

# PIVOT

Last winter a tenant farmer I know talked his landlord into getting a pivot irrigation system, a decision based on expected drought. Wanting to save at all costs, they bought a used machine. I watched as the sections were towed to the field. One pickup pulled, one pickup followed.

The sections set like catapult ramps ready to thrust the tenant and his landlord into a new age. Section by section, two sections a day, by the fifth day it was a quarter mile long. They tested it on the sixth day. Pleased and proud, the landlord rested and the tenant gave thanks on the seventh. Monday would be the day to plant corn.

I stopped by as the tenant was filling his planter. Puzzled, I asked, "How will the pivot get around that row of trees, or pass by the building along the road? Can it go through those steep hills?" He was shucked. He had a cerebrum encasing a corn cob core which saw no problem as he pointed to a bulldozer. It would destroy two irritants and rearrange the other.

Learning pivots can't jump over, I decided to jump in. "What will come after the pivot? What will be pushed out for the next new improvement? Is the soil the next thing to go?" Hearing no reply from the taciturn tenant, I shoved harder. "Who will bring back the soil if it washes away, and what would you plant in what is left of what can't come back?"

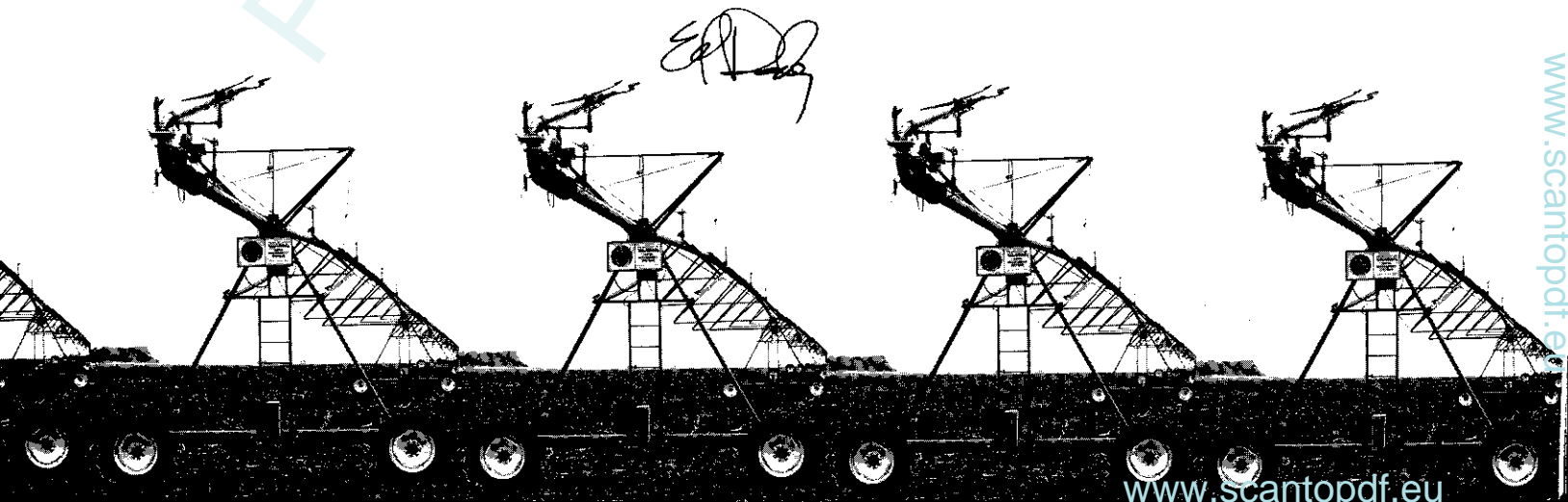
He said he intended to feed the world.


The summer was long and hot and dry. The pivot moved day after day with imperceptible motion; monotonous in motion on land leveled to monotony. There seemed less than the promise made in the spring. It was a fossil with its tail tied down, going in circles, searching for a grave, indifferent to what was beneath it, watering its own bones till death.

We saw each other last week. "It was a good year; my production was up; my costs were down; I've reduced my runoff; and it was a lot less work," he reported for my profit. He's putting up another pivot next year, a new one this time.

