

By Robert Earle Howells

PRAIRIE HOME

DISCOVER A CLASSIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPE IN NORTHEASTERN OKLAHOMA



AN UNBROKEN LANDSCAPE OF GRASSES AND WILDFLOWERS STRETCHES AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE, PUNCTUATED ONLY BY A COLLECTION OF DOTS ON A DISTANT HILL.



It's a herd of bison, my binoculars reveal. What I can't see, as I scan for miles, is anything human-made.

Before there were amber waves of grain, there were tallgrass prairies. At least 142 million acres of grass covered the territory from Ohio to Kansas, southern Texas to Canada—nearly a third of what became the United States. Today, almost all of it is gone, which is why this sight, on the Nature Conservancy's Joseph H. Williams Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in northeastern Oklahoma, is such a treasure. Most of the grasslands that greeted westward-hoing pioneers gave way to corn and wheat and development. But here a nearly pristine remnant remains, thanks to a convergence of circumstances that resulted in the initial ownership of 39,650 acres of protected prairie.

This vista is imprinted in my memory as one of the most profoundly moving in the country, and I'm thrilled to see it again. When I first visited three decades ago, there was no preserve, only the dream of one. Local ranch owners were willing to sell 100,000 acres of prime land, and the National Park Service

was interested. A deal was never finalized, but in 1989, the Nature Conservancy engineered an audacious \$15 million capital campaign to purchase the 29,000-acre Barnard Ranch and establish the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve. Conservation and restoration were well under way when I returned in the mid-1990s. Today, thanks to additional purchases over the years, some 51,000 acres are protected.

One thing that hasn't changed since my first visit: Harvey Payne, a rancher-attorney-environmentalist,

Prairie Portraits

In an ongoing project, Osage photographer Ryan RedCorn presents the Osage in ways that are vital and contemporary. Osage elder Herman Mongrain Lookout (left), 78, recalls stories his grandmother told of walking across the prairie when the Osage were removed from Kansas to Oklahoma in 1872. "The prairie is a remnant of what used to be," Lookout says.

RYAN REDCORN (PORTRAIT); HARVEY PAYNE (PRAIRIE); PREVIOUS PAGES: MORGAN HEIM (BISON)



The Nature Conservancy manages the 51,000-acre Joseph H. Williams Tallgrass Prairie Preserve, where wildflowers flourish and bison (opening photo) roam.



remains one of the most dedicated advocates for the prairie, and I'm grateful to have him again as my guide, all these years after our first walks on the edge of the unpreserved preserve. After Payne spent years calling for a prairie preserve, he became its manager for 18 years. He's retired from that duty now, but retains the title of community relations coordinator, and is happy to show me around and bring me up to date.

Payne and I meet in downtown Pawhuska, population about 3,500, the preserve's gateway town—and one aspect of the prairie experience that has changed dramatically since my first visit. Cooking-show celebrity Ree “The Pioneer Woman” Drummond has opened The Pioneer Woman Mercantile in one of Pawhuska's historic brick buildings, and the once sleepy town now regularly sees lines of fans stretching around the block, eager to chow down in her eatery or shop for kitchen implements and tchotchkes. A ripple effect has brought new galleries, boutiques, restaurants, and lodgings to downtown Pawhuska. For many visitors, the prairie preserve is serendipity rather than the reason to visit this corner of the state.

Pawhuska is also the seat of the Osage Nation, and the Osage's story is deeply imprinted on these hills. The Osage, pressured by white homesteaders to sell their property in southeastern Kansas in 1870, purchased the hilly Oklahoma land for 70 cents an acre and relocated to the prairie. Karma kicked in when Osage County's first oil wells began producing, circa 1900. Osage headrights—title to the land's gas and minerals—made the Osage almost instantly among the wealthiest people in the world.

As we drive north from town toward the preserve, I ask Payne to refresh my memory as to how a former cattle ranch can qualify as pristine prairie. “Well, first,” Payne says, “we can't call it pristine. As a functioning ecosystem, the tallgrass prairie as it existed historically is effectively extinct. But this is the best semblance of the original that we have.” The prairie's nearly natural state is due to a quirk of geology: The region is relentlessly rocky. The grassy hills are undergirded by so much limestone and sandstone that it's difficult to walk on the prairie, let alone plow it. John Deere's finest steel could never bust this sod.

So the Osage Hills became cattle country. Cattle's impact on the land is far less than that of agriculture—especially when ranchers are careful land managers, as the preserve's former owners were.

