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Cattle in the Flint Hills

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RANCHING

Cattle in the Flint Hills

The Flint Hills are often referred to as “steer country” rather than “cow country,” a distinction that refers to the practice of putting stocker cattle (i.e., steers and heifers intended for beef) on summer grass rather than keeping permanent cow herds (i.e., mother cows intended for raising calves, which will themselves become stockers – transient



cattle as opposed to fulltime residents, in other words. This is not to say that there are not many year-round cow herds kept in the Flint Hills (the Doyle Creek Ranch, site of this year’s Symphony in the Flint Hills, for instance, is well known for its top quality herd of Black Angus cows), but the dominant mode of Flint Hills ranching is, and has traditionally been, the pasturing of cattle from somewhere else for a prescribed season of late

spring, summer, and early fall grazing.

The first domestic cattle in numbers of any consequence that appeared in the Flint Hills were undoubtedly the oxen that pulled freight wagons along the Santa Fe Trail. Following the opening of the Trail in 1821, Council Grove, in the middle of the Morris County Flint Hills, became a major stopping point for Santa Fe traders, partly because of the good water from the Neosho River, partly because of the



E. T. ANDERSON-TYING STEER *September 28, 1916*

expansive grove of hardwood trees from which teamsters could construct wagon repairs, and partly because of the lush native prairie grasses.

Particularly in the spring and early summer when the protein content in the bluestem (to use this term generically for the four dominant tallgrasses of the Flint Hills – big and little bluestem, switch grass, and Indian grass) was at its peak, oxen would be allowed a few extra days of grazing around Council Grove in order to gain strength for the long stretches of dry prairie that often lay ahead on their journey. When Kansas Territory opened for settlement in 1854, it didn't take long for farmers and stockmen, as had

the Santa Fe ox drivers, to learn of the nutritional value of Flint Hills grass.

In fact, the oldest family-owned cattle ranch in the Flint Hills was established by David Sauble in 1856 only a few miles west of the site for this year's Symphony in the Flint Hills. By the time the big Texas-to-Kansas trail drives began a dozen years later, Flint Hills bluestem had already gained a well deserved reputation for its ability to put pounds of meat on a steer quickly and economically.

That ability, however, is seasonal. From late April through mid July the bright green grasses of the Flint Hills contain a high level of protein, but that level begins to drop in late summer

as the blades transfer the sun's energy into the roots for winter dormancy. By winter there is very little food value in the brown, dry grass. But a steer can gain weight rapidly on a diet of Flint Hills grass when it is at its peak. One reason for this, besides the abundance of protein, is that bluestem roots go deep into the soil and the soil of the Flint Hills is underlain (and often overlain) with limestone, a water-soluble rock. The roots of the grass pick up lime and transfer it to the blades as calcium, an essential nutrient for bone growth. The calcium in Flint Hills grass causes bones to grow more quickly than they would in cattle grazing on grass growing over a rock such as sandstone. The result is a larger skeletal structure, which in turn provides more frame on which the protein in bluestem can hang beef. Thus the phenomenal weight gains, as much as three pounds a day for a yearling on a diet of nothing but grass—Flint Hills grass.

Until barbed wire fencing became

economically feasible in the later 1880s, cattle summering in the Flint Hills were loose-herded, often by young men called "herd boys." Some of these herd boys, such as Arthur Crocker of Chase County and Tom Watkins of northeast Butler County, later became prominent Flint Hills cattlemen. Herd boys like Crocker and Watkins would camp out for days or weeks at a time with the cattle, particularly large herds of Texas cattle. Their employers would take supplies out to them, or the boys might occasionally come into headquarters. Other herders would take cattle out daily and bring them in at night, as my grandfather did in his youth with a small herd of cows owned by some men from Newton. Each morning he would graze the cows north toward Jack Springs in southern Chase County, then at night drive them back to his home northwest of Cassoday.

By the later 1890s much of the Flint Hills had been fenced, although there are accounts of cattle being loose herded



near Beaumont and in southeast Chase County as late as the first two decades of the twentieth century. Kansas fence law gave each county the option of deciding whether stock owners had to fence in their livestock (enclosed pastures) or whether farmers had to fence off their crops (open range). Marion County voted for the former option, Chase County the latter, which led to some inevitable disputes (and at least one death) when Marion County stock owners loosed their cattle onto the open

range pastures of Chase County.

During the years of the great Texas-to-Kansas trail drives following the Civil War, many of the cattle in the Flint Hills were Texas longhorns. In the 1870s, for instance, a group of Greenwood County men went to Texas, bought cattle, and drove them back to stock their pastures. Other times, longhorns owned by Texans would be summered on the open-range uplands of the Flint Hills before being driven on to cowtowns such as Abilene or Wichita. In 1880 a British syndicate, which owned a large cow-calf ranch in the Texas panhandle, established a ranch in northwestern Chase County where steers from its Texas ranch were sent for summer grazing and for winter feeding on corn raised in the Diamond Creek valley. This pattern of Texas cattle grazing summer grass in the Flint Hills, which became well established during last half of the nineteenth century, continued well past the middle of the next.

