

In Cass County, Illinois, just east of Chandlerville, I stood upon the promontory of a steep, south-facing hillside covered with prairie grasses, wildflowers, and shrubs. It was a tough climb to this spot, fighting the thorny brambles and thick vegetation, but it was worth it to see the expansive view of the small creek valley, where hawks would sometimes glide past at eye level. All that I saw, except for the small hill prairie where I stood, was forested. But I knew that there were other hill prairies in the area, and that all of them were mere remnants of much greater grasslands that once covered the flat uplands and rolling hills of central Illinois. I am drawn to this hillside and others like it for the view and the wildlife, but also for its connection to a far distant past—before Illinois, before the Europeans—to antiquity.

Twenty thousand years ago, when there were glaciers, arctic tundra, and boreal forests, there were no prairies in Illinois. After the glaciers retreated northward, and when the climate became much warmer—warmer than even the present day—the prairies, encouraged by wild fires,

### *Side Channels*

expanded into Illinois from the west. Of course, agriculture and modern civilization have long replaced the grand prairies of central Illinois, the once rolling grasslands that extended to the horizon. So the remaining hill prairies—too steep to plow and difficult to build upon, original prairies planted by no one, that remain much as they have been—are true relicts of an ancient landscape that has been mostly lost.

As I have gotten older, I have become increasingly drawn to that which exhibits age. In architecture, music, books, landscapes, and even people. How different from my views as a youth, when new always seemed best; when it seemed that even our new music, generated on an almost assembly-line regularity, was superior to anything that came before; when the open, superficially clean, widely spread suburban areas could easily be preferred to the closed-in, noisy, antiquated central city of Chicago and its older suburbs. While focused on new innovations, as a young man looking toward his future and wondering about the possibilities, reveling in the “Space Age,” I failed to fully appreciate the fine qualities of age, how a connection to the past could add a special flavor and context to my surroundings and experiences.

At middle age, I have reached the point where, should I live a normal life span, the years behind likely outnumber the years ahead. So I have begun to see the past not as something to draw away from, but as an invaluable archive of scenes and experiences from which to draw a deeper understanding. Newness by definition cannot have survived the myriad tests of time necessary to draw out hard-won qualities of integrity, strength, and durability. And valuing these qualities, I more often than not find myself seeking that which has survived a long and varied history.

These days I am quite aware that when I stand upon a high bluff top overlooking a system of ravines, hills, and river valleys, a hill prairie at my feet, I stand upon the cumulative result of the ages, upon a vegetation formation that existed long before I was born, long before my ancestors

*Drawn to Antiquity*

or the ancestors of most everyone I know traveled to this continent from elsewhere; a formation that I hope will remain for all future generations, even aware as I am of the inevitability, and perhaps desirability, of change. The power in the air at such moments is more than barely perceptible.

*Side Channels*



*Hopewell Hill Prairies Nature Preserve, Illinois*