Prairie/Plains Journal

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by

Prairie/Plains Resource Institute
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Prairie/Plains Resource Institute is a nonprofit membership organization dedicated to the inventory, preservation, and restoration of native prairie and other unique native habitats in Nebraska, and to general education about the natural and cultural heritage of the state. The Institute began working in 1980 at the local, grassroots level to achieve these goals.


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P/PRI at Age 3

Now that this organization has passed its third birthday intact, it seems appropriate that we take a moment to evaluate its brief history. There are indeed times of frustration when it seems like everything is moving in slow motion, and that little progress is being made toward our goals. It helps to stop to compare where we are now with where we were in the spring of 1980, when the Institute became an official reality.

P/PRI came about as a result of a number of persons recognizing a need in Nebraska - the need to appreciate the value of its native prairie remnants, and to locate and encourage protection of these prairies. We had been observing for some time that many other central states were developing such an awareness, noting such organizations as Save the Tallgrass Prairie, The Grassland Heritage Foundation, and The Land Institute in Kansas, and the Missouri Prairie Foundation in Missouri - not to mention the expanding prairie preserve system of The Nature Conservancy.

So, we started the Prairie/Plains Resource Institute as, primarily, a prairie preservation, restoration, management, and interpretation effort. In the process, a number of other interests and aims became a part of the Institute, and we found ourselves in the midst of a network of people and groups dedicated to such diverse interests as the preservation and restoration of all types of natural areas, promotion of an awareness of our cultural heritage on the prairies (including the folk school concept), restoration of abandoned lands for educational and recreational uses, native and edible plant landscaping, and research in sustainable agriculture. All of these things are relevant to the land, the prairie - how we relate to it, how it shapes our lives and culture.

The first Journal (which we borrowed money to print) was the first announcement of P/PRI's existence. The contributions resulting enabled us to pay off the loan within a year. Since then P/PRI has gained a modest membership of nearly 300. In addition, we had the good fortune of finding someone who would donate printing services, which freed up membership funds for uses other than the Journal. Two other members made possible the reprinting and selling of J.E. Weaver's The Prairie, and the selling of the remaining stock of Weaver's North American Prairie. All this meant we could do something besides dream and print dreams! So, from a beginning which was mostly a hodgepodge of ideas, three tangible projects have evolved: the Lincoln Creek restoration project, the Bader Memorial Park Natural Area interpretive-management program, and the annual Prairie Appreciation Week. Beyond this, the Institute has become established in Nebraska as a source of information and assistance in the area of prairie preservation, restoration, and management, and receives more requests for such information all the time. We have become a recognized participant in the "prairie network."

We cannot therefore help but feel pleased with where we are now compared with April, 1980. However, we are now facing the dilemma that every organization faces when its demands and ambitions exceed its funding. It is a challenge in many ways to do everything the Institute does with only spare time and volunteer labor. We will therefore now be facing the additional challenge of some serious fund-raising beyond membership contributions, as we are in need of expanding our educational efforts. Although we are presently limited to concentrating on the local activities defined above, we do not wish these projects to be the beginning and end of the Institute's work; rather, it is hoped that what we accomplish locally will serve as models to follow elsewhere in the future.

For now, here's an update on our local progress:

Lincoln Creek: As reported in the spring newsletter, the Institute finally, after several sessions with the City Council, obtained a 5-year renewable lease from the City of Aurora for 12 acres of city property in the proposed Lincoln Creek project area. This, together with the Institute's 6 acres (obtained through donation by Wilma Alborg) gives us an 18-acre parcel to work on. Included in this area are sites of prairie and wetland restoration, community orchard and garden, and ornamental garden. A trail system will be developed throughout. The 4' x 5' architectural model of the project area, built by Ernest Ochsner and Bill Whitney, has been a most useful publicity tool and was a definite advantage at the City Council meetings.

So far, two gardens are established in the community garden space, a number of trees and shrubs have been planted, and a new ½-acre prairie restoration is looking good. Thanks to Mike Herman from Kulm, N.D. for making this progress possible through a week of volunteer labor.

Since this project is going to require a considerable amount of such volunteer effort, we are organizing a local "Prairie People" group to help. Activities scheduled for this fall include removal of undesirable trees and shrubs and transplanting of desirable trees and shrubs, fence building, and a general cleanup of the area.

Materials needed, that we are asking people to donate, include: large dimension wood such as bridge planks, telephone poles, and ties, wooden or steel fence posts, woven wire, and rock or bricks. We are also in need of a small tractor with hydraulics, 3-point hitch and PTO, a sickle mower, a rotary mower and loader.

Bader Park: The tour program in the natural area is continuing to be a success, including several school groups last spring and other special groups (outside the regular public tour schedule) this summer. We had a special problem at Bader this season; however: the Platte River reached its second highest level of this century, and most of the riparian woodland was under water. Even the low areas of the prairie area were flat from the rise in the water table. The flood prevented the trail work that was planned, floated away a substantial bridge that had been put in this spring, and destroyed one of the sand dikes that was part of a major trail. Looking at the bright side, the flood also opened up new opportunities for interpretation. A case in point was the aquatic insect life inhabiting the new prairie wetland areas. It also brought attention to the nature and history of the Platte and its management.
Prairie Appreciation Week: The third annual Nebraska statewide Prairie Appreciation Week is September 18-24, 1983. Please refer to the calendar section of this Journal for information about major activities.

Because we need to become more involved with the schools, Prairie Week planners have selected a special theme this year of “Prairie as Classroom.” We are, accordingly, preparing teacher’s packets containing information about Nebraska prairies, suggestions for activities, two sample modules from two prairie curriculum packages, a Prairie Week poster, and information about establishing mini-prairies on school grounds as outdoor classrooms. These packets are being made available free to teachers through the Educational Service Units. Individual packets may also be obtained from P:PRI for $1.00 postage & handling.

Please help us spread the word about Prairie Week! Plan to participate in the scheduled activities and organize your own in your neck of the prairie!

Fire as a Tool
by Bill Whitney

Fire in this country has been, and still is, a maligned and poorly understood phenomenon. Historically, European settlers in the forests and rangelands had a respect for fire based on fear. Pioneer society was ill-equipped to understand the apparent biological relationships within the forests it plundered or the grasslands it plowed or overgrazed.

