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In Matfield Green, a Glimpse of a Viable Future

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LOT 7A, GROUP A, LARGEST PLOTS OF LAND FOR SALE
IN KANSAS, FROM "GEO LOGIC" SERIES
Robert Bupp

IN MATFIELD GREEN, A GLIMPSE OF A VIABLE FUTURE

In tiny Matfield Green the past is everywhere – a rusty horseshoe here, an abandoned stone step there, an old wooden shed melting to earth nearby.

But there's also a glimpse of one possible future for the Flint Hills – a future based on the creativity that the tallgrass prairie sparks and nurtures.

Located on the Flint Hills Scenic Byway, Kansas Highway 177, between Cassoday and Bazaar, Matfield Green is the longtime home of families who ranch or farm the land they love. Increasingly, however, Matfield Green has become a home for artists, writers, and others who find the Flint Hills inspiring and who thirst for a life authentic and close to the earth.

The community currently has about sixty residents and an abundance of visual art: two contemporary art galleries, two artist-in-residence programs, a sculptor's studio, and a "prairie/sculpture path" in development. Matfield Green also is a travel destination, offering six vacation rental properties often occupied by people who want the Flint Hills experience.

Matfield Green became a place for the arts in the 1990s when Wes Jackson and others from The Land Institute of Salina, Kansas, bought and repaired Matfield properties and used them as the location for the Institute's Rural Community Studies Program. The Institute encouraged the arts in Matfield and was instrumental in bringing famous American photographer Terry Evans, now of Chicago, to Matfield Green to photograph its people and places. But after a few years, The Land Institute pulled out of Matfield to focus on its work in Salina.



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In 2006 Pioneer Bluffs, the historic Rogler ranch north of Matfield Green, was auctioned off. A group of investors headed by architect and sculptor Bill McBride bought the ranch headquarters and surrounding twelve acres and subsequently established the nonprofit Pioneer Bluffs Foundation.

In 2010 the first art gallery in Matfield opened in the 1908 Rogler home at Pioneer Bluffs. The gallery's founders were Dutch expatriates Ton Haak and his wife, Ans Zoutenbier, who read about the Flint Hills in William Least Heat-Moon's *PrairyErth*. Both were active in the Dutch art scene and ran a gallery in Abiquiu, New Mexico, for twelve years before settling in Matfield Green.

Currently in its seventh season, The Gallery at Pioneer Bluffs has presented thirty-seven solo exhibitions of contemporary art and has sponsored many art workshops. The gallery's present owner and curator is Matt Regier, a printmaker who moved to Matfield Green with his wife, Tia, and family

in 2014. "This year's exhibitions are particularly honed in on the prairie," he says. "As an artist, I feel that the prairie has been sort of a best-kept secret; it has a real subtlety and mystique. It beckons the interested observer, past the apparent simplicity of 'grass,' to go deeper, to uncover its secrets."

The second art gallery, The Bank art space and visitor center, is a project of the Center for Living Education, a small nonprofit in Matfield Green. The gallery is located in Matfield's last remaining historic commercial building, now partially restored with the support of the building's owners and with funds raised by the nonprofit. To date The Bank has presented eleven solo shows by graduates of area art schools. Haak and Zoutenbier are the gallery's curators and managers; Haak currently is the nonprofit's board chair. Haak and Zoutenbier also are curators of the new Symphony in the Flint Hills Gallery in Cottonwood Falls and, since 2014, art editors of the Symphony's *Field Journal*.

The Center for Living Education also collaborates in Matfield's two artist-in-residence programs. One is done with The Gallery at Pioneer Bluffs and focuses on foreign artists. The other, Matfield Outpost, is a family-friendly residency that focuses on American artists.

Laura Berman, professor of printmaking at Kansas City Art Institute, and her husband, Chris Akers, established Matfield Outpost in 2014. Artists-in-residence in the program live at Prairieside Cottage, the vacation rental home owned by Berman and Akers. Many of the artists have responded to the Flint Hills landscape with great wonder, says Berman.

"One of them, an adventurous artist who's traveled all over the world, hiked into the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve and became bewildered and a little scared — she felt like she was on another planet," Berman says. "This kind of response confirmed that this is the right place to do a residency, the right place for

people to come and be inspired."

Matfield Green also has attracted writers who find they can enjoy the rural lifestyle while working for distant employers or clients, courtesy of high-speed Internet from the local phone company.

A prime example is Cindy Hoedel, a *Kansas City Star* writer who moved from Kansas City's bustling Plaza area to quiet Matfield Green a few years ago. When she began writing about her new rural life, the *Star's* readers lapped it up. Hoedel recently started a video cooking show, "Cindy's Kansas Kitchen," videotaped by the *Star* in her Matfield Green home. She also commutes to Kansas City twice a week to cover visual art events for the *Star*.

Hoedel says she came to Matfield Green because she loves the Flint Hills landscape and the reasonable cost of housing — and because she could "drop into a new group of people and learn from them, ranchers and old-timers, people who garden differently from city



VERDE
Anna Patricia Keller

people. There's a richness of knowledge here that I never had before." educational institution, Wichita State University's School of Art, Design, and Creative Industries, sees the town as a site for giving students hands-on, outside-the-classroom learning experiences. Beginning this year graduate students will earn course credit for working on projects related to the prairie/sculpture path taking shape immediately north of Matfield.

She says country living contributes to her creativity in a way she didn't expect. "It's sitting in the quiet and hearing the birds, and having the sun shine on my face because there are no tall buildings," she says. "Being in nature opens up my senses in a way that makes my writing better."

In addition to individuals who are attracted to Matfield Green, one

Sculptor Bill McBride conceived the path, which is on his land alongside

Kansas Highway 177, and he is developing the path in partnership with Ton Haak and the Center for Living Education. McBride says the completed path will give Scenic Byway travelers a place to stop and experience art while meandering through tallgrass prairie, over a stone arch bridge, and through the remnants of Matfield's historic cattle pens. Artists from Kansas and beyond have proposed sculptures and art installations for the path.

Less than a mile north of the sculpture path, the nonprofit Pioneer Bluffs Foundation will offer "Saturday Music Matinees" in 2016. The matinees will feature classical music performed in the loft of the newly renovated barn, says Lynn Smith, Pioneer Bluffs' executive director.

All of these arts-related activities in Matfield Green enrich the lives of visitors and residents alike, and they can benefit the local economy. When people move to Matfield or come for art residencies or vacations, or when

travelers visit the galleries, they usually spend money in the area. Arts-related projects also can create local jobs.

Don Wolfe, a photographer in the Matfield Green community and past member of the Pioneer Bluffs Foundation Board of Directors, says his work as chair of that board's art committee reinforced for him the key role the arts can play in economic development. "In a small community like Matfield Green, it may be the only thing that can fuel economic development, so it's extremely important," he says.

Other arts-related projects for Matfield Green are in the dreaming stage or on the drawing board, including a third artist-in-residence program – so stay tuned!

Paula Haas is a retired journalist from the Kansas City area who has lived in Matfield Green for four years. She is a graduate of the William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Kansas. She occasionally works as a freelance writer and editor for clients in Kansas and beyond.