



An aerial view of an intact prairie landscape in the Flint Hills.

## *Reflections on a Culture Renowned for Horsemanship and a New Opportunity to Preserve Prairie*

Article by **Bill Browning**

**A**ugust 31, 2012 – Last night we returned from a hectic journey to San Antonio to visit a sick friend. This morning I needed to renew my connection with the prairie. As I sat on a high ridge some twelve miles west of Madison, I watched a much diminished, but still grand streamer of hurricane Isaac slide in from the east. As it spun a galactic arm across the Flint Hills, clouds dimmed the sun's light on abandoned Teterville, miles to my south, and stuttered west up the turnpike far to my north.

The nearly unfathomable majesty of nature that this storm remnant represents is staggering. A weather system that has sustained itself for more than two weeks over thousands of miles suggests the old song lyrics: "Off the coast of Africa,

bound for North America" and finally it comes here to our Flint Hills Prairie!

It has been the second in a row of terrible summers for this part of Kansas, but this scene this morning still holds evidence of our beautiful grasslands.

In contrast was our trip down I-35 through central Texas, formerly the purview of great buffalo herds and the Comanche Nation. Everywhere the systems of nature now lay in ruins, replaced by the systems of unfettered development. From Ft. Worth south the journey was truly harrowing. Commonly there were 25 or more semis per mile and 50 or a hundred cars, darting like beetles among the behemoths. At one point we were nearly swept off the road by two halves of a swerving pair of double trailers. The whole of 300 miles

down from Ft. Worth to San Antonio was like a continuous strip mall punctuated by sprawling cities, industrial sites and mega car-dealerships, one of the ugliest vistas imaginable. Terrified of tempting the fates, we returned on a less-travelled highway fifty miles west of I-35 where the topography was much more inspiring but where whatever had been the ecosystem was largely replaced by junipers, (aka "Texas Cedars", *Juniperus ashei*, a cousin to our area's Eastern Red Cedars, *Juniperus virginiana*).

We saw one pastured "buffalo" and no evidence of the "pre-settlement" Comanche culture. Suffice it to say that the Comanches of the 18th and 19th centuries and other Native Americans would never have recognized their homeland anywhere but here on our Flint

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**I was born upon a prairie where the wind blew free and there was nothing to break the light of the sun. I was born where there were no enclosures and where everything drew a free breath. – Ten Bears, Yamparika Comanche**



Hills prairie and on other remnants of our state's remaining grasslands.

To borrow, and change, a line from an Alaskan belt buckle for my purposes here: "Parts of Kansas still are what that part of Texas was."

And that in a nutshell is the inspiration and conservation policy basis for the new **Flint Hills Legacy Conservation Area** conservation easement program that was officially activated in the spring of this year and is being sponsored by the U.S. Department of the Interior.

A long process of degradation and disappearance of ecologically sustainable, open-prairie landscapes has prompted this program to save a significant piece – hopefully and eventually up to a million acres – of the remaining tallgrass prairie in the Flint Hills with voluntary, perpetual conservation easements.

Permanent, irrevocable loss of our continent's remaining

tallgrass prairie is occurring in several forms. The obvious combination includes conversion to cropland and cities, suburban sprawl and fragmentation with small acreage developments, and establishment of industrial windpower complexes. Other true prairie areas are being overtaken with woody plants in route to becoming early succession woodlands. From a prairie or savannah enthusiast's perspective, these are not ecologically distinct and attractive savannahs like those on the oak forest edge. These areas become dominated with cedar, locust, hedge and elms. They are utilized by White-tailed Deer and a suite of species – but not Greater Prairie-chickens, Upland Sandpipers and Eastern Meadowlarks.

Factors leading to this devolution include: land owner/operator neglect of invasive woody plants; conversion of large ranches to ranchettes, often with horses pounding the life out of native prairie; fire suppression in areas with

**In addition to federally sponsored conservation easements**, several nonprofit conservation organizations accept donated conservation easements. The list includes the Kansas Ranchland Trust, The Nature Conservancy and the Kansas Land Trust. Audubon of Kansas is also qualified and receptive to consider donation of conservation easements consistent with our mission. Audubon has a special interest in preserving small remnant prairies that are ecological arks, and other critically important wildlife habitats. Immediately to the north, Wachiska Audubon Society of Lincoln, Nebraska has conservation easements on prairies within fourteen counties in southeast Nebraska.

increasing numbers of residential and other structures; individuals intent on creating large fescue lawns or letting everything grow wild to attract a trophy buck. Then, to add insult to injury, excessive and repeated broadcast applications of herbicides which destroy the plant diversity of native grasslands.

An intact remnant area of grassland has been identified and boundaries have been established. The scale of the program is truly grand, encompassing more than a million acres in the Flint Hills. Landowners within the designated region are offered generous compensation in exchange for foregoing certain development rights in perpetuity and agreeing to maintain the open prairie.

Funding for easement acquisition is very limited for this first year but will

hopefully grow through time. This is not the first foray by the U.S. Department of the Interior into voluntary easement programs with private landowners. Prior to more recent work in other critical habitats, the USFWS has a long history of protecting wetlands with conservation easements. The agency now has more than 100,000 acres protected with conservation easements along the Rocky Mountain Front and in the Blackfoot and Centennial valleys of Montana.

Audubon of Kansas heartily supports this conservation easement initiative of the USFWS. It will be a perfect complement to other easement programs, including the Grassland Reserve Program and the Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program administered by U.S.D.A's Natural Resource Conservation Service.



— Photos by Ron Klataske.

**An early morning view of gathering steers from a pasture on the Browning Ranch. Conservation easements are compatible with traditional ranching. The stogy-smoking cowboy on the right was Bill in an earlier era.**