Still, cattle are aliens here. The prairie's native ruminants were elk and bison. After the elk were killed off around 1830 and the bison by 1851, ranching and cattle took over. “It's a far cry from a cow pasture to a prairie preserve,” Payne says. We

only need look out the window to see that. The ranchland along the road to the preserve is lovely rolling pasture. But when we enter the preserve, the hills become a multifaceted work of art. “A tallgrass prairie is much more than grass,” Payne explains. “We've identified more than 750 species of flora on the preserve. Of those, 115 are grasses. The rest are broadleaves and sedges. The cattle will eat some species of grass so much that the broadleaves they don't like take over. Then some ranchers will engage in aerial spraying to kill these broadleaf plants. Then away go the greater prairie chickens and ground-nesting birds...”

Payne's voice trails off. Greater prairie chickens are one of the avian superstars here. Their mating dances are legendary and something that Payne, an avid photographer, has documented for years. His main point is that a true prairie is varied and abundant. My days on the prairie were to become a constant discovery and rediscovery of that fact.

AS WE CONTINUE INTO THE PRESERVE, it is obvious just how abundant a tallgrass prairie is. It's early September, when warm-season grasses are at their tallest, but we're not just talking about horizon-to-horizon big bluestem, which reaches up to 10 feet this time of year. We also see shorter Indian grass, with its feathery seed heads, and little bluestem, and some truly astounding displays of wildflowers. We pull to the edge of the road beside acres of Leavenworth's eryngo—one- to three-foot stalks with splashy purple thistlelike flowers—and a herd of bison indifferently munching around the fringe of the field. A lone giant post oak puts

a strong stamp on the scene, and meadowlarks flit all around. Bison tend to be scene-stealers wherever they choose to graze, and that's only right. They're irresistible to watch. Signs warn to keep one's distance from the massive wild beasts, but I'll admit to cheating a bit. Not that I'm posing for selfies with them, but I just like to stand nearby, watch, and anthropomorphize—this one's grumpy, this one's looking for affection, how cute is that calf, that guy... he's *huge*.

When I visited 20-some years ago, the preserve had around 300 bison. Today, some 2,700 of them are scattered in groups like this, freely grazing 25,000 acres in the preserve. A nearly 10-mile circular driving route in the western part of the preserve, the Bison Loop, passes through prime bison pasture. There's never a guarantee that bison will appear near the road, but I see them every time I drive through.

Bison—and cattle—stimulate growth on the prairie by grazing the land, but Payne tells me that would be for naught without fire. In a method known as patch burning, preserve managers



SHANE BEVEL (ALL); NG MAPS

Little town on the prairie (clockwise from top): Pawhuska (pop. 3,500) has seen a revival and tourist boom, thanks to the popularity of cooking-show celebrity Ree “The Pioneer Woman” Drummond. The Pioneer Woman Mercantile, in a renovated historic brick building on Main Street, houses a store selling kitchenware and cookbooks, and a restaurant serving comfort fare such as a meatloaf sandwich topped with fried onions.



RYAN REDCORN (PORTRAIT), HARVEY PAYNE (BIRDS)

A Place to Run Free

Truman Pipestem, 17, is headed to Yale University in the fall. A member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, Pipestem is also Osage, Otoe-Missouria, and Citizen Potawatomi. He plans to become a lawyer specializing in federal and tribal law. “The prairie reminds me of a child’s heaven, letting the wind blow your hair and playing tag all day long.”



torch about a third of the acreage every spring, late summer, and fall, mimicking ancient seasons of fire and nature’s way of rejuvenating nutritious new growth.

The hirsute beast I described as huge lumbers closer. At nine years old, he’s a bit of an outlier, Payne tells me. Most bull bison are rounded up and sold at age six, keeping the total herd size constant and healthy. But a few escape that fate. We continue to watch, mesmerized, for a while. Then Payne remarks: “When the tail comes up like that, it means either charge or discharge.” We don’t wait to find out which.

AFTER OUR DAYLONG REUNION TOUR of the preserve, Payne leaves me some sage advice for the next few days: “Appreciating the prairie requires a nuanced perspective. Get out there for

Prairie is the preferred habitat for the American golden plover. Says Truman Pipestem, “Just seeing America in its most simple form possible—with green grass and rolling hills—is a sight to behold.”

first light and last light. And stop. Stop a lot. Most people just drive through in the middle of the day and miss the experience.”

