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2010 – Ranching on the Tallgrass Prairie (Marty White, Editor)

Flint Hills Forever Dependent On Horses

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Recommended Citation

Buchman, Frank J. (2010). "Flint Hills Forever Dependent On Horses," *Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal*. <https://newprairiepress.org/sfh/2010/flinthills/3>

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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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COWBOYS - EARLY 1900'S

Horses have always been indispensable as a power source in the Flint Hills. During the early part of the past century, T.E. "Earl" Miser and Carl Barr are mounted ready to work cattle on Chase County pastureland. The same horses were often used for pulling family carriages as well as farm work including tillage, harvesting and feeding.

Flint Hills Forever Dependent On Horses

Horses have always been an essential element of the Flint Hills. Despite many changes during Chase County's history, and continually innovative technology, horses will always be a key part of operating the world-renowned bluestem grasslands.



"There are some people today who contend that horses aren't necessary to handle cattle in these big native pastures, but it's easier, faster and more economical when horses are used," contends Tim Miser, whose family's livelihood has long been in the Flint Hills.

"It's easier on the cattle and the land," Miser continues. "There are just too many things that machines can't do, and a horse can do them effectively and efficiently."

Raised west of Bazaar and now living on the Rock Creek Ranch not far from his boyhood home, Miser manages the cattle which annually graze these prairies.



A HORSE IS THE TOOL of his profession for Tim Miser who lives west of Bazaar in Chase County. He finds his horse invaluable and irreplaceable in managing thousands of head of cattle which annually graze large expanses of Flint Hills pasture.



DESPITE MODERNIZATION OF THE WORLD, life has actually changed very little in the Flint Hills of Kansas throughout its history. In the 1800s, cattle were driven by cowboys on their horses into Chase County for grazing. Well over a century later, cowboys and horses are still essential for managing pasture cattle.

It is his life's profession, and his horse is the tool of his trade.

"From spring until fall, I'm on a horse nearly every day whether it's moving, checking, doctoring, or gathering cattle," Miser confirms. "There's always some work to be done with a horse when cattle are grazing these hills."

Originally it was buffalo that grazed the hillsides. Native American Indians treasured those animals which were often hunted from horseback.

Cattlemen discovered the Flint Hills in the 1800s when cattle were driven from Texas to rail points in Kansas for shipment to eastern terminal slaughter markets.

"Cowboys on their horses would herd the cattle during the day and then graze them overnight," Miser says. "They found the cattle more rapidly increased weight on the Flint Hills than on other grassland in their route."

Soon, the area was settled by white men, and Indians were moved onto reservations.

"When white men arrived, they came riding horseback or in horse-drawn vehicles and brought cattle with them," explains Miser, whose great-grandparents came to western Chase County and started ranching near Diamond Springs in 1879.

"My grandfather, T.E. 'Earl' Miser,

settled on Rock Creek west of Bazaar in 1910,” Miser notes.

“Horses were the only source of power,” Miser reflects. “They were the lone means of transportation, and doubled to work the land and cattle.”

Unlike other regions where native grass was plowed under to grow crops, landowners found the steep, rolling hills with heavy limestone just beneath the top sod impossible to farm.

“The Flint Hills remain in much the same state they were in the beginning and are used only for cattle grazing,” Miser insists. “We convert a renewable resource, grass, into protein, beef, for human consumption.”

Although landowners such as the Misers had small cattle enterprises, much of the land was under absentee ownership. “Investors from all across the country owned large parts of the Flint Hills and still do today,” Miser relates. “Some land has been in families for many generations.”

Because the land’s sole purpose is producing pounds of beef from cattle,

sufficient numbers to utilize the Flint Hills to potential were not readily available.

“When cattle drives ended, the cattle were still shipped in here, often from Texas,” says Miser, who as a boy experienced the tail end of cattle coming to the Flint Hills on trains.

