

Chicago, Seeking Lost Glory, Hunts for a Plant Last Seen in 1916; Botanists rake city for vanished native flower; 'If you find it, start screaming'

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ABSTRACT

Extant only as an alcohol-soaked specimen in the bowels of Chicago's Field Museum, *Thismia americana* has about as much aesthetic appeal as a bean sprout. The seekers dispersed into tall grass, dropping to their hands and knees to forage through a thick mat of vegetation that occasionally distracted the party of plant nerds.

FULL TEXT

CHICAGO--Robb Telfer spent a recent Sunday crawling through a sewage-soaked Superfund site on the South Side, hunting for a Chicago native missing for a hundred years.

"If you find it, start screaming," the 35-year-old poet and naturalist yelled to his 20-person search team, plus one indifferent dog. "Shoot a flare in the air."

Mr. Telfer's quarry was *Thismia americana*, a thumbnail-sized flowering plant found only in Chicago--for the few years it was found anywhere at all. Now the retiring bloom has become an unlikely talisman for Chicagoans hoping to stoke some pride in a city with a bit of a chip on its metaphorically broad shoulders.

"Chicago is really hurting, but there's so much hope and it's hard to see," Mr. Telfer said as his band of naturalists combed through Indian Ridge Marsh, a postindustrial wasteland of sewage and invasive grasses on the city's southern fringe. "This flower is one of those hopes."

It isn't a plant that screams metropolitan mascot. Extant only as an alcohol-soaked specimen in the bowels of Chicago's Field Museum, *Thismia americana* has about as much aesthetic appeal as a bean sprout.

But Mr. Telfer, who works at the museum and also writes poems about Star Wars and community activism, believes he could sell the plant's unlikely charms--if only he could prove it still exists.

Botanist Norma Pfeiffer discovered *Thismia americana* here in 1912 amid stockyards and steel mills. The plant mostly feasted on underground fungi, she deduced, surfacing only in late summer with a single white blossom. She last found it in 1916. Much of its original habitat has long since been paved, polluted or both.

Mr. Telfer is the latest obsessive to take up the quest of finding it again, bolstered by an urge to lift his city's spirits. "This is something to be proud of, this is something that belongs only to the South Side of Chicago," he said.

Such expeditions for distinction aren't unusual in a city with a degree of "Second City" syndrome.

The label refers to the city's rise from the ashes of the Great Chicago Fire to become the nation's second-most populous after New York in the late 1800s. It slipped back to third behind Los Angeles in the 1980s, and is expected to fall to fourth behind Houston in the years ahead.

Today, tour guides assure guests the nickname doesn't imply Chicago is second-best to New York. Ads promote Chicago's predilection for hot dogs without ketchup and pizza as deep as a lasagna.

Despite a gleaming downtown, a Lake Michigan shoreline and plans to host President Barack Obama's presidential library, Chicago could use a lift. The once-mighty industrial and transportation powerhouse suffers from huge pension deficits, a financially shaky school system and high rates of gun violence.

Other recent bids for distinction have dried up. The city missed out on hosting this year's summer Olympics, which thrust Rio de Janeiro's beaches onto the world stage. George Lucas recently pulled plans for a huge museum here that foundered on opposition to building on the city's vaunted lake front.

Some of the city's most cherished accomplishments, like the World's Fair and the Cubs' last World Series title, passed more than a century ago. Likewise the last sighting of *Thismia americana*.

Plagued by plant envy, Mr. Telfer said he pines for Chicago to be home to a brand-boosting species like North Carolina's Venus flytrap. In a show of devotion, he even scoured for a costume to dress up like a six-foot-tall *Thismia*—but wasn't able to track down the outfit, originally made for a 2009 community theater production called "Thismia americana, The Play."

He wore more appropriate apparel when he led his searchers through a wetland on the South Side on an unseasonably chilly Sunday in August.

"This is real questing," said Vanessa Voelker, an Agriculture Department employee who drove all the way from Peoria to hunt with Mr. Telfer on a recent weekend.

Forrest Cortes, a manager at the Nature Conservancy of Illinois, discouraged them from venturing into northern stretches where he said a home septic tank emptied straight into the marsh where *Thismia* was last found. "We need to narrow it down," he said, or else "we all end up in poo water."

The seekers dispersed into tall grass, dropping to their hands and knees to forage through a thick mat of vegetation that occasionally distracted the party of plant nerds. "We're sifting through a whole good matrix of wet prairie species here into some wetland species," said Evan Barker, an ecologist from Wheaton, Ill. He pointed out golden rod, panic grass, milkweed and invasive phragmites.

"That's blue lobelia. People used to think it could cure syphilis," Mr. Barker said. "It's actually kind of poisonous."

The hunt tested the attention spans of two of the youngest participants, sisters Peppy and Oli Pitman. "We had to

wake up at six in the morning," said Peppy, 13. "We looked for a little bit, but then I found this cool sign," she said, wielding a warped piece of black and white metal, crusted with mud.

"I found a broken root beer cup!" interjected Oli, age 11. Recovering Chicago's horticultural glory would have to wait.

Trevor Edmonson's heart rate spiked while digging through mossy yards from where *Thismia* was first found. A promising white speck turned out to be a seed. "It was teasing us," said Mr. Edmonson, a project manager at the Wetlands Initiative, a local nonprofit.

After five hours, Mr. Telfer and his search party—covered in muck and mosquito bites, and picking dirt from under their fingernails—resolved to continue their search another day.

"This tiny plant with all of this intrigue and mystery," said Mr. Telfer, his voice trailing off. "It has to be out there somewhere."

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