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City in a Garden

Chicago's aesthetically challenged seal and prescient motto By Curt Meine

On March 4, 1837, the Illinois legislature approved Chicago's proposal for incorporation, and the lakeside village of 4,170 souls officially became a city. That June, the city adopted its official seal, one of those wonderfully cluttered montages of symbols that nineteenth-century Americans did so well: in the center, a sheaf of wheat against a federal shield of red, white, and blue, indicative of the Midwest's fruitful land; to one side, a tomahawk-wielding figure representing the native inhabitants of the land; on the other side, a ship (presumably bearing European immigrants) heaving across Lake Michigan toward its western shore;

and, floating overhead, a sleeping babe borne on a cloud and representing the newborn city reposing in peace and purity. The cloud was later upgraded to a large shell, Chicago being (natch) the pearl of the Great Lakes.

At the bottom of the seal, a ribbon is inscribed with the city's motto: "URBS IN HORTO," Latin for "City in a Garden." One interpretation holds that this reflected an appeal from the city's first mayor, William Ogden. Shortly after he became mayor in those busy months of 1837, the nation fell into a financial panic. Ogden paid off the city's debts by taking out personal loans and paying the bills. He also

encouraged his fellow Chicagoans to plant their own gardens in the city's open plots and peripheral fields—a sort of frontier hedge fund!

A more widely held interpretation is that the motto captured the vital vision of the city's founders, of their fair new city held in the fresh bosom of its rich, supporting hinterlands. Did they see those *hortus* lands beyond the city boundaries as Illinois tallgrass prairie flowering forth with its 850 species of native plants, rife with mammals large and small, birds and reptiles, frogs and bugs, with rich soils and abundant freshwaters? Or did they see those lands as what they might, and did, become:

“The only sustainable city—and this, to me, is the indispensable ideal and goal—is a city in balance with its countryside: a city, that is, that would live off the net ecological income of its supporting region, paying as it goes all its ecological and human debts.”

—Wendell Berry, “Out of Your Car, Off Your Horse:
Twenty-seven Propositions about Global Thinking and the Sustainability of Cities”

“futures,” the agricultural cornucopia, the mid-continental empire of grain and meat?

I don't know whether minutes were kept at the meeting of the 1837 *ad hoc* committee on a Chicago city seal and motto. Whatever the committee's view, I can't help but think that the motto expressed what must have been a common and visceral sense of the land's raw, organic fertility, built throughout 12 postglacial millennia by the land's soil-building, moisture-retaining, nitrogen-sucking, carbon-holding plants and its pollinating, grazing, seed-dispersing, nutrient-shuffling, and predatory animals. Chicago was to become an urban community bubbling away at the top of what Aldo Leopold described as the land's “fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and animals.” However the new city-dwellers and their country cousins might reconfigure the plumbing of that energy fountain, however short-sighted or visionary the efforts of ensuing generations to conserve its flow, the motto declared Chicago to be a city grounded in a place. It gave the city a stake in the land, as did the city's very name: the Miami's *chicagoua* or *chigagou* (for the native wild garlic, *Allium tricoccum*), the Potawatomi's *chicago*. The motto and those smelly garlics may not be as dramatic as the wild she-wolf suckling Romulus and Remus along Rome's River Tiber, but they still serve

to remind us of the city's—of every city's—rootage in the land, and in older cultures on the land.

Fast-forward 75 years, to 1914. In just three generations, Chicago's population had grown 500-fold, to more than 2 million. The expanding *urbs* had encroached relentlessly upon the *hortus*, not only in the immediate shadows of the rising skyscrapers but also across the vast prairies, northern forests, and extensive wetlands of the entire mid-continent. The result was a landscape, urban and rural together, transformed—a story told so compellingly by William Cronon in *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. That year the citizens of Cook County approved a measure to establish a “forest preserve district” that encompassed the entire county. Envisioning something far beyond the idea of urban parks, the measure authorized the district

to acquire . . . and hold lands . . . containing one or more natural forests . . . or lands connecting such forests or parts thereof . . . for the purpose of protecting and preserving the flora, fauna and scenic beauties within such district, and to restore, restock, protect, and preserve the natural forests and such lands together with their flora and fauna, as nearly as may be, in their natural state and condition, for the purpose of the education, pleasure, and recreation of the public.

