The Buffalo Plains, a large area of limey soil and calcareous rock outcrops in the northeast section of the city of Buffalo, was a unique natural area valued by local botanists and naturalists of the last century. This one-time haven of orchids and gentians now lies beneath such developments as the Trico plant at Jewett Parkway, the Main Street campus of the State University of New York at Buffalo and the "Parkside" residential neighborhood skirting Delaware Park. Botanical checklists and social-historical data bear witness to this transition.

The term "Buffalo Plains," once used to denote a large land tract, was carried on in the name of a rail-

Memoir of the Buffalo Plains
William F. Rogers and Richard H. Zander
road station, then as a post office designation, and presently is relegated to history.

The historical record detailing habitat change begins with David F. Day, a founder of the Buffalo Society of Natural Sciences and a botanist with great enthusiasm for the area's natural treasures. The Plains was of special importance to Day and his contemporaries. He described it in 1882 in his "Plants of Buffalo and its Vicinity":

"That portion of the city which lies east of Delaware Street and north of Scajauquady's Creek, offers to the botanist a field of no little attraction. It early acquired the name of 'Buffalo Plains.' Here, throughout an extensive area, the coniferous limestone, occupying a position almost horizontal, approaches very near the surface. In places, the rock remains uncovered. But, notwithstanding the fact that the soil is very shallow, the region was once well-wooded; and is still the home of some of the most interesting plants, rarely seen in other portions of our district. . . . Its Sylva, also, has its peculiarities. Here, alone, we have met Quercus Muhlenbergii, Q. prinoides and Ulmus racemosa. Nowhere else, with us, have Quercus alba, Q. obusiflora and Q. macrocarpa appeared so abundantly."

At the time Day wrote this, the Plains was a mosaic of farmland and wooded groves (maps 1 & 2). But a portion adjacent to Delaware Park was already being considered for residential development. By 1915 it had become the Parkside neighborhood, with boundaries of Humboldt Parkway and Amherst Street (south and north), Main Street (east), Parkside Avenue and Delaware Park (west) (map 3). "Parkside" was just the first of many residential developments that eventually smothered the Plains (map 4).

The history of the process that extended the city's neighborhoods into the countryside was researched by students of Professor Michael Frish's Urban History course at SUNY/
Buffalo. Their story of Parkside was aired recently in a special two-hour segment of WBFO's Buffalo Social History Project.

The students found that the land that was to become Parkside was held by two owners at the time subdivision began. One of them, E. R. Jewett, had bought his land in the 1860s. He subdivided his estate in 1880, laying out streets in curving paths that echoed the outline of Delaware Park (map 3). The subdivisions were sold to private individuals and to land company speculators. Heading the two major firms—Parkside Land Co. and Parkside Improvement Co.—were businessmen who saw healthy financial prospects in this quasi-suburban development.

Jewett Parkway was the first residential street established in the creation of the Parkside neighborhood. Its fine homes and large lots set the tone for the rest of the development. Other streets and homes were built on a scale less grand, but still reflected the aura of Jewett Parkway. Building had commenced at the turn of the century and in only 15 years the hundreds of houses that line Parkside's streets were completed. There was "no one far from the sound of hammers," according to Jo Blatti, WBFO staff member and producer of the Buffalo Social History Project.

The Parkside developers had done their market research well, insuring a range of housing and lot sizes that spanned the intended owners' aspirations and incomes. Lots on Jewett Parkway averaged 80' x 250'; on Humboldt Parkway, 50' x 175'; on Greenfield Street, 30' x 130'. From the beginning, the Parkside area drew residents from the established ethnic communities of Buffalo. There was a cultural mix both ethnically and socio-economically—people employed as builders, printers, chemists, dentists, and electricians lived side-by-side.

