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Grazing in the Flint Hills

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Trailing Edge
John Richardson

GRAZING IN THE FLINT HILLS

In autumn of the later nineteenth century, a herd of cattle was being moved from the Great Plains to the West Coast.

Along about Idaho a tremendous blizzard hit, and the drovers abandoned the herd to seek shelter. The next spring they went back to where they had left the cattle to see if a few head might have survived the northern winter. To their great surprise not a few but the entire herd had not only survived, but they were fat as mud. (How mud can be fat I have no idea, but that's the comparison my father always used.) They had been abandoned in a valley of winter-fat, a grass that is at its most nutritious in winter.

In the Flint Hills, my father also said, while on a hayrack filled with kaffir corn pulled by a team of mules, a cow standing in belly-high bluestem could starve to death in the winter without supplemental protein. The point is that different grasses have different strengths and weaknesses. With bluestem that strength comes with spring and the new growth. No other grass puts meat and fat on stocker cattle quicker.

Back in the Railroad Era of Flint Hills history, the summer cattle arriving by train were primarily two-year-old Texas steers. Some of those drouthy cattle were so weak they had to be "tailed-up" to get them pushed out of the stock cars — and some were dead on those cars. But, if it was a warm spring with a little rain to bring fresh grass, those skin-and-bone steers with a couple of weeks' worth of bluestem in their bellies would be wringing their tails and looking for something to chase.

The late Glen Pickett, who was reared near Hymer in northwest Chase County, told me how he and some of his friends, riding home from school in the spring, liked to practice their roping skills on

those skin-and-bone steers. But one time the skinny steer he roped turned out to be full of energy from eating new bluestem. Glen lost his dad's rope and was worried about telling him, but his father simply said, "What are you going to say to John Badger when he asks about the rope his steer is dragging?" (Badger brothers John and Granville are legends in Chase County.) Glen told me, "I didn't sleep well all summer until that pasture was shipped."

There are four major native tallgrasses in the Flint Hills — big bluestem, little bluestem, switch grass and Indian grass — and who knows how many other grasses, both native and domesticated. Native tallgrasses should not be overgrazed (take half, leave half is the rule of thumb), but they can survive almost anything except being plowed. I don't know how long it would take for a field that has been farmed to look like native prairie if planted back to bluestem, but in 1955 my parents bought a quarter section, half cropland and half native pasture. Dad immediately sowed the farmed portion to bluestem. Today, in 2023, the plant-back portion is still obvious.

By contrast, between our house near Cassoday (Cow Capital of Kansas, KFH farm announcer Bruce Behymer called it) and that of my grandparents lies a 20-acre pasture, the Little Pasture. My grandfather kept a few sheep there, along with a team of mules and some milk cows. The grass in the Little Pasture never got taller than shoe-top

high. It was that way for as long as I could remember. When both Grandmother and Dad Hoy died, my uncle inherited the 80 acres and the house and barn where they had lived.

A year or so later, my cousin and her husband moved into the house and acquired around 70 acres of native grass and 70 acres of plant-back, all of which they eventually rented to a pastureman for summer grazing. The Little Pasture lay fallow for a few years. One summer, driving by, I was amazed to see a lush pasture where the overgrazed Little Pasture had been. The grass growing there was knee-high bluestem. After many years of overgrazing, the native grass in that pasture had fully recovered with just a few years' rest. But the formerly farmed acreage on that property, planted back to bluestem, has not.

Back in the 1960s and 70s, my father started a windbreak north of our house. It was probably a hundred yards long and 20 yards wide. He used cedar trees for the exterior trees and hardwoods for the middle. Winter wind doesn't blow through a cedar the way it does a leafless oak or hedge. He had no trouble finding newly sprouted hardwoods, but for the cedars he scoured the back roads and nearby pastures for several years before he was finally able to finish the windbreak.

Today my father could get all the cedar trees he needed just by driving through almost any pasture in the Flint Hills.



Susan Feeds the Herd, Ferrel Ranch, Kansas, 2024
Jeremiah Ariaz

Cedars are everywhere, a green invasion. They can be cut down or mowed when small, but the easiest way to kill a young cedar (or a hedge or an elm sprout) is with the environmentally sound practice of using fire, a practice that originated with the original inhabitants of and hunters on the tallgrass prairie, the Plains Indians.

One thing that especially strikes me when I drive or ride through the Flint Hills today is the plethora of trees, not only cedars but hedge and locust, that have sprung up in recent years. If we don't do a better job with fire, we'll have as many trees here as in the Ozarks, but scrubs, not good timber.

About the time I entered high school (1953), a quarter section of native grass sold a couple of miles from home. The buyer was from somewhere west of Wichita, Kansas, and it soon became obvious that he didn't understand the grass here. Where he was from in shortgrass country, you apparently needed to fully graze a pasture, clip it off to the ground. The standard here is to graze half and leave half. Graze it all, year after year, and, like our Little Pasture, you'll have to let it rest for years to get it back to normal.

Sometime around 1970, Flint Hills ranchers began to double-stock. In other

words, if a pasture held 200 aged Texas steers for a grazing season that ran 180 days from mid-April to mid-October, for double-stocking they would put 400 yearling steers on it but take them off ninety days (half a season) later. That way the animals were using the pasture when rainfall is usually higher and grass stronger. Double-stocked pastures are empty for the occasional late summer and fall rains, which let the grass recover and thus provide enough herbage for a good fire the next spring.

At first, I had my doubts about double-stocking, but in the decades it has been practiced I have decided that it works. One thing that helps is that the temporary bovine residents have changed from larger aged steers to smaller yearlings. Also, cattle used to arrive all at once from their Texas homes, then be removed a few score at a time from their summer homes from late July until they were all gone by mid-October. Now they arrive all at once in the spring and leave all at once in mid-summer.

All Flint Hills ranchers, to one degree or another, are stewards of the land. As late Chase County rancher Wayne Rogler once told me, "I don't raise cattle, I raise grass."

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. Jim's latest book is "Gathering Strays" from the University Press of Kansas.



Sunrise, Ferrel Ranch, Kansas, 2024
Jeremiah Ariaz