

RECORD

BEVERLY HILLS, MORGAN PARK, WASHINGTON HEIGHTS & MT. GREENWOOD

The wild, wild ridge

By Carol Flynn

Blue Island got its name from early Chicago settlers, viewing the area in the distance from what is now downtown Chicago. An often-quoted early newspaper article from the Chicago Democrat, February, 1834, states:

"Nearly south of this town and twelve miles distant is Blue Island. This name is particularly appropriate. It is a table of land about six miles long and an average of two miles breadth, of an oval form and rising some forty feet out of an immense plain which surrounds it on every side. The sides and slopes of this table, as well as the table itself, are covered with a

handsome growth of timber, forming a belt surrounding about four or five thousand acres of beautiful table land.

"In summer, the plain is covered with luxurious herbage. It is uninhabited, and when we visited it, from its stillness, loneliness, and quiet, we pronounced it a vast vegetable solitude. The ridge, when viewed from a distance, appears standing in an azure mist of vapor, hence the appellation 'Blue Island'."

The azure mist is attributed to native plants in the area, perhaps wild blue iris or blue-tinged prairie grass. And comparison to an island was apt, as the prehistoric origin of this ridge was exactly that: an island in a

vast inland lake.

Geology of the Blue Island

Hundreds of millions of years ago, a large portion of North America, including the entire Chicago area, was covered by warm, salty, shallow seas, populated by marine animals. Through the eons, organic material disintegrated and formed a calcium-rich mud which eventually hardened into the limestone base the whole area sits on today. This bedrock formation was dramatically altered by the ice cover and melt water of glaciers, or moving ice sheets, that crept down from the polar ice caps during the various ice ages. The

last ice age ended about 15,000 years ago.

Melting water from the glaciers also changed the topography of the area. Outlets became carved into the terrain, allowing water to pour off into newly formed rivers. Eventually left behind was prehistoric Lake Chicago, the ancestor of Lake Michigan. Lake Chicago extended west to present day LaGrange, and south and east to cover the land including Northwest Indiana. As Lake Chicago's level dropped with time as more outlets developed, including the St. Lawrence River that let trapped water

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RIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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flow to the ocean, a tall ridge of land became exposed. This was the Blue Island, literally, an island left behind as Lake Chicago's water drained off to the east.

Geologists say they are not sure why this ridge of glacial debris formed where it did, when all of the surrounding area is flat. The cut of waves helped create the Blue Island Ridge which Longwood Drive runs along. At its highest

crest, Blue Island was reported as nearly 100 feet above Lake Michigan, although development has smoothed out its craggy features.

Pottawatomie Tribe of Native Americans

The Blue Island area contained a number of Pottawatomie villages prior to the arrival of white settlers. The earliest established road that ran through the area, the Vincennes Trail north-south from Chicago to

Vincennes, Indiana, had its beginnings as an Indian trail, and before that an animal pathway through the woods and floodplains. Animals instinctively seek out higher ground, and this trail meandered around the worst of the swamps and along and over the Ridge. Fur trappers had long used this "trace" to reach Vincennes, a prominent, thriving trading center dating back to the 1700s.

The Pottawatomie were both hunters and farmers. They planted their crops along the soft soil of the riverbanks and streams. Crops included squash, pumpkins, beans, potatoes, corn and onions. Fishing provided much of their food. They smoked fish and hunted during the summer to lay in food for winter.

The Pottawatomie signed away their Illinois land in 1833 and the majority left within a few years. There are reports that up to the 1860s there was still an Indian presence in the area and Indians returned to visit their ancestral grounds. Some Pottawatomie would travel from colder north Michigan around the lake in bark canoes and winter in the swamps near



The Pottawatomie tribe were the predominant Native Americans in the Ridge area when white settlers began arriving in the early 1830s. This 1855-1865 photo of members of this tribe is from the website www.oldpicture.com.

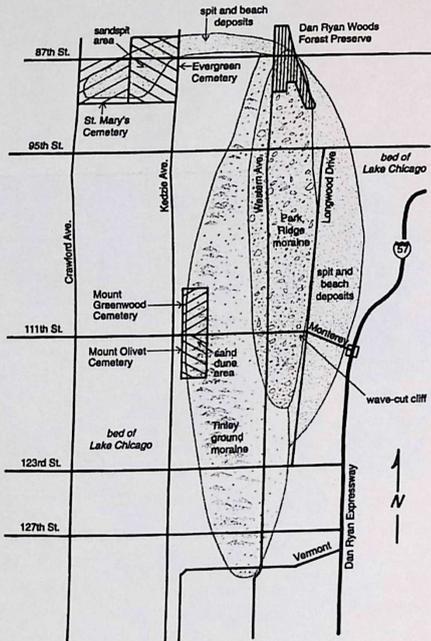
the Blue Island, and return to Michigan in the spring. They hunted game, speared muskrats and fished and would send the squaws to the settlers to trade venison for potatoes and corn. The early settlers had of course learned to grow corn and potatoes from Native Americans.

