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## Introduction: Never Cuss the Rain

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*Symphony in the Flint Hills, Inc.*

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*Distant*  
Clare Doveton

## INTRODUCTION

### NEVER CUSS THE RAIN

When I woke up to the sound of sleet hitting my roof, I knew that I'd have to change the day's travel plans.

By 7:00 a.m. I had a message from rancher Matt Perrier. At his Greenwood County ranch ice was darting across the open prairie in gusts up to fifty miles per hour. Cancelling our meeting would give him time to feed his cattle while I called to reschedule my other appointments. When we spoke by phone later that morning, we talked about the weather. But since the freezing rain was the first real moisture we'd seen in three months, neither one of us was complaining.

Essential to ranchers' livelihoods, rain and cattle are the two principal topics of conversation throughout the Flint Hills. And, sometimes, ranchers spend so much time talking to each other about these two topics, they forget to explain to the rest of us why rain and cattle are so important. Unlike their ancient ancestors who could count on consistent rainfall in their agricultural homelands in Europe, Ohio, Iowa, or Illinois, these ranchers have adapted to a climate of conspicuous extremes, marked by long periods of drought alternating with periods of heavy rainfall. Because unpredictability breeds superstition, Flint Hills ranchers abide by an age-old pledge to "never cuss the rain."

Perhaps this adage explains why federal reservoirs were unpopular here. By the 1950s ranchers were conditioned to take rain where they could get it – even in the form of floods – without complaint. Activists, including living legend Pat Sauble, have

succeeded in staving off a proposed federal reservoir project on Cedar Creek for more than seventy years.

The same vow of silence apparently does not apply to droughts. In contrast to points south and west where plows, wind, and drought conspired to transplant Great Plains topsoil to the east coast, the grasslands of the Flint Hills, anchored by deep perennial roots, fared fairly well in the dirty thirties. Folks give rocky soil a lot of credit for protecting these native grasslands from the plow. But they sometimes forget to credit the pragmatic ranchers who, often against the advice of agricultural experts, developed ways to hedge against drought while conserving one of the world's most endangered landscapes.

These days old timers wax on about dry times in the 1950s. But Matt Perrier's earliest drought memory dates to 1980. Every day when he got off the school bus, his mom would load him in a truck, and for hours they would haul water from one pasture to another. A few years back one neighbor protected his livelihood by hauling in an eighteen-wheeler full of water tanks to transfer water. There's another adage among ranchers that "you're not making money if you have to haul

water to cattle." But desperate times call for desperate measures – and it's impossible to tell a class of consummate "doers" that there is nothing they can do. Here, "quit" is a four-letter word; and sometimes doing something, however futile, can boost morale.

Like most nineteenth-century settlers, Perrier's ancestors chose the location of their Greenwood County ranch for one reason: it had good water. In 1834 Robert Loy was born in Westmoreland County, England, where his family lived in a place called Low Dalebanks. Known as "Dale Bank" in the eighteenth century, Loy's homeland was named for the valley (or dale) on the banks of the Eden River. Perrier, whose parents have visited the home place in England, says, "It's uncanny how similar the lay of the land at our ranch below the convergence of the east and west branches of Fall River is to the place in England."

Perrier's great-great grandparents Robert and Alice Loy arrived in Greenwood County in 1867, the year that marked the beginning of the great Texas-to-Kansas cattle drives. But they were not cattlemen. Although the name Dalebanks has become synonymous with Angus cattle, Englishman Robert Loy was known as a



*Prairie, Remembered*  
Kelly Yarbrough-Frasier

"great sheep man" and "father of sheep husbandry in Greenwood County." Until the Panic of 1873 and the grasshopper plague of 1874 put the nail in the coffin of extensive cash-crop farming in the Flint Hills, Loy even tried his hand at milling wheat.

Like most Flint Hills ranchers, Perrier's family learned to manage the grass

the hard way. And it took a couple of generations to begin to understand this foreign landscape. The Loys were exposed to the unpredictability of the cattle business through their son-in-law J. L. Barrier, who married Robert and Alice's daughter Ella in 1883. It was the peak of the nation's first cattle ranching craze. Even Teddy Roosevelt owned a ranch.

And most, including Roosevelt, lost their shirts. In the fall of 1884, Barrier paid \$43 per head for some steers. After feeding them corn all winter, he sold them in late December for \$43 per head.

The situation went from bad to worse. On January 15, 1886, the *Greenwood County Republican* reported that “The blizzards come so fast that we scarcely have anything to report.” They say, “if you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all.” In western Kansas whole herds were lost and a number of farmers and ranchers, disoriented by driving snow, froze to death, sometimes a few feet from their houses. Although Flint Hills stockmen fared better than their western Kansas brethren, they struggled through the 1880s. In late January 1886, the paper reported that “Most all the stock cattle stood the late storm exceedingly well, but it took lots of corn to keep them warm.”

