MENDING THE LORD'S HANDKERCHIEF

"I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord," Walt Whitman once said of grass, "a scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt, bearing the owner's name some way in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say *Whose?*"

Whose handkerchief is this, a 495,000-some-acre green and gold bandanna dropped on what came to be named Chase County, Kansas? The hankie has holes in it now—ripped by roads, torn by trees, frayed by the plow, snagged on barbed wire.

Jane's great-grandfather, Ezra Beedle, like other enterprising pioneers over a century ago, did his share to rend the Lord's handkerchief. He targeted the bottomland along Little Cedar Creek, the only acreage hereabouts that was at all likely to yield anything but a broken heart, and even then, the plenteous flint rock underlying a thin layer of arable soil was enough to break plowshares, backs and spirits long before it consented to produce corn.

Die mit traennen saehen, warden mit freuden ernten, reads one of my sod-busting great-grandmothers' epitaphs in an Old Leipzig, North Dakota cemetery: *sow in tears, harvest with joy.* Justina Sprenger and Ezra Beedle would have understood one another, I imagine, as would thousands of other pioneers who had intimate acquaintance with all the reasons one might likely be in tears by the time the prairie allowed itself to be sowed. Whether or not you'd live long enough to *harvest with joy* was always in question.

As a further insight into *sow in tears* and also, incidentally, a very brief history of the rise and fall of family farming, here are some statistics on the amount of labor and acreage required to produce 100 bushels of corn over the years, which may or may not take into account the rock-to-soil ratio of prairie ground, and almost certainly does not include a margin for the hours required to break the sod for the very first time. Nevertheless, these facts offer an interesting perspective:

Year	Labor-Hours	Acres	Equipment
1850	75-90	2.5	Walking plow, harrow, and hand planting
1890	35-40	2.5	2-bottom gang plow, disk and peg tooth harrow, and 2-row planter
1930	15-20	2.5	7-foot tandem disk, 4-section harrow, and 2-row planters, cultivators and pickers
1945	10-14	2.0	Tractor, 3-bottom plow, 10-foot tandem disk, 4-section harrow, 4-row planters and cultivators, and 2-row picker
1975	3.33	1.125	Tractor, 5-bottom plow, 20-foot tandem disk, planter, 20-foot herbicide applicator, 12-foot self-propelled combine, and trucks
1987	2.75	1.125	Tractor, 5-bottom plow, 25-foot tandem disk, planter, 25-foot herbicide applicator, 15-foot self-propelled combine, and trucks

Compiled from *A History of American Agriculture, 1776-1990,* http://inventors.about.com/library/inventors/blfarm1.htm

The trends are not at all hard to follow: more sophisticated and higher capacity equipment translates to less labor; the availability of bulk fertilizer and herbicide allows a higher yield out of fewer acres. If you think about it, this chart neatly demonstrates how jobs on the farm diminished as jobs in equipment factories and chemical plants increased. What have we wrought?

My heart goes out to the modern farmer. He or she is comfortably insulated in an air

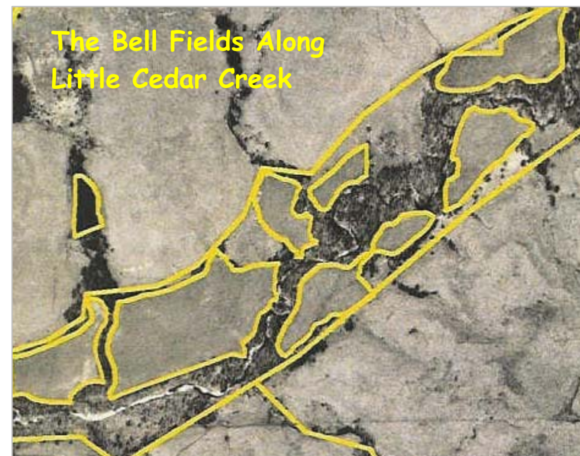
conditioned tractor cab, listening to music or books-on-tape, yet those shoulders are no less weighted with worry and debt than the sweaty, dusty shoulders of the farmer of a hundred years ago, who was blessed with six or ten children to work with him in the fields, whistling and singing, making the best of a hard job, and looking forward to the moment when Ma would come over the hill bearing meat sandwiches on sturdy homemade bread, freshly-baked pie or cookies and cold water from the cistern for a little refreshment in the middle of a hot afternoon.