There were railroad cattle pens at Bazaar, Clements, Cassoday and other now defunct communities in the Flint Hills. “The towns existed because trains stopped there,” Miser says. “When trains were no longer used for shipping cattle, towns soon died.”

Many of the transitions in Flint Hills management have been experienced first hand by Miser, and he can readily relate stories told by his grandpa Earl, dad Sam and uncle Jess before that.

Trucks were in existence in the early part of the last century, but very few were owned by Flint Hills families until the ’30s and ’40s. Horses were the only way to get anywhere and to move cattle from one place to another.

“When the trains came in with cattle in the spring, my dad and grandpa would sometimes ride their horses to the station

a day early, and spend the night on a bed roll, so they could drive the cattle to pastures in the morning," Miser recalls.

"Other times, they'd have to get up in the wee hours and ride to the rail pens to meet the cattle," he continues. "That was also true when cattle were being rounded up off pastures during the summer and fall for shipment out again on the trains to terminal markets like Kansas City."

By the '50s, most cowboys had trucks that were used to haul horses to the rail pens, but cattle were still being imported to the Flint Hills by trains. "I can remember helping drive cattle from the rail yards to pasture and also driving them back for loading out on the trains," relates Miser, whose first mount was a buckskin pony with a mind of its own.

"These were generally Hereford or Brahman cross cattle, sometimes three and four years old, in very thin condition when they arrived, but they'd really gain on pasture," Miser comments. "We'd start gathering the heavier ones and shipping

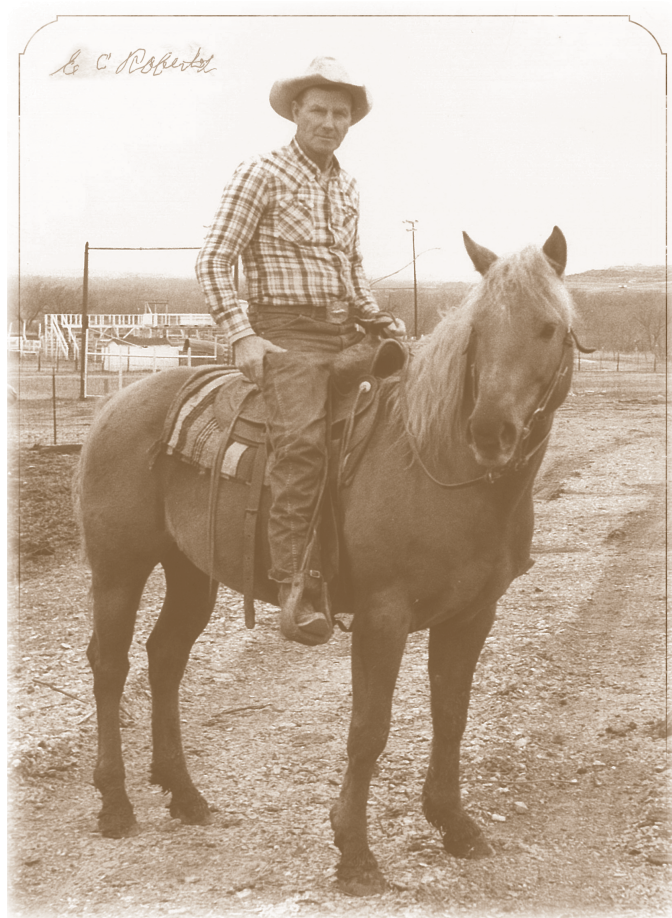
them out during the summer; the lighter cattle wouldn't come off until October."

By the '60s, trucks had replaced trains for transporting cattle, but large shipments still arrived every spring just as they do today. "The cattle are younger and lighter weight, coming in, but they come off grass now and go into feedlots to be finished for slaughter," Miser reviews.

One of the first feedlots for grain-finishing cattle was the Anderson family pens at Emporia and then the large Crofoot Feedlot on the big hill northwest of Strong City.

