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Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal

2014 – Flint Hills Land, Sky, and People (Cathy Hoy, Jim Hoy, Marty White, Editors)

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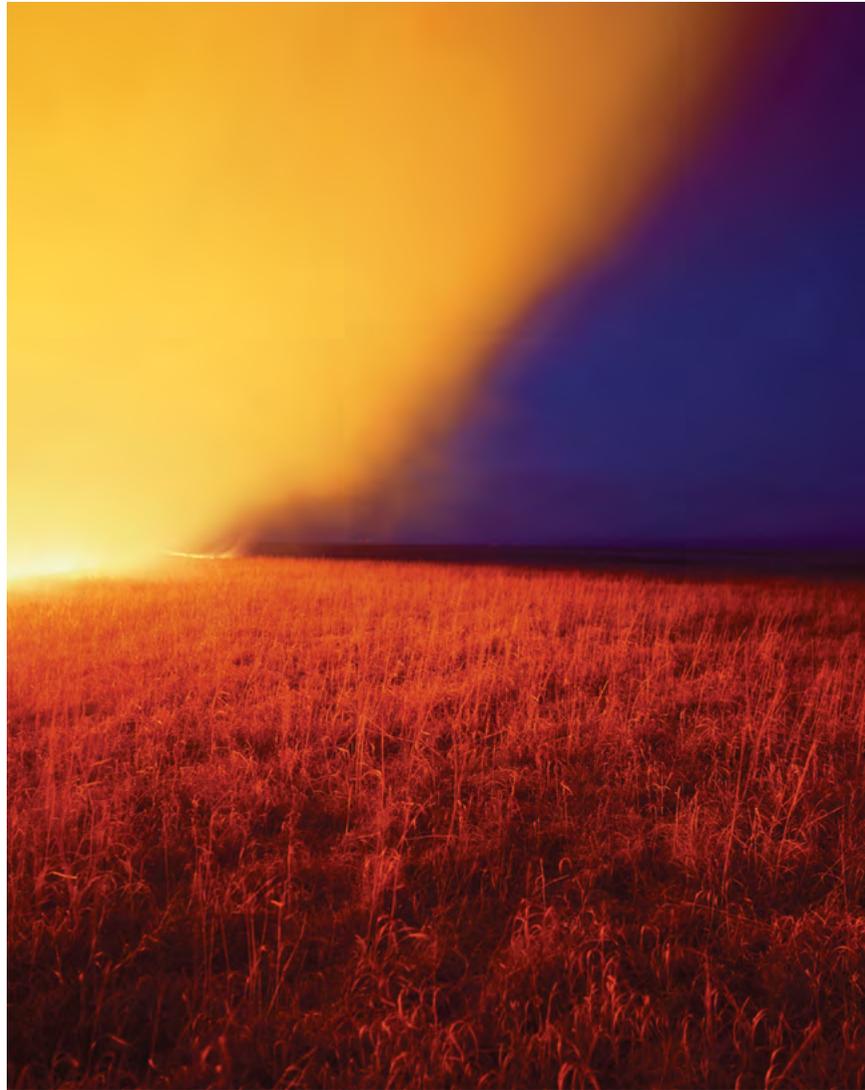
Recommended Citation

Courtwright, Julie (2014). "Such a Sight: Fire and Prairie Identity," *Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal*. <https://newprairiepress.org/sfh/2014/flinthills/6>

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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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FIRE NEAR CASSODAY, KANSAS, 1990
Larry Schwarm

Such a Sight: Fire and Prairie Identity

There were (and are) many ways to see a prairie fire—both literally and figuratively. Nineteenth-century tallgrass prairie dwellers, for instance, saw them in every conceivable manner—the flames crawling across the landscape during light winds and racing across it during gales.

Fighting with gunny sacks, they saw them on the fire line, close enough to singe and blister, and they saw them at a distance, across a river or from inside a moving train, the red serpent almost unreal against the dark open. In 2014, fewer spectators get to see the fires up close or hit them with a gunny sack, but the view of controlled burns across the Flint Hills during April evenings is just as breathtaking as ever. At other times of year, painters and photographers capture the images and display them, providing yet another way to see the legacy of the fires, layered through the eyes of the artist.

A host of contradictions infused with multiple meanings, historic prairie fires represented danger to life and property, but also, paradoxically, a crucial renewal of the grass, of the land, of the prairie. They were a tool to use in the tallgrass environment and also a great adventure—part of the lore of the Great West. Euro-Americans, as newcomers to the region, both applauded and condemned Native skill with fire, their perspective at any given time entirely dependent on shifting



PRAIRIE MEADOWS BURNING
George Catlin
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr.

land-use strategies and economic futures.