Traditional views about fire began to be challenged with the growth of the science of ecology in this century. People involved with the study of natural ecosystems started looking at the role of fire in forest regeneration, wildlife populations, the restoration and maintenance of prairie, and nutrient cycling. Often attempts to overcome a public disdain for fire (part of Smokey the Bear’s legacy) thwarted scientists’ efforts to uncover some fundamental aspects of naturally occurring fire. Today, due to the persistence of the research pioneers there is much more known about fire’s role in the ecosystem. Furthermore, much of this experience and knowledge has been transposed into the disciplines of economic rangeland and forestry management as well as natural ecosystem restoration and management.

P:PRI is involved with the use of fire as a land stewardship tool in east-central Nebraska. We hope this involvement will increase in the future, not only for natural area management, but also as a service to local rangeland owners. Many of the grassland remnants of this area are occupied by plant species that are undesirable for range cattle grazing or for preservation of the prairie ecosystem. These include Kentucky bluegrass, smooth brome, redtop, downy or Japanese brome (both commonly called cheat), and eastern reedcane or juniper. On the Platte bluffs of Hamilton County reedcane is particularly thick - literally taking over some pastures. Fortunately, prescribed burning can be used to set back and even kill some of the undesirablereeds, and the cheat brome is quite susceptible to fire whereas smooth brome and bluegrasses are more tenacious and require a succession of burns with close attention to timing.) At the same time the prairie flora thrives as a result of an interplay of physical and chemical factors in the soil and among the living plant roots, fauna, and microorganisms therein.

This short explanation of grassland burning and P:PRI’s involvement by no means indicates that we advocate the burning of the countryside with reckless abandon whenever possible. One does not use a hammer when circumstances call for a saw. Likewise, prescribed burning demands a knowledge of the plants or animals of a site; their seasonal factors, moisture and many other subtle relationships. Before using it as a tool one must know in advance that it will provide a desired management objective. However, unlike the simple comparison of hammers and saws there is a gap in our understanding of fire so that there remains some unpredictability in each case. In short, there is a strong need for more experimentation and study.

The Institute has purchased backpack spray equipment and will be obtaining other tools in time, including a pickup truck tank sprayer unit as a result of local
vocational agriculture student project in the Aurora High School. With the accumulation of proper equipment and a pool of experience among a number of volunteers, P/PRI can gain a prominent role in the preservation and management of Nebraska’s remnant prairies and thus aid in attaining a better understanding of their ecological dynamics.

Fire can certainly be “wild” and dangerous, but if it is prescribed because of a management or research decision that has taken into account many factors regarding species and their ecological relationships, time of occurrence, and extreme safety precautions, it can be most beneficial. A panacea it is not. Ignorantly applying it for every ill of the native grassland will not yield favorable results. In that light it should be remembered that much more needs to be learned about its effects.

These photographs are of Willa Cather Memorial Prairie prescribed burn of May, 1983. Crews worked long hours burning a “blackline” around about 400 acres of this mixed grass prairie and finally set off the main headfire. The purpose, other than to reintroduce a once naturally occurring and invigorating phenomenon to the prairie, was to set back Kentucky bluegrass which is a moisture robbing plant. It uses the spring moisture that the native grasses and forbs draw upon later in the growing season; in a dry summer this can be damaging to the natives. Over a period of years bluegrass can become dominant.

One interesting and unpredicted result of this burn was a massive “mushrooming” - inky cap mushrooms flourishing almost exclusively on the burn site shortly after the fire. When asked “why?”, Dr. Hal Nagel, manager of Cather Prairie, replied something to the effect, “that’s a good question.” The enigma of fire lives on.
Save Our Springs
by
Kelly Kindscher

Late last fall, I was traveling with David Ebbert from his farm near Quinter (Kansas) down to Castle Rock. On the way we were talking about the Ogallala Aquifer and groundwater depletion in his area and I was reminded of a story Paul Sears told me at the Land Institute three years ago. He told me that when he was a boy, he went out with his grandfather on Sunday afternoons to sample taste springs in his homelands of Ohio. His grandfather was a spring water connoisseur—recognizing springs with sweet water as different than those with a slight sulfurish taste — and he carried with him a special collapsible spring water drinking cup. Many, many years after he had grown up and left Ohio, Paul Sears returned to find those spring sites and as a man who had seen many changes in his greater than eighty year long life, he told us, saddened by the fact, that “they were all gone.”

There are still springs in our watershed and bioregion, although their numbers are much smaller than they once were and they probably are starting to decline at a more rapid rate, especially in those areas that lie above the Ogallala Aquifer. We have our own spring stories, such as the use of Diamond Spring and Lost Springs on the Santa Fe Trail and more recent ones, such as the one told me by a friend of David’s who also lives near Quinter.

Let me preface this story by saying that this is one of those late-night, approaching-drunkeness fish stories, but the Gove County native who told it swore it was true and who am I to question anyone who has grown up with the upstanding Castle Rock as an influence on their life. Anyway, he and his boyhood friends used to go fishing early each spring at a place where a spring formed a deep hole in the creek. There was this large tree that hung over the bank and the creek waters had scoured the dirt away from its roots. A second trunk of this tree, that was closer to the creek had died many years ago and had rotted out, so there was this hole that was right above the spring. It was easy to fish here, all one had to do was tie the line to the tree and lay in the grass and when the line jerked, pull the struggling fish up through the hole.

Well, there was this ancient, monstrous carp that lived in this spring hole and occasionally one could see him lurk around down there in the deep, dark water. One year, perhaps being a little careless, or perhaps touched with fish senility, the old carp went for the bait and gave the line a mighty jerk. Rushing over to the tree, almost falling in the creek in the process, David’s friend pulled the line up and the record-sized carp was hooked, but he was too big to pull through the tree hole and it created a hell of a problem.

