The Leet Pasture: Home to the Polks and Troutmans

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Looking from Americus Road west into the Leet pasture where this year’s Symphony in the Flint Hills is held, the viewer’s eyes are drawn up a gentle incline where cattle graze contentedly.

While walking the Flint Hills Nature Trail along the north side of the pasture, the observer is buffeted by wind billowing over wide-open stretches of grass. From that vantage point, the pasture is punctuated by two stone bridges dated 1913, once part of the old Missouri Pacific Railroad right-of-way. A cut interrupts a hill, opening up on the other side to the deep valley of Wright’s Creek stretching far to the south, with a clear blue pond nestled at the bottom. Another cut farther west along the trail opens to still another beautiful valley with Bluff and Rock Creeks.

Those familiar with the history of this prairie as the Polk and Troutman ranches, which were originally part of the Kaw Indian Trust Land. In 1886, the Council Grove, Osage City & Ottawa Railroad was built through here and later merged with the Kansas and Colorado Pacific Railway in 1890; it eventually gave way to the Missouri Pacific, which passed through these hills until it closed in the mid-1990s.

In 1894, Rev. Alexander Scott, a Presbyterian missionary in his 70s, began buying this land and over seven years bought more than 5,000 acres from Bushong to Comiskey on the county line. In 1899 he sold the western sections to daughter and son-in-law.
KATHERINE POLK AND FRIENDS

KATHERINE POLK, 1908

The younger Polk children each graduated from the College of Emporia, but Katherine’s senior year must have been difficult. No picture of her appears among the graduates in the college yearbook, the editors explain, due to family illness. Katherine’s mother Virginia died of cancer at the German Hospital in Kansas City that year.

In the first years after Virginia’s death, newspapers described her son George as one of the stars of the college football team. When World War I sent George to Europe, a letter to his sister Katherine states he and other medical students were with an American hospital unit “somewhere in France.” At the same time, brother Alexander worked as cashier at the Bushong State Bank, Katherine volunteered in town, and their father maintained his cattle operation.

Following the war, George finished medical school and began a practice in Independence, Missouri. Alexander also moved to the Kansas City area to

Emma and Joseph Troutman. The next year he sold the four sections closest to Bushong to his second daughter and her husband, Virginia and Albert Polk. For many years the adjoining Polk and Troutman ranches represented a land dynasty in north Lyon County.

Trained as a lawyer, Albert Polk had practiced law in South Dakota before coming to Kansas. One newspaper article reports that the family lived in Emporia while the oldest son, Alexander, attended the College of Emporia. After his graduation, they returned to their stately home at Bushong where two other children, Katherine and George, finished school. The Polk house was larger than what we see today. The house was originally built using running water supplied by a reservoir that was constructed of native stone up the hill from the house. From there water flowed through an underground, charcoal-filter system into the house.
work for Montgomery Ward and later
the Post Office. Katherine remained
in Bushong, serving as mistress of the
house, often entertaining visitors.

In 1935, Albert Augustine Polk was
interviewed by Emporia Gazette columnist
Laura French, about the effects of a
drought on his 1550-acre ranch. He is
quoted as stating most of 1300 acres
of bluestem grass had been damaged
but survived. At this time he said he
no longer owned cattle but rented his
pastures to others. He had lived on the
place for 36 years in a home beautifully
sheltered by cedars and furnished with
modern electrical conveniences.

When Albert died the following year
at the age of 83, sons Alexander, or
"Lex," and George returned home for
the funeral. Later that year Katherine
traveled to Alaska and following
her return visited her brothers. She
continued to entertain at her home in
Bushong. Lex died in 1940. At some
time in the early 1940s, Miss Polk must
have moved to be near her remaining
brother George in Independence.

In 1945 a roaring prairie fire,
allegedly started by a passing Missouri
Pacific train, burned several hundred
acres of pasture land. Starting on
the Polk ranch, the flames took a
northwesterly direction through the
three-foot-tall bluestem grass, jumped
the railroad tracks and crossed old
Highway 50 north. School boys from
Bushong High and many volunteers
from the neighborhood fought the fire.

