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Last Updated: 5:08 am | Tuesday, October 31, 2006

Biology prof helping to chart Ky.'s past

BY HOWARD MCEWEN | ENQUIRER CONTRIBUTOR

Bill Bryant sounds like a Woody Guthrie song when he describes his work.

"I have been studying the vegetation of Kentucky for most of my career," said Bryant, a Thomas More College biology professor. "From the Mississippi River to the mountains of eastern Kentucky and from the glaciated areas of Northern Kentucky to the grasslands along the Tennessee-Kentucky border."

This year, the Nature Conservancy, a national organization, and the University of Kentucky bought a farm in Harrison County that has some of the better remnants of the savanna-woodlands. Bryant, along with Dr. John Ferner of Thomas More, was hired to study this area.

ADVERTISEMENT "UK and the Nature Conservancy got involved because the blue ash-oak savanna-woodland ecosystem was being lost before it could be understood," Bryant said.

"People should realize that the combination of trees that make up these savanna-woodlands is unique to Kentucky and is fast disappearing due to land-use changes," Bryant said.

Bryant has been studying what he calls the savanna-woodlands of the Bluegrass region since the mid-1970s. He defines a savanna-woodland as a place where "the trees are dominant across an open grassland." Most of the sites are in the "inner" Bluegrass region, an area that roughly includes Fayette County and parts of surrounding counties.

"These savannas were the canelands or meadowlands that the early pioneers described. They were probably maintained by periodic fires and grazing by buffalo and elk that passed through," Bryant said. "Today, these are represented by some of the longer-lived trees scattered across some of the horse farms and agricultural lands in central Kentucky. These remnant trees, most over 250 years in age, are all that is left of the original vegetation of the Savanna-woodlands."

Bryant's work also enlightened his understanding of Kentucky history.

"The blue ash-oak savanna-woodland probably attracted the early settlers to the Bluegrass region of central Kentucky," Bryant said.

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