This story was still on my mind and as David and my talk continued, nearing Castle Rock somewhere near where the loess breaks are replaced with chalk ones, I realized that springs could be a way to make people more aware of water problems and they could be an effective organizing tool. Very few people in the western portion of our watershed would join a Save the Ogallala Aquifer
organization and wear T-shirts that have the aquifer on it instead of a harp seal or a whale, but many people have and would visit springs to have a Sunday picnic lunch or to pick watercress. The idea of outings to springs for tasting (if clean enough) or solely to have a picnic need to be revitalized. When people start going to springs and identifying with them they will begin to understand them as living things and can monitor their environment and especially their water environment from year to year.

Springs are indicators of a healthy environment, both above and below the ground. If the local groundwater table drops, a spring may dry up. Springs are valuable assets. They provide surface water for wildlife and help keep creeks flowing. They provide habitat for wet-loving plants (some of which are rare wildflowers such as lobelia and cardinal flower) and some good food sources (watercress and Indian potatoes, *Apios americana*, are two wild edibles I gather). Springs provide moisture for trees and high insect populations which attract birds and also habitat for fish. Because of their uniqueness and beauty, and the assets mentioned above, springs have always attracted people.

On February 28th I went to my favorite local spring a few miles from where I live, that is known to some as “the watercress patch,” often identified as the one north of town because there are others. I was pleased to see that there was already plenty of cress for the picking and that the deer had been helping themselves, and in spring exuberance I bent over and grazed the verdant spring site myself. One of the most enjoyable experiences at this spring that I have had was when I brought my father here who had always talked about a watercress patch that his father picked from when he was a child that was situated along the Republican River near Guide Rock, Nebraska. And as father and son, we continued the tradition of picking watercress together.

I have noticed that everyone I have brought to the watercress patch is moved by it as if carried by the gentle water, with all thoughts softened by the real, natural world. That is the experience that we need to share. It is even furthered when we can eat something tender and fresh like watercress from that spot. There are many watercress patches throughout our bioregion. Most of them have probably been planted, as watercress is not a native plant. I can think of five patches around the Lawrence area, two on the east side of Tuttle Creek Reservoir, two in the Flint Hills, and one near Ellsworth. I am sure there are many more.

I am beginning to compile a list of springs throughout our bioregion. Please tell me of any that you know of (give as exact a location as possible) and what is unusual about them - plants, rocks, size, past use, whether they have watercress, etc. Consider starting your own informal S.O.S (Save Our Springs) chapter. Ask others about locations of springs in your area and go out and visit them with friends. Monitor them and report any changes over time. By making people more aware of this local resource we can Save Our Springs.

We can also revitalize springs. I will serve as a consultant and can provide starts of watercress and calamus and other plants that can be introduced or reintroduced into spring sites. Write to: Kelly Kinescher, c/o The Appropriate Technology Center, 1101½ Massachusetts St., Lawrence, KS 66044.
PaWiTo
by
Bill Lock

Recently, several Prairie/Plains Resource Institute members and friends spent an afternoon in the bluffs south and west of Columbus, Nebraska, where an enlightened man has devoted nearly twenty-five years of his life to a place and an idea which people involved with the Institute seem to share. The place is called PaWiTo, (taken from the initials of the children of the people involved) and it represents a concern for restoration of the natural environment in a special way.

The man who offers PaWiTo to the world is Emiel Christensen, and his thoughts go far beyond a typical concern for preservation of natural spaces as a response to man's negative effect on this world. Through his restoration work at PaWiTo, Emiel challenges us to think about man's relationship to the environment and his role in civilization. In his own words, Emiel sees an 'urgent need for arousing citizen awareness and participation in seeking to advance understanding of man's relation to all components of his total environment as well as to others of his kind.'

Recently, one of the U.S. astronauts suggested that the world's leaders should be required to negotiate for peaceful resolution of problems while in orbit around the globe, as they would then recognize that they are planetary citizens. I don't think it necessary to go quite that far, or spend that much money to begin to understand our connections and interdependency. An afternoon with Emiel at PaWiTo would do just as well, if people are willing to stop, listen to that voice of experience and feel a special insight as PaWiTo begins to affect you.

Again, in Emiel's words:

Anyone who has experienced a feeling of exultation through contact or intimacy with such features of the landscape as a sweeping coastline, woody slopes, grassy prairies or undulating sand dunes knows what majestic views can mean to the inner consciousness of man. We need such experiences to evoke the diversity of moods and responses so essential to the broader understanding and clearer perceptivity required to continue the upward and onward march of mankind. Inspiring leisure is just as necessary to intellectual and spiritual growth as is invigorating exercise to physical well being.

*PaWiTo: A Thirty Acre Tract Dedicated to the Creative Use of Leisure Time; a 1969 report by Emiel and Mary Christensen.
Posted in one of PaWiTo’s shelters is the following:

TO ALL WHO FEEL CONCERN...Our Mother Earth mating with our Father Time has, through the eons, produced an abundance of widely varied and creatively related life forms. The interdependencies and complementarities existing within and between these varied forms are, as yet, not well understood by mankind. This is unfortunate for we, both as individuals and as a species, are products of, and participants in, the creative process of forming and maintaining these universal relationships.

During the past few centuries we have steadily advanced our specialized knowledge of, and dominance over, other life forms until now we can, to a considerable degree, direct and control substantial segments of these overall interrelationships. Since we have advanced our desire to dominate more rapidly than our will to understand the results, to date, our actions are not always beneficial to either mankind or our earthly environment. In fact, much of our behavior has promoted environmental decline.

As our human numbers become greater and more concentrated our knowledge of, contact with, and relationships to, other life forms tend to become even more attenuated; and, our long term security and survival opportunities are thereby diminished. To overcome this tendency toward fragmentation of related life forms will require efforts far beyond any foreseeable public undertaking. Although our national, state, and local park and wilderness programs are, in many cases, commendable they are woefully inadequate from the standpoint of building up citizen enlightenment and stimulating unity in creative use of leisure time.

Local private and corporate efforts are much needed, not only to supplement the public effort, but even more to guide its further development. PaWiTo as developed and maintained by the Bradley-Christensen families of Columbus, Nebraska is a case in point. We hope you find it enjoyable and life enriching...

The Owners.
Selma: A Life
by
Emmy Lou Whitney

She left her car in the barnyard by the summer kitchen and the brick washhouse, a few steps from the back stoop, just as she had done a thousand times before. Only this time it was different. It was the last time. Shortly after that she died.