If necessity is the mother of invention, it was the 1880s blizzards that invented a new approach to ranching. In 1890 a new breed of stockmen was born, one that would raise hay for winter feeding and graze cattle on native grasses in the spring and summer. While the government was paying farmers to plow and plant trees in a futile effort to improve the

state’s climate, the Barriers and their neighbors were rewarded for abandoning their ancestors’ traditions and adapting to the climate of their new homeland. As a consequence, they survived an 1893 drought that destroyed the state’s wheat and corn crops in places that subscribed to a belief among some scientists that “rain followed the plow.”

There’s a saying in the Flint Hills that “if you’re going to marry a cowboy, be sure you marry the one that owns the ranch.” By this measure, Robert and Alice Loy’s daughter Amelia (Amy) was a success. In 1903, after completing a degree at K-State and teaching high school for two years, she married E. L. (Bert) Barrier, related to J. L. Barrier, who married the other sister, Ella. Bert was a stockman who set the course of the family business for the next century.

Between the time of her sister Ella’s marriage in 1883 and Amy’s in 1903, the cattle business had changed. Many landowners had begun leasing their pastures and shipping cattle in for the spring and summer. By storing hay, they had tackled the corn problem. And now they found a way to provide their livestock with a reliable source of water.

If you look at historic maps of Flint Hills counties, you can begin to see clear trends over time. One of the most striking changes that happened between 1887 and 1901 was the sudden appearance of stock ponds. Unlike bison, which had evolved over thousands of years to travel great distances to water, cattle needed water closer at hand. Building ponds in pastures was so rare in the 1890s that every new pond merited a mention in the local paper. By the late 1890s, the *Greenwood County Republican* was peppered with notices of landowners building ponds, coinciding with reports of pastures for lease and, consequently, a “shipping season.”

The process of building ponds in the Flint Hills has changed little in the past century. In order to distribute grazing in a pasture, ponds need to be dispersed. Ranchers review maps and walk or drive their pastures to find low-lying areas with valleys narrow enough to efficiently build dams. They scrape off the top soil at the location of the pond before digging, then use the fill from the pond to build a dam, working to match the layers of soil with the surrounding ground. To keep cattle from spoiling the pond water, the ponds are sometimes fitted with gravity-fed stock tanks below the dam, and, beginning as

early as 1903, fences. Man-made ponds ensure that cattle have access to reliable, clean water, with the added benefit of alleviating overgrazing near streams and natural springs.

Having tackled challenges related to water and winter feeding, the Barriers were able to go “all in” on cattle and the Flint Hills. In 1903 Bert saw registered Angus cattle for the first time at the American Royal in Kansas City – and bought his first Angus stock in 1904. At the Improved Stockbreeders Association meeting in 1915, Bert gave a speech that “made the old timers sit up and take notice.” Bert believed that the Flint Hills was not only a great place for feeding cattle but also the best place for breeding cattle:

*In his opinion the bluestem section of Kansas has before it one of the greatest opportunities in the whole world. All through these famous limestone pasture areas there seems to be no question as to the superior development of bone and muscle following the growing of cattle under these conditions. There is something about the grass produced on these limestone hills which tends to build stronger and better stock than the short grass of the western plains.*



*Winter Ranching*  
Dave Leiker

By 1919 he owned sixteen registered Angus, with catchy names like “Prospector of Dalebanks.”

A century after Bert Barrier founded Dalebanks Angus, his descendants still talk about rain and cattle. But these days, there are new water-related challenges. Streams must flow to fill the stock ponds that supply the tanks, and streams flow best when surrounded by healthy grassland. Early conservation efforts, aimed at curbing erosion, introduced invasive plants that can rob the pastures and streams of moisture. Altered fire regimes have also allowed certain native trees to encroach into the prairie.

Among the worst of these offenders are cedar trees; larger trees can reportedly gulp up to thirty gallons of water each day. Eastern red cedars contributed to the horrific wildfire that swept through parts of western Kansas in 2016. Ironically, it has been reported that these unusually hot fires destroyed enough cedar trees to increase the flow of some springs and prairie streams.

Admittedly, man-made ponds impact the natural landscape of the prairie. But, one could also argue that the tallgrass prairie is and always has been a cultural landscape shaped by the hands of man —

beginning with the first Plains Indians who began burning grasslands thousands of years ago to draw bison. With proper design and maintenance, stock ponds can help protect streams and springs with minimal visual impact on the prairie. Without these ponds, it would be impossible to graze as we do today.

On cold winter days, Matt Perrier doesn’t cuss the freezing rain. Over five generations his family has learned to adapt to cycles of droughts and floods on their Greenwood County ranch – with ponds, tanks, and land management. His ancestors let loose of the plow generations ago, but now Matt has taken up the chainsaw in his fight to protect the tallgrass prairie from the cedar trees that threaten his homeland. Like his ancestors and the Plains Indians before him, he is on the front lines of a battle to manage Flint Hills WaterWays.

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Christy Davis, Executive Director of Symphony in the Flint Hills, is a fifth-generation Kansan who is passionate about the history, landscape, and culture of her home state.