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Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal

2025 - Prairie Sunset: An Anthology (Marcia Lawrence, editor)

2017 Chisholm Trail - They Say That Heaven Is a Free Range (selected by Mary Ice)

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Recommended Citation

Haak, Ton and Zoutenbier, Antonia (2025). "2017 Chisholm Trail - They Say That Heaven Is a Free Range (selected by Mary Ice)," Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal.

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The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

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A Korean hanbok top, called jeogori, at sunset
Arin Yoon

2017 — Chisholm Trail

THEY SAY THAT HEAVEN IS A FREE RANGE

TON HAAK & ANTONIA ZOUTENBIER

The Flint Hills provide opportunities for those of us who grew up in town to relax and enjoy the beauty of nature that surrounds us. As our family has spent more time learning about the Flint Hills, we have discovered many layers, not just in nature, but also in the way of life in the Flint Hills. People here work hard. For generations, they have protected the grass using methods learned from the Indigenous People who were here long before fences. Grazing and prescribed burning are the best ways to protect the Flint Hills. We owe thanks to those who continue to protect the Flint Hills. — Mary Ice

It feels a little weird, living in this part of the Western hemisphere, where, more than a century after he is commonly said to have disappeared, the cowboy is still very much alive, and the free-ranging beef cattle are still kicking too.

In this place, life is still based on the outdoors, a few 19th century customs and survival of the fittest.

The original cowboy culture, lasting maybe 20 years, had little permanence — a frontier institution that died even before the American frontier died. Its golden days were gone before the dawn of the 20th century. Yet my present domicile is living proof that it didn't completely disappear, didn't altogether die.

No, real cowboys didn't die out; they didn't even fade away. In the Flint Hills the cattle ranchers and cowboys and cowgirls are not shaping their lives after the images of the mythical culture

of dime novels and Western movies, a culture that never really existed. Their lives continue to be impacted by the land, the grasses, the streams and springs, the color of the sky and the unpredictability of the weather, and the devoted care given to their beef cattle. In Chase County each summer more than a hundred thousand head of cattle arrive to graze for the season; in the Flint Hills as a whole — still the virgin prairie — we are talking about a million “beeves.”

The cattle work is essentially the same as in those early days, albeit without the long, hot, dusty and brutal interstate cattle drives. In the 19th century, drives took many months, as chronicled in George Duffield’s journal that began on April 5, 1866, near San Sabe, Texas. Four months later:

“August 8th: Came to Big Walnut. Cattle stampeded & ran by 2 farms & the people was very angry but we made it alright. Was visited by many men. Was threatened with the law but think we are alright now. August 10th: Crossed from the Osage Hills into the Flint Hills of Kansas. No roads or trails of any consequence. Summer was wet, and the creeks winding through the treeless hills have plenty of water. Reached Council Grove on August 20th. Union Stockyard in Burlington, Iowa, to ship the cattle to Chicago, on November 1st. Seven

months in the saddle. Fewer than half of the longhorns we started with made it safely to the slaughterhouse.”

The cowboy era ended when barbed wire was developed. Settlers put fences around their property, and the railroad extended its lines and set up cattle loading pens everywhere. It was a sad day, as evidenced by the lyrics of this old cowboy song: “They say that Heaven is a free range land — Good-by, good-by, o fare you well; But it’s barbed wire fence for the Devil’s hat band — And barbed wire blankets down in Hell!”

Today adventurous and romantic drives are no more. Yet ranch work has not changed much. It’s still hard work, even now that cattle trucks unload and load almost in the pasture, and many a ranch hand keeps a horse more for fun or sentimental reasons than for work.

It feels a little unreal to me, prairie newcomer, to see my young neighbor T.W. Burton hitch up the trailer behind his truck and leave for his pastures to inspect his cattle and mend fences. He is the son of an old-time rancher, who is the son of an old-time rancher, and he and his wife Rachelle continue the tradition.

It feels a little weird, on days when work is not too hectic, to see the trucks drive up to the Hitchin’ Post at lunchtime with saddled horses in the trailers. The cowboys have their



The Vast Green
Lisa Grossman

equivalent of a business lunch before they continue their chores. Some are hired by big landowners to look after 5,000 head of cattle spread out over different pastures, each about a thousand acres or more. They drive their trucks out, release their horses, mount up and ride off to inspect the herd. They are conscientious workers, knowing that they are paid by the weight gain of the cattle under their supervision. A three-pound gain a day is not exceptional in the summer in the Flint Hills. Yet losing a calf or a heifer weighing a few hundred pounds instantly and seriously affects their income.

Cowboy hats with high crowns and wide brims are still abundant and not influenced by any fashion (other than being kept on indoors); they are sensible work gear just as the slant-heeled boots are, as are the ropes to throw “overhanded head catches” or “heeling catches.” Neither are raised-button spurs a luxury when on horseback. In the trucks they carry spare tires (for the rocky prairie soil commits murder on truck tires), salt blocks, posthole diggers, heavy rolls of barbed wire and a wide variety of tools. They tackle each problem they meet themselves, in any kind of weather, for help is not only far away but costly. Most of them are proud of their profession and in love with the rigors of the outdoors. They are in love with their culture. It is a feast for me, the observer,

to see them ride far out on the horizon, even the ones who drive a four-wheel-drive Kawasaki “mule” instead of riding a four-footed horse.

A good read is “Addie of the Flint Hills: A Prairie Child During the Depression” by Adaline Sorace, as told to her daughter Deborah. A few months ago, Adaline, now 94 years old and living in New York City, came to Pioneer Bluffs to autograph her book of vivid memories of the hardscrabble life so typical for rural Americans of her generation. She is a granddaughter of the Roglers and the Beedles who settled early in Chase County — those Roglers who started the ranch at Pioneer Bluffs, those Beedles from whom our buddy Jane Koger is descended.

If one thing stands out, it is the number of ranchers and cowboys and women who reach a very old age and keep going. I don’t think I have ever seen a community with such a substantial number of healthy octogenarians, not to mention those like Adaline Sorace or Evan Koger and others in their nineties and often, like Charlie and Betty Swift, still putting in a hard day’s work and enjoying a lusty conversation.

These prairie grasses must be good for two-legged beings, too. No wonder the cowboys from yesteryear used to sing: “Come all you jolly cowmen, don’t you want to go Way up on the Kansas

line? Where you whoop up the cattle from morning till night — All out in the midnight rain.”

Which rhymes perfectly if you pronounce rain roughly as rine, as of course all Flint Hills cowboys do.

Dutch natives Ton Haak and his wife, Antonia Zoutenbier, lived in Matfield Green, Kansas, for a number of years and operated the art gallery at Pioneer Bluffs before moving to Portugal in July 2016. Ton’s blog entry excerpted above was written in December 2010.

Mary Ice is a proud native Kansan. Much of her adult life has been spent out of state, but she and her husband Carl have happily retired to Manhattan, home of their alma mater, Kansas State University. Mary attended her first Signature Event at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve in 2015, its 10th anniversary. She joined the board of directors in 2017 and serves as Symphony in the Flint Hills board chair from 2024 to 2025. Mary and Carl have been longtime sponsors of Symphony in the Flint Hills.