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A Flint Hills Legacy: Grass and Cattle

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MAJESTIC HILLS
Allan Chow

A FLINT HILLS LEGACY: GRASS AND CATTLE

When Ezra Beedle homesteaded land in the Flint Hills in the 1800s, he saw a vast sea of tallgrass prairie with wide-open spaces and few trees.

When my sister, Kay Lauer, and I first bought land in the Flint Hills in 1979 – later to become the Homestead Ranch – we discovered soon afterwards that our great-grandfather, Ezra Beedle, had homesteaded the same property. What an incredible discovery!

In 2005 I put most of my ranch in a conservation easement held by The Nature Conservancy. With the easement, if Ezra Beedle were to return 200 years after homesteading, he would still recognize his land; it would still be tallgrass prairie with wide-open spaces and few trees.

My conservation easement allows for ranching operations to remain largely unencumbered. My right to burn and sustainably graze has not been affected by the easement. Though I have full control of access by others, the easement also allows for hunting and fishing and hiking and camping and the right of quiet enjoyment. The easement does, however, prohibit plowing and incompatible development, such as non-agricultural buildings, golf courses, motorcycle tracks, and ranchettes. The bottom line of the easement is to keep this prairie the way it has been for the last 150 years.

Grass management is the most important part of any rancher's life, and it is certainly mine. I have managed this property for the past thirty-five years with a cow herd, raising calves each year and selling them, and keeping the cow as my factory to harvest the grass. I also lease part of the ranch during the summer for yearling cattle, which is the most common grazing practice in the Flint Hills.

In addition to traditional ranching operations, I would like to see the niche marketing practice of raising grass-fed beef more broadly applied. The Flint Hills are ideally suited to grass fattening beef, perhaps more so than any native grassland in North America.

What I'm proposing is nothing new. Prior to World War II, much of the Flint Hills was used to produce grass-fed beef. Each spring transient cattle – mostly three-year-old steers – were shipped here by rail to fatten on bluestem pastures. Typically, about a third of the fattest animals were sorted and shipped out by rail in early to mid-July. Despite never taking a bite of grain, these animals were taken to centralized meat processing facilities for slaughter in places like Kansas City, Omaha, and Chicago. Another third of the fattest animals were gathered and shipped about a month later, with the remainder removed by early autumn.

Prior to railways, cattle were driven overland from Texas to take advantage

of the lush Flint Hills grass; the earliest account of this is from 1856 on the Sauble Ranch.

Consumer preference for fattier beef eventually put an end to the practice of finishing steers on Flint Hills grass. The last grass-fed beef operations of any scale in the Flint Hills were in the early 1960s. However, there has been a resurgence of interest in grass-fed beef, as consumers are increasingly concerned with where their beef comes from, how it is raised, and the health benefits of leaner meat.

Besides niche marketing of grass-fed beef, why not take it a step further and tie grass fattening with good management of the land and protection from future incompatible development?

We could call it Flint Hills Conservation Beef, or perhaps for my ranch, Matfield "Green" Beef. With more than 100,000 acres of land protected with long-term conservation agreements in the Flint Hills, we have enough area to do this on a regional scale. Consumers would win and feel



FLYING J
Don Wolfe

good about a place-based beef source, ranchers would win with a value-added product to market, and landowners would be rewarded for implementing good conservation practices. This brings to fruition the partnership of ranchers and environmentalists in a tangible way.

If my great-grandfather were to return to his homestead today, I think he would be pleased by the fact that he could still recognize the land and feel at home here. Thanks to the work of many, there will be thousands

of acres of tallgrass prairie protected for future generations.

Jane Koger is a fourth-generation Chase County rancher who has been owner and operator of the Homestead Ranch near Matfield Green, Kansas, for more than thirty-five years. She began the Homestead Range Renewal Initiative, an experimental burning program, in 2004, using patch burning to enhance wildlife habitat, especially for the Greater Prairie-Chicken. Jane's desire is to leave the land in such a condition that it would be recognizable to her great-grandfather, who homesteaded the land.