Full-season grazing from spring until fall, the traditional management method, is still practiced by some grass managers. Other operators implement short-season, intensive grazing with double the stocking rate for one-half the season, gathering in mid-summer. "I have cattle and pastures in both types of programs," Miser states.

Today, Miser manages several thousand acres of Flint Hills grass, many still owned by absentee landlords and



E. C. ROBERTS

King of the Cowboys in the Flint Hills was E.C. Roberts of Strong City. The father of renowned rodeo champions Marge, Ken and Gerald Roberts, Mr. Roberts was a rodeo livestock contractor honored at the National Western Stock Show in Denver, Colo., as the Rodeo Man of the Year. But he was most at home in the saddle on one of his many outstanding horses assisting with cattle roundups throughout the Flint Hills.

stocked annually by others' cattle that are shipped in on trucks, driven to pastures on horseback, and carefully managed throughout the summer with horses.

"Two things essential to keeping the Flint Hills thriving are burning and grazing," Miser emphasizes. "Fire is necessary to control invasive trees and weeds, and cattle must be grazed to keep grass varieties in balance.

"There's an old saying to take half and leave half, meaning there should always be ample grass remaining in the pastures after grazing season," Miser claims. "I've always been of the philosophy that if you take care of the grass, it will take care of you."

An accomplished horseman, Miser has also been successful in rodeo competition during his lifetime as a cowboy, collecting youth championships, attending Fort Hays State University on a rodeo scholarship, winning amateur rodeo titles, and competing on top ranch rodeo teams.

A former director of the famous Flint Hills Rodeo at Strong City, Miser now

judges ranch rodeos and working ranch horse events.

Interestingly, his wife, Carole, a daughter of Howard Roberts, is a granddaughter of legendary rodeo man E.C. Roberts, and a niece of rodeo stars Marge, Ken and Gerald Roberts. Mrs. Miser and their three grown children, two daughters and a son, help with ranch work on horses. Son, Trey, has followed his dad's steps in ranch rodeo events.

Hanging Tree dogs complement Miser and his horses when gathering and working cattle. "When I don't have another cowboy to help me, I take up to four dogs with me, and seldom have any trouble getting the cattle work done," he credits.

Having owned a number of top horses, Miser now has five that can be used in his profession. Three stand ready at all times. Hesitant to name the best horse he's ever had, Miser compliments, "I've had several good ones. Yeller, or Chester as my family called him, was a big palomino gelding that could do anything I ever asked of him."

Many of the top Quarter Horses in the



TIM AND SON ON HORSEBACK IN PENS. *Trey Miser, left, is the fifth generation of the Miser family to use horses for managing cattle in the Flint Hills.*

country have been produced right in the Flint Hills of Chase County. Russell Klotz, E.C. Roberts, Elmore Stout, Puncher Cooper and Frank Gaddie are among those breeders universally recognized whenever elite horses produced in the State of Kansas are mentioned.

Even though Miser admits owning a four-wheeler, “It will never take the place of a horse for me on the ranch,” he exclaims. “They are faster for checking fence and fixing flood gaps, but there’s nothing like a horse for working cattle.”

