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Places to visit on the I&M

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Caption: Santa Fe Prairie in Hodgkins features a retired caboose.

Hodgkins -- It seems an unlikely place for a rare prairie, surrounded by industrial park, rail yard and highway. But the 11-acre Santa Fe Prairie, tucked amidst all the development, is such a high-quality natural area that it is a designated Illinois Nature Preserve.

Santa Fe Prairie sits naturally on a layer of gravel that formed thousands of years ago. It consists of moist soils and gravelly, well- drained -- or drier -- soils, resulting in a wider variety of plants than would be expected at a site its size. There are more than 250 plant species native to Illinois there.

This tucked-away treasure would be paved and forgotten were it not for the dogged efforts of a handful of people who recognized its natural uniqueness and campaigned to protect it. Botanist Floyd Swink, who was an expert in prairie plants, discovered what is now Santa Fe Prairie in the 1940s. The land had been purchased by the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway in 1886 and left undeveloped.

In 1959, Mr. Swink showed the site to Dr. Robert Betz, a biochemist who, until that time, assumed the vacant lots of his boyhood Bridgeport neighborhood were "prairies." Upon being introduced to the site on the banks of the Des Plaines River, he realized true prairies are remarkably more beautiful and worthy of attention than the weed-filled ones of his youth.

When the site was threatened with industrial development in the 1960s, Dr. Betz was among those leading the effort to preserve what remained of it for future generations. It was a decades-long campaign. Thirty-five years later, the railway donated the land to the I&M Canal Civic Center Authority for permanent protection. Not much later, the prairie received Illinois Nature Preserve designation.

An exhibit at Santa Fe Prairie celebrates and explains the contributions of Dr. Betz and Mr. Swink. It features two life-sized steel silhouettes of the men exploring the prairie. Accompanying interpretive information reads, "Robert Betz and Floyd Swink collaborated for decades to save and restore the remnants of Illinois' once vast prairies. It all began here in 1959 when Swink, a leading authority on prairie plants, introduced Betz to the Santa Fe Prairie. Their dynamic leadership has inspired hundreds of volunteers and

conservationists to preserve our remaining prairies."

There is more to learn about Santa Fe Prairie in the site's visitors center -- inside an actual CE-11 Santa Fe caboose. Flip through bird books; gaze through the binoculars on-hand; or just enjoy a glimpse of an ancient landscape from the visitor center viewing deck. There is a gravel, two-mile-long bike trail at Santa Fe Prairie, which eventually will be a stop on the Centennial Trail. There is also canoe access on the Des Plaines River. The visitor center is open every Saturday, which is also when volunteers arrive to maintain and nurture the prairie. Stop by and see prairie restoration where it all began.

"Along the Canal" is brought to you by the Heritage Corridor Convention & Visitors Bureau and the Canal Corridor Association. Visit www.heritagecorridorcvb.com, www.canalcor.org and www.enjoyillinois.com for more on places and happenings in the I&M Canal National Heritage Corridor.

If you go

What: Santa Fe Prairie

Where: Hodgkins, at the intersection of Leon Cook Drive (71st Street) and River Road. Exit I-55 north onto LaGrange Road and turn east (right) at 67th Street. At the four-way stop, turn south (right) onto Santa Fe Drive, then left at Leon Cook Drive (71st Street) over the overpass onto River Road along the Des Plaines River. Turn right at the T-intersection toward the red caboose.

When: The visitor center is open 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. every Saturday and 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. every Sunday from Memorial Day through Labor Day. Special weekend events occur roughly once a month.

Cost: Free admission

For more information: (708) 598-6139, www.civiccenterauthority.org

