



Kansas State University Libraries
New Prairie Press

Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal

2016 - Future of the Flint Hills (Larry Patton,
editor)

Returning to the Flint Hills

John B.T. Campbell III

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sfh>

Recommended Citation

Campbell, John B.T. III (2016). "Returning to the Flint Hills," *Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal*.
<https://newprairiepress.org/sfh/2016/orientation/3>

To order hard copies of the Field Journals, go to shop.symphonyintheflinthills.org.

The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.



RETURNING TO THE FLINT HILLS

It was December of 1914. A short four months earlier the fighting in Europe had broken out in the great conflagration that would be known as “the war to end all wars.” Sadly, that moniker would be proven false in relatively short order.

In that same month a little girl was born in Cottonwood Falls, Kansas. She was the second child of George and Myrtle McNee. George was the president of the Exchange National Bank in Cottonwood Falls. Both George and Myrtle had been raised in the Flint Hills as well.

That little girl became Maurine McNee Campbell, and she was my mother. The McNee family moved to that new frontier of California in the mid-1920s, seeking fortune and opportunity as some had done before and many would do after.

Although the family now lived in California, the Flint Hills remained home. The family traveled back to Kansas throughout the 1920s and 1930s, either by train or long and arduous driving trips when paved roads were still scarce. One such trip in 1928 was the subject of a contemporaneous diary my mother wrote, which has now been memorialized in a book.

And then there was the land. The McNees had owned various tracts of it in the Flint Hills. It was all sold except for one 800-acre property that stretched from the banks of the Cottonwood River up into those very Flint Hills. They held on to it, and we still own it to this day.

OPPOSITE PAGE: HORIZON GREEN
Lisa Grossman

I am the third child of Alex and Maurine Campbell. I was born and raised in Los Angeles. I went to school in Southern California, I met my wife there, and we raised our two sons there. Los Angeles is a very long way from the Flint Hills. It is a long way in miles, yes, but an even longer distance in spirit.

Although I had visited the Flint Hills before, my sojourn back to them began only a few years ago when my mother fell into ill health, and I needed to better understand this farm that was a part of her estate.

It didn't take long. After a few trips, my wife and I and our two boys were back to a place where our bodies had rarely been, but where it seems our souls always were. We were back in the Flint Hills. We bought a house, then built a guesthouse, bought into a restaurant, and worked with the farm, which has now been in the family for one hundred years.

There is a beauty in the Flint Hills. There is a spirit that gets into the soul.

There is a music on the prairie that plays even when there are no violins. The people are warm, real, and honest. The land is rich, but the culture of artistry and expression is richer. And the history of the place is exposed for all to learn and appreciate, not covered up by subsequent events.

The McNees came to the Flint Hills in the 1870s. Their descendants, the Campbells, are back in the 2010s. And we won't be going anywhere. For a number of decades the population and the energy declined in this area and in other areas like it. People sought out the opportunity and excitement of more populated communities. We hope to be a part of bringing that vibrancy back to this special place.

Now technology enables us to have the connectivity of a large city within the openness of the prairie. Just twenty years ago that was not the case. But yet the feeling we get here; the freedom we have here; the friendships we make here; the space both in body

and in mind that we have here; and the serene beauty that exists here; none of these can be replicated in that aforementioned city.

The Flint Hills are coming back as a new generation discovers the magic these Hills have to offer. We are a part of that comeback. But there are more of us now and still more to come. With each person, with each family, the rebirth grows.

I love to walk to the top of the hill at the most northwestern edge of our property. There is a lone tree up there and a natural amphitheater in native stone. From there I can see miles in every direction. I see the hills, the river, the cattle, the farms, the trains, the farmhouses, and trees. And I realize that the view I see is not very different from what my grandfather would have seen when he stood on this place one-

hundred years ago. I take in a deep breath of that fresh air. I listen to the ever-present wind rustle through the tallgrass. I smell the sweetness of the wildflowers at my feet. Every sense is awake and alive.

And then I dream. I dream of what more the Flint Hills can be. We, of course, want to keep what it is and has been. But add to that a new layer of creativity and expression and life. A place that is at once old and new; serene and alive; creative and traditional.

I intend to be a part of making that dream a reality. I hope you will join me.

John B.T. Campbell III was born and raised in Los Angeles, California. John retired from politics in 2015 after fourteen years in a full-time elected office. He and his wife, Catherine, divide their time between homes in Cottonwood Falls, Kansas, and Irvine, California.

FOLLOWING PAGE: C - GREEN
Mariana Escribano