As the open range came to an end in the later nineteenth century, Texas ranchers, thanks to widespread fencing and the use of windmills to provide water where there were no springs or streams, began to upgrade their herds by replacing longhorn bulls with blooded Herefords and Durhams (i.e., Shorthorns), and later with Brahms. By the early 1900s most of the cattle on Texas ranches were either British breeds, Brahma (to use the Flint Hills pronunciation), or crosses thereof. Up until about 1970 most of these crossbred Texas steers coming to summer grass in Kansas were from two to four years old. They were shipped up on trains, arriving in mid April as the pastures were turning green after having been burned a few weeks earlier in order to clear off the previous year's dead grass. Beginning in July, the fattest of these steers would be sorted off and sent to market, usually Kansas City but sometimes to St. Joseph, Omaha, or Chicago. From July until the end of the

grazing season, this periodic sorting off of just the fattest steers would continue until the pastures were entirely cleared by mid October.

Around 1970 several changes occurred to alter this pattern of Flint Hills ranching. One was the complete switch from trains to trucks in hauling cattle. Another was in the nature of the cattle themselves. Rather than older steers, the cattle industry had begun to favor yearlings. Also, the dominance of the Hereford, Shorthorn, and Brahman breeds was being successfully challenged by a wave of "exotic" breeds—Charolais, Simmental, Limousine, Saler, Chianina, among others—as well as a growing preference for Black Angus crosses.



Kansas Historical Society

At about this same time the practice of double stocking was introduced, whereby twice as many cattle are put in a pasture, but for only half the normal time. During the first three months of the standard

“Take care of the grass and the grass will take care of you.”

six-month grazing season the grass is at its nutritional peak, enjoying its greatest growth spurt, and the average rainfall is higher. When the cattle are removed, the grass has another three months to grow and store energy. Thus, for example, instead of allowing three acres of grass for one yearling for six months, each yearling will get an acre and a half for three months.

One result of the above changes is that all the cattle arrive by truck at the pasture at the same time in the spring (as they did in the stockyards by train in the earlier period), but they all leave by truck at the same time at

the end of the season (as opposed to being shipped by train piecemeal over a three-month period as they fattened). Another change is that whereas summer cattle used to come to the Flint Hills primarily from Texas (as many still do), now they come from many states, from as near as Missouri and Oklahoma to as far away as Florida.

Whether in the earlier years or today, a successful Flint Hills rancher is one who manages grass rather than cattle: “Take care of the grass and the grass will take care of you.” Bluestem grass is both tough and fragile, and a rancher knows that if his pastures are systematically overgrazed, cattle will not do as well as they could and trees and brush will invade the prairie. He knows, too, that if an abused pasture is allowed to rest and if a careful plan of burning is followed, the grass will recover surprisingly quickly. But he also knows that once the native prairie is destroyed by plowing, it will never again be the same. The Doyle Creek

Ranch, site of the 2009 Symphony in the Flint Hills, provides a good example of well-cared-for grass.

Overgrazing was not uncommon in many areas of the Flint Hills during the earlier years, as some ranchers tended to put too many cattle on their land while others were more conservative. After a severe drouth in 1913, however, standard acreages for pasturing were adopted, not by governmental edict, but by a kind of unofficial consensus among landowners, graziers, cattle owners, and livestock organizations. Depending on the quality of the grass in a particular pasture, an aged Texas steer was given an average of five acres of grass for the six-month grazing season. Thus a 1,000 acre pasture would handle 200 big steers. A cow and calf might be given from six to eight acres for summer grazing, or eight to ten acres if kept on a pasture year-round.

When yearling stockers replaced the older cattle as the norm, around three acres per head were allotted; thus that

1,000 acre pasture that carried 200 mature steers would now carry around 330 younger ones. Alternatively, the stocking rate may be determined by the weight of the cattle being pastured, not by their numbers—more cattle in a pasture if they are lighter, fewer if they weigh more. In double stocking, that 1,000 acre pasture would receive around 650 yearlings in the spring, but they would all be removed after 90 days rather than 180.

In addition to stocking rates, ranchers have other tools to help maintain the health of their grass, such as access to water or the placement of salt. Another is the annual spring burn-off of the old grass, that most colorful of Flint Hills ranching rituals. Burning not only helps to keep the prairie clear of brush and trees, but it can also be used to influence grazing patterns. If in the previous year cattle have overgrazed one area of a pasture and neglected another, the rancher will sometimes burn the ungrazed area and not the

overgrazed section; the cattle will then favor the fresh grass in the burned area, allowing the overgrazed area to recover. Large pastures will sometimes be burned in sections a few weeks apart. Thus cattle will move to the most

Thanks in large part to these responsible ranchers, most of the Flint Hills today look much as they would have to the pioneers who arrived in the early days of Kansas settlement.

recently burned section as the new grass comes in. In recent years some ranchers have begun to patch burn, i.e., to burn a third of a large pasture one year, another third the second, and the final third on the third year. This

method not only fosters the strength of the grass, but it also creates favorable conditions for prairie chickens and other grassland birds to nest and feed.

The rule of thumb in pasture burning is to take half and leave half. In other words, a good grass manager attempts to ensure that the cattle graze only half the grass in a pasture, leaving the other half for burning the following spring.

Fortunately, most ranchers in the Flint Hills have, over the years, been good stewards of the land, caring more for good grass and fat cattle than for a fast buck. Thanks in large part to these responsible ranchers, most of the Flint Hills today look much as they would have to the pioneers who arrived in the early days of Kansas settlement.

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NOTES

BLUE GRAMA

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