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Chisolm Trail Sprawl

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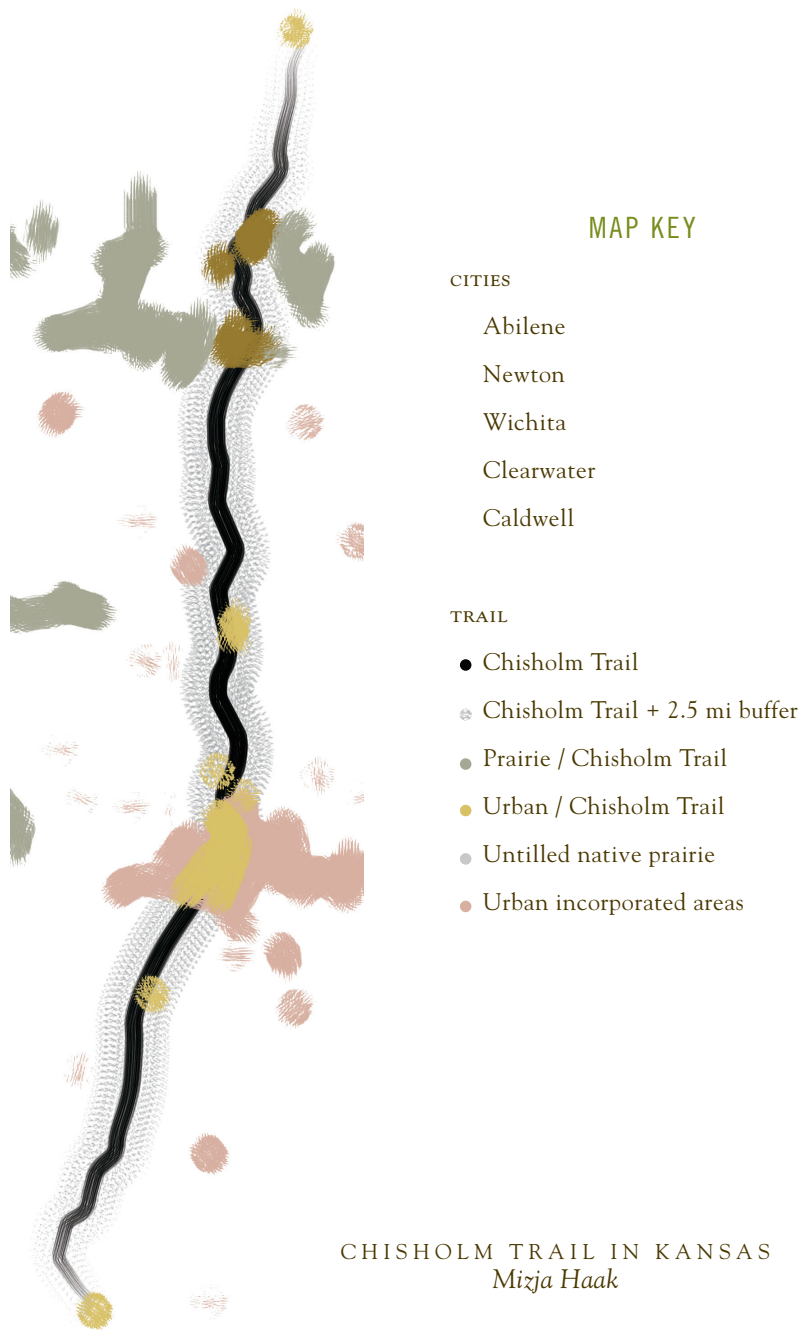
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CHISHOLM TRAIL SPRAWL

The Kansas portion of the Chisholm Trail, located just west of the Flint Hills, ran roughly 140 miles from Caldwell, at the Kansas-Oklahoma line, to Abilene. During the peak of the Chisholm Trail, from 1867 to 1871, at least two million head of cattle were driven from Texas to Abilene. Millions of hooves over the short life of the trail surely took a toll on the prairie; however, the influx of settlers eager to plow it to raise crops had a far greater and more permanent impact.

The Chisholm Trail was obviously important to those communities situated along the trail, but it also had an impact on the nation and even the fate of our prairies. Trailing maverick Texas cattle to Abilene and then shipping them by rail to eastern markets helped create a national appetite for beef, which in turn propelled a burgeoning cattle industry that relied on grasslands like the Flint Hills. This reliance on grasslands incentivized stewardship of prairie rather than its destruction.

