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2023 - Transportation in the Flint Hills

Plains, Trains and Automobiles: Perspective From a Six Bulls Crossing

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Recommended Citation

Manes, Rob (2023). "Plains, Trains and Automobiles: Perspective From a Six Bulls Crossing," Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal.

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The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

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Cowboy Mural, 2022
Jeremiah Ariaz

PLAINS, TRAINS AND AUTOMOBILES

PERSPECTIVE FROM A SIX BULLS CROSSING

She had crossed the Six Bulls River on that buffalo trail many times in her 12 years.

Her first crossings were on the back of her mother, who later showed her this place where bison had trampled a wide, gentle slope down the grassy east bank and up the rocky opposite side. It provided a safe place to traverse from the tribe's shaded fall camp on the east side to a grazing lawn on the west, where edible tubers were easy to dig. Even with the frequent disturbance of the great ungulates, the swirling river water was so transparent in the high September sun that she could clearly see the crawdads, mussels and glimmering fish that floated in darting ballets above the mottled white gravel stream bed. She stood motionless in the cool water as a huge school of common shiners moved in synchrony around her legs. The tuber digging would wait.

If that Kanza girl had waited there in the Six Bulls River for 50 more autumns, she would have witnessed her bison crossing become the Santa Fe Trail, with trains of lumbering, wooden-wheeled wagons pulled by every imaginable kind of hooved animal, sometimes flanked by weary, dirty pedestrians who plodded through 15 miles of dust or mud day after day. It was often miserable travel.

Standing there for another half century, she would have seen the river named Le Grande Riviere, Nee Ozho, Neozhoo and a half-dozen other monikers. Later, she would have witnessed the trail dust-choked from skinny-tired early automobiles that often broke down, leaving their passengers waiting for the next horse-drawn conveyance. She would have seen the river's

name changed finally to Neosho and her scenic crossing replaced by a concrete bridge carrying U.S. Highway 56 from the Kansas City livestock hub *exactly* to the place where she crossed, in present-day Council Grove, Kansas. If she had stood there until spring 2023, she would have seen her trail transformed into a wide black asphalt ribbon adorned in yellow and white stripes, a paved road that carries roaring tractor-trailer rigs and humming electric cars west to Springer, New Mexico, and beyond.

Kansas measures just a little more than 400 miles east to west and 200 miles north to south. It is carved by more than 140,000 miles of roads and 8,000 miles of railroad tracks. Six dozen airports, mostly small municipal facilities, display their triangle runway systems across the state. Kansas has long been a place of powerful commerce — the Wheat State, an aircraft hub, a technology producer and always a top cattle exporter. All of this commerce, and the people who make it happen, demand transportation — “planes, trains and automobiles.” Like all development, no transportation comes without impacts to nature and to the beauty of natural places like the Flint Hills.

Roads must be expanded and fortified to serve faster cars, heavier trucks, and new businesses and homes. Similarly, railways and airports demand upgrades, new routes, improved infrastructure, and

service to new customers and locations. In addition, safety improvements are a never-ending driver of all transportation system modifications. Rarely — perhaps never — do any of these system changes happen without impact to the wild beauty we treasure.

The Flint Hills bear the scars of our transportation demands. Some of those wounds were inflicted by influences far from the tallgrass prairie, far from Kansas. Before Kansas was a state, deep wagon ruts cut the Flint Hills, where many thousands of prairie chickens, furs and bison hides were loaded into wagons and hauled to Eastern urban destinations. Today, our lives and livelihoods depend even more on our ability to ship countless industrial and agricultural products across and out of the Flint Hills and Kansas to global destinations. And we travel for fun, for pleasure and for the sight of the very natural beauty our trafficways despoil.

So we must always diligently protect the wildness, scenic values, lands, waters and wildlife of the precious tallgrass landscape we love, while ensuring our ability to travel safely and efficiently across it. We have become much more adept at those complex challenges since the last wagonload of bison hides left Kansas. State and federal environmental standards for design and construction of highways, railways and airports are



Train Mural, 2022

Jeremiah Ariaz

rigorous, and the technologies for identifying and avoiding ecologically sensitive features are well established. Universities, government agencies and non-government organizations contribute important science to the protection of sensitive and important ecological assets.

The Nature Conservancy's Site Renewables Right data system, for example, identifies areas that might be

ecologically sensitive to many types of development, including transportation. And TNC's Intact Natural Landscapes database has been used for more than a decade to delineate and protect the contiguous Flint Hills tallgrass region. Soil stability, important wildlife habitats, water quality and air purity are guarded by a growing body of science and practice, and by public awareness.



Muscle Cars, 2022
Jeremiah Ariaz

State and federal laws and regulations also provide important environmental safeguards in the transportation development context. A fundamental, underlying philosophy of these rules is that public funds spent to create transportation benefits for everyone must not create environmental detriments for the country's or state's citizens to suffer. The federal Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act, National Environmental Policy Act and Endangered Species Act afford guidance to agencies and companies using federal funds. Further environmental stewardship guidance is provided by Kansas laws governing air, water and wildlife habitat. The use of state or federal funds in Kansas triggers the state's Environmental Coordination Act, which requires appropriate agencies to cooperatively review and govern the impacts of projects executed with taxpayer money.

One key effect of this legal framework is that when transportation infrastructure development unavoidably impacts important environmental features, the negative impacts must be mitigated or

offset. Damaged habitats are replaced or enhanced, often in areas removed from the site of the development impact, and sponsoring state and federal agencies are required to fund the permanent restoration and protection of like-kind natural features elsewhere. The science, practice and economics of mitigation has advanced greatly in recent years, and the quality of replacement habitats has improved correspondingly.

If the Council Grove crossing on the Six Bulls River carried only a 12-year-old girl, her people and a few hundred thousand grazing animals every year, there would be no need to understand, regulate and mitigate the impacts of transportation. But the future seems to guarantee even more demand for fast, safe and efficient conveyance across the Flint Hills and around the world. So we commit our minds, hearts and money to doing it right, even better than today ... to ensuring that a 12-year-old in 2023 can still see the Neosho River's shiners swirl around her feet and witness fall in the tallgrass.

A 50-year Kansan, Rob Manes says he's been fortunate to have a four-decade conservation career. About half of his work has been in the private sector and half in government agencies. Currently, he is director of The Nature Conservancy's North American Grazing Lands Program and continues to live in his beloved Kansas. He has four children, and most of his extended family members live in Ellsworth County.