

Hey Neighbor

For The Love Of Horses

By Frank J. Buchman

Horses Still Best Way To Handle Cattle

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Five lifelong cowboys agreed on that during a presentation at the recent Symphony in the Flint Hills.

However, they recognized that mechanical four-wheelers have become increasingly prevalent for use looking after the thousands of cattle grazing Bluestem pastures each year.

Likewise, a concern was aired about the decline in number of younger cowboys to replace those who are aging.

In a plush Flint Hills pasture overlooking two large clear ponds south of Council Grove in Morris County, Jim Hoy, director of the Center for Great Plains Studies at

Emporia State University, was moderator for the discussion.

Jack Gieswein, Kenneth Muller and brothers Bob and Wayne Alexander all live near Council Grove and have been cowboys since early childhood. Well past retirement age, they continue in the profession today. Hoy, raised as a cowboy near Cassoday in Butler County, is still active in ranch work and is considered an expert on the Flint Hills.

Along with oxen, horses were the mode of transportation for settlers into the Flint Hills in the 1850s, and were used driving Longhorn cattle from Texas into the area in the 1860s, Hoy

reported. It was free range grazing at that point, because fences had not been built yet.

"Cattle grazed in the Flint Hills during that Trail Drive Era, which lasted roughly until 1890," quoted Hoy. "For all practical purposes, railroads replaced trail drives at that point, and the Railroad Era was in full swing."

Horses didn't lose their importance, as they were essential for meeting cattle at train pens and driving them out to the Flint Hills. After World War II, trucks replaced trains as the primary way of hauling cattle. "Roughly by 1970, railroads had completely given way to the Trucking

Era of Flint Hills history," Hoy explained.

All of the panelists have experienced both the railroad and trucking eras. "We would meet the trains on our horses and trail the cattle to Flint Hills pastures," commented Bob Alexander.

There were a number of railroad stockyards throughout the county, including Wilsey, Diamond Springs, Skiddy and several around Council Grove, among others. "Sometimes, we'd have to get up at 3 o'clock in the morning to ride to the pastures so we'd be there by daylight. We didn't haul our horses back then," said Gieswein.

"Our horses were really broke in those days because we'd ride them all day, every day for weeks at a time," added Wayne Alexander.

"It was quite a sight when we'd bring a herd of cattle to the west railroad pens at Council Grove," Muller recalled. "We'd come across Elm Creek and try to keep the herd on the trail, but they'd always seem to get into somebody's yard and garden, despite the ladies in housedresses with dishtow-

els trying to shoo them away."

During the Railroad Era, steers shipped in from other states, often still from Texas, were typically British breeds varying drastically in weight and age, usually two years and older. "Those cattle had been handled with horses, so they weren't usually hard to drive and work with," Muller continued.

However, Bob and Wayne Alexander specifically remembered some old bulls their dad, Bud Alexander, had got in from Texas one year. "Those bulls really did gain, but when it came time to start gathering them, they took out for different country. We had good horses, but it was a real challenge before we got those bulls loaded back on the train," Bob Alexander reflected.

Because the cattle were of varying ages and weights, shipping dates from the Flint Hills lasted for several months. "Some of the bigger steers would be ready to move out in July, and the lighter ones wouldn't come off until October," Wayne Alexander verified. "We had to check those pastures

every week, and pull off the ones to ship. You can see, we rode our horses a lot and that made them better all of the time."

Hoy inserted, "Cowboys in other parts of the country always insisted that horses from the Flint Hills were better than those from anywhere else because they were ridden more throughout the year checking, doctoring, sorting and gathering."

"Many days we'd start before light and wouldn't get back until after dark. Sometimes, our horses would get so tired, we'd have to lead them part of the way. I was just a teenager, and it was work, but it was great," Gieswein informed.

When railroad stockyards closed, cattle continued to be shipped into the Flint Hills for summer grazing. All four of the panelists have served as grassland managers and continue to do so today.

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"Cattle sure have changed, too," Hoy pointed out. "When exotic cattle breeds, such as Charolais, Limousin and Simmental, started showing up, some of them hadn't ever seen a horse, and it took a lot of time getting them used to being around horses."

Full season grazing from mid-April to October started changing in the late '70s, according to the panelists.

"Now several of the pastures we look after are double stocked for one-half of the season," Muller related. "These cattle go out at the same time, but there are twice as many on the same acreage, and we take them off in July."

