The Konza Prairie; 40 Years of Earth, Wind, and Fire, 1971-2011

30th in the Keepsakes series, originally published October 25, 2011

In 1971, about the time a new pop band, Earth, Wind & Fire, was producing its first hit album, a preserve to study nature's version of those astrological elements was officially established on the prairie approximately 8 miles south of Manhattan. The Konza Prairie Research Natural Area, renamed the Konza Prairie Biological Station (KPBS) in 2000, was created through the joint efforts of The Nature Conservancy and Kansas State University as a field research station operated by the Division of Biology.

The concept for a research area for ecological research began with Lloyd Hulbert (professor in the department of plant pathology and botany, later biology) as early as 1956 but without land and other means, a prairie preserve remained in limbo. The stars fell into place for K-State when The Nature Conservancy, through funds provided anonymously by Katharine Ordway, was able to purchase an initial track of land along...
Interstate 70. With the funds came the stipulation that the site be given a Native American name. Konza, a variation of Kansa, the name of a tribe native to the state, was selected. Ordway, known as the "lady who saved the prairie," was responsible for funding the purchase of prairie lands throughout the United States. With donations from Ordway, the KPBS expanded to incorporate 8,600 acres of grasslands, including the Dewey Ranch house and barn (constructed in 1911-1912). Purchased in 1977, the housed became known as the Hulbert Center for Research when it was renovated in 1997. The barn underwent a major renovation in 2008 and became the KPBS Meeting Hall. Today, John Briggs serves as director of the KPBS.

The KPBS is dedicated to long-term ecological research, education, and prairie conservation. In 1980 the Konza Prairie Long-Term Ecological Program (LTER) was one of the first six such initiatives funded by the National Science Foundation. Since the program officially began 30 years ago in 1981, the focus of the LTER has been on fire, grazing, and climatic variability.

The most dramatic and visible research activity of the KPBS and LTER is the burning of the prairie.
Often misunderstood by observers, the program of controlled burns of the grasslands on an annual basis keeps the land free of trees and other woody vegetation. This burning is vital to the prairie ecosystem because it promotes new and nutritional growth of the native grasses. In addition, burning allows researchers the opportunity to study how fire impacts the species living on the Konza Prairie. Other studies involve the effects of fire between elements such as carbon and nitrogen, soil and plants. David Hartnett, K-State biology professor and former director of the KPBS, stated "...fire is absolutely essential to maintaining the prairie."

Another characteristic of the original prairie was the presence of bison. Their grazing provided another natural process for maintaining the native grasslands. With the increase in acreage and the introduction of range management and grazing programs (and construction of a large fence!), bison were reintroduced to the Konza Prairie in 1987.

To enable the public to experience the Konza, there are 3 hiking trails of different lengths totaling over 13 miles. They allow visitors to experience woods, creeks, limestone ledges as well as grasslands with impressive views of the Flint Hills.

The KPBS celebrated another milestone in 2011; the 15th anniversary of the Konza Environmental Education Program (KEEP) directed by Valerie
Wright. KEEP provides programming at the Konza Prairie site for school, youth, and adult groups through a variety of educational experiences, including curriculum-based activities related to science, mathematics and social studies. Docent activities and Friends of the Konza Prairie organization have proved to be very successful components of this program. Mike Haddock, assistant dean of the K-State Libraries, serves as president of the Friends in 2011.

To celebrate the contributions of the various programs of the KPBS and the LTER, the Institute for Grassland Studies hosted a symposium at K-State in September 2011. "Grasslands in a Global Context" featured keynote speakers and attendees from around the world.

During the four decades since the KPBS was established in 1971, its research programs have made the earth a better place to live!

=======
Sources: KPBS Historical Records (University Archives), Vertical Files-Konza Prairie, publications of the KPBS and photographs from the Univ. Archives and courtesy the KPBS, Friends of Konza Prairie, and Edward Sturr.