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The Leet Pasture: Home to the Polks and Troutmans

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The Leet Pasture: Home to the Polks and Troutmans

Looking from Americus Road west into the Leet pasture where this year's Symphony in the Flint Hills is held, the viewer's eyes are drawn up a gentle incline where cattle graze contentedly.



REVEREND ALEXANDER SCOTT

All photographs courtesy David and Ann Stark

While walking the Flint Hills Nature Trail along the north side of the pasture, the observer is buffeted by wind billowing over wide-open stretches of grass. From that vantage point, the pasture is punctuated by two stone bridges dated 1913, once part of the old Missouri Pacific Railroad right-of-way. A cut interrupts a hill, opening up on the other side to the deep valley of Wright's Creek stretching far to the south, with a clear blue pond nestled at the bottom. Another cut farther west along the trail opens to still another beautiful valley with Bluff and Rock Creeks.

Those familiar with the history of this land after white settlement know

this prairie as the Polk and Troutman ranches, which were originally part of the Kaw Indian Trust Land. In 1886, the Council Grove, Osage City & Ottawa Railroad was built through here and later merged with the Kansas and Colorado Pacific Railway in 1890; It eventually gave way to the Missouri Pacific, which passed through these hills until it closed in the mid-1990s.

In 1894, Rev. Alexander Scott, a Presbyterian missionary in his 70s, began buying this land and over seven years bought more than 5,000 acres from Bushong to Comiskey on the county line. In 1899 he sold the western sections to daughter and son-in-law,

Emma and Joseph Troutman. The next year he sold the four sections closest to Bushong to his second daughter and her husband, Virginia and Albert Polk. For many years the adjoining Polk and Troutman ranches represented a land dynasty in north Lyon County.

Trained as a lawyer, Albert Polk had practiced law in South Dakota before coming to Kansas. One newspaper article reports that the family lived in Emporia while the oldest son, Alexander, attended the College of Emporia. After his graduation, they returned to their stately home at Bushong where two other children, Katherine and George, finished school. The Polk house was larger than what we see today. The house was originally built using running water supplied by a reservoir that was constructed of native stone up the hill from the house. From there water flowed through an underground, charcoal-filter system into the house.

The younger Polk children each graduated from the College of Emporia, but Katherine's senior year must have been difficult. No picture of her appears among the graduates in the college yearbook, the editors explain, due to family illness. Katherine's mother Virginia died of cancer at the German Hospital in Kansas City that year.

In the first years after Virginia's death, newspapers described her son George as one of the stars of the college football team. When World War I sent George to Europe, a letter to his sister Katherine states he and other medical students were with an American hospital unit "somewhere in France." At the same time, brother Alexander worked as cashier at the Bushong State Bank, Katherine volunteered in town, and their father maintained his cattle operation.

Following the war, George finished medical school and began a practice in Independence, Missouri. Alexander also moved to the Kansas City area to



KATHERINE POLK, 1908



KATHERINE POLK AND FRIENDS
(perhaps College of Emporia banner)

work for Montgomery Ward and later the Post Office. Katherine remained in Bushong, serving as mistress of the house, often entertaining visitors.

In 1935, Albert Augustine Polk was interviewed by *Emporia Gazette* columnist Laura French, about the effects of a drought on his 1550-acre ranch. He is quoted as stating most of 1300 acres of bluestem grass had been damaged but survived. At this time he said he no longer owned cattle but rented his pastures to others. He had lived on the place for 36 years in a home beautifully sheltered by cedars and furnished with modern electrical conveniences.

When Albert died the following year at the age of 83, sons Alexander, or “Lex,” and George returned home for the funeral. Later that year Katherine traveled to Alaska and following her return visited her brothers. She continued to entertain at her home in Bushong. Lex died in 1940. At some time in the early 1940s, Miss Polk must have moved to be near her remaining

brother George in Independence.

In 1945 a roaring prairie fire, allegedly started by a passing Missouri Pacific train, burned several hundred acres of pasture land. Starting on the Polk ranch, the flames took a northwesterly direction through the three-foot-tall bluestem grass, jumped the railroad tracks and crossed old Highway 50 north. School boys from Bushong High and many volunteers from the neighborhood fought the fire. George Atkinson, who was managing the Polk pastures in those years, lost 118 acres of grass and lots of fencing.

