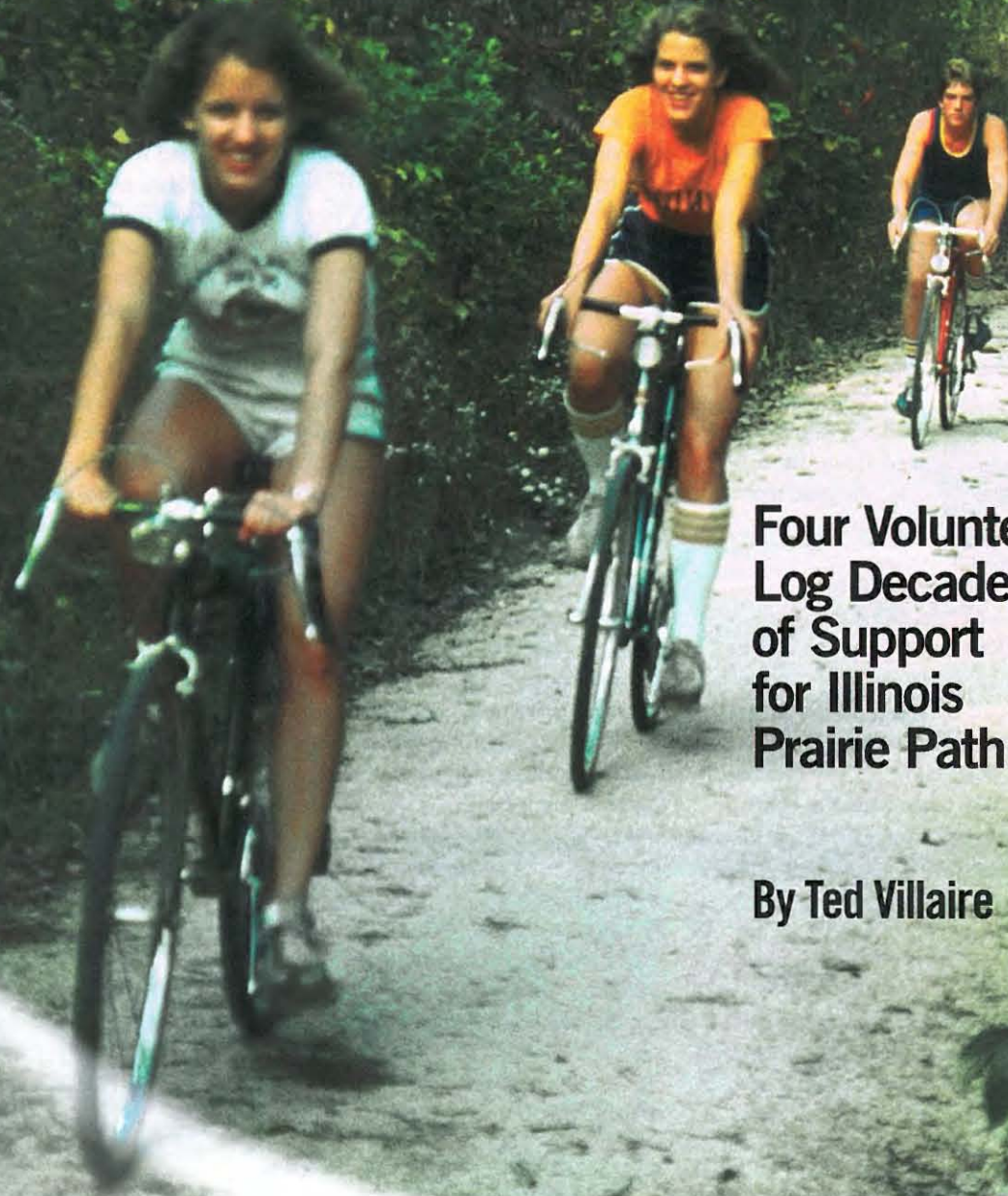


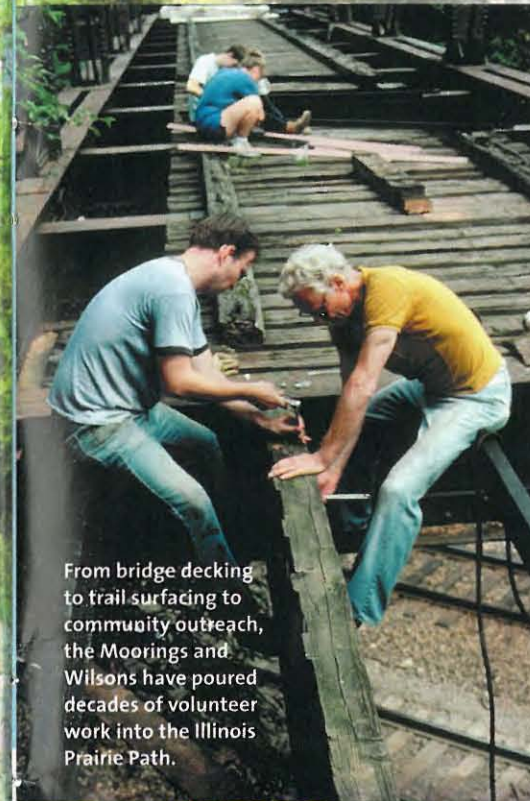
TRAIL OF YEARS:



Four Volunteers Log Decades of Support for Illinois Prairie Path

By Ted Villaire

From bridge decking to trail surfacing to community outreach, the Moorings and Wilsons have poured decades of volunteer work into the Illinois Prairie Path.