George Atkinson, who was managing
the Polk pastures in those years, lost
118 acres of grass and lots of fencing.

The Polk Ranch sold for $95,000
in April 1954. Irene Haines Leet of
Mount Clair, New Jersey, bought the
largest tract of 960 acres while Mrs. J.V.
Skonberg of Osage City bought 450
acres on the north side of the railroad.

An abstract in excess of 130 pages
detailed the particulars of the sale.

The Bushong cemetery contains
the graves of Albert and Virginia Polk,
Dr. George Polk and his wife and
daughter. But Katherine’s grave is not
there. The woman who lived on the
land the longest is missing. The Leet
family owned the land for nearly 50
years before selling to Texas cattleman
Johnny Arnold in 2005. Buster Wheat
began renting the pastures at the time
of the sale in 1954, and the Bill Besack
family purchased the Polk homestead.

The Troutman ranch seems to have
had a more torturous existence. As one
old-timer around here said, “It seemed to
be a tough place to make a go.”

Financial difficulties arose in
1902 when a lawsuit to foreclose the
mortgage was brought against Joseph
and Emma Troutman by her father, the
Rev. Alexander Scott. Interest had not
been paid on a promissory note. Scott
demanded that land be sold to satisfy
the note with interest. Records in the
Registrar of Deeds office show many
loans and subsequent mortgages on
Troutman land over the years.

Unexpectedly, Joseph Troutman died
in 1909 at the age of 60. Rheumatism
of the heart was listed as the cause of
death. With the community stunned,
Mr. Troutman’s obituary praised his
leadership ability and influence.
But his untimely death may have led to more financial difficulties for his children.

Jean Troutman, the second son, took over the ranch. By 1918 various tracts had been divided among Mrs. Troutman, daughters Virginia and Marie, and Jean. Jean married Georgia Withington, granddaughter of Charles Withington, the first settler in Lyon County.

The western part of the Troutman land around Comiskey was sold to J.O. Southard, who had come to Kansas in 1898 to work for the Wiser ranch north of Allen. In 1902 Southard and his brother-in-law, Charles Coffman, bought the 7,000-acre ranch. A few years later Southard sold his interest to buy the Troutman property, where he soon achieved a national reputation for the quality of his registered Hereford cattle. Known as “The Hereford King,” Southard built two octagonal sales pavilions for his annual auctions. He would sell his ranch in 1923 and move to Topeka, where he died in 1960. In 1944 the property was purchased by members of the Day family, who still own it.

By 1925, Jean Troutman was toying with the idea of drilling for oil. In March 1926, he bet the ranch on it. An El Dorado company leased 8,000 acres around Bushong, but Jean’s well came up dry. In 1927 he was forced to sell most of it to G. L. Ramsey.

A year and a half later the Jean Troutman family was living on a farm near Wilsey, Georgia, in despair over their financial reversals, domestic problems, and worries for the children’s education. Shot her young son Clinton and then attempted suicide by drinking carbolic acid. When Jean returned home, he found the door barred. He broke in to find his wounded son and unconscious wife and summoned a doctor from Council Grove. Both miraculously survived. A jury found Georgia Troutman of unsound mind, and she was sent to Lansing Prison before being committed to the State Hospital at Osawatomie.

In 1944 Ramsey sold out to Harry Kizler, who owned the property for 45 years. At the present time the land is split among at least five different owners, including the Days.

So that is what happened to the land the Rev. Alexander Scott bought in the 1890s. These storied hills could probably tell many other tales if we were to know the Native American accounts of living on the Kaw Reservation. And before that, who else enjoyed gazing across these rolling Flint Hills?

Jan Huston is a retired English teacher from the Emporia Public Schools. Since retiring, she has volunteered at the Lyon County Historical Research Center and has written historical pieces for the Emporia Gazette, tidbits for the Flint Hills Shopper, and the script for the documentary film, A History of North Lyon County. She and her husband are lay speakers for the United Methodist Church and live northeast of Americus.

All photographs have been recently rediscovered. See page 67.