



Multicultural Wilderness

Immigrants, African Americans, and Industrial Workers in the Forest Preserves and Dunes of Jazz-Age Chicago

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Abstract Wilderness parks in the United States are often described as landscapes of leisure for affluent white nature tourists. This article challenges that interpretation by exploring visitation to the Cook County Forest Preserves and the Indiana Dunes State Park, two Chicago-area wilderness parks that during the early twentieth century attracted far more visitors than all of the national parks combined. The author argues that if we turn our gaze from rarefied and far less-visited parks such as Yosemite and Yellowstone to the wilderness parks created just outside of major metropolitan centers, we can clearly see that early-twentieth-century wilderness landscapes attracted a far more cosmopolitan audience than commonly assumed. Moreover, the author shows that marginalized Chicagoans were not simply passive consumers of wilderness. Drawing on theorists and historians of mass-culture reception, the author makes the case that new immigrants, children of the foreign-born, African Americans, and industrial workers appropriated these Chicago wilderness parks in much the same way that they borrowed and creatively rewrote Jazz-Age mass-culture entertainment such as Hollywood films. Far from places that Americanized immigrants and neutralized class tension, Chicago-area wilderness parks became important sites for the production and reproduction of subaltern national, ethnic, and working-class communities.

Keywords wilderness, leisure, Chicago working class, African Americans

On October 30, 1916, Stephen T. Mather, head of the just-created US National Park Service, convened a hearing at the Chicago Federal Building on whether to create a new national park just forty miles southeast of the city. The proposed reserve, the Sand Dunes National Park, featured massive windblown mounds of sand along the southern Lake Michigan shore. The Indiana dune area also included forests, marshes, oak savannas, prairies, and an extraordinarily rich diversity of plant life, so much so that the

area became the outdoor laboratory of Henry Cowles, the American founder of plant ecology.¹

Speakers at the hearing gave a number of reasons for preserving the dunes and creating a national park. Some testified that the nation's rapidly growing system of national parks underserved the Midwest and that people there needed a signature wilderness park where they could come into direct contact with the nation's frontier past. Others explained that this unique indigenous Indiana landscape inspired artists, musicians, and painters and served as a vital laboratory for scientists such as Cowles. Speakers also made it clear that the new national park would serve the exploding immigrant and working-class population of nearby Chicago. Contact with the dunes would restore and renew the tired industrial workers who toiled at monotonous jobs, serve as an alternative to unhealthy urban amusements, and Americanize those who were foreign-born.²

T. W. Allinson of the Prairie Club (the midwestern analog of the Sierra Club and the Appalachian Trail Club) rose and spoke directly to this last issue. Chicago's poor, he told those gathered, needed not only food, shelter, and clothing but also outdoor recreation in a wilderness area such as the dunes, a place where they could "refresh the eyes and breathe pure air into the lungs" and "test disused muscles." To demonstrate the powerful effect of nature on the poor, he explained how he had taken two Lithuanian workers from Chicago out to the dunes to help build a home for sick children. After seeing Lake Michigan and the dunes, "the first thing one of those men did . . . was to drop his tools, stretch open his arms, look around and up to heaven, take a deep breath, and say, 'Just like Lithuania.'"³

US environmental historians have focused considerable attention on privileged Anglo-American nature tourists, romantics, and wilderness park advocates, such as Mather, Allinson, and members of the Prairie Club. We know that the opening of wilderness parks often entailed the forced removal of Native Americans and others who had long relied on these landscapes for subsistence and work. We know that once the national parks were open, middle- and upper-class European Americans used them and other wild landscapes of leisure to not only temporarily escape from urban modernity but also to essentialize masculinity, whiteness, heteronormativity, and hegemonic American nationalism. We also know that the fetishization of wilderness often blinded affluent Americans to their interactions with ecosystems back in the city. This is why there is "trouble with wilderness," as the historian William Cronon famously put it in 1995.⁴

1. On the Indiana dunes, see Franklin and Schaeffer, *Duel for the Dunes*, 22–95; Engel, *Sacred Sands*; Marcus, "Battlefields of Sand"; Fremion, "'Save Our Shores.'"

2. Mather, "Report."

3. Mather, "Report," 57–58.

4. Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 78–79. See also Guha, "Radical American Environmentalism"; Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy"; White, "Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?"; Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 170–216; Pulido, *Environmentalism and Economic Justice*, 125–90; Warren, *The*

But what do we make of that Lithuanian who traveled to the dunes, stretched out his arms, and recalled his distant Baltic homeland? Where does this marginalized individual fit within US historians' framing of early-twentieth-century wilderness recreation? Was his response an anomaly or in fact a revealing clue that American wilderness parks may have attracted a more heterogeneous audience than historians have commonly assumed? And if so, did marginalized Americans view wilderness landscapes differently than affluent tourists?

In this article, I explore these questions by focusing on the Indiana Dunes State Park and the Cook County Forest Preserves during the first decades of the twentieth century. I argue that these wilderness parks just outside Chicago attracted new immigrants, the American-born children of the foreign-born, African Americans, and industrial workers, all of whom were eager to escape an urban-industrial city that they often saw as artificial and unhealthy. But just because they visited wilderness parks does not mean that they shared with elites the view that these landscapes would Americanize immigrants, soothe class tensions, and enhance productivity on the factory floor. On the contrary, Chicagoans used wilderness parks in ways entirely unanticipated by their Anglo-American creators. In much the same way that they appropriated commercialized mass culture, disadvantaged Chicagoans transformed seemingly untouched "wild" landscapes into sites to produce and reproduce national, ethnic, and working-class community.⁵

Creating Chicago Wilderness Parks

The push for Chicago wilderness was part of a national movement. As is well known, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, middle- and upper-class Anglo-Americans (particularly men) expressed considerable anxiety over the effects of urbanization, industrialization, immigration, and the closing of the western frontier, supposedly the font of distinctive national characteristics and a potent site of Americanization for recently arrived Europeans. One response was the creation of national parks. The frontier might be gone, but hiking, camping, and sightseeing in national parks would keep an urban-industrial America young, healthy, productive, and unified. In Chicago, privileged Anglo-Americans shared these same concerns, but they responded

Hunter's Game; Keller and Turek, *American Indians and National Parks*; Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness*; Johnson, "Conservation, Subsistence, and Class"; Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps*; Mitman, *Reel Nature*; Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature*.

5. For other social histories of leisure in nature, see for instance Limerick, "Disorientation and Reorientation"; Montrie, "I Think Less of the Factory Than of My Native Dell"; Fisher, "African Americans, Outdoor Recreation, and the 1919 Race Riot"; Montrie, *Making a Living*, 91–112; Taylor, *The Environment and the People in American Cities, 1600–1900s*, 296–337; Chiang, "Imprisoned Nature"; Goodall and Cadzow, "The People's National Park"; Goodall, Cadzow, and Byrne, "Mangroves, Garbage, Fishing"; Kahrl, *The Land Was Ours*; Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces*; Fisher, *Urban Green*; McCammack, *Landscapes of Hope*; "Lands of Leisure"; Chiang, *Nature Behind Barbed Wire*, 147–74.

on a more local level. At once they built a pathbreaking system of small neighborhood athletic parks in working-class neighborhoods and planned an elaborate system of wilderness parks or forest preserves on the city's fringe. At the forest preserves and the nearby Indiana dunes, Chicagoans could escape the industrial city and come into regenerative contact with the midwestern wilderness supposedly first encountered by European explorers.⁶

In Indiana and in Illinois, political obstacles delayed the opening of parks. After court challenges scuttled early bills, the state of Illinois finally in 1913 passed strong legislation authorizing the creation of forest preserves. Anticipating the National Park Service's dual mandate to both protect scenery and serve tourists, Illinois called for the acquisition and management of land with the "purpose of protecting and preserving the flora, fauna and scenic beauties within such district, and to restore, restock, protect, and preserve the natural forests and said lands together with their flora and fauna, as nearly as may be, in their natural state and condition, for the purpose of the education, pleasure, and recreation of the public." In 1916 Cook County began purchasing land, and by 1922 Chicago had 22,000 acres of forest preserve on its fringe. Meanwhile, following the National Park Service hearing in 1916 with which we began, the Indiana dunes nearly became the Midwest's signature national park, but financial resources suddenly needed for the war effort as well as opposition from northern Indianans interested in attracting industry to the site thwarted efforts. Undeterred, defenders of the dunes successfully lobbied the state of Indiana, which purchased 2,000 acres of beach, dune, marsh, prairie, and forest and created a state park that was finally open to the public in 1926.⁷

Although Chicago-area wilderness parks were intended to come across as untouched, pristine, and natural, they were always the product of landscape architecture. The very first act of landscape architecture or gardening in the creation of American

6. On wilderness recreation and the frontier, see for instance, Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness." On Chicago, see McCarthy, "Politics and the Parks"; Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 61–99; Tippens and Sniderman, "The Planning and Design of Chicago's Neighborhood Parks"; Dominic Pacyga, "Parks for the People;" McArthur, "Parks, Playgrounds, and Progressivism"; Bluestone, *Constructing Chicago*, 36–61; Grese, *Jens Jensen*, 29–33; Draper, "The Art and Science of Park Planning in the United States"; Gems, *Windy City Wars*, 77–83; Bachin, *Building the South Side*, 127–38. On the forest preserves, see Hayes, "Development of the Forest Preserve District"; Retzlaff, "The Illinois Forest Preserve District Act of 1913 and the Emergence of Metropolitan Park System Planning in the USA"; Vena, "The Nature of Bureaucracy"; Vena, "Preservation's Loss"; Vena, "Forest Preserve Proposition of 1914."

7. Hayes, "Development of the Forest Preserve District." For quote, see General Assembly of the State of Illinois, *Laws of the State of Illinois*, 387–38. Franklin and Schaeffer, *Duel for the Dunes*, 73–97. Especially given the National Park Service's recent efforts to create more urban national parks as well as increased interest in the ecosystem services of urban green space, historians have not focused enough attention on late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century peri-urban wilderness parks. On these parks, see Rawson, *Eden on the Charles*, 233–76; Steinberg, *Gotham Unbound*, 197–207; Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible*, 33–34; Hise and Deverell, *Eden by Design*, 1–64; Peterson, *The Birth of Urban Planning in the United States*, 164–66. For an international perspective, see Douglas, *Cities*, 270–73. The signature urban national park unit is Golden Gate National Recreation Area. See Rothman, *The New Urban Park*.

