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The Heritage of the Plow

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Rebirth
Norman Akers

THE HERITAGE OF THE PLOW

Narratives of the past, present and future of the Flint Hills have the potential to shape the lives and careers of young Kansans — the very individuals who will write the next chapters of our region's history. Who better to ask to imagine the coming pages of our story than young scholars earning their degrees in the colleges and universities across the Sunflower State? What follows is the winning essay from a new writing contest sponsored by donors who treasure each year's Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal. Here's to an ongoing stream of Field Journal contributions from young Kansans, starting this year and continuing for years to come. Who knows — perhaps we will be treated to an offering from the next William Allen White, Laura Ingalls Wilder or Langston Hughes!

At 8 years old, flitting between the ornamental trees at the new family home, I spied my father making for a pine tree with his chainsaw.

“Dad, you can’t cut it down!”

I loved the pine specially because it was sick. I thought that I could save it with my care alone and that our yard in Abilene, Kansas, would stay exactly as it was. The pine would remain friends with the golden rain tree in the side yard and the silver maples in the front.

“It’s dead,” Dad stopped to explain. “Cutting it down is better for all the other trees.”

“But I named him.”

I called him Roger the pine. And I was utterly convinced that love could save a dying thing.

The Schartz family came to America from Luxembourg sometime in the late 1860s. My Great-Great-Grandpa PJ, the fourth of seven, was the last child born to Peter and Mary in Luxembourg, around 1867. His brother John was born in Illinois around 1870. Great-Great-Great-Grandpa Peter applied for citizenship in Illinois on July 23, 1870. By 1905, many of his children had transplanted themselves to Ellinwood, Kansas, near Great Bend.

The Schartzes proliferated in Ellinwood and the surrounding area. They sold land and cattle and were featured prominently on a 1916 Great Bend Daily Tribune list of all the county residents who owned automobiles.

In his autobiography, Grandpa Omar calls his grandfather PJ a “land speculator.” The timeline suggests PJ was not in Kansas in the mid-1800s when white land speculators first threatened Indigenous land claims. PJ, nevertheless, was allowed to purchase land previously and variously occupied by the Kaw, Kiowa, Pawnee, Ute, Comanche and Osage. He disseminated this land to each of his nine surviving children as farmsteads.

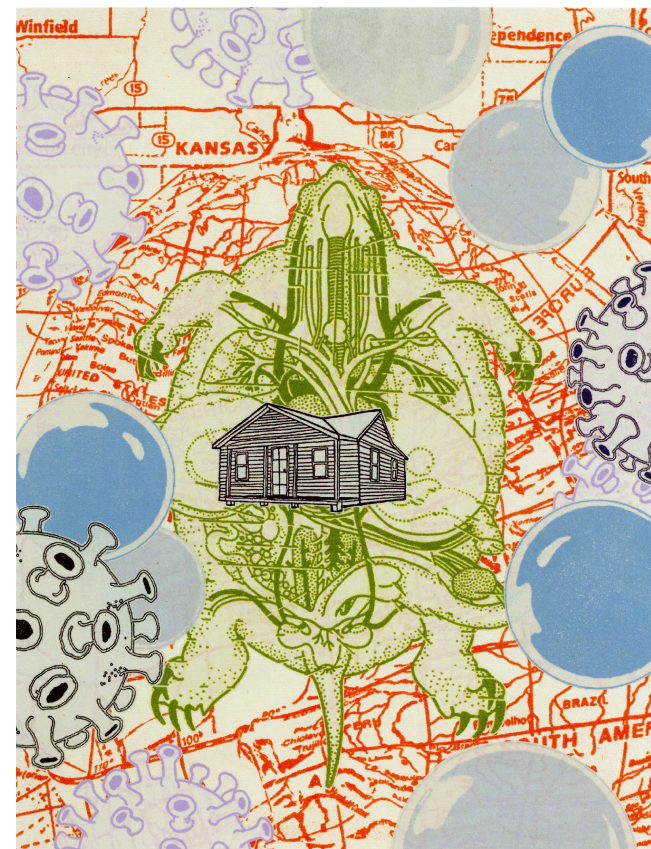
Nearly 100 years after Great-Great-Grandpa PJ arrived in Kansas, I was born in the heart of the Flint Hills in Council Grove, a small town founded on unwillingly ceded Kaw land, a town which became instrumental in the removal of

Indigenous nations from Kansas. Behind me, my family’s history plowed a deep furrow from the High Plains of the West to the Flint Hills.