The old woman was 79 - an old maid, people had called her. She spent her whole life on the home place. She had buried her parents and brothers and sister from the old house and now she, too, was gone. The only time she left was when she went to a retirement home for a year. She wasn't happy, though. Her animals, her cats and dogs, were a constant worry. And so, at the end, she had come back when her final illness claimed her.

What secrets had she learned from so sparse a life? Was she often lonely? Had she ever dreamed of far-away places or romance as she walked beneath the thick old trees? Were her beloved animals her children and grandchildren? Did she find peace tending her flower garden?

If a life is measured in possessions, hers was lacking. She hadn't even bothered to put in running water. Perhaps she liked stepping outside to the pump, feeling the newness of each morning and the quiet dark of the night. She certainly wasn't poor; she owned a half section of good farm land.

Now that she's gone the land will be even more productive, what with gutting the place, trees and all, and planting corn right up to the road. Then, like her, everything will be gone. A family, traditions, the old ways, gone.

The old woman lies buried up the hill a few miles, in the German cemetery under the shadow of the tall church spire.
Villages, Farming, and Rural Living
by Norris Alfred
From the editorial files of The Polk Progress:

We gained some understanding of the infectious power of farming equipment when we bought a roto-tiller early this spring. Afflicted with a glass back, we had been told to quit shoveling snow and to cease gardening. We were delighted to quit shoveling snow, but not so happy to quit gardening. Last summer, the back slipped and weeds took over the garden. Now, in one-half an hour we can cultivate the entire garden. Before, we would spend hours with a hoe.

Are we grateful for this ingenious piece of equipment, which makes the boring labor of hoeing so much easier and faster? Perhaps we are, but our initial reaction after a half-hour of cultivating was: "Wow! I could take care of a garden double the size of this one." For years we have been debating in this space which came first, big farming equipment or big farms. Now we know it was big machinery that made big farms possible, and desirable.

Having settled that debate we can point an accusing finger at farm equipment manufacturers and declare: "You are the culprit. You are the reason rural village Main Streets are full of empty stores buildings. May you roast in hell." That's too pat a reason, of course. The deterioration of commercial life in rural communities is due to many adverse developments, starting with the Model T Ford. More powerful tractors and bigger farming equipment is only one of many factors that, at one time, caused a confident prophet to declare: "Communities of 5,000 and less population are doomed."

We never believed that. It was a statement publicized, probably, to sell a book. Authors write books and publishers print and sell books. Between the writing and the selling are many decisions, some questionable. Perhaps the author, with unquestioned integrity, had written that village communities would slowly disappear because horse powered farming with intensive labor—the reason for village communities—was being replaced by tractors and mechanized equipment. That isn't an assertion that would sell books. Add a definite figure "5,000" and all people living in communities of less than 5,000 will be curious about the book and many will buy it.

"People are people the world over" is a quote from something or other we read, which tersely describes the brotherhood of the human race. We are together or this liveable planet in hostile space, and it behooves us to get along with one another. The getting along includes submerging our differences and emphasizing our similarities. Our differences are many, but we believe our similarities are more numerous. We have never counted them, but if we were to write a book, and a publisher was to sell it, the book would probably be listing the 1001 similarities of all people on earth.

One of our similarities is gregariousness. People like to live in communities of comprehensible size. That size varies. Though it is incomprehensible to us, there are those able to comprehend New York City, Mexico City, London, Calcutta, Tokyo, Paris, Rome, Moscow. Otherwise, how are hundreds of millions of people able to abide life in such densely populated metropolitan areas?

Hundreds of millions also live in smaller cities and villages. Nebraska divides its communities into villages and cities. Villages have populations of less than 1,000 and cities 1,000 and more. We won't delve into the why of that magic number. It is mentioned to give an idea of the size we are referring to when we write "village."

We have been ridiculed more than once for publicly stating rural living is a way of life worth sustaining. Two times we were on panels discussing such a subject before audiences young in age and, perhaps, young in wisdom. The young are more likely to be gung-ho about every so-called "advance" in farming equipment and technique, defining it as "progress." If we ask, and we did, "What is progress?" a ready answer is not at tip of tongue.

Is it progress that one farmer now is capable of farming a section of land and more? Is it progress when one human voice can be heard by hundreds of millions? Is it progress when one human finger can push a button (or however a missile is fired) and incinerate possibly a million humans, not to mention all other kinds of life, plant and animal? What we are asking: "Is efficiency progress?" Is this what we want—a more efficient life?

Nature is gloriously inefficient. We saw evidence of this in a prairie meadow while we were looking for bobolinks a week ago Sunday. The green of the meadow was sprinkled with white and yellow flowers. We knew, from several
years watching that meadow, the sprinkling will change in color and location as other flowers bloom in their season. It is a marvelous bit of nature's infinite variety that allows all life opportunity to exist. In that meadow nothing grows in efficient rows. We never look for bobolinks in a cultivated field.

An efficient world without bobolinks is not our idea of “the good life.” An efficient world has us living in rows, vertical and horizontal. We have sectioned the land, divided villages into blocks, put the flow of rivers into straight ditches, trimmed out hedges and our concerns to the squared boundaries of our lives. It looks neat and lifeless.
Nebraska is Here to Stay*

by
Bruce H. Nicoll
1957

Keep in mind that the following essay was written in 1957, and that statistics cited pertain to that time. There is much food for thought here, in light of our present agricultural issues, especially that of water. Compare and contrast with the articles by Norris Alfred and Kelly Kindscher.

Ten years ago John Gunther passed through our state gathering material for his book *Inside U.S.A.* He concluded, seriously, that the weather runs Nebraska. His observation is understandable. We don’t talk about the weather. We discuss it with an uncommonly dedicated interest. Anytime. Anywhere. With friends or strangers.

You pause at a street corner, waiting for a car to pass. You turn to the fellow standing beside you. “Pretty day!” you say. The fellow grins at you. Then he squints upward to the brilliant blue sky. He says, “Yes, sure is.” You know he is a Nebraskan if he reflects a moment and then adds soberly, “But we could stand some more rain.”

