



THE FLINT HILLS

MARK FEIDEN and JIM HOY



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SPECIAL THANKS

Stephen Anderson
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Pat Kehde
Rhonda Nehring
Jay Nelson
Edward Robison
David Uhlig

Of the 400,000 square miles of tallgrass prairie that once covered North America, less than 5% remains—primarily in the Flint Hills of eastern Kansas.





INTRODUCTION
Mark Feiden

“United States to Nehring, Military Bounty Land Act of March 3, 1855, Register’s Office, Lecompton, Kansas Territory, August 1st 1859. Military Land Warrant No. 55847 ... has this day been located by John Sebastian Nehring upon the N. 1/2 of the S.E. 1/4 of the N.W. quarter of Section 9 in Township 13, Range 11.”

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Though the Sunday afternoon drive was very much a part of my childhood, and though I had participated in the occasional pilgrimage to visit relatives and see the “old home place,” my love affair with the tallgrass prairie didn’t begin in earnest until I enrolled at the University of Kansas. The previous year, my father’s parents had passed away in succession. Left unfinished was a trip that my Grandfather and I had planned, to explore together, his hometown of Alma, Kansas. As a child, I was an enthusiastic listener when my grandfather and his siblings reminisced about growing up in the Flint Hills. I was especially enamored of tales of weekends and summers spent with their grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles on *Nehring Branch*—the small, interrelated community of Germans and Swedes that had begun in August of 1859 with a 120-acre claim situated along a tributary of the Mill Creek, south and east of town. I had eagerly anticipated our adventure and was heartbroken when it didn’t take place.

I have always been someone who requires a certain amount of time alone, and my freshman year at University was no exception—especially living away from home for the first time and under one roof with 70 other people. It was not long before I set out on my own to discover these “Flint Hills” that I had heard so much about. These regular explorations became an important source of rejuvenation that I continue to rely on today—some 30 years later.

In the beginning I was, most certainly, focused on heritage. I reacquainted myself with a great-uncle and became friends with cousins Rhonda Nehring and Stephen Anderson. With their help, I would discover all or part of six family homes, three cemeteries, two school houses, one possible Indian burial site, miles of stone fence, countless stories of farm and ranch life, endless views, and a part of myself previously unknown. If home is where the heart is, I was soon at home in the Flint Hills.

In short order I would make three more important discoveries: That the Kansas Turnpike was not the only way to get from Wichita to Lawrence; that it was, above all else, the rich and deeply-layered landscape that captivated me; and that my Dad was just as interested in this stuff as I was. My roaming grounds had been expanded, my area of interest was defined, and I had an audience! This is when I first began experimenting with photography as a means for sharing my experiences.

An awe-inspiring, 5.2 million-acre slice of natural history—described by early European explorers as “an endless sea of grass,” had been revealed to me. Just outside my back door was this place that ran counter to everything I thought I knew about Kansas. It was not flat; it was not divided neatly into squares; it was not cultivated. Many large expanses of pasture were not even fenced. I had fallen in love with the largest remaining stand of tallgrass prairie—once a predominate feature of the North American landscape. Twenty or so Kansas counties that, by virtue of their rocky soil, have largely escaped farming and now stand together, nearly alone, in representing one of the most unique and endangered eco-systems in the world.

This volume is not intended to be an all-inclusive study, nor do I consider my photographs to be fantastic works of art. I have certainly spent more time in some parts of the region than others and conspicuously missing are some of the iconographic images typically associated with the area. I simply wish to share, through my eyes, this special place that has played an integral role in my life for nearly three decades.

When I first began envisioning this book, I knew that I wanted to work with Jim Hoy. I knew that Jim, a native son of the Flint Hills and accomplished writer, would be the perfect person to provide not just an introduction to the area, but one that was tempered by a deep personal connection. I was pleased when he agreed to take on the task and again when I read his essay. Perfect. Together I hope we succeed in bringing a warm smile of familiarity to the indoctrinated while enlightening, in some way, those who are less

familiar with this unique landscape—one that has meant so much to both of us.

Mark Feiden is a sixth-generation Kansan with pioneer roots in both Reno and Wabaunsee counties. Originally from Wichita, he began exploring the back roads as an alternative to the Kansas Turnpike while earning the first of two degrees from the University of Kansas in Lawrence. In 1997, Mark cofounded The Konza Press—“Celebrating the people, places and rich traditions of the Great Plains.” Mark has collaborated on three previous titles: *The Kansas Landscape, Volume One*; *The Kansas Landscape, Volume Two*; and *Panoramic Kansas*.

THE FLINT HILLS: LIKE NO OTHER PLACE ON EARTH

Jim Hoy

A tallgrass prairie is a rare thing indeed. Unlike the semiarid Great Plains of North America, the Asian Steppes, or the South American Pampas, a tallgrass prairie gets abundant rainfall, plenty enough to support unirrigated crop agriculture. The bluestem grass that once blanketed Illinois and Iowa has been replaced by tame grasses—fescue, brome, oats, corn, milo, wheat. Today over 95% of the 250 million acres of native tallgrass prairie that once reached from Texas into Canada, from eastern Kansas into Indiana has been turned into farmland.