I wonder what happened to our sacred contract with the land when modern equipment relieved us of the need to ever be on our hands and knees in the dirt, the supplicant's pose.

All of this begs the question of why anyone thought it was a good idea to plant corn on the prairie in the first place. *Beat your swords into plowshares* was meant as a call to peace, but what is more violent than ripping through the fourteen to sixteen-foot roots of Dotted Gayfeather and Compassplant, or cleaving the six- to nine-foot deep root systems of Big Bluestem and Switchgrass?

We are realizing only in retrospect—over a hundred-and-fifty years later—that the Lord's handkerchief got dropped where it did for a perfectly good reason, *designedly dropt,* as Whitman said. The deeply-rooted native grasses are far more well-suited to the climate and the soil than are cultivated crops. Grass is hardy, drought-resistant and self-perpetuating. And it does not seem to mind in the least that it is growing on rocks.

Unfortunately, having realized this, we can't just say *oops* and let the land go back to grass. The Lord's handkerchief requires fairly extensive and expensive mending, and even after that investment, it is unlikely that the darning and patching will result in anything the Lord might be likely to recognize from when it was first dropped.



When Jane bought this place in the late 1970s, she kept a number of small creek-bottom fields, about forty-six acres all told, in alfalfa and brome for more or less the same reason that families still cut the ham in half without knowing the practice started because great grandma didn't have a big enough pan for a whole ham—they are impelled by the force of habit and unquestioned tradition. After fighting the rocks, floods and droughts, not to mention the difficulty of getting equipment in and out of the small fields, she finally one day asked herself why she was putting so much into something that gave so little back for all the trouble.

Now these fields, some of which were originally plowed and planted by Great Grandpa Ezra, are known as *go-back ground.* This is a different kind of handkerchief—a white one of surrender that says "I give up. Let it go back to its wild nature."

Trouble is, this land has been half-tamed and is now neither good crop ground nor good prairie. These fields have been left to their own devices for some eight years without benefit of either plow or fire and are now liberally strewn with buck brush, locust saplings, red cedar starts, sumac, ironweed and broom weed, all warning flags of prairie in distress.

I had ample time to muse on these things over the better part of a week as I drove a tractor and mower round and round in these fields. One thing I can tell you, in the twelve-decade-long civil war between the farmers and the rocks, I can officially declare that the rocks won. I can also tell you that ten acres does not seem like much land when you're standing in the middle of half a million acres of prairie, but when you've made umpteen passes around a ten-acre field on the tractor, each acre begins to assume a much larger proportion.

Mowing is next to last in a series of steps taken over the course of a year to patch the Lord's handkerchief. Although it does not sit easy with me, the first steps required treating the existing vegetation with various powerful herbicides. The navigational reference point for mowing is *the kill line*, which defines the area within which all the vegetation has been chemically eradicated. There is something eerily post-nuclear and deeply disturbing about the way these fields look, but we were advised that this is the most expedient way to give the new native grass a fighting chance. Planting the grass with a no-till drill rented from the Natural Resources Conservation Service is the final step in restoration, unless you count praying for rain as a formal part of the process.

When I got back on a tractor for the first time in thirty or so years, wearing my overalls and my straw hat, it felt like a homecoming,

much more natural than sitting in a desk chair in front of a computer ever felt. The N-series Ford tractor upon which I learned to drive in North Dakota so many years ago is not very much different from the Ford I am driving this week. I come from a long line of laborers upon the earth—sowers and reapers, walkers behind plows, drivers of horses and oxen, and more recently, operators of tractors. Whether it's genetic or not, I seem to instinctively understand the pace of farming. There is nothing fast about it and nothing to be gained by getting in a hurried frame of mind. As I mow, I am driving not very much faster than I can walk, which I've found is an optimal speed for thinking.

Truly, there is little to compare with driving a tractor for hours on a sunny day to make you want to give praise and thanks. In my opinion, it is better than a good prayer meeting. I can see how someone with a different disposition might find it a fertile time for fretting and fussing, but I don't know how it's possible to stay miserable for long while you're driving tractor, especially on a beautiful day. "I have an old pickup truck that shakes the hell out of me," Jane's grandpa Roy Beedle liked to say, "so why do I need to go to church?" He was joking, but there's something to what he said. Old trucks and tractors have a way of shaking the devilish blues right out of you, making room for a holy joy. It's still as true as it ever was, that *a merry heart doeth good like a medicine,* and I'm thinking that if more of us had merry hearts, we'd need fewer of the many medications I see advertised to alleviate heartburn and high blood pressure.

