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## The Weather

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**Rodeo**  
Dave Leiker

## THE WEATHER

“Cloudy in the west and alookin’ like rain,  
My damned old slicker’s in the wagon again.”

So goes a verse in the old-time cowboy song, “The Old Chisholm Trail.” Change “wagon” to “pickup” and many contemporary Flint Hills cowboys could well identify with that verse. Not a few have gotten an unscheduled dowsing from a thunderstorm that came up unexpectedly out of a sky that was blue when they first unloaded their horses from the trailer that morning. What they say about Kansas in general, “If you don’t like the weather, wait an hour (or a day or ten minutes — I’ve heard many variations) and it’ll change,” is equally true for the Flint Hills.

A friend of mine is a transplant from California, and in her first couple of years here, she mentioned to me that whenever she made a comment about current weather conditions, the native Kansan she was talking to would often reply, “But that’s not usual.” What is our usual weather? In general, it’s one thing, but each individual day is often a little different. Think about it: There can be a summer hot spell of ten days of hundred-plus degrees, but it’s usually not that many in a row. Or there can be ten days with rain every day, but that doesn’t happen very often. Or we can have high winds or no winds for two weeks straight, but that’s not the typical pattern. The point is, Kansas, and, by extension, Flint Hills weather is invariably variable. As the old truism goes, the only constant is change.

Any conversation here in Kansas can start with the weather, which is not true for places where the climate is more predictable. Except for the occasional hurricane, southern states will always be warm and humid. Arizona will always be hot and dry, and Southern California will always be sunny and bright.

But here in Kansas it can be cold in the morning and hot in the afternoon – or vice versa. It can either be warm and dry in winter, or it can be cold and snowy. I remember as a kid the bees buzzing around my grandparents' house at Christmas and other Christmas times when it was frigid with big snow drifts. The same is true for summer. Usually, you can count on several days in a row in July and August with highs in the hundred-degree range, but I also remember a couple of years when the temperature never hit triple figures all summer long, and at least one July where I was wearing a jacket.

The old saying tells us that there are two things you can be sure of: death and taxes. I believe that here on the plains of Kansas, we can add a third constant: drouth. Not often, thank goodness, do we get the extended dry years of the Dust Bowl or of the 1950s, but a dry spell of a few weeks that will lower the yield of field crops or stunt the growth of pasture grass is something that often happens, sometimes more than once during the growing season. I missed the 1930s, but I well remember the dry years of the middle 1950s, a drouth that began right after the record-breaking floods of 1951.

It was summer of either 1952 or 1953 that my father and I were riding across the Funk Pasture, a section of grass northwest of Cassoday. Except there was

no grass. Not enough to hide a jackrabbit, Dad said. As we rode along, there was a crackling sound as our horses' hooves crunched the brittle, dry, short stems of bluestem, the ground covered with the ashes of that spring's pasture burn. There had not been enough rain either to wash away the ash or to cause the grass to grow tall enough to hide it.

It was in the middle '50s that a cowboy who was either from or had worked in Arizona was working on a Flint Hills ranch. We were sitting in Opal's Café, waiting for the train to arrive so that we could load cattle, and this man (I can see him in my mind's eye, but I can't recall his name) was telling about a bet he had lost. There had been no rain for well over a month, he said (which we all knew anyway), when he and another cowboy set out from the barn for a day in the pastures. The Arizonan commented on how Kansas was even drier than Arizona, and the Kansan said, "I'll bet you 10 dollars we get wet before we get back to the barn this evening." The Arizonan shook his hand, and the two set off under a blue sky and a searing sun. About midafternoon, a small thunderhead built up, lightning flashed, and a strong shower of rain hit them. They could still see the sun shining in front and on either side of them, the path of the rain wasn't more than a few hundred yards wide, and the shower lasted only a few minutes. But



**Storm III**  
Clive Fullagar

it was enough to soak both cowboys, and back at the barn the Kansas cowboy collected his 10 dollars.

Despite the sometimes prolonged dry spells, the Flint Hills generally have enough rain to provide grass for the transient cattle that fill the Hills every summer. Not quite as bad, because at

least the grass grows thick and tall, are the times when so much rain falls that the bluestem loses its nutritive power, that it becomes "washy" and doesn't pack on the pounds the way it usually does. Ideally, there's enough moisture from the sky in spring to cause the grass to quickly cover the ground blackened from





**Brook Under Heavy Snow in the Pasture**  
**West of Matfield Station — 10 February 2021**  
 Philip Heying

the spring burn with a vibrant green (Jim Richardson, the National Geographic photographer from Lindsborg, has commented that the two greenest places on earth are Ireland and the Flint Hills), and enough rain coming at appropriate times to keep the grass strong and growing during the summer.

Winter weather is also important in the Flint Hills, especially since more cattle are now here year-round than when I was young, and not just cow herds but yearlings being kept in lots or on dry grass until pasture season begins. When I was growing up, we fed our cows a sorghum called kaffir corn in addition to alfalfa and prairie hay during the winter. Protein pellets have now replaced the sorghum, and big round or big square bales have replaced our stacks of loose hay. Also, snowfall is less frequent and less deep now than earlier on. Winter weather can still be onerous for Flint Hills cowboys and ranchers, but nowadays they have a warm pickup cab to get into rather than a mile or two in the open driving a team of mules pulling a load of hay to feed the cows.

No question but that weather plays an important part in the life of a Flint Hills rancher. Rain falls unevenly, and an inch at the home place may be 6 inches a mile away — or nothing. A conversation often begins with “How much did you get?” and

the hearer knows without asking that the question refers to rainfall.

One of my favorite stories is about the old Kansas farmer who finally hangs it all up when he hits his early 80s — no more milking the cows and bucket-feeding the calves twice a day, no more pulling windmills in the heat of summer, no more breaking pond ice for the cows in subzero temperatures with the wind blowing sleet in his face. Instead, he and his wife have accepted their married daughter’s invitation to join her in Southern California. After a couple of years of sunny, mild weather, he steps out of the house one morning, looks up at the blue sky and mutters, “Oh, hell. Another damn beautiful day.”

We have those beautiful days here in the Flint Hills, too, and we cherish them because they’re not every day.

Jim Hoy, a native of Cassoday, is professor emeritus of English and director emeritus of the Center for Great Plains Studies at Emporia State University. His latest book is “My Flint Hills,” published by the University Press of Kansas.