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Foggy Morning Cattle Drive
Dave Leiker

RANCHING THROUGH THE SEASONS IN THE FLINT HILLS

JIM HOY

Like much of the American West, the Flint Hills are cattle country, but they have their own characteristics. It is the best grass in America for putting weight on stocker cattle, but only in the spring and summer. As my father used to say, a cow could be standing belly deep in bluestem grass in the winter and starve to death without hay or other supplements. But in the early grazing season (mid-April to mid-July) a yearling can gain three to four pounds a day eating nothing but grass. For many years, two-year-old Texas steers were the major grazers in the Flint Hills. Today cattle from many states are brought here to gain weight. Also, today there are more locally owned cow herds, not just transient grazers, than in the early days. — Jim Hoy

As anyone who has ever operated a farm or ranch knows, work never ends.

Routine chores must be done every day, while other jobs are seasonal, following a more or less predictable timetable. Over the years the methods of performing some ranch work in the Flint Hills have changed and some haven't, although the essence of that work is constant, dictated by the demands of caring for the land and livestock. Those demands themselves are controlled by the seasons.

In springtime, Flint Hills air is permeated by the pleasant odor of grass smoke as ranchers burn off last year's dead grass, continuing a Native American practice that began long before Kansas Territory opened for settlement in 1854. Each spring the Kansa Indians would pull bunches of old, dead grass to make

rawhide-wrapped balls to be set afire and dragged across the prairie. Pasture burning, a defining feature of ranching in the tallgrass prairie, not only creates better grazing conditions for cattle (as it had for bison in earlier times), but also helps keep the Hills covered with grass, not brush and trees.

From early settlement until after mid-twentieth century, firelines were often set by dragging burning grass with a pitchfork or metal-handled rake or by dropping matches from the back of a horse. Occasionally a kerosene-soaked, chain-wrapped hay bale would be lighted and dragged behind a pickup truck. Sometime around the 1970s (its origins are obscure), the firestick came into use. A homemade device of folk technology that takes a variety of forms, a firestick is essentially a piece of gasoline-filled pipe with a plug on one end and a drip hole on the other. Pulled behind a truck or attached to the back of a four-wheeler, the firestick is today used to set fires throughout the Flint Hills. In earlier days backfires were managed or wildfires were fought by beating out flames with water-soaked gunny sacks or denim overalls. Motorized water sprayers, which became widely available after World War II, today make controlling prairie fires much easier.

Another spring chore on a Flint Hills ranch is repairing fence. Open-range herding and stone walls gave way to

wire fencing once barbed wire became commercially viable in the late 1800s. Barbed wire was stapled to hedge wood posts (variously called Osage orange and bois d'arc), and well past the 1950s, Flint Hills cowboys carried a saddle hammer and a staple bag as they rode fence in the spring. Today many cowboys carry a pair of fence pliers on their saddles because steel posts, with metal clips for attaching the wires, are used where older fences have been replaced. Instead of riding fence horseback in the spring, contemporary cowboys place fencing equipment in the bed of a pickup or an ATV four-wheeler to go around a pasture perimeter stretching sagging wire, repairing broken wires and reattaching loose ones.

Burning pasture and fixing fence are mere preparation for the main business of Flint Hills ranching: pasturing cattle raised in other areas for summer grazing before they are shipped on to feedlots or, in earlier times, directly to packing plants. From the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries, most of these transient cattle were aged Texas steers, and they arrived on trains from mid- to late April. Cowboys would meet them at stockyards scattered throughout the region, then drive them to their summer homes, a distance that, before the mid-1920s, could be as much as 30 or 40 miles. Around 1970, trucks had replaced

trains for transporting cattle to and from the Flint Hills, and at roughly the same time consumer taste had dictated a switch from two- and three-year old cattle to yearlings. Today these younger cattle are often unloaded from trucks directly into the pastures where they will spend the grazing season.

Summer is the season of cattle care in the Flint Hills, for the pastureman/woman must, at minimum, watch for and treat illness, look for strays and provide salt and access to water for the livestock in his charge. Thunderstorms bring both welcome moisture and added work, for a Flint Hills cowboy has to look for cattle killed by lightning and also repair water gaps. A water gap is a portion of fence that crosses a flowing stream or a dry draw, and if it is not replaced after high water washes it out, cattle can stray onto a road or into a neighboring pasture.

