

Grass in the Flint Hills and Osage Country

*Grass in the priceless weather
Sucked from the paps of the Earth,
and the hills that were lean it fleshed with its green—
Oh, what is a lesson worth.*

—John G. Neihardt

Grass seems to be one of the few things in central eastern Kansas possessing qualities that border on the eternal. We note this phenomenon as we cross over the lovely hills and dip into the verdant valleys while driving southward from Manhattan, Kansas, down highway #177 headed for Tulsa, Oklahoma. Our philosophizing causes us to reflect that mankind (or is it peoplekind now) came only lately to the scene. This five million acre tallgrass region known in Kansas as the Flint Hills is usually referred to as Osage Hills or Osage Country in northern Oklahoma. In the relatively short time humans have been coming to this region, they have been attracted by grass, nurtured by it, and finally blanketed in death by the same. A few lessons, but probably not many of all there is to know, have been learned from what the green sward offers man. Nearly a century ago Senator John J. Ingalls put it this way:

The primary form of food is grass. Grass feeds the ox; the ox nourishes man; man dies and goes to grass again and so the tide of life, with everlasting repetition, in continuous circles, moves endlessly on and upward in more senses than one, all flesh is Grass.

Flint Hills is a misnomer, it was not named after flint rocks or flint stones that Indians used to make arrow and spear points. It was probably named flint by the early settlers because the exposed limestone and sandstone appeared sharp and flint-like.

The limestone rock with a bit of sandstone in Oklahoma resting only a few inches under the surface of the hills does deteriorate, and if exposed too long will decompose, but the grass rises perfectly and perennially—or so it has for hundreds of thousands on into millions of years; the southern portion escaped ice age glaciation. For a million or more years nature has experimented, as it were, to determine which grasses best suited the conditions. There is a common concept that limestone contributes plant nutrients. Approximately 10,000 years ago the buffalo—

James C. Carey

the bison we think of—came into the area and depended on the products of that same sward for appeasement of their appetites. At least by the year 1200, if not before, the native American Indian was also reaping the benefits from that natural pasture of Kansas and Oklahoma. With the coming of the Spaniards the Indians first saw horses, “the hornless elk,” and guns and swords “thunder-sticks and shining knives.” Life would never be the same for those first human inhabitants.

In 1541 Francisco Vazquez Coronado in search of the fabled Seven Cities of Cibola wrote the King of Spain a letter that described the “limitless plains” which carried him to the buffalo (“cows”), too many to number, and where the Indians used the buffalo as either a great storehouse or as a kind of traveling commissary from which the native Americans sustained life from that “fine pasture land, with good grass”. “The land itself” was “very fat and black” with plums, nuts, grapes, and mulberries.”

Historians differ as to how far Coronado's men penetrated Kansas. Likely the expedition did not go northeast of present day Lindsborg, if that far, thus it reached at most only the outer fringes of the Flint Hills.



South of Manhattan



Kansas Flint Hills

Coronado told his sovereign ruler that the buffalo "cows" provided the Indians with food, clothing, "tents of hide," beds, and fuel (dung). Captain Juan Jaramillo, accompanying Coronado, foretold the later ranching industry as he observed the "good meadows" and to him what appeared to be a country of "very fine appearance," for he had not "seen a better in all our Spain or Italy nor a part of France," nor wherever he had travelled in "His Majesty's service, for it is not a very rough country, but is made up of hillocks and plains . . . there is profit in the cattle ready to the hand, from the quantity of them, which is great as one could imagine." Such was the land Coronado's men must have seen in Kansas, and less than 50 years after Columbus first reached America.

Native Americans, those first settlers in the area, developed a culture that depended heavily upon the grass-fed bison. Corn, beans, and other crops came into production of course with time, but it was not plow farming of the sort that tore up the surface of the earth. In Oklahoma the Osage group called the "Little Ones" were somewhat consoled when in the 19th century the "Heavy Eyebrows," the whites, "couldn't put the iron thing in the ground," as they noted that limestone and sandstone soils repulsed "the iron thing."

