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2009 Discovering This Place - Cattle in the Flint Hills (Selected by Marty White)

Jim Hoy

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CATTLE IN THE FLINT HILLS

JIM HOY

Jim Hoy's article "Cattle in the Flint Hills" reminds me of how lucky I am to have spent my entire adult life in this special part of Kansas. When I first arrived in Council Grove in the early 1970s, I didn't know the difference between a cow, steer or heifer. I learned quickly as our family pastured feeder steers May through July — double stocking, as Jim explains in his article. Caring for these beautiful grasslands has been an important part of our family's heritage for many years and hopefully will continue for many more. — Marty White

The Flint Hills are often referred to as "steer country" rather than "cow country," a distinction that refers to the practice of putting stocker cattle (steers and heifers intended for beef) on summer grass rather than keeping permanent cow herds (mother cows intended for raising calves, which will themselves become stockers).

There are year-round cow herds kept in the Flint Hills, but the dominant mode of Flint Hills ranching is, and has traditionally been, the pasturing of cattle from somewhere else for a prescribed season of late spring, summer and early fall grazing.

The first domestic cattle in numbers of any consequence that appeared in the Flint Hills were undoubtedly the oxen that pulled freight wagons along the Santa Fe Trail. Following the opening of the Trail in 1821, Council Grove became a major stopping point for Santa Fe traders, partly because of the good water from the Neosho River, partly because of the expansive



Violet Angus
Steve Snell

grove of hardwood trees from which teamsters could construct wagon repairs, and partly because of the lush native prairie grasses.

Particularly in the spring and early summer when the protein content in the bluestem tallgrasses was at its peak, oxen would be allowed a few extra days of grazing around Council Grove in order to gain strength for the long stretches of dry prairie that often lay ahead. When Kansas Territory opened for settlement in 1854, it didn't take long for farmers and stockmen to learn of the nutritional value of Flint Hills grass. By the time the big Texas-to-Kansas trail drives began a dozen years later, Flint Hills bluestem had already gained a well deserved reputation for its ability to put pounds of meat on a steer quickly and economically.

That ability, however, is seasonal. From late April through mid-July, the bright green grasses of the Flint Hills contain a high level of protein, but that level begins to drop in late summer as the blades transfer the sun's energy into the roots for winter dormancy. By winter there is very little food value in the brown, dry grass. A steer can gain weight rapidly on a diet of Flint Hills grass at its peak. One reason, besides the abundance of protein, is that bluestem roots go deep into the soil and the soil of the Flint Hills is underlain with limestone, a water-soluble rock. The grass roots pick up lime and transfer it

to the blades as calcium, an essential nutrient for bone growth. The calcium in Flint Hills grass causes bones to grow more quickly than they would in cattle grazing on grass growing over a rock such as sandstone. The result is a larger skeletal structure, which in turn provides more frame on which the protein in bluestem can hang beef. Thus, the phenomenal weight gains — as much as three pounds a day for a yearling on a diet of nothing but Flint Hills grass.

Until barbed wire fencing became economically feasible in the later 1880s, cattle summering in the Flint Hills were loose-herded, often by young men called "herd boys." Some of these herd boys, such as Arthur Crocker of Chase County and Tom Watkins of northeast Butler County, later became prominent Flint Hills cattlemen. Herd boys like Crocker and Watkins would camp out for days or weeks at a time with the cattle, particularly large herds of Texas cattle. Their employers would take supplies out to them, or the boys might occasionally come into headquarters. Other herders would take cattle out daily and bring them in at night, as my grandfather did in his youth. Each morning he would graze the cows north toward Jack Spring in southern Chase County, then at night drive them back to his home northwest of Cassoday.

By the later 1890s much of the Flint Hills had been fenced. Kansas fence laws gave each county the option of deciding whether stock owners had to fence in their livestock (enclosed pastures) or whether farmers had to fence off their crops (open range). Marion County voted for the former option, Chase County the latter, which led to some inevitable disputes (and at least one death) when Marion County stock owners loosed their cattle into the open range pastures of Chase County.

As the open range came to an end in the later nineteenth century, Texas ranchers began to upgrade their herds by replacing longhorn bulls with blooded Herefords and Durhams (Shorthorns), and later with Brahmans. By the early 1900s most of the cattle on Texas ranches were either British breeds, Brahma (to use the Flint Hills pronunciation) or crosses thereof. Up until about 1970 most of these crossbred Texas steers coming to summer grass in Kansas were from two to four years old. They were shipped up on trains, arriving in mid-April as the pastures were turning green after having been burned a few weeks earlier in order to clear off the previous year's dead grass. Beginning in July, the fattest of these steers would be sorted off and sent to market. From July until the end of the grazing season, this periodic "sorting off" of just the fattest steers would continue

until the pastures were entirely cleared by mid-October.

