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A quick guide to help you rediscover *Thismia americana*, a baffling Chicagoland endemic last seen in 1916

Nigel Pitman & Cassandra Kelsey, Keller Science Action Center, The Field Museum

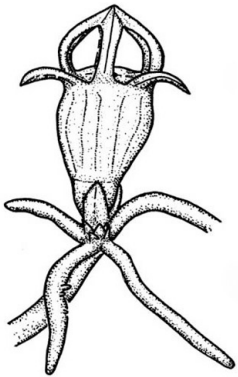
Photo credits indicated below. Produced with support from Connie Keller & the Andrew Mellon Foundation

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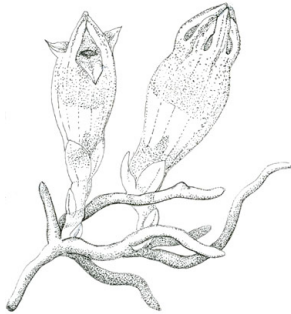
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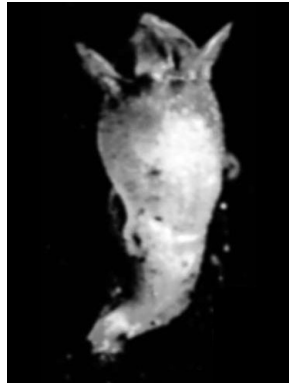
In August 1912, botanist Norma Pfeiffer was exploring a wet prairie in southern Chicago when she spotted a tiny flower peeking out of the soil—a flower that baffled experts across North America. On closer inspection, the mysterious plant proved to be an undescribed species of a mostly tropical genus of saprophyte—plants that have no leaves or chlorophyll but draw their energy from rotting plant matter. Pfeiffer studied the species until 1916, and then... it vanished. *T. americana* has never been found anywhere else in the world, and repeated hunts to the original locality have failed to turn up the plant. Some people have long since given up hope and consider the species to have been driven extinct by the heavy industry that dominated the region for decades. The rest of us are confident it's still out there, thriving incognito in remnant prairies of the Calumet region—and we need your help tracking it down. This guide brings together drawings and photos of the plant, a map of the region, and photos of some other plants Pfeiffer found growing alongside *Thismia*. Happy hunting!



Thismia americana
From: Pfeiffer (1914), Merckx (2014)



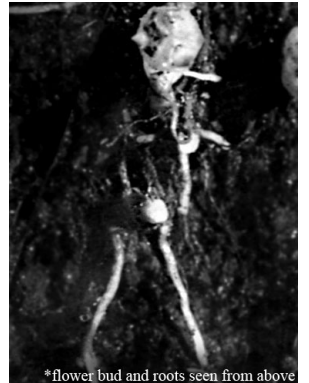
Thismia americana
From: Marion Pahl (1973)



Thismia americana
From: Pfeiffer (1914)