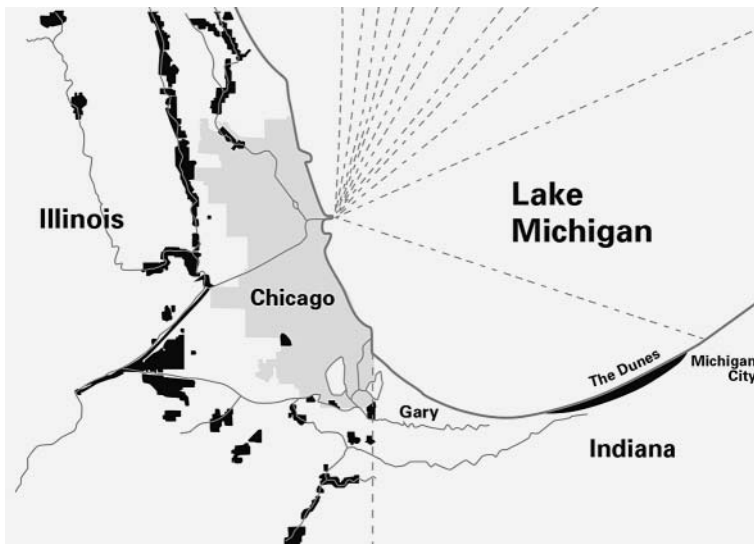


Figure 1. Map of Forest Preserves, Indiana Dunes, and Steamship Lines, circa mid-1930s. Map created by the author.

wilderness parks was typically the forced removal of local inhabitants who had long used the land for subsistence and work. Unlike those who created Glacier, Yosemite, and Yellowstone National Parks, wilderness park administrators in and around Chicago did not remove Indians from the land. Earlier waves of European settlers had already done the work for them. French, English, and then American explorers, fur trappers, and missionaries traded with the Pottawatomi, Miami, and Illinois, but they also brought disease, distortions of traditional trade, and in some cases warfare. Finally, in the 1821 and 1833 Treaties of Chicago, the US government cleared the land for white settlement by forcing Native Americans west of the Mississippi. Anglo-Americans, Germans, Irish, and Scandinavians then moved in, using land that would become future wilderness parks to farm, graze animals, cut timber, and fish. To create wilderness, Cook County and the State of Indiana ultimately bought out these landowners, sometimes at considerable cost (\$1,000,000 by 1930 for the Indiana Dunes State Park; \$20,330,000 by 1931 for the Cook County Forest Preserves). Park authorities then criminalized poaching and other unauthorized extractive activities.⁸

8. On Indian removal from national parks, see for instance Warren, *The Hunter's Game*, 126–51; Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness*; Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature*. On the impact of European contact on Chicago-area Native Americans see Haeger, “The American Fur Company and the Chicago of 1812–1835”; Peterson, “Wild Chicago”; Hornbeck, *Atlas of Great Lakes Indian History*; White, *The Middle Ground*; and Keating, *Rising Up from Indian Country*. On European settlement in future wilderness areas, see Cottman, *Indiana Dunes State Park History and Description*, 44–61; Clemensen, *Historic Resource Study*, 44–61; Roberts Mann, *Origin of Names and Histories of Places, Including Major Forests and Holdings, Picnic Areas and Recreational Facilities, Nature Preserves, Aquatic Areas, and Wildlife Refuges in the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, Illinois*, 1964–1965, in Cook County Forest Preserve Documents, University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago (hereafter “CCFPD”); Prairie Research Institute, *Natural and Cultural Resources Master Plan*, 55. On land purchases, see Conservation Commission, *Third Annual Report*, 207–12; Forest Preserve District of Cook County, in the State of Illinois, *Forest Preserves of Cook County*, 3, 7; “Add to Forest Preserve,” *Chicago Eagle*, 3

Once secured from those who used the land for subsistence and work, landscape architects and their crews manufactured wilderness. Laborers destroyed buildings, fences, and other signs of recent habitation. In the forest preserves they eradicated exotics and replanted the landscape with tens of thousands of native seedlings and saplings from the forest preserve nursery. The county also built sewage treatment facilities to cleanse the Chicago and Des Plaines Rivers before they entered the parks, and they stocked these rivers with bluegills, crappies, black bass, and other hardy native species that could survive moderately polluted waters. Ironically, in an effort to create an idealized wilderness for park visitors, land managers at the dunes and forest preserves sometimes did significant ecological damage. While staff protected some native animal species and reestablished native plants, they, like early-twentieth-century National Park Service land managers, drew the line at animals they deemed incompatible with nature tourism. Staff in Chicago-area wilderness parks failed to reintroduce the area's large predators (gray wolves, mountain lions, bobcats, coyotes, and black bears) despite the fact that these animals played pivotal roles in maintaining ecosystem health. Staff also vigorously suppressed wildfires, which, as anthropologist Natalie Vena Bump notes, led to reforestation of ancient prairie landscapes.⁹

In addition to significantly altering ecosystems, park creators also placed structures on the land. They built parking lots, toilets, bathhouses, fire roads and towers, pavilions, log cabins, entrance gates, utility infrastructure, and more. In the forest preserves, there were even tennis courts, baseball diamonds, and golf courses as well as the Brookfield Zoological Park, famous for jettisoning cages in favor of moats so visitors would have seemingly unmediated encounters with wild animals. To some, this might suggest that unlike National Park Service administrators, the designers of Chicago's peri-urban parks prioritized recreation over wilderness. One must remember, though, that early-twentieth-century National Park Service leadership also saw roads, cars, campgrounds, and modest structures (not to mention the suppression of wildfires and

September 1921; Mann, *Origin of Names and Histories*; "County Forests Great Asset to Chicagoland," *Chicago Tribune* (hereafter *CT*), 26 July 1931. On rules restricting or banning extractive activities, see Forest Preserve District of Cook County, in the State of Illinois, *The Forest Preserves of Cook County*, 126–45; Cottman, *Indiana Dunes State Park History and Description*, 37; The Department of Conservation, *Indiana Conservation Laws*.

9. On ecological restoration efforts, see Crissey, "Suburban Forest Preserves," 85–88; G. Rex Volz, "New Horizons at Our Doorstep," file: "History, Reports and Interviews, 1930–1947," CCFPD; Roberts Mann, "Landscape Engineering in the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, Illinois," paper presented at the Western Society of Engineers, December 6, 1943, Chicago, Illinois, CCFPD; Vena, "Centennial History Series: First Catch — Initial Fish & Water Management in the Forest Preserves"; Forest Preserve Advisory Committee, *Recommended Plans for Forest Preserves of Cook County, Illinois* (Chicago: Chicago Regional Planning Association, 1929), Early Forest Preserve Planning, ca. 1920s, CCFPD; Conservation Commission, *Third Annual Report*, 82–85; Conservation Commission, *Thirteenth Annual Report*, 108; Conservation Commission, *Fourteenth Annual*, 96, 120. On how fire suppression and tree planting adversely impacted prairie ecosystems, see Vena, "Preservation's Loss"; Vena, "The Nature of Bureaucracy." On eradication of predators in the national parks, see Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks*, 71–75, 119–22.

the killing of top predators) as entirely consistent with the proper design and management of a wilderness park.¹⁰

With First Peoples who had long occupied the land safely removed, Chicago wilderness managers, like rangers in the national parks, could slowly reintroduce their presence. According to guidebooks, travel books, and articles in the *Chicago Tribune*, a visit to the forest preserves or the dunes would transport visitors backward in time. Visitors learned that in these wilderness parks they would encounter an “Indian paradise,” a special magical place where Chicago’s residents, both rich and poor, would find the ruins of ancient and vanished peoples. Like eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century European aristocrats who incorporated vestiges of vanished peasant life (such as a deserted village) into their pastoral parks, wilderness park builders in Chicago preserved Indian ruins and made these traces a central feature of a regenerative nature experience. Guides noted that Native Americans had first blazed the trails that wove throughout the parks. In the dunes, for instance, one could hike trails “first marked out by the feet of a now vanished race—a race that lived so close to Nature as to be part and parcel of her primitive forms.” Forest preserve guides called attention to Indian camps, chipping stations, and ancient mounds, all vestiges of a fleeting indigenous people who supposedly lived at one with nature. One also might discover the ruins of forts and abandoned portages once used by early French explorers and missionaries, or perhaps the abandoned farm site of an early Anglo settler. As Forest Preserve Board of Commissioners President Peter Reinberg put it, “Not a single tract in the Forest Preserve District is without its part in history.”¹¹

As in national parks such as Yosemite and Glacier, Chicago park managers sometimes invited Indians back into the wilderness to perform. In 1920, the governor of Illinois declared September 24 Indian Day, and Cook County organized a three-day Indian council in one of the preserves. On September 26, a Sunday, 30,000 automobiles clogged the forest preserve roads, and 150,000 Chicagoans spent the day watching Indian dances, sports, and ceremonies. Desire for contact with the Indians was so intense that assembled First Peoples had to be protected the following year. Organizers housed

10. On structures in the Forest Preserves and Dunes, see Crissey, “Suburban Forest Preserves,” 87; Cottman, *Indiana Dunes State Park History and Description*, 38–42; Forest Preserve Advisory Committee, *Recommended Plans for Forest Preserves of Cook County*; Conservation Commission, *Thirteenth Annual Report*, 10, 108; Conservation Commission, *Fourteenth Annual Report*, 14, 16, 125, 201–202. On the Brookfield Zoo, see Ross, *Let the Lions Roar!* On changing wilderness ideals, see Sutter, *Driven Wild*; Louter, *Windshield Wilderness*.

11. On Indians and tourists in national parks, see Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness*, 71–87, 107–108, 115–132. For quote on Indian paradise, see Forest Preserve District of Cook County, *Forest Preserves of Cook County*, 27. For quote on feet, see Cottman, *Indiana Dunes State Park*, 63. On Indian trails and ruins, see Forest Preserve Commissioners, *Forest Preserve Accompaniment* (Chicago: Forest Preserve Commissioners, 1925), Cook County, Illinois Board of Forest Preserve Committee – Miscellaneous Pamphlets, Chicago Historical Society; Sauers, “A People’s Paradise of Fifty-One Square Miles of Woodland,” 288; Forest Preserve District of Cook County, *Forest Preserves of Cook County*, 14–24, 27, 49, 52, 70, 80–81; “Duneland Sings Song of Peace 1 Hour from Loop,” *CT*, 17 July 1939; “Indiana Plans Great System of State Parks,” *CT*, 12 April 1931.

Indians from a dozen different tribes on a forest preserve island. “Palefaces,” as the *Chicago Tribune* put it, were banned from the island and could only observe the Native American village from an elevated viewing area on the lake’s edge. The extraordinary popularity of the Indian council prompted some forest preserve supporters to make plans for a permanent Indian village. Ransom Kennicott, chief forester of the Forest Preserve District and a leader of the Forest Preserve Booster Club, explained that the village would attract thousands of visitors. The county, he wrote, would plant willow, which would enable the forest preserve Indians to make baskets for tourists. Chicagoans, he wrote, will be “glad of the opportunity to buy the Indian baskets and beadwork for reasonable prices knowing that they are genuinely Indian-made,” and he assured the club that the Indian Fellowship League, a group associated with the Chicago Historical Society, would select the “right class of Indians” for the village.¹²

Members of the Prairie Club and other wilderness enthusiasts denied American Indians a dynamic, changing relationship with the natural world in the past, but they also denied these same Indians a modern present. At the forest preserve Indian village, First Peoples had to play the part of living historic relics. But early-twentieth-century American Indians sometimes had urban jobs, wore ties, bobbed their hair, and drove cars. They also sometimes hired lawyers (in 1914 and 1926, the Pottawatomie sued the city of Chicago in an unsuccessful effort to recover the entire Chicago lakefront). But none of these signs of Indian modernity could be permitted in the wilderness; hence the need of the Chicago Historical Society to select the “right class” of Indians for the forest preserves. European-American fetishization of Indian ruins, their evident excitement over presenting living remnants of a “vanishing race,” and their penchant for racially cross-dressing as Indians all demonstrate that efforts to preserve wilderness were deeply linked to Jazz-Age Chicago’s very unnatural racial politics.¹³

For Anglo-American park advocates, regenerative contact with indigenous mid-western frontier landscapes would conserve the labor power of working-class Chicagoans. Forest preserve and dunes boosters saw regenerative leisure-time contact with remnants of a frontier wilderness as a vital antidote to work and life in Chicago’s seemingly artificial urban-industrial environments. Unlike “unhealthy,” “passive,” “unnatural,” and “dissipating” forms of urban working-class leisure such as watching movies, wilderness recreation would be active and restorative. Visitors to the forest preserves

12. “Hunting Ground Trail,” *CT*, 26 September 1920; “These Indians Can Give White Men Pointers,” *CT*, 26 September 1920; “Paleface, This Week the Red Man Holds His Celebration,” *CT*, 20 September 1920; “Indians Gather Tomorrow on Old Hunting Grounds,” *CT*, 23 September 1920; “All American Indians Invited to Big Powwow,” *CT*, 18 September 1921; “Listening to the Manitowish: Friendship Drum is Tuned for Indian Day Rites,” *CT*, 23 September 1921; Ransom Kennicott, unpublished paper, 26 November 1920, Unpublished Papers from the Booster Club, Chicago Historical Society, 3–4; 3–4 for quote.

