

NAMING MIDEWIN

By Marta Witt, U.S. Forest Service

The Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie is located in northeastern Illinois, an area known to have been occupied by Potawatomi Indians, as well as smaller numbers of Ottawa, Ojibwa, and other Native American tribes. It was thought appropriate to give the first national tallgrass prairie a Potawatomi name, because of their long occupation of the general area during the late 1600s through the early 1800s.

“Midewin” is the Potawatomi name for their “Grand Medicine Society,” an inter-band group that used their power, and influence to not only heal individuals, but also keep the greater Potawatomi society in balance. The word “Midewin” was chosen from several Potawatomi words because the Midewin society’s purpose in healing and balance represented our hopes for the new prairie.

The Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie was established in 1996 as the largest portion of the peacetime conversion of the former Joliet Army Ammunition Plant. Much of the land subsequently transferred to the Forest Service in 1997 had been used to support munitions manufacturing or had been leased for farming. Less than three percent of the land contained native vegetation. Many of

the wetlands had been drained; some of the streambeds had been dredged into straight channels. The task of healing and restoring these lands to their former beauty will take many years.

There are no longer any federally recognized tribal governments in northern Illinois. In 1994, as the concept of restoring the former Joliet Arsenal to a natural area was being developed and the name Midewin was the first choice of the partners involved, the Forest Service contacted the only two federally recognized tribes at that time that had a historic attachment to this area, the Citizen Band Potawatomi Indians of Oklahoma and the Prairie Band Potawatomi Tribal Council in Kansas. A positive response was received from the Citizen Band, and no response was received from the Prairie Band.

The Forest Service recognizes the significance of this Potawatomi name and is committed to its respectful use. We are conscientious in explaining its meaning and acknowledging its importance. We believe that the restoration of the prairie is in keeping with the purpose of the Potawatomi Midewin society, and our intention is to honor that purpose.