Flint Hills grasses, Big Bluestem, Little Bluestem, Indian grass and switchgrass, are most nutritious in those three months, and cattle will gain faster during

that period than on any other grassland anywhere in the world, Hoy contended. Cow herds are grazed year-round on some pastures, but the bulk of Flint Hills grazing is with growing cattle.

Hoy emphasized that the Flint Hills is the largest remaining native prairie under private ownership. "The other big native rangelands are government owned," he stated.

Modernization and changes have caused decreased use of horses. "We used to ride our horses to

the pastures and ride them home. Now, we haul our horses everywhere in a trailer. They stand around more than being ridden," Muller revealed.

"A horse has to be ridden to know anything. It's a long, slow process," recognized Wayne Alexander, who like each of the panelists has raised and trained many horses during his career.

"Wet saddle blankets make good horses, and I've trained some top horses," continued Wayne Alexander, an all-around rodeo

champion many times over. "I really craved that roping."

All of the group had rodeo experiences to relate. "If you're a cowboy, you like rodeos," admitted Gieswein, who's been a member of champion ranch rodeo teams along with the others. The Alexander boys participated in amateur and Old Timers rodeos successfully throughout the Midwest.

Although all members of the group have bought and sold horses consistently throughout their lives, each

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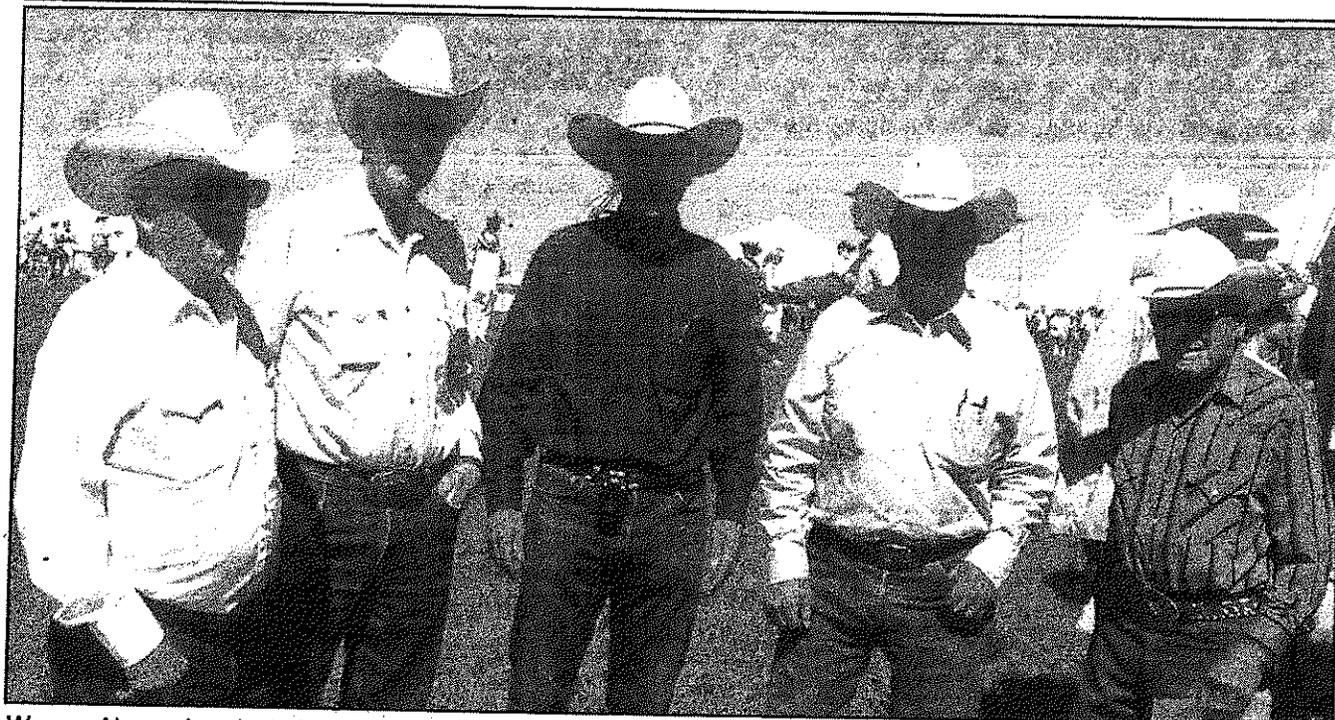
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"Still, there's nothing that beats riding a horse every day checking and gathering cattle to get trained," Muller clarified.

