

# Seeking Continuity on the Sauk Prairie

by Curt Meine

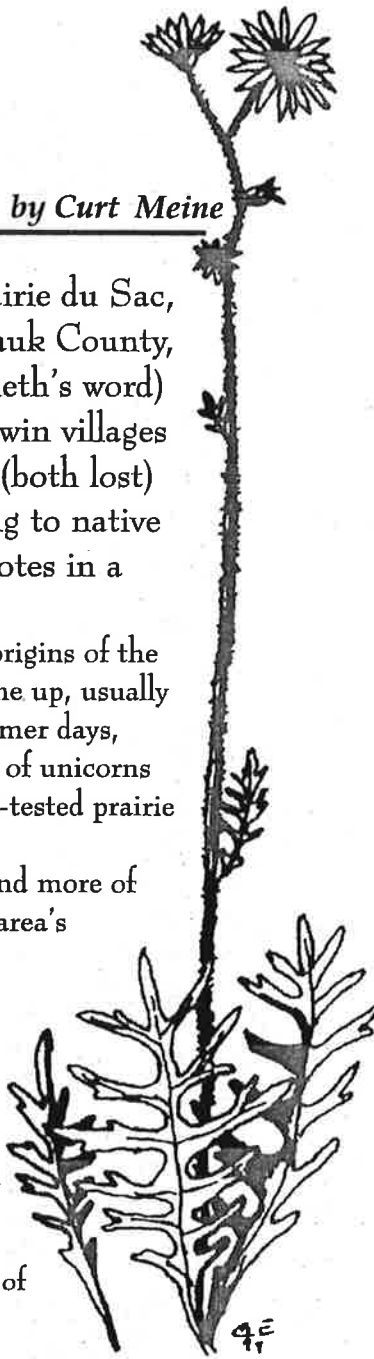
For decades the towns of Sauk City and Prairie du Sac, neighbors along the Wisconsin River in Sauk County, carried on a lively and (to use August Derleth's word) "ludicrous" rivalry. Well into the twentieth century the twin villages wrestled over such issues as the siting of the county seat (both lost) and the post office (both won). They struggled, according to native son Derleth, "with the aimless persistence of two dust motes in a sunbeam."

Faint echoes of the old contest can still be heard, but the origins of the rivalry are now mostly forgotten. Only rarely does the subject come up, usually in response to questions from curious out-of-town visitors. In former days, according to Derleth, "it would have been easier to unearth a herd of unicorns than unity on the Sauk Prairie." But time, like the bark on a fire-tested prairie oak, has overgrown the old scars.

Although the towns have resisted legal unification, more and more of the local billboards, businesses, and institutions have adopted the area's umbrella designation of "Sauk Prairie."

The shift in terminology is fitting, and holds a hidden promise. The names of the two towns are certainly evocative, and they carry political authority. But "Sauk Prairie" was and is a *place*. The promise is that here, as elsewhere, our politics may yet come to be understood within, and subject to, the place, rather than the other way around; that traditional political divisions can be eased through a deeper appreciation of the local landscape and its history.

August Derleth's instincts as a regionalist allowed him to appreciate that promise. Even as he recounted the more absurd aspects of Sauk Prairie's political history, he presented its rich natural and human



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history to the world in his "Sac Prairie Saga," his collection of books, poems, and memoirs that told the story from within.

"I am much attached to this corner of the earth," he wrote in the early 1940s, "not only because it possesses great natural beauty in abundance, but because it affords me a *necessary continuity*" [emphasis added].

There is pith to that final phrase, not only for writers and regionalists, but for all of us displaced moderns. Let us expand on his remark. Continuity is necessary because change is constant. And as the pace of cultural change has accelerated, the need for continuity has grown increasingly important — and desperate. Community institutions that have traditionally provided a degree of continuity now face the challenge of keeping pace. What does our contemporary longing to strengthen our families, neighborhoods, and communities represent but a concerted effort to weave at one end of the social fabric what rapid economic and technological change are fraying at the other? Until recently, however, discussions of continuity have rarely included the landscape in which our communities are embedded. Can there be any continuity if the very sources and setting of our communities are left out of the picture?

Sauk Prairie will not be alone in confronting such questions. It does, however, enjoy certain advantages. It has the richly textured past that Derleth and others have chronicled. And it has that name, which makes it difficult to ignore its origins in Indian country and in tallgrass prairie. In Sauk Prairie, as elsewhere, much of the past and of the natural has been obliterated; but much still is on display.

Sauk Prairie sits in a bowl. The rims consist of pre-Cambrian quartzite in the Baraboo Range to the north, ridges of Ordovician sandstone to the west, and the Wisconsin River with its associated bluffs to the east and south. The gentle ridge of the terminal moraine bisects the bowl; to its west is outwash plain, to its east rolling hills and pothole ponds. Some combination of local topography, soil type, prevailing winds, rainfall patterns, fire, grazing animals, and the activities of native people allowed the bottom of the bowl to support at the time of European contact a 14,000-acre expanse of prairie, grading along its edges into oak savanna and woodland.

The Sauk Prairie proper stretched south from the base of the bluffs, then west to meet the sandstone. As with so many early descriptions of the Midwest's tallgrass empire, the accounts of Sauk Prairie's explorers and settlers often waxed rhapsodic. One noted the "myriads of flowers of every shape, shade and color, and the luxuriant grasses.... a handsome picture set in a beautiful frame." The perceptive modern traveler along US 12 can read where the prairie lay. The farms on the rich soils of the outwash plain and former prairie are flush. An extremely occasional stand of big bluestem can yet be seen along unimproved roadsides. The continuity of those tall grasses is fragile indeed. For the farms, continuity still rests at the end of the day on the generative capacity of the prairie soils.