I started to question his given Truth, pointing out the crack in the stone his commandments were carved in, but I had been drenched. Where could anyone find an argument against satisfaction? It was dryland farming; I was scratching rock trying to plant a doubt.

I'd have to wait till it rained, and hope a thought might sprout. It pivots on whether the questions soaked in.





## Wild Plant Foraging

Kay Young

Asked to name a common weed, it is likely that most persons would quickly incriminate the common dandelion. It seems to be everywhere - lawns, gardens, roadsides, cracks in walks - anywhere its tiny windborne seeds can find a spot of soil. Because of the dandelion's prevalence today, it is hard to imagine that when European immigrants first came to settle the area we now know as the prairie-plains, there were no dandelions in the Americas.

This situation was seen as a terrible lack by some settlers, and they soon wrote back home for dandelion seed. Once planted, the dandelion patch was carefully tended until a stand was well established. Thus these settlers assured themselves a plentiful supply of the "spring greens" to which they had formerly been accustomed.

Two other popular European greens, lambsquarters and curly dock, also spread across the prairie. In addition, many native plants, especially fruits and nuts, became part of the settler diet and were still used long after cultivated gardens and orchards were in production.

Several studies made around the turn of the century document many uses of wild plants by native peoples living on the prairie, but the information about uses of wild plants by settlers must be gleaned in bits and pieces from historical records such as books, journals, and letters, and from personal interviews with settlers' descendants.

Research in this area has long been an interest of mine, and that eventually led me to search out and try wild edible plants myself. A few years ago I became curious about just how extensive the contemporary use of wild plants was. So I wrote letters to the editors of one hundred small newspapers across Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, and North Dakota asking subscribers if they used wild edible plants or if their parents had, and if so, which ones and in what way?

Over 130 persons wrote back. From their letters and from interviews with older persons across the plains it would seem that the dandelion, lambsquarters, and dock are still much-loved plants when it comes to spring greens. Furthermore, the method of preparing dandelion or other wild greens seems much the same today as when the settlers prepared them.

Generally, the leaves are picked in spring during the early morning. They are washed, then boiled until tender. The water is drained off and a little bacon grease is added for flavor. The greens are then placed on the table with a bottle of vinegar for those who wish to add it.

But for the dandelion, greens are only part of the story. Dandelion roots make a delicious coffee-like brew, and the flowers are wonderful added to quiche. To make the "coffee" you need one medium root for each cup. Wash the roots well (I use a brush). Place the roots on a rack on a cookie sheet; bake at 350 degrees for about one hour. Because the size of the roots vary it is difficult to set the exact amount of time needed, but the timing is critical. The roots are ready when they are brown and brittle, and smell a little like chocolate. If underdone there is little flavor, if overdone the flavor is unpleasant. (Good luck!) When properly roasted, the roots are ready to brew.

Each yellow dandelion head, usually called a "flower", is really a cluster of many flowers on a common base. For quiche, cut the yellow flowers from each base and discard the bases. Use about one-half to one cup flowers in a medium-sized quiche or add one-fourth to one-half cup to a six egg omelet or to scrambled eggs - subtle flavor, but good.

Many other wild gourmet treats can be found in addition to the dandelion. In issues to follow I will identify some of them and provide recipes. But remember that the dandelion is easy to identify and nearly all of its parts are safe to eat when cooked. I worry about some wild plant gatherers because in recent years the word "natural" has become a synonym for "healthful." With wild plants such a concept can be dangerous. Some can cause sickness and even death if eaten. Just because a plant occurs *naturally* does not mean it is harmless.

The dangers of some wild plants need not deter you from the pleasures, however. The reward for caution and being well informed is to be able to pick and enjoy an abundance of safe plants. It is with that hope that the following cautions and list of books are offered.

#### Cautions:

1. Learn to identify plants by their scientific names as well as their common names. Plants often have more than one common name, and two or more very different plants may share the same name.

2. Identification is not enough. Before trying any new plant or plant part, check its edibility with more than one good authority. Even responsible authors have omitted vital information.

3. Don't overeat of any plant - be especially cautious the first time you try a new one. In the same plant the chemistry of one part may be different from another, so use only those parts specified as being edible. This is true for garden plants as well: rhubarb stalks are safe to eat, but their leaves are poisonous. Never put into your mouth any plant or plant part you do not know to be safe. In short, *don't experiment.*

4. Along with human well-being, consider the well-being of the plants. Be gentle when you pick and cut. When you dig, never deplete an area of any plant, and always try to leave the earth as undisturbed as possible. Become informed about rare and endangered species, and never harvest where such activity is prohibited, as in national parks.

