



# Chicago Wilderness

MAGAZINE

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## News

# Dr. Robert Betz, 1923–2007



Bob Betz popularized the prairie.

*Photo: Courtesy of Fermilab Visual Media Services*

attempted to date, more than 1,000 acres.

At the entrance to Santa Fe Prairie, visitors will see black iron statues, the silhouettes of Swink and Betz exploring the plant life there. The figures now stand as a surreal memorial, but the prairie behind them is their true eternal legacy.

The public is invited to a memorial celebration on Saturday, July 7, at 2 p.m. in Ramsey Auditorium at Fermilab. Brief speeches will be followed by a reception and a walk in the Robert F. Betz Prairie. RSVP to (630) 840-5422 by June 29.

Related Article:

■ [Bob Betz: Lighting the Fire Within](#), *CW Winter 2005*

The man known as “Mr. Prairie” passed away on April 5, 2007. A biochemistry professor with Northeastern Illinois University, Betz was probably best known for what he did outside of work. Almost four decades ago, he became one of the first to recognize the extent of the Midwest’s surviving original prairie ecosystems, and he rallied the public to save the fraction of a percent that still remained. He led the charge to restore not only these remnants, but to reestablish the nearly lost ecosystem in new preserves.

“Had it not been for Bob, the prairies we have to inspire us would not be here,” said botanist Gerould Wilhelm.

Betz helped save 44 “cemetery prairies” throughout the Midwest, original native prairies that survived because they grew on pioneer cemeteries and resultingly weren’t developed or farmed.

He first learned about Chicago-region prairie species from botanist [Floyd Swink](#), whom he encountered at [Santa Fe Prairie](#) in Hodgkins, Illinois. While dyed-in-the-wool botanists such as Swink focused mainly on learning as much as they could about the plants themselves, Betz actively reached out to everyday people, becoming a popularizer of restoration, leading countless prairie walks, giving animated talks, and inspiring protégés.

The professor’s best known achievements were the [Gensburg-Markham](#) and [Fermi Prairies](#). He discovered and saved Gensburg-Markham Prairie, one of the largest high-quality prairies in the eastern tallgrass region. At the Fermi National Accelerator Lab (“Fermilab”) in Batavia, Illinois, beginning in 1974, he worked with grounds crews to innovate techniques for restoring prairie at the largest scale

