Names 40.1 (March 1992)

The Changing Geography of Vegetation Placenames in the Indiana Prairie Border Region

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Abstract

Maps of the Indiana prairie-forest border region show that historical changes in vegetation placenames have mirrored human transformation of the landscape. Early names were applied to actual vegetation features. With destruction of the natural vegetation they have disappeared or shifted to non-vegetation features, often with little spatial relationship to the original vegetation patterns. Artificial new vegetation names have proliferated on cultural vegetation and apparently on fragmentary remnants of the original forest. The overall trend has been toward homogenization and loss of place specificity in both vegetation cover and vegetation placenames.

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Introduction

Geographers have mainly been interested in placenames as indicators of cultural patterns. For example, Robert Bastian and Wilbur Zelinsky have used placenames to define the boundaries of culture regions, and Robert West has traced diffusion of Louisiana French settlement through placenames. Placenames can also be seen, however, as a record of human-environment interaction. In this conception, placenames suggest how people perceive and use natural landscapes and how their relationship to the land changes as the land is altered by cultural manipulation.

The prairie-forest border region of the U.S. Midwest is a promising place to study the relationship between placenames and landscape change. In this regional transition from eastern forest to western grassland, American frontier settlers first adapted to life in a treeless landscape. Terry Jordan, Douglas McManis, Bernard Peters (in several articles), and others have shown that the local vegetation mosaic was both an important frame of reference for early travel and a strong influence on settlement patterns. In the succeeding century and a half, the natural vegetation has been replaced by a rectangular cultural grid of fields, towns, and woodlots. In this setting the placename cover should have been both diverse and dynamic.

This paper traces historical changes in the spatial pattern of vegetation placenames in the prairie border of northwest Indiana, as shown on published maps of the region. Previous placename studies in the prairie border area (Butler; Minkel; McMullen; Peters, "Relic Names") have mostly been purely historical or purely geographic, and thus have failed to show changes in placename patterns through time. Moreover, the geographic work has been broadly regional in scale and thus insensitive to local relationships between placenames and landscape patterns. Here we attempt to combine historical and geographic approaches in an analysis of vegetation/placename correspondence at an intermediate scale.

Our analysis focused on two sets of questions. First, how closely did pioneer placenames match the original vegetation mosaic? One measure of correspondence is the degree to which placenames differentiate vegetation types. The degree of differentiation apparently varies: Leo Waibel found a rich array of Spanish and Indian vegetation names in Cuba, but Zelinsky ("Generic Terms" 144) noted the low diversity of vegetation names in northeastern North America. The location and density of names are also pertinent. George R. Stewart's principle of "entity and use" (*Names on the Globe* 8) claims that places are most likely to be named if they are distinctive and useful in everyday life. In the prairie border region, this principle would predict an inverse correlation between the local extent of a vegetation community and the density and accuracy of vegetation names. For example, grassland names should be most abundant and closely tied to the occurrence of actual grasslands east of the main prairie region, where the prairie becomes fragmented into small, discrete outliers. The reverse should be true of forest names.

Second, how have pioneer placename patterns changed with emergence of the modern cultural landscape? In southern Michigan, Peters ("Relic Names" 60) found that settlement brought a decline in the number of prairie names and transfer of the remaining names from actual prairies to towns and other cultural features. The same changes should have occurred in northwest Indiana. Marked spatial shifts in placenames might also be expected, though this possibility has scarcely been explored. For example, the distribution of vegetation names should have become more haphazard as the original vegetation patterns disappeared.

In contrast to past investigations, we paid particular attention to differences between forest and grassland names. Anticipating contrasts in settlement and use of forests and grasslands, we asked whether there had been corresponding differences in the historical geography of forest and grassland placenames.

Setting

The area studied is a rectangle of about 4,000 square miles spanning the forest-grassland transition in northwest Indiana (Fig. 1). In the early 1800s the forest-grassland boundary ran diagonally across the area from northeast to southwest, with a prominent extension eastward through present Tippecanoe and Clinton counties (Fig. 1). The boundary was really a complex transition zone with outliers of forest and grassland on either side, but grassland became essentially continuous in the Grand Prairie, which extended west from present White and Benton counties into Illinois. The border of the Grand Prairie Natural Region, from a recent classification of Indiana natural regions by Michael Homoya and co-authors (250), provides a convenient, if approximate, division between forest and grassland vegetation (Fig. 1).

