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Preserving Prairie: Restoring Fort Riley's Grant Ridge

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PRESERVING PRAIRIE:

Restoring Fort Riley's Grant Ridge



Alexander Gardner's 1867 photograph of Fort Riley shows the fort protected by a massive ridge to the south - a classic Flint Hills escarpment. Named in honor of General Ulysses S. Grant, Grant Ridge formed the southern boundary of the original 1853 Fort Riley Military Reservation.

The ridge also marks where the 1853 Mormon Trail, a 1,300-mile journey from Illinois to Utah, descended from the Flint Hills uplands into the Kaw River Valley. The photograph depicts another classic Flint Hills feature as well: not a tree can be seen in the uplands. Photographs and drawings in the succeeding years portray the fort in a sea of prairie grasses. The few trees growing there stood along the river bottoms and creek beds.

Built at the base of Grant Ridge in the late 1950s, Interstate 70 cut the ridge off from the fort. In the 1970s, the severed

land was deeded to Geary County.

Today, this area includes Freedom Park at Exit 301, which contains picnic tables, a monument marking the Mormon Trail, and a path leading up to Grant Ridge.

Atop the ridge sits an aging "Atomic Annie," one of twenty Cold War mobile cannons, on loan from the Smithsonian. Visitors praise the park, proclaiming that it is a "much better and more educational stop than your typical rest area."

A Symphony in the Flint Hills trademark has been a view from the concert site of an impressive expanse



VIEW OF FORT RILEY
SKETCHED BY JOHN GADDIS MAY 5, 1862
Wisconsin Veterans Museum, Madison, Wisconsin

of landscape-scale tallgrass prairie. The 2013 event, however, celebrates another important and unique Flint Hills attraction - the cultural history of Fort Riley's original main post with its array of native limestone structures. Consequently, the concert site, Artillery Parade Field, does not include an expansive view of the prairie. Fortunately, it does offer a view of the Grant Ridge skyline. Unfortunately, in contrast to the treeless post-Civil War landscape, the ridge has since been invaded by Eastern red cedar, elm, and locust trees.

In the Flint Hills, tree invasion has long been a threat to the tallgrass ecosystem. Although it is unusual to think of trees as undesirable, wildlife biologist Randy Rodgers, in "Tree Invasion" (*Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal 2010, Volume II*), describes invasive trees as "...a metastasizing cancer on our prairies." He explained:

Prairies, often taken for granted, are among Earth's most threatened landscapes. The prairie's unique assemblage

of wildlife is a rare treasure on the global scale. Yet, many of us who live here suffer from the delusion that meadowlarks are somehow ordinary. Grassland birds have shown steeper and more widespread declines than any other guild of birds in North America. Foremost among these species are prairie chickens, amazing creatures of wide-open spaces and clear horizons. Eons of adaptation have favored the survival of those birds that avoided trees, the hunting perches of hawks and owls, and habitat for many predators. This avoidance means it won't take a sweeping front of woodland, but only widely scattered trees to eliminate prairie chickens from otherwise suitable landscapes. And tree invasion is just as much the enemy of bobwhite, grassland songbirds, and the exquisite upland sandpiper.

Symphony in the Flint Hills faced a dilemma - the only view from the concert site presented an example of a prairie in decline. But, good news came quickly: Richard Roeser, who ranches the Grant Ridge pasture, had recently

opened discussions with the US Fish & Wildlife Service to participate in a federal wildlife management program to control invasive species in the Grant Ridge pasture. The program, Partners for Fish and Wildlife, works with private landowners across the region to control and eradicate invasive vegetation in native grasslands, riparian areas, and streams. According to its website:

Eastern red cedar trees have invaded many parts of the Kansas prairie, threatening wildlife habitat and grazing lands. Research has shown that as little as one tree per acre invading into native prairie can have a negative effect on the use of that acre by grassland nesting birds. It has also been shown that prairie chickens have an innate avoidance of structures that rise above the grasslands, such as trees, utility poles, or buildings. In addition, one acre of cedar trees can rob as much as 55,000 gallons of water per year from surrounding grasslands and streams. Trees also produce a shading effect and, in the case of eastern red cedar, can smother

the native grasses. Combined with negative effects on the water cycle, the amount of forage available to a livestock producer is greatly reduced. This, in turn, directly affects a producer's bottom line as well as the local economy.