When I came home for lunch today, Jane said, "I can see we should have gotten you on a tractor much sooner." My contentment must have been etched quite clearly on my face.

But back to the Lord's handkerchief. I started thinking about the idea of *pure potential* a week ago when I met the Sharp Bros. Seed Co. driver in Cottonwood Falls to receive over five hundred pounds of Big Bluestem, Little Bluestem, Indiangrass, Sideoats Grama and Switchgrass. The scent of that native grass seed mixed in mesh bags and crammed into my Suburban was like a highly-distilled prairie perfume. I would gladly dab a little Essence of Prairie behind each ear

every day for the rest of my life if I could smell the way that seed did—so sweetly possible. These were identical to some of the fibers out of which the Lord's handkerchief was first woven, and I recognized immediately that I was in the presence of something sacred.

I started thinking about those millions of tiny seeds—my precious cargo—and how each one of them contained within its small self the complete instructions to make a complicated grass plant. Each seed is as alive as you or I, as one botanist put it, and is waiting only for the optimum conditions in which to unfurl its potential into perennial splendor. In my experience, nothing more powerfully represents potential than seed, unless it is a newborn baby, a little girl playing the violin or a young boy singing his heart out. These are things that make me weep, they are so pure and have the possibility to become so much.

I wonder how Ezra Beedle would have responded if someone told him back in 1882 that the seed from the native prairie grass he was working so hard to plow under would someday be worth something, that it could be harvested and sold, that just the seed to replant forty acres of fields would cost in the neighborhood of $1,600.

I knew when I answered the call to be a steward of the prairie that I was taking on something very important, even though I wasn't completely clear on my underlying motivation. The answer came to me while I was driving the tractor yesterday, an answer like a little seed that suddenly sprouted, having lain dormant in anticipation of that very moment. The word that returned repeatedly to ride the tracks on my train of thought was *atonement.* The root word, *onement*, I gleaned from the Oxford English Dictionary, is an archaic term that referred to harmony and wholeness, so that *at-onement* came to describe a state of unity. *Atone* literally means *to put at one* or *to be at one,* implying that something divided has been reunified. This fits beautifully, I realized, with the idea of the Lord's torn handkerchief.

That our ancestors were among those who ripped the handkerchief in the first place is what makes this reconciliation so very personal. This was my revelation on the tractor. And even though I am not making atonement on the same land my forebears sundered, I am nonetheless reweaving one small corner of a very large bandanna.

Sin is a word often used in association with atonement and I don't in any way mean to imply that my great grandparents or Jane's committed anything amounting to a sin by cultivating the prairie. If anything, theirs was only a failure to ask some fundamental questions—not something towards which those earlier generations were much inclined, living as they did in a head-down, one-foot-in-front-of-the-other way, and with so few apparent options to boot—questions like: Why is this so hard? Why does the earth resist the plow? Why does the soil yield such abundant grass and such sparse corn? What will this look like in seven generations?

This is all we really have to offer now that's any different from what our great grand-parents did: more questions and an eye toward the long haul, a focus on the renewable rather than the extractive, and a closer examination of what natural systems have to teach us about themselves.

No matter how we proceed, it is entirely possible that we're still operating under a faulty assumption. Until we are pointed in another direction, however, we put our hearts wholly into the undertaking and hope we're

asking the right questions. I must confess, it does make me nervous to be practicing my mending on what was once so fine and intricate a fabric.

I wouldn't blame you for wondering, as I did, why we're bothering to replant this handful of acres. Jane's answer took me by surprise. "We need to grow a good load of fuel so we can burn out those damn trees." She's referring to needing a stand of grass healthy enough to carry a fire that's sufficiently hot to knock back the opportunistic trees that have slowly walked up from the creek and over from the shelterbelts like a ragtag outfit of volunteer troops from the eastern forest regiment, sent here to divide and conquer. Periodic intense fire and drought are the only natural forces that prevent the Lord's handkerchief from becoming the Lord's paisley shirt or hound's-tooth jacket. In other words, the army of trees would already be in full occupation if not for fire and drought.

