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Shaped by the Flint Hills

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West of Madison
Bob Regier

SHAPED BY THE FLINT HILLS

Another field trip to the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve? My third-grade-self pouted and sighed, silently wondering what could be so fascinating about those hills and pastures that surrounded me every day.

Listening to Mrs. Wold, who pointed out every species of grass and insect that we'd already been talking about in class, just didn't seem very exciting. At the ripe old age of eight, I assumed that everyone was familiar with the rolling Flint Hills that I called home. How could you not know their beauty?

As I got older, I realized the folly of my third-grade point of view. I was suddenly grateful that I had been raised on a farm in the middle of the Flint Hills. With time, I came to realize how significantly the tallgrass prairie vistas of my childhood would influence my life. It is my hope that everyone can be touched by the magic of the Flint Hills, appreciating their beauty, understanding their importance and working together to sustain this ancient natural landscape.

I was raised on a production agriculture farm near Saffordville, Kansas. For as long as I can remember, I have been riding with Dad in the tractor to plant the next crop, driving the truck to help feed cows and spending hot, grueling summers in the hayfield. On our farm, we produce soybeans, wheat and bales of brome and prairie hay, and we formerly ran a cow-calf operation. The majority of my childhood was spent learning the ways of farming in the Flint Hills. Eventually, I was trusted to operate the bigger equipment, like the planter and the drill, as well as the plow, to prepare the ground for the next crop. Farm work is seldom easy, but it's always necessary.

Farming in the Flint Hills has its own unique methods and guidelines. For starters, the flint rock makes tilling the hilly pastures an impossible task, so production is confined to bottomland vales and

river valleys for traditional row crops like soybeans and wheat. Thousands of head of cattle graze those untillable pastures, and sometimes — if the giant flint rocks don't get in the way — a hay crop can be coaxied from the rolling prairie hills. Flint Hills grass is prime cattle feed, providing ample nutritious grazing all summer long as the cattle are prepared for market. The Flint Hills are fickle and complicated to farm compared to the rest of Kansas.

I didn't fully appreciate my growing-up years in the Flint Hills. I saw the pristine natural landscape as simply a backdrop to the constant round of hardworking days on the farm. Slowly, I realized my passion for agriculture and the Flint Hills, which grew into my goal to educate others about their food, their clothing and the natural resources around them. I became an agriculture teacher. It is only in retrospect that I understand the gift that came wrapped in hard work and appreciate the valuable skills gained in those endeavors.

Many of my students in southeast Kansas have never experienced the Flint Hills, except for the background image on my laptop. Taken from my grandparents' lane, it shows the rolling hills and tallgrass prairie bathed in the shimmering colors of a Flint Hills sunset. Students often ask about the scene — my perfect opening to describe the beauty and wonders of the tallgrass prairie, as well as the realities of Flint Hills farming life. I tell them about the different

grasses, the same ones that Mrs. Wold used to describe and point out on our long-ago field trips. I talk about the vivid sight and acrid scent of burning pastures in the spring, explaining how fire clears the dead grass to make way for nutritious new growth for cattle to graze in the summer.

These discussions are part of my everyday lessons. My students are growing up in a flatter, tree-filled environment, and we talk about how different agriculture looks here compared to the Flint Hills, just a few counties over. We compare farming methods and sometimes debate the way things should be done.

I believe the future of agriculture is in good hands, based on interaction with the future agriculturists who grace my classroom every day. These young people are living and learning the ever-changing roles and methods of production agriculture. It is said that less than two percent of the U.S. population is directly involved with production agriculture. That means the entire food supply produced by our country relies on the efforts of a tiny percentage of our population.

There are many diverse career paths within the agriculture industry, from agribusiness, technology, engineering and journalism to research, welding, education and mechanics. Many of my students originally believed that they had no future in agriculture because they weren't raised on a farm or ranch. The dwindling number of



East of Cassoday
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Americans actively involved with farming points up the need to recruit more people to the agriculture industry. I am a firm believer that the vast field of agriculture holds a viable career path to suit anyone's interests and skills. Agriculture is not just about farming.

My experiences growing up in the Flint Hills shaped who and where I am today. The tallgrass prairie is a special

place that needs more producers, more visitors and more inhabitants who revel in its beauty and want to protect it. Looking back at third-grade me, I rejoice that my vision expanded into appreciation of the magnificent Flint Hills. Someday, I hope to come back home to the familiar rolling hills and sea of waving tallgrass. Until then, I will miss it every day.

Meghan Eidman is a Kansas native from Chase County. She graduated from Chase County Junior Senior High School and is an alumna of the Agricultural Education Department at Kansas State University. She is currently in her second year of teaching high school agriculture and is the FFA Advisor at Girard (Kansas) High School.