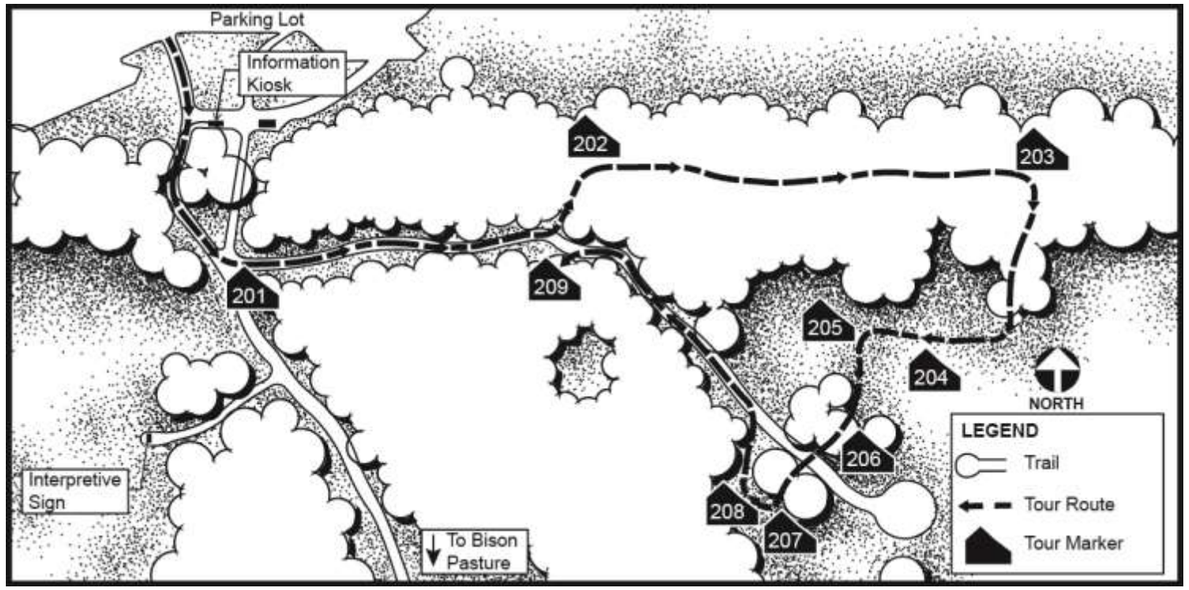

Welcome to the Rodgers / Schumacher Farmstead Walking Tour

The Rodgers / Schumacher Farmstead is one of two farmsteads in the Iron Bridge Trailhead area that are eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.*

Its original development probably dated from the mid-1800s. The first indication we have of structures on the property is an 1873 plat map. The farmstead was continuously used and modified until the Army bought the land for the construction of the Joliet Arsenal in late 1940.

This walk will take you through the Schumacher farmyard where foundations of its long-gone structures still exist. This will be a leisurely 1/4 mile loop walk on a mowed grass and gravel path.

Stopping points are numbered where you can pause and learn a bit about life on their farm.

Some of the walk will be on uneven ground. Watch out for tripping hazards. Sturdy shoes are recommended.

** The other one is the Morgan Farmstead, on the north side of the access road and the parking lot.*

Who Were the Rodgers and the Schumachers?

The land was first purchased in 1835 by Elias Reed.

In 1844 Sophronia Goodenough married Michael Rodgers, and they soon acquired substantial land holdings in Will County, including this parcel. They did not farm all the land themselves but instead leased or, as it was said back then, rented the land to other farmers. On their passing, their daughter Florence inherited the properties.

Arthur Schumacher and Verna Redden had been married for 4 years when, in 1921, they leased 200 acres of the Rodgers holdings. The property was called Fairview Farm, and they ran a successful and prosperous dairy farm here for the next 20 years. They also grew corn, sweet clover, red clover, wheat, oats, soy beans and hay, and raised hogs and chickens for sale. During the 1930s, Mr. Schumacher also produced three varieties of clover seeds for sale to meet crop rotation guidelines recommended by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The Schumachers had 3 children; Erma, Alvin, and Robert, who lived on the farm from their birth until the Army bought the land. From them we have learned much about life on Fairview Farm.

Start your walk from the information bulletin board at the Iron Bridge Trailhead parking lot. Walk south on the gravel path and turn left to sign #201.

This brochure is provided by the

Midewin Heritage Association

A "friends of Midewin" organization whose purpose is to promote an understanding of the rich cultural and natural history of the land which today is Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie.