This is a critical point in the conversation. You can be un-Nebraskan and nod in agreement, stifling the conservation. Or you can accept the challenge and remark, “Well, maybe so. But the wheat needs more weather like this. The harvest will be getting started in a week or so.”

“The wheat’s made!” the fellow exclaims. “No use worrying about that. It’s the corn. The subsoil’s too dry. If we have a summer like the last one, the corn will need plenty of subsoil moisture.”

You are now ready to discuss the weather. In depth. And we usually do.

But when visitors are puzzled or amused by our obsession with the weather, as conversational fodder, many of us become inarticulate. We just smile self-consciously and shrug our shoulders. We know it’s been this way for a long time, and we feel we can bear the habit honestly. We can’t quite believe the weather runs Nebraska, but we’ll admit its caprices have profoundly influenced us.

*Reprinted from *Roundup: A Nebraska Reader*, edited by Virginia Faulkner, by permission of the University of Nebraska Press. Copyright© 1975 by the University of Nebraska Press.

Weather and our concern about it are rooted deeply in Nebraska history. Our history is not yet the exclusive pursuit of the archivist. Our past is still near us in the living memory of many.

Slightly over one hundred years ago, the first big wave of pioneers crossed the Mississippi, forded the Missouri, and plunged into the expanse of land which separated them from the riches of Oregon and California. Part of this land obstacle was Nebraska, hence a place to be traversed in the shortest possible time. In this respect our state, or what was to become a state, commended itself to the immigrants: it was an excellent highway. Some of the Forty-Niners settled in Nebraska, but the major settlement came later, in the years immediately following the Civil War and in the 1880s.

The pioneers had no Baedekers. What did they know of Nebraska? There were the forbidding tales of the explorers and travelers, Lewis and Clark, and Zebulon Pike, and Major Long; and there were the railroad advertisements promising them a lush and fertile land. Neither picture was wholly true nor wholly false; and neither could prepare them for what they found—a storehouse of agricultural wealth in a realm of natural violence. The New Frontier was without a counterpart in their experience.

There was the grass, a vast ocean of it washing endlessly over the prairie, the horizon unobscured by the comforting outline of trees, nowhere an object the eye could fix on. The familiar sound of settlement: the ring of the woodman’s ax was stilled in the silence of the grass. They had yet to learn that the tall grass of eastern Nebraska bespoke a subhumid climate where precipitation is always something less than in the humid forestlands of the East; that the mid-grass of central Nebraska told of an even drier region; that the short grass further west indicated an almost arid climate. And everywhere the grass had another, broader message: it can exist (where other vegetation fails) in long periods of normal or abnormal wet weather followed by extended periods of drought.

There was the weather—too, had to be learned about. And to be learned about it had first to be lived through. Hallucinations, unique to the Great Plains, would slash out of purple thunderheads, in an instant transforming the flat country into a dreamland. And the perpetual wind: nowhere in the interior of any continent were the winds so persistent, one moment carrying the land, the next doing it violence. The blizzard, as the pioneers described snow driven straight before a strong north wind, meant incredible suffering for many, death for some. Almost as deadly were the hot south winds of drought periods, blasts from a fiery furnace, searing the face of the prairie, leaving destroyed fields in their wake.

Finally, there was the soil—the hidden treasure resting beneath the grass, a triumphant of Nature’s patient husbandry during countless millennia. The tall grass, the mid-grass, and the short grass had each developed a rich soil from the gravel, sand, silts, clays, volcanic ash, and potash blown down upon the Nebraska flood plains from the melting glaciers or blown in by the ceaseless winds. Here beneath the grass the pioneer found his reward. And in eastern Nebraska he possessed a fertile soil unequaled on the earth.

Yet his was indeed a frustrating predicament: a soil that would produce bountifully when nature smiled as it often did and a soil that lay barren when nature frowned as it often did. Three sides of migration washed over Nebraska’s
prairie before the farmer established a firm foothold, each wave contributing something to man’s attempt to subdue the wild land. It was a unique phenomenon, this struggle to adapt to and master the Great Plains environment. In many respects it was heroic.

Consider the white man’s innovations: the sod house carved from the treeless prairie; buffalo chips for fuel where there was no wood; the steel plowshare which was the only tool rugged enough to turn the tough sod; the windmill, even in the names of its models—Go-Devil, Jumbo, Battle Axe—flinging defiance at that region of much wind and little water; new kinds of crops to replace the failures from seeds brought from the humid east; new cultivation practices, known as dry farming or dryland farming, to save every drop of moisture.

It’s nearly a century since we became a state—since plows broke the prairie sod and longhorns moved into our ranges. But what a time—oh Lord, what a really rough time—we’ve had getting our agriculture squared up with its environment.

We’ve licked the grasshoppers, which once descended on our fields in clouds and devoured everything that grew. The tractor and the multitude of machines which followed it have reduced enormously the labor required to farm and have transformed agriculture into a somewhat complex technological endeavor. The machines are reducing the number of farms and increasing their size and at the same time driving more workers from the rural areas into our villages and towns. We have adapted our crops so that they are capable of yielding in quality and abundance. (Our winter wheat, for example, draws premium prices because it makes into one of the finest baking flours in America.) We have worked hard at tillage practices (like summer fallowing, stubble mulching, and crop rotation) to make the best use of our soil and water. We are improving our marketing standards and practices to reward those who strive for high quality products. We have made great progress in our perennial battle with the insects. We have discovered ways to add more meat, of better quality, to the carcasses of our meat animals at greater profit to the rancher and livestock feeder.

Now, all this is very heartening; yet the fact remains that we are still frustrated, perplexed, dismayed, and deceived in our farming enterprise, and most of these grievances can be traced to the basic trinity of our agriculture: weather, water, and soil.

Since our beginnings in Nebraska, we have enjoyed four long periods of normal or above-normal precipitation and, brother, when the elements cooperate, our soil will grow practically anything in quantity. Each of these halcyon times has been interrupted by droughts of varying intensity: one of the worst blighted our state from 1932 to 1940, and we are now in the midst of another which began in 1952 and is still with us in 1957.