The prairie preserve isn’t like a national park, laced with hiking trails and scenic viewpoints overlooking major landmarks. It has a pair of hiking trails that form a 2.5-mile figure-eight loop, and scattered turnouts beside 20 miles of graded gravel roads. It’s possible to drive through, tour the visitor center, and drive back to Pawhuska in a couple of hours. But I spend most of the next three days heeding Payne’s advice. Up early. Out late. Stop constantly.

The Most Beautiful Sunsets

Olivia Ramirez, 22, is a full-time nanny in Tulsa. "Oklahoma sunsets are so beautiful, but on the prairie they are so much more beautiful. The way the sun hits the grass, even the best picture cannot capture it," she says. "Our creation story says Osage are the stewards of the land and that we show other people how to live with the land."



First light is amazing, not for any particular dazzle on the horizon, but for the soothing calm and quiet. When I cut my engine, I hear, at times, absolutely nothing. Then maybe a few early birds. Amazingly, given that this is flyover country, I never once hear an airplane above. Sometimes I hear bison grunting, coyotes howling, wild turkeys rummaging.

Last light is a living elegy. The prairie feels like a long-gone relative come to life, and in the fading light, a strong sense of nostalgia comes over me. There was a time when this quality of peace, this quiet abundance, was the norm. Now it's a glaring

exception. It's easy to feel sad for what we've lost. But then maybe a white-tailed deer bounds through a field of Maximilian sunflowers, or a Swainson's hawk soars by. I feel settled. And grateful to have this opportunity. It is, after all, why I've come back here.

Between prairie excursions, I poke around Pawhuska. The Osage Nation Museum has a fascinating exhibit of traditional wedding outfits. Across town, in the Osage County Historical Society Museum, one exhibit informs me that from 1904 to 1924, more wealth (from oil) was produced from the Osage Hills than from all the American gold rushes combined. In the

RYAN REDCORN (PORTRAIT), MATT PAYNE (SUNSET)

On the preserve, it's still possible to experience the kind of unimpeded views that greeted the pioneers—rolling grassland that stretches to a sunset horizon.





Where Ancestors Walked

Darian Lookout, 23, is Herman Mongrain Lookout's granddaughter. She works for the Osage Nation's financial assistance department and makes traditional Osage clothing, weaving, and beadwork on the side. "My ancestors walked this land. I want to make my ancestors proud and I want to be a good example of Osage and Native American youth."



decade between its first discovery well and its statehood in 1907, Oklahoma became the world's largest oil-producing body. Pawhuska was once the site of the first Rolls-Royce dealership west of the Mississippi.

I stop in at the Osage Nation headquarters to meet Chief Geoffrey Standing Bear. He tells me about the Osage's recent purchase, from Ted Turner, of the 43,000-acre Bluestem Ranch, a cattle spread west of town that will be wholly owned and operated by the Osage.

"Land is critical to our effort to rebuild our nation," Standing Bear says. "We've halted the loss of our land. Now it's up to future generations to do what they can with it." Though he envisions an eventual bison preserve, this will be a working cattle ranch and not open to the public.

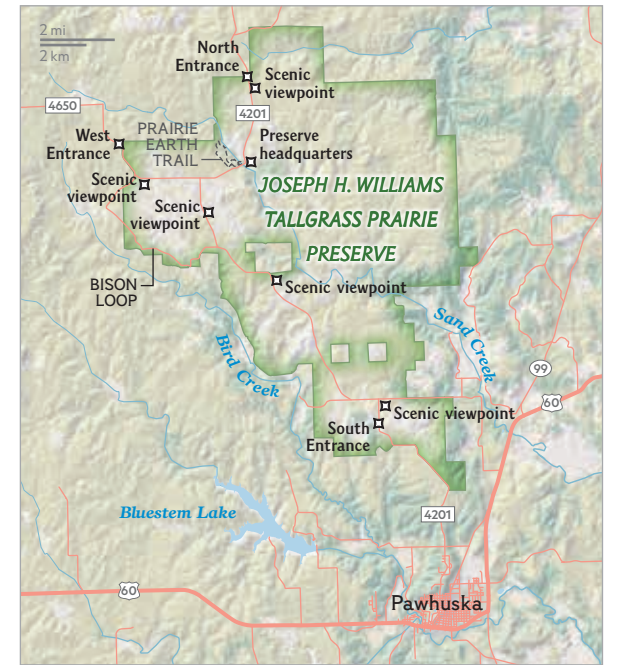
Controlled burning helps the prairie rejuvenate, creating a mosaic of diversity—patches of tender new shoots (which bison love), patches thick with accumulated thatch, patches with multiple plant species.