One remembrance says the young white folks would race their ponies with friendly Indians out on the prairies.

Many Indian relics were found in the area by early settlers including arrowheads and broken pottery. Excavating Indian graves while establishing homes and farms was not uncommon.

Nature and the Ridge

Mother Nature offered plenty of natural resources to the



Erosion and movement caused by glaciers resulted in tills and moraines. Till is finely ground particles left by retreating glaciers. Together with large rock fragments left intact and scattered, moraines were formed. Moraines are rock ridges left at the margins of a melting glacier and they can be massive or appear more moderately as hills. Blue Island is described as a moraine composed of glacial till dumped by a moving ice sheet. Illustration from Raymond Wiggers, Geology Underfoot in Illinois, Mountain Press Publishing, 1997.

pioneers who began settling the Blue Island in the 1830s. The top of the Ridge was mostly open plain with tall scrub and scattered groves of trees. Long stretches of heavy timber extending along the rims and sides of the island earned the area the name "Long Wood." The trees included pine, walnut, maple, hickory, elm and others, but largely predominating were various species of oak.

The trees supplied the first building materials to the settlers, for primitive log cabins. Finished lumber had to be brought in from Chicago or Indiana or from farther east until a lumber industry later formed in the immediate area. The land was abundant with other materials such as stone and clay, which were also used when gathered from the surface. Future industries for building materials would include limestone quarries and brick-making.

The lowlands surrounding the Ridge were a mixture of prairie, interspersed with groves of trees, and wetlands. One early report states that from the Ridge you could look north over an unbroken prairie and see in the distance

the smoke hanging over Chicago, which then went no further south than Roosevelt Road (1200 South). Ravines with flowing streams cut through the Ridge and poured their water into these lowlands. South of the prairie were prominent sloughs where the waters seldom dried up.

In addition to the natural springs in the area, Artesian wells provided an abundant supply of fresh water. Wells sunk 35 to 50 feet on top of the Ridge usually resulted in a good supply of drinking water.

Game was plentiful. Deer abounded in great numbers; a hundred deer could be seen in a single herd. Small game included raccoon, rabbits, squirrel and ground hogs. Prairie chickens, pheasants, quail, plover, and some wild turkeys were all available for the taking. Migratory waterfowl included ducks, geese, and sandhill cranes. Wild pigeons were here by the millions up to the late 1860s. It is reported that the flocks were so numerous that they would obscure the sun. Alas, by the early 20th century, the Passenger Pigeon was entirely extinct in North America from hunting and

deforestation.

Beaver and otter in the lakes and swamps, and buffalo and elk on the prairies were all in the area but were the first to disappear after the white settlers came to the area. Mink and muskrats were numerous until the 1870 – 80s but eventually were trapped out. The pelts of these and other animals like raccoons and fox allowed a tannery industry to flourish for a while.

Calumet River to the east and Stony Creek to the immediate south of the Ridge were alive with fish. Wall-eyed pike, pickerel, channel cat, sturgeon, black bass, gar, dog fish, red horse, and mullet are all mentioned as being plentiful. A favorite method was to spear sturgeon at night wading in the shallow rapids working by the light of torches made from shellbark hickory.

Sections of the terrain were black oak scrubs, having an understory of hazel, blueberry, and other shrubs. Wild fruits were abundant. One writer reminisced that "West Pullman was then a huckleberry patch. Wild strawberries grew thickest on the prairie east of Prospect. Blackberries were

thick on almost all the ridges. Plums were plenty." Hazelnuts were found. There were black walnut and wild cherry trees, and impenetrable thickets of wild crabapple, thorn apple and plum trees, interlaced with wild grapes.

Wolves were the largest natural predator. The actual number of wolf attacks on humans throughout North American history is very small; nonetheless, they were a source of fear and unease for the settlers and their livestock. Chickens, young lambs and calves were always good targets. The howling of the wolves at night was very unsettling. One sandy ridge extending south from 115th was known as Wolf Ridge because of the number of wolves that had their burrows there in sandy terrain, among a dense growth of scrub timber. It was an area to be avoided especially after sundown. But the wolves were mostly exterminated or driven off by 1870 due to the relentless efforts of the settlers. Bear, panthers, and lynx were also in the area in much smaller numbers but were hunted out very soon.

