



Kansas State University Libraries
New Prairie Press

Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal

2012 – The Prairie: Its Seasons and Rhythms
(Laurie J. Hamilton, Editor)

Ranching through the Seasons in the Flint Hills

Jim Hoy

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sfh>

Recommended Citation

Hoy, Jim (2012). "Ranching through the Seasons in the Flint Hills," *Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal*. <https://newprairiepress.org/sfh/2012/prairie/2>

To order hard copies of the Field Journals, go to shop.symphonyintheflinthills.org.

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

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cad@k-state.edu.

Ranching through the Seasons in the Flint Hills

As anyone who has ever operated a farm or ranch knows, work never ends. Routine chores have to 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 has changed and some hasn'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.



DOCTORING

All illustrations by Bruce Brock

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 had begun long before Kansas Territory opened for settlement in 1854. Each spring the Kansa Indians (whose reservation encompassed the site of this year's

Symphony in the Flint Hills) 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 it also helps to 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 a 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 nineteenth century. Barbed wire was stapled to posts made of hedge wood (variously called Osage orange and bois d'arc), and well past mid-twentieth century 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. By 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, which come from Texas and many other states as well (some from as far away as Florida), 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



SHIPPING CATTLE

(many of whom are women) must, at a 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 also 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. Again, much of this fence work that was formerly done with a team and a wagon is today done by pickup truck or four-wheeler.

In the summer a Flint Hills cowboy is usually in every pasture he looks after 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 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 he often carries on his saddle.

Shipping time, i.e., removing cattle from the pasture at the end of grazing season, begins in mid-summer and runs through autumn. In the days when railroads hauled cattle, shipping of big Texas steers would begin in mid-July and not end until 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 (or Omaha or Chicago) 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 cattle in the Leet Pasture, where this year's Symphony in the Flint Hills is being held, would probably

have been driven to nearby stockyards at Bushong or Allen or Comiskey.) 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 café 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 crew would be riding 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. In other words, 400 yearlings for three months in a pasture that would normally accommodate 200 yearlings for a six-month season, but those 90 days would begin in late April or early May and end in late July or early August, the period when rain usually falls more abundantly, the grass grows more vigorously, and the leaves contain the highest levels of protein.

Another feature of double-stocking (and of yearlings on full-season pastures, as well) is that all the cattle generally leave the pasture at the same time. 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 such tasks as building new fences, improving his pens and outbuildings, weaning calves (if he maintains a herd of mother cows in addition to pasturing 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 in order 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 a 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 often 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.

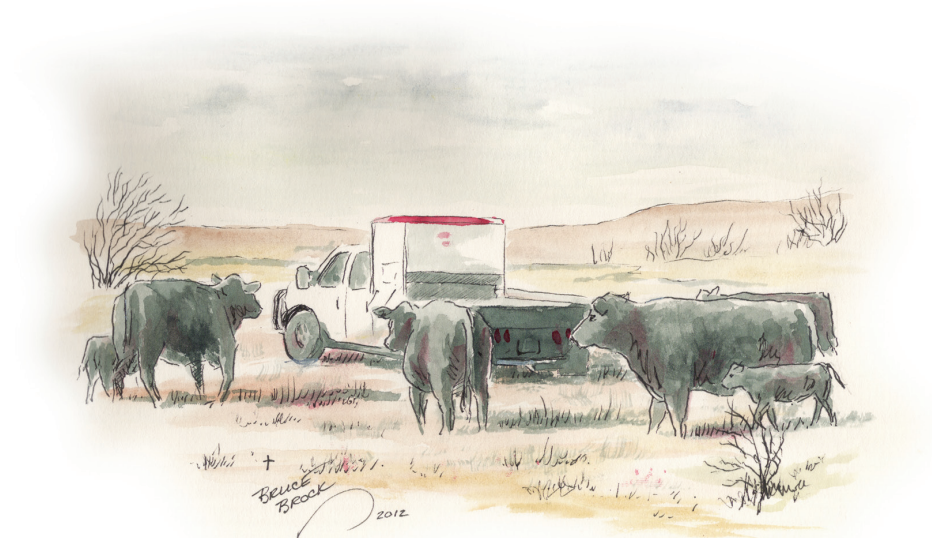
In late spring he will vaccinate, brand, and castrate the calves. Some ranches use a calf cradle, which secures the calf while it is turned on its side to be worked.

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 teaches folklore and literature at Emporia State University. He is an authority on the folklife of ranching, a topic on which he has lectured throughout the world. Jim's publications include 12 books and over 100 articles. He is also the co-author of "Plains Folk," a syndicated newspaper column, and the Director of the Center for Great Plains Studies at Emporia State University.



WINTER FEEDING