

Stillman Nature Center

33 W. Penny Road
South Barrington, IL 60010-9578
847-428-OWLS (6957)
stillnc@wildblue.net
www.stillmanncc.org

Beaver and Human Colonies Stillman Newsletter, Winter 2004

A beaver colony in the wilds gives a touch of romance and a rare charm to the outdoors. -- from *In Beaver World* by Enos Mills (1913).

Earth Day and the beavers here at the Stillman Nature Center leads me to Enos Mills. Long before April 22nd was dubbed Earth Day, it was Enos Mills' birthday. He was born in 1870.

Who was he? A dedicated conservationist who settled in Estes Park, Colorado. Once there, he worked tirelessly for the creation of Rocky Mountain National Park which was established by Congress in 1915. The *Denver Post* dubbed him "The Father of Rocky Mountain National Park." As the opening quotation suggests, he was also an author.



As you might expect, *In Beaver World*, is set in what is now the National Park.

In 1991, I reviewed *In Beaver World* (which had been reissued by the University of Nebraska Press) for a couple of environmental publications. I shared the review with a friend who was a ranger at the Park. He, in turn, shared it with a member of his congregation, Enda (yes, Enda) Mills, Enos' daughter.

Beavers in Illinois

A hundred years ago, when Enos Mills was watching his Colorado beavers, they had been nearly or entirely exterminated here in Illinois. At one time, they were common in the state.

In describing his second trip to Illinois (1674 - 1675), Father Marquette said that the local Indians gave beaver skins as gifts. Before the interior, low-lying areas of Illinois were drained, beavers were present. Early settlers in Champaign County found beavers and beaver dams.

Ninety years ago, Mills saw what was happening, "In the golden age of the beaver, their countless colonies clustered all over our land." He continues, "Elm avenues now arch where the low-growing willow drooped across the [beaver-dug] canal, and a populous village stands upon the seat of a primitive and forgotten colony." Mills would be surprised to learn that in many of our suburbs today, a healthy beaver might be easier to find than a thriving elm.

How did the beavers return to Illinois? With a little help from Uncle Sam. As early as 1929, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (which is celebrating its 100th year) released a pair on the Savanna Army Depot. In the 1930s, the Forest Service also sponsored beaver releases in Illinois. Others, no doubt, came on their own from neighboring states.

Beaver Problems?

Beavers are now so plentiful that some villages are trapping them because they are cutting residents' trees. Good luck with the trapping. In a Tennessee study, 169 resident beavers were removed from a wetland site. Within a few years, 162 new beavers had moved in. Migrating two-year-olds, in search of new territory, often move into the vacated ponds and lodges.

Protecting the more valuable trees would be a better solution. I suggest stopping at a hardware store and buying a roll of heavy gauge wire mesh (4 feet high with 2" by 4" squares). Form a cylinder with the wire and place it around the tree. Leave about five to six inches between the tree and the freestanding cylinder. As long as the wire is flush with the ground, the beaver should not go under it.

Back to Colorado

Since reviewing *In Beaver World*, I've had a chance to visit with Enda Mills. Despite being only three when her father died in 1922, she has done an honorable job of looking after his cabin in the Rockies and keeping his memory alive.

It is a sense of history that Stillman's beavers inspires in me. As Mills correctly observed, "The beaver hastened, if it did not bring, the settlement of the country." Voyageurs, and the fur companies behind them, opened pathways and established trading posts across the continent. When the supply of beavers was exhausted, the settlements often remained.

Now, the once-rare beavers are colonizing our human landscapes. Somehow, that only seems appropriate.

© 2003 Mark Spreyer