

Stop Mowing the Ditches

Written by Rich Miller

Tuesday, 23 September 2003 18:00

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As I've told you before, I spent much of my childhood on a farm in rural Iroquois County. One of the chores I thought was completely pointless back then was mowing the ditches. It was dangerous work. The mower, or the tractor, depending on the ditch, could tip over while you were negotiating the steep inclines. I heard lots of harrowing stories about farmers, my own granddad included, who ran over hornets' nests while mowing ditches. Plus, mowing took away natural cover for wildlife, which was fast losing its habitat under the President Richard Nixon-inspired "fencerow to fencerow" planting programs.

 Farmers are "keep up with the Joneses" types. If one farmer paints his barn, everyone else on his stretch of road will follow suit. If one puts up a certain kind of fence, so will most of his neighbors. And if one keeps his ditches immaculately trimmed, no one would dare allow his to go all weedy.

 Anyone who allowed his ditches to grow without check back then was whispered about by his neighbors. He must be shiftless, they'd say, to let his property deteriorate like that. Or maybe he was too ill or too old to take care of his responsibilities.

 Long after I moved off the farm I realized that many of the ditch weeds we relentlessly battled back then were actually wildflowers, if allowed to grow to maturity. That revelation reinforced my youthful disdain for ditch mowing.

 I could never quite figure out why the state highway department would set aside

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only tiny “no mow” stretches along our interstate highways. Mowing probably makes it easier to pick up the garbage strewn by thoughtless drivers, but other than that, the wild growth was always far more interesting to look at than the dull, lawn-like stretches so common to Illinois’ highway borders.

 I owned a house in the country for a few years and I refused to mow my ditches. After several weeks, my thoughtful neighbor could no longer abide my apparent sloth and took it upon himself to “help me out” by clipping my grass. I tried to explain to him what I was hoping to accomplish, and he looked at me like I was a freak. Why would I want a bunch of ugly old weeds destroying the view of my beautiful house? Eventually, though, wildflowers began to blossom, and I couldn’t have been happier.

 So I thought it was a great idea when Illinois First Lady Patti Blagojevich suggested planting wildflowers along the interstates. The vast reduction in mowing and other upkeep costs would most likely pay for the entire program, and we’d have something besides cornfields to look at while driving through central Illinois. (Don’t get me wrong, I love cornfields - and beanfields. I enjoy watching the seasonal progression from plowing, to planting, to growing, to harvesting and back again.)

 But you’d have thought the First Lady’s idea was some sort of goofy, mega-expensive, ultra-liberal boondoggle if you perused the media coverage. “State to spend cash on flowers in fiscal crisis,” blared one headline. “Roadside flower-planting plan creates dustup,” another read.

 Mrs. Blago was obviously forced to endure the barbs because her husband has been picking fights with popular politicians over their budgets. It’s payback time in Illinois politics right now, and her wildflower project has become a handy bludgeoning device. But this is not the first time that Mrs. B has been unfairly maligned. Her husband was slammed for putting her on a child-welfare advisory panel, and she has been hammered by Downstate editorialists for refusing to move to Springfield. For whatever reason, she’s taken a lot of needless hits, including this latest wildflower thing.

 My only problem with her wildflower concept is that it doesn’t go far enough. We should stop mowing the roadsides altogether, or at least leave a wide, continuous strip completely untouched. On a drive last month through the rural county where I was brought up, I discovered that lots of farmers have finally stopped mowing their ditches. What appeared to be Hairy Wild Petunias were in bloom, and the blue flowers lining the roadsides were spectacular.

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