

The Flint Hills of KANSAS

by Tom MeBeth

If God has a special place for cattle and the people who tend them in heaven it must look like the Flint hills. My family moved to the Flint hills in 1960. I was eleven years old. I've loved them ever since.

People always talk about their spring beauty. May, June and early July are the season when the native warm-season grasses are at their nutritional peak for grazing. For more than 100 years thin, southern cattle have been shipped to the Flint Hills to gain pounds and profit.

The amazing thing is how those gutted-up bags of ears, skin and bone are transformed into fat, slick feeder cattle. For

The tall grasses' spring opulence loses some of its nutritional punch from July through October. That's why so many ranchers have gone to intensive grazing. Intensive grazing is the way buffalo used the I Hills. They migrated they weren't in one spot all the time.

Even though spring's verdant vibrancy dulls as summer progresses. July through October is my favorite part of the year in the Flint Hills. When the grass goes to seed, seed runners rise six feet or more. The Bluestems and switchgrass develop delicate plumes which send their seeds off on the wind. Pastures become a sea of waving gentleness.

The Flint Hills are the largest remaining tall-grass prairie, encompassing 500 million acres.

30 years I've heard old men in high-top Blucher or McI owell boots say. "You wouldn't know they was the same cattle!"

They're right. The rich grasses of the Flint I lulls are a miracle. I have never understood how soil that shallow laid on top of a pile of limestone can grow grass that good.

The color of New England and the Ozarks have nothing over fall in the Flint Hills. When summer's heat softens a thousand earthen shades become sweet like persimmons after a frost. Afternoons of siren-song breezes through grass interspersed with Meadowlark



JIM PATRICO PHOTO

calls will slowly and forever tear holes in your heart.

The logs of late autumn lie in the valleys. When the moon shines full it brings a ghostly appearance with a haunting whisper of graceful silence. You'll want to reach out to grasp the peace of that silence.

Fall eases into winter. Freezing fog-oust covers everything- knee, posts, barns, limestone outcrops and the grass - with a layer of ice. Winter's destructiveness takes on a gem-like appearance. I never understood the word, radiance, until the sun came out on the first ice storm I witnessed in the Illills.

Snow seldom drifts to the ground from the sky. It comes from the north, horizontally, screaming like a banshee coining after all the warmth and lift' of spring amid summer with a vendetta. Spring begins almost

violently. The Flint I Hills are populated with pyromaniacs. Night ill late April is a virtual Phoenix's funeral pyre.

Fire is as much a part of the Hills ecosystem as is soil and rain. The Plains Indians noticed burning the, prairie. called the buffalo. Buffalo liked the new grass that comes after a burn. Black earth brings warmth to time soil quicker arid new growth sooner. Today range scientists recomend burning to keep the tall grass prairie healthy and cattle people follow their findings.

With all its contradictions,]"in continually intrigued by the Flint Illills. I'm not the only one who feels that way. The people who own and care for this land are not only cattle producers, they are environmentalists of the truest nature.

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