Tangled Up in the Devil's Rope

We tried to save the life of a deer this June, but we failed. She was a nursing doe. Somewhere out there in the tall grass or the trees was a motherless fawn we did not find, and I have been struggling to make sense of all the layers of significance in this particular saga.

If the tallgrass prairie was still like it used to be 200 years ago, which is part of the vision that fuels our work out here, I would not be writing this story. Three main components of the tale would not have converged in 1804, for this is a unique tragedy of civilizing influences. Allow me to take the long way around to the rest of the story, kind of *the foot bone's connected to the ankle bone* route to the heart of the matter.

First of all, the tallgrass prairie 200 years ago had very few, if any, white-tailed deer. They're here in significant numbers now. Why are there so many woodland citizens in a grassland? This is a dangerous question because it has a long and complicated answer. I'll try to be brief, but forgive me, I've been thinking about this for almost a month. In a nutshell, we have deer on our grasslands because the prairie has been gradually becoming more like a woodland, not because of a natural evolution, but as a result of human intervention.

The presence of trees on the prairie is due in part to a couple of pivotal pieces of early legislation—The Homestead Act and the Timber Culture Act—both of which focused on cultivation of plants not native to the prairie.

The Homestead Act was passed by Congress during the Lincoln administration in 1862 and took effect January 1, 1863. In a somewhat subtle irony, this is the same day the Emancipation Proclamation became effective, granting freedom to people we never had the right to enslave on the very day we systematically began to put into bondage land that was never truly ours to own. I may appear to digress, but in truth, everything is connected. But back to the legislation, in brief, the Act declared that any citizen (and this included the slaves who were now theoretically free) or

intended citizen could claim 160 acres—one quarter square mile, also known as a quarter section—of surveyed government land. Claimants were charged with the responsibility to *improve* the plot with a dwelling and cultivated crops. After five years, if the original filer was still on the land, it was his or her property, free and clear.

The Timber Culture Act, introduced ten years later by a Senator from Nebraska, was another law that encouraged *civilization* of what had once been referred to as The Great American Desert. If a settler planted forty acres of timber (reduced to ten acres in 1878) and fostered their growth for ten years, the individual was entitled to that quarter section of land. The Act also permitted homesteaders who occupied their land for three years, with one acre of trees under cultivation for two of those three years, to receive a patent to the land. The law was eventually repealed in 1882; it was a little too easy for land speculators to take advantage of its intentions.

Considering the fact that most of the pioneers came here from places in which trees were abundant, they were more than happy to plant them on the range for windbreaks and shade, for firewood and fenceposts, and to make the treeless prairie seem just a little more like home. This brings up a question: why have we historically been so eager to make the places we go look as much as possible like the places from which we came?

Planting trees on the prairie has only recently come to light as a bad idea. Russian olive, black locust, honey locust, Osage orange (known locally as *hedge*), Eastern red cedar, blackjack oak—these trees are the legacy of The Homestead and Timber Culture acts. Although it is rare to see a tree from an original claim, the sons and daughters of those trees have been carried down through the years by wind, water and birds. The seedlings seek and find their fortune along creeks, in abandoned fields, or in poorly-managed pasture. Once established, locust and hedge in particular are stubborn and persistent. If you cut down either one and fail to treat the stump with a herbicide, it will promptly sprout a dozen shoots with which to replace itself.

Other efforts to accomplish dominion over these wild, windy, rocky grasslands—cultivation of extractive crops and fencing the open range, for example—were equally presumptuous and ultimately damaging to a complex and delicate system. "We can never know," wrote George Perkins Marsh in 1965, "how wide a circle of disturbance we produce in the harmonies of nature when we throw the smallest pebble into the ocean of organic life."

