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## Cattle and Railroads – The Flint Hills Connection

Phil Miller

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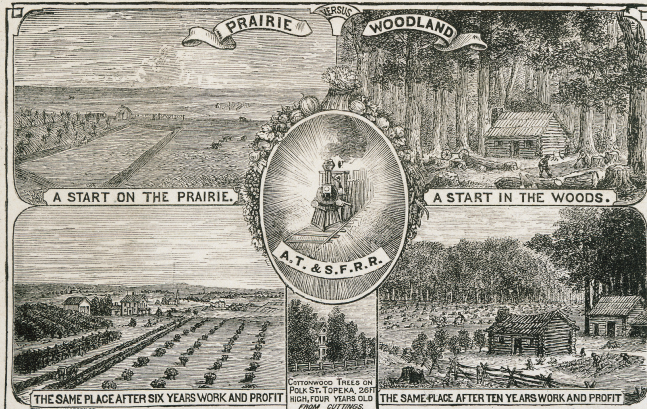
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## *Cattle and Railroads – The Flint Hills Connection*

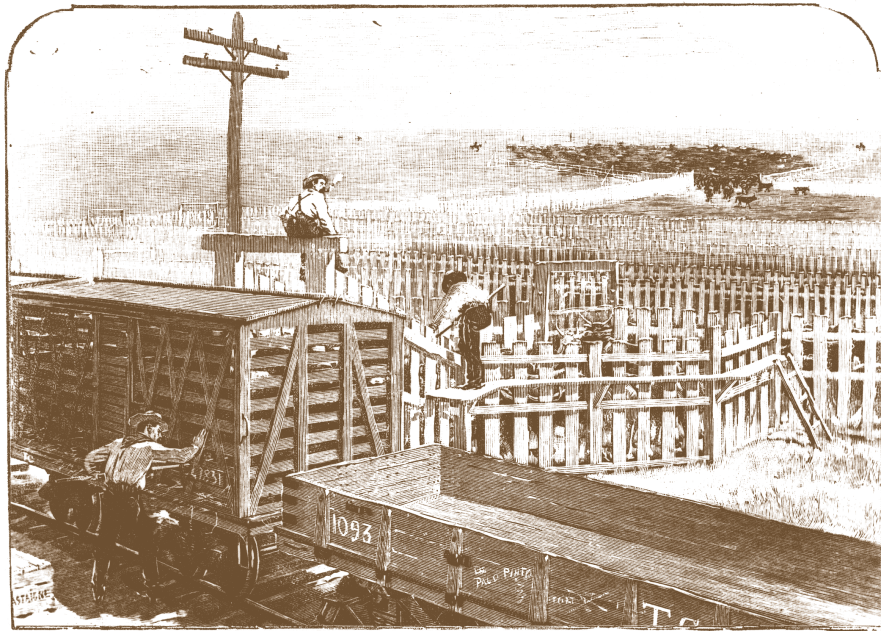
For centuries the lush grasses of the Kansas Flint Hills were the domain of the American Bison. But the coming of railroads in the 1860s signaled a change in the life of the prairie ... the end of the Bison's reign and the arrival of domesticated cattle. By 1867 the Kansas Pacific Railway had reached Abilene, and the cattle drives from Texas along the Chisholm Trail brought cattle to Abilene for shipment to the packinghouses of Kansas City, St. Joseph and points east.



By the mid-1870s Texas cattle drives were added to the annals of Kansas history. But raising cattle throughout the southwest was still big business, and ranchers needed a place to fatten cattle for market. The Flint Hills, located about halfway between the cattle-growing areas and markets in the North and East, were the perfect answer to summer or

year-round grazing. A railroad poster boasted that the area was “the best stock country in the world.”

By the 1890s cattlemen and other investors were buying grassland along the rail lines in the heart of the Flint Hills. Large cattle interests, such as Eastern Land and Loan of Atchison, and Western Land and Cattle Co., bought huge tracts



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of land in northwest Chase County from the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe (Santa Fe) and the Missouri, Kansas and Texas (Katy) Railroads. Shortly thereafter both companies began to fence in their land holdings in anticipation of cattle being shipped in from Texas.

Pioneer Chase County rancher Henry Rogler remembered seeing the first wire fence in the southern part of his county in 1890. By the start of the 20th century, most of the open range land was fenced.

By 1900 Texas cattle began arriving by train to graze the tallgrass prairie, heralding the age of the Transient Grazing Industry. Trains coming from Texas were required to stop in Oklahoma City to unload the cattle for feed and water.