Drought is a grim spectacle, and some measure of our anxiety about it is founded in rain-making experiments. During the drought of the 1890’s, the rain-makers did a thriving but unsuccessful business; now in the 1950’s, they are with us again—this time backed up by substantial scientific fact. The new rain-making devices—dry ice and silver iodide—do work, but only under conditions within the cloud mass normally required for rain. Let us not kid ourselves—the Nebraska skies will remain a wild unpredictable realm, and drought will remain a characteristic of our weather.

We have been more successful in making better use of the water after it falls. Our main source of water lies beneath the surface. We have a marvelous underground storage system. Precipitation in the sandhills soaks downward, then percolates slowly (some of it is 50 years old before we use it) southeastward across the state. This “reservoir” of groundwater supplies all of our municipal water systems except Omaha’s, and we have little fear of exhausting it, since at any given time it holds roughly a billion acre-feet of water.

In the past twenty-five years we have found another use for groundwater. Pump irrigation is growing by leaps and bounds. Power pumps are now watering about a million acres of crop land. And the growth continues. There is some justifiable concern that we will overdevelop our groundwater resource in some areas, and here again we are faced with the problem of innovating. Our surface water law, there is reason to believe, does not precisely fit the underground use problem. Debate will soon be joined. In our own way and in our own time public policy for groundwater will be evolved. The current fear is that our groundwater resource may be abused before we arrive at a decision.

Our interest in gravity irrigation—this is the kind that flows over the land in ditches supplied by reservoirs on rivers—has blown hot and cold, depending upon the weather. The drought of the 1890’s spurred interest in the arid western part of the state and resulted in a Bureau of Reclamation project on the upper North Platte. It transformed the valley there into an ever-abundant agriculture. In the 1930’s, the drought provoked a renewed interest in irrigation in central Nebraska. New dams were built on some of our rivers, and additional uncertain cropland was assured of a constant water supply. In 1944 the Congress enacted a flood control act which has come to be known as the Missouri Basin Development Program, under which our reservoirs have been built. Thirty-three more are planned. The program contemplates adding 1,600,000 acres of irrigated land in Nebraska.

Nebraskans are responsible for another innovation, less than a decade old, which will help us control and conserve our water. This is the small watershed program designed to hold water on the land or in small reservoirs upstream before runoff swells creeks and streams to destructive size downstream. The program operates in the small watersheds which comprise the much larger river basins. The Salt-Wahoo program in eastern Nebraska was a national pilot project. Twenty small watershed organizations have been organized in Nebraska. The program is spreading to all parts of the nation.

These programs ultimately may bring a fourth of our cultivated land under irrigation, help us conserve water upstream before it becomes a flood, and partially free us from the ups and downs of production caused by our wet-dry cycles. Our farming will become more diversified and more productive.

We have used and abused our soil. Fifty per cent of our land has suffered only slight erosion. The remainder has had moderate to severe erosion. Our profligacy is worst in eastern Nebraska where our richest soils lie. Here over seven million acres have been stripped of 75 per cent of the topsoil and that’s the part we live on.

Except in the sandhills and adjacent grazing areas, we have plowed up the prairie grass and with it the best soil conservation system ever devised. Listen to
the plea of Prof. C. E. Bessey, a world-famous botanist at the University of Nebraska, writing in 1902:

The planted crops may be ever so good and successful, yet they may not warrant the destruction of that wonderful grassy covering which now adorns our hills and valleys. The wild grasses are disappearing not only because of cultivation of the soil but also on account of too heavy and injudicious grazing. We have been as wasteful of our natural grasses as our fathers were of the forests of the eastern states.

Well, we went right ahead with the plow, and in the 1930’s the folly of our ways became painfully apparent. We became a part of the “Dust Bowl.” The fact is we had the living daylights scared out of us: some believe the land would never recover from its desert condition.

When the federal soil conservation program began in 1936, we were Johnny-on-the-spot. Soil conservation districts were organized under a state law enacted in 1937. Our first district was one of the nation’s first, and we were the first state west of the Mississippi to include all its land under soil conservation districts. Contouring, terracing, strip cropping, crop rotation, gully control, grassed waterways, stable mulching, shelterbelts, and windbreaks are now familiar words. We have come a long way in our struggle to save the topsoil, but there is a king-size task still ahead. Nebraska now has 3,500,000 acres of land unsuited for cultivation and another 1,500,000 which shouldn’t be farmed. Year after year, wind and water continue to erode the topsoil of the naked land. The destruction is made-made. Perhaps the Plainsmen will devise a remedy-in-time.

Those who came to the Great Plains and settled in Nebraska were the restless, the ambitious, the discontented, and the poor. They saw in the West a new chance to make a place for themselves, to build, to acquire wealth, to win power.

For the Europeans there was, as well, the bright promise of political liberty.

All that the pioneers sought was attainable. But this was rugged, unfamiliar country, and the conditions it imposed for success were tremendous. Some failed to grasp the meaning of the new land; they were the ones who gave up and got out. Not all those who stayed understood the total significance of the new frontier, but they were resourceful enough to absorb the shocks and husband the gains. The land and the climate influenced them profoundly, but not exclusively. There were other shaping forces—economic, political, social, of national and international origin from which they could not and did not escape.

Certainly the circumstances of life in Nebraska, which obliged the settlers to devise new ways to earn a livelihood, played an important part in moulding their social and political character. With the past still so close to the present in our state, we who live here believe we can see how the Plains environment came to breed a distinctive type of political innovator. In the 1890’s, for example, there were grasshoppers and there was a drought. Both were regional, and disastrous. There were ruinously low prices for whatever we were lucky enough to grow or raise. That this was a consequence of a glutted world agricultural market was something we didn’t know. Our misfortunes, we earnestly believed, had resulted from the machinations of the trusts and vested interests of the East. So we revolted. The Grange movement, bitterly demanding a fair shake for agriculture, blossomed into a political party which was appropriated by W. J. Bryan and came near to putting its candidate into the White House. And although the Populist Party’s life was short, its progeny were numerous—Progressivism, the Non-Partisan League, the Farmers Alliance, the Farm Holiday Association. Moreover, the issues raised in 1892 were to be issues again in 1932, with social and political consequence not yet measurable.