The beautiful upland prairies, both north and south of the Neosho River, seemed always to hold considerable attraction for those coming to Kansas, as was the case as early as the 1820's when Augustus Storrs and Alphonso Wetmore provided U.S. Senator Thomas Hart Benton



A Tallgrass native pasture.

from Missouri scouting information on the physical setting of the eastern end of the Santa Fe Trail. Among the good descriptions given us is one of the place which came to be known as Council Grove. From the published report of 1825 we excerpt the following:

The Prairie here, in the month of May, is adorned with a great variety of flowers, and, probably, presents some of the most distant and beautiful views on earth. The grass having attained its growth, is high; and, in the bottoms, was, in some places, several inches taller than a person's head, on horseback, when we returned.

Further to the southwest, of course the grass did not grow as tall as that reported above.

One hundred and thirty-five years later, rancher Dan Casement echoed Coronado, Jaramillo and the Santa Fe Trail explorers when he wrote that the Bluestem hills were "Mother Nature's round, undulating breasts, soft and warm in the sunshine, restfully inviting and rich in the promise of nurture."

They are teeming with life if you have eyes to see and ears to hear . . . As the whistle of an upland plover; see an occasional prairie chicken or covey of quail . . . There is the seasonal procession of the wild flowers: evening primroses, Canterbury bells, the dainty pink ball of perfume we call the sensitive rose, indigo flowers, the brilliant Indian paint brush—dozens of others. And in the fall, of course, the goldenrod, the wild aster and the purple Kansas gayfeather.

Indeed, there is beauty of detail as well as contour in our hills, and, above all, over all, the God-given abundance of the blue-stemmed grasses.

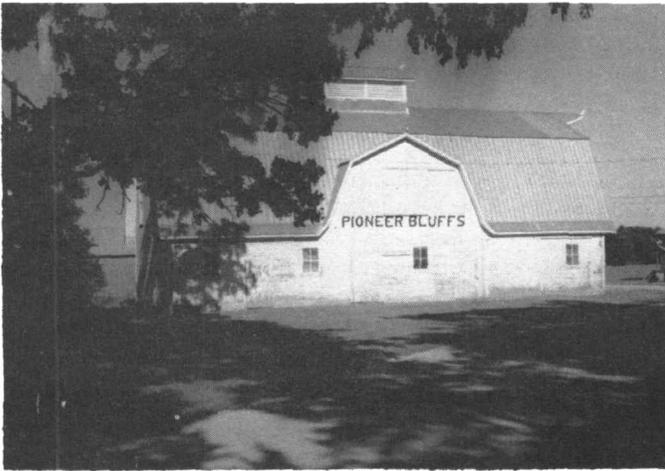
Those who know something of the hidden beauty of grasslands readily understand why there has been a deep interest in preserving the better facets of the tallgrass prairie.

Over the last 130 years Americans and Europeans have come to love the land of eastern central Kansas and

"We who love grass and see it as our great blessing, are seemingly willing to face the adversities. There are those of us who will continue to hazard their all for this particular way of life."

northeastern Oklahoma. For a time almost all of them leaned on the tallgrass for a livelihood, and today a segment of the population still makes grazing a way of life. Thus it is that the bluestem grasses predominate, but other natives that are prized include Indian grass, switchgrass, buffalograss, gama grass, and grama grass. Species composition has been modified by the introduction of Kentucky bluegrass and cool-season annual grasses, particularly Japanese brome. At the turn of the century the native bluestem grasses, big and little, dominated, and it remains until today the favorite grass for fattening cattle. The number of cattle produced has of

²For aspects of the controversy to "Establish a Tallgrass Prairie National Reserve" in the states of Kansas and Oklahoma see H.R. 5592, U.S. 96th Congress, 1st Session, introduced in the House of Representatives on October 15, 1979; also see "The Tallgrass Prairie: Can It Be Saved?" by Dennis Farney (photographs by Jim Brandenburg) in the *National Geographic*, January of 1980.



19th century barn, Henry Rogler place.

course depended in part on the amount of fodder and millet that the bottom land would raise. About the turn of the century some alfalfa and cottonseed cake came into use.