The arrival of hundreds of thousands of hungry cattle gave new life to dozens of Flint Hills communities, such as McFarland, Hymer, Cassoday, Council Grove, Bazaar, Clements, Elmdale, Eskridge, Aikman, Cedar Point,

Beaumont, and Matfield Green. In each location, corrals (or stockyards) were built to handle the arrival and departure of all these animals. More cattle were shipped from Aikman, Cassoday, Matfield Green and Bazaar than from any other 25 mile stretch on the Santa Fe.

In 1887 the Santa Fe's tracks reached Bazaar (just a few miles east of the 2010 Symphony in the Flint Hills concert site), and in the early 1900s Bazaar became the largest shipping point for cattle in the country. In some years more than 2,000 carloads of cattle came and went from its corrals.

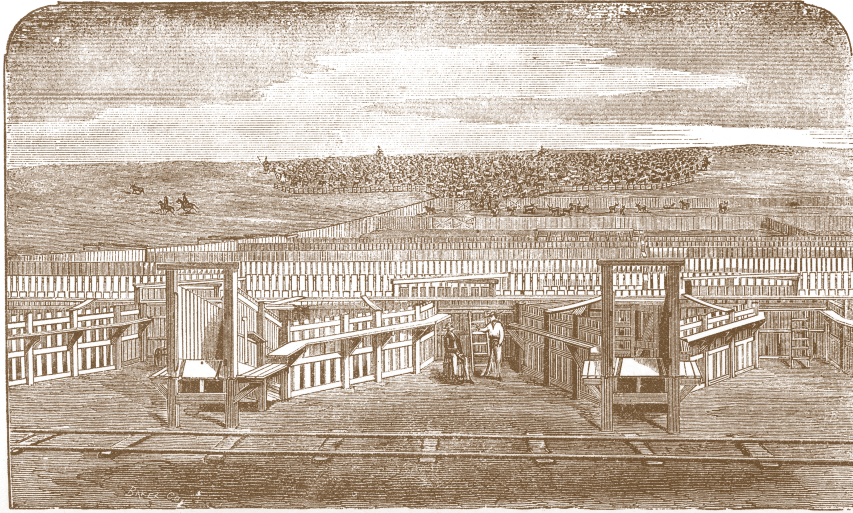
At Matfield Green (about 15 miles southeast of the concert site), a remnant of one of the corrals still exists. Even though time and a prairie fire have taken their toll, you can still see the dip tank, scales, cattle pens and chutes.

Long-time Cedar Point area rancher Pat Sauble recalls bringing a herd of cattle across the Cottonwood River Bridge toward the railroad corrals at Cedar Point. As the cattle drew close to the railroad

tracks, a steam engine gave a loud whistle blast. Panicked by the noise, Pat's herd turned and bolted back across the bridge. Before cowboys could surround the herd, some of the cattle stampeded all the way to Wonsevu, nearly 10 miles in the wrong direction. It took Pat and his cowboys three weeks to locate all the cattle that were nearly on the train that day.

Veteran Chase County rancher Tom Burton remembers that cattle arriving from Texas were run through a dip tank filled with the pesticide DDT upon their arrival at a Flint Hills rail yard, just in case they were carrying anything contagious. One by one cattle were driven to the edge of the tank where they plunged into it, swam the short distance to the other end, and ascended a ramp to get back up to ground level to drip-dry.

After getting cattle through all the preliminaries at the railroad corral, it was time to "head 'em up and move 'em out" to the pasture that would be their home for the next several months. The journey got underway with cowboys ahead, behind



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and on both sides of the herd. Using county roads, town streets and dedicated cattle-driving lanes across pastures, a cattle drive sometimes went as far as 15 miles or more.

Growing up in Matfield Green in the 1940s, Tom Burton remembers watching cattle drives through the streets of town. Despite cowboys' best efforts, cattle would run through residents' yards, trampling gardens and pulling laundry off the lines as they passed by. As a schoolboy, Tom had the good fortune to be in the east-

facing 5th/6th grade classroom where his teacher would let students gather at the windows to watch the cattle drive.

Some of these cattle were on their way to pastures more than 10 miles southeast of Matfield (where the AT&T towers are now located). Future cattlemen such as Tom must have been dreaming of the day when they would be the cowboys.

According to Tom Burton, one night (seems like the cattle trains always arrived at night) a train pulled in to Matfield Green with 25 carloads of cattle from

Lampasas, Texas – perhaps as many as 1,000 head. Leaving the corral, the cowboys headed the huge herd about five miles west across pastures, then onto a dedicated cattle-driving lane, and finally north onto a county road for the last leg of the journey. The cattle arrived at their destination, a pasture on ranch land then owned by Texan Charles Lipps ... the very pastures where you are enjoying the 2010 Symphony in the Flint Hills event.