Around 1970 several changes occurred to alter this pattern of Flint Hills ranching. One was the complete switch from trains to trucks in hauling cattle. Another was in the nature of the cattle themselves. Rather than older steers, the cattle industry had begun to favor yearlings. Also, the dominance of the Hereford, Shorthorn, and Brahman breeds was being successfully challenged by a wave of "exotic" breeds — Charolais, Simmental, Limousin, Saler, Chianina, among others — as well as a growing preference for Black Angus crosses.

TAKE CARE OF THE GRASS AND THE GRASS WILL TAKE CARE OF YOU.

At about this time the practice of double stocking was introduced, whereby twice as many cattle are put in a pasture, but for only half the normal time. During the first three months of the standard six-month grazing season the grass is at its nutritional peak, enjoying its greatest growth spurt, and the average rainfall is higher. When the cattle are removed, the grass has another three months to grow and store energy. Instead of allowing three acres of grass for one yearling for six



Prismatic Bull
Steve Snell

months, each yearling will get an acre and a half for three months.

One result of these changes is that all the cattle arrive by truck at the pasture at the same time in the spring (as they did in the stockyards by train previously), but they all leave by truck at the same time at the end of the season (as opposed to being shipped by train piecemeal over a three-month period as they fattened). Another change is that whereas summer cattle used to come to the Flint Hills primarily from Texas, now they come from many states, from as near as Missouri and Oklahoma or as far away as Florida.

Whether in the earlier years or today, a successful Flint Hills rancher is one who manages grass rather than cattle: "Take care of the grass and the grass will take care of you." Bluestem grass is both tough and fragile, and a rancher knows that if his pastures are systematically overgrazed, cattle will not do as well and trees and brush will invade the prairie. He knows, too, that if an abused pasture is allowed to rest and if a careful plan of burning is followed, the grass will recover surprisingly quickly. He also knows that once the native prairie is destroyed by plowing, it will never again be the same.

Overgrazing was not uncommon during the earlier years, as some ranchers tended to put too many cattle on their land. After a severe drouth in 1913,

however, standard acreages for pasturing were adopted, not by governmental edict, but by a kind of unofficial consensus among landowners, graziers, cattle owners and livestock organizations. Depending on the quality of the grass in a particular pasture, an aged Texas steer was given an average of five acres of grass for the six-month grazing season. Thus a 1,000-acre pasture would handle 200 big steers. A cow and calf might be given from six to eight acres for summer grazing, or eight to ten acres if kept on a pasture year-round.

When yearling stockers replaced the older cattle as the norm, around three acres per head were allotted; that 1,000-acre pasture that carried 200 mature steers would now carry around 330 younger ones. In double stocking, that 1,000-acre pasture would receive around 650 yearlings in the spring, but they would all be removed after 90 days rather than 180.

Ranchers have other tools to help maintain the health of their grass, such as access to water or the placement of salt or the annual spring burn-off of the old grass, that most colorful of Flint Hills ranching rituals. Burning not only helps keep the prairie clear of brush and trees, but it can also be used to influence grazing patterns. If in the previous year cattle have overgrazed one area of a pasture and neglected another, the rancher will sometimes burn the

ungrazed area and not the overgrazed section; the cattle will favor the fresh grass in the burned area, allowing the overgrazed area to recover. Large pastures will sometimes be burned in sections a few weeks apart. Cattle will move to the most recently burned section as the new grass comes in. In recent years some ranchers have begun to patch burn, burning a third of a large pasture one year, another third the second, and the final third on the third year. This method fosters the strength of the grass and also creates favorable conditions for prairie chickens and other grassland birds to nest and feed.

Jim Hoy, reared on a small ranch near Cassoday, Kansas, was Professor Emeritus of English at Emporia State University, where he taught for 45 years, and was Director Emeritus of the Center for Great Plains Studies. Jim was an authority on the folklife of ranching, a topic on which he lectured internationally. He wrote, co-authored and edited 21 books.

Marty White's involvement with Symphony in the Flint Hills started with the first event in 2006. She has been a volunteer, editor for the Field Journal and served on the Board of Directors, acting as chair in 2013. Marty, along with her family, hosted the Signature Event in North Lakeview Pasture, Morris County, in 2008 and 2021.

The rule of thumb in pasture burning is to take half and leave half. In other words, a good grass manager attempts to ensure that the cattle graze only half the grass in a pasture, leaving the other half for burning the following spring.

Most Flint Hills ranchers have, over the years, been good stewards of the land, caring more for good grass and fat cattle than for a fast buck. Thanks in large part to these responsible ranchers, most of the Flint Hills today look much as they would have to the pioneers who arrived in the early days of Kansas settlement.



South Fork Cottonwood River headwaters, Late Spring Sunset
Philip Heying