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Seasons on the Ridge

Seasonal changes brought pluses and

imagine the fauna that existed in the sloughs – turtles, frogs, snakes, salamanders. The sloughs were breeding

impatient drivers could often find their wagons hopelessly mired.

But spring time also created a joyous

which brought illness to the settlers. Few escaped the ague or “shakes” which we now know was most likely malaria. But summer also brought most of the wild fruit, and day-long trips could be spent berry picking and picnicking in scenic groves of trees. Tiger lilies, daisies, wild mustard and tall grasses decorated the landscape.

Water fowl descended upon the wild rice beds of the sloughs by the thousands every fall.

Wild artichokes, wild sunflowers, and other prairie plants taller than men grew where the ravines poured their waters into the lowlands.

There are reports that wild hogs, probably escaped domestic pigs gone feral, wintered in the woodland in a ravine bottom full of artichokes and other roots. On the plains, pea vines and prairie grasses grew together so densely and thickly interlaced it is reported that snakes could run along the top of them.

Late summer and early fall could have prolonged hot and dry spells, leading to dreaded prairie fires. Some of these fires would be set on

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The early “roads” were not more than wagon tracks, muddy and impassable in wet weather. This photo from the RHS collection shows the Chambers House, 10330 Seeley, built in 1873-74, one of

the earliest homes still standing. Note the plank sidewalk and the wooden stage built in front of the house for access to wagons.

minuses. The lowlands surrounding the Ridge were water-logged and impassable much of the year, especially in spring when spring torrents and melted snow turned some areas into sticky black muck, covered with 2 - 3 feet of water, and surrounded by tall, deep green reeds. Reports of victims “mired and drowned in the marsh” while attempting to cross were only too common. One can

spots for migratory fowl. One story has a sandhill crane safely nesting in a giant slough where 103rd and Wood St. is now. The eggs were safe because no one would venture out to the nest to collect them.

There was only the one well-established road leading to Vincennes.

Wagon drivers were frequently marooned around the Ridge during wet periods; venturesome or

tableau of a profusion of wild flowers.

Delicate varieties of prairie flowers would bloom where the land had been cleared by fire in previous years. Phlox, shooting stars, and violets covered the earth. The orchid family was represented by several varieties of lady slippers, pink, white, and yellow, under the trees at the edge of groves.

Summers brought great swarms of mosquitoes and flies,

RHS spring program looks at baseball

"In the Spring, a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of . . .," well, Tennyson might have written "love", but in Chicago, we know the real answer is baseball. Since the 1850s,



During World War II, Army Air Force Sergeant Joe DiMaggio and Navy Chief Specialist Harold "Pee Wee" Reese autographed baseballs for commanding officers before the Central Pacific Area Championship, known as the Service World Series, in Honolulu. This is just one baseball document in the National Archives as shown in the book *Baseball: The National Pastime* in the National Archives.

the sport of baseball has been called the national pastime.

On Sunday, April 6, at 2:00 p.m., RHS will host the program, *Baseball: The National Pastime* in the National Archives, featuring the book of the same name released in 2013 by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), the independent agency of the United States government charged with preserving and documenting government and historical records and with increasing public access to those documents.

The speaker will be Kristina Maldre Jarosik, Education Specialist, National Archives at Chicago. The cost for the program will be \$5 per RHS member, and \$10 per non-member. Light refreshments will be served. Reservations are not needed, but to help RHS with advance planning, if you will attend, or if you have any questions, please call RHS at 773/881-1675 or drop a line to ridgehistory@hotmail.com.

Available in print or on-line for downloading, this book tells the story of our national pastime

through documents, photographs, audio, video, and other records preserved at the National Archives. Our nation's history is intertwined with baseball. The book covers the role of baseball during the two world wars, contract disputes, civil rights, equal access and opportunity on and off the playing field, the steroids era, the universal appeal of the game to players and fans, Presidential involvement, improvements to the sport, Little League, Spring Training, Opening Day, and celebrations along the way.

Ridge, from page 4
purpose to clear the land of undergrowth for farming and hunting. Native Americans had long practiced controlled burning in the area. But some of the fires had unknown origins and could become dangerous to life and property. The dry tall grass could reach heights as tall as men and stretch for miles. Once afire, winds could spread the flames, which could leap 30 feet in the air.

The fires could be viewed in safety from the top of the Ridge.

It is said that the severity of the coming winter could be predicted by how the muskrats built their winter homes. If they started early and built them several feet high above the water level, it meant a hard winter was coming. If they were slow getting started, and didn't seem to care when they got through, and were satisfied with a "bungalow" type of

house – that foretold a mild winter.

