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## A Brief History of the Flint Hills

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**Bringing the Cows Home**  
Mark Feiden

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FLINT HILLS

There are many different ways to approach writing a history, but ultimately it boils down to what the writer thinks is most important.

There could, for instance, be many approaches to a history of the Flint Hills: small towns, farming, petroleum, water resources, ethnic groups, geology, biology, etc. But to my mind, the most important approach should be cattle. When I think particularly of how they are transported to and from this tallgrass prairie, the history of this place falls roughly into three distinct eras, preceded by one long prehistorical era.

The bovine that was the precursor to cattle in the Flint Hills was the buffalo, the American Bison. Ride across any Flint Hills pasture that hasn't given way to the plow (and millions of acres have not), and you will see scores of buffalo wallows, i.e., circular (usually) depressions in the dirt where bison once rolled to combat flies. Some of the wallows are hundreds, even thousands of years old, predating even the first humans who settled here. Those first humans were the Indigenous Americans, and the humans who succeeded these first peoples became tribes whose names we recognize — Osage, Pawnee, Kanza, Comanche, Kiowa, Cheyenne, and Arapaho.

These people inhabited the Flint Hills for several thousands of years before European explorers and settlers arrived. The few marks they left on the land were chiefly tepee rings and stone tools. We know that some of them were here at least 12,000 years ago because they left behind a number of Clovis and Folsom projectile points, as well as a few buffalo jumps.

Euro-American history in Kansas and the Great Plains began with Coronado, but he did not reach the Flint Hills. American settlers arrived in parts of the Flint Hills soon after Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, and that influx increased with the passage of the Homestead Act in 1862. Settlers soon discovered, however, that only the creek and river bottoms were suited to farming; the hilltops were either covered with large rocks, or the rocks were only a few inches below the surface, presenting a formidable obstacle to a plow. As an Osage Indian is said to have warned a homesteader with a sod-busting plow strapped to the side of his covered wagon: “You will have a hard time putting that iron thing in the ground here.”

Unlike much of the ranching West, a distinctive feature of the Flint Hills is a mix of farming (the lowlands along streams) and ranching (the rocky uplands). The early homesteaders brought with them a few cattle, but the bovines that became the hallmark of the Flint Hills were Texas cattle, brought in after the Civil War to gain flesh on the warm-season tallgrass prairie before shipment to feedlots or to market on railroad trains in the autumn. This pattern – bringing in thousands of longhorns during the spring, then shipping them to Iowa or Nebraska farm feedlots, or to Kansas City, St. Louis,

Omaha, or St. Joseph markets when they had fattened – developed soon after the War Between the States.

This is what I call the Trail Drive Era of Flint Hills history. Cattle transported themselves on foot (guided and prodded by mounted drovers) from Texas to Kansas to run free during the summer grazing season. Cowboys then rounded them up and loaded them on trains that took them to the stockyards, feed yards, and packing plants of the Midwest. The most famous of the cattle trails, the Chisholm Trail, which opened in 1867, ran just a few miles west of the Flint Hills. As early as 1868, drovers moved cattle into the Flint Hills to graze for a few months before going on to the cowtowns. None of the major Texas-to-Kansas cattle trails deliberately passed through the Flint Hills. Cowboys much preferred softer, sandier soil for a drive, not the rocky Flint Hills.

The Trail Drive Era of the Flint Hills thus began around 1867 and ended around 1890, when cattle were loaded onto trains in Texas and unloaded in Flint Hills stockyards. They were then driven horseback, sometimes for a mile or two, sometimes for as many as 40 miles, to the pastures where they would spend the summer, until it was time to load them back onto trains to send them to Iowa or Nebraska farm feedlots, or to markets in Omaha, Chicago, or



**Anderson Ranch**  
Mark Feiden

Kansas City. Thus, the Railroad Era of Flint Hills history.

That 1890 date is flexible because some Flint Hills towns got railroads earlier than others. The Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway, for instance, reached Bazaar in Chase County in 1886, and Bazaar soon became the major shipping point on the ATSF. Not until 1924 did that railroad extend south through Matfield Green and Cassoday on its way to Oklahoma, at which point Cassoday — the Cow Capital of Kansas, as KFH Radio agricultural

broadcaster Bruce Behymer dubbed it — became the major shipping point on the ATSF.

I was fortunate to come of age during the last quarter century of the Railroad Era. My father, Kenneth, and his brother, Marshall, were genuine Flint Hills cowboys, sought after by ranchers from as far away as Madison to help work and ship cattle. They would ride from our little ranch a mile west of Cassoday (this was long before horse trailers and pickup trucks) to Madison to help



Josh and Jim Hoy  
Mark Feiden

Dow Gilbreath with cattle, sleeping in a Greenwood County oilfield shack along the way.

My father first took me to help pastureman Frank Klasser (pronounced Clay-zure) drive cattle from his Greenwood County ranch a dozen or more miles east of Cassoday when I was 6 years old. We would round up a pasture full of 2- or 3-year-old Texas steers, then Olin Weaver (of the Texas Livestock Producers Commission Company, if I remember correctly), Klasser, or occasionally my father or another cowboy would cut out the steers fat enough for

market. We kids would “hold-the-cut” while the other steers were turned loose to gain more weight before their turn for shipping. In the spring, the steers would arrive 40 or 45 steers to a stock car and leave a few months later 20 or 25 to a car because they had gained so much weight.

Next, while Klasser or someone he designated counted the steers left behind (the pastureman was responsible for the count; if he was short at the end of the season, he had to pay for the ones missing), the rest of us began moving the herd to the Cassoday stockyards. Once there, we weighed the cattle, put them

in a pen, and waited for the train after eating at Opal's Café. Once the train arrived (usually mid-to-late afternoon) we would load the steers, ride home to chore, and get ready for the next shipping day.

Sometime after World War II, cattlemen began using trucks for hauling cattle, chiefly from the Flint Hills to markets. During the 1950s, trucks began to be used more for bringing cattle from Texas into the Flint Hills, although trains were still bringing the cattle from Texas. By the late 1960s, however, railroads were discouraging the cattle trade, and by 1970, you would be hard pressed to load a steer on a train anywhere in the American West. We had entered the Trucking Era of Flint Hills history.

At about the same time, as the public's taste changed from older to younger, more tender beef, the cattle grazing in the Flint Hills switched from 2-year-olds to yearlings. Very soon thereafter, double-stocking became more common. Double-stocking means putting twice as many head in a pasture as normal but leaving them only half as long. Thus, instead of 500 steers in a pasture for six months, you would put 1,000 steers in a

pasture for three months. They graze the pasture in mid-to-late April until mid-to-late July, a period when rainfall is usually more abundant and when grass grows the fastest and is the most nutritious.

Another significant difference is that in the Railroad Era, all the cattle arrived at one time, but just part of them would leave at any one time, spacing out their departure over the last three months of their time in the pasture. With double-stocking, the cattle all arrive on the same day and all leave on the same day. Also, in the Railroad Era, you had to go to the stockyards to receive the cattle before driving them to their summer home. Trucks, however, will take cattle directly to the pasture, unloading them there by using a portable chute. At the end of the season, the cattle all leave at the same time. If there is not a set of pens in the pasture or in a nearby pasture, then a set of portable pens can be set up.

So those, to my mind, are the three eras of Flint Hills history: Trail Drive, Railroad, and Trucking. I do not foresee any other way of transporting cattle that would replace trucks, unless diesel prices rise so high that we are forced to return to trail driving.

Jim Hoy, a native of Cassoday, Kansas, 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.