13. On the relationship between Anglo-American nostalgia and actual American Indian lives, see Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*. On legal action against the city, see “Indians’ Suit for Strip of Lake Front Rejected,” *CT*, 19 March 1914; “Two Indians, 233 Years Old, Claim Land in Chicago,” *CT*, 30 October 1923.

and the dunes would not view nature from afar but would hike, camp, canoe, climb, swim, and transform frontier labor into recreation. All of this would result in health and greater productivity back in the city's factories. As the journalist Forrest Crissey put it, Chicago's nearby wilderness playgrounds would "conserve this nation's most precious natural resource—the human beings which compose it."¹⁴

For Anglo-American dunes and forest preserve supporters, wilderness parks not only conserved the health and labor power of industrial workers living in urban environments but also naturalized Germans, Irish, Poles, and Italians and their Chicago-born children to their new nation and soothed the class tensions for which Chicago was infamous. Around the campfire in the wilderness, immigrants and workers would mingle with middle- and upper-class nature lovers, and divisions would magically disappear. As the historian and dunes defender George A. Brennan put it, "The great numbers of foreign-born laborers of the region may see and be taught what the primitive America was. It will give a new sense of proprietorship, not only to the recent immigrant, but to the children that are to the manor born, and by establishing this great common playground of the people, we will make a center for the getting together and the unifying of the cosmopolitan people of the world." But while Anglo-American wilderness enthusiasts such as Brennan opened the doors to the white masses, they either ignored African Americans or explicitly drew a color line across the wilderness.¹⁵

Immigrants, Working-Class People, and African Americans: Creating Wilderness Parks

While it was affluent Anglo-Americans who most often spearheaded establishing the dunes and the forest preserves, marginalized Chicagoans played significant roles behind the scenes. It is true that organized labor initially opposed a 1905 forest preserve referendum. But unionists' opposition rested not on the fact that their working-class members were uninterested in green space. Rather, labor leaders were concerned that setting aside wilderness parks on the urban fringe would steal resources desperately needed for the creation of parks in dense working-class neighborhoods. As the Chicago Building Trades put it in 1905, "The great need of Chicago is for small parks in the congested districts, where the children of the poor can come for air and recreation."¹⁶

After the election of Irish immigrant and horseshoer John Fitzpatrick to the presidency of the powerful Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL), organized labor changed tack

14. On active versus passive recreation, see Addams, *The Spirit of Youth and City Streets*, 68–69; Nash, *Spectatoritis*. Also see Gorman, *Left Intellectuals and Popular Culture in Twentieth-Century America*, 34–52. On active wilderness recreation as an antidote to Chicago modernity, see for instance Foreman, *Recreation Needs of Chicago*; Burnham and Bennett, *Plan of Chicago*, 42–48, 53, 58, 123; Forest Preserve District of Cook County, Illinois, *Annual Message of Daniel Ryan for the Fiscal Year of 1921*, 4; Mather, "Report," 34–35, 38–39, 56–57, 59–60, 82–85, 88. Crissey, "Suburban Forest Preserves," 85.

15. For quote, see Brennan, *The Wonders of the Dunes*, 324.

16. On lack of support, see Riess, *City Games*, 140; Bachin, *Building the South Side*, 166. For quote see, *Chicago Examiner*, 4 November 1905, quoted in Bachin, *Building the South Side*, 166.

and began demanding wilderness parks. When Fitzpatrick ran for mayor in 1918, he promised not only to expand the city park system but also to build more forest preserves at the end of streetcar lines. In addition, the CFL actively lobbied for the creation of a Sand Dunes National Park. “The remarkable botanical exhibit known as the sand-dune country” ought to become a “national park and playground of the people,” testified a CFL representative in 1918. Far from rejecting wilderness parks as an exclusive retreat of privileged nature tourists, one of the most influential labor organizations in the United States demanded them, including a new accessible national park outside of Chicago.¹⁷

The forest preserve system received additional political and financial support from immigrant and black communities. The Bohemian National Cemetery Association of Chicago purchased \$15,000 worth of Cook County Forest Preserve bonds. The German-language newspaper *Abendpost* urged readers to approve the creation of the forest preserves in 1914, and although the newspaper could not support another bond issue in 1929 because of the city’s dire financial condition following the stock market crash, it did note that more shelters, comfort stations, and forest preserve improvements are “of course highly desirable.” The *Chicago Defender*, the nation’s most influential black newspaper, also lent its support to the development of the forest preserves, which garnered the editors a letter of thanks from the preserve superintendent.¹⁸

Marginalized Chicagoans not only supported wilderness parks politically and financially, they also did the hard and often forgotten work of building them. Importantly, the individual most responsible for the creation of the forest preserve system as well as Indiana Dunes State Park was not an established Anglo-American park builder but rather a Danish immigrant. Jens Jensen, who worked as a common laborer for Chicago’s West Park District, took a keen interest in the landscape of the Midwest, which—not unlike the Lithuanian worker with whom we began—reminded him of his own distant European homeland. In much the same way that contemporary Frank Lloyd Wright turned away from imported classical or Gothic styles in favor of a more indigenous architecture, Jensen urged Americans to reject the English landscape style and build midwestern parks that captured the spirit of the indigenous prairies. Famously in 1888 he transplanted native plants into a corner of Union Park and created what he called an American garden. Unable to buy native plants in Chicago nurseries, he took his

17. On Chicago labor groups’ use of urban green spaces, see Fisher, *Urban Green*, 114–43. For quotes on dunes, see Mather, “Report,” 89, 90. On Fitzpatrick, see Keiser, “John Fitzpatrick and Progressive Unionism, 1915–1925”; McKillen, “Chicago Federation of Labor,” 225–27; Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*, 259–63. On Fitzpatrick’s campaign, see “Labor’s 14 Points,” *The New Majority*, 11 January 1919. On Fitzpatrick’s local campaign platform, see “Labor Forms a Party; Urges Many Reforms,” *CT*, 30 December 1918.

18. “The Meeting of the Sbor Ceskeho Narodniho Hrbivova,” *Denní Hlasatel*, 2 June 1921, file: Bohemian, Chicago Foreign Language Press Survey, Special Collections, Joseph Regenstein Library, University of Chicago, Chicago (hereafter “CFLPS”); “For Our Chicago!,” *Abendpost*, 31 October 31 1914, file: German, CFLPS; “Bonds and Other Propositions,” *Abendpost*, 2 November 1914, file: German, CFLPS; M.S. Szymczak, “Co-operation Appreciated,” *Chicago Defender*—National Edition (hereafter “CD-N”), 8 September 1928.

family on weekend plant-collecting excursions on the urban fringe, just where local streetcar lines ended. Worried that urban sprawl was destroying these prairie and forest landscapes, he called for the preservation of Chicago's striking wild scenery, and in 1904, he coauthored the special parks report that established the blueprint for the Cook County Forest Preserves. Furthermore, in 1908, Jensen cofounded the Prairie Club, which launched the campaign to preserve the dunes. In 1913, he also established Friends of Our Native Landscape, a wilderness organization dedicated to protecting "examples of the native landscape types that existed in Illinois at the advent of the white man and which are fast vanishing before the encroachment of industry." Like fellow immigrants Albert Bierstadt, John James Audubon, and John Muir, Jensen helped convince Anglo-Americans to appreciate their own indigenous landscape.¹⁹

The second most influential person in the creation of the forest preserves was Henry G. Foreman, a Chicago-born Jew. Foreman started in banking and real estate and then graduated to politics and municipal reform, serving as president of the South Parks Board, where he oversaw the development of fourteen athletic parks in South Side working-class neighborhoods. Early on he held that the forest preserves were a natural extension of the inner-city playground system, and he advocated tirelessly for an outer belt of wilderness parks. After becoming president of the Outer Belt Commission he joined Jensen in urging the county to purchase tracts of land—wooded valleys, rivers, creeks, marshlands, forested bluffs, and Lake Michigan beaches—before developers destroyed them. He argued that these wilderness landscapes would serve Chicago's foreign-born, who toiled at industrial jobs for little pay, sought their recreation in "places of harmful amusement," and lived in artificial, dense, and "life-sapping" urban tenements. In the forest preserves "residents of the crowded districts" could visit a landscape where "there is no artificial park treatment," come close to the "heart of nature," and enjoy hiking, camping, fishing, nature study, and other healthy recreational activities that counteracted city life.²⁰

Once the Forest Preserves and the Dunes were established, Jensen and Foreman were joined by other foreign-born and first-generation Americans. The German-American florist Peter Reinberg served as first president of the Forest Preserve District and expanded the preserves by 18,000 acres. In recognition of his work, the county created Deer Grove's Camp Reinberg, which during the early twentieth century introduced thousands of disadvantaged Chicagoans to camping. Also instrumental was the Czech-

19. On Jensen, see Grese, *Jens Jensen*; Eaton, *Landscape Artist in America*; Doty, "Ecology, Community, and the Prairie Spirit"; Sniderman, "Bringing the Prairie Vision into Focus"; de Wit and Tippens, "Prairie School in the Parks"; Collier, "Jens Jensen and Columbus Park." For Jensen's account of his rejection of European landscaping and the creation of an American Garden in Union Park, see Jensen, "Natural Parks and Gardens."

20. On Foreman's life, see "Henry Foreman. Former County Board Head, Dies," *CT*, 26 July 1932; "Funeral Services Held for Henry G. Foreman, Prominent Jewish Leader of Chicago," *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, 27 July 1932, CFLPS. For quotes, see Foreman, *Recreation Needs of Chicago*, 9. 10. Also see Foreman, "A Neighborhood Center Provided by the Municipality."

