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A Letter To Koger

Jane Koger

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Grassland Species in the Anthropocene: Prairie Chicken
Kirsten Furlong

A LETTER TO KOGER

Koger Whit Lauer is Jane Koger's great-nephew and was born in 2023. The succession plan for Jane's ranch, the Homestead Ranch, is in the hands of Koger's family. Jane chose to share her stewardship values through a letter to him.

Dear Koger,

I want to tell you how I found where I belong in the world. When I returned to Chase County at the age of 26, I wanted to buy some pasture in the Flint Hills. Your grandmother Kay and I purchased land from the Bell family, whom we had known all our lives. AFTER the purchase, we discovered that it was the same land our great-grandparents had homesteaded in 1884! We were both amazed and elated. This seemed much more than coincidence, and I knew in my heart this is where I belonged. I've loved being here all my life and know I found my Home on the Range.

Years ago, I was asked an important question: "Do you want a pasture or a prairie?" I knew I wanted a home, not only for me but for the community of plants and animals that are native to the tallgrass prairie — a home for the prairie chickens, jackrabbits, ornate box turtles, big bluestem and switchgrass, and for the coyotes, rattlesnakes, butterflies and meadowlarks.

Aldo Leopold said, "When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."

I've lived a wonderful life here in this prairie community, and I hope one day you will, too.

Anyone who knows your Aunt Jane knows how much I love prairie chickens! I've introduced them to many dozens of people over the years at the booming ground on the ranch. I've been

told by environmental experts that I may be the last generation to experience the joy of watching them do their fascinating mating dance. I am stewarding this land in such a way that I hope will make it more likely that you will get to share this extraordinary “dance” with your children, too.

BEING A LAND STEWARD TAKES PRIORITY OVER RAISING THE BEEF WE ALL LOVE.

The biggest change I made in stewardship of this land is the shift from a focus on cattle to a focus on the natural landscape and grass management. Being a land steward takes priority over raising the beef we all love, Koger! Ranchers live in a “working landscape” where there’s an important connection between our need to “protect” as well as “produce” from the land. Good grass and range management improves water quality, provides better water absorption and reduces flooding. It can also reduce wildfires and help lock up atmospheric carbon; all these “environmental services” are vitally important to the well-being of everyone on the planet. So, we’re part of a bigger picture that I hope you’re also starting to see.

Another major change I made in grass management is the shift to patch burning,

only burning one-third of the pasture each year instead of burning it all. Patch burning has made a huge positive impact on the flora and fauna on the ranch. Burning one sector each year means the entire pasture is burned once every three years. This has increased the diversity of plant life, which has resulted in an increase in the number and diversity of butterfly species (which we have counted) and many other small insects and pollinators, too. Patch burning creates better habitat for wildlife and more cover for ground-nesting birds like meadowlarks and prairie chickens. Anyone who likes to hunt, fish or watch birds experiences this improvement. The ability to see tallgrass every year is a real boost for a rancher — and one-third of our pastures have tallgrass.

Don’t get me wrong; cows and summer cattle have been a big part of my life here, but we’ve come to view them as tools for caring for the land. Their grazing and presence on the land elicit microbial responses that make the prairie healthier. Good grazing management practices entail using our cattle as tools to enhance the prairie. Fire and grazing are both essential to maintain a tallgrass prairie.

Sometimes, Koger, I wonder if your great-great-great-grandfather Beedle were able to visit us today whether he would recognize the land as it was when he homesteaded here in 1884. For the land

to remain as it is during and beyond your lifetime, I have placed it in a conservation easement. The easement protects the land from development but doesn’t impact our grazing operations, recreational use or ranch management. It will remain tallgrass prairie in perpetuity. That seems the best gift I can give to you and your children — and to the land. Because of this easement, we often refer to the ranch as the Republic of Grass.

This year is the 30th anniversary of Symphony on the Prairie that I hosted (with lots of volunteer help!) on the Homestead Ranch in 1994. That original event was a turning point for me in how I viewed stewardship. Several thousand people sat on that tallgrass prairie hillside with a 360-degree view of nature and enjoyed an evening concert of symphonic music. They stayed to watch one of the prairie’s best gifts — a spectacular sunset. I wish you could have been there! The people who were there knew they had

experienced something extraordinary — something that filled their souls. And I realized that stewardship of the land was not only about its ecology and economics, but it also has social and cultural dimensions. More importantly, that evening I understood that the prairie isn’t just home to me. Many people feel at home on the range, and I was happy to share mine with them.

Tallgrass Express String Band sings a song, written by Annie Wilson, that says, “Just a few places left now to pleasure the eyes with that clean curve of hill against sky.” The tallgrass prairie is one of those few places, and it nurtures people in unexplainable ways. I hope someday you will feel it, too! And I surely hope we can sit together and watch the prairie chickens do their spring mating dance on our ranch!

Love,
Great Aunt Jane

Jane Koger is a fourth-generation Chase County rancher who has been the owner and operator of the Homestead Ranch near Matfield Green, Kansas, for more than 42 years. She began the Homestead Range Renewal Initiative and experimental burning program in 2004, using patch burning to enhance wildlife habitat, especially for the greater prairie-chicken. Jane desires to leave the land in such a condition that it would be recognizable to her great-grandfather, who homesteaded it.