The Polk Ranch sold for \$95,000 in April 1954. Irene Haines Leet of Mount Clair, New Jersey, bought the largest tract of 960 acres while Mrs. J.V. Skonberg of Osage City bought 450 acres on the north side of the railroad. An abstract in excess of 130 pages detailed the particulars of the sale.

The Bushong cemetery contains the graves of Albert and Virginia Polk, Dr. George Polk and his wife and

daughter. But Katherine’s grave is not there. The woman who lived on the land the longest is missing. The Leet family owned the land for nearly 50 years before selling to Texas cattleman Johnny Arnold in 2005. Buster Wheat began renting the pastures at the time of the sale in 1954, and the Bill Besack family purchased the Polk homestead.

The Troutman ranch seems to have had a more torturous existence. As one old-timer around here said, “It seemed to be a tough place to make a go.” Joseph and Emma Troutman had met and married in Iowa before living in Virginia for a number of years. Arriving in Kansas, they settled near Comiskey. They had four children: Paul, Virginia, Jean and Marie. Troutman was well-respected as a sheep and goat rancher, serving for a time as president of the state’s dairy goat association. Active in politics, he spoke at various events as a Republican and was considered one of the best-known men in Lyon County and owner of one of the largest sheep ranches in the country.

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Financial difficulties arose in 1902 when a lawsuit to foreclose the mortgage was brought against Joseph and Emma Troutman by her father, the Rev. Alexander Scott. Interest had not been paid on a promissory note. Scott demanded that land be sold to satisfy the note with interest. Records in the Registrar of Deeds office show many loans and subsequent mortgages on Troutman land over the years.

Unexpectedly, Joseph Troutman died in 1909 at the age of 60. Rheumatism of the heart was listed as the cause of death. With the community stunned, Mr. Troutman’s obituary praised his leadership ability and influence.

But his untimely death may have led to more financial difficulties for his children.

Jean Troutman, the second son, took over the ranch. By 1918 various tracts had been divided among Mrs. Troutman, daughters Virginia and Marie, and Jean. Jean married Georgia Withington, granddaughter of Charles Withington, the first settler in Lyon County.

The western part of the Troutman land around Comiskey was sold to J.O. Southard, who had come to Kansas in 1898 to work for the Wiser ranch north of Allen. In 1902 Southard and his brother-in-law, Charles Coffman, bought the 7,000-acre ranch. A few years later Southard sold his interest to buy the Troutman property, where he soon achieved a national reputation for the quality of his registered Hereford cattle. Known as “The Hereford King,” Southard built two octagonal sales pavilions for his annual auctions. He would sell his ranch in 1923 and move to Topeka, where he died in 1960. In 1944 the property was purchased by members

of the Day family, who still own it.

By 1925, Jean Troutman was toying with the idea of drilling for oil. In March 1926, he bet the ranch on it. An El Dorado company leased 8,000 acres around Bushong, but Jean’s well came up dry. In 1927 he was forced to sell most of it to G. L. Ramsey.

A year and a half later the Jean Troutman family was living on a farm near Wilsey. Georgia, in despair over their financial reversals, domestic problems, and worries for the children’s education, shot her young son Clinton and then attempted suicide by drinking carbolic acid. When Jean returned home, he found the door barred. He broke in to find his wounded son and unconscious wife and summoned a doctor from Council Grove. Both miraculously survived. A jury found Georgia Troutman of unsound mind, and she was sent to Lansing Prison before being committed to the State Hospital at Osawatomie.

In 1944 Ramsey sold out to Harry

Kizler, who owned the property for 45 years. At the present time the land is split among at least five different owners, including the Days.

So that is what happened to the land the Rev. Alexander Scott bought in the 1890s. These storied hills could probably tell many other tales if we were to know the Native American accounts of living on the Kaw Reservation. And before that, who else enjoyed gazing across these rolling Flint Hills?

Jan Huston is a retired English teacher from the Emporia Public Schools. Since retiring, she has volunteered at the Lyon County Historical Research Center and has written historical pieces for the Emporia Gazette, tidbits for the Flint Hills Shopper, and the script for the documentary film, A History of North Lyon County. She and her husband are lay speakers for the United Methodist Church and live northeast of Americus.

All photographs have been recently re-discovered. See page 67.



BUSHONG CAMPFIRE GIRLS
After returning home from college, Katherine Polk’s volunteer work included leading a group of Camp Fire girls.