American politician Anton Cermak. Before becoming mayor in 1931, Cermak amassed political power as president of the Forest Preserve District. Although he profited from graft in the parks, he opened up the forest preserves to the automobile and became an important wilderness booster. In addition, the Polish Jew Oscar S. Caplan served as a special attorney for the Forest Preserve District, and the Italian Rocco De Stefano worked as part of the district's legal staff. A Pole, Professor Miecislau S. Szymczak, served as superintendent of the forest preserves. The German Peter Ellert served as secretary for the district. The Italian Terzo Amidei worked as staff naturalist at the Indiana Dunes State Park. Today, the political and material support of ethnic Americans in the forest preserve endeavor are reflected in park names: Pulaski Woods, Dan Ryan Woods, Cermak Woods, Linne Woods, White Eagle Woods, Schiller Woods, Camp Reinberg, Frank Bobrytzke Forest, Brezina Woods, among others.²¹

While immigrant and ethnic Chicagoans assisted Anglo-Americans in efforts to preserve and manage the Forest Preserves and the Dunes, the heavy lifting of transforming the land and producing wilderness fell almost exclusively to working-class Chicagoans. They were the ones who planted thousands of indigenous shrubs and trees, restocked ponds, dug drainage ditches, cut trails and roads, laid pipes for fresh water and sewage, cleared campgrounds and picnic areas, and built fences, picnic benches, and privies. Their contributions were most apparent during the Great Depression. Nine thousand Civilian Conservation Corp and Civil Works Administration employees worked in the forest preserves, including at Skokie Marsh, the largest CCC undertaking in the country. Many of these workers were immigrants, the working-class children of the foreign-born, and African Americans, who lived in segregated camps. Their long hours of manual labor in the forest preserves and the dunes are forgotten, since the entire point was to obscure the fact that the landscape had been altered by humans in the first place.²²

Knowing Wilderness through Leisure

Once workers put away their tools and wilderness parks were open, the forest preserves and the dunes proved extraordinarily popular. The Indiana Dunes State Park saw 124,362 visitors in 1927, the park's second year of operation. By 1928, Dunes visitation

21. On Reinberg, see "Reinberg Tells New Plans for Forest Parks," *CT*, 6 January 1920; "Founder of Forest Preserves Gave Name to Reinberg School," *CT*, 1 June 1967; Maloney, *Chicago Gardens*, 188, 197–198. On Cermak, see Lewis and Smith, *Chicago*, 426–427; Gotfried, *Boss Cermak of Chicago*. On Caplan, see *Illinois—Heart of the Nation*, n.d., file: Jewish, CFLPS. On De Stefano, see "Rocco De Stefano," *Chicago Evening Post*, 16 November 1929, file: Italian, CFLPS. On Szymczak, see "Professor Szymczak Is Pleased with New Appointment," *Dziennik Zjednoczenia*, 3 June 1927, file: Polish, CFLPS. On Ellert, see "Peter Ellert Dead," *Abendpost*, 1 October 1923, file: German, CFLPS. On Amidei, see Conservation Commission, *Thirteenth Annual Report*, 113. On park names, see Mann, *Origin of Names and Histories*.

22. For a good overview of these efforts, see Mann, "Landscape Engineering in the Forest Preserve District." On the obfuscation of labor in park construction, see Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 150–210. On Skokie, see McCammack, *Landscapes of Hope*, 209–248.

surged past that of Yosemite, the most visited park in the national park system. In 1924, the Cook Country Forest Preserves hosted an extraordinary 7.6 million people. That same year, the entire national park system was visited by only 1.9 million visitors. Historians of the so-called American wilderness experience during the early twentieth century have focused almost all of their attention on national parks. If historians turn their gaze away from the breathtaking scenery of Yosemite, Yellowstone, and Glacier and instead explore the Jazz Age wilderness parks that the vast majority of American nature tourists actually visited, we see clearly that wilderness sometimes attracted a far more diverse audience than we have been led to believe. Hardly the exclusive playgrounds of affluent Anglo-Americans, the Dunes and especially the Cook Country Forest Preserves were multicultural landscapes that reflected Chicago's extraordinary diversity. As we will see, immigrants, the Chicago-born children of the foreign-born, African Americans, and industrial workers all made extensive use of these wilderness parks on the urban fringe. Visitation to the Forest Preserves and the Dunes in fact confirm an important lesson learned recently by the National Park Service. National parks are not inherently white or privileged spaces. The problem is that national parks are often simply too far from minority and working-class populations. If one brings national parks to urban people (rather than hoping that urban people will travel to distant wilderness parks), park visitation quickly becomes much more diverse.²³

While it is relatively easy to demonstrate that large numbers of marginalized Chicagoans visited the dunes and especially the forest preserves, it is far more difficult to answer the question of *how* they perceived and enjoyed these wilderness parks. We know a lot about how affluent white tourists understood wilderness. Historians and American Studies scholars have studied Teddy Roosevelt's wilderness trips, the Jazz-Age auto tourists who sought to "See America First," Ansel Adams's nationalistic photography, and baby boomers' insatiable appetite for wilderness documentaries and ecotourism. We know that these privileged nature tourists saw wilderness as "an island in the polluted sea of urban-industrial modernity" and as "the ultimate landscape of authenticity," as Cronon puts it. We know that wilderness was extraordinarily fertile soil for the cultural construction of whiteness, masculinity, and American nationalism. But how did marginalized Germans, Poles, Italians, Mexicans, and African Americans, the children of the foreign-born, and industrial workers view wilderness parks? What precisely did they do in the wilderness landscapes of "nature's nation"?²⁴

23. For Preserve statistics, see Todd, *Public Recreation*, 166. For Indiana dunes statistics, see Conservation Commission, *Fourteenth Annual Report*, 116. For national park statistics, see *Annual Report of the Department of Interior*, 1931, 111. National Park Service, "Urban Agenda."

24. On Roosevelt, see Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy"; Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 170–215. On autotourists, see Belasco, *Americans on the Road*, 19–70; Louter, *Windshield Wilderness*. On the "See America First" movement, see Shaffer, *See America First*. On photography and documentaries, see Mitman, *Reel Nature*; Dunaway, *Natural Visions*; Spaulding, *Ansel Adams and the American Landscape*. On baby boomers, see Price, *Flight Maps*, 111–256. For quote, see Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 80.

Historians have already made a stab at answering these questions, albeit with urban rather than wilderness parks. Social historians such as Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar remind us that consumers of city park landscapes were hardly passive. Working-class people, immigrants, women, African Americans, and members of LGBTQ+ communities not only appropriated and creatively and subversively “misread” Hollywood movies, television shows, and other forms of commercial mass culture produced by the dominant culture, they also gave new and unexpected meanings to urban park landscapes, such as New York’s Central Park.²⁵

But while environmental historians can learn a great deal from social histories of city parks, we should approach this literature with caution. A central thesis of Rosenzweig and Blackmar’s book *The Park and the People* (1992) is that while elite park builders such as the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted saw city parks as a rural escape from the artifice of the city, most working-class park goers viewed these same landscapes as an extension of the city rather than its antipode. “Sadly for Olmsted,” the historians write, “most New Yorkers did not share his vision of the park as a tranquil retreat from the city.”²⁶

Evidence from Chicago, though, contradicts Rosenzweig’s and Blackmar’s findings. Marginalized Chicagoans did not see their wilderness parks as an extension of the city, as mere public or recreational space. Rather, they most often viewed parks as green and therapeutic places where they could find temporary escape from a grim urban environment that they viewed as artificial and unhealthy. In other words, like Olmsted, marginalized Chicagoans also drew a line between city and country and sought to cross it during their leisure. But just because large numbers of Chicagoans viewed green spaces—including wilderness parks—as a vital antidote to the artificial city does not mean that they shared the view of Olmsted and other Anglo-American park builders that nature would defuse class tension and Americanize the foreign-born. On the contrary, in much the same way that they appropriated mass culture, Chicagoans invested wilderness parks with new and unexpected meanings, transforming these landscapes into potent sites for the production and reproduction of working-class and ethnic community.

Immigrants in Nature’s Nation

Foreign-born Chicagoans had long sought out green spaces in and around Chicago to temporarily escape blighted urban environments. Almost as soon as large numbers of Germans and Irish arrived in the city, they battled Anglo-Americans for the use of

25. Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will*, 127–10; Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*. Also see Hardy, *How Boston Played*; Riess, *City Games*; Gems, *Windy City Wars*; and Bachin, *Building the South Side*, 127–204.

26. Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *Park and the People*. Rosenzweig and Blackmar, “The Park and the People: Central Park and Its Public, 1850–1910,” 129.

public and private park space. During the second half of the nineteenth century, European immigrants brought to Chicago the “continental Sunday,” the practice of spending Sunday afternoons picnicking, dancing, drinking beer, listening to music, and playing outdoor sports in beer gardens, public parks, and commercial groves. Conservative Anglo-Americans, who often spent much of Sunday indoors at church and took a far more contemplative approach to the appreciation of nature (if they enjoyed nature at all), reacted poorly to the Continental Sunday. Repeatedly during the second half of the nineteenth century, conservatives tried to restrict immigrant use of green spaces. The foreign-born, in turn, took delight in noting that the dour puritans of Victorian Chicago did not know how to enjoy themselves outdoors and seemed peculiarly blind to the wonders of nature.²⁷

By the 1890s and the first decades of the early twentieth century, marginalized Chicagoans dominated English landscape parks, neighborhood athletic parks, and Lake Michigan beaches. Take Lincoln Park on Independence Day in 1892. The *Chicago Tribune* estimated that 20,000 people came out to enjoy themselves and that park goers made up a veritable “congress of nations.” The reporter spotted Chinese from nearby Clark Street, Greeks, Persians, Poles, Swedes, Russians, Jews, Italians, Germans, Irish, French, and Arabs as well as African Americans. These immigrants came to Lincoln Park to socialize, listen to music, and play sports for sure, but as the reporter made clear, the chief attraction was escaping the city and enjoying nature. The journalist explained that those from neighborhoods where “grass and sunlight and flowers are unknown” spent their day in the park looking at the animals confined behind bars at the Lincoln Park Zoo. Others gathered under the trees, took boats out on the park lagoon, strolled along the parks’ winding pathways, or picnicked on the grass. Meanwhile, children, “pale and bleached like vegetables growing in the dark,” waded in the water and played on the lawn. The *Tribune* reported that while all were “free to select [their] mode of pleasure,” everyone in the park was there “to enjoy the sunshine and the refreshing breezes from the lake.” The journalist reported similarly diverse crowds in Garfield, Jackson, and Douglas Parks as well as along the lakefront. In fact, wrote the journalist, “Every public green and common in the city was crowded with happy human beings enjoying the day in the open air and the warm sunshine.” Seemingly the one group underrepresented in the city’s parks were affluent Anglo-Americans, the ruling class of “nature’s nation.”²⁸

Once the dunes and especially the forest preserves were open to the public, immigrants ventured out in large numbers. Charles G. Sauers, general superintendent of the preserves, explained that “each nationality has its own distinctive characteristic in the

27. On the continental Sunday, see McCrossen, *Holy Day, Holiday*, 41–46; Bohlmann, “Sunday Closings.” On tension in parks over Sunday, see Hardy, *How Boston Played*, 59–60, 93–94, 106; Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 238–259; Fisher, *Urban Green*, 43–46. On dour Puritans, see for instance, “The Origin of Picnics,” *Chicagoer Arbeiter-Zeitung*, 27 June 1883, quoted in Keil and Jentz, *German Workers in Chicago*, 205–6; “The Hypocrite’s Holiday,” *Svenska Nyheter*, 30 August 1904, file: Swedish, CFLPS.

