroad Prairie to celebrate GPF's 35th Anniversary. She enjoyed a hike with fellow GPF Member, Sue Smith, along the Shortline Prairie. Wendy and her husband, Richard, provided the funding to purchase GPF's first land acquisition at Shortline Prairie in 1984.

In December, GPF Warbler Ridge welcomed the HOOAH (Healing of our American Heroes) organization to Warbler Ridge. This non-profit organization allows disabled veterans the chance to connect with one another for physical and mental support through hunting and fishing activities.

(Bottom) Tree-mendous Trees- Help us make the 500 TREE-CHALLENGE DAY! In 2019, GPF planted 24,000 trees, but in 2020 we need you to make our goal of another 26,250 trees! YOU have a role in this good work. We are hosting a 500 TREE-CHALLENGE DAY this spring to show the community how dedicated our Warbler Ridge tree-planting volunteers can be! Help us plant 500 trees in ONE DAY- Stay Tuned for the tree delivery date!

Upcoming Events, Join US!

In the interest of health and wellness, visit GPF's website and facebook for event changes or cancellations as our communities deal with the COVID-19 situation.

Contact volunteer@grandprairiefriends.org



FIRST Saturday of the Month Stewardship

(April 4, May 2, etc.)

(9am-11am): Stewardship workdays are held the first Saturday of each month March- November at the Warbler Ridge Conservation Area. All ages welcome, equipment provided. Meet at the Daileyville Road/ Red Barn Trailhead parking area.



IN YOUR BACKYARD:
Explore the Wonder of **WARBLER RIDGE**
OPEN HOUSE:
SATURDAY, APRIL 18, 1-4PM

- **LIVE ANIMALS:** See live raptors & reptiles up close!
- **GUIDED WALKS:** Explore the trails with local experts!
- **BIRDS:** Learn more about the project that's been catching so much attention!
- **GET INVOLVED:** Learn ways that you can help!

LOCATION: South trailhead on Daileyville Rd; only about 3 miles south of Charleston.

MORE INFO: For more info and directions, please visit GRANDPRAIRIEFRIENDS.ORG.

FREE! Light refreshments will be served.

PRESERVE • RESTORE • PROMOTE

YOU ARE GRAND PRAIRIE FRIENDS

Spring Open House at Warbler Ridge Conservation Area

Saturday April 18th (1pm- 4pm):

Warbler Ridge Open House! Come find out about this local resource. Enjoy guided hikes, chat with our local volunteers and staff, enjoy animal visitors and activities! There is a seat for everyone at the Grand Prairie Friends table and we can't wait for you to find your fit! Free & Open to the public.



Charleston Chamber of Commerce After-Hours at Warbler Ridge (Public)
Thursday May 7 (5pm-7pm),
Warbler Ridge Conservation Area, Charleston:

Everyone is welcome to socialize and snack during the evening

after-hours event at the Daileyville Road/ Red Barn Trailhead parking area.



Annual Native Plant Sale
Saturday May 9 (8am-1pm),
INSIDE Lincoln Square Mall,
Urbana:

Annual Native Plant Sale Time! Come buy or come volunteer! Over 4,000 native local nursery and volunteer-raised plants for your yard, prairie restoration, school, church, garden or beyond. All proceeds benefit GPF!



We're Hiring!!

[Visit our website](#) for Seasonal Intern Positions



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