Child of the Northwest Wind: Alice Gray and "Diana of the Dunes"
By David Hoppe

Photographer Ed Boilini and I are on our way to the grave of Alice Gray, the woman known as Diana of the Dunes. For three days we have been searching for signs of her life in the Indiana dune country she adopted in 1915. Now we are following directions to Oak Hill Cemetery, where she was buried in February 1925.

She didn't want to be here. By most accounts, she wished to be cremated on a funeral pyre atop Mount Tom, one of the tallest sand dunes on the Lake Michigan coast. Her ashes were to be scattered on what she called the Northwest Wind, a wind, she wrote, "Where naught of man's endures before the suns." It is also possible that she wanted to be buried in her family's plot in Chicago. Surely her plans didn't include a grave in Gary, the city United States Steel had imposed on the wild landscape that Alice Gray, in spite of herself, came to stand for. As it happened, what she wanted didn't matter.

Accounts of Alice Mabel Gray's life and her ten-year sojourn in the Indiana Dunes arecontradictory, fragmentary, often baldly sensational. They also suggest a life whose trajectory wasstrikingly contemporary—a way of saying that it was ahead of its time, which, in this case, is also away of saying, tragic. Combining, as it does, feminism, deep ecology, spiritual quest, protest against industrial dehumanization, the consequences of media celebrity, free love, outlawry, and, finally, violence, Alice Gray's story—for all its gaps—is a formidable, if cautionary, tale.

We know that Alice Gray was born in Chicago in 1881. She was one of at least three children, including a sister and brother, born to a successful physician. She graduated from the University of Chicago in 1903. She held an A.B. degree, was a member of Phi Beta Kappa, and had received honorable mentions for excellence in astronomy, mathematics, Greek, and Latin. The year she graduated, university president William Rainey Harper made the first recorded effort to preserve a portion of the Indiana Dunes.

It is difficult today to imagine the adventurousness and ambition of midwestern social and politicalthought that Alice Gray was immersed in a hundred years ago. At that time Chicago was anincubator for a new vision of what America might become, and the University of Chicago, foundedin 1892, was a bubbling source of the city's intellectual energy. The artists and intellectuals of whatcame to be known as the Chicago Renaissance—Jane Addams, Harriet Monroe, Carl Sandburg,Jens Jensen, and Louis Sullivan among them—founded their belief in an ideal democracy on amidwestern sense of place. In their view, politics and aesthetics were inextricably linked, as were the city of Chicago, Lake Michigan, and the Indiana Dunes. As Sullivan put it: "Do you think the picture of the City one thing, the picture of the fair broad water and land another thing? The drama of the City one thing, the drama of the open another?"

A balance of commerce, art, and a spiritual understanding of nature (as exemplified by Native Americans) was, for these activists, a key to social liberation. The duneland was an integral part of that balance. As it became threatened by industrialism, so, for them, did the dream of a vital and redemptive democracy.

Between 1905 and 1908, United States Steel created Gary, Indiana, around what was then the largest steel plant in the world. Named for Elbert H. Gary, chairman of U.S. Steel's board, Gary was initially built on seven miles of duneland shoreline. While for Chicago artists and intellectuals the Dunes represented a place of spiritual power, for U.S. Steel this apparent wasteland provided the perfect site for an industrial plant with its inexpensive real estate and its excellent transportation connections. By 1909 Gary was a city of twelve thousand residents, and the activists of Chicago and its university had begun to shift their emphasis from celebrating this Indiana landscape to preserving it.

It was against this backdrop that Alice Gray made her way to Duneland in October 1915. She wasthirty-four years old and fed up with city life. "I wanted to live my own life—a free life," she told areporter a year later, in 1916; "The life of a salary earner in the cities is slavery, a constant fight forthe means of living." She decided to make a life for herself in the still unspoiled dune country east of Gary.

