

How We Got a Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve in the Flint Hills

by Dick Seaton

As early as 1832, artist George Catlin thought the Tallgrass Prairie should be preserved in a park. D.W. Wilder, editor of the *Hiawatha World*, wrote in 1884 that we “ought to have saved a...park in Kansas, thousand acres broad—the prairie as it came from the hand of God.” Walt Whitman said in 1889 that it is America’s “characteristic landscape.”

Since these early visionaries, many Kansans, including our own Ron Klataske, have lobbied for a Prairie Park in the Flint Hills. What we ended up with is the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve near Strong City. It is not a national park, and is almost all privately owned by the Nature Conservancy. Established in 1996, it encompasses 10,894 acres of undeveloped prairie and is managed cooperatively by the National Park Service (NPS) and the Conservancy.

The back story is interesting, especially if you are a history buff.

Starting in the 1920’s midwestern scientists, concerned with loss of flora and fauna in the remaining prairie, began advocating for a national prairie park. The NPS initially took no interest, although National Grasslands, which are a different animal, came into existence under the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Forest Service in the 30’s and 40’s.

However, in 1956 an Interior Department Advisory Board formally recommended studies for acquiring grasslands to be incorporated in the national park system. And gradually, the focus narrowed to a tallgrass prairie park.

In February 1958, a conference in Manhattan launched the first effort, to create a large park east of Tuttle Creek Reservoir, then under construction. Later that year NPS proposed a park of at least 30,000 acres somewhere in the prairie. By 1959, this proposal had crystallized to a 34,000-acre national park in Pottawatomie County. Two years later it had grown to 57,000 acres, and the Kansas congressional delegation introduced bills to create it. The Kansas legislature even appropriated \$100,000 to assist with the purchase.

But gradually, opponents began to organize. They made headlines in late 1961 when rancher Carl Bellinger confronted Interior Secretary Stewart Udall with a gun and ordered him back to his helicopter and off Bellinger’s land. After this so-called Twin Mound incident, the Pottawatomie County effort faded away.

Later in the 60’s NPS began restudying an earlier proposal to consider three possible Flint Hills sites, located in Elk County,

Chase County or Osage County, Oklahoma. In 1971 Congressman Larry Winn of Overland Park and Senator James Pearson introduced bills calling for a 60,000-acre park somewhere in Kansas. Then the lines of battle really began to form. Supporters came together in Save the Tallgrass Prairie (STP) and opponents countered with the Kansas Grassroots Association (KGA).

Winn introduced several more bills, but none succeeded. Then in 1975 NPS floated the idea of a “Flint Hills Agricultural Reserve.” Instead of a park, it would be made up of privately owned prairie under regional management, and would recognize the area’s local culture of ranching. By 1979 a coalition which included National Audubon, the National Parks Conservation Association, the Wilderness Society, Friends of the Earth, and the Izaak Walton League was promoting the idea of a “preserve.”

This represented the first major turn in the road, with support shifting toward something closer to what we now have in the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve.

But a second major turn took place in 1988 when the Z Bar Ranch in Chase County came on the market, although legislative efforts went nowhere and support was quiet during the Reagan administration.

In June of 1988, National Audubon (NAS) acquired an option to purchase the ranch of almost 11,000 acres. Ron Klataske was regional vice president of NAS and was in charge of the effort to acquire it for a national park. He was opposed to condemnation, but suggested a purchase by the federal government, the state, or NAS, on a “willing seller” basis.

Editorial support came quickly from the *Wichita Eagle Beacon*, *The Emporia Gazette*, *The Topeka Capital Journal* and *The Manhattan Mercury*. The *Gazette* thought it “could be the opportunity of the century to preserve a bit of beautiful bluestem country.”

Proponents and opponents lined up once again. The idea of federal ownership seemed to be off the table. Even so, in April of 1991 the NPS actually came out against the proposal, on the ground it was too small. Both of our senators, Bob Dole and Nancy Kassebaum, declined their support.

But Kassebaum did not step away. Instead, she announced she would work for creation of a private foundation to purchase the ranch. With her well-known skills for consensus, she established



Spring sunset at Mount Mitchell. Photo by Dr. Jackie Augustine.

the “Kassebaum Commission,” which between 1991 and 1994 brought all the players together. A corporation, Spring Hill Z Bar Ranch, Inc., was created in 1992.

With Bill Clinton’s election in 1992 the NPS was again on board, and it signed a consent agreement with the corporation. NPS agreed to operate the ranch and the corporation committed to raise five million dollars within two years to buy the property.

Kassebaum’s intervention was the third major turn in the road, as it brought supporters together with the Kansas Farm Bureau and Kansas Livestock Association, both previous opponents.

Klataske then approached the National Park Trust, and on March 4, 1994 they announced an agreement to raise the \$4.7 million price and to keep the ranch in private ownership. By June the Trust had borrowed the money and purchased the ranch.

Meanwhile, NPS determined that it needed to own at least 180 acres in order to successfully manage the property as part of the national park system. Legislation was passed and signed by Clinton on November 12, 1996, creating the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve. The “preserve” designation allows NPS more flexibility in managing the property than would a designation as a “national park”.

Along the way, the Trust was having trouble paying on the loan. Ed Bass of Texas came to their rescue with a \$1 million gift and \$2 million for a 35-year grazing lease. Then in April 2005 the Trust transferred title to the Nature Conservancy (TNC), through the Kansas Park Trust. So now we have the Preserve, operated under a cooperative agreement between NPS and TNC, which aims to preserve some prairie, while sharing the story of area ranching, Native American history of the region, and the diverse ecology of the Flint Hills.

Although we don’t have a real prairie national park in the Flint Hills, we have saved and preserved a tract “ten thousand acres broad,” as wished for by the Hiawatha editor. We also have many ranchers who continue their good stewardship of the land. In addition to the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, we also now have some 110,000 acres of Flint Hills prairie subject to conservation easements held by TNC, Kansas Land Trust, Ranchland Trust of Kansas and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.