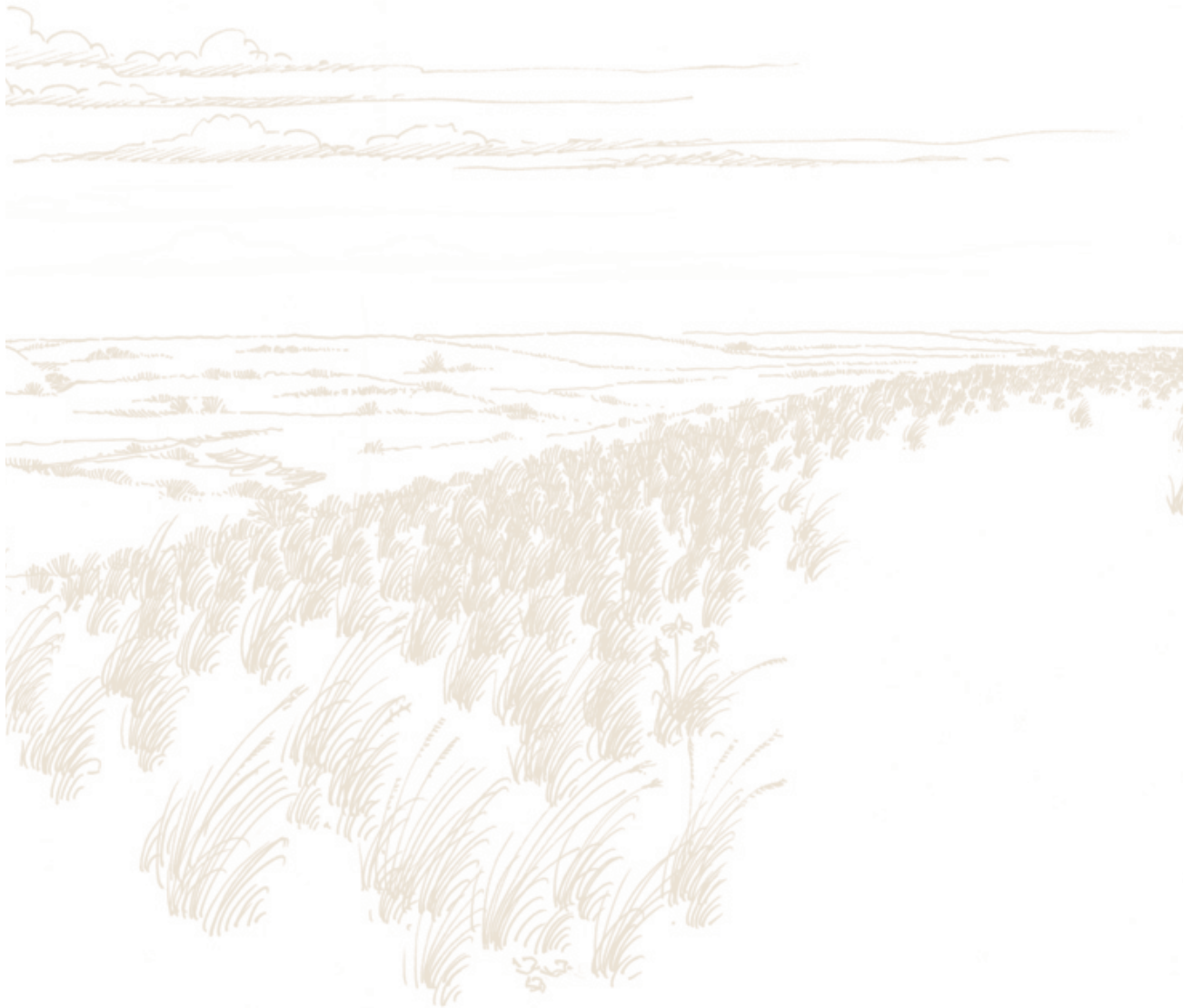
Cattle leaving Flint Hills pastures were either headed to a location for further fattening, or directly to the meatpackers. Long-time rancher Evan Koger remembers riding into the Kansas City Stockyards with trainloads of his cattle. Evan rode in the caboose or in a drover car that was put on the train for ranchers and cowboys. Usually arriving in Kansas City in the middle of night, Evan and other ranchers accompanied their animals to the Stockyards, ensured their well-being, and then got a few hours sleep at a hotel. Next morning they returned to the Stockyards to watch the commission

men (the middle men between the rancher and the packinghouse buyers) sell their cattle. A check for the sale would arrive at the ranch headquarters a couple of days later.

