



Kansas State University Libraries
New Prairie Press

Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal

2015 – Grasslands of the World (Jim Hoy, Larry Patton, Marty White, Editors)

A Brief History of Symphony in the Flint Hills

Christy Davis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sfh>

Recommended Citation

Davis, Christy (2015). "A Brief History of Symphony in the Flint Hills," *Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal*. <https://newprairiepress.org/sfh/2015/thanks/1>

To order hard copies of the Field Journals, go to shop.symphonyintheflinthills.org.

The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.



A BRIEF HISTORY OF SYMPHONY IN THE FLINT HILLS

In his classic 1991 tome *PrairieEarth: A Deep Map*, William Least Heat-Moon introduced the world to the Kansas Flint Hills. When Chase County rancher Jane Koger met Heat-Moon, she shared the concerns of many Chase County residents – that a long-debated “prairie park” might result in the place they loved being overrun with Winnebagos. But she also predicted that “one day ranchers and conservationists are going to be on the same side.”

One reviewer of Heat-Moon’s book called it “the most beautiful symphony to America and its vanishing past I have read.” For Jane Koger, the Kansas Flint Hills was not a part of the nation’s vanishing past – but as alive as the prairie grass, and she set out to celebrate the magic of this place with a symphony of her own.

In 1994, Koger hosted 3,000 guests on her Chase County ranch for a “Symphony on the Prairie” to celebrate her birthday and honor her mother. With the help of volunteers, the Chase County Arts Association, and women musicians from all over the Midwest, she put on an outdoor concert that featured Joan Tower’s Second Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman and a selection of Aaron Copeland pieces. The concert concluded with a sing along of a special arrangement of “Home on the Range.”

This magical evening was the stuff of legend – and the public clamored for an encore. Two years later, Joyce Thierer and Ann Birney, known for their “Ride Into History” program, organized a “sequel” to Symphony on the Prairie on Koger’s ranch. The event,



called Brass on the Bluestem, featured the musical stylings of Monarch Brass, which was touring in the area. Although Brass on the Bluestem did not prove to be a springboard for a regular concert series, the breathtaking panorama of the open prairie set to captivating music and the sunset on the distant horizon were not soon forgotten by those in the crowd, including Phil and Kathy Miller.

In 2003, Phil and Kathy Miller moved from Wichita to Matfield Green, where Kathy co-founded the Great Plains Earth Institute. That organization had begun exploring the idea of producing a prairie concert in 2004 as a fundraiser. After much thought and analysis, the organization reluctantly gave up the idea, having decided it was too big a project and too financially risky for a small non-profit group.

The Millers were left to ponder the question that had been asked since Jane's birthday concert ten years earlier: "Will there ever be another symphony on the prairie?" They realized the success of such an ambitious project would require

committed people from a larger geographic base, more time to plan, and more time to raise considerable financial resources.

In March 2004, the Millers convened a small group of Flint Hills notables in Council Grove to determine the level of commitment for such an undertaking. These enthusiastic and capable organizers included Sharon Haun, director of Council Grove's "Voices of the Wind People" pageant; Mary Honeyman, Site Administrator for the Kaw Mission State Historic Site in Council Grove; Emily Hunter, who moved to Matfield Green in 1994 to work for The Land Institute; and Ann Birney and Joyce Thierer from Admire, who had organized Brass on the Bluestem in 1996. At that first meeting, the group named itself "Flint Hills Arts Alliance" with the purpose to "organize, coordinate, and promote a variety of cultural events within Chase, Morris, Riley, and Wabaunsee counties, including the development of a biennial symphonic concert series held in the natural environment of the Flint Hills." Early on, the organizers began building

a list of others throughout the region and beyond who might contribute to their project. By summer 2004, Suzan Barnes, Proprietor of the Grand Central Hotel in Cottonwood Falls; Ellen Morgan, Director of Community Arts Agencies of Kansas; and Judy Morton from Wabaunsee County Economic Development had joined the board.

Having secured a broad geographic base, the group began planning an event that would enhance appreciation for the tallgrass prairie and benefit the economy of the Kansas Flint Hills. They began promoting the event before they had settled on its name. In October 2004, the Wichita Eagle reported that a "Concert on the Prairie" was in the works. When it incorporated the following month, the organization chose the name "Symphony in the Flint Hills, Inc." because "Symphony on the Prairie" was already taken by an organization affiliated with the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra.

In May, Symphony in the Flint Hills board members met with the Trusler





Foundation to share the organization's vision for showcasing the natural beauty of the Flint Hills through symphonic music and creating an economic boost for rural Flint Hills counties. The Foundation board grasped the vision and provided seed money to hire Emily Hunter as the organization's first Event Coordinator. The Trusler Foundation has generously continued its support over the years.

The board had originally hoped to hold the inaugural event on private ranchland. But when they found no ranchers willing to take a chance on the unproven enterprise, they turned to their friends at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve. The event would coincide with the Preserve's tenth anniversary. Soon, the group had the support of the National Park Service, The Nature Conservancy, and the Kansas Park Trust. Louise Carlin, Executive Director of the Kansas Park Trust, joined the board in July 2005. Governor Kathleen Sebelius, Chair of the Kansas Park Trust, accepted an invitation to be the event's Honorary Chair.