And winters in the Chicago-area, as we all know, can be very severe. Extreme cold, blizzards, drifts taller than the tallest men were the norm. Stories of people freezing to death and their remains being devoured by wolves sometimes appeared.

Winter was trapping time, when animal pelts were at their thickest. And the natural terrain did lend itself to winter fun like

coasting down the hills on bobsleds and ice skating on the frozen streams and ponds.

The Ridge was an unknown and hostile wilderness, but it was also an area of great natural beauty and abundance. Eventually, nature gave way to development. But even today, here and there remnants of the once great wild Ridge can still be found. In the next issue of the RHS Record, we will look at some of these existing wild places.

The News Desk

Edris Hoover, RHS President

Annual Meeting

It is Monday morning, literally. Yesterday, February 9, was our Annual Meeting, when members gathered to elect the officers and directors for the coming year. A timely and compelling program was also held - A Tribute to Jack Simmerling - delivered by Bill Tyre, Executive Director and Curator of Glessner House.

Thank you to the Nominating Committee headed by Lois Schell, and the Program Committee for their hard work for this event.

The RHS Board is made up of sixteen Directors who serve two year terms. All officers are elected for one year. RHS has nine Directors Emeriti, persons who have served on the board and been members for at least 10 years. You will find the officers and directors listed in every issue of the newsletter.

It is my pleasure and privilege to begin a new year as your President. The Executive Committee will be joined by Larry Brown as Treasurer.

He begins his second term as a Director. During this time he has worked closely with Treasurer Bill Sandstrom to build a financial data base and to develop programs and reports which will give us concise information on our income, expenses and resources. He has done an outstanding job in this transition period.

Bill Sandstrom has been RHS Treasurer since 1997, when my own father retired as Treasurer. We owe a great debt of gratitude to Bill for his unfailing efforts to take care of our money and pay our bills. He has fulfilled this trust with diligent attention and he well deserves our thanks.

Coming on the Board as a new Director for a two year term is Elaine Spencer, the widow of the late Carl Spencer, a great friend and benefactor of RHS. The Spencers own the American Perforator Company, now managed by their son, although I understand that "Mom" is on call from time to time for some precision jobs. She told me that early on she learned to operate a punch press machine.

Elaine, who has had long experience in managing the family business and is well known to RHS, will be a welcome asset.

Newsletter and membership

March is membership renewal month at RHS. Please use the enclosed envelope to renew your membership and to help recruit new members. A major benefit that members receive is this newsletter, the Ridge Historical Society *Record*. The *Record* helps fulfill the RHS mission to preserve, share, and educate on our local history, and also inform you of programs, projects and events.

Each issue of the *Record* costs about \$1200. This covers the research and writing of the features; gathering pictures; editing, review, layout and production; and mailing first class. An individual membership is \$25. But don't stop there. If you like this publication and you value the information it brings you, support this work and the archives and research behind it and become a contributor or patron.

And speaking of archives

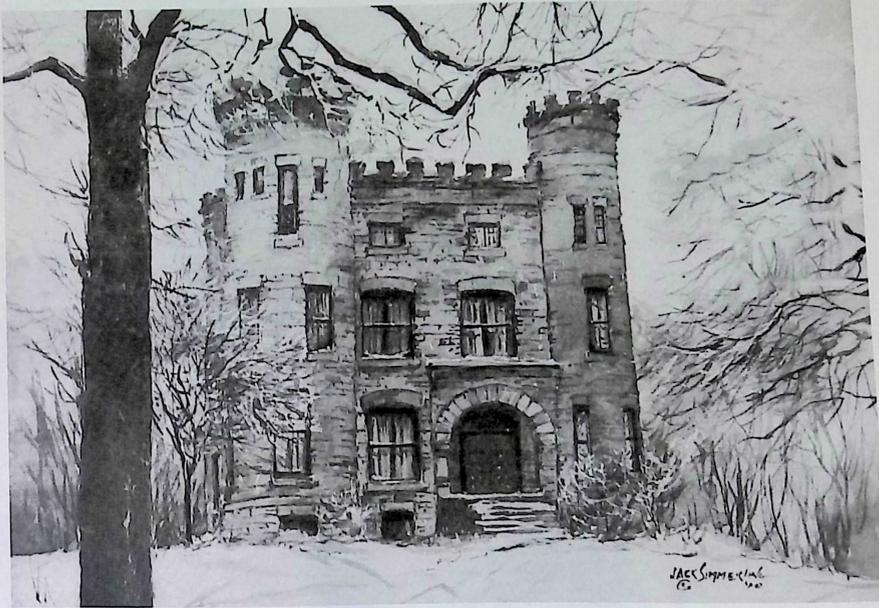
Something is always coming across the desk at RHS which attracts my attention in a special way. Ms. Margaret Cusak dropped off a beautiful 16-page souvenir program for the June 4, 1935 Premier Opening of the Beverly Theater at 95th and Ashland Ave.

