



—Journal Photo

The cobblestone home of Ahira Hinkley, an early settler, still stands at Eagle

Prairie Past Is Present

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Eagle. — A walk along the Milwaukee Road tracks through Eagle is not much of a risk because the train comes through only twice a week. And the walk provides a view of the same kind of prairie, meadow and wetland that the early settlers encountered in their crossings here some 20 years before the Civil War.

Wide fields of grass meet occasional hills and drop at times into little ponds or dribble into marshes.

To historians and naturalists, that's what makes it so ideal. More important, that's what makes it worth preserving.

More than almost any area in the county, the Eagle area has it all: woodlands, wetlands, water and prairie.

Old Patterns Persist

These features do not occur in equal proportions, but they are all there and that is what drew Ahira Hinkley, the first settler — whose cobblestone house still stands — and others to the

southwestern corner of Waukesha County.

Geese still settle in ponds here, and nature seems largely unaffected by the slow encroachments of civilization, represented by an occasional modern house in the middle of a patch of prairie.

A timber trestle bridge, built to give Hinkley access to all of his land after he granted the railroads the right to cut through it, still stands, though it shows some charring, the results of occasional attempts by vandals to burn it down.

The rusty rails that pass beneath the trestle carried the first rail passengers west from Milwaukee in 1851. It was originally thought that the railroad would spur settlement in the area, museum records show.

Importance Explained

But with the county so big and migration so dispersed, Eagle never became an urban center.

There are plans to convert the railroad track to a hike-bike trail if it is abandoned by the railroad.

"The area doesn't look as spectacular as a waterfall," said Jean Penn Loerke, the county historian. But she spoke of its enduring significance.

"Here we have a landscape which is largely unchanged" since the time of European settlement in the 1850s, she said.

Early settlers were not particularly aware that they were history makers but they were aware and took full advantage of the fact that the area offered enough resources to make them a self-sufficient community.

Loerke ranks the area today as one of the county's most significant remaining landscapes because it has been largely unaltered by man and because the natural environments still support themselves.

She said that not only did early settlers seek areas that reminded them of home (such as Wales' "Welsh Hills"), but they sought areas that had the potential to sustain small communities.

Because men could hunt, fish and farm in the immediate area, Eagle ranked high.