

Elizabeth Fries Ellet Interpretive Trail is signed, dedicated

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A hiker didn't need to walk far along the Elizabeth Fries Ellet Interpretive Trail Aug. 2 to escape from the 80-degree heat that roasted the rest of Eden Prairie.

Canopies of trees shaded the pathway, and silenced the road noise from nearby Highway 212 enough to make the chirp of a bird (or was it a tree frog?) easily audible.

About 30 people took the first official walk on the trail in the Richard T. Anderson Conservation Area – following seven signs that illustrate the

history, human and natural, of the land near the Minnesota River Valley that author Ellet is credited with naming Eden Prairie.

The trail, more than three years in the making, wouldn't have happened without the persistence of Eden Prairie resident Vicki Pellar-Price, speakers at the dedication agreed.

Pellar-Price's organization, Writers Rising Up, spearheaded the project, which included researching and locating the various biomes in the conservation area (open since 2004) and soliciting sponsors for the seven interpretive signs.



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Artist Doug Van Valkenberg (left) displays to Don Sletten of Eden Prairie one of the interpretive signs Van Valkenberg designed for the new Elizabeth Fries Ellet Interpretive Trail. The trail, named in honor of the writer credited with naming Eden Prairie, was dedicated Aug. 2 in the Richard T. Anderson Conservation Area.

Kathy Nelson was the sole representative of the current Eden Prairie City Council to attend the dedication, but three former council members attended.

Former City Council member Ron Case said the city, the Eden Prairie School District or the Eden Prairie

Historical Society (of which his wife, Kathie Case, is president) could have appropriately taken the lead in creating the trail. But it was the passion of Pellar-Price, he said, that made it a reality.

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“A community is so much more than its land and its buildings,” Case said. “It’s the people.”

Former Mayor Nancy Tyra-Lukens said the city took possession of the land that is now the Anderson Conservation Area before she and Case first assumed their council seats more than 12 years ago.

But without the trail and the interpretive signs along it, she said, “you could not see how wonderful this land is.”

Former Councilmember Jan Mosman went so far as to suggest that it’s priceless.

Walking the trail, Mosman said, gives a hiker “a real story of Eden Prairie that you can’t make up.”

Pellar-Price shared some of that story directly from its source – a rare first-edition copy of Ellet’s book “Summer Rambles in the West,” recounting her journey, by boat on the Minnesota River, to the river bluff area that is now called Eden Prairie because she declared it to be “the garden spot of the territory.”

Ellet was 34 when she made that trip 155 years ago, Pellar-Price said, to a township that had been settled by people of European descent. The area was named Eden Prairie in 1853.

In researching what kind of flora and fauna Ellet likely saw on her Eden Prairie “rambles,” numerous biomes, from big woods to sedge meadows to prairies, were uncovered.

Photos of several plant and animal species were taken over an 18-month period in all four seasons by Writers Rising Up members and the Kestrel Design Group, whose artist, Doug VanValkenberg, created the digital templates for the seven signs.

But birds such as the cerulean warbler and plants such as the marsh marigold are not the only things pictured on the signs.

In addition to Ellet, the signs also picture 19th-century authors such as James Fenimore Cooper, who advised Ellet in her work on a series titled “The Women of the American Revolution;” Edgar Allan Poe, who published some of Ellet’s poems; and Henry David Thoreau, who writes of his 1861 visit to the Minnesota River Valley in “Minnesota Journal: Notes on the Journey West.”

One of the challenges of creating the trail was finding sponsors willing to give \$2,000 for each of the signs.

The Eden Prairie Lions Club sponsored three of the signs – Sedge Meadow, Settlers Ridge and Minnesota River Valley. The Bill Clark family of Eden Prairie sponsored the Bottomland Forest sign, and the Eden Prairie Foundation sponsored the Oak Savanna sign. The remaining two signs, Big Woods and Prairie, were sponsored by the Metropolitan Airports Commission.

Tim Anderson of MAC, who lives in Eden Prairie, said he hopes the gesture “helps build some better relationship with the city than perhaps we’ve had in the past.”

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