Things became no simpler in the modern era. Although centuries of humans, native and newcomer alike, have used prairie fire to create and maintain the grassland, most modern residents have little understanding of its role, either historic or current.

Considered by many to be only a relic of the past, not relevant to the modern Great Plains, the fires, in a sublime instance of environmental irony, are actually as influential when withheld from the prairie as when applied. Withholding fire invites woody intruders—trees and brush that disrupt the landscape and drink scarce water

from the ground. Applying fire, as ranchers in the Flint Hills so skillfully do, maintains grass dominance, creates environments for sundry species, both flora and fauna, and preserves the wide-open character of the prairie. Present or absent, fire's influence is perpetually seen on every inch of tallgrass prairie. Fire and grassland are co-dependent, the Bert and Ernie, so to speak, of the tallgrass region.

But let's move beyond the physical. Prairie fire (with human help) maintained and (largely) created the tallgrass, but it also did so much more that is less tangible, less visible, and more. . . felt. The flames burn and singe, it's true, but prairie fire, as an identifying characteristic of the region, has also left a more subtle (yet critical) emotional imprint on the land and the people who live there. Because they were so beautiful, dangerous, and necessary, all in one, the total experience of prairie fires—fearing them, fighting them, and admiring

them—formed a complicated emotional connection between prairie people and the land. This connection is historic but also lingers, even in 2014.

At first, nineteenth-century Euro-American newcomers saw prairie fires as exotic and otherworldly—something beautiful and mesmerizing, but also foreign and therefore frightening. Albert Myer, a soldier stationed on the Great Plains in 1855, admired the beauty of a fire moving away from his camp one evening and listened to the pleasant crackle of the flames as he watched the “broad wavering light, and the solemn grandeur of the scene.” He wished his family could have been there with him to see the novelty of the burning prairie, but he was equally relieved that they were not, thus ensuring their safety. Abbie Bright, a Pennsylvanian visiting in Kansas, woke from a sound sleep in October 1870, to stand in the cold night, blanket around her shoulders, and watch a distant fire, an opportunity her brother said she might never have again. She

found the fires lovely, almost beyond description, but also fearful. “Saw a prairie fire,” she later summarized in her diary, “such a sight.”

Over time, as the newcomers settled into the strange prairie environment, it became more familiar, and prairie fires took on added meaning. Learning about fire, how to fight it when necessary, how it shaped the landscape and renewed the grass, and its unique importance to the region, created an emotional connection between the fires, tallgrass people, and the land, which visitors like Myer and Bright did not share. Take, for example, a letter written by a Nebraska woman to her son back east in April 1887. “By the way,” she wrote, “there is at this moment a splendid prairie fire blazing just west of us. Some of your . . . Massachusetts people never saw such a sight with all their privileges.” Unlike visitors, who saw the fires as novelties, the prairie mother included the burn in her letter almost as an afterthought—a common occurrence, but clearly one

she cherished. This fire was *hers*. Other Plains people might be fortunate enough to see one, too, but these fires were unique to her region, and in fact *identified* her region. She was fond of them, as she was now fond of the prairie itself. Easterners were left to their envy.

In the same way, a Junction City, Kansas, newspaper editor, in 1862, revealed his own affection for the fires, along with a little prairie possessiveness. “Mother Earth, in our neighborhood, has donned a garment of mourning,” he wrote after a prairie fire. “Blackness covers the face of the earth as far as the eye can reach. But in a few weeks it will be replaced by the lovely garb of vegetation peculiar alone to our beautiful prairies.” While prairie fires might temporarily blacken the earth and burn the grass away, the editor recognized fire’s critical and long-term role of facilitating new growth and actual renewal of the landscape. For this, like the Nebraska mother, the editor was grateful.



SMOKE AND LIGHT
Dave Leiker

Thus, over time, the fires that shaped the land, although a threat to property and, less often, human life, inspired complicated emotions and reactions from those who lived on the prairie. Paradoxically, the same force that threatened also came to identify the region and the region’s people. Familiarity bred understanding and affection. Today, as tallgrass people have adopted different lifestyles and relationships to the land from historic residents, familiarity, understanding, and affection for the fires are waning. And yet, fire’s influence and presence

always remains, both literally and figuratively. We just need to find a way to see (and feel) it for ourselves. Who knows? The fires that shaped our home might even inspire a little prairie possessiveness in us too.

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