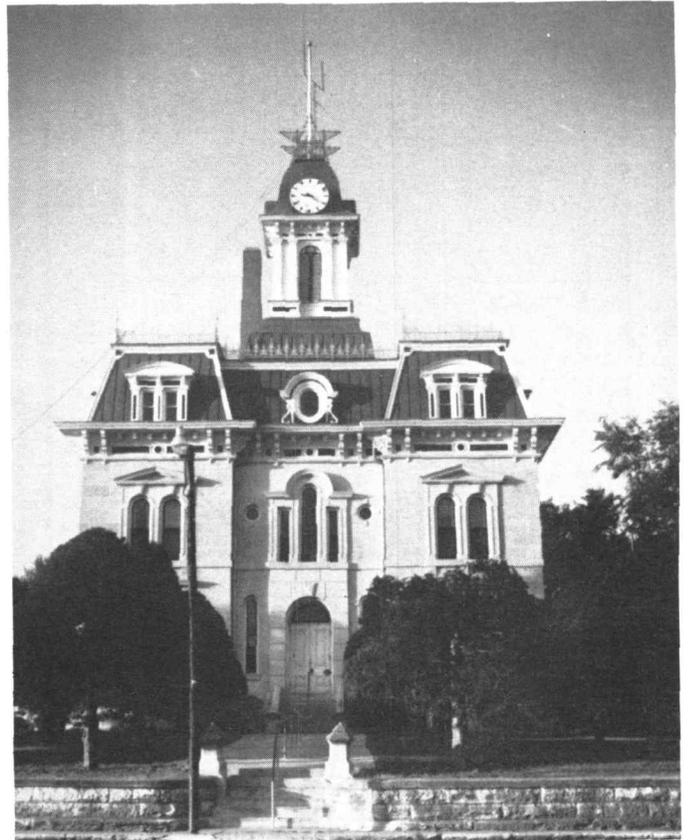
Shortly before this, at least as early as the late eighties and early nineties, the native grasses were used to graze cattle from Texas and the Southwest. Thus the Flint Hills became the largest commercial grazing area for transient cattle in the United States, a fact not widely recognized until recently if even now. The native herds that Henry W. Rogler remembered were mostly Shorthorn breeding whereas a mixture of breeds were brought in for the short period contract grazing. With the coming of livestock from the Texas Panhandle and southeastern New Mexico (even some from Old Mexico) Chase County, Kansas, earned a fine reputation for fattening cattle.

The handling and care of non-resident cattle and non-resident land was by 1900 an important business across the heartland of the Flint Hills. The April 15-May 1 intervals of cattle importation into the tallgrass areas of Kansas and northeastern Oklahoma came to constitute one of the largest, if not the largest, of annual two-week mass migrations of cattle in the history of the world. This



Henry Rogler house, built in 1907.

has continued down to the present writing. In addition to serving the regular customers from the Southwest, these five million acres of Flint Hills grazing land from Nebraska on into Oklahoma have long been a haven for drought-stricken cattle from as far south as old Mexico and as far north as North Dakota. Over-grazing and drought in the 1933-1936 years were very debilitating to the range, but it was a time for learning lessons. Shortly after that critical period, cattlemen began to use half and leave half the growth of the native grass so that the plant could store food for the following season. Ranchers also learned that an annual burning, by controlled processes, was beneficial to the range in various ways, from brush and weed control to the production of a more succulent and thus fat producing grass. The use of powered dozer equipment also made it easier to find and store water for cattle consumption.



Chase County Courthouse, Cottonwood Falls, Kansas

The large majority of independent cattlemen want to keep the tallgrass country pretty much as it now is. Most of them appear to be in opposition to any program whereby the government would set aside large tracts of range for the establishment of a tallgrass prairie national reserve for the recreational benefit of the general public.

We are reminded that land put to recreational usage would reduce our food production capacity. Also, residents of the area often point out to visitors that the layer of soil over the Flint Hills is not deep enough to support farming born of the plow. But there have been numerous would-be plow farmers who earlier tried and failed to successfully plant the hills. Over the years probably one million acres across the Flint Hills have gone back into grazing, and each year there is more moving that way.

