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Potato City: Nature, History, and Community in the Age of Sprawl

Sue Leaf

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Catbirds and pocket gophers, bur oaks and bull snakes, bluestem grass and leopard frogs have populated the gently rolling prairies around Sue Leaf's midwestern farming community for centuries. A hundred years ago her town, located forty-five miles from the nearest city, shipped thousands of tons of potato starch across the country, stiffening the collars of working men. Today it has become one of America's fast-growing suburbs. As naturalist and biologist Sue Leaf watched her rural surroundings become a magnet for developers, she became curious about the history of the land. Before the freeway and the housing developments, before the farmers cultivated the fertile soil, what plants and animals called this place home? To her delight, Leaf discovered the oak savanna, a park-like ecosystem that supports abundant wildlife and soothes the human psyche with its quiet, open spaces. As she looked more closely, she found remnants of the savanna in her own yard, in the trees lining her quiet street, and in nearby preserved patches of prairie. In lyrical essays, Leaf traces the natural history of her community, offering rich details about the people who built this area, about its once prosperous farms, and about the oak trees and wildflowers and prairie animals native to this part of the country. By examining remnants of the past still visible in a place deeply affected by sprawl, Leaf reveals how to slow down, look carefully, and untangle the jumble of unnoticed clues that can enrich our daily lives. "Leaf advises us all to discover our own communities' natural treasures before, through ignorance, we lose them." --Boston Sunday Globe "Leaf writes about the pace of sprawl, the loss of farmland and a way of life that seems like a dream or a place buried somewhere in our collective memory." --Los Angeles Times

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