COURTESY OF JEAN MOORING

As the iconic Illinois Prairie Path (IPP) passes the half-century mark this year, the Chicago-area rail-trail displays its remarkable success in many ways. Swarms of people use the trail year-round. Towns all along the 62-mile route hail it as a community asset. Hundreds of people show up on cleanup days to keep the trail groomed and proud. And then there are the four volunteers—two married couples—who over the decades have contributed ideas, elbow grease and countless hours to get the path off the ground and into the hearts of local residents. Jean and Paul Mooring and Nancy and Dick Wilson have led a small but determined group of tireless volunteers who have planned, built and bolstered the IPP, even when there was no roadmap for doing so.

Before becoming a rail-trail, the IPP hosted the Chicago, Aurora and Elgin Railroad. The line carried commuters from burgeoning western suburbs through a mix of urban and natural environments and on into Chicago's central business Loop. Not long after the railroad ended service along the line in 1957, residents began using the corridor as a walking path. Today, as one of the busiest trails in the Midwest, the IPP hosts throngs of cyclists, runners and walkers throughout much of the year.

Trials and Triumphs

It all started in 1963, when a group of visionaries organized to create the trail. Two years later, DuPage County, which is home to a vast majority of the trail, bought the right-of-way. An ambitious group of volunteers soon got to work developing the trail. The Moorings and Dick Wilson became active in the group early on.

But the path from track to trail was not always smooth. During the early 1970s, for example, a small bridge became a big headache for the volunteers. The bridge, which spans the East Branch of the DuPage River on the eastern edge

of DuPage County, required reconstruction or major repairs five times in rapid succession. According to Deborah Fagan, who served 10 years as trail coordinator for DuPage County, the saga of the bridge reflects how the Moorings and Wilsons approached their work in the early days of the trail. "It really showed their tenacity," she says. "They just kept moving ahead."

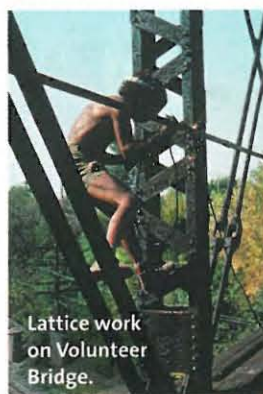
After the railroad removed the original steel train bridge, it was replaced with a wooden bridge for pedestrians in 1969. When vandals irreparably damaged the wooden structure, a replacement was swiftly built. But when the remaining structural support of the old steel bridge was pulled down, it fell the wrong way and damaged the new bridge. Then, not long after the damaged bridge was repaired, the river flooded and swept the bridge downriver. County employees hauled the bridge back upstream and returned it to its original position. The following day the bridge disappeared downriver in another flood.

Yet another wooden bridge was erected and served the trail for about five years. But in 1977, when an arsonist started a rash of fires in the area, the bridge was torched on two occasions. After the second fire, all that was left was charred logs.

"I was almost ready to give up," admits Jean Mooring, 86. "It was getting exhausting." But the Illinois Prairie Path nonprofit advocacy group quickly set its sights on raising money for a much more expensive all-metal bridge, and the Moorings and Wilsons forged ahead.

Despite the bridge, Mooring says her 48 years of volunteer work on the IPP have been a source of great pleasure. She seems to speak for all four lifelong volunteers in saying, "You will always find more joy than adversity" in a trail-building project such as this, "and you have the satisfaction of improving people's lives."

In the 1970s, the Wilsons and



Lattice work on Volunteer Bridge.

ABOVE: COURTESY OF JEAN MOORING

Moorings helped coordinate yet another IPP bridge project. For this one, some 80 volunteers provided their skills and labor to build a long bridge to replace a railroad bridge in the town of Wheaton. People from all backgrounds got involved. Among the volunteers were high school students from a local employment training program who fabricated the bridge's metal framework.

According to Mary Jo Malach, current secretary of the board of directors of the Illinois Prairie Path advocacy group, a project like that would have been impossible without the seamless coordination and strong leadership provided by the Moorings and Wilsons. "They're advocates for every single detail about the trail—who volunteers like that? There are just not many people like them around."