28. “Out in the Sunshine,” *CT*, 4 July 1892.

conduct of its picnics, in the choice of their location, in their amusements and costumes. Indeed, on a single Sunday, one might pass from one grove to the next and easily imagine that he was traveling in Europe.” A reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* noted that forest preserve visitors “chatter in a babble of tongues, eat special national dishes, and whirl in the colorful folk dances of the old country.” Scores of immigrant organizations filled out applications for forest preserve picnic permits: the Italian American Citizens Club, Persian Hebrew Congregation, Aloysius Parish, Vizoko Litovzk Aid Society, Tatra Slovak Union, American Sokol, 11th Ward Jugo-Slavian, the Independent Sisters of Odessa, Circolo di Culture e Divertimento, the Czech-Slovak Benevolent Association, the Ulster Irish Liberty Union, the Croatian Peasant League, the Swedish National Society, the Polish National Alliance Council, and the Mexican Methodist Church, among many others. In American wilderness parks, Greek women in native garb served succulent roasted lamb, Croatian priests celebrated high mass, synagogue members sang Jewish folk songs, Italian families joined forces for a picnic under the woods and listened to the men play accordions, and Mexican couples danced to the music of the Marcias and Garcia Orchestra.²⁹

It was one such picnic that inspired one of Swedish-American writer Carl Sandburg’s most famous poems, “Happiness” (1916):

I asked the professors who teach the meaning of life to tell me what
is happiness.
And I went to famous executives who boss the work of thousands
of men.
They all shook their heads and gave me a smile as though I was
trying to fool with them.
And then one Sunday afternoon I wandered out along the Desplaines river
And I saw a crowd of Hungarians under the trees with their women
and children and a keg of beer and an accordion.

For Sandburg, it was not Chicago’s professors and business executives who knew the true meaning of life. Rather it was a recently arrived group of Hungarians who used

29. For quote from Sauer, see “Expect 500,000 to Visit Forest Preserve Today,” *CT*, 14 July 1935. For the quote, see “42,600 to Attend Picnics Today,” *CT*, 23 July 1939. “400,000 To Picnic In Forests Today,” *CT*, 14 July 1935; “Expect 400,000 At Picnics In Parks, Forest,” *CT*, 5 July 1936; “90,000 To Jam West Side Forests,” *CT*, 11 July 1937; “42,600 To Attend Picnics Today,” *CT*, 23 July 1939; “200,000 To Picnic In Forests Today,” *CT*, 21 July 1940; “Tire Crisis Booms Forest Picnics,” *CT*, 19 July 1942; “Forest Picnics See New Boom In Tire Crisis,” *CT*, 19 July 1942; Cutler, *The Jew of Chicago*, 227–28; “Activities of the Mexican Methodist Church,” *El Nacional*, 6 August 1932, file: Mexican, CFLPS; “About 10,000 Attend Croatian Day Held at East Side Forest Preserve,” *Daily Calumet*, 27 August 1934, file: Croat, CFLP; “The Messinians,” *Saloniki-Greek Press*, 31 July 1929, file: Greek, CFLPS; “Splendid Picnic of the Vereinigte Maennerchoere,” *Abendpost*, 10 September 1934, file: German, CFLPS; “Cerny Club of Town of Lake to Hold Picnic,” *Osadne Hlasy*, 24 July 1931, file: Slovak, CFLPS; “Italian Picnic in the Forest Preserve, c. 1920s,” box 56, 60.16.1 and 2, Italian American Collection, Daley Library Special Collections, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois (hereafter “OHACP”); “Josef Sowa,” box 9, OHACP.

their one day off to escape the city and enjoy nature under shade trees and along the banks of a prairie river.³⁰

In addition to picnicking, Chicago immigrants made other uses of the forest preserves and the dunes. If during a summer Sunday in the 1920s or 1930s we were to have canoed the Chicago or Des Plaines Rivers or hiked the old Pottawatomie trails through the forests and across the prairies of the Cook County Forest Preserves, we would have come across German, Italian, Slovene, and Greek campers, hikers, swimmers, and boaters. Perhaps we might see a member of the city's Danish, Polish, German, Ukrainian, or Bohemian recreational fishing and hunting clubs casting into a pond or semi-polluted river. Or we might meet Czesława Kowalewski, a Polish émigrée who loved to pick flowers, berries, and mushrooms. "I always enjoy woods," the Polish woman told an interviewer. "I like Easter because it was close to spring and going out in the woods, picking flowers, picking things like that. . . . I love to pick those things [mushrooms], berries, anything. That's for me, I don't know why, I love woods."³¹

Perhaps at the dunes or in the forest preserves we might have spotted hard at work Hugo Von Hofsten, a Swedish painter who made it his mission to preach through his art "the gospel of nature's beauty—a gospel which modern man, in his hurry, is apt to overlook and forget." Hofsten painted the landscapes of rural Sweden, but he also made it his mission to introduce Chicagoans to the extraordinary beauty that they had at the edge of their great industrial city. He was joined by fellow Swedish painters Charles Hallberg, Birger Sandzén, and Leon Lundmark, the Dutch artist Tunis Ponsen, the Jewish Romanian modernist Emil Armin, and the artists in the Czech Umelecky Klub who frequently ventured with their easels out to the dunes and nearby "primitive forests."³²

Walking through the wilderness, we might have seen Leonard Dubkin, a Ukrainian Jewish boy who grew up in the slums of Chicago's West Side. When he was not going to school or working, Dubkin ventured to urban green spaces as well as the future site of

30. Sandburg, "Happiness," 20.

31. On hunting and fishing clubs see for instance, "Club Activities," *Abendpost*, 25 August 1924, file: German, CFLPS; "German Clubs and Societies of Chicago," *Abendpost*, 6 July 1935, file: German, CFLPS; Christanson, "Danes," 229–230; "Polish Activity in Chicago," *Dzienniki Chicagoski*, 22 December 1890, file: Polish, CFLPS; "Polish Societies in America: Polish Hunters' Club of Chicago, Illinois," *Dziennik Chicagoski*, 5 August 1892, file: Polish, CFLPS; Anna Masley, "Study of Ukrainians, A Nationality Group of Chicago and Vicinity," box 157, file 6, Ernest W. Burgess Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Joseph Regenstein Library, University of Chicago, Illinois (hereafter EBP); "Shooting Competition Results," *Denni Hlasatel*, 6 June 1911, file: Bohemian, CFLPS. For quote on woods, see Czesława Kowalewski, box 4, OHACP.

32. For quote, see "In the foreground," *Sevenska Tribunen-Nyheter*, 2 August 1922, file: Swedish, CFLPS. For more on Swedish painters, see "Among Swedish Artists in Chicago," *Sevenska Tribunen-Nyheter*, 28 December 1921, file: Swedish, CFLPS; "The Swedish Art Show," *Sevenska Tribunen-Nyheter*, 7 February 1923, file: Swedish, CFLPS. On Tunis Ponsen, see Gerdt, *The Lost Paintings of Tunis Ponsen*. On Armin, see Engel, *Sacred Sands*, 106–7; Jacobson, *Thirty-Five Saints and Emil Armin*. On the Umelecky Klub, see "Art Club Sponsors Lecturer," *Denni Hlasatel*, 2 June 1921, file: Bohemian, CFLPS.

the Clayton F. Smith Forest Preserve. There he found a marsh, a forested area, and a prairie “just like I had read in my history books.” It was, he explained, “the largest space that I had ever seen in my life.” Once back in his slum, the boy wrote up stories of his adventures with urban and peri-urban nature on the public typewriter at Hull House and published them in the Sunday children’s page of the *Chicago Daily News*. Later in his life, Dubkin would go on to write a half dozen books about urban nature and strike up a correspondence with Rachel Carson. “It seems to me,” Dubkin would later write, “that people are forever traveling great distances, and journeying to strange countries, to see things that, if they only knew it, exist beside their own doorstep.” There was no reason to go to “some far-off land” to get a glimpse “into some of the mysteries of nature.”³³

Immigrants picnicked, swam, skied, and enjoyed fresh air, sunshine, and scenery, but they also used green spaces to “imagine ethnicity.” As Kathleen Neils Conzen and other historians demonstrate, ethnicity is hardly primordial or essential. It does not grow organically from the soil. It is neither uprooted nor transplanted. Rather, ethnic leaders in the present convince a group of strangers that they are in fact one ethnic community by identifying a common origin, selectively drawing on the past, and narrating a shared group history.³⁴

In Chicago, the foreign-born had long made public and commercial parks into important spaces for remembering the past and imaging ethnicity. At regional and national festivals, such as the Italian Festa Della Madonna, the German Cannastatter Folkfest, the Irish Our Lady Day in Harvest, the Swedish Midsommar, the Czech Posvícení, ethnic leaders and nationalists used Chicago park landscapes as venues to remind those assembled of their distant homelands, their common history, and the culture of the folk. At the same time, they reminded picnickers of the responsibilities of citizenship.³⁵

Once the forest preserves opened and became more accessible, national, ethnic, and religious organizations often moved their picnics out of urban parks and to the urban fringe. Like the Danish landscape architect Jens Jensen, who saw his native Slesvig in the midwestern prairie, or the Lithuanian worker who looked out at Lake Michigan from the dunes and recalled the Baltic, Chicagoans’ forays out of the industrial American city and back to nature often served as an opportunity to remember distant villages, regions, and nations. Irish organizations used the forests for folk dancing, fiddling, Irish football, and “activities demonstrating Goelic [sic] culture.” For Greeks, an outing to the Desplaines River was an opportunity to spend a “day in the outdoor regions, as our ancients used to do.” The Swedes, who moved the Midsommar festival to

33. On Dubkin, see Yearwood, “Family Memoir”; Greenberg, “Leonard Dubkin,” 287–88; Bryson, “Empty Lots and Secret Places”; Fisher, *Urban Green*, 7–37. Dubkin’s six books were *The Murmur of Wings*, *Enchanted Streets*, *The White Lady*, *Wolf Point*, *The Natural History of a Yard*, and *My Secret Places*. For quote on forest preserve, see Dubkin, *My Secret Places*, 3. For quote on exotic land, see Dubkin, *The Natural History of a Yard*, 6.

34. Conzen et al., Vecoli, “The Invention of Ethnicity”; Schultz, *Ethnicity on Parade*.

35. On the use of urban parks to imagine ethnicity and remember home, see Fisher, *Urban Green*, 38–63.



Figure 2. Immigrant picnic with dancing in the Forest Preserve Wilderness, circa 1920s–30s. Forest Preserve District of Cook County. FPDCC_00_06_0008_1422, courtesy of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County Records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago.