The Homestead Range Renewal Initiative (HRRI) we are undertaking here on the ranch is driven by the vision of returning our small section of the prairie to its original treeless state. There are a great many trees between us and this vision, a fact that has given me much to consider. The truth is, I am a lover of trees. I have planted trees, climbed them, sheltered often in their shade, and yes, hugged trees on numerous occasions. Just the other day, working cattle in the full-on sun of a July afternoon, I would gladly have given about anything for a tree to shade the pens I shared with a bunch of hot-bodied, uncooperative cows. This blunt wisdom from Randy Rodgers, a wildlife biologist from Hays, has helped me begin the monumental task of letting go of the trees:

> …it is as much an act of redemption for us to kill trees that invade our prairies as it is for others to plant trees in a forest clear cut. It is not for us on the plains to grow second-rate versions of the great deciduous forests of the east or the conifer forests of the west. Our responsibility is to guard our precious remaining prairies for ourselves and our children, for spectacular prairie chickens and tiny grasshopper sparrows, and for the other people and creatures of the Earth.[1]

So, gathering the threads of my story so far—deer and the trees that provide them with suitable habitat—I highlight a third thread, sort of the villain of the tale. I already mentioned this element briefly as one of humanity's tools for dominion over wide-open spaces: fences.

Nine patents were issued between 1868 and 1874 for various improvements on what ultimately became known as barbed wire. This invention has been credited with affecting political, social, and economic practices throughout the region, ranking with the rifle, six-shooter, telegraph,

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[1] Rodgers, Randy, "Tree Invasion," *Kansas Wildlife & Parks*

windmill, and locomotive as the primary tools that tamed this part of the country. According to one source:

> The widespread use of barbed wire changed life on the Great Plains dramatically and permanently. Land and water once open to all was fenced off by ranchers and homesteaders with predictable results. Cattlemen, increasingly cut off from what they regarded as common-use resources…first filed land-use petitions and then waged fierce range wars against the property-owning farmers. Gradually, there was a discernible shift in who controlled the land and thus wielded the superior power. Living patterns of nomadic Native Americans were radically altered as well. Further squeezed from lands they had always used, they began calling barbed wire "the Devil's rope."[2]

The Devil's rope is ubiquitous now. It has been used everywhere from farms to ranches to prisons to concentration camps. For our part, we'd like to get rid of as much barbed wire on this ranch as we can. So far this year we've removed nearly a mile and a half of fence. Altogether, if you calculate the length for all five strands of wire on a fence, we've taken down 2,285 rods, or about seven miles of wire.

So, if you'll permit me one last frantic knitting session to pull all the strands together, or to connect the foot bone to the ankle bone to the leg bone, I'll at last get around to telling you the actual story of the deer, which is heartbreaking and troubling at an even deeper level for all this connectivity.

Because the white pioneers came west with the intent to break the wild prairie before it broke them, they cultivated the land and planted trees and otherwise exercised dominion, with blessing and subsidization by the U.S. government. The crops and trees reduced the quantity and vigor of the native vegetation, but provided inroads for wildlife like the deer. Trees and deer are opportunistic and adaptable; prairie chickens and Henslow's sparrows are not. The land, seized from a common pool of resources used with reverence and thrift by indigenous peoples long before any European explorers ever landed, was surveyed and platted and claimed and fenced with the Devil's rope. Those fences created thousands of tiny monarchies in which cattle were each king's highest priority, and so the predators of cattle, such as wolves, which were also the predators of deer,

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[2] http://inventors.about.com

were systematically extirpated. The system of natural checks and balances that had functioned perfectly well for thousands of years was fatally disrupted. And the doe we tried to save, innocent of anything but natural cravings and wanderings and a failure to heed "No Trespassing" signs, got caught in the middle.

Here's what happened. Susan and Anne had just left here on a Sunday afternoon, heading back home to Comanche County, hauling two horses and a mule, a wet tent and soggy sleeping bags. The weekend had been busy and full of people here on the ranch for Jane's birthday. We were all weary, and Susan and Anne had a four-hour drive ahead of them. I had just untied my shoes and was about to stretch out on the bed for a long-anticipated afternoon nap when the phone rang. Susan's voice on the other end had that mixed quality of calm and urgency that marks a person adept at responding to crisis. "Bring wire pliers. There's a deer caught in the fence just past the McDowell."

Emergencies are a part of life to which I have become quite adept at responding usefully. I don't dither; I'm swift and decisive. Without even bothering to tie my shoes, I grabbed some tools and jumped in the Polaris. The trip from here to there only takes about five minutes, but it seemed like I had hours of time to imagine the different ways in which a deer could be trapped in barbed wire.

"Turn on your best animal karma," said Susan, as I arrived and hastily handed her one of the two pair of wire pliers I'd brought with me. "I'll take one side and you get the other; we'll have to be careful because she'll probably kick and flail when we start cutting her loose."

