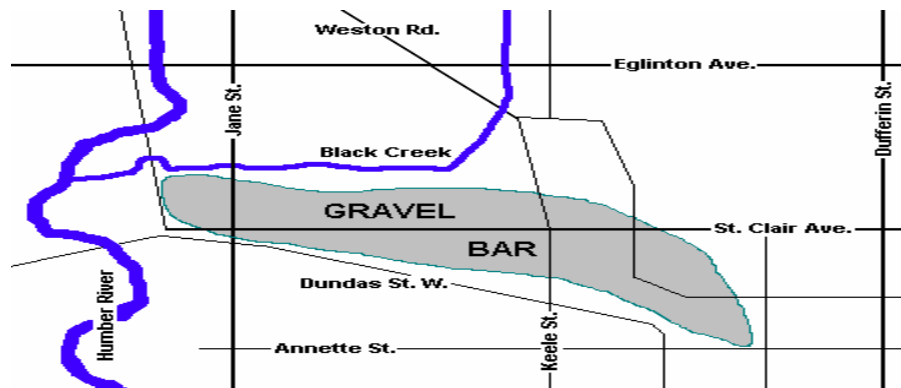


Black Creek Prairie Remnant

By Ian Wheal

Lower Black Creek is home to a rare and unique vegetation caused by the retreat of the glaciers some 12,000 years ago. Nestled on the slopes of the Black Creek and including all of Lambton Park and Lambton Golf Course, is some 500 acres of what was once tall grass prairie.

Along the south slopes of the creek on a gravel and sand ridge (Davenport Gravel and Sand Bar) the soil is very dry and even semi-arid in places with savannah type vegetation.



Bluestem, switch grasses, Indian grass and prairie cord grass were present. This tall grass prairie was more characteristic of the United States Great Plains than of Canada.

There are two theories as to how this happened.

The first theory: as a result of the end of glaciation some 12000 years ago, prehistoric Lake Iroquois vanished and left behind an elevated gravel and sand bar high above and east of the Humber River which was almost arid and supported soils and vegetation produced by wind carrying germinating seeds hundreds of kilometres to find a ready host on the elevated gravel and sand bar.

Winds were ferocious here in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. There were stories of dust storms and blowing sand dunes caused by land erosion (in 1901).

Prairie grasses and varieties of sagebrush took root on the gravel bar. Water was scarce or non-existent on the gravel bar.

The second theory, equally plausible, is that human activity, and in particular the coming of the

Canadian Pacific Railway (Credit Valley Railway) to West Toronto Junction in 1879 resulted in trade in livestock and in horse ranching.

Between about 1914 and 1973, thousands of cattle and horses from the US Great Plains, and in particular from the Llano Estado on tierra caliente (hot country) around Sand Angelo, Texas travelled by the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe (A.T.S.F.) Railroad (Now Burlington Santa Fe) to the Unions Stockyards (later Ontario Stockyards) in West Toronto. Local hay and feed were put into stock cars for this 1,400 mile journey.

Cattle and horses were fed, watered and exercised along the ATSF Railroad route at such places as Emporia, Kansas, Fort Madison, Iowa, Chicago, Windsor and Sarnia.

Cattle and rail crews from down Mexico-Texas way rode with the livestock. Animals were put out to pasture in the Black Creek valley to fatten them up before sale or slaughter at the West Toronto Packing Houses and Stockyards.

Herdsmen or hacienda ranchers drove the cattle across St. Clair Avenue until 1983.

Further Reading:

Restoring Canada's Native Prairies: A Practical Manual

by John Morgan, Douglas Callicutt and Jacqueline Thompson, Winnipeg, Manitoba. c.1997

The Changing Prairie - North American Grasslands

by Anthony Joern and Kathleen H Keeler, Oxford Press, 1995.

Ecology of World Vegetation

by O.W. Archibald, Dept of Geography, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, 1995.