The SUNY students drew their information from building permit and sewer records at City Hall, from insurance company atlases and from

MAP 3. 1880. The Buffalo Plains is still present as open space penetrated only by two railways and Main, Colvin, and Amherst Streets. Jewett Parkway, east of the Park, is only in the planning stage. Cornelius Creek is still present along Bird Street (now Hertel Avenue). From "Beer's Atlas of Erie Co., New York," New York.
MAP 4. 1893. In the time of 13 years, the streets of the Parkside neighborhood have been laid out. This and residential developments surrounding the “Erie County Poorhouse” have begun to fill in the area of the Buffalo Plains. Cornelius Creek is apparently only a sewer line. From “Atlas of the Vicinities of the Cities of Buffalo and Niagara Falls, New York,” G.M. Hopkins & Co., Philadelphia.

Interviews with residents of Parkside. The botanist has a less extensive information base to draw on to describe the floral changes that have occurred with the growth of the city. In the case of the Plains, development drastically altered this unusual habitat. The characteristic oak groves of a century ago are no more. Some few of the original oak trees do survive, but most of the rarest native plants have been displaced by lawns and gardens.

Of the native species reported for the Plains by Day in 1882, five have not been collected at all in this century and may now be entirely absent in our area. With some changes in names since Day’s time, these are:

- Aplectrum hyemale, Putty-root
- Orchid
- Desmodium marilandicum, Smooth Small-leaved Tick Trefoil
- Gentianopsis puberula, Downy Gentian
- G. quinquefolia, Stiff Gentian
- Scirpus clintonii, Clinton’s Club-rush.

Sixteen other species are now rare, represented by surviving populations largely in limestone areas east of Buffalo or in the Niagara Falls region.

- Adlumia fungosa, Allegheny Vine
- Arabis glabra, Tower Cress
- Asclepias tuberosa, Butterfly-weed
- Cirsium pumilum, Pasture Thistle
- Euonymus atropurpureus, Wahoo
- Geranium carolinianum, Carolina
- Crane’s-bill
- Helianthemum canadense, Frostweed
- Lechea villosa, Hairy Pinweed
- Linum virginianum, Slender Yellow Flax
- Myosotis verna, Early Forget-me-not
- Polygala senega, Seneca Snakeroot
- Ranunculus fiscularis, Early Buttercup
- Rhus glabra, Smooth Sumach
- Spiranthes gracilis, Slender Lady’s-tresses Orchid
- Swertia carolinensis, American Columbo
- Viola rafinesquii, American Field Pansy

The native flora in most parts of the Plains is largely exterminated.
The remaining land once known as the Buffalo Plains is almost entirely residential. The Poorhouse has become the County Hospital and this will in turn be replaced by the University of Buffalo. The naturalist must seek elsewhere for the rare native plants that once graced the Buffalo Plains.

Thanks are given to the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society for permission to reproduce maps from their collections.

Floristic studies made by biology students at Rachel Carson College of SUNY/Buffalo in recent years have turned up none of the rare species. The areas studied were the remaining open spaces along railroad tracks that pass through the Plains. It is possible that everyday disturbance, drainage and chemical spraying for weed control have extirpated the remnant species of Day’s favorite botanical haunt.

It is significant that only six of the species mentioned above are protected by New York State Law. Many of the rare native species once present in the Plains are now found only east of Buffalo along the limestone escarpment through the towns of Clarence and Newstead, or north into the Niagara Falls region. These areas are now in turn undergoing extensive development, but preservation of remaining populations of rare native species through protection of habitats is still possible.

The Buffalo Plains valued by Day succumbed during an era when Buffalonians began to move out from the central city to more spacious surroundings. Government showed only a perfunctory interest in housing and practically none in habitat preservation. Today’s situation may not be much different. As shown by Zander (1976), there are no adequate sanctuaries established to preserve the limey habitat and associated rare native plants that remain in the Niagara Frontier region after residential and industrial development of the Plains. Partial preservation of the rare native flora is a goal yet to be accomplished.

LITERATURE CITED