After more than sixty years of “romance” between Flint Hills cattle and railroads, change once again came to the Flint Hills. Beginning in the 1940s, better roads and bigger trucks fueled the transition from cattle trains to cattle trucks. In the 1940s, trucks hauled 1/3 of the cattle. By the early 1960s, trucks had nearly taken over. The ability of trucks to go into the pasture to load and unload cattle was, undeniably, a huge advantage for ranchers. And the colorful cattle drives between the railroad corrals and the ranch pastures became part of the storied history of the Flint Hills.

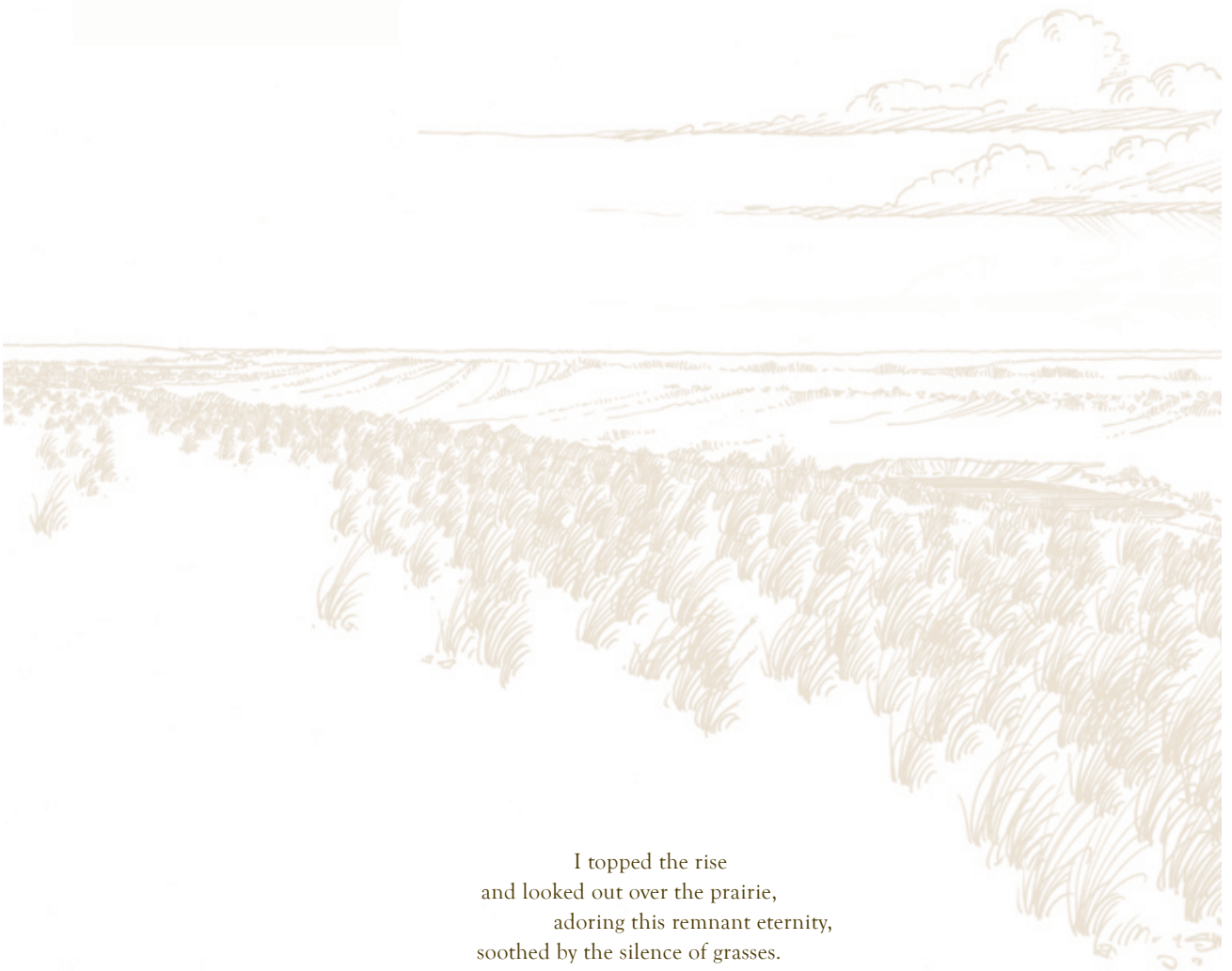
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*Phil Miller spent 25 years as a banker in Wichita. After he and his wife Kathy moved to Matfield Green, they convened a group of Prairie enthusiasts that became the first Board of Symphony in the Flint Hills. Phil served as Secretary-Treasurer and Public Relations/Fund Raising Chair for the first Symphony in 2006.*





NOTES



I topped the rise  
and looked out over the prairie,  
adoring this remnant eternity,  
soothed by the silence of grasses.

—Steven Hind