Thanks to the creation of state and national parks along the fourteen miles of lakeshore between Gary and Michigan City, much of the ground that Alice Gray knew is at least recognizable today. In October, the high oaks turn crimson and the maples, gold. Close to the ground, where a compost of oak dust and generations of fallen leaves make the sandy soil an ancient gray, the blueberry brush is waxy and wine dark. Inland, near the Chicago, South Shore and South Bend Railway that delivered Alice here, the only sounds, on this day, are those the wind makes through the treetops and the occasional screech of blue jays.

Head north and soon the forest canopy gives way to the massive blue dome that overarches the lake. Cottonwood trees, their leaves like silver coins, shimmer on the slope of the foredune. Sound—not so much of waves, but of a great, constant energy—fills the air above your head. The sand underfoot is no longer dark, but tawny, soft, and deep. Long green blades of marram grass grow in clumps, tracing ridges and holding them against the wind. At the dune's crest you behold Lake Michigan. Alice Gray wrote, "The Indiana Dune country, like Chicago herself, is the child of Lake Michigan and the Northwest Wind." The water, a rocky green and blue, stretches to the horizon. On clear days, you see the skyline of Chicago, a line of distant spikes. At night the city is a burnt orange smear across the western sky.

When Alice climbed down from the train in 1915, the Dunes were sparsely inhabited and, for the most part, inaccessible by automobile. Hermits or recluses were not unusual in these parts, but a woman on her own was, especially a younger woman. That she was considered young—by her friends as well as her detractors—is worth noting. It is hard to imagine a thirty-four-year-old woman passing as a "young girl," as the Prairie Club's Margery Currey described her in 1915, when life expectancies were considerably less than they are today. And the few photographs that purport to show Alice Gray hardly reveal the "nymph" the press was so anxious to exploit.

What seems more likely is that there was something in her character, in her attitude and, finally, in her behavior, that, while it set her apart, also made her compelling, even attractive. She was not an inarticulate waif, but a woman who, whatever insecurities may have dogged her, presented a confident front. As far as the rest of the world could see, Alice Gray knew what she wanted and how to get it. This seeming self-assurance made her both an icon and a target.

She had not been in the Dunes a year when the first reporter, from Chicago's Examiner, went to her for an interview. Exactly how he learned about her is, like so much of her story, obscured by legend. What seems to have happened is that after she managed to get through the winter living in an abandoned shack—some say she took shelter in an old railroad car—some fishermen saw Alice bathing in the lake. As the legend has it, she would strip and bathe naked twice a day. Then she would dry herself by running naked along the beach. Some say the fishermen's wives heard about this ritual and were indignant; others ascribe the indignation to local shopkeepers. In any event, someone tipped the media, and by mid-July a story was in the works. Alice Gray was about to become "Diana of the Dunes."

According to the interview she gave the Examiner, Alice arrived in the Dunes carrying only "a jelly glass, a knife, a spoon, a blanket and two guns." She said she slept under the stars for four nights before finding an abandoned hut: "Then I began housekeeping, and all the furniture I have is made of driftwood. Everything is driftwood here, including myself, and I have named the place 'Driftwood.'"Lord Byron's poem "Solitude" was her inspiration, causing "my first longings to get away from the conventional world, and I never gave up the idea, although a long time passed before I could fulfill it."

Her interview appeared in Chicago on 23 July. Over the course of the next week, at least twenty-five variations on the Diana story appeared in newspapers throughout the region. On 24 July the Gary Evening Post published an interview with a fisherman's wife, Matilda Burton, who described the hermit/nymph: "She wears her hair bobbed. She has no mirror and knows when her hair is too long by the length of the shadow it casts on the ground. When she thinks it needs bobbing she cuts it by the shadow. Her winter dress consists of a short coarse skirt, big boots, ragged waist, and a little cap. In the summer she wears just an old light dress and the ragged waist. She never wears shoes or stockings."