In the summer a Flint Hills cowboy is usually in every pasture at least once a week, sometimes in his pickup, to replenish salt and mineral or to check the water supply. Often, however, he is on his horse, counting cattle and looking for strays. He (or she) also regularly checks for cattle with pinkeye or foot rot, either of which disease will lead to weight loss or even death. After roping the afflicted animal, he will give it a shot of antibiotic from the syringe and medicine bottle often carried on the saddle.

Shipping time once began in mid-October, the traditional close of pasture season. Sunday was the preferred shipping day, in order to have cattle ready for sale when the market in Kansas City opened on Monday morning. Well before dawn a rancher would lead a crew of cowboys and often cowgirls (and sometimes the cattle owner and/or a representative of a livestock commission company) to the pasture to be shipped. After gathering the cattle on a level area, a few carloads of the fattest steers would be cut out of the herd and headed for the stockyards. The rest of the herd would remain in the pasture to grow fatter until the next shipping day. By mid-October the pasture would be "cleaned out," in Flint Hills parlance.

Once at the stockyards, often around noon or a little after, the cattle would be weighed and placed in a pen to await the arrival of the cattle-hauler locomotive, which usually puffed in by mid-afternoon, giving the shipping crew ample time to be fed at the local cafe or with a picnic provided by the pastureman's wife. The steers, which had arrived some 40 or 45 to a stockcar, would be loaded out at a rate of about 25 to a car. As the train pulled out, the cowboy crew would ride back to their respective homes in time for evening chores.

Around the time that yearlings replaced older steers and trucks replaced trains, a change in Flint Hills grazing practice also

occurred: double-stocking, or intensive early-season grazing. Here twice as many cattle are placed in a pasture, but for only half as long. Thus a typical shipping day for a Flint Hills rancher today means getting his shipping crew to the pasture well before dawn (as in the old days), gathering all the cattle into a set of pens in the pasture (or a nearby pasture or a set of portable pens set up the day before), calling the trucks (which have parked out of sight a short distance away) on his cell phone, loading the trucks (around 60 to 65 head on a triple-decker potbelly semi that had delivered 80 to 85 yearlings in the spring), then heading back to the ranch by mid-morning. Rather than a full day's work, shipping today rarely lasts a full morning.

Once his pastures are empty in the fall, a Flint Hills rancher might take a short vacation, then begin building new fences, improving his pens and outbuildings, weaning calves (if he maintains a herd of mother cows in addition to pasturing s summer cattle) and otherwise getting ready for taking care of his cows during winter.

In earlier years many Flint Hills ranchers raised alfalfa and prairie hay, as well as kaffir corn (a grain sorghum), in the summer to feed their cow herds in winter. Before balers became common, hay was loose-stacked in large cone-shaped haystacks, then loaded onto

hayracks to be hauled to where the cows were being wintered. Kaffir would be bound into bundles at harvest time, then placed into tepee-shaped shocks. During the winter the bundles would be thrown onto a mule-drawn wagon by pitchfork, then tossed to the cows.

Today kaffir corn is no longer grown, its feeding function replaced by commercially manufactured protein pellets. The outbuildings on a typical Flint Hills ranch include a large hay shed and a tall storage bin for pellets. Mounted on the back of a rancher's flatbed pickup is a big-bale loader and a pellet feeder for dispensing feed in a pasture where the cows are wintering, preferably a pasture with a stand of trees for a windbreak and a spring or flowing stream to provide water. Otherwise, a major winter chore is chopping ice from a pond.

When cows start dropping calves, usually in late February or early March, the rancher's late-winter workload intensifies. He must check heavy springers (cows about to have calves) several times a day in case the cow requires birth assistance. Baby calves born during blizzards often need to be taken into a shed, or even the kitchen, to warm up enough to be returned to their mothers. Coyotes and wandering dogs can also be a problem.

In late spring he will vaccinate, brand and castrate the calves. Some ranches use



Winter Cattle Drive at the Sauble Ranch
Dave Leiker

a calf cradle, which secures the calf while it is turned on its side to be worked. More fun for cowboys (and easier on the calves) is dragging calves, in which ropers catch the heels of the calves and pull them to a waiting ground crew for

working. During the summer the rancher will monitor the herd, as he does the transient yearlings in his care.

Once calving is over, spring has arrived and it is time to burn pasture, fix fence, and start the yearly work cycle once again.

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. Jim was a dedicated contributor to the Field Journals and selected his favorite story from among his numerous contributions. He consistently shared his writing in every edition. Jim attended every Signature Event and presented in all but a few years. He served as board chair during the 10th Anniversary celebration in 2015 at Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve and also served on the Advisory Board.



Cold Hard Gravel
Zak Barnes