The inaugural program featured a variety of events, then finally came the moment everyone was waiting for, "together on screen for the first time," Al Jolson and Ruby Keeler in *Go Into Your Dance*.

My friends and I spent many Saturday mornings at the Beverly for the kids programs. Ms. Cusak, thanks for the memory. This program is a welcome addition to the RHS collection. Along with many, many fascinating items, it is available for viewing at RHS Headquarters.

Please be a 2014 member. Be as generous as you can. If your newsletter label shows 2014, then we thank you for paying forward.

And thanks for listening.



This Jack Simmerling painting of the Irish Castle at 103rd and Longwood Drive was on display at RHS for the Annual Meeting on February 9. The painting was on loan from Errol Magidson, the creator of the documentary, "Chicago's Only Castle - The History

of Givins' Irish Castle and Its Keepers." Simmerling assisted in the development of the documentary and DVDs are for sale at RHS; call 773/881-1675 to arrange to stop by and pick up your copy.

Time for the Spring Bonnet Tea!

RHS will hold its Spring Bonnet Tea on Sunday, May 4, beginning at 2:00 p.m., at RHS, 10621 S. Seeley Ave.

This has become a very popular event for adults and youngsters. An elegant repast of finger sandwiches, scones, shortbread and other savory delights, plus an assortment of delicious teas, is featured.

If you have not yet attended one of these Victorian Teas, you owe it to yourself to

come this year. This is also a chance to visit the historic Graver Driscoll House and learn more about RHS and the collection.

The cost is \$20 per attendee age 17 and older; \$10 per attendee 8-16 years old.

Attendees are invited to wear a spring hat!

Reservations are required and may be made by contacting RHS at 773/881-1675 or ridgehistory@hotmail.com.

RHS House Doctor Program looks at masonry

On Sunday, March 23, 2014, at 2:00 p.m., RHS will offer "House Doctor Program: Exterior Masonry - Stucco, Brick, Mortar." The speakers will be Simon Leverett and Mathew Wolf from Henry Frerk Sons, Chicago. The cost is \$5 per RHS member and \$10 per non-member. Light refreshments will be served.

Masonry is generally a highly durable

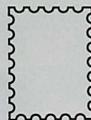
form of construction. However, the materials used, the quality of the mortar and workmanship, and the pattern in which the units are assembled can significantly affect the durability of the overall masonry construction. Extreme weather can cause degradation of masonry wall surfaces due to frost damage.

The speakers specialize in restoring masonry facades.

Ridge Historical Society
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BEVERLY HILLS, MORGAN PARK, WASHINGTON HEIGHTS & MT. GREENWOOD

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SPRING 2014 ISSUE



Mark your calendar for these exciting events

non-member. Light refreshments will be served. Contact RHS at 773/881-1675 or ridgehistory@hotmail.com.

SUNDAY, MAY 4, 2:00 P.M.

The Spring Bonnet Tea

At RHS, 10621 S. Seeley Ave., Chicago.

Cost: \$20 per attendee age 17 and older; \$10 per attendee age 8 to 16 years old. Reservations required; contact RHS at 773/881-1675 or ridgehistory@hotmail.com.

SATURDAY, MARCH 29, 2014

10:00 A.M. TO 2:00 P.M.

Dewalt Mechlin Chapter of the

Daughters of the American Revolution:

Genealogy Workshop conducted by a skilled team of DAR genealogists who will assist prospective DAR members with the application process or members who have

SUNDAY, MARCH 23, 2:00 P.M.

House Doctor Program: Exterior

Masonry – Stucco, Brick, Concrete.

Presenters: Mathew Wolf and Simon

Leverett, masonry specialists, Henry Frank Sons, Chicago. At RHS, 10621 S. Seeley

Ave., Chicago. Cost: \$5 per RHS member; \$10 per non-member. Light refreshments

will be served. Contact RHS at 773/881-1675 or ridgehistory@hotmail.com.

SUNDAY, APRIL 6, 2:00 P.M.

Baseball: The National Pastime in the

National Archives

featuring the book of the same name released in 2013 by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).
Speaker: Kristina Maltre Jarosik, Education Specialist, National Archives at Chicago. At RHS, 10621 S. Seeley Ave., Chicago. Cost: \$5 per RHS member; \$10 per