

## Apathy Canyon: The Ditch That's Eating a Forest

Chicago Wilderness, Fall 2005, by LeAnn Spencer

In the ten years since volunteer stewards Barbara and George Birmingham started working to restore the Theodore Stone Forest Preserve, they've seen a lot of exciting growth. Situated along busy LaGrange Road, just north of I-55 in the southwest suburban village of Hodgkins, Illinois, the 145-acre preserve has become an oasis. Its two prairie patches have broadened in size, and native wildflowers are returning, along with orioles, bluebirds, and fritillary butterflies.

One area of increase, however, has brought nothing but heartache. It's a gaping canyon in the oak woods on the north side of the preserve. The canyon's eroding maw — now 50 feet wide, 20 feet deep, and 1,000 feet long — is swallowing 100-year-old oak trees and channeling dirty water toward the two remnant prairies.

There's nothing natural about the canyon. What decades ago was a slight depression has been gouged into a muddy gorge by floodwaters flowing from a 36-inch concrete drainpipe. The pipe carries stormwater from the adjacent Quarry Shopping Mall directly into the preserve.

The problem dates to the mid-1960s, when a trucking company received a 20-year permit from the Forest Preserve District of Cook County to lay the pipe and drain stormwater into the preserve. That permit has long since expired, and the property has changed hands. The pipe has remained, but it has lost the ability to contain the increased volume of runoff water that came with new development and spreading parking lots. Today much of the pipe is broken and can be found in huge, jagged (and, some say, terribly dangerous) chunks at the bottom of what volunteers refer to as "Apathy Canyon."

Without a legal permit, Quarry Mall has dumped enough parking lot runoff water to erode a gully deep into the preserve — destroying woodlands and prairie.

"People were saying, 'this is happening because nobody cares,'" said Barbara Birmingham. Under former Forest Preserve District Superintendent Joseph Nevius, she says, "there were things going on, but they weren't satisfactory. Nevius had said, 'I want the pipe closed, the water out, the canyon refilled and revegetated,' but he didn't have funds to back that up. I don't know that he asked for them."

Since current District Superintendent Steven Bylina began his campaign to reform the agency's practices in August of 2003, the district has ramped up talks between all parties. But efforts to agree on a solution with consultants for the mall manager, Mid-America

Asset Management of Oakbrook Terrace, have so far been unsuccessful. "I don't think many of the mall people over the years have come to see the damage," said Birmingham. "They're very nice, but they change a lot."

Unchecked runoff has long been a chief culprit in stream degradation, but the canyon at Theodore Stone vividly shows the effect it can have on land. "The water that is coming is not just a lazy little runoff that comes down over the ridge after a hard rain," said Birmingham. "It sounds like a waterfall."

She and other critics say the runoff could damage the entire preserve. The preserve slopes down from a moraine on the northwestern boundary, where the canyon cuts through an oak savanna. From there, the land slopes toward the two prairie remnants, one of which is a rare dolomite plant community distinguished by rugged outcroppings of exposed bedrock. The unusual thin-soil conditions there support uncommon plants such as hairy penstemon and the federally endangered leafy prairie clover.

Birmingham has noticed distressing changes in recent years. The canyon now funnels not only water, but tons of eroded soil from the collapsing upland woods. Already this wash has covered what Birmingham estimates to be "several football fields" of formerly dry-to-moist prairie with at least six inches of sediment — woodland subsoils and "warm, salty, oily, dirty water."

"The outfall area is vegetated, but it's a whole different plant community than the area on either side of it," she said. "On the edges of the dolomite prairie, the prairie dock and tall coreopsis have given way to red bulrush, Canada rye, and other lower-quality, pollution-tolerant, wet-loving plants. I'm concerned that our cardinal flowers and sweet flags will go, too." As the silt oozes toward the finest, most delicate parts of the prairie, the unique and mostly small plants will be buried. Any survivors will be overtaken by opportunistic plants that previously hadn't been able to compete on the dolomite bedrock.

The current health of the preserve's native plants is largely the result of thousands of hours of labor by the roughly 40 volunteers engaged year-round in restoring native habitat. "When we started work here, it was a buckthorn nursery," Birmingham said. Today, the buckthorn is receding, and she can tick off the wide variety of native plants that have returned to the preserve, including Illinois bundleflower, partridge pea, blue vervain, and both purple and Sullivant's milkweed.

As discouraging as the silt deposits, Birmingham and others say, is an oily, iridescent sheen on small ponds and a marked absence of frogs and toads in the spring — further evidence that pollutants may be tainting the preserve.

The drain also raises larger questions about protection of the district's entire 68,000 acres. Some forest preserve neighbors extend their lawns onto district property or construct unapproved roads, parking lots, industrial dumps, marinas, baseball fields, and equestrian arenas.

"Our policy is simple: There will be no encroachments on forest preserve land," said Steve Mayberry, spokesman for the district. "We are taking steps right now to remove all encroachments on our land."

Calls to mall managers for this article were unreturned. Their current offer, however, is to spend about \$500,000 to refill the canyon and replace the old pipe with a new one that would empty into a "stilling basin" 600 feet into the preserve.

Officials at Friends of the Forest Preserves, a nonprofit advocacy group, say that no encroachment is acceptable, and that the proposal only moves the stormwater farther into the preserve. The group wants the drain removed, the canyon filled, new oaks planted, and the unnatural runoff diverted away.

"This is destruction of forest preserve property," said Benjamin Cox, executive director of Friends of the Forest Preserves. Most important, Cox said, is to redirect runoff into existing stormwater systems. But he advocates combining that with methods for retaining water on the mall site. Resurfacing the parking lot with special pavers, adding green roofs to mall buildings, and planting "bioswales" in parking lot median strips would all allow water to soak into the underlying soil. Even enlarging the existing detention pond and enhancing it with water-filtering native plants might be part of the solution. "These are all being done in Chicago right now," Cox said.

Forest preserve officials are still hopeful for an agreement. "The Forest Preserve District's mission is to protect flora and fauna. That's very clear in our mission," said P. K. Parker, the district's real estate administrator. "Otherwise it will be nibbled away before you know it." Preserve advocates also hold out hope. But they are painfully aware that the preserve is deteriorating with every season that goes by. They know that Apathy Canyon is hungry, and it's not just nibbling.