62-Mile Commitment

The IPP was the brainchild of May Theilgaard Watts, a local artist, writer, horticulturist and early environmentalist. She saw the great potential for the unused tracks and in 1963 penned a letter about it that was published in the *Chicago Tribune*. Watts wrote, "The right-of-way of the Aurora electric road lies waiting. If we have the courage and foresight ... then we can create from this strip a proud resource." Watts ended the letter with a call to action, telling readers that "many hands are itching" and "many bulldozers are drooling" for this land. **Shortly after the letter was published, 80 people turned out for a walk along the path.**

Watts spoke widely to local groups and municipalities to drum up support for the path. "She was a tall and quite beautiful woman, and always had a twinkle in her eye when she spoke," recalls Jean Mooring.

The path's eventual success owes much of its initial spark to Watts and a small group of volunteers who happened to be women. "May's original group did a lot of work, securing the trail and educat-



ing people about it. They raised a great deal of money over a three-year period, and they worked with big entities," says Malach. "This group of women set the tone for the next wave of volunteers."

That wave notably includes the Moorings and Wilsons. **Paul Mooring has served on the IPP board since 1971, and spent 21 years as board president.** (He worked at Argonne National Laboratory as a physicist for more than 30 years. Now, at age 91, he continues to work part-time in the field.)

Jean continues to serve on the IPP board after 32 years and volunteered as editor of the organization's newsletter for 16 years. Raising their three daughters while deeply involved in development of the IPP made the Moorings' volunteering commitment a family affair.

Dick Wilson first became acquainted with the IPP in the early 1960s when, as a scoutmaster, he led Boy Scout hikes along the path. He saw the trail as a great resource for anyone who wanted to get out and enjoy the natural world. In 1965, he decided to join the trail's volunteer board.

"I thought [the IPP] was going to be very important," says Wilson, 86. He was right. The trail not only became a landmark in the region. It also was an important element in his personal life: He met his future wife on the trail in 1971.

"We met on a 20-mile hike put together by the Sierra Club," says Wilson, who retired from his job as a lab technician for a petroleum products company in 1985. **"I figured that a woman who can hike 20 miles is the one for me."** After Dick married Nancy in 1972, the Wilsons became another dynamic duo among IPP volunteers. **Nancy served on the IPP board from 2006 to 2011, and Dick retired from the board in 2011 after 46 consecutive years of service.**

For the first 22 years of the IPP, the trail was maintained entirely by volunteers. In addition to building bridges, the Wilsons, Moorings and others cleared deadfall, installed trash cans and benches, and built display cases for maps. Before the trail was largely taken over by DuPage County in 1985, volunteers performed all the political and administrative duties as well, such as coordinating efforts among the towns along the corridor, raising funds to pay for insurance, and hiring contractors. And, of course, they swiftly took action to mobilize volunteers when they needed to fight for the trail.

"It's the variety [of volunteer work] that makes it so interesting," says Nancy, 74. She retired in 1989 from a local community college, where she taught medical technology.

"There is something about their complete dedication to the trail—it's a different level of commitment, and that is a real treasure," says Malach of the Moorings (left) and the Wilsons; (below left) the Wilsons at the trail's 50th anniversary celebration on October 3, 2012.

On the Trail

During their many years of IPP involvement, Nancy says the Wilsons' favorite volunteer activities have been leading bird and wildflower walks along the path, helping restore prairies, and planting trees and flowers. The Wilsons are most drawn to the natural areas along the trail northwest of Wheaton, including Lincoln Marsh, where majestic views of wetlands and prairie open up, and Pratt's Wayne Woods, which encompasses creeks and sprawling wetlands inhabited by water birds.

The Moorings are less physically mobile now and don't explore the extent of the trail as much as they would like. Still, they visit the trail frequently and often can be seen sitting at its primary crossroads in Wheaton, where the main stem of the path splits in two, branching northwest toward Elgin and southwest toward Aurora.

Flowers, prairie grasses and outdoor sculpture adorn the small park where they like to sit. **The facility is named Volunteer Park in honor of the Moorings, the Wilsons and the dozens of other volunteers who have nurtured the trail for the past 50 years.**

The unflagging dedication of the Moorings, the Wilsons and other IPP volunteers has been recognized locally and nationally. In the Chicago region, numerous newspaper articles have appeared showcasing the couples' volunteer work. A local environmental organization at one time handed out an annual award to trail advocates; the award was named in honor of Paul and Jean Mooring. Then **in 1988, IPP volunteers received a national Take Pride in America Award. At a White House ceremony, the Moorings stepped forward to accept the award on behalf of all the dedicated volunteers who have made the IPP both an inspiration and a destination.**

Ted Villaire is the author of *Best Rail Trails Illinois* and five other guidebooks focusing on hiking, bicycling and camping in Illinois. He serves as the editorial manager at the Active Transportation Alliance in Chicago.

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