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2016 - Future of the Flint Hills (Larry Patton,
editor)

Down to Earth: The Future of the Flint Hills

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Recommended Citation

Sherow, Jim (2016). "Down to Earth: The Future of the Flint Hills," *Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal*.
<https://newprairiepress.org/sfh/2016/orientation/2>

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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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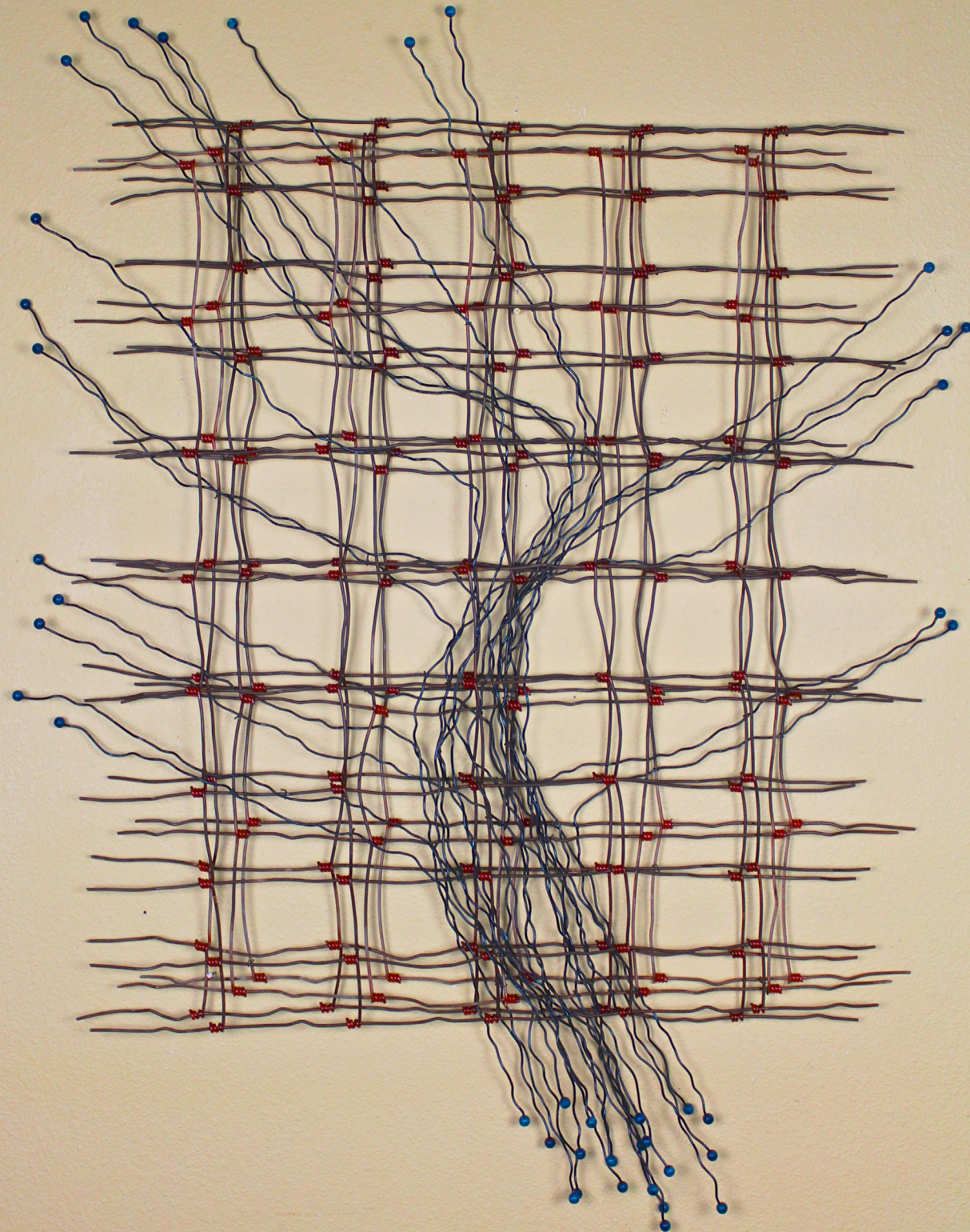
DOWN TO EARTH: THE FUTURE OF THE FLINT HILLS

What is the future of the Flint Hills? As a historian, I believe my profession can provide important insights about future trends. It is necessary, however, to understand that history never repeats itself. Bleeding Kansas, a battle waged to create a free or slave state, will never happen again. That is a story of the past. And decisions for the future based on lessons or events from the past often lead to unintended consequences.

Nonetheless, the study of the past is important for two reasons. First, the study of history gives insights about human nature. Second, a thorough study of the past will give clarity to how we have reached the present. Understand the historical forces creating the present, and humans can make better decisions about guiding or altering those forces into the future. I think there are several historical trends of the Flint Hills that must be understood before deciding which paths to take into the future. In a significant way, the Flint Hills economy has always been an urban one. Without the growth of metropolitan markets in the United States and Europe, and the transportation links to them, there would have been little reason to farm or ranch here.

Beginning in the 1800s, the rapid growth of cities has driven the spread of farming. By 1900, for the first time in human history, the global urban/industrial economy outstripped agriculture. In short, railroads from Chicago, St. Louis, and

OPPOSITE PAGE: AQUIFER (WALL SCULPTURE)
Bill McBride



cities along the east and west coasts made possible, and profitable, the ranch and farm economy of the Flint Hills. Similarly, the global urban matrix — its tastes and culture, technologies, demographics, and economics — molded the economy and demographics of the Flint Hills.

