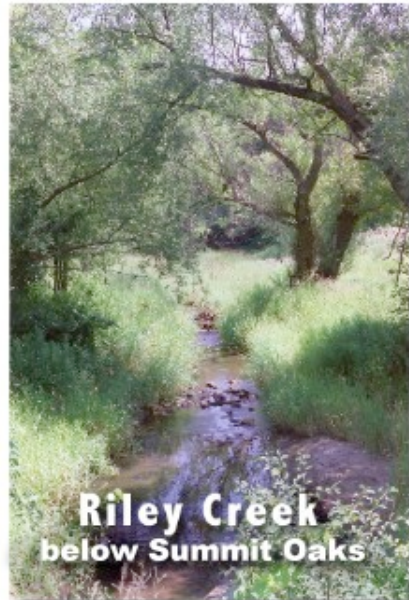


# What was then

Jeff Strate

This commentary appeared in a special, May 1, 2008 edition of the *Eden Prairie News* celebrating the City Government's 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. The photographs have been added for this presentation.



Two weeks after early Eden Prairie residents held their first town government meeting in the Gould School House on May 11, 1858, Sioux and Chippewa warriors shed each other's blood in a pitched battle a mile and a half to the south. The Battle of Shakopee played out on the Minnesota River bottoms opposite the ferry at Murphy's Landing near what settlers called Big Creek. It was the last in a centuries-long series of disputes between Minnesota's two great Native American nations over territory -- in today's political and civic parlance: land use and land rights.



One can see the battle site from the paved trail that separates a boom town of suburban town homes from the prairie bluffs that fall off to Highway 212 and the riverine cottonwoods, marsh lakes and corn fields beyond.

Soon after the battle, settler Phillip Collins found a smoking pipe and a sketch map drawn on birch bark in the pouch of a fallen Chippewa fighter. The map showed local hills, lakes and rivers and a number of icons, some representing foxes and cows.

It seems reasonable that the cow figures represented European farms and the beginnings, back then, of unpredictable change to the small patch of prairie, forest and wetland upon which more than 65,000 people now live and half as many more come to work each day.

The bands of local Chippewa and Sioux had claims on a landscape that was thousands of years old and that had embraced and informed them on all things economic and spiritual, But the land, according to the new laws, was no longer theirs to live on or fight over. By 1855, say the historians, all of Eden Prairie had been claimed by settlers under the federal Pre-Emption Act of 1841.

150 years ago, Eden Prairie was dominated by oak savanna, prairie, big woods and lush green and buggy arteries of creek valley, wetlands and lakes.

Back then, Eden Prairie was still only in the beginning stages of becoming an economically viable farming community; a transition that was to quickly and radically alter the eco zones that had evolved since the retreat of the last ice age. In 1858, the snows and rains that fell within the Minnesota River's immense prairie watershed, formed a clear and clean ribbon that flowed from the Dakotas, past Eden Prairie's southern border to the Mississippi River. Big Creek (renamed Riley Creek) and Nine Mile and Purgatory Creeks were also clear and clean supporting a variety of insects, fish, birds and animals such as beaver, otter, mink and muskrat. With its cold, spring fed waters; the lower reaches of Riley Creek supported native Brook Trout.

The characteristics of each of Eden Prairie's lakes were as distinct then as they are today except that greater varieties of fish, birds and insects lived in them. They had not yet been infested with curly leaf pondweed, milfoil, purple loosestrife and carp or runoff from farm fields and storm water sewers.

Historians write of David Livingston, Eden Prairie's first European Settler excitedly shouting to a pioneer family lumbering through the tall prairie grass on an ox wagon: "Help yourself to a square of wild paradise. Up to your boot tops the black loam is and there's a creek and a lake nearby."

To the hard-pressed pioneers, as it was to the Sioux and Chippewa, Eden Prairie was indeed a paradise of warm season plenty with carpets of prairie and woodland flowers and promise of high yields of wild rice, fruit and berries and -- crops. The definition of paradise -- of "Eden" -- changed as the plains were broken by plow and drained by hundreds of county ditches and as small cities and then suburbs were built. It changed as the big woods that cradled Lake Minnetonka and spoked into Eden Prairie was felled for building materials, pasture and cropland.



Eden Prairie's contemporary street names could also be listings in a necrology of the native plant and animal species that have mostly died out since the 1850's. But some of those things – Ginseng, Columbine, Wild Geranium, Tall Blue Stem, Coneflower, 250-year old stands of Basswood, Sugar Maple and Oaks, Wild Cherry, bog Cranberries, Snake Grass, Barred Owls, Osprey, Bald Eagles, Pileated Woodpeckers, Blue Birds, Pelicans, Skinks, and a passing Cougar -- can still be spotted within the boundaries of our City's conservation areas and creek corridors and the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge.

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This version of *What was then* is available at [www.jeffstrate.com](http://www.jeffstrate.com)

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