#### Recommended Books:

Angier, Bradford: *Feasting Free on Wild Edibles.*

Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 1972.

Harrington, H. D. *Edible Native Plants of the Rocky Mountains.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1967.

Peterson, Lee. *A Field Guide to Edible Wild Plants of Eastern and Central North America.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1978.

---

Dandelion: *Taraxacum officinale*

Lambsquarters: *Chenopodium album*

Curly Dock: *Rumex crispus*

---

*Kay Young, well known locally for her interest and experience in ethnobotany, is coordinator of the Encounter Center at the State Museum, University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She received her B.A. from UN-L under the University Studies program with an emphasis on folklore and botany, and is currently in the process of completing her M.A. from Western Kentucky University with a thesis about working with plants in the field of folklore.*

## Loren Eiseley, Plains Author

Emmy Lou Whitney

It may be presumptuous to make the claim, but make it I shall: this is Loren Eiseley country. How can this be, when we who call ourselves Eiseley devotees know that his many countries ranged from the bottom of the deepest cavern to the darkest corners of man's mind? Those were his spiritual and intellectual countries. Who can say if they were more, or less, important to him than his geographical early home on the Great Plains?

Certainly, he has never been considered a regional writer. In no way was he of the genre of that impressive body of Nebraska writers that includes Willa Cather, Mari Sandoz, Wright Morris, and John Neihardt. The first three writers left the state, but not before the plains experience had taken its hold on them and forever influenced their literature. But Cather, Sandoz, and Morris are novelists; fiction almost always demands place, as does epic poetry such as Neihardt's. Eiseley, however, took up the pen of naturalist, scientist, and philosopher simultaneously, never seeming to need place.

The above authors were by no means a homogeneous group. The only similarity in their work is its almost exclusive Nebraska setting. This brings up the question of what constitutes a regional or state writer: is it a fact of birth, or is it because the region leaves a definite stamp on the author's work?

If we answer the first question in the affirmative, we must concur that the argument is strong; Loren Eiseley should have a rightful place among Nebraska writers. That he does not is somewhat of a mystery. Is it perhaps because his writing is so unusual, so original that it fits no pattern of style nor of place? Classification narrows. Critics, publishers, and editors, not wishing to narrow, may have been hard pressed to pigeonhole his writing, both poetry and prose. Kenneth Heuer, editor of the recent *Darwin and the Mysterious Mr. X*, notes in the preface: "Eiseley's literary accomplishments may have overshadowed his scientific endeavors and often confused

those who could not understand what errand he was on. After all, why was he, a scientist, elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters and a recipient of many of the major literary awards?" And he continues, "It is, however, possible for a man to be two things at the same time..."

Eiseley's following is not large, although it is growing steadily. He isn't easy to read. In fact, he is often extremely hard to comprehend. But if one is attuned to his wavelength, to his haunting, brooding spirit, then to read him is to ache.

As literature goes, his is new. Neihardt's poetry was standard fare in English classes 50 years ago. Cather's novels were "in" in the earlier years of this century, then "out" and, not surprisingly, now securely back in vogue.

Eiseley's prose, for the most part, is scientific, for he was first and foremost an anthropologist. But should this exclude him as a regional author any more than it should Sandoz because her work was historical or Neihardt because his was mythological? I think not.

His poetry is completely transcendental, spanning his entire adult life. *All the Night Wings*, a collection of poetry published posthumously in 1980 contains "Spiders," written when he was 21 years of age, and "Beware my Successor," written shortly before his death.

Loren Eiseley did not enter into the intense love-hate relationship with the Great Plains, such as that experienced by Cather and Morris. His intensity was of another kind, traveling worldwide, directed into the very soul of nature and backward into time.

When he does mention Nebraska it is in pure reminiscence. His autobiography, *All the Strange Hours*, is full of it. But one has the impression that any place would have served his childhood as well. Because of his deaf mother and her frustrated, poverty-stricken spirit, his boyhood could not have been anything but strange. He had to create his own world, and he came to live more and more within it. This solitary world included nature and all its mystery; he became intimate and finally at one with it.

