

The Flint Hills of Kansas

By Jim Hoy

A few years ago in June I was driving by the site of this year's Symphony in the Flint Hills with a visitor from Australia. My friend's son operates seven cattle stations in the Kimberley, a cattle-raising region at the northern end of the state of Western Australia. The acreage on these seven stations totals 3,000,000 acres, on which he runs 60,000 brahma cows. As we drove, Pete suddenly asked me to stop; he wanted to take a photograph of the pasture we were passing: "I can just show a picture of this grass to our cows and they'll get fat!"

That was a bit of an exaggeration, but that's the effect the Flint Hills often have on cattlemen from other regions. As Texas historian C.L. Sonnichsen once noted: "To a stockman from West Texas, where a cow has to be a detective to find the next spear of grass, the Flint Hills are simply unbelievable. He can hardly imagine there is that much grass in the world."

Those Australian cows in the Kimberley were allotted 50 acres each, nearly ten times more than a cow here would require. Early on in the big Texas-to-Kansas trail drives that followed the Civil War, Texans discovered the ability of bluestem grass to put weight on cattle quickly and cheaply, particularly during the summer grazing season when steers have been known to gain over three-and-a-half pounds per day eating nothing but grass. Today cattle are trucked in to the Flint Hills from many states for summer grazing, some from as far away as Florida.

The Flint Hills stretch from Marshall County in the north down through Riley, Geary, Pottawatomie, Wabaunsee, Morris, Lyon, Chase, Greenwood, Butler, Elk, Cowley, and Chautauqua counties and on into Oklahoma, where the southern Flint Hills are called the Osage Hills. Ranching here differs from that in other ranching areas of the West because its major

focus is on summer grazing of transient cattle (i.e., cattle brought in from other areas and shipped on to feedlots after the grazing season).

The major features are the tri-partite relationship of landowner, cattle owner, and pastureman (or custom grazier). The landowner is responsible for paying taxes and major capital improvements, such as new fences or building ponds. The cattle owner is responsible for transporting cattle into and out of the pastures and for any special medical expenses or feed requirements. The rancher (i.e., custom grazier) is responsible for receiving the cattle in spring, providing access to salt and water, maintaining the fences, normal care of the cattle, and shipping them at the end of the grazing season.

He or she is also responsible for burning off the dead grass in the spring, the most colorful aspect of Flint Hills ranching folklife. Ever since the days of the Osage and Kansa Indians, the Flint Hills have been burned each spring to renew the grass and provide good grazing for bison (the Indians) and cattle (the ranchers). Without burning the prairie would within a few decades revert to a scrub forest of hedge, cedar, and locust. By the way, all of the carbon released into the atmosphere by these fires is sequestered back into the earth during the growing season, so prairie burning does not contribute to global warming.

The Flint Hills are important not only economically and environmentally, but also culturally because their five million acres comprise the largest expanse of tallgrass prairie still extant, not only in North America, but anywhere in the world. The annual rainfall required for a tallgrass prairie is more than sufficient to raise crops without irrigation, which is why prairie states such as Iowa and Illinois are covered with corn and soybeans today. Only the rocks of the Flint Hills protected them from the plow.

Perhaps most important of all the expansive landscape and big skies of the Flint Hills are a national treasure. There is a quiet and calm beauty, one that leads to contemplation. If you want to have your breath taken away by rugged spectacle, go to the Rocky Mountains or the Grand Canyon; if you want a chance to relax and catch your breath, come to the Flint Hills.