The farmers’ anguished outcries often have been the prelude to both local and national innovations. Nebraskans play leading roles in amending national homestead laws which made the basic land unit adequate to support a family on the Great Plains. Nebraskans did the political agitating necessary to organize the western states in support of a federal program of reclamation and irrigation. Nebraskans substantially reinforced the demands which led to Theodore Roosevelt’s federal reforestation program and which would mean so much to the treeless prairie. Nebraskans figured prominently in the revolt which led to the federal soil and water conservation programs, and emergency farm relief inaugurated in the distressing 1930’s.

Agricultural crises and the resulting social unrest have inspired innovations within our borders. Among them are movements which culminated in abolishing price abuses perpetrated by the “big-line” elevators, in ending arbitrary intra-state rate-making by the railroads, in delegating more legislative power to the people through the process of initiative and referendum, in providing the direct election of senators for political office, in establishing the one house legislature, in converting all power-generating facilities within our borders into a single publicly owned system.

Much that has happened in Nebraska can be explained in terms of a frontier society, for our state was a frontier for nearly half its politically organized existence. Much that has happened can be explained in terms of traits we inherited from the pioneers. Much also is explained in terms of new influences, developments of the past quarter-century.

The growth of small industries in our state has been great, and their wealth is rapidly approaching our agriculture’s. Our population gains are occurring in the towns and cities. Broad ribbons of concrete and asphalt, supporting streams of trucks and automobiles, tie us closer together. Food, clothes, furnishings, gadgets, all the paraphernalia of living appear in our stores at virtually the same instant they reach the consumer in Brockton, Mass. Main Street in Nebraska has the same neon-lit, plastic-and-glass-front look as Main Street everywhere in the U.S.

Books, magazines, motion pictures, radio, and TV bombard the Nebraskan as they do the eastern suburbanite—with the good and the bad of our mass culture, be it the NBC Symphony or Elvis Presley, Arnold Teynbee or Mickey Spillane, Oliver’s Richard III or Proctor and Gamble’s “Life Can Be Beautiful.” Communication has bridged the distances-physical and psychological—which once separated us from the main stream of America. It has made us more conscious of America and its place in the world community. It has made us aware that while agriculture is an important factor in our national life, it is not the single most important factor. It has dramatically changed our conditions of life.

The unifying forces have not yet become leveling forces. This is important to us because we believe that a most significant aspect of Nebraska life remains, as
it was in our earlier years, a robust individualism. We show it most in state and local politics which are tough on politicians and a morass of frustration for those who seek a common unity in attacking our problems.

We are a people of diverse interests and attitudes. Agriculture is our largest single economic interest, yet within it the corn-grower and the wheat-raiser and the dryland farmer and the irrigator and the cattle rancher and the livestock-feeder go their separate ways. The worries of our growing industrial enterprise are not always those of the agriculturist. Historical and not-so-historical rivalries flourish between regions, counties, towns and neighborhoods. These offer formidable obstacles to innovations which, viewed in broad perspective, would benefit the whole.

Local conflicts of interest are not unique to Nebraska. They can be found everywhere in America. Yet, in Nebraska they are more meaningful, more virile, more intense, more personal. We take stubborn delight in expressing our individualism; and our society is so constructed that we can be heard.

Despite automobiles and planes, distances are still imposing from Omaha to our western border is roughly the same distance as from Chicago to Pittsburgh, or from Washington D.C. to Boston—and those who “stump” our state find it an arduous task. Further complicating matters for them is the fact that Lincoln and Omaha are our only cities with metropolitan areas. Thirty-nine other cities have populations between 2,500 and 25,000. The remaining 495 are under 2,500, and most of these are less than 1,000. About a third of us live on farms and ranches, another third in small towns and villages, and the rest of us in the larger towns and cities.

No prevailing force—local political machines, political leader, newspaper chain—binds us together. At times we suffer for our parochialism, our refusal to look at the nationwide picture, our lack of a voice that speaks for us all. At other times the idealists and innovators rise among us to be heard. We listen and follow. From our achievements and disappointments we have acquired a social conscience which is cautious but not perverse, conservative but not bigoted, responsive but not gregarious. Our need to be “thoroughly sold” on a new idea and on those expounding it derives in large part from our predominately small-town life.

We lead a “showcase” existence in our towns. We do not build high fences and hedges to separate us from our neighbors. We find it hard to understand those who wish to withdraw from our midst into a private world of their own. We share not only the housewife’s cup of sugar but our joys and sorrows, hopes and ambitions, successes and defeats.

We are unabashed boosters. We want to build, to improve, to grow. We are not embarrassed if our starry-eyed idealism must sometimes yield to hard-headed practicality, because ours is a man-made world unsupported by mineral bonanzas. When a man runs a good farm or a good ranch or a good business, we tell him. But when we do his inward satisfaction is balanced by an outward embarrassment. We covet the esteem of our neighbors, but we like to be known as common folks. We take an inordinate interest in our children because all the children of our communities are an integral part of our lives. We hope they will succeed us on our farm, in our business.

Here we are Somebody; we are an Event when we are born and when we die. Here is an intensely personal world, a world where “they” are people with faces and first names. In our home towns we find a comfort and a security in the familiar which we wouldn’t trade for all the variety and novelty and urban glitter of the eastern metropolises.

Thousands of Americans hurtle across our state each year, pausing only long enough to gas up and gulp a hamburger. They have heard that there is nothing spectacular or super-colossal here: for them, it was for the Forty-Niners, Nebraska is a land-obstacle to be traversed in the shortest possible time. But we are not disturbed at this brush-off. We do not pluck at their sleeves to detain them. We have a proud record behind us and a spacious future ahead. We know what has been done and what can be done to make our agriculture more productive, while still conserving and protecting our water and soil. We think it remarkable that our community of small industries should be rapidly growing, even though many of them must import raw materials and export their finished products.

We believe we have done a pretty fair job of ordering our society without forfeiting our sometimes too-individualistic approach to solving our problems. We believe we are headed for bigger things and better ones, and we fondly cherish the hope that our children will do a better job than we.

We find a satisfying beauty in our state—in the precise rows of towering corn stalks, the freshly turned earth, the grandeur of a thunderstorm, the awesome loneliness of the sandhills grass, the well-kept yard.