Contact us:

Midewin Heritage Association

PO Box 54

Wilmington, IL 60481

MidewinHeritage@gmail.com

www.facebook.com/MidewinHeritage

For more information on Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie:

https://www.fs.usda.gov/main/midewin

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OnCell - "A Tour Guide in Your Pocket"

Information about Midewin on your mobile device or computer.

Mobile: Free download from wherever you get your apps. Search for "OnCell", then search for "Midewin".

Front cover photo: Fairview Farm, Erma and Arthur Schumacher, 1920's. All photos courtesy of the Arthur Schumacher family.

06/20

USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie

One Hundred Years on the Rodgers / Schumacher Farmstead Site

A Selfguided Walking Tour

Midewin Heritage Association

Forest Service

Publication 06/20

201 *Black Locust Grove*

The trees in this grove are black locust trees. Their introduction on the west side of the farmstead was advocated by the Soil Conservation Service during the Dustbowl years of the 1930s. They were widely promoted for soil conservation. Black locust (Robinia pseudoacacia) reproduce both by pollen and via root suckers, so the entire grove that you see may in fact be just a few individual organisms. The Schumachers would cut and store this wood for the winter for use as fuel on the farm. Black locust is dense wood. A cord of black locust wood provides the same amount of heat as a ton of anthracite coal. Black locusts live about 60 years, so this grove is very old and nearing the end of its life span.

Follow the path to the left until you reach sign #202.

202 *Early Farming on the Prairie*

As you walk along the mowed path near the field to the north, consider some of the challenges to the early settlers as they attempted to farm the land. Sod busting, plowing through the deep rooted native plants, was nearly impossible until the advent of the self-scouring steel plow. Although John Deere is credited with this invention in 1837, a local man from Lockport, John Lane, had developed a similar plow in 1834. Mr. Deere obtained a patent on his invention. Mr. Lane did not.

The retreating glaciers of the last Ice Age, some 18,000 years ago, left a landscape of marshes, ponds and lowlands that often stayed wet well into the planting season. Farmers spent much time and effort digging ditches and laying field tile to drain their land to make it suitable for farming.

Getting farm produced commodities to market in the early days was limited to what could be carried in a horse drawn wagon, until the completion of the I & M Canal in 1848 and the construction of the Chicago, Alton & St. Louis Railroad through the area in the summer of 1854.

The rail bed of that line is still in use today. It lies on the opposite side of Illinois Route 53, which you can see by looking northwest across the field.

Illinois Route 53 was previously the famous Route 66, but when it was constructed in this area in 1922, it was just called “the concrete road”. It provided even more transportation options. The section of the road between Joliet and Wilmington is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Continue on the path to sign #203. You are on old Blodgett Road, which was a main east/west road separating Florence Township to the south from Jackson Township to the north.

203 *Osage Orange Trees*

The large trees reaching over the road from each side are Osage orange (Maclura pomifera), with their softball sized fruit called “hedge apples”. The French-Canadian trappers called them “Bodark” trees, from "bois d'arc" or “bow wood” which was what the trees were widely used for by Native Americans. These trees, native to Arkansas, Oklahoma and North Texas, were imported to Illinois as seedlings in large numbers in the 1850s. They were planted close together and with their intertwining branches provided a living, dense, thorny, hedge fence. They were touted to be “horse high, bull-strong and hog tight.” They were a godsend to farmers on the tree-poor prairies.

Alvin Schumacher remembers that one of the jobs on the farm was trimming the thorny trees each year with a tool his father fashioned. Once the hedges are no longer maintained, they grow into full-size trees and that is what you see on either side of the road. The dense, rot-resistant wood was also used for fuel, fence posts, and tools. Be careful! They still bear the thorns that made them so effective as fencing!

Turn right (south) at sign #203 and walk about 50 feet to the arrow. There turn right (west) again. Continue to sign #204.

204 *The Silo*

Note the round concrete foundation of the silo. Silage is grass or other green fodder compacted and stored in as close to airtight conditions as possible, typically in a silo, without first being dried. It is used as animal feed in the winter. The foundation you see suggests a round stave silo. Round, wood stave silos, held together with metal hoops and fed by mechanical elevators, were common by the early 1900s. The image shows a silo, much like this one, under construction with the first few staves in place.

USDA Farm Bulletin #855
Homemade Silos 1917

Alvin Schumacher does not recall the silo from his boyhood and it may have been from an earlier property tenant. Though silos are icons of Midwestern farms, their use was not universal. Arthur Schumacher was but one of many very successful farmers who apparently never used a silo or silage.

Continue west from the silo to sign #205.