As the *Encyclopedia of Chicago* explains, “No similar preserves existed anywhere in the world at the time, but architect Dwight Perkins, the principal proponent of the preserve idea, believed that the preservation of nature would have important value for life in a growing metropolis.” The claim is somewhat chauvinistic, for Cook County's forest preserve district was inspired by other efforts—including Boston's in the 1890s to protect portions of its outer lands in parks. Nonetheless, the people of North America's great Midwestern *urbs* were taking a revolutionary step to conserve the *hortus* in which it was embedded. As Perkins and his compatriots in Chicago's Municipal Science Club had stated, Cook County's special lands “should be preserved for the benefit of the public in both the city and its suburbs, and for their own sake and scientific value, which, if ever lost, cannot be restored for generations.”

Fast-forward another century, as we mark the centennial of Cook County's Forest Preserve District. The population of the city proper holds at around 2.7 million, while the larger metropolitan region is now home to 9.5 million. The preserves that were once on the urban fringe are now themselves embedded, forming an emerald chain through the developed urban and suburban landscape. The *urbs* leap-frogged the close-by *hortus*, while the greater *hortus* of the Midwest agricultural landscape has been

transformed into a severely cultivated and highly profitable but biologically depauperate *desertus*. The redirected fountain of energy now overfloweth into corn and soybeans, feedlots and muck farms, corporate boardrooms and the floor of the Chicago Board of Trade.

But another transformation also occurred along the way. Over its century of existence, the district's green network of forest, savanna, prairie, wetlands, streams, and lakes grew to embrace about 68,000 acres (275 km²) of open space within the Chicago region. Surrounding counties followed Cook County's example and undertook their own land-protection efforts. But in the absence of fire, grazing, and other disturbances, plant succession had its way: shrubs and trees spread into the open prairies and filled in the understories of the savannas and woodlands. The fragmented district lands had no defense against the surge of invasive plant and animal species—and no response. White-tailed deer disappeared, then returned, then proliferated, browsing their way down the list of palatable plant species (and into suburban lawns and gardens). At the interface of the *urbis* and the *hortus*, dramatic ecological change came constantly to the “natural forests and said lands.”

Beginning in the 1970s, Chicago-area citizen-conservationists returned to the forest preserves with a different understanding of land stewardship. An ecological restoration movement took root. People of the *urbis* took to the *hortus* with a new appreciation of the *avium* (roughly, the wild). The city and its rippling economy had altered forever the wild woodlands, savannas, prairies, wetlands, and waterways of the hinterlands. But in the city, and across the hinterlands, restorationists

sought new ways to integrate the *urbis*, the *hortus*, and the *avium*.

This dirt-under-the-fingernails restoration work did not only yield revitalized prairies and oak groves, but it also provided the basis for a far-sighted experiment in urban conservation. In the mid-1990s, the Brookfield Zoo, the Field Museum, the Openlands Project, and The Nature Conservancy—plus other civic organizations and institutions and local, state, and federal agencies—banded together to form a new conservation consortium. They christened it, provocatively, Chicago Wilderness. Now comprising some 300 member groups from across the entire Chicago metropolitan region, Chicago Wilderness is dedicated to protecting and restoring the region's biological diversity and ecological health and to reconnecting the city's people to their landscape. The name that seemed oxymoronic to some now seems like almost a dare—an ongoing challenge to our conservation ideas, policies, and practice. Through Chicago Wilderness, the city provides a model of new ways to honor the wild amid the urban, to enrich the urban amid the wild, and to keep them connected, in more fruitful and durable ways.

For all of human history, the story of our species' cultural development has emphasized the conversion of wild landscapes to agriculture, the movement of people into cities, the rise of industry and the globalization of trade, the intensification, mechanization, and corporatization of farming, the continual spread of cities and suburbs into the rural countryside and up against the wild. Chicago has exemplified, on a dramatically condensed time scale, that saga. But Chicago's history and geography and culture—

its time and place and people—also allowed it to emerge from that story with the intimation of a radically revised trajectory. The city now acts to protect, restore, and sustain something of its natural inheritance, its layers of post-glacial, prehistoric Woodland Period, Miami and Potawatomi, and European frontier nature. It now benefits (as communities large and small increasingly do) from a new agrarian movement that recovers connections to land through food, in the city and beyond. In so doing, Chicago aims to conserve the foundations on which it was built, the fountain from which its wealth and health have flowed.

And so, on a planet whose growing human population is increasingly urbanized, we might consider revising and extending Chicago's motto as an example to the world: *Urbs in horto . . . hortus in avio . . . avium in universo* (i.e., the cosmos). We might see the city anew, not only as a human community but as a place within its place. We might aspire to complete the circle that Chicago's founders began to trace in 1847: to re-place the city within the cosmos and to find the cosmos within ourselves; to find some greater harmony across our landscapes, within and far beyond the cities and at every place in between. ♣

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