Burton told how Alice cooked outside her hut and used boxes for furniture. She said that Alice's only utensils were an old coffeepot and a cup she found by the railroad tracks. She suspected that Alice had "quite a bit" of money, saying that, at different times, she had used $5 and $10 dollar bills to pay for things. "She says," claimed Burton, "that when she was at the University of Chicago she grew discontented with the way things were run. She was always crazy about the Lake and people would not let her go down in the night and swim." Yet, Burton also said: "It is hard to make her talk at all. Generally she will not listen and chases people away with a revolver if they ever come near. She will not take any assistance . . . and shuns discourse."

For the next year Alice Gray apparently lived as she wished. She gathered berries and fished, although she was no stranger to shopkeepers in Chesterton who sold her bread, salt, and other provisions. She regularly patronized the public library in Miller, walking along the lakeshore to town and then filling a gunnysack with books and magazines. Her favorite reading, according to the librarians, was Cardinal John Henry Newman's Apologia pro Vita Sua. Some people said she was quiet—often a euphemism for stuck-up or strange. When one of her neighbors offered to make her a shift of some of her favorite fabric, a blue cotton poplin, Alice told her she would accept it only if it were hand-stitched. A sewing machine wouldn't do. Other people, though, said she was friendly,

particularly local children who came her way. She was open about her interest in the natural history and lore of the Dunes, and she wrote about it.

In 1917, when the Prairie Club, along with an alliance of other Dunes preservation groups, began planning a major public event aimed at creating a park in the Dunes as well as celebrating a sense of midwestern community and place, Alice Gray was invited to participate. On 6 April she took the stage in Fullerton Hall at the Art Institute of Chicago to speak, along with a collection of some of the city's leading artists and intellectuals, about the significance of the Indiana Dunes. Margery Currey published a portion of Gray's essay, "Chicago's Kinland," in the *Prairie Club Bulletin*.

"Chicago," wrote Alice, "is used to thinking of herself as the child of Lake Michigan, in the prosaic sense of her commercial origin; for the lake not only gave her her water-borne trade, but deflected the land routes between East and Northwest. . . . But when we come to form myths on our geological knowledge—as the Greeks did on their guesses—as to the origin of our city, we shall think of her as the child of Lake Michigan in a more poetic sense."

After describing how the glacier created the rich soils of the Chicago plain and the waters of Lake Michigan, she told of how it left a "strip of fine, level sand" in northwest Indiana: "In this the Northwest Wind, having shared with Chicago its vigor and joy and renewed its delight as it passed over the lake, has moulded the Dunes. So the Indiana Dune country, like Chicago herself, is the child of Lake Michigan and the Northwest Wind. . . . Besides its nearness to Chicago and its beauty, its spiritual power, there is between the Dune country and the city a more than sentimental bond—a family tie. To see the Dunes destroyed would be for Chicago the sacrilegious sin which is not forgiven."

When she took the stage beneath the grand proscenium arch in Fullerton Hall, Alice Gray was not simply a curiosity created by the newspapers. An emerging author and activist, she was a public figure with a cause. She was a woman who had dared to live a life her contemporaries only dreamed about. She had known the truth of the line from Byron's poem that she had quoted to reporters a year before, "In solitude when we are least alone." In only a short time, however, that truth would fade.

No one knows for sure who Paul Wilson was. Some said he was a Texas rattlesnake hunter who read the stories about Diana, fell in love with her from afar, and traveled to Indiana to be with her. More likely is that he was from the region. Another account suggests his real name was Paul Eisenblatter, an illegitimate relation of a Michigan City family, who had, by the time he met Alice, had several run-ins with the law and had done time for burglary. In any event, Wilson was consistently described as a huge man with a quick or violent temper: "a giant of a man whose physical feats were legendary along the beach." According to Samuel Reck, an Ogden Dunes developer who owned the land on which the couple would eventually live, Wilson was actually about six feet, two inches and about 225 pounds.

A handy man to have around, Paul was an able fisherman and carpenter. He also made money by making rough-hewn furniture and selling it to the summer people who were coming to the Dunes in increasing numbers. Although those who came in contact with him said he was unlettered, he seemed proud of Alice's writing, often referring to it, although never revealing what it was about.