The upland here is an undulating glacial till plain dotted with moraines, kames, stabilized dunes, and glacial lake beds (Gray). Before European settlement, upland vegetation was correspondingly diverse, ranging from black-soil prairie to sand prairie and from dry oak-hickory forest to mixed forests of oak, hickory, walnut, ash, and tulip poplar (Homoya et al. 250–52).

Most of the area was opened for settlement during the 1820s and 1830s, after completion of the U.S. General Land Office survey. However, settlement of the Grand Prairie lagged behind settlement of the forested region to the east for a variety of reasons, including poor drainage, difficulty of initial cultivation, and land speculation (Gates 18ff). Habitations in the Grand Prairie were closely confined to prairie groves until plowing of the prairie accelerated in the 1870s (Jesse Birch 245; Gates 24). Today the prairie region remains thinly settled; most of the major towns in the study area are farther east, in the former forest region. However, the original prairie vegetation has been more nearly eliminated than the forest. Prairie is now almost entirely confined to a few railroad rights of way, whereas forest, though much reduced, remains common in woodlots and along streams. The Grand Prairie has been termed the most highly altered of all Indiana natural regions (Homoya et al. 250).

Map Sources and Mapping Methods

We used a historical sequence of three map series covering the entire study area at relatively large scale and containing detailed placename information: the early nineteenth-century plat maps of the United States General Land Office (GLO) Survey; an 1876 atlas of Indiana; and the

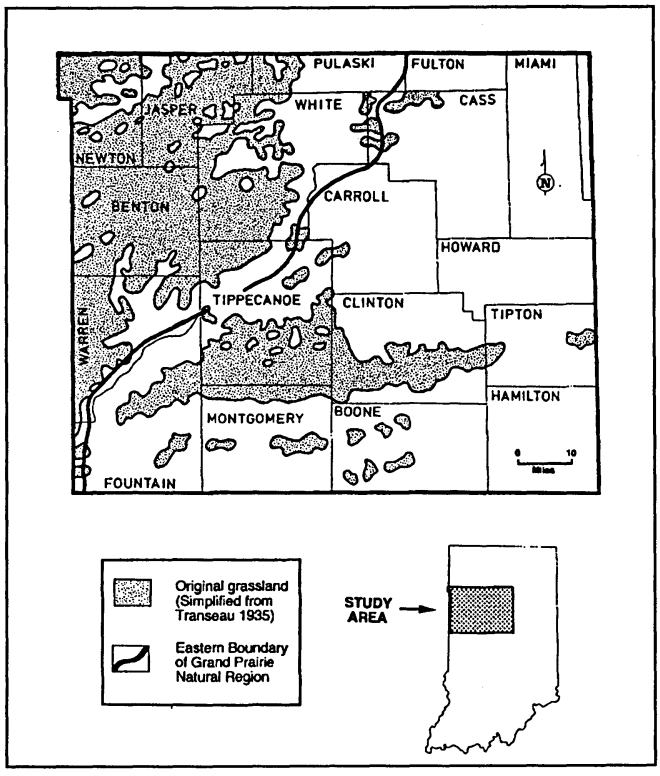


Fig. 1. Location of study area.

current 7 1/2' topographic maps of the United States Geological Survey (USGS). Additional information from certain other maps is cited in the Discussion, but we found no other maps meeting all of the above criteria. The point of this selective approach was to avoid biasing the spatial patterns within time periods by mixing maps with different formats. Control for differences in format between time periods was impossible, and our analysis of strictly historical changes is correspondingly limited. In view of the central role of these maps in the analysis, a brief description of each map source is presented below.

The GLO Survey. Most of the study area was surveyed from 1820 to 1834. (A small portion of the eastern half was surveyed as late as 1846). Surveyors drew plat maps of each township surveyed at a scale of 1:31,680 (two inches per mile) (Henderson 17). They had few instructions about what to show on the plats, which thus can vary greatly in amount of detail

reported (Henderson 17). This is true for the study area, in which some plats contain more extensive notes than others about the nature of the vegetation, but this variation appears to be uncorrelated with the pattern of vegetation placenames. All plats for the study area were copied in Detroit in 1849; we used microfilm positives of these copies kept at the Indiana State Archives, Indianapolis.

