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The Power of the Pump: Windmills in the Flint Hills

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THE POWER OF THE PUMP: WINDMILLS IN THE FLINT HILLS

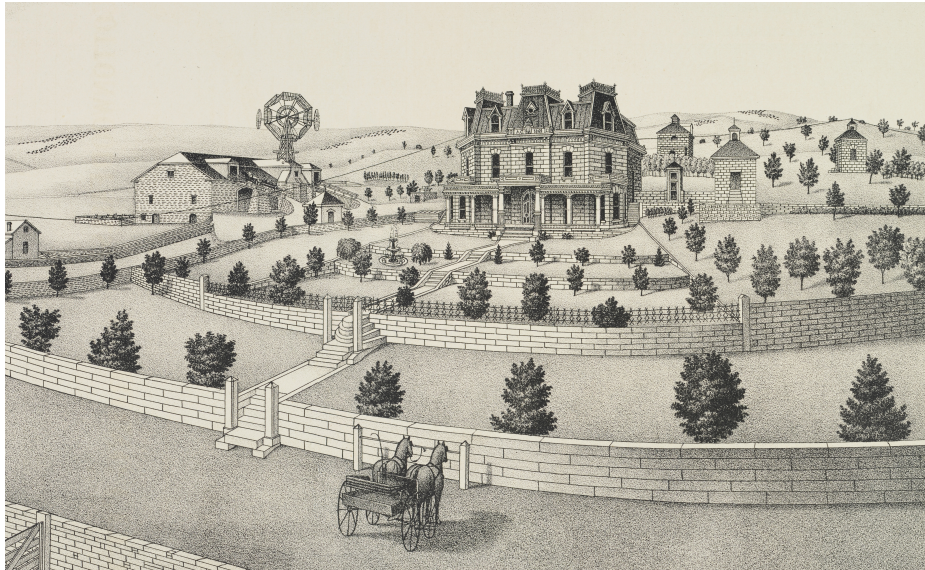
Before the 1850s in America, windmills were merely metaphors for the quixotic. This changed in 1854 with the invention of the first commercially viable windmill, a so-called self-governing model that automatically turned to face the shifting wind.

The blades began turning in the Sunflower State in 1857 after Kansas newspapers reported on a *Scientific American* article about San Francisco's adoption of the newfangled implements. "If a large supply of wind constantly in the market and obtainable without money and without price," the article noted, "be peculiarly favorable to the windmill business, then, certainly Kansas is just the place for it."

Soon, windmills were must-have civic improvements for budding Kansas metropolises, rural Flint Hills communities not excluded. Neosho Rapids, a Lyon County community whose population had not yet reached one hundred, constructed a large masonry windmill in 1872. In 1886 the City of Cottonwood Falls built a windmill to pump water from the Cottonwood River to a "small culvert" that supplied every house in town. "Why need you wear soiled linen?" said an ad in the *Chase County Leader*, "When the Cottonwood river runs by your door and you can buy twenty-three bars of good soap at Smith & Cartter's for \$1."



Windmill, Butler County
Jason Keller



Spring Hill Ranch
Kansas State Historical Society

At the height of the 1880s economic boom, businesses and large farming operations purchased large wooden windmills. One model at the Clements House supplied water to “all parts of the hotel.” The state’s largest windmill, attached to the barn at Spring Hill Ranch in 1881, powered an oil-cake crusher, root cutter, hay chopper, corn sheller, and pair of corn burrs. When its thirty-foot wingspan met the unpredictable prairie winds, the vibrations were strong enough to damage the limestone barn, forcing its removal after only one year.

Despite these setbacks the new windmill age coincided with the development of the ranching economy. And by the 1880s mass production had created an affordable and convenient way to pump water for cattle. In 1886 the *Chase County Courant* informed its readers that “A wind-mill and tank from which a supply of water could flow, pumped from a mill, is the climax of perfection in watering stock; unless there are natural springs from which it can be conducted.” By the 1890s ranchers’ options for equipment had expanded. Currie Windmill Company’s Manhattan plant turned out its line of “poor man’s

windmills” from the 1890s until World War II. A single windmill could water seventy-five head of cattle.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a growing number of advertisements for pastures for sale or lease mentioned windmills as a type of insurance policy against drought. The following quotation comes from an ad for a 4,000-acre Wabaunsee County pasture placed in 1893 by James H. Tully:

At times during extra dry seasons before the land was fenced for pasture it was neglected, and at times short of water, but I have fenced the land and repaired the springs, located ponds below them, put in twenty large water tanks, and will drill two wells and erect windmills and tank for same to hold water at all times, in order to make water convenient in every section; have also taken in additional land with a never failing creek on same.

At the turn of the century, implement dealers began touting gas-powered pumps as an alternative to windmills. A. M. Clark, the self-proclaimed “Windmill Man,” promoted an engine called “The Crackerjack,” which, he said, “could not get out of order except by the most

criminal carelessness.” But, unlike gasoline and electricity, wind was free, and windmills were nearly fool-proof. When you gaze across the prairie today, you’ll still see cattle drinking from tanks of water pumped from the reliable Kansas wind. They’re a reminder of the resourcefulness of those who came before us.

Christy Davis, Executive Director,
Symphony in the Flint Hills.