My friend Hunter, a fellow graduate student at Kansas State University, asks me what I mean when I say, “I love Kansas.”

“I just *do*,” I want to say. You don’t get it. I’m Kansas stock. I’m farmers’ crop. I was bred for callused hands and windburn. Great-Grandma Dora put her drinking glasses in the cabinet upside-down because she lived through the Dust Bowl, and I do it too. We’re hard-work’s-the-only-thing-that-gets-you-anywhere folk. I love Kansas so much I came back to school to write my lament for Flint Hills bison. We’re born of the land, made of the land, dirt and blood of Kansas on our hands.

These sources of family pride matter not enough, and all too much, in face of history. They recognize what we had a hand in, admit to what we did and don’t change a thing. Our pride is settler pride. It is pride that we came here and made it work. Pride that my grandfathers found a way to make the High Plains produce soybeans and wheat. Pride that I coaxed the story of Flint Hills bison from splintered prairies and libraries in land-grant universities. The true grit of



What We Can't See
Norman Akers

the Schartz man is to survive in places he doesn't know.

Strike that.

**WITH PRIDE I PLACE MY
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KNOW WE DRAGGED THE DUST
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The true grit of the Schartz man is to make these places work the way he *wants*. With pride I place my cups upside-down to keep the dust out like I don't know we dragged the Dust Bowl here on the leash of colonial agriculture. Like I haven't spent the last two years curled in library chairs on land granted to universities without the permission of its original stewards, reading about how white movement into Kansas decimated bison and tallgrass prairie in the Flint Hills.

White men must break things in order to reap. Before you plant, you must break the soil. Before you run cattle, you must fence the land and break the horizon. Before you write your lament for bison, you must break their land and population into fragments. My family heritage says so. Upon Grandpa Omar's death, we each inherited one of his oil paintings, the subject often farm toil. The heritage

of the plow hangs in places of distinction in all the homes of my close relatives.

Maybe I love Kansas only because it survived us coming here.

The more I examine the mythos we have created for ourselves in Kansas — an assumption that we can make anything, any place, be what we want, and that all our hard work means we deserve it — the more I come to admit I love Kansas less than I thought. Maybe the voyage from Luxembourg, the long trail from Illinois to Kansas, and the years of drought made me think that loving a place was making it into what you need.

In the Flint Hills, the survival of the prairie biome is predicated on destruction. A burn cycle of about five years encourages new grass growth, provides nutrients for the soil and burns down young cedar trees which, left to grow, would expand into a canopy that would block out the sun and kill the prairie grasses beneath it. Burning, the Flint Hills' destruction by its own devices, prevents these things. Bison have been recorded running toward smoke because they know fire makes room for new growth and new grazing.

White farmers and ranchers also practice burning, but we burn too frequently, and with our yearly burnings dies biodiversity and the opportunity for

regrowth. Following our practices, the land will work the way we want and give us what we think we need. Every time we burn and grey smoke coils into azure sky, we don't see the reminder that this land used to be what it needed.

The Great Bend Weekly Tribune wrote of Great-Great-Great-Uncle John in his obituary that Schartz men are "sturdy pioneer[s] who came to this country when it was little more than wilderness, [and were] a material factor in its building." In Manhattan where I live and study bison, just north of the Konza Prairie tallgrass preserve, I learn that only 4% of Kansas' prairies survive. I sit back in my chair beneath the wide windows of the library and try to understand that my

forefathers, that my father, that I were a material factor in this undoing. Loving the bison I visited in the beginning stages of my master's project or the wide-open farmland Grandma Jewel pointed toward while she whispered stories of our past is not enough.

Tallgrass prairie resisting in the highway median is threatened by the rumbling of automobiles. A debt is owed to Indigenous stewards of this land for the farms of Schartz wealth. Dying pine trees must be chopped down. Kansas has no native pines anyway. There is work here. Work is what my forefathers have taught me to do. And I want to love this place in ways that whiteness never taught me.

Achilles Schartz Seastrom is a graduate student at Kansas State University studying creative writing. His work on the Midwest is often inspired by long, rambling hikes he takes with his greyhound, Loch.