The 1876 state atlas. The Indiana atlas is one of many state and county atlases completed by private firms in the Midwest shortly after the Civil War (Ristow 403). We used a recent partial reprint of the atlas published by the Indiana Historical Society, comprising a set of individual county maps at scales varying from about 1:84,000 to 1:170,000 (*Maps of Indiana Counties*). The placename information is detailed, including the names and boundaries of many individual prairies and groves and the names of minor cultural features. There are some obvious inconsistencies (for example, some prairie boundaries stop at county lines), but the spatial pattern of these errors does not appear systematic.

USGS topographic maps. USGS 1:24,000-scale topographic maps covering the study area were published from 1957 through 1987. The placename cover probably changed somewhat during this interval, but any changes would be scattered more or less randomly over the study area, in keeping with the haphazard spatial pattern of publication.

Placenames were transferred from the original maps to 1:250,000-scale USGS topographic base maps. Separate maps were prepared for each of the three time periods, referred to below as the early 1800s, late 1800s, and mid 1900s. We mapped all proper placenames that might refer to natural forest or grassland (excluding wetland vegetation names, such as marsh and swamp). The origins of some names could be checked in *Indiana Place Names* (Baker and Carmony), but the rest remained a matter of judgment.

Vegetation names were separated into two classes: *true generic* names, attached to the features themselves, and *false generic* names, attached to something other than the feature specified in the name. For example, the word *prairie* in *Pretty Prairie* is a true generic, and in *Pretty Prairie Road* it is a false generic. *Pretty Prairie* would become a false generic name if it were applied to a town rather than an actual prairie. True generic and false generic names are distinguished on the accompanying maps by open and closed symbols, respectively. After attempting to map point, line, and areal symbols as they were shown on the original maps, we decided, for cartographic clarity, to reduce all of these to dots centered on the location of the original symbol. This areal generalization did not materially affect the broad geographic patterns addressed.

Grassland Placenames

Early 1800s. At the time of the GLO survey, northwest Indiana was largely unsettled, and placenames were sparse. Although surveyors recorded the locations of many grasslands, only five were named (Fig. 2). These grasslands were all prairies, though the plats also showed *oak openings* and *barrens*. All of the named prairies were small and located outside the main prairie region except for Grand Prairie, whose name was letter spaced across several entire plats.

Late 1800s. By 1876 three of the five earlier prairie names had apparently disappeared, though *Thornton Prairie* survived in the community of *Thorntown*. Nevertheless, the number of named prairies had increased to eighteen (Fig. 3). Many of the names were highly descriptive: *Shawnee Prairie, String Prairie, Nine Mile Prairie, Weasel Prairie*, and *Pretty Prairie*. False generic prairie names had also begun to appear on creeks and rural townships, making up about one-third of all prairie names. None of these false generics incorporated the name of a specific prairie; hence the same name might be repeated in the landscape on different features. For example, four different counties had Prairie Townships. Most of the names remained outside the prairie region proper. They were sufficiently dense to outline accurately the belt of grassland stretching across the southern part of the study area (Fig. 1).

Mid 1900s. USGS topographic maps show no decrease in the total number of grassland placenames since the late 1800s (Fig. 4), though larger map scale and better data collection could have inflated the number of names shown. More certain are changes in the character and distribution of the names:

> 1) There has been an essentially complete shift from true generic to false generic prairie names. (The only remaining true generic, *Fox Prairie*, is actually a small bog.) Most of the early prairie names seem to have disappeared entirely from maps, though two (*Osborn Prairie* and *Pretty Prairie*) have survived as false generics. A few other false generics appearing for the first time on USGS maps are probably relics of earlier true generic names (e.g., *Rock Prairie Church*, *Bacon Prairie Creek*). More than half of the false generic prairie names contain no indication of a specific prairie; there are four *Prairie Creeks* and three *Prairie Townships*.