St. Paul Woods, used the Illinois wilderness park to remember their Viking ancestors and their distant Scandinavian homeland. Filipinos, who retreated to the forests of La Grange Park, saw their annual picnic as an opportunity to “bring back that Oriental vigor, enthusiasm and hilarity because the change of atmosphere and surroundings is the most fitting background for the revitalization of the Community spirit.” For those who forgot or for the Chicago-born who had never traveled back home, community leaders in the forest preserves reminded participants of ongoing obligations to distant homelands. Privileged Anglo-Americans might think that vestiges of wilderness frontier preserved in parks would assimilate or naturalize immigrants, but the reality on the ground was far different. At national and ethnic picnics, Chicagoans used the wilderness landscapes of “nature’s nation” to evoke ancestral soil and to imagine themselves as German, Irish, Greek, Serb, Filipino, and Mexican.³⁶

36. On picnics, see for instance, “About 10,000 Attend Croatian Day Held at East Side Forest Preserve,” *Daily Calumet*, 27 August 1934, file: Croat, CFLP; “The Messinians,” *Saloniki-Greek Press*, 31 July 1929, file: Greek, CFLPS; “Splendid Picnic of the Vereinigte Maennerchoere,” *Abendpost*, 10 September 1934, file: German, CFLPS; “Cerny Club of Town of Lake to Hold Picnic,” *Osadne Hlasy*, 24 July 1931, file: Slovak, CFLPS;

Chicago-Born Children of Immigrants

While Anglo-American reformers often gave up on Americanizing recent arrivals, they took a keen interest in immigrant children. By taking ethnic youth out of the city and to the wilderness, recreation directors at local athletic parks and settlement house workers hoped to conserve the health of young people, provide an alternative to passive and enervating commercial amusements, and naturalize their charges to American soil. Such objectives were pursued for instance by Mary McDowell's University of Chicago Settlement, which took children from Back of the Yards, Chicago's notorious meatpacking district, on trips to city parks as well as to the forest preserves and the dunes, the location of Camp Farr, the settlement house's youth camp.³⁷

To combat the Americanizing effects of such settlement house outings as well as to counter the unhealthy effects of the urban environment, immigrant organizations sponsored their own competing wilderness trips. In addition to importing Old World outdoor recreational groups such as the German Turnverein, Bohemian Sokols, Polish Falcon nests, the Ukrainian Sich, Gaelic Athletic Clubs, and Greek Ahepa Clubs, the foreign-born also transplanted their own wilderness organizations. The city was home to German, Hungarian, Greek, Jewish, Ukrainian, Chinese, and Italian Boy Scout troops as well as new groups such as the Volunteers of Zion and Polish *hacerstow*, which combined scouting with the fight for Polish independence. Many of these youth organizations ventured out of the city to ethnic wilderness camps throughout Chicago's recreational hinterland and even travelled back to the Old County for direct contact with ancestral soil. But they also visited the dunes and especially the Cook County Forest Preserves.³⁸

"Ahepa Picnic," *Saloniki-Greek Press*, 2 August 1927, CFLPS; "Irish Club Unit to Have Outing Next Saturday," *CT*, 13 August 1939; "Dance at Outing: 3 Nationalities Find City Has No Room for Hate," *CT*, 26 June 1939; "Friendly Picnic," *La Lucha*, 1 September 1934, CFLPS; "Collection for War Relief Made at Lithuanian Picnic," *Lietuva*, 11 August 1916; "German Singers Celebrate in the Open," *Abendpost*, 24 June 1935, CFLPS; "Our Community Today," *The Philippine Messenger*, 7 June 1936, CFLPS. On the Filipino picnics at Grange Park, see Alamar and Buhay, *Filipinos in Chicago*, 14.

37. On settlement house outings, see for instance, Seman, "Chicago's Program for Meeting Its Recreational Needs," 505; Osborn, "The Development of Recreation in the South Park System of Chicago," 75; Chicago Park District, *Annual Report* (1939), 44, 46, 62; Allen, "Saturday Afternoon Walks"; Holman, "What We Did on a Summer Playground in Chicago"; Sheridan, "Hiking in Chicago"; Richards, "Public Recreation," 102.

38. On ethnic youth organizations, see for instance Riess, *City Games*, 93–102; Jentz, "Turnvereins," 835–36; Nolte, "Our Brothers across the Ocean," 15–37; Beijbom, *Swedes in Chicago*, 270–71; Pienkos, *One Hundred Years Young*, 24–69; Darby, "Emigrants at Play," 52–54; Lovoll, *A Century of Urban Life*, 133–35; Kuropas, "Ukrainian Chicago," 211–212; Puzzo, "The Italians in Chicago," 66. On scouting, see for instance Scheidlinger, "A Comparative Study of the Boy Scout Movement in Different National and Social Groups"; "Polish Scouting," *Narod Polski*, 26 April 1916; file: Polish CFLPS; George Fields, "History of the Triangle Community Organization," file Jan 116, box 4, OHACP; Weinberg, "Jewish Youth in the Lawndale Community," file 3, box 140, EBP; "A Bohemian Troop of Boy Scouts," *Denni Hlasatel*, 18 June 1911, file: Bohemian, CFLPS; "Greek Boy Scouts of Chicago," *Saloniki*, 19 September 1914, file: Greek, CFLPS; "The Verhovay Fraternal Society," *Otthon*, 23 August 1935, file: Hungarian, CFLPS; "The Ukrainian Catholic Boy and Girl Scouts of America," *Ukrainian Youth*, 5



Figure 3. Arts and crafts created by children in the Polish Sokol Camp, 1931. Forest Preserve District of Cook County. FPDCC_00_06_0008_1422, courtesy of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County Records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago.

Sometimes Chicago-born ethnic children and adolescents abandoned all adult supervision and traveled out of the city and to the forest preserves and even the dunes on their own. Frederick Thrasher, a sociologist at the University of Chicago and arguably the early twentieth century's preeminent expert on gangs, explained that unaccompanied groups of Chicago youth could be seen not only in green spaces across the city but

December 1935, file:Ukrainian, CFLPS; "Activities of the Garibaldi Institute," *Vita Nuova*, June 1927, file: Italian, CFLPS; Todd, Bryaon, Vierow, *Private Recreation*, 93. On camps, see for instance, "Camp News of the Pilsen Sokol," *Denni Hlasatel*, 2 August 1922, file: Bohemian, CFLPS; Todd, Bryaon, Vierow, *Private Recreation*, 102; "About the Illinois Turner Camp"; "Commemorate Pilsudski's Battle With the Reds Today," *CT*, 4 August 1935; "Camp Chi," *Chicago Hebrew Institute Observer*, 1928, file: Jewish, CFLPS. On trips back to homeland, see "Speech on Greek Schools," *Saloniki*, 25 September 1917, file: Greek, CFLPS; "The Polish National Alliance Youth Excursion to Poland," *Weekly Zagoda*, 26 February 1931, file: Polish, CFLPS; "Sokol Excursion to Homeland," *Denni Hlasatel*, 27 Spetember 1906, file: Bohemian, CFLPS. On trips to the dunes and the forest preserves, see for instance "Polish Children Display Skill in Forest Pageant," *CT*, 7 September 1931; "The Sokol Havlicek-Tyrs Prepares for an Excursion," *Denni Hlasatel*, 25 August 1922, file: Bohemian, CFLPS; Seman, *Jews of Chicago*, 235–236; "Resurrection Sisters' Academy," *Narod Polski*, 15 August 1917, file: Polish, CFLPS; "Young Judaea Column," *Daily Jewish Courier*, 24 July 1927, file: Jewish, CFLPS.

also in outlying wilderness parks. He wrote that groups of boys “frequently go en masse for overnight hikes or camping expeditions to Fox Lake, the Desplaines River, and the various forest preserves adjoining the city. The forest preserves, like the river and canal regions, tend to become areas of escape from social control.” Chicago youth would sometimes save up money to buy tents, hunting knives, and other camping gear and retreat to the forest preserves’ wilderness, where they sometimes survived on produce stolen from farmers’ fields.³⁹

Unsupervised groups of boys escaped to Chicago wilderness parks, but so too did social athletic clubs (SACs), self-organized neighborhood organizations comprising young adults of both sexes. These clubs, which were devoted principally to athletics and socializing and occasionally to machine politics and criminal enterprises, rooted their identity not in the soil of a distant village or nation but in Chicago working-class neighborhoods, which SACs sometimes delimited by painting graffiti on fences, bridges, and the sides of buildings. Insular neighborhoods produced ethnically homogeneous SACs while ethnically heterogeneous neighborhoods (and there were many in Chicago) produced ethnically mixed SACs. While SACs made extensive use of city parks and beaches to create community, they also ventured to the forest preserves and outlying commercial groves, where they picnicked, danced outdoors, drank, raised money for SAC projects, and enjoyed a temporary reprieve under shade trees from industrial jobs back in the polluted city. Ragen’s Colts, for instance would picnic and drink in Old Santa Fe Park (along the Des Plaines River); the Blue Condors SAC picnicked at a log cabin in the forest preserves; young Jewish men and women fitted out the rear of produce trucks for passengers and drove to the dunes.⁴⁰

We know from social historian Lizabeth Cohen that during the 1910s and 1920s young ethnic Chicagoans used mass culture to forge ethnic and interethnic neighborhood identities and create working-class youth culture. Young people, often of diverse backgrounds, frequently gathered at amusement parks, dance halls, and movie theaters and created a hybrid culture with its own street language, music, fashion, gender roles, invented traditions, and meaningful places. Although widely derided by both Anglo-American reformers and immigrant parents, this youth culture born of commercialized amusement enabled young Chicagoans to bridge lines of nationality, ethnicity, language, and even sometimes race. This Jazz-Age working-class youth culture, Cohen argues, was a necessary precondition for the remarkable rise of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) during the Great Depression.⁴¹

39. See Thrasher, *The Gang*; for quote, 138. Also see Cutler, *The Jew of Chicago*, 227; Slayton, *Back of the Yards*, 58–59.

40. Jablonsky, *Pride in the Jungle*, 122; Belknap, “Summer Activities of Boys Back of the Yards Chicago,” 65–66; “The Neighborhood” (18 December 1924), Folder 10, box 2, MMP; Edward Ross Scribano, “The ‘Back O’ the Yards’ Gangs” (1931), file 1, box 162, EWB; John L. Brown, “Back of the Yards Survey” (1938), file 2, box 74, Chicago Area Project Papers, Chicago Historical Society, Chicago, Illinois (hereafter “CAPP”); “Blue Condors to Hold a picnic at Preserves Sunday,” *Journal Town of Lake* (hereafter “JTL”), 11 August 1938.

