

Relic Names on the Landscape: The Prairies of Kalamazoo County

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DURING THE INITIAL SETTLEMENT OF AN AREA by the American pioneers, the local vegetative landscapes were very important. They were frequently given names which, in the early years of occupation, were widely recognized and used. But, as the works of our culture, such as roads, towns, fields, and political units, overspread the land, vegetative landscape features declined in importance as place-designators as they became less conspicuous. In many instances these names have even disappeared entirely from common usage and, when presently utilized, are commonly attached to a feature of the cultural landscape, and thus, have lost their original significance as parts of the physical landscape. The prairie names in Kalamazoo County, Michigan, evidence this linguistic change.

Although most of Kalamazoo County was covered by forests when the first American settler arrived, several prairies were also present. These grasslands varied in size from a few hundred to several thousand acres. Each was given a name: Prairie Ronde, Gourdneck Prairie, Gull Prairie, Grand Prairie, Climax Prairie, Genesee Prairie, Toland's Prairie, Dry Prairie, and Indian Fields. These places were thought worthy of naming because they were easily identifiable features and were the first areas to be settled. Only after the prairies were taken up did settlement spread to the remainder of the county.

Until the towns grew to consequence, the prairies were the only well-known locations in Kalamazoo County. The importance of the largest prairie in the county, Prairie Ronde, as a place-name in southwestern Michigan is revealed by an advertisement in an 1834 newspaper of a nearby county. The paper gives the location of the "Big Island Hotel"¹ as, "in the village of Schoolcraft, Prairie Ronde."² The county name was apparently thought less significant than the prairie. The importance of the county's prairies as place locations is again shown by an 1834 inquiry about a stray horse. In it the settler felt it sufficient to give his address as simply, "Grand Prairie, Kalamazoo County."³

¹ "Big Island" was the name given to a grove of trees in the center of Prairie Ronde.

² (White Pigeon) *Michigan Statesman and St. Joseph Chronicle*, August 9, 1834.

As the economic, political, and social organization of Kalamazoo County progressed, and came more and more to be concentrated in the towns, the prominence of the prairies and their settlements declined. This decrease in relative importance, coupled with the fact that as the forest was cleared the prairies became less conspicuous features of the landscape, resulted in a decline in the usage of the early names. Within three or four decades only the "old timers" remembered the prairies and used the early terminology. With the landscape changes and the ultimate death of those who had firsthand knowledge of the features of the land at the time of settlement, the original usage eventually disappeared altogether.

At present, a few of the old prairie names are still in use and can be found on maps of the county, but the majority of the people who use these place-names have no idea of their original importance and meaning. Only three place-names in Kalamazoo County remain today to give us a hint of those now extinct features of the pioneer landscape: 1) Gourdneck Lake preserves the name of a large prairie just east of Prairie Ronde which the first comers thought was shaped like the neck of a gourd; 2) Climax Township and village were named after the grassland located there and extending northward into Charleston Township; and 3) the only present-day reminder that there were once prairies in the county is the utilization of the name Prairie Ronde for one of the townships.⁴ Thus, as the pioneer landscape disappeared so did many of the names associated with it. The three remaining prairie place-names, used now in a different context, are relics of this past landscape.

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³ *Ibid.*, September 6, 1834.

⁴ For more information on the prairies of Kalamazoo County see Bernard C. Peters, "Early American Impressions and Evaluations of the Landscape of Inner Michigan with Emphasis on Kalamazoo County" (unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation, Geography Department, Michigan State University, 1969).

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