205 *The Barn*

After the farmhouse, the barn was the heart of the prairie farm. Even though only foundations remain, they tell us a wealth of information about the history of this farm.

On the left (south) portion of the closest foundation you’ll see local dressed limestone, incorporated into later concrete construction. Within the poured concrete foundations on the north (right) you can see the milking stalls for the dairy operations of the farm, with channels running east-west in the concrete pad to facilitate drainage and to allow flushing the stalls into the barnyard.

The foundations of this barn suggest episodes of modifications and expansions over time. In his interview, Alvin Schumacher said that in the 1930s the family had approximately 20-25 milk cows on the property. Dairying operations were in the north part of the barn (right side in the photo) where the roof is lowest. Horses were kept in the south side of the barn.

Arthur Schumacher continued to use horses long after many other farmers had switched to tractors. In 1940 he traded in three of his draft horses for a Massey Harris combine.

Turn left (south) and continue until you reach sign #206.

206 *The Milk House*

Interviews with the Schumacher family described Arthur Schumacher’s substantial and active dairy operations on the farm, which required a milk house to prepare the dairy products for shipment.

Milk houses were constructed near enough to the milking area to be convenient but far enough away that the dust, flies and particulate matter in the air wouldn’t contaminate the milk. The concrete box you see was the cooling tank for the 8 -gallon milk cans. The photo shows the milk cans and the windmill used to draw water from the well near this spot. The cool water was run over the milk cans to keep the milk fresh until picked up for transport to the dairy.

Continue southwest on the path across the trail to sign #207.

207 *The Hog House*

In the early days of agriculture on the prairie, one way to make corn production more profitable was to turn corn, which was heavy and hard to transport, into something more valuable and easier to move. Much of the corn produced was converted to corn meal and pork. As Samuel B. Ruggles said in 1860, *“Corn thus becomes incarnate; for what is a hog if not fifteen or twenty bushels of corn on four legs?”* And many a farmer knew the phrase, “walking his corn to market.” Hog drives were held in this part of the country, until railroads and refrigeration made feasible the shipment of dressed pork to market. The hog house on Fairview Farm was an integral part of the agricultural enterprise as it still is on many farms in the region.

From the hog house, turn right to sign #208.

208 *The Corn Crib*

Much of central and northern Illinois is corn country and has been for 150 years. Before advances in mechanization and transportation, corn was often left on the stalk until it was needed. The development of transportation and the growth of Chicago as both a market and a transshipment point changed farming in the region.

Farm sizes and scale of production grew, and subsistence farming gave way to agricultural products as commodities. “Drive through” corn cribs became the norm. The farmer would drive the wagon into the building and shovel the corn, still on the cob, into the “cribs” on the sides.

With mechanization, farmers could run conveyors and fill the cribs from the top through a cupola on the roof. A rotating metal chute inside the cupola was moved to direct the flow of corn into the cribs. Cribs continued to be built as drive-through buildings since wagons or trucks still had to enter them to load.

In the photo, note the small seed shed in the foreground. This is where Arthur Schumacher kept the several varieties of clover seed that he sold as an additional source of income on the farm.

Return to the gravel trail, turn left and walk to sign #209.

209 *The Farmhouse*

Although the first farmhouse on the site may have been built in the 1860s, the foundation you see now dates to about 1924. When the Schumachers moved here in 1921, the house then at the site was in disrepair and uninhabitable. They negotiated with the owner at the time and were provided the materials for rebuilding, but the family did most of the actual construction themselves. Inside the foundation you can see dressed native limestone peeking through the concrete skim coat. We think this suggests that during the 1920s construction, elements of an earlier structure’s foundation were incorporated.

The home the Schumachers built here was state of the art for its time. Period photos show a handsome, bungalow-influenced home with face brick on all four sides. It boasted indoor plumbing, an electric refrigerator (versus an “ice box”), an electric washing machine, an electric stove and a telephone. The room-like feature you see in the back-left corner of the basement was a cistern to capture soft rainwater for washing.

The large section of the foundation on the west (your right as you view the house) that is missing was removed in 1941 to facilitate the Army’s moving of the house. Alvin witnessed a moving company taking their old home down Blodgett Road, destined for the Elwood Ordnance Plant's administrative and housing area on South Arsenal Road. The structure was likely torn down in 2005 or 2006 as part of the development of the Island City Industrial Park. Arthur and his brother-in-law bought the other Fairview Farm buildings, dismantled the barn, and used the lumber for their new farms that they would establish in Plano, Illinois.

We hope you enjoyed your farmyard walk.

Return to the gravel trail, and turn left to return to the parking lot.