41. Cohen, *Making A New Deal*, 147.

Cohen's *Making a New Deal* is a signal contribution to our understanding of working-class reception of mass culture, but her focus on movie theaters, amusement parks, and dance halls obscures the importance of urban and peri-urban green space in the production and reproduction of working-class youth culture. Certainly curious sociologists followed the American-born children of immigrants to places of commercialized amusement, but just as often they trailed them to parks, beaches, and forest preserves and watched them as they played baseball, gambled, picnicked, drank alcohol, danced the foxtrot, chatted in street English, and enjoyed romantic encounters. In other words, young people also used green spaces—including wilderness parks—to forge a culture that most adults saw as unnatural, implicitly oppositional, and pathological, a social world born not of history, tradition, and soil, but directly of the urban environment. Jazz-Age youth culture was born not just of the movie theatre, the dance hall, and the amusement park; in Chicago, it was also a wilderness product.⁴²

African Americans

Since Reconstruction, black Chicagoans had made extensive use of Chicago's city parks. But especially after the onset of World War I and the Great Black Migration out of the South, white Chicagoans had tried to contain the rapidly expanding black population in ghettos, in particular the so-called black belt on Chicago's South Side. At the same time, park officials, lifeguards, police, and white gangs worked together to push African Americans out of urban parks and off city beaches and onto a small number of segregated and underserved green spaces. When African Americans eager for sunshine, fresh air, or a dip in Lake Michigan challenged this exclusion, extraordinary violence was sometimes the result. Chicago's most violent and destructive incident of civil unrest—the 1919 race riot—occurred after whites drowned a black boy whose raft drifted too close to a white beach.⁴³

Memory of the race riot certainly frightened some African Americans away from parks and especially beaches. In his autobiographical history of black Chicago, African American businessman and writer Dempsey Travis blamed the race riot for his never having learned how to swim as a child. He recalled that “the tragedy forever affected my parents' attitude toward Lake Michigan. . . . To Dad and Mama, the blue lake always had a tinge of red from the blood of that young black boy.”⁴⁴

But despite the viciousness of the riot and continuing acts of racist violence and official segregation, African Americans continued to seek out nature. African Americans insisted on using public beaches and parks, including nearby Washington Park, first designed by Frederick Law Olmsted back in the 1860s. The pastoral English park, which was informally renamed Booker T. Washington Park, became the therapeutic green

42. On early-twentieth-century Chicago working-class youth culture, see Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 143–47; Diamond, *Mean Streets*, 65–118; Thrasher, *The Gang*, 394.

43. Fisher, “African Americans, Outdoor Recreation, and the 1919 Chicago Race Riot.”

44. Travis, *An Autobiography of Black Chicago*, 26.

escape for tens of thousands of inhabitants of the “Black Metropolis,” a city within a city that emerged in the wake of the race riot. To this “two-square-mile plot of green,” reported the black sociologists St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, “Bronzeville’s teeming thousands swarm.” Here, noted the scholars, was the “playground of the South Side.” At the same time, African Americans increasingly ventured outside the city in search of wilder landscapes. As the Associated Negro Press reported in 1925, “There are many who love hunting, rowing, hiking, and the call of the great outdoors. All of this is conducive to better health conditions, and there is hope that thousands in the congested cities may more and more become interested in God’s great outdoors.”⁴⁵

When Chicago blacks tried to enter and use wilderness parks, they sometimes faced exclusion, much as they did back in the city. Black children were barred from joining white scouting troops; the Prairie Club, which played a key role in creating both the Indiana Dunes State Park and the Cook County Forest Preserves, was open only “to white people of any nationality or creed”; and Indiana gas stations on the way to the dunes posted signs that said “we cater to white trade.” Once at the dunes African Americans sometimes found park staff segregating black people to one corner of the beach. Similarly, in the forest preserves black Chicagoans encountered segregated youth camps, hostile white neighbors, and a racially restricted landscape.⁴⁶

But blacks did not turn away from wilderness. Despite formal and informal segregation and exclusion, black organizations (church groups; political organizations; social clubs; all-black Boy Scout, Girl Scout, and Campfire Girl troops; and the black YMCA and YWCA) sponsored outings to the forest preserves and the dunes. “Hike along out to the dunes once in a while,” urged the writer of the *Chicago Defender* “Boy Scout News” column. “Nothing surpasses a hike to the dunes any day. Now that the leaves are falling and nature is coloring up a little. Nothing will give you more of a thrill than an overnight hike to the dunes.”⁴⁷

45. On Booker T. Washington Park, see Bontemps and Conroy, *They Seek a City*, 151; Frazier, *Recreation and Amusement among American Negroes*, 102. On black use of Washington Park, see Fisher, “African Americans, Outdoor Recreation, and the 1919 Chicago Race Riot,” 75–76; Fisher, *Urban Green*, 95, 97, 103–4; 110–11; McCammack, *Landscapes of Hope*, 15–59. On black recreation outside the city, see Fisher, “African Americans, Outdoor Recreation, and the 1919 Chicago Race Riot,” 74–75; Fisher, *Urban Green*, 99–102, 108–9; McCammack, *Landscapes of Hope*, 60–101, 154–98. Associated Negro Press Releases, *Annual Survey, December 30, 1925*, in Claude A. Barnett Papers, Part 1: Associated Negro Press Releases, 1928–1964, Series A, Chicago Historical Society, Chicago, Illinois.

46. On segregation in scouting, see Philpott, *The Slum and the Ghetto*, 307. On separate Mexican and Asian troops, see C. H. Humphrey, “Project Study” (1931), file 6, box 180, EBP. For Prairie Club quote, see *Social Service Directory*, 126. On white trade sign, see “And This Is Civilization,” *Chicago Defender*, Local Edition (hereafter “CD-L”), 7 September 1929. On segregated resorts, see, e.g., “A.L. Jackson Wins Jim Crow Suit Against Resort Owner,” *CD-N*, 31 December 1932. On the dunes, see “Indiana Governor to Probe Dunes Park Jim Crow Rule,” *CD-N*, 30 June 1934; “Bars Bathers at Beach In Indiana Park,” *CD-N*, 28 August 1937. Also see Fremion, “Save Our Shores,” 105–6. On the forest preserves, see McCammack, *Landscapes of Hope*, 170–96.

47. On black scouting, see, e.g., “Boy Scout News,” *CD-N*, 31 October 31 1925; “Boy Scout News,” *CD-L*, 21 November 1925; “Girl Scout Notes,” *CD-L*, 14 July 1934; “Camping Solves Many Hot Weather Problems,” *CD-L*, 15 July 1939. Also see Todd, Byron, and Vierow, *Private Recreation*, 77. On Y trips and Camp Wabash,



Figure 4. African American Boy Scouts in Chicago, 1942. Library of Congress. LC-USW3-000123-D, courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

Faced with exclusion, most affluent blacks opted to pass their time not in public wilderness parks but at black resorts, in particular Idlewild, “the Black Eden,” a resort in the forests of western Michigan. The resort boasted a clubhouse, a dancing pavilion, numerous cottages, a church, and excellent bands, but the main attraction for many visitors was the outdoors: abundant wildlife, pine forests, wildflowers and berries, hiking and riding trails, and a sandy beach on a crystal-clear lake filled with fish. Every summer, visitors stayed in cottages or pitched tents and spent their days swimming in the lake, hiking through the forested countryside, fishing, and canoeing. With its bird-life, wildflowers, rabbits, porcupines, deer, and majestic forests of pine and oak, Idlewild, noted one advertisement, was the perfect place for the camera-toting nature lover. “Nature hikes and picnics coupled with study of wildlife peculiar to our location are perfect ways in which you can forget the hustle and bustle of the city.” The sociologist and civil rights leader W. E. B. Du Bois was so taken with the place that he

see “Y.M.C.A. News,” *CD-L*, 10 July 1920; “YWCA,” *CD-L*, 7 August 1920; “YMCA,” *CD-L*, 30 May 1925; “Camp Wabash News,” *CD-L*, 27 July 1926. For quote on hike to dunes, see “Boy Scout News,” *CD-L*, 7 November 1925.

purchased an oak-covered lakeside lot, which he jokingly called “Bois du Bois.” “For sheer physical beauty, for sheen of water and golden air, for nobleness of tree and shrub, for shining river and song of bird and low, moving whisper of sun, moon and star,” he wrote, “can you imagine a more marvelous thing than Idlewild?”⁴⁸

Like other Americans, African Americans used green spaces to build urban community. Since the 1890s and the emergence of strict segregation in housing, some black leaders had questioned the goal of assimilation. By the time of the 1919 race riot, during which angry white mobs cut Chicago blacks off from the rest of the city and forced them to fend almost entirely for themselves, the older integrationist position had lost all credibility. In its place came a focus on economic independence, the development of black institutions, and the building of a Black Metropolis, a city within a city. At the same time, African American cultural leaders increasingly championed “race pride” and romanticized African origins.⁴⁹

During the Jazz Age and Great Depression, some used green space to remember the landscape of the rural South from which many Chicago blacks had recently migrated, but the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow made Southern nostalgia or pastoralism a fraught and even impossible project. Others looked even further into the past and used Chicago parks to celebrate a shared African past. African Americans did the cultural work of building community at Egyptian pageants held in parks as well as at the massive Bud Billiken annual picnic held every year in Washington Park. The remembrance of origins and the imagination of community could also be witnessed at the massive outdoor pageant *O, Sing a New Song*, where the black community witnessed a cast of 5,000 actors tell the story of the race, from the Jazz Age back to West Africa, where African villagers (played by Zulu actors) lived in close and harmonious contact with nature prior to the arrival of European slavers.⁵⁰

48. For quote on hustle and bustle, see Idlewild Chamber of Commerce, “Folder in the Interest of Idlewild,” n.d., 2, quoted in Wilson and Walker, *Black Eden*, 104. For quote from Du Bois, see Du Bois, “Hopkinsville, Chicago, and Idlewild,” 158–60. On Idlewild, see Wilson, “Idlewild”; Wilson and Walker, *Black Eden*; Mark S. Foster, “In the Face of ‘Jim Crow,’” 138; Fisher, “African Americans, Outdoor Recreation, and the 1919 Chicago Race Riot,” 74; Fisher, *Urban Green*, 100–101, 112, 144; McCammack, *Landscapes of Hope*, 60–87, 156–70. The second-most-popular vacation destination for black Chicago was Ivanhoe, in rural Wisconsin. On Ivanhoe, see Gonzales, “A Black Community in Wisconsin.”

