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Jeff Manes: Ike Prairie a slice of heaven on Earth



Dan McDowell, 68, is a retired steel worker whose passion now is natural land restoration and preservation. | Photo provided

“That man is the richest whose pleasures are the cheapest.”

— Henry David Thoreau

Dan McDowell recently took me on a tour of a five-acre Eden he calls Ike Prairie. The property is owned by the Spring Lake chapter of the Izaak Walton League in Hobart, near Interstate 65 and 61st Avenue.

McDowell is not a member of the IWL, but he is a member of the Friends of Robinson Lake and the Shirley Heinze Land Trust.

McDowell, 68, is a retired steel worker who has been married to Margaret for 48 years; they’ve raised three adult children. Dan is a native of Tennessee, but has lived in the Hobart area more than 50 years.

McDowell doesn’t have a degree in botany, but he really knows his stuff. He could’ve rattled off the scientific names of every plant on the property, but, for my sake, was kind enough to speak English rather than Latin.

How many years were you in the mill?

“I worked at U.S. Steel for 37 years,” he said.

What department?

“No. 1 Caster; I was an upper hoist operator. I’d raise ladles of molten steel to be cast into slabs. I got out early because I didn’t want to be a slave to the clock.

“Out here, there is no pressure. I do this because I want to do it. I live for stuff like this. I get some good help out here, too. It’s not entirely me alone. This property will be here a long time after I’m gone.”

Are you a self-taught botanist?

“Not really, but after retirement, I did natural land restoration work for three years part time with the Shirley Heinze Land Trust. That’s where I learned everything I know.

“I also I learned a lot from some very educated people like Sandy O’Brien; she’s the one who is responsible for getting the burns done here. Sandy not only talks the talk; she walks the walk.”

What is Ike Prairie?

“It’s an important remnant of the historic silt loam- bur oak savanna ecosystem. This property starts off as a dry prairie, going into a wet prairie, going into a natural wetland.”

When did restoration at this site begin?

“In 2005, this area was very rough. There was a tremendous amount of autumn olive, purple loosestrife and canary reed grass that had to be eradicated.

“There also was quite a bit of debris, such as tires and metal objects, that had to be removed. The recovery of this place in seven or eight years has been amazing.”

To what do you attribute this recovery?

“Fire. A controlled burn is the most important restoration tool there is. Hands down, that’s what makes this preserve successful.”

How often do you burn?

“We have burned two years in a row, but usually every other year.”

Dan, this is something, and right next to I-65. Most people driving by probably don’t have a clue this place exists. Let’s go for a hike.

“This prairie looks like it’s predominantly sunflowers and goldenrod, but it’s much more. This is a rare lady’s tress orchid, and that is a New England aster.”

What is this handsome blue-flowered plant?

“Bottle gentian.”

Did you sow the seeds of these prairie plants?

“No, it’s all natural. There are more than 200 species of plants on these five acres. This eared false foxglove gets its name because the leaves have ‘ears’ on them.

“It’s nice to have these types of plants scattered throughout the preserve.”

Fauna living in Ike Prairie?

“Well, we don’t have rabbits anymore because we have a den of coyotes living over there by that tree.

“We do have woodcocks, finches and many other species of birds here. After a rain, the prairie is swimming with frogs. There are butterflies, deer, crayfish, snakes and turtles, too.”

Really nice.

“How did you hear about me?”

A former copy editor of mine, Tim Zorn, contacted me. He thought you’d be a good interview. He also told me you are reluctant to talk about yourself, but become very passionate when telling people about this restoration project.

“Tim is good people; he’s also a member of the Friends of Robinson Lake.”

Places like this are important.

“If 10 percent of the population could give just six or eight hours a year doing some type of conservation work, there would be significant improvement to our natural areas.

“Indiana has 250 dedicated nature preserves; I’ve visited 187 of them.”

Several decades ago, an environmental group called the Grand Calumet Task Force was formed.

Tough duty, the Grand Cal. It might surprise some folks, but most of the GCTF charter members were steel workers like Dan McDowell.

He has done volunteer work for the Department of Natural Resources, the Nature Conservancy and Lake County Parks. But Dan derives no more pleasure than when he traipses through the daucus carota and nepeta cataria of Ike Prairie, just off I-65.

That would be Queen Anne's lace and catnip to you and me.