Founded in 1991, the National Grazing Lands Coalition Initiative provides high quality technical assistance on privately owned grazing lands to increase the awareness of the importance of grazing land resources. Shortly thereafter, the Kansas Grazing Land Coalition was created with a similar mission: to improve grazing lands through collaborative education such as range schools, coffee shop meetings, youth education contests, public education meetings, and videos covering management topics. The Kansas Grazing Land Coalition works closely with the US Fish & Wildlife Service to accomplish its goals.

In addition to these efforts, the Westar Energy Green Team, a group of employee and retiree volunteers, takes on environmental projects across Kansas, including prairie restoration.

The Green Team has been a partner with Symphony in the Flint Hills from its inception, helping with site preparation. They have also completed tree removal projects across the state, including the Mt. Mitchell Heritage Prairie, featured in *Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal 2011, Volume III*.

Symphony in the Flint Hills contacted the US Fish & Wildlife Service to see if a collaborative effort could be organized to restore the Grant Ridge pasture. Their discussion led to a partnership among Geary County (landowner), the Roeser family (rancher), United States Department of the Army - Fort Riley DES - Fire & Emergency Services, the Westar Green Team, Symphony in the Flint Hills, Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition, and the US Fish & Wildlife Service. The Special Provisions section of the agreement illustrates the goals of this unique partnership:

It should be noted that in June the annual Symphony in the Flint Hills will be held in Geary County on the historic

grounds of Fort Riley. These 170 acres will be visible from the Symphony site. This, in turn, will offer an excellent opportunity to educate the public on the threats to the Flint Hills of Kansas and will allow us to demonstrate practices that can benefit our native prairie ecosystems.

Fragmentation is one of the greatest threats facing tallgrass prairie; increased fragmentation causes smaller, independent units of prairie, and these smaller acreages do not function biologically as well as an integrated whole. A large part of the fragmentation issue is the creation of more edge habitats, which, for a variety of reasons, inversely decreases interior stability. This project will help mitigate the negative effects of habitat edge by removal of invasive woody growth, enlarging the uninterrupted blocks of prairie, and increasing both the quantity and quality of the more stable interiors. This project will initiate habitat changes favorable to trust species such as upland sandpipers, short-eared owls, grasshopper sparrows, and other grassland birds, while at the same

time improving the economic viability of the local rancher and community. This project is a joint effort among Geary County, the Roeser Family, Westar Energy's Green Team, United States Department of the Army-Fort Riley DES - Fire & Emergency Services, Symphony in the Flint Hills, the Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition, and the US Fish & Wildlife Service. All the above partners have come together and agreed to help make this project work to benefit our country's largest remaining tract of Tallgrass Prairie, the Flint Hills.

Again quoting Randy Rodgers:

Those of us living on the Great Plains must come to realize that it is as much an act of redemption for us to kill trees that invade our prairies as it is for others to plant trees in a forest clear cut. We must realize that on the prairie, occasional fire is an act of renewal, not destruction. We should applaud, not deride, those who properly and carefully apply it. It is not for us on the plains to grow second-rate versions of the great deciduous forests of the east

or the conifer forests of the west. Our responsibility is to guard our precious remaining prairies for ourselves and our children, for spectacular prairie chickens and tiny grasshopper sparrows, and for the other people and creatures of the Earth.

The Grant Ridge restoration project will offer a restored Flint Hills view from Fort Riley and Interstate 70 while serving as an example of a successful cooperative effort among diverse partners.

Michael Stubbs is a historian of Kansas and the Flint Hills. He is the founder of the Mt. Mitchell Prairie Guards and an activist concerned with community affairs. One of his projects was naming all the roads in Wabaunsee County. He lives near Eskridge.

Bruce Waugh, a fifth generation Wabaunsee County landowner, practices law in Kansas City and is active in the preservation of the Flint Hills. He is a past president of Symphony in the Flint Hills and serves on its board.