The tallgrass prairie, positioned on the eastern flank of our nation's grasslands, is closest to the forest and always vulnerable to invasion by it. Between forest and prairie is the real zone of unrest, the savannah, in which a mix of tall grasses and trees are eternally in competition with one another. During periods of drought and fire, the grasses have the upper hand. During wet cycles, the trees make a comeback.

The Lord's handkerchief always did have a few trees—willows and cottonwoods along the creeks, green ash and American elm on lower slopes, and bur oaks above the streams, facing off against the grass—but nothing like what we have today. Patches of woodland that have escaped fire here in the Flint Hills have enlarged by 250 percent since the 1850s.

If early settlers had known that a single deciduous tree can suck up as much as a hundred gallons of water a day during the growing season, they might have thought twice about planting all those rows of trees, but of course, the Homestead and Timber Culture Acts offered incentives for the practice. Not that folks from the eastern U.S. forests or the woodlands of Europe needed much encouragement in that direction anyway; the lack of trees on the prairie was widely perceived as a deficiency that needed prompt correcting.

Planting trees here was like establishing a series of savannah outposts, little havens for the woody infiltrators. This was a bigger threat to prairie integrity in the tallgrass region than anywhere else, since it has the highest annual precipitation and is therefore most hospitable to the trees that were planted not only by the early settlers, but also by later generations.

After the prolonged drought of the 1930s killed off between fifty and sixty percent of all trees in Kansas and Nebraska and took an even higher toll in Texas and Oklahoma, you've got to wonder why nobody stopped to think *say, maybe trying to grow trees (or crops) out here isn't such a great idea.* Instead, a frenzy of tree-planting ensued, based on the notion that the rows of trees would prevent additional crop ground from blowing in the wind. This is the kind of pretzel logic needed to support the vain hope that two wrongs might possibly make a right despite what mama always said. Between 1935 and 1958, Americans and Canadians planted a total of 32,000 miles of windbreaks on their grasslands.

We're hoping that three lefts do make a right and that by methodically tracking backwards and reversing some of the processes that made significant alterations in the Lord's handkerchief we can begin to make amends: plant seeds, beat back the trees, take down

fences, and restore the prairie fabric as much as possible.

Naturally, there are limitations. This part of the prairie will never look exactly as it once did. We cannot eradicate the roads or take down the power lines. We will always be able to see the obtrusively light-studded service area on the turnpike from our house.

On the other hand, there are occasional windows that open into the past—brief moments when time appears to collapse—and these glimpses fuel our faith. Some afternoons we can look up the hill and see the wagon train coming through the tall grass—across the pristine green and gold bandanna—and imagine that nothing of the original pattern has yet been altered, that everything, just like the seeds we are planting, is pure possibility.

A pair of hawks came to visit us in the field one afternoon as I was mowing and Jane was sowing; they were majestic Northern Harriers. The birds stayed extraordinarily close to us for hours, allowing us to get within eight or ten feet of them. No doubt they were waiting to see what small mammals and snakes we might scare out of the brush with our tractors, but their proximity and vigilance struck me in another way altogether, inclined as I naturally am toward finding significance in the least little thing.

Hawks, with their soaring flight and steep dives toward earth, are symbolic messengers between heaven and earth. These raptors take the long view and see the larger pattern, but they also have the acute vision to notice the tiniest detail on the ground. I began to feel that they had been sent as handkerchief inspectors. I got the sense that their serenity and apparent fearlessness of our closeness was a sign that they approved of our work.

"This is not for the faint of heart," Jane remarked at the end of that grueling ten-hour day. In the course of five days we had four flat tires, ran out of gas, replaced three shear pins on the mower, had the mower seize up altogether on the last field, and other minor snafus. Meanwhile, we ate whatever we could scrounge up from the refrigerator and cupboards, piled our dirty dishes in precarious pyramids, left enough prairie soil in the bathtub to sprout seedlings, and collapsed into bed each evening in utter exhaustion.

Like Jacob, however, we are not shy of wrestling for a blessing when the need arises, rolling up our sleeves, putting our muscle and sweat into it, planting our feet firmly and saying *I ain't letting go, not until you bless me.* The hawks, I believe, came on that afternoon to announce that the blessing had been given.

Jane is down in the field sowing the last few bags of seed right now. I am not the least bit surprised that rain is predicted for tomorrow.

With providence, the Lord's name will still be legible on this corner of the handkerchief in another hundred years, and although we won't be here to see it, that is the ultimate blessing upon which we stake our faith and toward which we direct our labors in the grass.

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