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Establishing the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve

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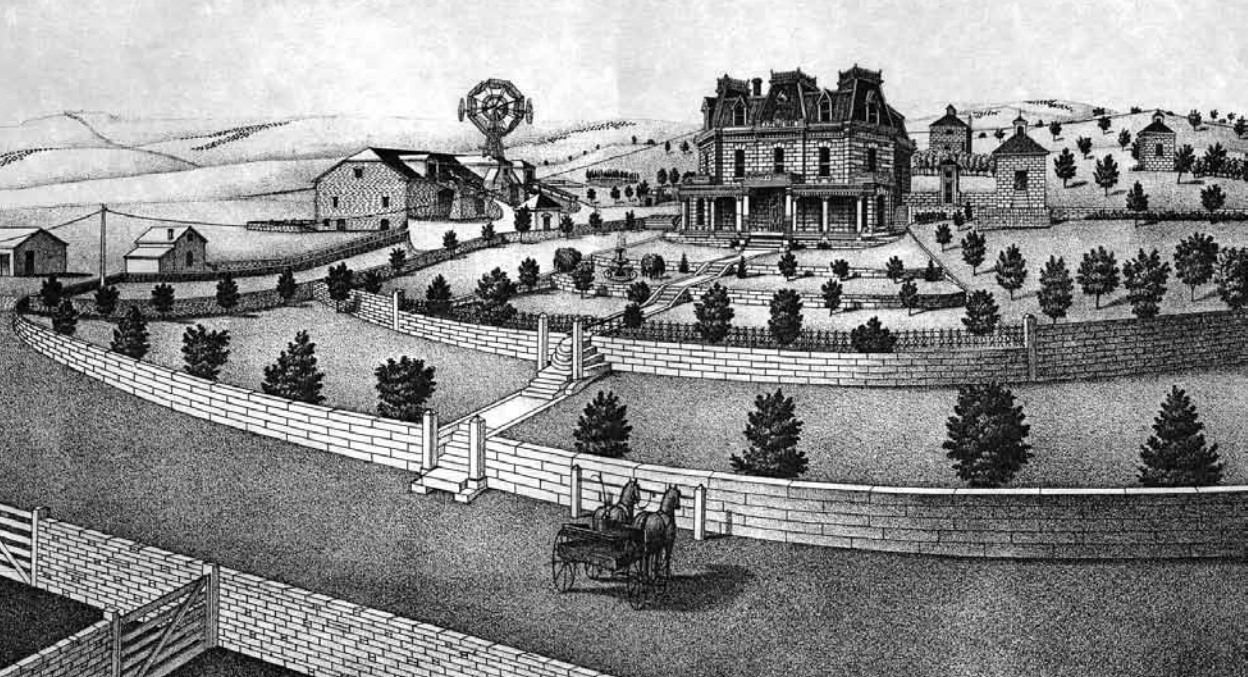
ESTABLISHING THE TALLGRASS PRAIRIE NATIONAL PRESERVE

Efforts to establish some sort of national prairie park go back to the 1920s. In 1930 Victor E. Shelford of the University of Illinois proposed that a large area of grassland on the Nebraska-South Dakota border be taken into the national park system. His suggestion went unheeded, and it was not until the later 1950s that interest again began to grow.

In 1958, as a result of a nine-state study by G.W. Tomanek and F.W. Albertson of Fort Hays State University, the National Park Service proposed to establish a 34,000 acre national prairie park east of Tuttle Creek Reservoir near Manhattan, Kansas. Two years later the National Park Service added 23,000 acres to the proposal to assist in flood control plans after the severe flood of 1951. Opposition from Kansas farmers and ranchers was strong, however, crystallizing in a confrontation that drew national attention when Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall and National Park Service Director Conrad Wirth, arriving by helicopter to meet a tour guide to the proposed site, were met instead by rancher Carl Bellinger, who ordered them off his leased property at gunpoint.

In 1971, interest in a park grew when Kansas Senator James Pearson and Representative Larry Winn each introduced legislation to establish a 60,000-acre prairie national park with an unspecified Flint Hills location. Initial opposition was led by the Kansas Livestock Association (KLA), supplemented two years later

OPPOSITE: SEA OF KANSAS FLINT HILLS
Jim Richardson



S.F. JONES, SPRING HILL FARM AND STOCK RANCH, *Kansas State Atlas 1887, Published by L.H. Everts and Co., 1887*

with the organization of the Kansas Grassroots Association (KGA). Pro-park support was coordinated by Save the Tallgrass Prairie, Inc. From 1973 through 1980 Congressman Winn continued to introduce legislation to establish a park, each time facing opposition from KLA, KGA, Kansas Farm Bureau, and the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts. Among the chief arguments of the anti-park faction were the loss of revenue once a sizeable chunk of land had been taken off the tax rolls and the belief