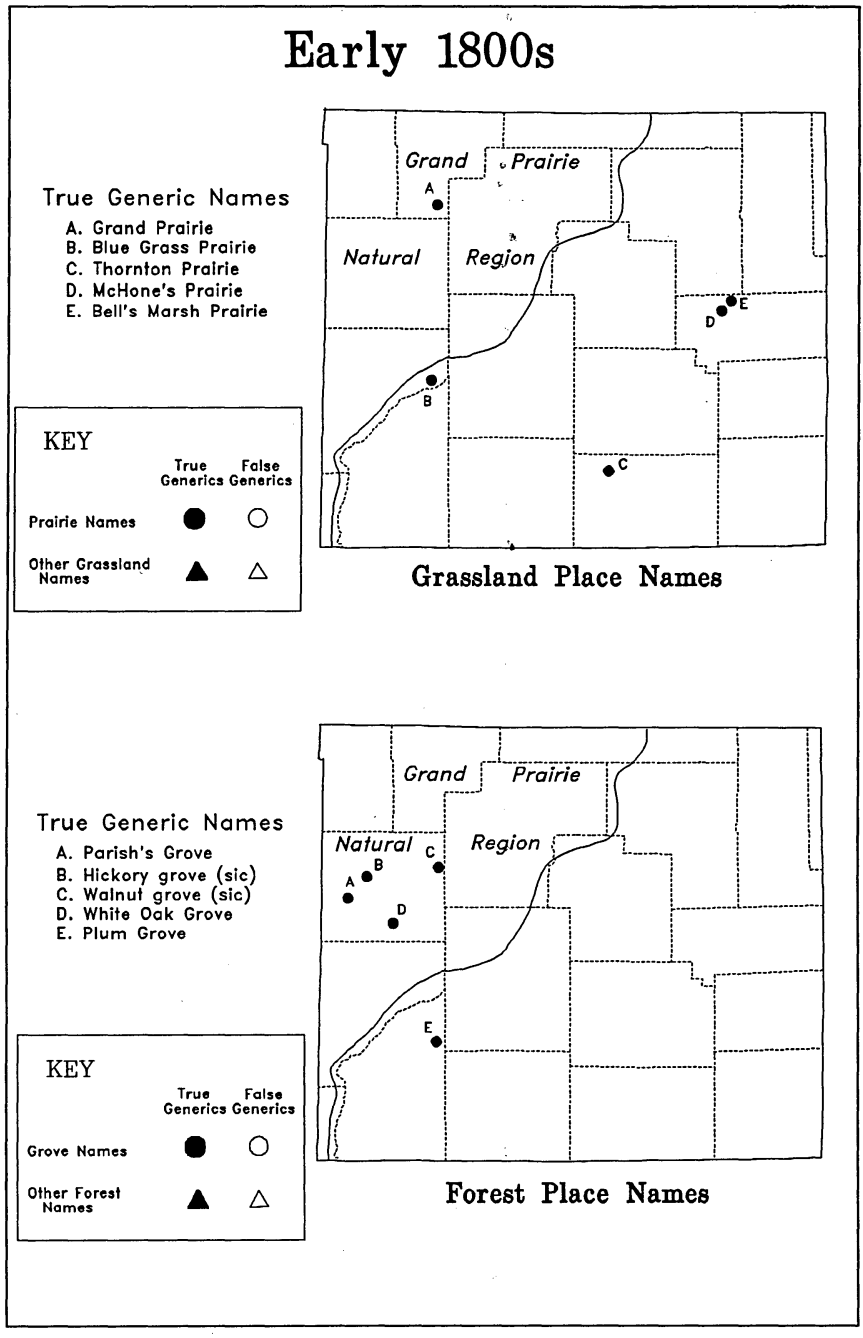


Fig. 2. Forest and grassland placenames, early 1800s.