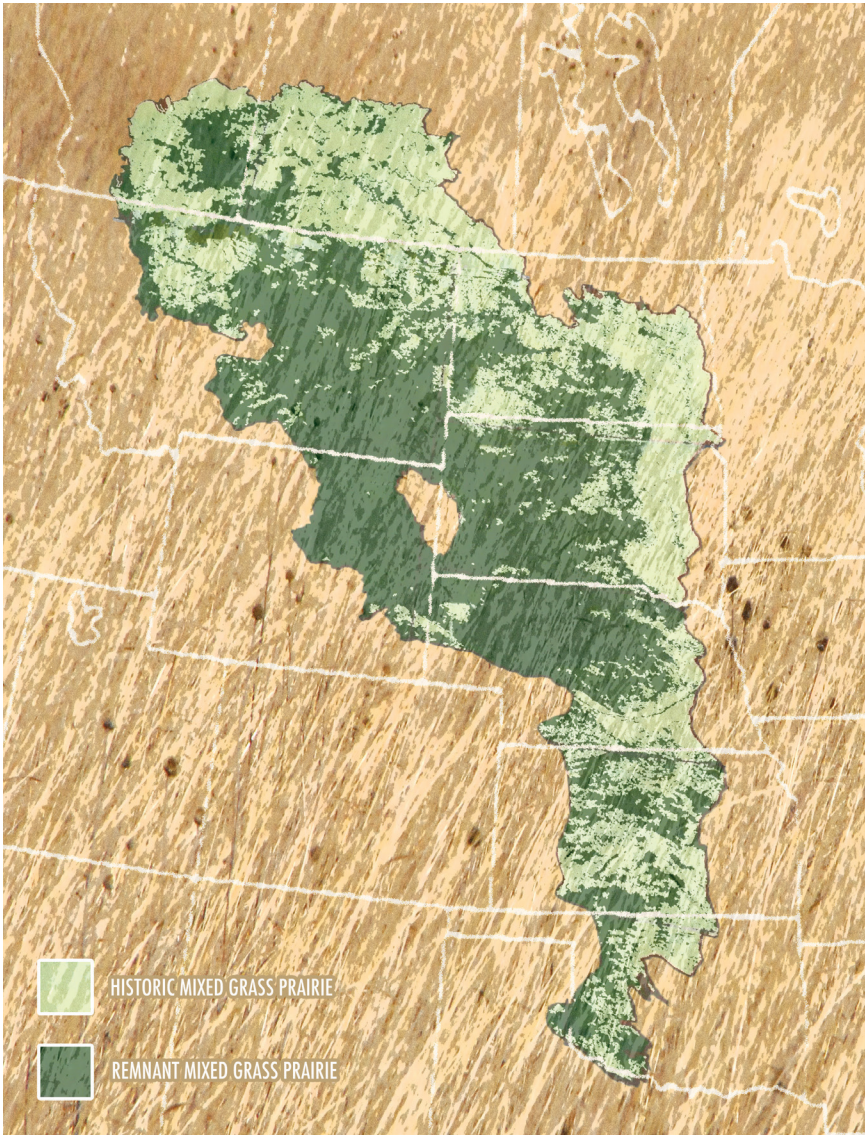
The influx of transient cattle into Kansas had a profound influence on how the Flint Hills landscape would later be managed. Some of the cattle that came up the drives were diverted into the Flint Hills to fatten on the luxuriant tall grasses. After the cattle trailing days waned, Texas cattle began arriving in the Flint Hills by rail to graze

on Flint Hills grasses. After gaining as much as four pounds per day, cattle were loaded back on cattle cars and shipped to large livestock processing facilities in places like Kansas City, Omaha, and Chicago. The Flint Hills became perhaps the most important cattle grass-fattening area in the country. Sometime after WWII, this practice was replaced by grain-finishing cattle in large feedlots. Regardless, the Flint Hills remains an important grazing land for transient cattle, where they are brought in each spring in double-decker cattle trucks in order to reach an ideal weight and condition for final finishing in feedlots.

The Chisholm Trail ran along an area of transition where tall and short grass prairies met and integrated. This transitional prairie, called mixed-grass prairie, is richer in ecological diversity than shortgrass prairie, but less so than the tallgrass prairie many of us in the Flint Hills are more familiar with. Only about one-third of the Great Plains' historic natural prairie (short, mixed and

tall grass) remains. Roughly 40 percent of this is represented by mixed-grass prairie. State and provincial declines for mixed-grass prairie range from 30 to 99 percent. The Flint Hills landscape demarks the western-most edge of the tallgrass prairie ecosystem, which once extended from Texas to Canada and from Kansas to Kentucky. Tallgrass prairie is by far the most impacted of the three major grassland types; only about 4 percent of it remains.

The underlying limestone and chert of the Flint Hills largely repelled the plow, thus preserving North America's largest tallgrass prairie remnant. But much of the area immediately west of the Flint Hills, where many of the large cattle drives occurred, was ideal for farming (deep prairie sod with few rocks). As evidence of this, only 21,265 acres of intact native grassland remains (4 1/2 percent of original) within a 2 1/2-mile buffer of the 140-mile Chisholm Trail in Kansas. While trampling by some two million cattle would have had a significant



MIXED GRASS PRAIRIE GRASSLANDS
Mixja Haak



MEMORY OF A WILD PRAIRIE 1
Kelly Yarbrough

impact, the damage from plowing the prairie following the trail years resulted in a scar that was far greater. Another conversion factor was the establishment of cities and towns. The same 140-mile buffer reveals that 47,820 acres of the trail is now classified as urban or incorporated, more than twice the area of what is left of native prairie.

The irreversible nature of this change reminds me of Humpty Dumpty in the Mother Goose nursery rhyme; in that, it is nearly impossible to put the prairie back together again once it is broken. This is why it is so critical we work together to save what is left of our prairies. Plowing is not the number one threat to them today; instead it is incompatible development, woody encroachment, and invasive weeds.

One tool to preserve what is left is the use of the conservation easement, which is a voluntary, legal agreement (usually perpetual) between a landowner and a qualified conservation organization

that ensures that the conservation value of the land is preserved. Conservation easements also preserve traditional land uses for future generations.

While it is too late to save the prairie along much of the Kansas portion of the Chisholm Trail, we fortunately still have an even larger corridor of prairie—the Flint Hills. But it, too, is vulnerable to being lost. We should seize the opportunity to be remembered as the generation who protected this swath of prairie so that perhaps future generations can see reenactments of cattle drives in a realistic prairie setting.

Brian Obermeyer has been the director of The Nature Conservancy's Flint Hills Initiative for the past sixteen years. Brian works with ranchers, landowners, and other stakeholders to help preserve the biological integrity of this impressive landscape. In addition to his private lands conservation work, Brian oversees stewardship on more than 13,000 acres of Conservancy-owned land in the Flint Hills, including the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve.