A patch of tallgrass very much worth saving

By William H. Metcalfe

WHEN explorers from New France were pushing into the continental midwest, 250 to 300 years ago, they must have marvelled at the tall prairie grass. This big bluestem grass reached a height of 10 feet in Texas; and even in the shorter frost-free season of the northern Red River valley, it could reach five feet. This tallgrass prairie covered 320 million acres on each side of the Mississippi River, from Ohio west to Nebraska and north into Manitoba in a slim finger 100 miles long. Today, 99% of that vast stretch of tallgrass prairie has long since disappeared, victim of the farmer’s plow and the real estate developer’s scrap-
er and bulldozer. With it has gone an ecosystem of plants and animals that scientists rate as among the most complex and best balanced in the world.

Fortunately for scientific research, patches of the original prairie remain scattered through the area. And more fortunately for Manitoba scientists, one of the biggest and best of these is close at hand — right in the city of Winnipeg.

It consists of 26½ acres of tallgrass prairie, surrounded by houses, apartments, warehouses and a school, yet in almost the same state that it was when the Living Prairie Museum came this way in the 1730s. It is the biggest piece of undeveloped prairie in any large city on the continent. Manitoba does contain a larger stretch in a wildfowl sanctuary a few miles north of Winnipeg; but as far as urban location is concerned, Winnipeg’s prairie is unique.

What’s more, it’s there for all time to come, safe in the hands of the city’s parks and recreation department and designated as the Living Prairie Museum.

Some people see it, sniff and ask: “How can they call it a museum? It’s just a bunch of grass and wildflowers.” Yet it is just as much a museum, in the dictionary sense, as the Royal Ontario in Toronto or the Museum of Man and Nature in downtown Winnipeg. It is, as the dictionary says, “an institution devoted to the procurement, care, and display of objects of lasting interest or value.”

Two factors were responsible for the astonishing survival of this bit of prairie in the midst of a busy city. One was nature’s placing of a layer of limestone so near the surface as to discourage early farmers and, for many years, modern city builders as well. The other was the existence of a small band of determined nature-lovers, headed by three scientists and an 87-year-old man angrily waving his cane at opponents of preservation.

These were the people who, a few years ago, awakened the public to the value of the prairie treasure within the...
city, and who, when that treasure was threatened, marshalled enough support to withstand the threat.

Here’s how it all came about.

In the late 1960s, the property, long neglected by preservationists and commercial interests, began to display a magnetic attraction for both groups. The three scientists, seeking an ecosystem as a project for the International Biological Program in 1968, had decided to locate and identify the remaining bits of tallgrass prairie within Manitoba. Only four of 60 sites suggested qualified as original tallgrass prairie. The biggest and most accessible of these was right in the Winnipeg suburb of St. James. Its possibilities were first brought to the attention of the municipal parks board chairman and alderman, Peter Moss, by an employee of the board, Mike Gwiazda. Moss quickly became an ardent promoter of the project and a strong ally of the three scientists.

These people are still practising professional naturalists in Winnipeg. They are Dr. Robert W. Nero, wildlife specialist in the wildlife branch of the provincial Dept. of Natural Resources; Dr. Jennifer Walker-Shay, professor of botany at the University of Manitoba; and Dr. Karen Johnson, curator of botany at the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature.

Having determined the immense scientific value of this piece of ground, they set about winning over the general public to the cause of preserving it. They thought they had a fair chance of getting the area — part of a much larger tract that had fallen into municipal hands through tax sale some years before — because it was owned by the municipality of St. James. Nero and company hoped that if they could produce a formidable wave of public support, the council might make the land available.

They did a great job of public relations, too, delivering illustrated lectures, enlisting the support of horticulturists, visiting schools with their message, preaching conservation wherever they could find a receptive ear. They knew they had to move quickly, because real estate developers had become interested in the land. Practically all other residential housing sites in the area had already been taken up. Only this stretch of prairie remained; and, limestone or no limestone, it now offered a profitable opportunity for developers.

The conservationists did move quickly but so did the developers. By the time the conservationists were able to make their presentation to the St. James council, the councillors were all aware that they could get some big money for the municipality if they sold to the developers. That first meeting of council was held November 19, 1968.

One councillor who supported selling the land made no bones about his opposition to the conservationists’ plan. “Why on earth,” he asked one of the Nero group, “do you want to save that land? It’s only a big patch of weeds.”

His attitude seemed to be shared by a majority of council because it shelved the conservationists’ request. There was plenty of talk about supporting the idea in principle, but that was all. A decision was deferred until after the municipal election, to be held almost a year later. Nero and his associates took some comfort in the fact that, while their request was denied for the time being, a decision on selling the land was also postponed.

Fortunately for the conservationists’ cause, one of their strong supporters was elected to council in that election — Pearl McClenigal, now lieutenant-governor of Manitoba. She had campaigned for speedy action on the property, because in spite of all the protestations of support-in-principle, council was dragging its feet.

There was more foot-dragging after the election, but finally, on April 21, 1970, the subject came before council. By this time, the missionary work of the conservationists had begun to get results. Members of St.
James Horticultural Society and other Nero supporters packed the public gallery for that meeting. As Nero today recalls it, it soon became apparent that victory was by no means assured. Then, as things were starting to look grim, a minor miracle in the person of the old man with a cane made its appearance. He was Pete de Wet, full of life and fire despite his 87 years, and he adressed council as a ratepayer and a former president of the local horticultural society. Angrily waving his cane under the noses of the recalcitrant councillors, de Wet spoke for only 10 minutes. But he spoke with such fervour and good common sense that the gallery broke into round after round of applause. His words and the supplicant animals live there every day the gallery were enough to turn the trick. When the vote was taken, conservation had won by a majority of one.

"There’s no doubt Pete de Wet saved the day," Nero recalls. "He gave them hell for 10 minutes and that was just enough to swing it for us."

In 1971, the 2½-acre field was officially set aside as a park by the municipality, plus another ½ acres for an interpretive centre and a parking lot. Later, after St. James had become a part of Winnipeg, Governor-General Jules Léger officially opened it at the Living Prairie Museum. In 1976, when the interpretive centre was completed, the city held another formal opening; and de Wet, by then 93, shared the ribbon-cutting honours with Winnipeg Mayor Stephen Juba.

For de Wet, it was a fitting climax to a remarkable career. I first knew him in 1931, when I joined nearly 20 other reporters on the night staff of the Winnipeg Free Press. He had been born and raised in South Africa, where he became a farmer and a Boer general who gave the British such a hard time in the Boer War at the turn of the century. He married a London woman in 1908 and they came to Canada with their first child in 1910.

When I first knew him, his newspaper specialty was reporting the activities of hardrock miners. He left the paper shortly to become executive secretary of the Manitoba Chamber of Mines, meanwhile developing his interest in horticulture. Many men eat off in their youthful enthusiasms when they arrive at old age, but not Pete de Wet. He remained vitally interested in the Living Prairie and, in fact, was just as much of a naturalist, right up to his death in 1978.

Some of the other principals of the great St. James prairie controversy are also dead. But Pearl McDonnel, as full of life as ever, lending grace, charm and enthusiasm to her post as lieutenant-governor, looking back to that decisive meeting of the council, says that she had a part in the opportunity “to preserve part of our heritage.”

For his part, Nero says: “Perhaps no finer proof of the sophistication of a city exists than the decision to set aside that fragment of grassland. It enables educators to study and others to discover what is the original prairie really meant. It’s a place for people to learn. But the complexities of the natural world, that the prairie is something more than open, cultivated fields.”

To him, as to many others, it’s a glorious experience just to stand there amidst the grass and plants, in an ecosystem that is many thousands of years old and yet still a vital part of a modern city. It is this combination, he says, that makes the setting unique, exemplified by the song of the meadowlark, close at hand, and the accompanying roar of a great jet plane taking off from the Winnipeg International Airport.

From early spring untill late fall, the interpretive centre is a busy place. Dozens of kids, chief among the kids, and their assistants are hosts to thousands of visitors, young and old, and take them on tours of the prairie. School children find the visit fascinating.

Many people are astonished at the depth of the prairie sod, which may run to as much as a foot. This deep sod is nature’s way of ensuring that the prairie plants get all available moisture. The average precipitation in Winnipeg is only 20 inches, contrasted with 52 inches in Vancouver and 37 inches in Montreal. And what is staggering is that water is retained by the sod even after it would have disappeared from ordinary soils. In addition, the grasses established further moisture insurance by sending their roots down to a depth, sometimes, of more than 20 feet into the subsoil.

The sod of a first-class prairie is about two inches deep. But that’s all the grass needs, especially if it is watered by the householder. The prairie grass depends only on rain and snow and snow thus it develops a sod much deeper than that of city lawn grass.

This depth and toughness of the sod explains why the pioneer settlers found it so hard to break the prairie land. Even with only one mould-board, and the pulling power of two oxen, the plows found it very hard to do.

This is the ecosystem so remarkable in its complexity and in the protection it affords to its plants and animals. Over the centuries it has nourished its charges, withstanding on their behalf the challenges posed by such conditions as drought, excessive heat and cold, high winds, floods and prairie fires.

"Right: a long-horned borer beetle."

"Bottom right: the meadow voles, more commonly known as a field mouse, puts the fecundity of rabbits to shame. These creatures meet, mate and multiply almost before rabbits can get started. Voles are found in abundance at the Living Prairie Museum."

The system provides a home for more than 165 species of native prairie plants. Naturally, far fewer support from the prairie than did before the core fences appeared. However, smaller animals such as mice and voles are still there, along with many species of birds and insects. Of the birds, the western meadowlark is recognized by most people by its appearance and its distinctive call.

There’s no doubt which flower is the favourite. It is the prairie crocus, Manitoba’s official emblem, which is not a true crocus at all, but an anemone (a member of the crowfoot family), as is the prairie buttercup. It is the first flower to bloom in the spring and to many older people a most nostalgic reminder of their childhood. They can recall being taken, each spring, to see the crocuses in bloom. They can recall, too, the thrill as they gazed, goggle-eyed in wonder, at the wide stretches of prairie turned purple by the flowers.

Uncontrolled picking and the destruction of the habitat have largely brought an end to such spectacles. But, for Winnipeg folk, the flowers may be observed and loved all over again every April and early May in their Living Prairie Museum.