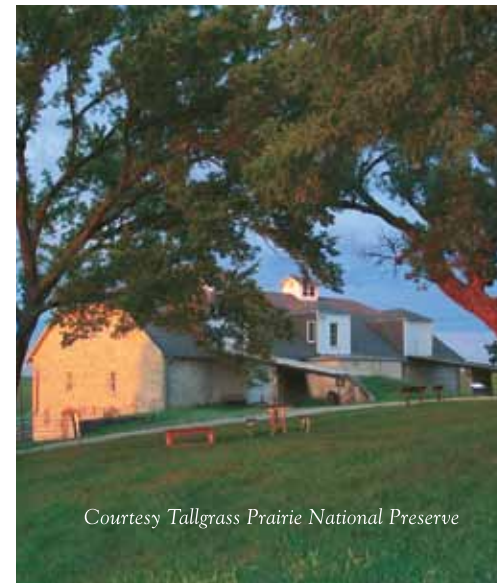
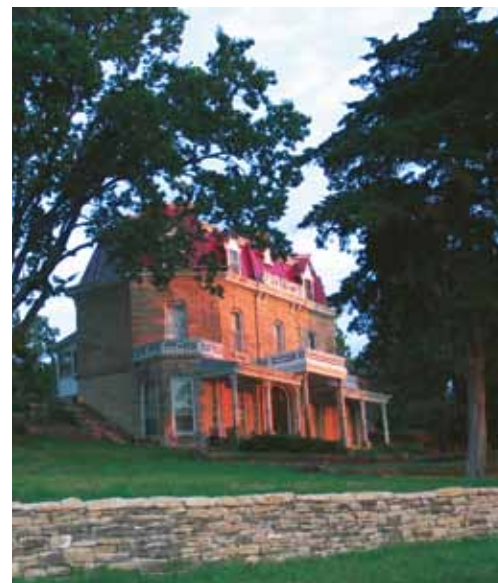
that ranchers were good stewards of the land. Pro-park adherents, including environmental groups associated with the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society, argued along with Stewart Udall that a tallgrass park would “fill the last gap in the nation’s park system.”

With the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and a concomitant moratorium on National Park Service acquisitions, Winn dropped his legislative attempts. In June 1988 the National Audubon Society optioned a purchase of the Z Bar Ranch from Boatmen’s First National Bank of

Kansas City, which had acquired the ranch two years earlier. The core of the Z Bar had been the Spring Hill Ranch, founded by Colorado cattleman Steven F. Jones in 1878. Two years later, Jones spent \$40,000 to construct the striking native limestone house and barn that have become landmarks. In 1888, Jones sold his ranch to Barney Lantry, a stone cutter who had arrived in Chase County a year before Jones. Subsequently the property changed hands several times before being purchased in 1935 by the Davis-Noland-Merrill Grain Company of Kansas City. In 1975 the company changed its name to the Z Bar Cattle Company and the ranch became the Z Bar.

Ron Klataske, West Central Regional vice-president of the Audubon Society, working with Congressman Dan Glickman, set out three possibilities for the Z Bar: 1) purchase and operation of the ranch by the National Park Service, 2) purchase and operation by the National Audubon Society, or 3) purchase and operation by the state of Kansas. He further suggested that local leaders, ranchers, landowners, and environmentalists get together to work out a plan.

Anti-park groups, recalling that earlier proposals had specified parks many times larger than the Z Bar’s



Courtesy Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve

10,000-plus acres and fearing the imposition of eminent domain on neighboring properties, along with loss of tax revenue, again mounted heavy opposition. Many factors came into play in this debate, but in essence it boiled down to a controversy between ranchers versus environmentalists, each side believing that it would do a better job of caring for the land. Others outside these two core groups could see positive and negative arguments on both sides, and sentiment leaned toward setting aside some sort of prairie preserve open to the public. In 1991 the House of Representatives passed Congressman Glickman's bill to establish the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, but the two Kansas Senators (Robert Dole and Nancy Landon Kassebaum) took no comparable action.

Early the following year, however, Senator Kassebaum convened a meeting at the Z Bar, bringing together a group that included interested parties both for and against the park. At her urging, the

conferees agreed to an outline of a plan that would keep some 99 percent of the land in private ownership, while allowing the National Park Service to own the buildings and to operate the facility for the benefit of the public. Although Boatmen's Bank and the private foundation created to purchase the ranch (Spring Hill Z Bar Ranch, Inc.) were not able to agree to terms of sale, the principle established by what became known as the Kassebaum Commission had created the conditions that made it possible for the National Park Trust, a nonprofit land trust established in 1983 by the National Parks and Conservation Association, to buy the land with the intent of having the National Park Service administer the ranch as a part of the national park system.

Soon after the National Park Trust had obtained ownership of the Z Bar Ranch in June 1994, legislation was introduced by Kansas senators Dole and Kassebaum and by representatives Glickman, Pat Roberts, Jan Meyers, and Jim Slattery that would allow the

National Park Service to own up to 180 acres containing the ranch buildings and the one-room school. The remainder, owned by the National Park Trust, would remain on the tax rolls. The purchase was assisted by Texas rancher Ed Bass, who contributed a million dollars towards the purchase price and also negotiated a long-term lease on grazing rights for an additional two million dollars.

Final passage of the bill occurred in October 1996, and the legislation was signed into law by President Bill Clinton a month later. But the 75-year odyssey to establish the prairie park had not yet come to an end. In 2004 the National Park Trust agreed to sell the private portion of the preserve to the Kansas Park Trust, an agency that had been initially established for that purpose. In March 2005 The Nature Conservancy purchased the property from the Kansas Park Trust, thus adding nearly 11,000 acres to its holdings in the Flint Hills, which also include the 8,600-acre Konza Prairie Biological Research Station south of Manhattan

and the 2,200-acre Flint Hills Tallgrass Preserve east of Cassoday, in addition to the 38,000-acre Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in Osage County, Oklahoma.

Once the Kansas Park Trust had transferred ownership to The Nature Conservancy, its remaining mission was to initiate construction of a visitor center. That was accomplished in 2012, Kansas Park Trust disbanded, and today the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve is maintained and operated by a dual public/private partnership, the first such arrangement in the nation: the National Park Service as operator and manager and The Nature Conservancy as the primary land owner.

*Jim Hoy is Professor Emeritus of English and Director of the Center for Great Plains Studies at Emporia State University. His books on ranching history and folklife include *Cowboys and Kansas*, *Flint Hills Cowboys*, and *Cowboys Lament: A Life on the Open Range*. Jim is the Chair of Symphony in the Flint Hills Board of Directors.*