It was, perhaps, predictable that the transformation of Driftwood from hermitage to love nest brought a new wave of attention to Gray's continuing story. Fishermen in Miller took excursions out on the lake to spy on the couple's shack; the saga of Diana and her mate became regular fodder for area newspapers. In 1920, the same year that Rand McNally published Peter S. Goodman's Map of the Indiana Dunes: Wonder Region of the Middle West, which identified one of those topographical wonders as "Diana Dune," the Chicago Herald Examiner ran a story that was reprinted on the front page of the Chesterton Tribune. The garrulous headline read: "Tells Tale of Diana of the Dunes. Chicago Newspaperman Comes Out and Writes Verbosely of the Maid. Caveman Wins the Dunes' Diana."

In the story that followed, Gray was depicted sitting Indian fashion on the ground in front of Driftwood, rubbing her toes in the sand. She had just come from a swim in the lake; the reporter called her "Mrs. Crusoe." "Twice daily," he wrote, "she plunges into the surf. From the first of Spring when the ice breaks up and floats away, to the end of each fall day finds her breasting the breakers opposite her little lodge called Driftwood. There are no bathingsuit regulations nor beach censors near Driftwood and it is said no one even would have learned of this hermit maid except for a sudden great demand by fishermen for binoculars which tipped off the proprietor of the general store at Tremont. And he told the world."

While Paul Wilson balanced on the limb of a nearby tree, Gray spoke of being attracted to his "magnificent physique." She said she was indignant about the stories that were being written about her, said her plans were "a bit indefinite," but announced that she and Paul will wed as part of the opening of a Dunes National Park. Sounding rather like D. H. Lawrence, she expressed an admiration for Mexican civilization and quoted from Huckleberry Finn: "As Mark Twain's Colonel says to the men about to lynch him, 'There's not a man among you dares to do this thing.'"

Apocryphal as this story almost undoubtedly is, it still speaks to the nature of the celebrity Alice Gray experienced. Paul Wilson's arrival added the frisson of free love to her profile. While this might have been irresistible to the press, it almost certainly aroused resentment in the community, a resentment that may have been compounded by the fact that Duneland property was becoming a valuable commodity. With Dunes Highway—Highway 12 -- in the works, the frontier era of Duneland history was coming to an end. Alice Gray and Paul Wilson would become local curiosities, allowed to stay in the Dunes so long as the developers who now owned the land they lived on permitted it.

When the body of a murdered man was found in a shallow grave near the couple's shack, suspicion initially focused on Wilson. He was eventually cleared of the crime, but the incident established what would become a pattern: whenever there was trouble, he and Gray were likely to be the first ones blamed.

Eugene Frank, a local deputy, seems to have had a particular grudge against the couple. Frank was responsible for looking after summer cottages in and around Ogden Dunes during the winter months. Gray and Wilson had established themselves in a shack in Ogden Dunes which they called the Wren's Nest. Frank began spreading the word that he thought the couple was responsible for pilfering provisions from some of these houses. On hearing his accusations, Gray and Wilson went

to Frank and confronted him. Frank met them with a revolver, hitting Gray over the head ("pistol-whipped" say most accounts) and shooting Wilson in the foot. Frank was charged with assault and battery but never convicted.

Gray's skull was fractured. While she was recovering in Gary's Mercy Hospital, looters ransacked the Wren's Nest, taking her belongings, including manuscripts she was said to be working on. These manuscripts have never been recovered.

In 1923 the stretch of Dunes Highway between Gary and Michigan City was completed. With the Dunes accessible by automobile, the demand for property escalated. Samuel Reck, a cofounder of what became the Ogden Dunes development, met with Gray and Wilson: "They called to see me about staying in the shack. Questions of squatter's rights had to be considered. . . . At that first interview Paul's attitude was hostile, defiant. . . . Diana, however, was more the diplomat. She knew more about the ways of business and property rights though it was very clear she was out to stay in their shack without rent or restriction. I assured them that we would be glad to have them there, that there should be a market for their fish and also there should be a good chance to make some revenue— by taking out boating parties. . . . I assured them we formed our opinions of people ourselves and not from hearsay or gossip."

