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GRASSLANDS – WIND IN THE BLUESTEM
Chris Wolf Edmonds

FUTURE OF THE FLINT HILLS

Each year, thousands of bicyclists flock to the Flint Hills to test their mental and physical endurance in a 200-mile extreme race known as the world’s premier gravel grinder. In 2015, when record rainfalls transformed gravel roads into quicksand, the race lived up to its name “Dirty Kanza.” After a thirty-six-hour battle against mud and “soul-crushing” wind, only half of the starters had completed the race. One racer, who was quoted in 2014 as saying there was “nothing fun about it,” dedicated countless hours to training and, like hundreds of others, returned to do it again. They aren’t lured by the prize money. In fact, there isn’t any. They come for the wide-open spaces that test their personal limits. In the words of three-

time champ Rebecca Rusch, “Anyone who finishes this race is a winner.” In this way, participants embody the spirit of the Kansas state motto, *Ad astra per aspera*. Finishing the race is a triumph over the wind, sun, and mire.

Those of us who are working to build a *Future of the Flint Hills* face a long and grueling ride. Twentieth-century economic trends have eroded the populations and financial security of our rural communities. Development around urban communities has eaten away at the tallgrass prairie landscape. And invasive species threaten grazing operations, wildlife, and the unmatched beauty of this place.

The race to tackle these challenges is not a sprint, but an extreme distance event that will require deep thought, bold action, and endurance. Many will try and fail. We’ve asked some of the region’s thinkers, doers, and leaders to share their thoughts and opinions on the *Future of the Flint Hills*. In this volume, they’ve responded with cautionary and inspiring tales from the past and their ideas for creating a future for both the region’s communities and landscape. This book does not have all the answers. But we hope it does encourage further thought and discussion.

To illustrate the *Field Journal*, we’ve selected contemporary images that evoke the themes of memory, change, and dreams of the future. They are works of artists who know and appreciate the Flint Hills: Kansas natives, visiting professors, and artists in residence.

This year, we’re grinding out a *Future of the Flint Hills*. The road is hilly, rocky, and muddy. But there’s plenty of room in these wide-open spaces for great ideas that respect the beauty and culture of this region we love. If you’ve got what it takes to endure the wild ride, roll up your sleeves and join us. Expect to get dirty. Hope to finish. But don’t expect any prizes other than the satisfaction of contributing toward a brighter future for the heart of Kansas. *Ad astra per aspera*.