

STUDYING FLINT HILLS FOLKLIFE

by
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The Flint Hills of Kansas run in a north-south band some 50 miles wide from near the Nebraska border in Marshall County through Chautauqua and Cowley Counties, where they merge with the Osage Hills of Oklahoma. This area, widely famed both for its sweeping pastures and for its fertile river-bottom farmland, is home to many cowherds, both registered and grade, but the major use of its rich bluestem grasses is to fatten transient cattle, to put a quick and economical gain on steers and heifers shipped in from outside the region for the pasture season, a continuing practice since at least as early as 1856.

Many changes have occurred in the Flint Hills in the nearly 200 years since Zebulon Pike gave them their name. By mid-nineteenth century the farmsteads of pioneer stockmen had replaced the camps of Native Americans along the valleys of the Verdigris, the Neosho, the Walnut, and the Blue. Today many of these valley farms are operated by the descendants of pioneers, while in the upland pastures the Texas longhorns that replaced the bison have in turn been supplanted by British and exotic beef breeds. The tents and picket ropes of open-range herders have given way to flatbed pickups and stock trailers, the cattle cars of the railroad shipping era to today's pot-belly trucks.

A link to earlier times, however, is preserved in the folklife of the region, which embraces such things as cattle-working customs, farming practices, oil-field lore, legends and beliefs, and material culture. Each of four successive summers, now, beginning in 1986, I have taught a course in Flint Hills Folklife, a course that combines classroom lectures and archival research with field trips to farms and ranches, to

county historical museums, and to native prairie preserves. Students have ranged from youthful undergraduates to people in mid-career to those of retirement age. Some have been ranchers and ranch wives, many have been teachers (both elementary and secondary, both from the humanities and from the sciences), others have been in government service. Whatever their backgrounds, participants have been drawn to this class by their interest in and love for America's last tallgrass prairie.

The five million or so acres of the Flint Hills is relatively small compared to the vast ranch country of West Texas or to the unbroken stretches of range in the plains of Wyoming and Montana, but the distinctive cattle culture that exists here is as worthy of study as that of any of the better known regions. In fact, I am becoming convinced that the potential for the academic study of any aspect of the folk culture of the Flint Hills is restricted only by the limitations of the mind that confronts it. Granted, the accessibility of materials can be a problem, for many of the standard documents for academic study of the region are hidden away in unlikely places, while the scholarly value of many of the less traditional documents is not always recognized. One purpose of this class is to teach students to seek out hard-to-find written sources for the study of the Flint Hills, but an equally important purpose is to get them to look beyond these sources, to get them into the field (more precisely, into the pastures) and to encourage them to read the landscape and the people for clues about this distinctive culture. Or, as my colleague Tom Isern puts it, first get them into the library, and then get them out of it.

During these past four years the students have responded well to the demands placed upon them. They have contributed to the store of knowledge about the Flint Hills by conducting oral history interviews, by indexing issues of early-day newspapers, and by unearthing letters, diaries, obscure legal documents, and other such material. More important, they have used both standard and innovative approaches in studying a wide variety of topics--legends of ghosts, of murders, of notorious disasters (such as the Knute Rockne plane crash); histories of locally renowned ranchers, cowboys, and cowgirls (some of them nationally renowned, such as Marge Roberts, champion bronc rider and rodeo trick rider); accounts of community festivals and rodeos (such as the Burdick Field Day rodeo where in 1915 Bill Pickett bulldogged a steer with his teeth); investigations of customs and traditions associated with cattle, with farming, with the oil patch, with small towns, with one-room schools; stories of devil's lanes and water witching.

Cattle culture is undoubtedly the core of Flint Hills folklife, but other themes are also important, as is made evident in the selections chosen for inclusion in this issue of *Heritage of the Great Plains*, three of which deal with ethnicity in one form or another. Diverse groups have lived here since the

opening of Kansas Territory in 1854: Native Americans (the Kaw reservation was near Council Grove), blacks (Exodusters settled at Dunlap and in Wabaunsec County), and a variety of Europeans (Swedes, Irish, Slavic, Swiss, German, French, among others). Although no one ethnic group dominates the region, the British influence is pervasive, as suggested in place names such as Chelsea, Cambridge, Matfield Green, Reading, and Westmoreland. The remaining paper deals with one of the twentieth century's major natural disasters in the Flint Hills, the Flood of 1951. Before the building of watershed dams and Army Corps of Engineer reservoirs, many towns in the area were subject to flooding. El Dorado and Strong City, particularly, suffered major damage in the 1950s, but those larger towns survived. Smaller ones, such as Saffordville, were almost literally wiped off the map by the floodwaters.

Despite floods and droughts and through changing population patterns and increased mechanization, the Flint Hills have maintained their vitality and their beauty. The grass and the rocks have provided durability, the people resilience, resulting in a distinctive folk culture whose study promises to occupy the endeavors of students for many summers to come.