We Nebraskans understand the conditions of life here. With good humor and serious purposefulness, we accept them—and like it.
Fence near Osmond
Michigan prairie enthusiasts: A booklet entitled “Public Prairies of Michigan” by Kim Alan Chapman and Robert J. Pleznak is available for $4.50 postpaid from the Michiana Prairie Society, Box 667, Kalamazoo, MI 49005.

Wanted: Items for this section of the Journal. Any bits of information of interest to the prairie people network would be appropriate. Send notices of events in for the calendar section also. In fact, we need items for every part of the Journal! See guidelines on the inside front cover. Journal subscribers include schools and universities, conservation organizations, and persons with interests in prairie preservation, restoration, landscaping, and interpretation, appropriate technology, sustainable agriculture, and plains history and folklore.

CALENDAR


Sept. 18-24: PRAIRIE APPRECIATION WEEK

Here are a few of the events scheduled so far; watch newspapers for activities in your area:

Sept. 18 (Sunday): Program at Neale Woods Nature Center, Omaha - “The Loess Hills of Western Iowa,” presented by Jean Novacek Bates, student at UNL who recently completed a 3-year study of the loess mounds in western Iowa. Her program will be presented at 2 p.m. and 3:30 p.m. There will also be guided hikes to the transplanted prairie at Neale Woods. Admission is free and open to the public. This event is co-sponsored by the Audubon Society of Omaha, the UNO biology department, and the Fontenelle Forest Nature Center.

Sept. 18 (Sunday): “Prairie as Catalyst,” program at Union College, Lincoln - 7:30 p.m. Special speakers: Hal Holoun, artist; Dr. Paul Johnsgrd, UNL life sciences professor & author; Ted Kooser, poet, Philip Otto Rosefield, composer-singer. Sponsored by the Wachiska Audubon Society - Lincoln.

Sept. 21 OR 22 (Check with D. E. Hutchinson or Peter N. Jensen in Lincoln): Guided tour of native plant gardens in Lincoln 5 p.m. Sponsored by the Soil Conservation Society of America.

Sept. 23-25 (Friday evening to Sunday noon): Prairie Appreciation Weekend Festival, Nebraska Youth Leadership Development Center, Aurora. Sponsored by P/PRI (Festival flyers with complete program and registration information were recently mailed to all members; if you still need one let us know).

Sept. 24 (Saturday): Field trip through the prairie at Pepper Creek Outdoor Learning Center, Chadron. For details contact Ron Woedoe, Professor of Agriculture and Biology, Chadron State College, Chadron, NE 69337, (308) 432-6293.

Sept. 24 (Saturday): A film “Prairie Should be Forever,” will be shown at 1:00, 2:00, 3:00, and 4:00 p.m. at the Neale Woods Nature Center, Omaha. Sponsored by the Fontenelle Forest Nature Center.

Oct. 1: Field trip to Pawnee Prairie. For details call Ron Cisak, President, Audubon Society of Omaha, (402) 496-0190.

Sept. 29 - Oct. 1: Northern Great Plains History Conference, University of North Dakota-Grand Forks. Inquiries should be directed to Dr. D. Jerome Tweton, Dept. of History, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND 58202.

September - October: GREAT PLAINS FESTIVAL...celebrating the land and the people

The Great Plains Festival, a series of art and educational events, will be held in the Scottsbluff/Gering area in September and October. Through a variety of events, including films, lectures, exhibits, and workshops, the Great Plains Festival will provide opportunities to learn more about the rich cultural diversity and significant social developments of the Great Plains. The Great Plains Festival is co-sponsored by the Panhandle Library System, Scotts Bluff National Monument, Scottsbluff Public Library, the University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension, the University of Nebraska Learning Center, and the West Nebraska Arts Center. A partial listing of events is listed below; for more information, call (308) 632-2226 or (308) 632-1319.

Sept. 4 - 30: Nebraska Art Collection, West Nebraska Arts Center.

Sept. 4 - 30: Quilt Show, West Nebraska Arts Center.

Sept. 10-11 (Sat. Sun.): Great Plains Outdoor Experience, sponsored by the University of Nebraska Learning Center. Come experience the beauty of the great plains and relax on this weekend campout at Smith Lake in the Nebraska Sandhills. You can hike, fish, canoe, and participate in informal learning sessions on outdoor photography, wildlife, and native plants. An evening campfire meal and an early morning walk will add to the experience. Instructors: Ruth Morton - University of Nebraska-Lincoln; Bob Grier, Mike Moore - Nebraska Game & Parks Commission; Lynne Vacarri - Prairie/Plains Resource Institute. Cost: $10/person; special rate for families. Location: Smith Lake Wildlife Management Area.

Beginning Monday, Sept. 19, 7-9 p.m. - Six weeks series, “Great Plains Experience.” Come learn about the land and the people of the Great Plains. This free six week series of evening sessions will combine films, lecture, discussion, and museum exhibits to present you with an exciting opportunity to explore and examine the culture and history of the Plains area in which you live. This series is co-sponsored with the Panhandle Library System and the Scottsbluff Public Library, and is made possible in part by a grant from the Nebraska Committee for the Humanities. Instructor: Richard Loosbrock, Ph.D., Professor of History at Chadron State College with special interest in the Great Plains. Location: Scottsbluff Public Library.

Friday & Saturday, Sept. 23-24 and Oct. 21-22: Great Plains Writers’ Workshop. This two weekend workshop will encourage participants to write about experiences of the Great Plains. Activities will include writing (some assigned by the instructor, some self-assigned), sharing writing in progress, collaborating in improving others’ writings, reading and discussing published accounts of the Plains, and discussing problems in writing and in getting published. Two or three additional evening meetings will be arranged. Instructor: Les Whipp, Ph.D., director of the Nebraska Writing Project and member of UNL faculty for over twenty years. Cost: $50. Time 7-9:30 p.m. and 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Location: University of Nebraska Panhandle Station.


Oct. 1: Square Dance, West Nebraska Arts Center.

Nov. 6: Ethnic Contributions to North Platte Valley Agriculture, Scottsbluff Public Library.