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NEWS

AN ESKER RUNS THROUGH IT

By Charles Leroux. Tribune Staff Writer
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the trillium and wild violet were beginning to bloom in northern Kane County's Blackhawk Forest Preserve. The forest, mostly oak and shagbark hickory, was leafing out, to the dismay of Ray Wiggers.

"Geologists prefer it when there are no leaves on the trees," geologist Wiggers explained. "You can see the landforms better."

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"Illinois is a flat and boring state ... nothing but cornfields and crowded expressways. ... If you're interested in geology or the history of the earth, you'd better head to the Rockies, the Grand Canyon or New England. Nothing important ever happened here, at least not until Abraham Lincoln decided to run for Congress."

He doesn't believe any of that, though. Instead Wiggers sees his native state as a place of vast geologic diversity and interest, a place of "a thousand doorways to vanished worlds."

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And nowhere in Illinois does he find more geo-excitement than in Kane County, shaped by the geologic activity of two periods in time, one very old and one relatively new.

"Some 425 million years ago during the Silurian period," Wiggers said, "Illinois was at the latitude of southern Brazil. This was before continental drift put things where they are now. The area was covered by a shallow tropical coral sea."

Wiggers, 46, is big, bearded and craggy, visually what you want in a geologist. As he swung his arm in a great

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The second period of great effect on Kane County was the Pleistocene, sometimes called the "Ice Age," when glaciers covered up to 85 percent of Illinois.

"Recently," Wiggers said, "about 15,000 years ago, the Fox River cut through the ridges that held it back and spilled into the valley it occupies today."

The ridges that restrained the Fox as well as the valley walls on either side of it were moraines formed from material the glacier deposited as it melted around its edges. Now, keeping the insect population in check, swallows silently skim the surface of the river as unaware of the ice sheet's work as are most of the humans who picnic on the Fox's bank.

"There's Fermilab," Wiggers said pointing to a tower in the distance. We are atop Johnson's Mound, a 100-foot rise shaped like a flattened gumdrop standing alone near Kaneville. Here, high above the rolling farm land, different colors of soil are clearly visible, dark where forests stood, light where prairies grew.

The mound is a kame, a rare geologic structure created when the sand and gravel that had collected in a depression in the glacier was left behind as the ice receded. Johnson's Mound, a lovely, forested place with sweeping views of the land below, is part of the Kane County Forest Preserve system, and therefore protected.

Though it may seem silly that anything so large and made of stones would need protection, Wiggers explained that many landforms have been obliterated. Because kames are mounds of sand and gravel, many have been mined. One in Glacial Park in McHenry County suffered that fate, and there has been talk of trying to rebuild it, a massive and expensive job compared to preservation.

"Development has spread so quickly here in Kane County," Wiggers said. "When I was a boy, the Fox River was the 'Siegfried Line' that suburbanization did not cross. Then it moved to Randall Road, which was crossed by the '70s. Now it's all the way out to Route 47."

Wiggers said that the westward spread of housing not only has physical effects such as the depletion of ground water, it obliterates landforms visually.

"The vistas in this part of Illinois are essentially horizontal, broad, sky-filled expanses," he said. "Subdivisions destroy that vista."

Jon Duerr, Kane County director of resources, said, "Beginning in the '90s, growth here really accelerated. The big developers came in, so, instead of 30 or 40 houses going up in a subdivision, there'd be 300."

The citizens of Kane County, concerned about keeping the natural beauty that drew many of them there, recently passed a referendum to sell \$70 million of bonds for land acquisition for the forest preserve. Duerr estimated that the bond issue would add 5,000 acres to the preserve's current holding of 8,000 acres.

"We use a 100-point system in evaluating real estate for purchase," Duerr said, "and landforms, things like exposed bedrock, certainly add points."

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"Not so scenic," he said, pointing toward a small, fenced-in quarry just off the road. An esker is a snaking ridge formed from a stream that ran beneath the glacier. That stream became plugged with sand and gravel, which was left behind as the glacier melted. The Kaneville Esker is the largest in Illinois, or was before county highway department and other miners discovered it.

Wiggers has met a woman who flew over this esker in the '60s and recalls it as a continuous, sinuous ridge. In the years since, it has been mined for its water-washed sand and gravel, ideal bedding material for roadways and other construction. The once-wondrous esker now is as chopped up as a snake would have been by a machete.



Wiggers teaches at Morton Arboretum in Lisle and the Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe. He also gives lectures at schools and libraries. Among his lecture titles, "Geology at the Local Level," which touches on the dangers the land faces.

"If the federal government," Wiggers said, "should ever enact an Endangered Landforms Act--and I'm about half serious that they should--kames and eskers would be on the short list."

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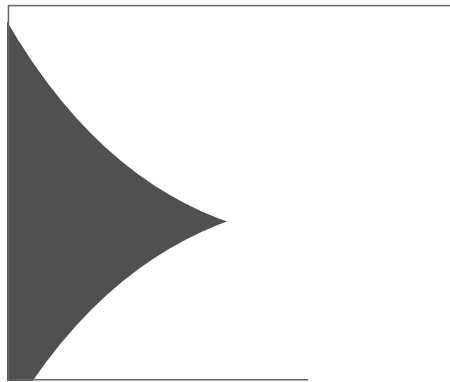
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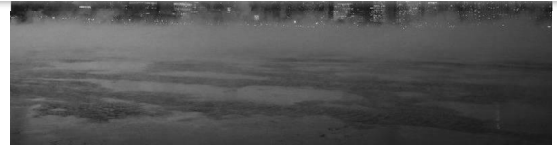
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