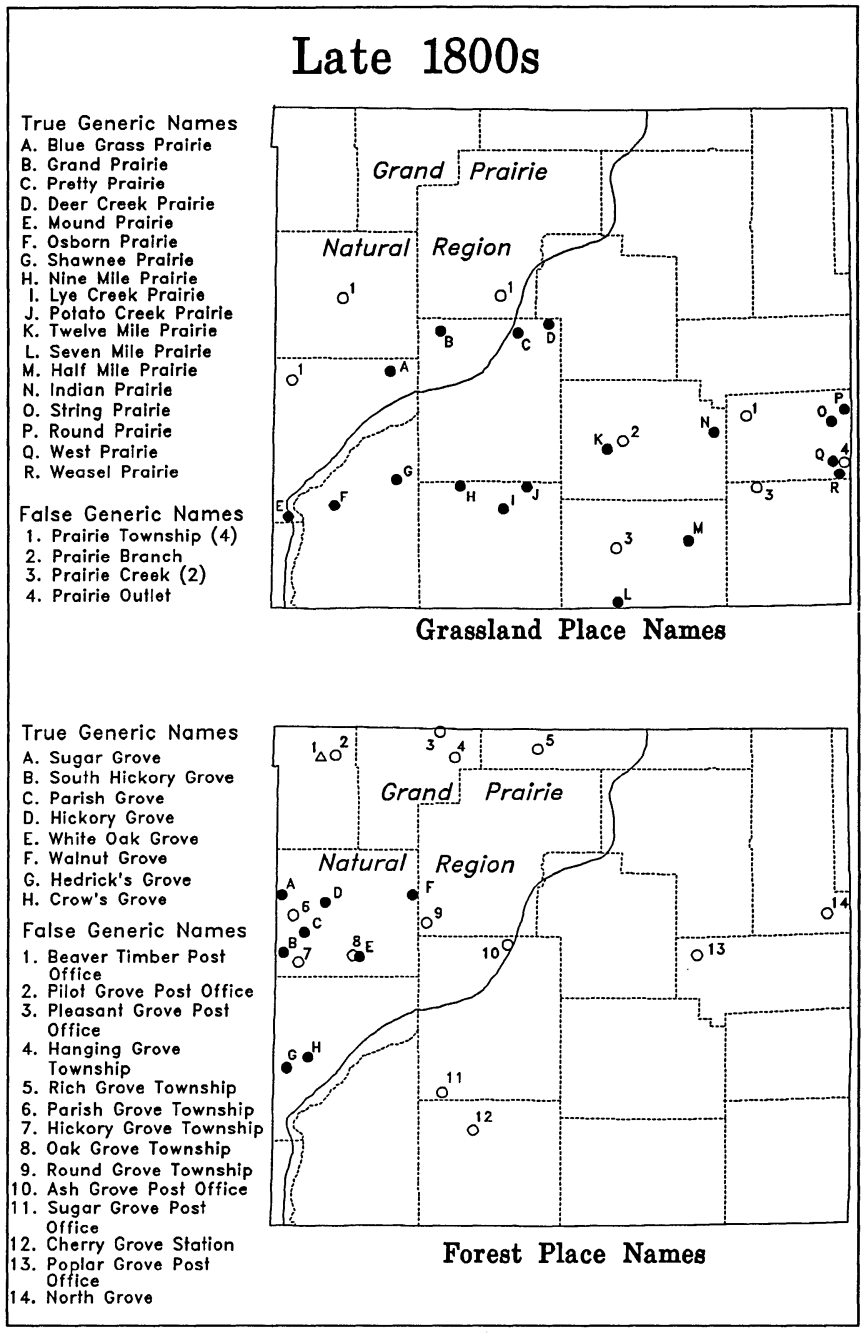


Fig. 3. Forest and grassland placenames, late 1800s. Symbols as in Fig. 2.

2) Two new kinds of grassland terms (*meadow* and *lea*) have appeared. These terms are used only in false generic names, mainly on urban and suburban subdivisions (*Meadowbrook, Northern Meadows*), streets (*Southlea Drive*), and schools (*Edgelea School*).

3) Grassland names remain concentrated outside the main prairie region, but their geographic distribution has become less closely related to the original locations of outlying prairies. The names are more generally scattered, and the outline of the former prairie salient across the southern part of the study area has largely disappeared.

Forest Placenames

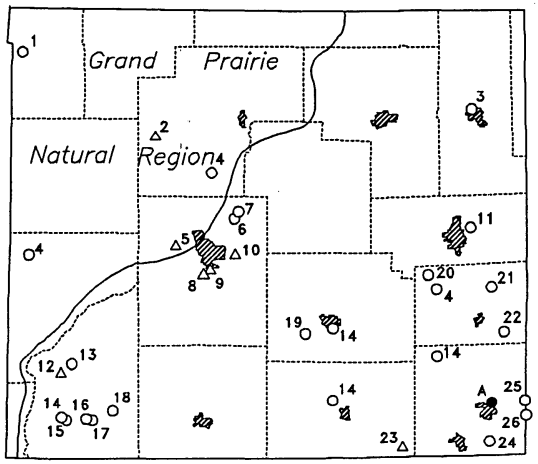
Early 1800s. GLO plat maps showed the locations of about fifteen *groves*, five of which were named (Fig. 2). Four groves were apparently named for the dominant tree species (e.g., *White Oak Grove, Hickory Grove*). Surveyors also noted the location of one *woods*, the only other forest generic evident. The distribution of *grove* was an approximate mirror image of *prairie*: four of the five names were in the prairie region.