Magnanimous as Reck may have seemed, Gray and Wilson must have concluded that their situation was untenable. Too much was happening around them. They began planning their escape.

After at least two false starts, Wilson succeeded in fixing up a boat. It was, according to Reck, twenty-four feet long and equipped with a four-cylinder marine motor. Wilson's plan was to take the Sag Channel into the Illinois Waterway, from there to the Mississippi and, eventually, the Gulf of Mexico. Their ultimate goal was the Nueces River in Texas. Wilson claimed he was familiar with this country (from rattlesnake hunting days, perhaps) where, he said, waterfowl abounded and the warm climate would soothe Gray, who still suffered from the aftereffects of Frank's beating.

Reck, who was probably relieved to see the couple go of their own volition, provided Gray and Wilson with provisions for their journey and wished them well. They set sail in the fall of 1923. Some accounts say they got as far as New Orleans; others, that they made it all the way to Texas. For reasons that have never come to light, the couple ultimately returned to Indiana.

"Imagine our surprise," recalled Reck, describing a moment that must have made his teeth drop, "one spring morning . . . to hear voices saying good morning and look up into the faces of Diana and Paul. They looked rather bedraggled each carrying a bundle. . . . There did not seem much to say so I made the best of it and told them they were welcome." They wanted the Wren's Nest back. Reck had intended to tear it down but procrastinated through the winter months, and now here were Alice and Paul.

If autumn in the Dunes is beautiful, winter can be unforgiving. Ice forms on the lake in conical piles; the surface of the inland sea looks like a frozen planet. Barren tree branches etch jagged black designs on a background of snow. The northwest wind that Alice wrote about can stop your throat and take your breath away.

Samuel Reck's account states that on the night of 8 February 1925, Paul Wilson appeared at Reck's house with an urgent request that Reck fetch a doctor. Alice was seriously ill. Paul said she didn't want a doctor, but after she became unconscious he decided she better have one. Reck then went for a Dr. DeLong in Gary, driving the distance from Ogden Dunes along the frozen beach. By the time they got back to the Wren's Nest it was too late. Alice Gray was declared dead of uremic poisoning early in the morning of 9 February. She passed away, according to Reck, in Paul Wilson's arms."

Diana of Dunes Dies As She Lived, In North Indiana Sand," proclaimed the Indianapolis News. "It was in Wilson's arms that Diana died [the paper's obituary, like so many others, captured this detail of Reck's account] scorning medical treatment, preferring death in the sand." The story went on to say that "Diana" wished to be cremated and her ashes scattered from the peak of Mount Tom. Only once was Alice Gray referred to by her actual name.

The obituary also referred to Wilson as Gray's husband, an idea the couple promoted as early as 1921 in a Gary Post newspaper article. But like so many aspects of Gray's story, the truth behind this assertion is in doubt. Indeed, much of the information about Alice Gray's last years that is found in newspaper stories or in accounts like Samuel Reck's is open to dispute. Ted Urice, the chief photographer for U.S. Steel, researched Gray in the 1970s and added several new layers to the saga. Urice, for example, said he looked for but could not find a marriage license for Gray and Wilson. He said that Samuel Reck's son, Nelson, showed him a bill of sale indicating that Paul Wilson sold Reck the Wren's Nest for $116. Of still greater significance was Urice's finding that Paul beat Alice, inflicting severe bruises to her abdomen and that it was this abuse that led to the uremic poisoning that killed her.

It is just as difficult to figure out exactly what happened in the days immediately after Gray's death. Samuel Reck left a remarkably detailed account that placed him near the center of events, claiming, for instance, that were it not for his intervention, Gray's brother and sister—who were living at the time in Michigan City—would have washed their hands of anything to do with her burial. It was, says Reck, his threat to go the newspapers that prompted them to provide funds for her funeral.