Sensing endangerment of the future for the Flint Hills cowboy, the group of five cautiously discussed infringement of four-wheelers.

"Ten years ago, I would have said that these things would never beat a horse for working cattle, and I'd still like to think they won't," Muller countered. "However, more people are using them all of the time. I even have one myself. I don't use

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"There are some cattlemen who don't have horses any more and seem to get along. Yet, when something needs doctoring or a stray gets away, there's nothing that will beat a good horse," Bob Alexander defended. All of the group conceded to that consensus.

Likewise, there was discussion about the younger generation of cattlemen to fill these senior cowboys' boots. "My son has always wanted to be a cowboy, and he's a rancher now," Muller noted. Hoy's son is heavily involved in ranching, with entrepreneurship endeavors tied to the Flint Hills.

"One of my sons has a small cow herd, and likes the ranch life, but it's not possible for him to make a living," Bob Alexander stressed. Wayne Alexander's boy is a race horse trainer, still with ties to ranch life, but Gieswein's sons have no interest in being cowboys.

Low pay scale of the cowboy was reviewed, along with high expenses. "It will have to be for the love of the lifestyle, rather than the

money, for young men to want to be cowboys," Bob Alexander asserted.

"Life as a cowboy sure doesn't make a person rich money-wise, but it's a way of life I wouldn't change for anything else anywhere," Muller summarized. "There's absolutely nothing in this world like riding a good horse across the Flint Hills to look after a herd of steers."

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about the future in the Flint Hills, there will always be cowboys mounted on good horses.

Proof was in the pudding as a herd of cattle was being herded across the pasture during the Kansas City Symphony Orchestra's evening presentation. One steer started to run off, and the others immediately began to follow. Quick action by well-mounted cowboys brought the herd back into control, to much apprecia-

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Old-Time Cowboys Insist Horses Still Best Way To Handle Cattle In World-Renowned Flint Hills

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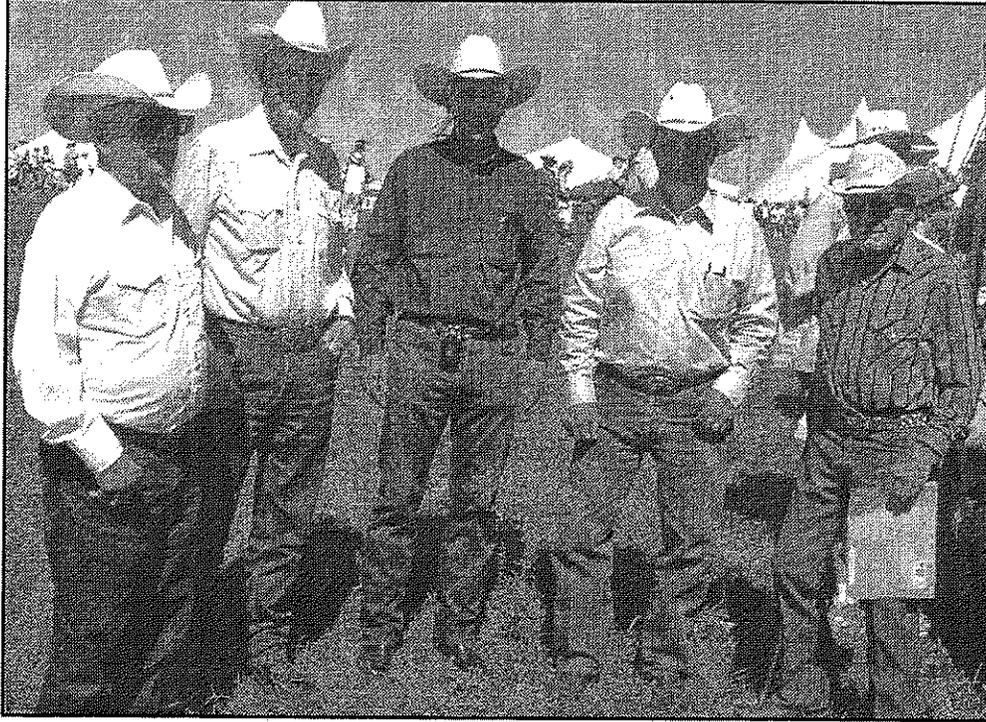
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