Late 1800s. By the late 1800s there were at least twenty-one *grove* placenames and one non-*grove* name (*Beaver Timber Post Office*) in the study area (Fig. 3). Four of the five original true generic *grove* names survived, and two of them had spread to cultural features (*Hickory Grove Township, Parish Grove Township*). By now, about two-thirds of the names were false generics, mostly attached to post offices and rural townships. All of these incorporated the names of specific groves and were presumably derived from true generic names. *Grove* did not appear alone as a specific placename element, in the fashion of *Prairie Township* and *Prairie Creek*. *Grove* names remained concentrated in the Grand Prairie, but with some eastward movement evident.

Mid 1900s. Striking changes are apparent in modern forest placenames. First, USGS topographic maps suggest that the number of forest names has more than doubled, from twenty-two to forty-nine names (Fig. 4). Although this increase could be due to changes in map format, it is much greater than the increase in grassland names for the same period.

In addition, forest names, like grassland names, have almost all changed from true to false generics. The single true generic name, *Frances Slocum State Forest*, is only about fifty years old. However, a greater

Mid-1900s



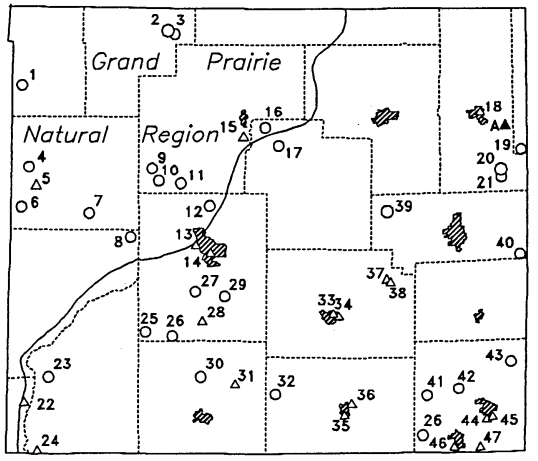
Grassland Place Names

True Generic Names

A. Fox Prairie

False Generic Names

1. Prairie Vine Cemetery
2. Meadow Lake Church
3. Prairie Ditch
4. Prairie Township (3)
5. Green Meadows
6. Pretty Prairie Road
7. Pretty Prairie Cemetery
8. Southlea Drive
9. Edgelea School
10. Meadowbrook
11. Prairie Creek Ditch
12. Leas
13. Osborn Prairie Church
14. Prairie Creek (4)
15. Prairie Creek Church
16. Scotts Prairie Church
17. Scotts Prairie Cemetery
18. Prairie Chapel
19. Clinton Prairie High School
20. Prairieville Church
21. Rock Prairie Church
22. Bacon Prairie Church
23. Northern Meadows
24. Conner Prairie Museum
25. Prairie Baptist Road
26. Prairie Church



Forest Place Names

True Generic Names

A. Frances Slocum State Forest

False Generic Names

1. Pleasant Grove Cemetery
2. Hanging Grove Township
3. Hanging Grove
4. Parrish Grove Township
5. Midwood
6. Hickory Grove Township
7. Oak Grove Township
8. Pond Grove Cemetery
9. Round Grove Township
10. Round Grove
11. Badger Grove
12. Ash Grove
13. Woodland Avenue
14. Elmwood Avenue
15. Lakewood
16. Oak Grove Church
17. Hickory Grove Church
18. Elmwood School
19. Pleasant Grove Church
20. North Grove Cemetery
21. North Grove
22. Tree Spring
23. Prescott Grove Cemetery
24. Silverwood
25. Wheeler Grove Cemetery
26. Sugar Grove Cemetery (2)
27. Hickory Grove Cemetery
28. Elmwood Cemetery
29. Spring Grove Cemetery
30. Cherry Grove
31. Darlington Woods
32. Walnut Grove Church
33. Woodside Park
34. Woodside School
35. Brendan Wood
36. Elmwood
37. Forest Township
38. Forest
39. Poplar Grove Church
40. Center Grove Church
41. Union Grove Cemetery
42. West Grove Cemetery
43. Walnut Grove
44. Forest Hill School
45. Forest Park
46. College Wood School
47. Lynnwood Farm

Fig. 4. Forest and grassland placenames, mid 1900s. Symbols as in Fig. 2. All towns of more than 5,000 people are shown.

proportion of the early forest names has survived: of twenty true or false generic grove names from the 1800s (ignoring occurrence of the same name on more than one feature), ten appear in some form on USGS maps. It is noteworthy that *grove* has survived in the names of small rural settlements (e.g., *Hanging Grove, Round Grove*), but *prairie* has not.