His eloquent passages in *The Immense Journey*, recounting floating down the Platte River, identify completely with the Plains: "I was streaming alive through the hot and working ferment of the sun, or oozing secretively through shady thickets. I was water..." We Great Plains inhabitants intuitively know that to feel about the Platte in this way one must have dwelt within its confines or its valleys. This is Nebraska writing. This is Great Plains literature. This is Eiseley country, literally - and figuratively.



While reading Loren Eiseley's autobiography I learned that he had lived briefly in Aurora, Nebraska. After some research into school files I found his address. Although the little cottage is no longer there, I remember it much as he described it. It was razed about 20 years ago. A sidewalk on the vacant lot now leads up to nothingness. Somehow this is a fitting, surrealistic monument to the strange man who saw through time and looked at things that were not visible. As I drive past - and I often do - I sometimes catch a shadowy glimpse of a small, solitary lad running up that walk.



"A fitting monument..."

Emmy Lou Whitney is a free-lance writer and Aurora correspondent for the Grand Island Independent. She is also a charter member of Friends of Loren Eiseley. Scanned in May, 1997.

## reviews

*Uses of Plants by the Indians of the Missouri River Region* by Melvin R. Gilmore. Original edition of 1919 reprinted 1977 by University of Nebraska Press; Lincoln. 109 pages. A BISON BOOK paperback. \$3.50.

The author of this volume was one of the pioneer students of Plains Indian ethnobotany, the science dealing with how plant products were used for food, drugs, tools and other purposes. Gilmore's work first appeared as his doctoral thesis in botany at the University of Nebraska and was later published in the Bureau of American Ethnology annual report for 1919.

The principal tribes discussed in Gilmore's study were the Pawnee, Omaha, Ponca, Winnebago and Dakota. Occasional references to Cree, Cheyenne, Chippewa and Ojibwa uses of plant material were also included. Although all of these native American cultures depended heavily upon hunting and fishing for food, both wild and cultivated plants were used in a variety of ways.

The reader will follow with interest Gilmore's accounts of how native wild plants provided both necessities and ceremonial articles. Much of the information contained in his study was derived from interviews with older tribal members who had retained early traditions. A few questions for which answers are provided include: Which trees or shrubs were preferred for bows and arrow shafts? How many types of berries were gathered for food and how were they used? Were any plant fibers used for thread or cord? Which seeds and dried roots were ground into flour? Which plants provided drugs or medicine for a variety of ailments?

Plains Indian agriculture depended upon a small number of crops: several types of corn, beans, squash, pumpkins, tobacco and sunflowers. All of these were probably grown in fairly small acreages, even in larger villages, since the tools used in Indian agriculture were at first made of materials at hand - wood, stone, bone and antler. After metal tools such as spades and hoes were obtained from trading posts, the scale and effectiveness of food production could have increased somewhat.

The text is supplemented with a table of plant names (scientific names, English common names, and names used by the various tribes); an index; and more than 50 photographs. An introduction to the reprint by Hugh Cutler of the Missouri Botanical Garden includes a short biography of Gilmore and an update of plant technical names that have been changed since the original edition appeared. *Curt Tweedt*

*Restoration and Management Notes*  
William R. Jordan, III, editor  
University of Wisconsin-Madison Arboretum

"A forum for the exchange of news, views, and information among ecologists, land reclamationists, managers of parks, preserves and rights-of-way, naturalists, engineers, landscape architects, and others committed to the wise stewardship of plant and animal communities."

There has long been a need for good interdisciplinary information networking in the area of preservation, restoration and management of natural areas. *Restoration and Management Notes* is a most commendable effort toward the fulfillment of that need. The 40-page premier issue includes two introductory articles about restoration and management: Rex Boner and Mark Heitlinger from The Nature Conservancy's Midwest Region comment on the steward's point of view, and John Cairns from the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg Virginia, discusses the ecologist's perspective. Following these essays are 101 entries ("notes") contributed by persons and organizations throughout the midwest and beyond, covering a broad spectrum of topics relevant to restoration and management: prairie, forest, wetlands, propagation, landscaping, animals, problems and questions, publications, programs, projects...and more.

