

Reprieve for the Grasslands

How grassroots effort saved a Deer Park coastal prairie

BY SUE MAYFIELD GEIGER

The prairie provides us with a background against which we may measure the success or failure of our own land use and management... [It] is the outcome of thousands of years' worth of sorting of species and adaptations to soil and climate. Prairie is so much more than land covered with grass. It is a slowly evolved, highly complex organic entity, centuries old.

– John E. Weaver

Over nine million acres of prairie grasslands once existed for Native Americans and early settlers. Today less than one percent remains as a refuge for rare and endangered birds, mammals, reptiles, insects and plants. The Coastal Prairie along the western Gulf Coast of the U.S. is

a tall grass prairie similar to the tall grass prairies of the Midwest. Yet, these prairies have dwindled from nine million acres to less than 100 acres in Louisiana and less than 65,000 acres in Texas. So, it was quite a surprise when prairie hunters scanning aerial imagery located 52 acres of the highest quality prairie in the city of Deer Park—a town surrounded by urban sprawl and ship channel chemical plants.

After obtaining permission from the landowner to study the prairie, conservation groups were amazed at their discovery—a piece of history that definitely needed to be preserved.

Situated in the middle of suburban neighborhoods, the prairie had never been plowed and was basically virgin land containing a diversity of plant and animal life. Specifically, over 300 native plants (including several rare varieties), over 50 species of birds (many grassland songbirds) and a variety of amphibians, including the Chorus frog which plays an important role as an indicator species. Yet the 52 acres was already being sought after by developers who had plans to build 150-plus homes on the land. Property owner and native Deer Park businessman, Dean Lawther, had a sale price on the acreage of \$4 million and agreed to give conservationists time to raise the funds to buy the prairie.



Lawther – Deer Park Prairie Preserve



Deer Park Prairie Volunteers



Jennifer Lorenz, BLC Executive Director

Bayou Land Conservancy (BLC) was contacted in late 2012 to help with fundraising efforts, but raising money was not an easy task. Funding came in slowly and time was running out. In August of 2013, Lawther was receiving offers over \$4 million from developers and gave BLC a deadline of August 20 to raise the agreed-upon price of \$4 million. Thanks to social media and news outlets, \$3.2 million was raised by deadline, but they fell short. Lawther graciously extended the deadline to September 10, at which time the goal was met and the prairie was saved. The “Lawther – Deer Park Prairie Preserve” is now protected from any

future development and will forever be a place of refuge for innumerable species of plants and wildlife.

Jennifer Lorenz, BLC’s Executive Director, says saving the prairie was touch and go with everyone involved sitting on the edge of their seats. “I had a lot of dark moments when I thought it was not going to happen,” she says, “because had we not raised the money there would be 150 or more houses on the land emitting carbon dioxide gases, not to mention the addition of concrete and roads.” Lorenz went on to say that prairie grass root systems go underground as much as 30 ft. and they do as much

absorption of carbon dioxide gases as trees do if not more. The bottom line is that the prairie will continue to serve as an air quality buffer for that area, instead of an emitter.

Lorenz’s initial reaction when she first saw the prairie was unbelievable shock due to it being such a diverse tract of land. “Parts of Houston used to look just like the Deer Park prairie,” says Lorenz, “so historically that is why this property is so amazing. We talk about Houston being so flat but in fact, before the land got scraped down for agriculture, there was more of a tall-grass, rolling topography, and that is what exists on the Deer Park prairie.

Since this tract has never been cleared or grazed or had row crops, it is a fascinating piece of land that is a remnant of what used to be.”

Lorenz reflects back to the morning of September 10, 2013: “We all got up biting our nails, not knowing if we would meet our goal. All of the money went to buy the prairie. BLC did not charge an administrative fee or interest, plus we had to cover a few pledges that were not met, but no checks bounced and we had over 1600 donors.” Philanthropists Terry Hershey and Jane Dale Owen were lead funders; Shell Oil was a corporate donor, and Albemarle Corporation contributed through an employee-driven fund. Lots of citizens gave small amounts, including retired residents and retired teachers from Deer Park. Lorenz also gives kudos to her BLC staff and volunteers who worked diligently around the clock. “It was a grassroots effort that was accomplished due to social media and a full-blown press campaign,” she says. “Ninety-eight percent of the people who gave money never even saw the prairie. We were able to show the specialness of this land due to our YouTube campaign.”

Lorenz is most pleased that the prairie will provide a boost of “green” in another way to Deer Park. “We have brought so many people to visit the prairie who stay several hours,” she says. “They eat lunch, gas up their cars, and even shop while they’re there. Birders and native plant lovers actually bring a lot of money into an area like this. It also provides another vision of Deer Park—not just a town adjacent to refineries, but an area that has a world-class green space within it.”

Pasadena ISD is excited to work with the Prairie. Teachers and administrators from that district have toured the prairie and are supportive and enthusiastic about bringing students out for educational purposes. Deer Park ISD and LaPorte ISD will be welcomed as well. Students will be able to do historical, geography, geology, botany, and butterfly studies. “We have a ‘No Child Left Inside’ environmental education program that we will eventually have at the prairie and we are hopeful that the cities and surrounding school districts will help us be proponents for the ecotourism boost that the prairie will offer for the region,” says Lorenz.

Saying that there will never be an entry fee to tour the prairie, Lorenz is adamant about the fact that the land was donated to the Native Prairies Association of Texas for the community. The public access does have to be managed, however, so visitors will be required to stay on a one-mile trail system. “People will be able to hike (no biking), but dogs are not allowed due to prairie gophers and ground nesting bird species such as the eastern meadowlark,” says Lorenz.

Most importantly, the Lawther – Deer Park Prairie Preserve will be an educational facility to inform visitors about native plants. “We have so many beautiful native plant species that can handle drought, and a deluge of rain, so we need them,” says Lorenz. “The bee and monarch butterfly population is suffering. We want to teach people to roll back on the herbicide, pesticide and fertilizer that impact these lands. The cool thing about this prairie is that the soils that have been there for eons are still there. That is why it is so incredibly diverse—the topsoil has not been leveled or scraped off. When you plant things that grow here naturally, you use less water.”

The prairie has plans to provide a seed source from some of the plants that are there. “Hopefully, we can encourage folks to get away from the manicured lawn look and strive for more of a wildscape yard, like the Lawther – Deer Park Prairie Preserve.” (For more information: bayoulandconservancy.org)

Publisher’s Note: The prairie abuts the property line of Grandview Memorial Cemetery. Our writer shared with us that her father is buried there and that she likes to think of him being surrounded by all that lovely nature. We agree.



Blue Sage



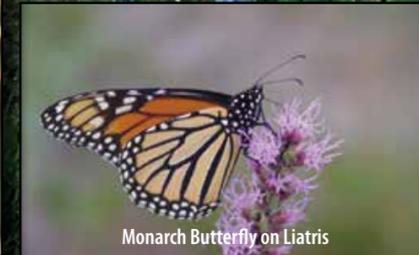
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Maximilian Sunflowers



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Monarch Butterfly on Liatris



Maryland Meadow Beauty



Purple Aster



Rosinweed



Procession Flower



Viola sagittata