New kinds of forest names have also begun to spring up – particularly *forest* and *wood* or *woods*. Most of these names designate urban or suburban features such as streets (*Elmwood Avenue*), schools (*Forest Hill School*), and subdivisions (*Brendan Wood*). The street names may already have existed in 1876 (the state atlas does not show most urban street names), but other names must be more recent.

Finally, forest names have undergone marked expansion eastward into the former forest region. Almost two-thirds of modern grove names and all but two or three of the new forest and wood names are east of the Grand Prairie.

Discussion

The changes outlined above suggest some general conclusions about the relationship between placenames and the changing landscape of the prairie border region. We consider first placename patterns in the 1800s, when much of the natural landscape remained or had only recently disappeared, and then historical trends.

Early placename patterns. Early placenames were closely tied to the vegetation cover. Most nineteenth-century placenames designated actual prairies and groves of trees, and the pattern was accurate, in the sense that there were prairies and groves where the names were located. For example, prairie placenames in the 1876 atlas neatly outline the prairie belt stretching through Tippecanoe, Clinton, and adjacent counties. The placename pattern was coarser grained than the vegetation mosaic. However, our map sources underestimate the true placename density. We have found five additional prairie names and three grove names in an incomplete search of other maps of the late 1800s (*Combination Atlas*; Johnson; Young), and other names never appeared on maps.

As Stewart's principle of entity and use would predict (*Names on the Globe* 8), placename density varied more or less inversely with the local extent of vegetation named. Most named forests were isolated groves in the Grand Prairie, and most named grasslands were small prairie outliers in forest. This pattern would be reinforced by inclusion of the eight additional names mentioned above: all of the prairie names among these

were located in the forest region and all of the grove names in the Grand Prairie. Clarence W. Minkel (160) has found a similar inverse relationship in Minnesota, where prairie names are denser in the prairie-forest transition zone than in the prairie region.

Early placenames contained few generic terms for different vegetation types. Only two, *prairie* and *grove*, covered almost all upland vegetation. *Barrens, woods*, and *oak openings* appeared as descriptive terms on GLO plat maps but apparently were not incorporated in early placenames. Vegetation generics were thus no more diverse here than in the northeastern United States (Zelinsky "Generic Terms" 144). However, forest names commonly indicated species composition (e.g., *Hickory Grove, Walnut Grove*), whereas grassland names did not—with the possible exception of *Blue Grass Prairie*, which might have referred to the dominant native bluestems.

These early placename patterns are consistent with what we know generally about settlement of the Midwestern prairie border region. Pioneers chose land at the local boundary between forest and prairie, often favoring small, isolated prairies and prairie groves rather than extensive tracts of forest or prairie (B. P. Birch; McManis). They cultivated or grazed livestock on the prairie but built their homes in the shelter of the forest, using the trees for lumber and firewood. This pattern probably held true in northwest Indiana (Jesse Birch 23, 245). Isolated groves and small prairie outliers were thus more important and more likely to be named than large tracts of forest or grassland. Settlers would have been intimately familiar with individual tree species, but they had less reason to know the prairie flora; hence trees (especially economically important trees) were more prominent in early placenames.

Historical changes. Perhaps the most obvious historical change in the placename cover is loss of early true vegetation placenames from modern maps. This change is certainly due in part to human destruction of presettlement vegetation patterns. For example, elimination of the original prairie mosaic of Tippecanoe and Clinton Counties has eliminated the need for the former rich array of prairie names.

Loss of early vegetation names is also related to development of the cultural landscape, though here the relationship has been more complex. Some names have survived destruction of the original vegetation through transfer to cultural features (e.g., *Pretty Prairie Road*). Others have disappeared, because they have lost significance in the modern cultural grid (cf. Peters, "Relic Names" 60). This is true even where the original vegetation persists. For example, Parish Grove was a locus of Indian and

pioneer settlement (Jesse Birch 23ff, 40) and remains a prominent natural feature of central Benton County, but *Parish Grove* disappeared from maps as railroads and highways bypassed the grove. *White Oak Grove* became obsolete as the grove itself was incorporated into the town of Oxford.