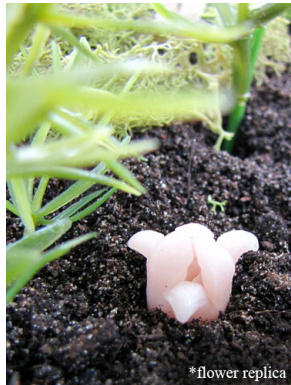
*flower seen from above



*flower bud and roots seen from above



Thismia sp. root
Photo: V. Merckx



Thismia americana
Photo: L. & S. Namestnik



Thismia americana
Photo: L. & S. Namestnik



ASSOCIATES

Solidago gigantea
Photo: R.W. Smith



Euthamia graminifolia
Photo: B.S. Walters



Rudbeckia hirta
Photo: Ann Arbor Natural Area Preservation



Eupatorium perfoliatum
Photo: B.S. Walters



Asclepias incarnata
Photo: B.S. Walters

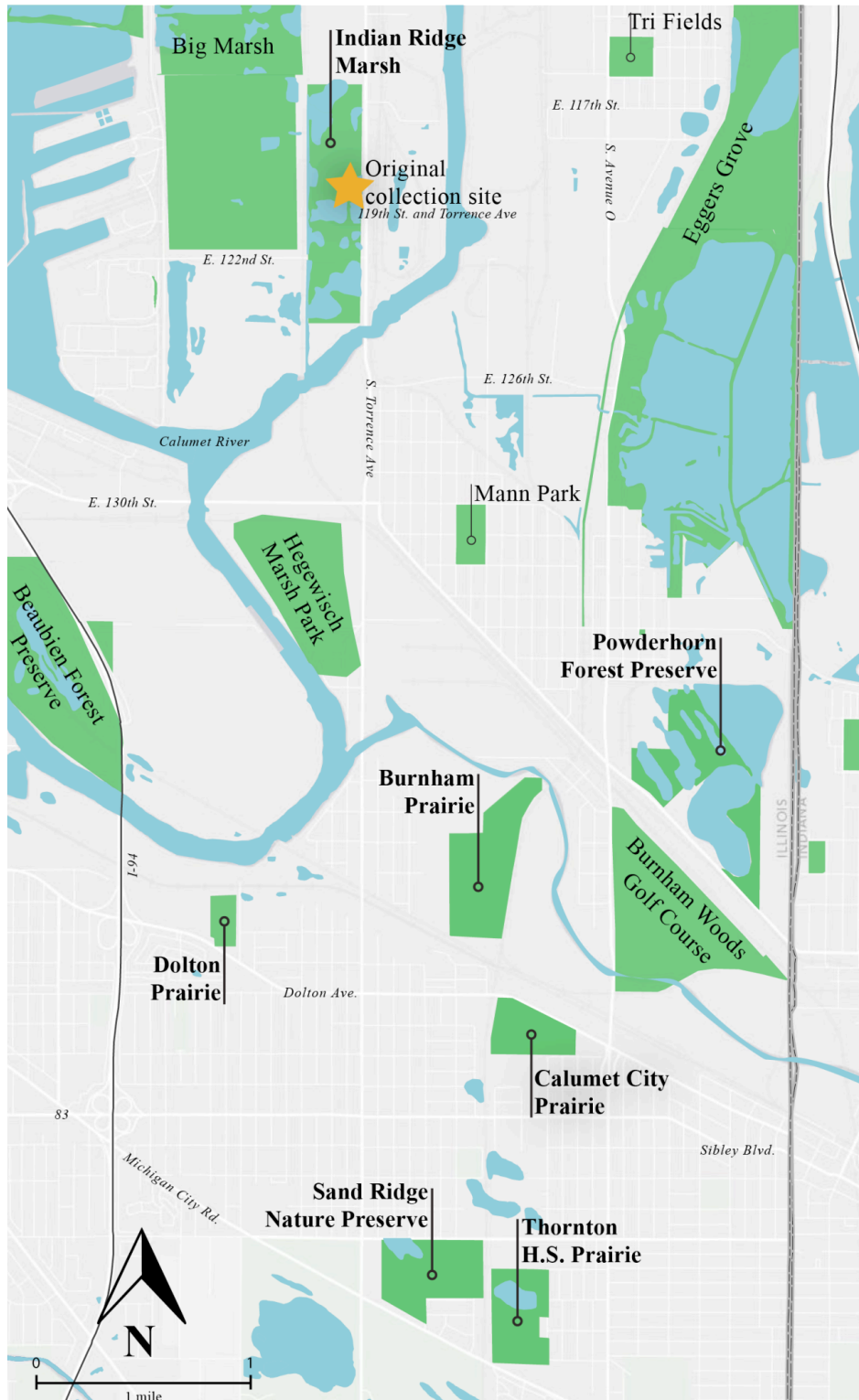


Iris versicolor var. *shrevei*
Photo: Rebecca Collings



Acorus calamus
Photo: B.S. Walters

Where to look: Honestly? Your guess is as good as ours. In her 1914 description of the plant Norma Pfeiffer wrote that its “...habitat may be described as low prairie, characterized by such plants as [see associates on page 1]...” Here’s a map of the Calumet region, just south of Chicago. The map shows the original collection site, which is beginning to recover from a century of heavy industrial impact—as well as six other prairie fragments that ecologists consider possible candidates. Wherever you look, you’ll want to get down on your hands and knees, under the prairie plants, so that you can scan the soil, humus, leaf litter, and moss beds. The flower is mostly white, but Pfeiffer described its petals as “a delicate blue-green” and noted that “most of the plants have only this colored upper portion above the level of the soil or of the surrounding moss.”



When to look:

Thismia americana has only ever been found **between early July and mid-September**, when it flowers and fruits. For the rest of the year it’s underground. Don’t forget, the flower’s a tiny thing—about this big!



Photo of Norma Pfeiffer from Masters (1995)

Want more information?

Bowles et al. 1994. Results of a systematic search for *Thismia americana* Pfeiffer in Illinois. The Morton Arboretum, Lisle.

Masters. 1995. *Thismia americana* N.E. Pfeiffer: A history. *Erigenia* 14:8–14.

Merckx & Smets. 2014. *Thismia americana*: The 101st anniversary of a botanical mystery. *International Journal of Plant Sciences* 175:165–175.

Pfeiffer. 1914. Morphology of *Thismia americana*. *Botanical Gazette* 57:31–39.