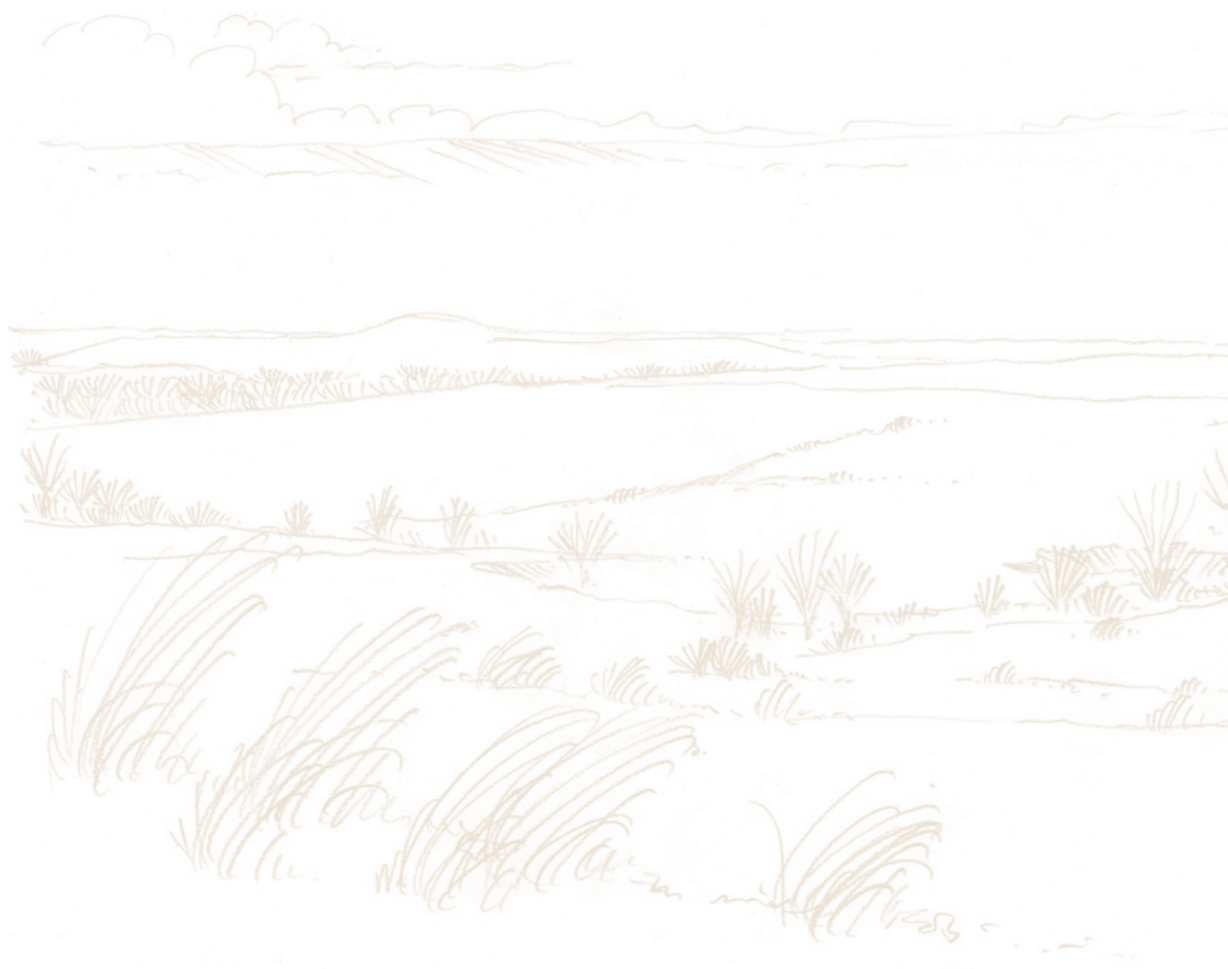
Horses aren’t ridden as much as they were in the days of his dad and

grandfather, yet Miser considers his of higher quality. “Many horses are bred to work cattle under every kind of situation, but often they aren’t ridden enough to get to their potential,” he relays.

“I ride and use my horses. Some might be better at one thing than another, still they’ll all get the job done when the need arises,” Miser concludes.

Frank J. Buchman is a lifelong horseman and writer who lives on a ranch near Alta Vista. He works for WIBW Radio and also writes syndicated columns and freelance articles for publications around the country.

NOTES





Those green prairies, rolling like gentle swells of the ocean,
starred and gemmed with flowers.....are a joy forever.

—*Handbook for the Kansas Pacific Railway, 1870*