HARVEY PAYNE REJOINS ME for my final day on the prairie. We're headed for the hiking loop, but first detour to pay homage to John Joseph Mathews, the Osage writer who's been called the "Thoreau of the Plains." His 1945 Waldenesque book, *Talking to the Moon*, recounts a decade spent living in a tiny sandstone cabin on a patch of prairie surrounded by blackjack oaks. The Nature Conservancy acquired the Mathews property a few years ago and offers guided tours of the cabin. The place is suitably simple and supremely tranquil. Inside, its most striking feature is a huge stone fireplace, which, Payne promises me, is "the only

RYAN REDCORN (PORTRAIT), HARVEY PAYNE (BURN)



Spring brings the arrival of bison calves, a new generation to call the prairie home.



Travel Wise: Tallgrass Prairie Preserve

WHEN TO GO

The Joseph H. Williams Tallgrass Prairie Preserve is operated by the Nature Conservancy and is open year-round. Best times to visit are spring through fall. The grasses are at their tallest in fall, but more likely to be green in spring and early summer. nature.org

WHERE TO STAY

Pioneer Woman Boarding House
Ree Drummond's cowboy-chic hotel has eight individually designed rooms adjacent to her famous Mercantile in downtown Pawhuska. pwboardinghouse.com

Frontier Hotel

This new hotel occupies the meticulously renovated Triangle Building, across the street from the Mercantile. Most rooms have a kitchenette. frontierhotelpawhuska.com

Million Dollar Inn

This Osage-owned, four-suite inn is across the street from the Osage Nation Museum. Each room has a kitchenette and private bath. milliondollarinn.com

WHERE TO EAT

Pioneer Woman Mercantile
Ree Drummond's popular restaurant serves massive portions of country-style cuisine in an airy downstairs space. An upstairs bakery serves pastries and grab-and-go items. thmercantile.com

Grill 125

This local favorite serves excellent burgers, steaks, and pies on Pawhuska's Main Street. (918) 287-3444

Bad Brad's Bar-B-Q

The casual roadhouse on the western edge of Pawhuska is where to get your smoked meats. badbrads.com

WHAT TO READ

Visions of the Tallgrass, by James P. Ronda, is a new coffee-table book about the natural history of the prairie. *Killers of the Flower Moon* is David Grann's deeply researched account of the murders of Osage people in the 1920s that became the FBI's first big case. *John Joseph Mathews: Life of an Osage Writer* is a new biography by Michael Snyder.

one in Osage County with a Latin inscription painted onto the front of the mantel." It reads *Venari Lavari Ludere Ridere Occast Vivere*—to hunt, to bathe, to play, to laugh; that is, to live. A photo on the mantel shows Mathews, pipe in hand, sitting beside the fireplace, looking, well, utterly at home. The writer, who died in 1979 at the age of 85, is buried just outside, his grave marked by a modest stone.

We've saved the hiking loop for last. The trail starts in a remarkable stand of big bluestem, at least eight feet tall. The way is marked by a mown strip—we're walking entirely on cropped grass—then circles through deep woods beside Sand Creek.

I'm not a particularly knowledgeable birder, but I'm an appreciative one, and there's a lot going on. Amid a chattering

of red-bellied woodpeckers is a lovely song by a Carolina wren coming from the oak canopy. On the longer portion of the figure eight, Prairie Earth Trail, we cross Sand Creek to behold a sight straight out of a Gary Larson cartoon—seven vultures perched on an old corral rail, and six more on a dead tree trunk. Then suddenly a great horned owl swoops right in front of us, aiming for the creek, and four of the vultures follow suit. Must be something tasty down there.

As we leave the creek and woods and ascend a hillside, we reach a different world. Trees small, grasses tall—a sure sign of fire-managed terrain. We sit for a while on a bench, and Payne recalls a Yogi Berra saying: "You can observe a lot just by watching." Some of the big bluestem, silhouetted against a gauzy sky,

are fully 10 feet tall. Payne notices my gawking and adds a slightly mind-blowing tidbit: The root systems of prairie grasses extend the same distance as or more than the height of the plant.

I think about that as we reach the apex of the trail, and the views over the hills to the west seem to extend forever. The sky appears infinite. The tallest grasses in the world wave in the breeze, yet half their growth is underground. Life runs deep on the prairie.

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HARVEY PAYNE (BISON)

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