For the first travelers along the lower Wisconsin, the Sauk Prairie must also have done wonders for perspective. Whether Ho-

Chunk, Sauk, or Fox, or the later missionaries, trappers, and explorers, they gained at Sauk Prairie a glimpse between worlds. Descending the river from the Fox-Wisconsin portage just upstream, travelers would here have come upon the first open expanse of prairie along the water route west, a first hint of the mid-continent's great grasslands. Conversely, ascending the river from the Mississippi below, they would have left the prairie behind them here, adjusting their eyes from grasses to forests, and their bellies from bison to deer. At Sauk Prairie, they gave continuity to the divided biomes of what is now Wisconsin.

Sauk Prairie has a venerable history as contested territory. The fundamental scrape, between the glacier and the earth, left us the moraine and the outwash and Devil's Lake nearby. Through the subsequent twelve millennia, forest, oak savanna, and prairie skirmished for control. The shape and extent of Sauk Prairie changed with the ages, expanding with aridity, shrinking with moisture. Bur oaks, which Aldo Leopold described as "the shock troops sent by the invading forest to storm the prairie," shifted position in response to the frequency of fire and the abundance of rain. Oak openings thinned and thickened with the changing conditions.

The prairie gained its name from the native Sauk who made it their home place prior to European contact, coexisting with the nearby Ho-Chunk. First pushed west by the territorial expansions of eastern peoples, then relocated beyond the Mississippi by the incoming Europeans, the Sauk left only their name. In 1832 Black Hawk's desperate Sauk

band returned from exile and sought to reestablish continuity with the land. They barely saved themselves through their heroic resistance at Black Hawk Ridge, which rises above the Wisconsin River at the south edge of the prairie. Days later, their own continuity was all but lost on the Bad Axe.

Then followed the continuing disputes between the immigrant villages on the prairie's fringe. Subsequent bouts featured a clash over where to bridge the river, a "thunderous rift" in Sauk City's Roman Catholic congregation, and an argument about placement of Highway 12 through town. Meanwhile, outside of town, plows overturned the prairie sod, and the struggle to extract organic wealth commenced. Early rounds, involving wheat and the chinch bug, hops and the hop louse, passed quickly before the search for a more sustainable agriculture began. By the late 1800s the farms had diversified, the mix of livestock and grains mimicking the pre-agricultural mix of the grazers and the grazed. With the twentieth century came changes that would alter both town life and farm life. The civic bickering continued, but faded increasingly into insignificance against a background of world war and economic depression. Farming continued, absorbing one new wave of mechanization after another.

And then the global forces and local landscape collided, abruptly and unpredictably, in the Sauk Prairie. Even before the United States entered World War II, plans to build an ammunitions manufacturing facility in the area had taken shape. With the assault on Pearl Harbor, events progressed inexorably. Occupying much of the northern half of the former Sauk Prairie, built through the swift

and bitter removal of some eighty farm families, the Badger Ordnance Works (later renamed the Badger Army Ammunition Plant) went from paper plans to production in little more than a year. The plant was active through the Korean and Vietnam wars, and remained on stand-by through the long vigil of the Cold War.

The Badger Army Ammunition Plant is now closing, a poignant end to this disputatious century. And with closure, another contest has begun: to determine the fate of the plant's 7,350 acres and, in a way, of the natural and human history that lies dormant in its soil. Again the continuity of prairie and oak savanna, of the native peoples' presence, of the farmer's efforts, and of commerce and industry are in question. The outcome will display to all, and to posterity, our capacity to learn and respect our history; to define and locate our community within the broader landscape; to create "necessary continuity" not out of desperation, but out of an awareness of needs, responsibilities, and possibilities.

Passing regularly through the Sauk Prairie in the late 1930s and 1940s, Aldo Leopold would have observed the gradual diminution of the roadside prairie remnants, the removal of the farm families, the construction of the ordnance works. It is said that the first experimental efforts in ecological restoration that Leopold helped initiate at the University of Wisconsin's arboretum involved, in part, prairie species transplanted from the river bluffs overlooking Sauk Prairie. Continuity was much on his mind, and those of other

conservationists, in those Dust Bowl years. The durability of the Midwest's prairie soils, of the continent's wild places, and even, during and after the war, of the human enterprise itself, was in question. Leopold framed the issue, inimitably, through the eyes of a prairie dweller. Reflecting upon the elimination of prairie flora and fauna, he wrote, "What a thousand acres of Silphiums looked like when they tickled the bellies of the buffalo is a question never again to be answered, and perhaps not even asked." His fear was well justified, but perhaps his despair premature. Many in Sauk Prairie are asking such questions again, and seeking answers.

Often on still winter mornings at Sauk Prairie, thin veils of mist rise up off the Wisconsin River and drift over the valley's brim. The layered wisps hang like the pieces of a delicate mobile, mingling with woodsmoke rising from the chimneys of town homes and farm houses. Morning sunlight angles in over the river bluffs, sometimes carrying shadows of the bald eagles that ply river and sky through the winter months. The river, freed from its last dam upstream of Prairie du Sac, slides west toward its meeting with the Mississippi.

On the coldest mornings, all things in sight, from the river to the Baraboo Hills, grow crystals of frozen fog. Of all the moods of the Sauk Prairie landscape, this is the one I find most settling. The stories of this place, layered like the fog, lift and drift and mingle. We see through time in patches, we are struck by light, shadows of the other creatures cross us. Our lives are connected, and we try to arrange for continuity.

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