

## **Natural Areas Journal (2007) Volume 27(No.3)**

### **Dr. Robert F. Betz.....**

Dr. Robert F. Betz, a conservation hero and prairie champion passed away at 84 this spring. Bob Betz was a War World II veteran and biochemist by training. He was a professor of biology at Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, where, in addition to biochemistry, he taught ornithology, plant taxonomy, and plant geography. Many of his students are now Professional biologists in the natural area field.

Dr. Betz was the key architect in the establishment and restoration of the 1,200-acre Fermi Lab Prairie at the National Accelerator Laboratory in Batavia Illinois. Earlier restorations were developed by transplanting actual prairie plants from threatened sites, a much more laborious process that has been replaced by direct seeding. ). Betz developed the technique of using succession to restore prairie by beginning with seedings of early successional prairie species, followed by those of later successional stages. The Fermi Lab was one of the first to consider bison as a management tool.

**<http://www.fnal.gov/pub/about/campus/ecology/prairie/index.html>**

Dr. Betz was equally famous for his remarkable discovery that Pioneer Cemeteries could be the very best places to look for original, undisturbed prairies in Illinois and Indiana. Bob conducted an exhaustive inventory to find these prairie gems. He could often be seen crawling around the back lots of mowed cemeteries where he coined the phrase looking for "Bonsai Prairie Plants". Bob taught many of us how to identify these bonsai prairie plants even if they were mowed to within an inch of the soil surface. Bob is credited with finding scores of these pioneer cemeteries in Illinois and Indiana, many of which are now protected. To protect his prairie finds, he developed a one-man prairie preservation society through Northeastern University, including a sign and plaque for each of the prairies.

*"Dr. Betz spent numerous days seeking out cemetery prairies in Indiana. He told me he deliberately had at least one of his daughters attend a university in Indiana so he would have time to spend in Indiana. One time Dr. Betz made a trip to Lake County to meet the owner of what is now "Biesecker Prairie Nature Preserve", to give him an autographed copy of the Torkel Korling Prairie book, and try to convince him that the prairie was in need of preservation. Bob chased a butterfly all over the prairie, to catch it to show to the owner. Bob traveled with me and Irene Herlocker on a 14 hour field trip, driving all over Indiana., to show us cemetery prairies he had located. He personally paid for an historic roadside plaque to mark the "historic Wea Plains" cemetery prairie, and the trustees still protect that cemetery prairie today. He was*

*personally involved with saving Hoosier Prairie Nature Preserve, German Methodist Cemetery Prairie, and a number of others in Indiana.”---John Bacone, Director of the Indiana Nature Preserves.*

Dr. Betz was also a key champion for saving the outstanding prairies near Markham, Illinois, which included the 100-acres Gensburg-Markham Prairie that Dr. Betz, the Gensburg brothers, the Natural Lands Institute, The Nature Conservancy and the President of Northeastern Illinois University saved from development. Today over 436-acres of some of the highest quality prairie in the world are protected at the Indian Boundaries Prairies. It was designated as an Illinois Nature Preserve in 1976 and in 1988 it was a designated a National Natural Landmark, by the National Park Service. He was also instrumental in the identification and protection of the Goose Lake Prairie in Illinois.

Bob Betz was also an authority on milkweeds. He and his students published papers on the pollinators, herbivores and flower, pod, and seed production of native milkweed species. His favorite plant was Mead’s milkweed (*Asclepias meadii*). In the 1960’s, he held a National Science Foundation grant to study the ecology of Mead’s milkweed, long before the Federal listing of this and other E & T species, and before conservation biology of plant species became a conservation science. He later served on the Federal Recovery Team for Mead’s milkweed. His studies of Mead’s milkweed focused on naturally reproducing populations in railroad prairies, from which he compiled valuable long-term demographic data that was unavailable from the more common hay meadow populations, which were annually mowed and never reproduced.

Bob, known as the “Prairie Prophet”, was in great demand at Prairie Conferences and workshops all over the Midwest. He was a fire and brimstone evangelist for prairie protection. No one left a Bob Betz speech without being energized to save prairies! Throughout his career, he served as an advisor to the Illinois nature Preserves Commission on fire management and acquisition of prairies. He also developed ranking systems of prairie quality, which was adapted by the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory, and influenced national thinking on ranking quality of prairies. In 1996, Dr. Betz, along with long time friends and colleagues, Floyd Swink and

Ray Schulenberg nominated as the “Prairie Triad” were awarded the **George B. Fell Award** from the Natural Areas Association.

The first prairie Bob Betz ever saw was a place called the Santa Fe Prairie, on a field trip with Floyd Swink. It took Bob and other people who loved Santa Fe Prairie almost a lifetime to save it. But they did. It is now an Illinois Nature Preserve. Silhouette statues of Dr. Betz and Floyd Swink have been erected there. Bob’s enthusiasm and work ethic has won him the admiration, respect, and love of hundreds of colleagues, students and contemporaries

throughout the Midwest.

Thanks to a great man. He will always be remembered for saving prairies in Illinois and Indiana and influencing people like Marlin Bowles, Ron Panzer, Bill Glass, John Bacone, Steve Packard, Randy Nyboer, Mike Madany, Jack White, Don Kurz, Laurel Ross, Steve Byers, Randy Heidorn, and a host of others. A day long Symposium, *Conservation Biology of Eastern Tallgrass Prairie*, in Dr. Betz's honor will be held at the Botanical Society of America Annual meeting "Botany 2007" in Chicago on July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007 (<http://www.botanyconference.org/>). A memorial will also be given in his honor on 7 July 2007 at the Fermi National Accelerator Lab, Batavia (RSVP to Fermilab).

To read about how Dr. Betz caught "prairie fever" see

<http://chicagowilderness.org/issues/winter2005/betz.html>.

Thanks to John Bacone, Marlin Bowles and Randy Nyboer for assistance with this effort to honor Dr. Betz.

Francis M. Harty  
Director of Lands  
The Nature Conservancy-Illinois

#### Publications of Robert F. Betz

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Betz, R. F. and H. F. Lamp. 1992. Flower, pod, and seed production in eighteen species of milkweeds (*Asclepias*). Pages 25-30 *In*: D. D. Smith and C. Jacobs (eds.). Proceedings of the Twelfth North American Prairie Conference. University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls.

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Betz, R.F., W.R. Rommel & J.J. Diehl. 2000. Insect herbivores of 12 milkweed (*ASCLEPIAS*) species. Page 7-19 in C. Warwick (editor) Proceedings of the 15<sup>th</sup> North American Prairie Conference

Betz, R. F., F. J. Lootens, and M. K. Becker. 2000. Two decades of prairie restoration at Fermilab, Batavia, Illinois, p.20-30 In: C. Warwick (editor). Proceedings of the Fifteenth North American Prairie Conference Proceedings. Natural Areas Association, Bend, Oregon.