The editor's introduction details the new publication's major objectives and carefully defines the ground it will be covering. It is to deal "only with the restoration and management of ecological communities for essentially scientific or esthetic purposes; or in other words, with the development and preservation of ecosystems of high ecological quality."

*Restoration and Management Notes* will, for now, be published on an occasional basis. Complimentary copies of the current issue are available on request. Subscriptions are \$8 for three issues; make checks payable to the University of Wisconsin Arboretum, and send to the UW Arboretum, 1207 Seminole Highway, Madison, WI 53711.      *ju*

---

## The Prairie

*J. E. Weaver and T. J. Fitzpatrick*

Originally published in 1934 in the Duke University Press Ecological Monograph Series. Reprinted, 1980, by Prairie/Plains Resource Institute. 295 pages.

Reviewed by Peter N. Jensen, State Range Conservationist, USDA Soil Conservation Service, Lincoln, NE in the *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation*, March-April, 1981:

Dr. J. E. Weaver was known worldwide as an ecologist and educator working in the area of natural plant communities. Between 1916 and the late 1960s he authored and coauthored numerous scientific papers and books on plant ecology, prairie plants, and prairie plant environment.

*The Prairie* discusses the climate, soil, plant species, and complexity of the prairie, and includes a brief discussion of secondary plant succession as related to disturbed areas. The book contains 120 figures of plants, singly or in association with other plants, and 16 tables regarding the study procedure of the plant communities.

The area surveyed in the North American grassland for this publication covered the more humid easterly portion of the native grasslands in six states, including parts of Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, South Dakota, and Minnesota. This area's prairie is composed of hundreds of native plants, including grasses, forbs, grasslike plants, and shrubs.

*The Prairie* was considered a masterpiece by early day plant ecologists. Even though the publication has been out of print for many years, the information in this timely republication is still extremely useful to students, conservationists, educators, naturalists, and others. Although there has been a slight reduction of some of the figures from the earlier printing, the quality of the reprint is good.

---

*The Prairie* is available from Prairie/Plains Resource Institute, 1219 16th St., Aurora, NE 68818. \$6.00 post paid. Ten or more copies are \$4.50 per copy post paid. Please include payment with orders.

---

### INFORMATION REQUESTED

An inventory of prairie curriculum materials is in progress, to be published in a future issue of *Prairie/Plains Journal* or an interim bulletin. We would appreciate hearing about any such materials that are available. Please provide a good descriptive summary that includes details such as age or grade level of applicability and ordering information. We know that excellent lesson plans exist; they just need to be distributed and used - now!

Prairie/Plains Resource Institute is a non-profit membership organization founded in 1980. It is part of a growing network of people who are looking for, preserving, studying, restoring, and educating others about prairie. The Institute is also working to design and promote a concept of resource development that protects and sustains the productivity of people, soils, watersheds, and communities. Details of Institute activities appear in the organization's biannual publication, *Prairie/Plains Journal*.

The Institute is currently operating on membership donations alone, barely covering the publication costs of the *Journal* and a few minor operating expenses. At the time of this printing, the organization is 115 strong. We need to at least double that number - and therefore ask that every member find at least one other person who will take advantage of the form below.

#### MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

As a member of Prairie/Plains Resource Institute, you provide support for its publications and other activities associated with its goals. You receive *Prairie/Plains Journal* and any special bulletins printed during the calendar year of your contribution. Membership is renewable at the start of the following year.

All donations to Prairie/Plains Resource Institute are tax deductible.

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_  
ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

Circle Category: Individual (\$10.00 minimum per year)  
Corporate (\$50.00 minimum per year)

Amount enclosed: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

IN MEMORY

Lou Bottenberg



We had never heard of clog dancing until we met Lou Bottenberg, and it's doubtful that anyone ever met Lou without also learning a few clog steps! His dancing and mandolin playing put a lively spark into many a prairie gathering. An active Kansas prairie enthusiast and preservationist, he introduced many others to the prairie and its diversity of life.

Lou Bottenberg died in the collapse of the overhead walkways at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Kansas City, July 17, 1981.



Maine Plains  
Resource  
Institute

Non-profit Org  
U.S. Postage  
**PAID**  
Permit No. 21  
Aurora, NE 68818

1219 16th Street, Aurora, Ne. 68818  
402/694-3307