Fencing the Flint Hills

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GREAT BALLS OF WIRE
Don Wolfe

FENCING THE FLINT HILLS

As the Chisholm trail became the thoroughfare for millions of Texas cattle coming to railheads in Kansas, it initiated economic opportunities in Kansas cattle towns and the countryside surrounding them. But the increased settlement it spawned only served as obstacles to trail drovers as homesteads with their fences were established.

Many of these fences were established either with the use of hedge (Osage orange) seedlings, or by building rock walls. The trail days of the Chisholm were ebbing as barbed wire was patented, but with it, fences could be established in days rather than months for stone walls, or years for hedge. Barbed wire came to symbolize the end of free or "open" range, and the end of the trail driving era.

Fences were necessary for land owners not only to adequately manage and care for their stock, but also to properly manage the great grassland resource of the Flint Hills. The year of 1867 was not only the year cattle began trailing the Chisholm, but also the year that fencing of Kansas homesteads took a bold step forward.

Federal government research had determined that the cost of building perimeter and interior fences on any given farm in the Midwest was greater than the combined costs of the land, livestock, and other improvements. Therefore, to provide an incentive for settlers to plant hedge for fencing, the Kansas legislature passed a law in 1867 to pay farmers forty cents for every rod (sixteen and one half feet) of hedge fence.

The incentive law was abolished in the late 1870s, but before then many farmers took advantage of the opportunity and planted hedge with abandon. Additionally, hedge rows were often established along public roadways.

The hedge tree, or Osage orange (*Maclura pomifera*), is not an indigenous species to Kansas but rather to the Red River region of Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Arkansas. Lewis and Clark, as well as early French trappers, learned of the great value of the tree to Native Americans for the construction of bows and other tools– hence the French name of bois d'arc (bow wood) for the tree.

By the 1840s it had been introduced into Illinois for use as fencing. Spreading to other Midwest states, it was advertised for sale in a Lawrence newspaper as early as the mid-1850s. Hedge could pass the nineteenth-century test of a good fence: "horse high, bull strong, and pig tight." If the trees, which took three to five years to establish, were routinely pruned to the recommended height of four and a half feet, they formed an impenetrable barrier of woven stems spiked with short but strong thorns.

The fruit of the hedge tree, the hedge apple, was in such demand that it became a commodity purchased and sold on the Chicago Board of Trade. During the 1860s and 1870s, hedge seedlings were so popular that they made the greatest volume in all Kansas nurseries. By 1882, hedge fencing had become the most popular fence in Kansas. Although wire overtook hedge as a fencing material by 1886, use of hedge peaked in 1895 with more than 72,000 miles reported.

However, the hedge tree was not done providing service as fencing material. Fence posts made from the tree were found to be exceedingly durable, with "one hedge post wearing out two postholes." While it is commonplace to see hedge posts throughout the Flint Hills, many have been replaced with steel since steel will withstand the frequent prescribed fire that is necessary for tallgrass prairie maintenance.

The 1867 Kansas law that allowed counties to abolish open range offered the same incentive for the construction of a stone wall fence as for the planting of a living hedge fence. The forty cents per rod sum constituted approximately 20 percent of the cost of creating the fence, considering that Dickinson County reported a two-dollar cost per rod of stone fence in 1870.

Stone fences are also commonly referenced as "rock fences" because some regard "stone" to imply quarried, dressed rock such as that used in construction of buildings. It was for dressed rock that the Junction City Stone Sawing Company secured a contract in 1867 to furnish stone for the construction of the east wing of the Kansas State Capitol. But in contrast to dressed rock, the rock used to build fences, though quarried, was not dressed. It was also "dry-laid," meaning no mortar was used in construction.

Wood for fence rails was somewhat scarce in the plains, including Kansas, but many fences were built of rock instead of wood because of the German ancestry of settlers in the Flint Hills region. The newly arrived immigrants began using the flat limestone rock to erect fences as they had done in their native land.

In the town of Alma, Wabaunsee County, German settlers used rock to build fences, houses, and downtown buildings, establishing Alma as the "city of native stone," and the county boasts

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some of the most beautiful rock fences in Kansas. These fences became the inspiration for the establishment of the Native Stone Scenic Byway. Designated by the state, it follows Kansas Highway 4 from the east through Dover to Eskridge and then turns north on Kansas Highway 99 through Alma to Interstate 70. It runs about fifty-four miles.

Today, Wabaunsee County hosts a bi-annual Stone Fence Restoration Workshop. It was developed to help ranchers and farmers living near the Native Stone Scenic Byway learn how to restore old stone fences on their land. It has turned into a draw for history buffs looking for a way to recreate and experience this distinctive part of pioneer life.

The first patent in the United States for barbed wire was issued in 1867 to Lucien B. Smith of Kent, Ohio, who is regarded as the inventor. However, Joseph F. Glidden's patent in 1874 after he made his own modifications is essentially what is still used today. Glidden was embroiled in legal patent disputes for some time, but he eventually emerged the victor and is regarded as the father of barbed wire. Barbed (or barb, bob, or bobbed) wire was not immediately received favorably by settlers who dubbed it "the devil's rope." History records the quote: "Injury to both humans and livestock by vicious barbed wire suggests this invention is the work of the devil."

In time, however, due to economic, time, and construction advantages, barbed wire replaced both stone wall and hedge fencing.

Fences not only serve to contain cattle on their allotted pasture acreage but also add to the panorama of the Flint Hills. The neatly trimmed hedge fence of yesterday became hedge rows, as the trees were allowed to grow without pruning. They became a common denotation of one Flint Hills valley crop field to another, but many have been removed to accommodate today's large farming machinery. The propensity of the tree to spread into native tallgrass prairie pastures

CHISHOLM TRAIL DAYS
Andy Sharp

has also led to the removal of hedge rows that border pastures. Still, they are frequently seen throughout the hills.

The remnants of stone wall fences still stand, monuments to the enduring pioneer spirit of early Kansas settlers. Few of them serve as actual fences today, but with strands of barbed wire running alongside, they add a certain mystique to the landscape.

The beauty of the natural world lies in the details. Just as a stream or gravel road beckons, so does a fence line, tempting the adventurer to follow where it leads.

Fences perhaps changed the Flint Hills, but the fences only served to accommodate the changes that took place, as private land ownership developed and the legal action necessary to control the grazing of cattle was put in place. The Chisholm Trail, the cattle industry, the Flint Hills, and fences all share a common link in Kansas history.

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