Openlands Lakeshore Preserve Podcast
The Story of the Preserve

NARRATOR: About 25 miles north of Chicago, on the site of a former army base, is a remarkable piece of land that tells a story that goes back thousands of years. It’s the story of Openlands Lakeshore Preserve, a unique natural setting that is home to not one, but three of the most distinctive ecosystems in the state: 80’ bluffs overlooking Lake Michigan; a mile of shoreline; and three wooded ravines. Each of these areas support diverse populations of native plant species - including several threatened and endangered species, and many native species not found anywhere else in Illinois.

To understand why this landscape is so special, let's go back about 14,000 years.

That’s when the glaciers last retreated after grinding back and forth a couple million years and in the process carving out the Great Lakes. As the last glacier moved north, it left behind long mounds of clay, sand, and gravel. It also punched a hole in the northern shore of Lake Michigan, allowing water to flow out. The water level of the lake dropped 260 feet, exposing 20 miles of lakebed east of the current shoreline. Over the next several thousand years rain and water from the melting glacier gradually flowed back across this lakebed, replenishing the lake. As it reached the rocky ridge left by the glacier, it chewed away at the base, carving out the ravines, and forming the steep bluffs that now line the shore.

Not long after the glaciers moved out, humans moved in and have been here ever since.

GERould Wilhelm: “When the native people were here they lived right up on the bluffs, and they were always burning in the woods, and they were always removing enough wood every year for cooking and heating
and building things. So this ravine and all other natural systems co-evolved with native people."

NARRATOR: That's Jerry Wilhelm, who helped design the restoration plan for the Preserve.

With its steep, forested ravines and bluffs, this area was not suitable for farming and, unlike the rest of Illinois, has never been plowed. But by the mid 19th century the lakefront north of Chicago was attracting interest for another reason - wealthy families were building mansions here, taking advantage of the scenic bluffs overlooking the lake.

At the same time, the labor movement was gaining strength in Chicago, as workers fought for an eight-hour day. Concerned business leaders of the north shore advocated using the U.S. Army to quell worker uprisings. In 1887 a group of businessmen bought over 700 acres of land and donated it to the federal government, in order to build a fort for their protection.

Despite this beginning, Fort Sheridan mainly served as a training and administrative center for most of its history.

In 1989 Fort Sheridan, along with many other military properties around the country, was scheduled for closure. Openlands took a leading role in the negotiations to protect the open space at Fort Sheridan. 259 acres were transferred to the Lake County Forest Preserve District, but a mile of lakefront, three ravines and the bluff at the southern end of the former fort were still unprotected. U.S. Senator Mark Kirk, then congressman for the district, led the effort to save this resource as public open space. In August 2006, Openlands accepted the challenge to develop the 77 acre property as a nature preserve.

Openlands was the logical choice to take on this role. Formed in Chicago in 1963, it was one of the first conservation organizations in the country to focus on urban areas. Connecting people to the land at all different scales, Openlands’ projects range from small inner city community gardens to the 19,000 acre Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. In all, Openlands over the years has saved more than 55,000 acres and played a major role in shaping the character of our region.
With $4 million from the Grand Victoria Foundation, Openlands began to restore the land that would become the Lakeshore Preserve back to ecological health. As you might expect, a hundred years of military use left some serious environmental issues. Clean up in the northern part, now part of the Lake County Forest Preserves, was more difficult and expensive, but this particular southern section was not in terrible condition overall; it had been abused but also just ignored.

As Openlands President Jerry Adelmann explains, returning this land to good health and sharing it with the public fits perfectly with Openlands' goals.

ADELMANN: "We've always had a strong interest in the lakefront. It's obviously one of the iconic features of our city and region. And so little of it is open and available to the public outside of the city of Chicago. So to have this mile of lakefront in relatively natural condition is a unique opportunity, and if we didn't do it, it would very likely not be protected."

Openlands thanks The Boeing Company for its generous support of the podcasts.

The Openlands Lakeshore Preserve audio tour was written and produced by Ed Herrmann. Editorial supervision by Lisa Roberts and Glenda Daniel. Thanks to all artists, scientists, and others who shared their expertise through interviews: Jerry Adelmann, Sharon Bladholm, Dale Bryson, Aimee Collins, Jerry Dennis, Kate Friedman, Kurt Hettiger, Ken Klick, Susanne Masi, Bob Megquier, Olivia Petrides, Lisa Roberts, Jonathan Rosen, Jim Steffen, Ginny Sykes, Vivian Visser, and Jerry Wilhelm. Narration by Shawna Tucker and Ed Herrmann. Original music and sound design by Ed Herrmann. Special thanks to Doug Carroll for his recordings of barking and panting dogs and laughing monkeys, and to Tom Nunn for his skatch box sounds.