As old names have vanished, new kinds of names have sprung up, such as *forest, wood, lea*, and *meadow*. These new generic terms are clearly unrelated to natural vegetation patterns. They are almost entirely confined to urban streets, schools, and subdivisions, and many of them must have originated after the original vegetation was removed. Their rise instead seems tied to appearance of a more managed, parklike landscape of fields and woodlots. Stewart (*Names on the Land* 272) has shown that such names were used in eastern North America to evoke poetic images of English estates, but that they were often applied with little attention to their real meaning.

Together, these changes have blurred the original spatial correspondence between vegetation placenames and vegetation patterns. The accurately placed early true generic names have been lost or transferred to other features, and many of the new false generics appear more vaguely related to the original vegetation (*Prairie Creek, Prairie Township*) or entirely inaccurate, as in the urban names cited above. The most precise indicators of former vegetation patterns in the present placename cover are probably grove names, which are mostly applied to point features such as villages, post offices, and churches at the sites of the original groves.

There have also been intriguing differences in the fates of forest and grassland placenames. More of the early forest names survive on modern maps, and forest names have apparently increased relative to grassland names since the 1800s. Forest names have also resisted the loss of specific modifiers seen in such grassland names as *Prairie Township* and *Prairie Ditch*. Early grove names have been transferred to small towns, but no town is now named for a prairie. (At least two prairie town names—*Prairieville*, in Clinton County, and *Prairie Edge*, in Montgomery County—appear on small-scale state maps of the mid 1800s (e.g., Johnson; Young), but both towns apparently vanished before publication of the 1876 atlas.) Finally, forest names have undergone a striking eastward expansion into the former forest region, whereas grassland names have remained essentially static.

These contrasts seem due to differences in human use and perception of forests and grasslands. Prairie groves were centers of pioneer settlement and thus significant sites in the early cultural landscape. As the surrounding prairies were plowed, many of the groves were preserved, presumably because they were valued for shelter, ornament, and wood

production. Winona Welch found that all eight of the natural prairie groves of Benton County survived in 1930, though they were gradually being reduced by cutting and grazing; the surrounding prairie (originally some 97 percent of the county) remained only along roads and railroads (72). Survival of grove names may thus have been favored by both persistence of the actual groves and their continuing significance in the cultural landscape. In contrast, the small named prairies of Tippecanoe and Clinton Counties soon lost their initial importance as the grass was turned under and the surrounding woods cut away.

The eastward spread of forest names can be partly explained by differential population growth. Faster population growth in the forest region created more cultural features to be named, and the names were more likely to evoke the surrounding forest than prairie. However, it seems likely that fragmentation of the original forest cover also played a role. As the forest was cleared for agriculture, the remaining stands would have acquired new prominence and perhaps become more likely to acquire forest names. For example, it is difficult to imagine names such as *Woodside Park* or *Forest Hill* arising in continuous forest. In the prairie region few remnants escaped the plow, and those that did would have been hard to distinguish from ordinary pastures.

These placename changes prompt broader observations about human relationship to environment. The presettlement landscape of the Indiana prairie border region was a diverse mosaic of forest and prairie. Settlers were by necessity sensitive to some of its complexities, as the diversity of early vegetation placenames indicates. However, agriculture simplified and homogenized the presettlement vegetation cover, and urbanization and farm mechanization have removed most people from close contact with what remains. Placenames are among the few potential reminders of what has been lost in such landscapes, but here vegetation placenames have suffered the same fate as the landscape: "native" names have disappeared or moved, and "alien" names have proliferated – names which, like introduced crops and weeds, can be found anywhere. Some of the original names probably persist in popular use (Berleant-Schiller 92), but one suspects that they will not linger long. To the extent that diversity is valued in both cultural and biological landscapes, this parallel homogenization of vegetation and placename cover is to be regretted.

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Notes

1. This work was partly funded by an undergraduate research grant to Lisa Kennedy from the Indiana University Honors Program. Early versions of the paper were presented at the regional meeting of the Association of American Geographers in Duluth, 1991, and the national meeting of the Association of American Geographers in San Diego, 1992. We are grateful to Leigh Darbee of the Indiana Historical Society for assistance with historical maps, to Kevin Mickey for drafting the figures, and to Jim Baldwin of Indiana University Library and an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on a draft.

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