The board solicited proposals from both the Wichita and Kansas City Symphonies looking for an orchestra that was "up for an adventure." The Kansas City Symphony responded with enthusiasm. That first year, the Symphony, its 100-voice chorus, and the Paul Winter Consort would perform *Grasslands: Prairie Voices*, a symphony composed by Kansas native and Grammy Award winner Eugene Friesen.

A project of this magnitude would not be possible without generous sponsors and patrons, and getting them excited about an event that was little more than a dream proved a challenge. Commitments from the Governor and Kansas City Symphony helped build credibility for the fledgling organization. Wichita marketing firm Sullivan Higdon & Sink stepped in to help, donating countless hours of professional services to get the project off the ground.

Armed with marketing materials, a video, and an elaborate fundraising plan, the founders embarked on a

statewide tour to share plans for the event and secure pledges from Patrons, Sponsors, and Grassroots donors. The board was buoyed by generous commitments from the Trusler Foundation, The Forrest C. Lattner Foundation, the K.T. Wiedemann Foundation, and the Jean and Willard Garvey Fund, as well as other significant supporters in the Flint Hills, Wichita, and Kansas City areas.

Beth Harshfield from Wichita and Bruce Breckenridge from Kansas City, who had been instrumental in early fundraising efforts, joined the board in late 2005, as did Council Grove supporter Garland Richardson.

Supporters throughout the region began hosting parties to solicit patrons. It was at one of these Patron Parties in Kansas City that Roger Blessing, a retired architect, recognized the organization's need for someone with his skills. Roger and his wife Jeanne volunteered countless hours of expertise and energy drafting layouts for the first six events.

Commitments for funding and a marketing plan allowed Symphony in the Flint Hills to begin selling general admission tickets in fall 2005. The organization received a boost late in the year when one of the marketing photos featuring a stringed quartet of Kansas City Symphony musicians surrounded by the prairie appeared on the cover of the 2006 Kansas Visitors Guide. With an idea as big as the Kansas sky and a little help from their friends – the Governor, the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, The Nature Conservancy, the Kansas City Symphony, Patrons and Sponsors, and hundreds of volunteers from over fifty Kansas cities and towns, and nine other states – this aspiring arts institution had captured the imaginations of 5,000 people, who had purchased all of the event’s general admission tickets by April. If everything went as planned, Chase County’s population would triple on June 10, 2006.

But there were no guarantees. The average high on June 10 is 83 degrees.

But like the generations of ranchers who had come before them, the organizers could not count on mild weather. As Event Coordinator Emily Hunter said in the weeks before the event, “There’s no way to guarantee magic. The people who are coming to this event, what we all have in common is that we’re willing to take a risk for something extraordinary.”

Despite a record high of 93 degrees on event day, a record that stands to this day, the prairie and the Symphony did not disappoint. In the words of Emily Hunter, the event was “completely co-created by every single person, blade of grass, breath of air, note of music, everything.” At the close of the concert, many audience members wiped away tears as their voices carried “Home on the Range” across the prairie at sunset. As Paul Winter of the Consort said at the end of the day, “This event was beyond the call of beauty.”

The event met its goals of enhancing appreciation for the tallgrass prairie and ushering in the desired economic

impact for the Kansas Flint Hills. In the months that followed, Yahoo ranked the Kansas Flint Hills as one of the country’s top five travel destinations based on web searches.

By the time the programs for the event were printed, Symphony in the Flint Hills had announced the date of a second-annual concert with a location yet to be determined. Since 2007, Symphony in the Flint Hills’ Signature Event has been held on eight additional properties with uniquely beautiful Flint Hills vistas. Although the organization has faced challenges from wind and rain, the skies have always cleared in time for the concert. Through the years, the organization has expanded the programs designed to advance its mission to “heighten appreciation and knowledge of the tallgrass prairie, by providing opportunities to experience symphonic music and place-based education in the Kansas Flint Hills.” Programs include “Joyful Noise,” a music and prairie camp in partnership with Camp Wood YMCA that will celebrate its fifth year in 2015.

In the same way that William Least Heat-Moon’s *PrairyErth* introduced the Kansas Flint Hills to the world, Symphony in the Flint Hills rekindles the spirit of “Home on the Range.”

More than two decades after Jane Koger’s legendary birthday concert, in many ways her prediction rings true. Conservationists and ranchers are, indeed, working together to preserve the tallgrass prairie. Ranchers, who have conserved this endangered landscape for generations, have partnered with land trusts to protect 180,360 acres of tallgrass prairie through easements and preserves.

As we return to our roots at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve to present the Tenth Anniversary Signature Event, we honor all those who work to preserve the history, culture, and ecology of this one-of-a-kind landscape and those who dare to dream of pairing it with symphonic music.

Christy Davis, Executive Director,
Symphony in the Flint Hills