49. On this shift, see Spear, *Black Chicago*, 51–89.

50. On problems of black southern pastoralism, see e.g., Dixon, *Ride out the Wilderness*, 2; Bennett, “Anti-Pastoralism, Frederick Douglass, and the Nature of Slavery,” 195–210; Griffin, “Who Set You Flowin’?”; Outka, *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance*, 171–200; Smith, *African American Environmental Thought*, 149–54. On anti-environmental black thought, see Glave, *Rooted in the Earth*, 5–6. On how the history of violence and exploitation on the land shapes African American outdoor recreation, see Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces*, 32–66; White, “Black Women and the Wilderness.” On the importance of what we might call the African pastoral to early-twentieth-century African Americans, see Corbould, *Becoming African Americans*; Ladino, *Reclaiming Nostalgia*. On Egyptian pageants, see Attwell, “Recreation for Colored America,” 162. On “O, Sing a New Song,” see *O, Sing a New Song*, see “Greatest Pageant in the History of the Race Was Staged Saturday,” *CD-N*, September 1, 1934; “Africans to Aid Pageant,” *CD-N*, August 11, 1934; “Expect 75,000 to See

Despite Jim Crow restrictions, African Americans also undoubtedly used outlying wilderness parks to remember the past and build community. There is little record of what transpired when the all-black Wabash YMCA, African American Boy and Girl Scout troops, parishioners of Ebenezer Baptist Church, or thousands of supporters of Oscar De Priest (the nation's only black congressman) visited the forest preserves and the dunes. But we do have W. E. B. Du Bois's reaction to Idlewild. For Du Bois, the Black Eden was a stunning natural landscape where "the sons and great grandchildren of Ethiopia" left their dress coats, servants, and formal attitudes back in the city and converged as one people, forging a "center of Negro art, conference, and recreation."⁵¹

Industrial Workers

Since the eight-hour day movement of the Gilded Age, labor organizations and their members had made frequent excursions to city parks, which they used in part to unite workers across ethnic lines and make a Chicago working class. But unlike immigrant nationalists or black leadership, interethnic and interracial labor organizations could not forge unity by gathering in a park to collectively remember a common history rooted in the soil of a preindustrial homeland. Their constituency was simply too nationally, ethnically, linguistically, and racially diverse for a joint exercise in nostalgia. So instead of evoking a common origin in the misty past, union leaders in Chicago parks pointed to the future. Diverse groups of trade unionists gathered in parks to picnic with their families and listened to speeches that evoked a reformed future where workers would have more time for leisure, including outdoor recreation. Socialists, meanwhile, imagined a future where the state controlled the means of production. Anarchists also picnicked in urban green spaces, where they blasted capitalists, judges, and religious leaders, waved the red and black flag (negating the flags of all nations), and called for global revolution against capitalism and the state.⁵²

As transportation costs fell in the early twentieth century, labor groups increasingly ventured out of the city and to wilder landscapes. Members of the Women's Trade Union League, led by the glove maker Agnes Nestor, built a summer camp for its members (with labor and supplies provided by the bricklayers' and painters' union) on the edge of the Palatine Forest Preserve. The camp offered horseback riding, tennis, golf, archery, and hiking. During the 1910s and 1920s, the Chicago Federation of Labor built Camp Valmar, a lakeside resort in rural Camp Lake, Wisconsin, where industrial workers could escape increasingly mechanized jobs in the city and enjoy camping, swimming, boating, fishing, and duck hunting. According to the CFL, the camp served as a

Negro Pageant Tonight," *CT*, August 25, 1934; "O, Sing a New Song Spectacle Greatest in History," *CD-N*, September 1, 1934; Ford, *Soldier Field*, 159–64.

51. For Du Bois quote, see Du Bois, "Hopkinsville, Chicago, and Idlewild," 159–60.

52. On nineteenth-century labor organizations' use of green space, see Fisher, *Urban Green*, 114–126; Nelson, *Beyond the Martyrs*, 127–152.

melting pot, a beautiful natural place where “differences will be forgotten and solidarity will be brought about.” Meanwhile, The Young People’s Socialist League and the Communist Pioneers created their own youth camps in the woods of Illinois and Wisconsin.⁵³

The CIO, which emerged on the scene in the 1930s, also made extensive use of Chicago parks, including wilderness parks. It is true, as Elizabeth Cohen argues, that the CIO used mass culture to unite immigrants, the children of the foreign-born, and African Americans and make an industrial working class. The new inclusive industrial union understood that mass culture did not necessarily transform American workers into middle-class consumers. Rather, labor leaders understood that radio programs, movies, and professional sports could bridge ethnic and national differences and serve as a lingua franca for a heterogeneous self-conscious industrial proletariat. But it is also the case that the CIO continued a tradition that stretched back to the Gilded Age and used green spaces—including wilderness areas—to make a Chicago working class.⁵⁴

The central recreational event for the CIO’s Packinghouse Workers’ Organizing Committee was the annual picnic, which was held the first year in the Buffalo Woods Forest Preserve and in subsequent years in adjacent Birutes Grove. The *Back of the Yards Journal* announced that “tens of thousands of packinghouse workers, their families and friends, are expected to come to this beautiful picnic grove on the outskirts of Chicago . . . to eat and drink, play and celebrate the growth of a powerful labor organization in the Chicago packinghouses.” After a bus ride, families from Back of the Yards and the nearby black ghetto of Bronzeville found “sunshine and lots of fresh air,” mountains of barbeque ribs, barrels of beer, and gallons of ice cream. Union brothers and sisters played tug of war, watched baseball games where interracial CIO teams with uniforms emblazoned with their local number competed against one another, and listened and danced to jazz from the Charlie Straight Orchestra. Rather than building community by looking backward to some common origin, workers united over a shared vision of a reformed future, one where they would have higher wages, more job security, shorter hours, improved conditions on the floor, paid vacations, and more.⁵⁵

53. On the WTUL, see “Recreational Activities of Labor Organizations,” 900; “Women’s Trade Union League in Conference,” *The New Majority*, 13 September 1919; “Women’s Trade Union League Camp Opens,” *Federation News*, 9 June 1928; Nestor, *Woman’s Labor Leader*, 270. On Camp Valmar, see “Labor Group to Have Club Near Antioch,” *CT*, 18 March 1928; Valmar Federation Club *Health, Wealth, and Happiness for You!*, Chicago Historical Society, Chicago, Ill.; “Organized Labor’s Country Club Completes Organization,” *Federation News*, 12 May 1928; Cohen, *Making A New Deal*, 210. For quote on solidarity, see “Show Interest in Valmar Club Project,” *Federation News*, 14 July 1928. On socialist and communist youth camps, see “Camp Yipsel Has a Very Beautiful Season.” National Secretary, Young Peoples Socialist League, to Emil Wingenburg, 14 July 1917, in, *Hearings before a Special Committee of the House*, 222. “Establish Child’s Soviet Camp on Lake Near Kenosha,” *Milwaukee Journal*, 25 July 1929; “Young Communists Get Training in Wisconsin Camp,” *CT*, 28 July 1929.

54. See Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 291–360.

55. On PWOC-CIO picnics, see “Yards Workers will attend Picnic Sunday,” *JTL*, 8 July 1937; “42,600 to Attend,” *CT*, 23 July 1939; “Chicago Council Holds Annual Picnic June 16,” *JTL*, 10 June 1940; “Council Picnic Draws 8,000,” *JTL*, 24 June 1940; “Chicago Council’s Picnic on June 22,” *JTL*, 9 June 1941. For quote on

The goal of every picnic was to raise money to send disadvantaged working-class Packinghouse children to wilderness summer camp. Sig Nowacki, of the Wilson local and the lead on the effort, said that “fourteen days in the country, during these hot summer days that are coming soon will mean a great deal for the health and the happiness of kids who would otherwise be playing in the hot city streets or trying to cool off under some fire hydrant.” The union was flooded with applications. Every summer, PWOC-CIO managed to send an ethnically and racially mixed group of boys and girls to the Palos Park Forest Preserve. PWOC-CIO also provided support to the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council, a grassroots community organization organized in part by radical sociologist Saul Alinsky. With PWOC-CIO help, the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council could send interracial groups of packinghouse children—Polish, Lithuanian, Mexican, and African Americans—out of the polluted yards to Camp Pottawatomie, a National Park Service camp on Indiana’s Tippecanoe River.⁵⁶

Conclusion

We know that immigrants, their American-born children, African Americans, and industrial workers were victims of environmental injustices. Early-twentieth-century Chicago was filled with hundreds of thousands of former peasants, sharecroppers, downsized American farmers, and *campesinos* who had been driven off the land by agricultural modernization, natural disasters, war, and persecution. Once in Chicago, many did the hard, alienating, and sometimes dangerous work of transforming natural resources—iron ore, grain, trees, and animals—into commodities. And most lived in environmentally blighted slums and ghettos where they shouldered a disproportionate share of the city’s many environmental hazards: coal smoke, cold and fire-prone tenements, rats and other pests, trash dumps, sickening smells from the meatpackers, the polluted Bubbly Creek, infectious disease, and lack of green space.⁵⁷

beautiful picnic grove, see “Chicago Shifts Picnic Date to July 23,” *JTL*, 26 June 1939. For quote on sunshine, see “Attend the CIO Picnic Sunday!,” *JTL*, 13 June 1940.

56. On PWOC-CIO summer camp, see “Chicago to Have Annual Picnic at Berutes Grove, June 16,” *JTL*, 27 May 1940; “Chicago Council Holds Annual Picnic June 16,” *JTL*, 10 June 1940; “To Send 100 Kids Camping,” *JTL*, 24 June 1940; “PWOC Kids to Get Two Weeks at Camp,” *JTL*, 8 July 1940; “First Chicago Kids Off to Summer Camp,” *JTL*, 22 July 1940; “Chicago Sends Kids to Camp,” *JTL*, 19 August 1940; “Strong Men of Unions Are Boy Scouts at Heart,” *JTL*, 22 August 1940. For quote, see “Send 70 Kids to Camp—CIO Picnic Goal,” *JTL*, 5 June 1940. On the BYNC camp effort, see “Back of the Yards Girls Turn to Scouting Work,” 7 April 1941, Joseph B. Meegan Scrapbook, microfilm reel 10, Neighborhood History Research Collections, Back of the Yards, The Special Collections and Preservation Division, Harold Washington Library, Chicago, Illinois (hereafter NHRC-B); “BYNC Sends 90 Boys, Girls to Summer Camp,” 2 July 1941 Joseph B. Meegan Scrapbook, microfilm reel 10, NHRC-B; “Send 70 Kids to Camp—CIO Picnic Goal,” 5 June 1940, Joseph B. Meegan Scrapbook, microfilm reel 10, NHRC-B; “PWOC Kids to Get Two Weeks at Camp,” *CIO News*, *PWOC Edition*, 8 July 1940; “What Is It That Youth in BY Is Going to Do to Solve Local Problems,” *JTL*, 9 November 1939; “Industrial Areas Foundation,” file 1, box 74, CAPP.

57. On environmental inequalities in Chicago and the nearby city of Gary, see Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*, 52, 57, 59–65; Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities*; Pellow, *Garbage Wars*; Washington, *Packing Them In*; Platt, *Shock Cities*; Taylor, *Toxic Communities*, 89, 141, 154–55, 179, 185, 194, 204, 205–12, 218, 220–21, 227, 229,

Less known, though, is that marginalized Chicagoans often responded to an urban environment that they saw as unhealthy, unnatural, and unjust by seeking out nature, including nearby wilderness parks. They too were often nature romantics, although their romanticism was not handed down from Henry David Thoreau but rather emerged as a response to rapid immersion in a seemingly artificial urban environment, subjugation to seemingly unnatural regimes of industrial labor, and exposure to strains of Old World cultural nationalism.

As we have seen, when Chicagoans left the city and entered into an American wilderness park, the result was not necessarily erasure of working-class consciousness, assimilation into the dominant Anglo-American culture, or forgetting of distant homelands and naturalization to American soil. On the contrary, in some of the same creative ways that they used commercial mass culture, Chicagoans appropriated the Indiana Dunes State Park and the Cook County Forest Preserves and made these landscapes their own. In wilderness parks—supposedly those most American of spaces—Chicagoans imagined themselves as German, Irish, Polish, Italian, Mexican, Filipino, African American, and as members of an industrial working class. As such, Chicago wilderness parks were home not to one Anglo-American or white culture of nature but rather multiple, overlapping, and differently privileged cultures of nature.

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231, 237–38, 249–50, 255–58, 260, 263, 265, 272, 274; Taylor, *The Environment and the People in American Cities, 1600–1900s*, 83, 147, 169, 170–71, 173, 174, 190–96, 202–07, 208–209, 215, 293–95, 318–19, 353–54, 399–400, 448, 449, 461–462, 468.

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