For example, railroad transportation, besides funneling cattle and crops into an urban economy, also shaped the urban geography of the Flint Hills. Railroad companies required shipping points for loading cattle and crops, and these places became the small and large communities that once dotted these hills. In places like Volland and Bazaar, cattle were loaded into freight cars headed to Kansas City and Chicago packing houses, and from there the products were fed into the vast urban markets of the United States and Europe.

Transportation, communication, and economic changes after World War I dramatically altered the agricultural economy of the United States. Without

exception, these trends touched the people living in the Flint Hills. The mechanization of agriculture, along with truck and auto transportation and advances in radio, disrupted the communities formed around animal-powered farming and railroad connections. At the dawn of the twentieth century, most counties and cities reached the apex of population and after World War I began an unabated decline. With the concentration of rail connections in larger cities, numerous small communities like Volland lost their economic base.

The demographics of Chase County reveal these trends quite clearly. The population reached 8,250 people in 1900. Since then, the population of the county has shown a steady decline to 2,760 people by 2013. Compared to trends in 1900, the farms are much larger today, considerably fewer in number, and managed by owners averaging fifty-six years in age. Only a fraction of the towns in 1900 continued to be viable by 2000.



DAWN AND DUSK (FRONT AND BACK)
Shin-hee Chin



In the last fifteen years the ascendance of computers in nearly every aspect of our lives has furthered demographic change in the region. Since 2000 only four counties have shown consistent growth: Butler, Geary, Pottawatomie, and Riley. All other counties are losing population and are aging.

Butler County stands out from the other three. This has to do with a couple of factors. First, it is the eastern half of the county that lies properly within the Flint Hills. Second, the discovery of the massive El Dorado oil field in 1915 has significantly differentiated the economy of the county from the Flint Hills range economy. The population of El Dorado, Kansas, the center of the petro economy, has remained fairly flat, ranging between 10,000 and 13,000 between 1915 and 2014.

GRAIN ELEVATOR
Phil Epp

After World War II, the urban population of the county outpaced rural growth. While the eastern half of the county has resembled the trends of Chase County, the western half, with economic ties to oil production and refining, witnessed the exurbia growth of Wichita, Kansas. A small urban corridor opened along U.S. Highway 400 that has sustained the growth of Andover and Augusta.

So what accounts for the growth of Geary, Pottawatomie, and Riley counties? The reasons for their continued growth rest largely with the increased presence of publicly supported institutions. The city of Manhattan is the main beneficiary of this fact. Federal spending supports Fort Riley, grants and student aid to Kansas State University, the relocation of the National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility to Manhattan, and the Army Corps of Engineers. State spending supports Kansas State University, the relocation of the Department of Agriculture, and assistance to the public school system.

Manhattan has undergone dramatic economic transformations by engaging in aggressive public/private enterprises building upon its knowledge-based economy, retail offerings, health care services, air transportation, and quality-of-life venues. Should these trends continue, the Manhattan metro area is set to grow.

The fate of Butler County, on the other hand, is tied to forces difficult for the people living in it to control. First, its population will ebb and flow with the fate of Wichita. Next, the well-being of El Dorado, if its economy is not shifted away from a reliance on oil, will face the volatility of a global oil economy that is pushing the price of oil to almost unheard of levels below \$30 a barrel.

The eastern half of Butler County, along with the rest of the counties, with economies built largely on ranching and to a lesser degree on farming, will continue to face challenges with a declining and aging population. Other factors, such as global population growth and climate change, pose considerable

challenges for the region, too. As global population soars, crop production will become more important, while cattle production with its large use of grazing land, water, and croplands will become harder to maintain. In short, cattle prices will climb with meat consumption declining.

Compounding this situation is the looming decline of the Ogallala Aquifer, which maintains the feedlots and packing companies in western Kansas. A sizable portion of the Flint Hills cow-calf industry supplies the western Kansas feedlots and packing houses, and in forty years this entire industry in western Kansas will face a dramatic reorganization if the Ogallala Aquifer can no longer sustain it.

The remaining ranchers and farmers in the Flint Hills will have to be highly adaptable, given the effects of global climate change. The findings of nearly all climatologists suggest that weather patterns throughout the region will become increasingly erratic.



DRAGONFLY
HUMMINGBIRD
RAVEN
Hilary Lorenz

To sustain the economy, ecology, and population of the Flint Hills will require regional cooperation and planning, something akin to an enhanced Flint Hills Regional Council. It will require farmers and ranchers working hand-in-hand with the main metro areas to support the transportation, educational, health, recreational, and financial needs of rural residents. Success will depend upon sensible public/private initiatives.

To flourish, the Flint Hills region must keep a collaborative relationship with the federal government. The simple fact is that urban representation in Congress is far greater than that of a rural region like the Flint Hills. Consider that the city of Los Angeles has greater congressional representation than the entire state of Kansas. The urban interests and rural interests of the nation need to understand each other and to work toward each other's mutual benefit. Since federal agricultural spending is more than \$8,000 per capita in Chase County, regional and federal

cooperation is imperative. In the case of the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, regional and federal cooperation has proven beneficial.

A bright future for the people of the Flint Hills is possible when its residents and leaders understand the region's place in the national and global economy and take a regional approach in planning for and adjusting to economic, technological, and environmental realities. Those communities nimble enough to adjust to changing times will survive. With an accurate understanding of its past, and with clear-eyed planning for its future, the people of the Flint Hills can look forward to living prosperous and satisfying lives.

Jim Sherow is a fourth-generation Kansan, raised in Maize, Kansas. He is actively involved in public history, historic preservation, and public service in the Manhattan community. Jim is the author of five books and has published more than twenty book chapters. He is a former mayor of Manhattan, and professor of history at Kansas State University.



GREEN JUNGLE
Hilary Lorenz