

Conservation Corner

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“These bluffs are a great curiosity.” Railroad Entrepreneur John Insley Blair, 1863

Last week our grandson Evan had the opportunity to play in the 8-10 Little League State Championships as a member of the Davenport Southeast team. As this year’s tournament was held in Sioux City, Ron & I were able to attend a couple games. We’ve been to some nifty baseball parks over the years, and this summer’s venue was no exception. Evan’s team played five games on the Morning-side Little League Field at Pulaski Park which featured a dramatic backdrop of a Loess Hills bluff and this week’s geological friend.

The Loess Hills have been described as a world treasure and perhaps Iowa’s best-kept secret. Early explorers, trappers, and surveyors commented on these “Mountains in Miniature” rising up from the floodplain of the Missouri River. Even today, one’s first impression is often “They look like they don’t belong here.”

In 2013, I had the opportunity to participate in a fall harvest event at the Sac County Nature Center as they hosted the Smithsonian traveling exhibit “Listening to the Prairie, Farming in Nature’s Image.” The featured speaker was Cornelia F. Mutel, Senior Science Writer at the University of Iowa and author of over 15 books. I encourage you to check one out, perhaps the one I revisited this week: *Fragile Giants: A Natural History of the Loess Hills*.

Loess, the parent material for many of the world’s richest agricultural soils, is not rare in itself and is associated with major river valleys around the world including Germany’s Rhine River Valley and China’s Yellow River. *Loess* is from the German word for loose and refers to the tiny particles that are light enough to be lifted into place by the wind. Our Loess Hills had their beginnings when Ice Age glaciers ground the underlying rock into dust called “glacial flour.” As rising temperatures melted the ice, prevailing westerly winds created the large dunes that have since been sculpted into the landscape now known as the Loess Hills.

Iowa’s Loess Hills are unique in North America as the only place where the loess is deep enough to create new landforms. Now surrounded by farmland, these hills have retained their prairies and woodlands with their rich and unusual mixtures of native plant and animal species. The deep loess also contains a rich collection of fossils and artifacts as layers of loess preserved a cultural and natural record of the megafauna and Iowans who first called the hills home.

Today Iowans may travel over 200 miles along the Loess Hills National Scenic Byway which stretches from Sioux City to St. Joseph, Missouri. To help preserve this archeological, biological, and geological treasure, in 1975 over 10,000 acres were designated as a National Natural Landmark.

Loess is sometimes called sugar clay, as it loses all cohesion when wet. Dry loess, though, is able to stand in near-vertical cliffs, including the one behind Field 5. Have you played baseball in the shadow of the Loess Hills?