Be that as it may, what is clear is that Gray was not cremated. A funeral in Gary was arranged that, according to Urice, became like a carnival with people selling Duneland souvenirs. Some accounts say that Gray's relatives did not attend; others say they did. Paul Wilson was definitely there. Upset by the presence of reporters, he apparently broke down over the casket, pulled a pistol from his pocket, and swore he'd take some kind of revenge. He was restrained by police officers on the scene. Gray's body was taken to Oak Hill Cemetery and buried in a grave that was unmarked because monies collected by schoolchildren for a headstone were never put to use.

There is a headstone on Alice Gray's grave today. When I call Jean Nelson, a businesswoman in Chesterton who, I've been told, is responsible for raising the money to finally honor Gray's memory, she tells me that a stone has been purchased but that she's not sure whether it has been placed yet. The last time she heard, she tells me, the stone was still sitting in front of the monument company's entryway. She assures me she is going to call them and find out what's going on.

So as Ed and I drive south on Broadway, following directions to Oak Hill Cemetery given to us by the librarian at the Miller Branch of the Gary Public Library, we don't know whether we will find Alice Gray's resting place or not.

Eventually we turn west. The neighborhood is old and working middle class, still holding its head up—in spite of all the tribulations Gary has been through in the past twenty years. We have been told that Oak Hill is large, but it turns out to be about the size of three city blocks. You can see from one end of it to the other. The visitors' center is a white stucco box with green trim. The only other vehicle there is a groundskeeper's truck.

The attendant tells us that Gray is buried in Section D. "You can see it from the road," she says. Evidently the stone was installed in the past week; a local television crew was there just a few days before, recording the stone on video.Outside the sky is overcast; there is a warm breeze. Dogs are barking across the road. As we follow the path to the section where Gray is buried we note the names of those with whom she shares this place—Krinich, Zvic, Borovich, Tula, Stargevich, Ratojcich—immigrants who came to northern Indiana to work in the mills. Directly overlooking Alice Gray's site are two vertical stones for a Russian couple, both of whom were buried in the 1920s. Oval china portraits of each of them are affixed to their respective stones—he with a moustache, spit curl, and a flower in his lapel and she with a steadfast expression on her clear, round face. Other than these two, the dates on the surrounding stones indicate that this area was relatively vacant in February 1925.

It is not as easy for us to locate Gray's flat stone as the attendant had led us to believe it would be. But eventually we find it—a rust-colored granite slab somewhat larger than a file drawer. "Alice Gray Wilson," it tells us, affirming a marriage that may never have taken place, adding yet another layer to the legend, "Diana of the Dunes." For all the contradictions, the competing versions of her story, there is, finally, an eloquent stillness here, like a hand raised up to signal: Enough.

Later, Ed and I drive Highway 12, east to Michigan City where we will spend the night. The road is undulant, two lanes gently curving right, then left according to the forested contours of the dunes. Oak trees grow close to either shoulder; some stretches are like driving down an arcadian corridor. This, we know, is Alice Gray's true ground. We pass place-names and landmarks, the remnants of her story, as if turned to fast forward: Ogden Dunes, Tremont, an old house, now in the shadow of a giddily massive Bethlehem Steel plant, where she was once given shelter from a blizzard. Along this way we also see the cocoa-colored signs directing drivers to points of interest along the National Lakeshore, the "Kinland" that she described in 1917, officially preserved.

On the outskirts of Michigan City, the eastern border of the National Lakeshore, we come upon a sign, yet another kind of memorial to Alice Gray. Hand-painted and weatherworn, it stands by the side of the road like an injured memory: "Diana's Auto Repair." There is an old garage and a handful of hard-driven cars parked at odd angles. The South Shore Railroad tracks are a stone's throw away. For a moment history and legend tease at the curtain of everyday life. Alice Gray claimed this place; that claim still holds.

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