Only in the Flint Hills of Kansas and their southern extension, the Osage Hills of Oklahoma, has the tallgrass prairie escaped the plow, saved by rocks that either jut out from among the lush grasses or lie only inches below the surface. Limestone is the most abundant of these rocks, but it is the hard flint that caused Zebulon Pike to write the following words in his journal on 12 September 1806: “Passed very ruff flint hills. My feet blistered and very sore.” Technically, the flint here is a form of chert, but “Chert Hills” just doesn’t sing, and neither does “Bluestem-Limestone Hills,” a name proposed in the early 20th century that thankfully failed to catch on.

“Flint Hills” has just the right ring to it, like the ring of a steel horseshoe striking a flint rock as a cowboy lopes down into a valley to check cattle. Since pioneer times, cattle have been the lifeblood of the Flint Hills. At least as early as 1868, only one year after Abilene became the mecca for Texas longhorns headed for northern markets, some of those longhorns were being pastured on Flint Hills grass. The pattern of Texas cattle on Kansas bluestem (to use the term generically for the dominant Flint Hills grasses: big and little bluestem, Indian grass, and switch grass) for the summer grazing season held for over a century. Today many of those summer cattle still come from Texas, but others come from Oklahoma, Missouri, other parts of Kansas, even as far away as Florida.

The reason stocker cattle (i.e., older cattle not yet ready to become beef) and the Flint Hills go together so well is because Flint Hills grass is the best in the world for putting on weight quickly and economically. Not only are the leaves of bluestem rich in protein, which produces meat, but they also are rich in calcium, which helps bones grow bigger and stronger. Limestone is a soluble rock, and the deep roots of bluestem carry that lime into the leaves as calcium. Thus a skinny steer that arrives in the spring and stays through the summer when bluestem is at its most nutritious will gain weight almost unbelievably fast. Few cattle fail to gain at least two pounds a day, and in a good grass year cattle can gain more than three pounds a day eating nothing but grass. Compare the cost of grass to that of corn and think of how much corn it takes to add 300 pounds to a steer and you can see why stock raisers love the Flint Hills.

But there is a hitch. Whereas the buffalo grass of the High Plains retains a high level of nutrition throughout the year, bluestem has almost no nutritional value in the fall or winter. It is a warm season grass that emerges in late spring, is at its peak in mid-summer, and gradually loses its power in late summer and early fall. The sunshine that went into the leaves in spring and summer goes into the roots in late summer and autumn in order to store energy for the next season. That is why the majority of cattle in the Flint Hills are summer, not year-round residents. Those ranchers who do maintain a herd of mother cows must provide hay and protein in order to bring them through the winter.

Undoubtedly the most colorful feature of Flint Hills ranching is the annual spring burn-off of the previous year's dead grass. Clearing off the old grass with fire allows the sun to warm the earth more quickly, thus facilitating the new growth, while the ashes provide nutrients. Long before Kansas opened for settlement in 1854, the native Kaw and Osage Indians burned the prairies each spring in order to attract bison to the tender and tasty new growth. Without fire, and with its 30 or more inches of annual rainfall, the Flint Hills could easily become as forested as the Ozarks.

But the Flint Hills are more than just cattle and grass. The region is a stronghold for the greater prairie chicken, Henslowe's sparrow, and other species of birds whose populations are dwindling or threatened. Hawks of various kinds, turkey vultures, and an occasional bald or even a golden eagle circle Flint Hills skies, while killdeer, plover, nighthawks, and meadowlarks fly

up from the grass. There are also great blue herons, kingfishers, cattle egrets, and cowbirds, among scores of others. Badgers, coyotes, and jackrabbits populate the uplands, while raccoons and bobcats prowl the streams. Wildflowers—butterfly milkweed, blue false indigo, sunflowers of various kinds, cow slobber, bee balm, primroses, gayfeather, lead plant, bundleflower, golden rod, broom weed, prairie orchids—punctuate the green grass with bright patches of orange and red and yellow and blue, moving in succession from early spring to the first frost of fall. This array of native flora and fauna makes the Flint Hills a treasure house for nature lovers.

The Flint Hills are also a place of big skies, far horizons, and great beauty. That beauty is not always immediately apparent to a first-time visitor, but it is awe-inspiring to those who know and love the Flint Hills. The rugged landscape of the Rockies, say, or the Cascades is an aggressive beauty, one that reaches up and strikes you full in the face. But the Flint Hills are smooth, not rugged, and their beauty is quiet. It is a beauty that soothes, not overwhelms. The Flint Hills don't take your breath away; they give you a chance to catch it.

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Jim Hoy is a Professor of English and director of the Center for Great Plains Studies at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas. Reared on a stock ranch near Cassoday, Kansas, he has lived in the Flint Hills area all of his life except for graduate school in Missouri and a teaching stint in Idaho. Jim is a folklorist and fifth-generation Flint Hills rancher who can often be found cowboying on son Josh's Flying W Ranch. The Flying W is a 7000-acre working cattle ranch in Chase County offering guest ranching services to people wanting to experience the Flint Hills and cowboy culture. Among Jim's dozen books are *Cowboys and Kansas*, *Flint Hills Cowboys*, and *Cowboy's Lament: A Life on the Open Range*.

PHOTOGRAPHS by MARK FEIDEN