The record of one prominent ranching family located just north of the village of Matfield Green mirrors the history of others who would forever try to protect and preserve the natural pastures. Wayne Rogler's paternal grandfather walked south from Iowa, stopping along the South Fork of the Cottonwood River, while the maternal grandfather Sauble rode a horse out from Maryland and settled on Cedar Creek to the southwest of what is today Matfield Green. For years, now, three generations of Roglers have made a living and built their lives around grass and cattle. In the 1970's Wayne Rogler wrote, "We who love grass and see it as our great blessing, are seemingly willing to face the adversities. There are those of us who will continue to hazard their all for this particular way of life." The lives of Charles, Henry, and Wayne Rogler have spanned the history of white man's livestock development on this beautiful pasture. Their ranch has supported up to 10,00 head of cattle at a time, while their neighbors, the Crocker Brothers' place (recently sold to Sam Methvin) has sustained as many as 18,000 to 20,000. These ranchers have dealt with the problems of predators, water or the lack of it, brush and

weed control, and low beef prices knowing always that it was all for nought unless the human spirit flourished. They recognized that the spirit flourished if nature's ways were respected as concerned the protection of the natural grasses.

The Chase County courthouse building at Cottonwood Falls, Kansas, stands out beautifully from the rolling hills surrounding it. This structure is a memorial to the dead and living who would preserve the wonderful legacy of the past. At the same time, this striking courthouse may offer an appeal to the unborn beseeching those future generations not to unduly molest that lovely area so adorned by nature. In closing it seems fitting to quote John J. Ingalls' words which are inscribed on his tombstone at Atchison, Kansas:

When the fitful fever is ended, and the foolish wrangle of the forum and the market is closed, grass heals over the scar that our descent into earth has made, and the carpet of the infant becomes the blanket of the dead.

We are reminded of his concept that "all flesh is grass," and we again ask if grass is forever.?

Desert Ranching in Central Nevada

Evan A. Zimmerman

The Zimmerman Ranching Corporation is a family-owned and operated ranch located in Central Nevada. The members of the Corporation are my wife and I, and four sons: Ross, a veterinarian, Ted, Dennis, Arnie and their families.

The families live at five different locations on the ranch. The cattle are grazed in Smokey and Monitor Valleys, and on Monitor, Toquima, and Toiyabe Ranges. Ours is a cow-calf operation with the steer calves, at weaning age, moved to meadowlands for finishing. At times they are fed ranch-grown alfalfa and meadow hay until sold at 20-22 months of age.

Very little help is hired in the winter because ours is mainly a family run ranch. Usually, there are two hired men in winter, one at the RO headquarters ranch and one at the Disaster Peak ranch, where the steers are finished. In March eight additional men are hired for spring, summer, and fall work for moving and handling cattle, irrigating and haying, and for general ranch work.

My wife and I have been ranching in Nevada for 30 years, that's 22 at Disaster Peak, 6 at the RO Ranch and a couple of years at the Triple T and Monitor Ranches. Our main ranch brand is the I lazy F; we also use the Seven K and the Flat O.

The author ranches at Round Mountain, Nev.

Editor's Note: This article is adapted from a slide talk the author gave at a joint meeting of the Nevada and Arizona Sections in January 1980 at Lake Havasu City, Arizona. He did such a good job that he was invited to prepare an article for *Rangelands* based on his presentation.

Our cattle are run roughly on 11 million acres of public land administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), 1 million acres of National Forest land, and a 1 million acres of Section 15 land administered by the BLM. In addition, our steers are run on 55,000 acres of BLM administered land at the Disaster Peak Ranch.

The Disaster Peak Ranch, near McDermitt, Nev., has a rest and rotation system on an allotment that is fenced into 9 pastures. Three pastures are totally rested every year. Furthermore, the pastures are used differently every year. For example, a particular pasture may be used in the spring one year before seeds ripen or after they ripen another year, or late in the fall yet another year. Sometimes the livestock are permitted to eat all the forage and another time they are allowed only 30, 40, 50, 60, or 70 percent usage. It all depends on what we think this certain pasture needs. If the cattle eat the forage right into the ground early in the spring one year, that pasture will then be rested for the rest of that year and all of the next year. The following year it might not be used until very late in the fall. There is no standard rule for when or how to use each pasture each year. The chief guideline is what each pasture looks like before cattle are turned in. Observation during the time they are in a certain pasture determines whether it should be used for a short or long period. These decisions are not made alone. They are made with the cooperation and approval of BLM personnel. It is of the utmost importance that we as public domain range users take care