"I have good animal karma," I assured her, "but let me tie my shoes first." I crouched down to secure my laces, studying the unfortunate position into which the doe had gotten herself. All four of her legs were tangled in the barbed wire and she was hanging upside down, bringing to mind an animal trussed and hung from a spit for cooking. She had clearly been there for quite some time. The worn-down patch of mud and grass under her back told the story of her frantic struggle to free herself over long hours, perhaps even overnight.

A story often benefits from a little good-news-bad-news tension, and in this case both the good and bad news lay in one fact: the doe did not kick and flail. This was good because Susan and I suffered no injuries. This was bad because it meant the deer was in deep shock. She was still breathing, but quickly and shallowly, her pulse racing irregularly. Her amazingly slim and fragile-looking legs were terribly gouged and bloodied by the barbs. Susan, a veteran of horse, cattle and mule doctoring over many years on her ranch, knew enough to move each limb to check for breaks. More good news. Each positive sign fostered a correlative increase in our hope that there was something we could do. "Look," said Susan, touching the doe's tight bag, "she's nursing. There's a fawn out here somewhere."

We also had a second opinion from a nurse who works at the prison down by El Dorado. She and her husband and son had been driving by when Susan and Anne stopped. They pulled over too, waiting to see if there was anything they could do to help. The instant community that forms around a crisis is one of the more beautiful things about the human experience. As we were assessing the doe's condition, another passerby had stopped as well, a tool-pusher on an off-shore oil rig who does a little work for us on the ranch from time to time. He could not resist making several joking references to "venison" and "dinner" during the next hour, but in fairness, he was also the only person who called the next morning to inquire about the doe.

I hate to make any generalizations about gender-based responses to trouble of this nature, but without any formal assignment of responsibility, the two men and the young boy began to discuss the matter of fixing the fence we'd cut while the women considered how to move the deer out of the sun down by a little creek, how to replenish the doe's fluids, how to dress her wounds, and where her fawn might be. Everybody mobilized to do what they could. Anne supplied a big piece of plastic sheeting we could use to transport the deer across the pasture. The nurse contributed her bottle of drinking water. Susan got her horse first-aid kit out of the trailer. I ran home to mix up a bag of electrolytes and grab a fence stretcher. The men went to find some wire to mend the

fence. Before long, Jane and Sherry came down from the house to see if there was anything they could offer by way of help or encouragement.

Finally, after Susan had managed to coax a considerable quantity of water and electrolytes down the deer's throat with a syringe, encouraging her with soft words and by gently stroking her neck to make her swallow, and after dressing her wounds with a clear liquid that dries to form a transparent bandage, there was little else we could do. We were so invested by that time, however, that we were reluctant to leave without some sign that our efforts had made a difference.

I'd noticed that one side of the deer's face and neck were encrusted in mud from her struggle on the ground; her eye looked dry and abraded. Having nothing else constructive to do, I took the bandanna off my head and went down to the creek to soak it in water. The opportunity for such intimacy with a wild creature was unprecedented in my experience. I gently washed her eyelashes and face and bathed her throat and neck with the cool cloth, going back and forth to the creek for fresh water. It's the kind of thing a mother does when there's nothing else to do. By then her breathing had slowed and deepened to a more normal rate and, wonder of wonders, she actually lifted her head for a moment.

When we all parted ways, the doe's band of Good Samaritans was reasonably hopeful. I promised to come back and check on her in a few hours. Susan stopped on her way to the truck. "You just know there's always a lesson in something like this," she mused, "but when a bunch of people show up, you never know if it's for you or someone else." I drove home wondering if it wasn't possible that there were lessons for all of us. At the very least, it reminded me of the timelessness of these 400-year-old lines from *The Merchant of Venice*:

> The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
> It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
> Upon the place beneath: it is twice bless'd:
> It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

Sherry and I went back to check at sunset. We were encouraged that the doe was still breathing and had evidently moved just a little from the position in which we'd left her. I said a little prayer and left some meat scraps down the road, in hopes the coyotes would accept it as an offering and leave the deer in peace.

Early the next morning I went back by myself to check on her. You already know how the story ends. I gave it away in the very beginning. Still, I have to finish the tale.

I could tell the minute I saw her that her spirit had vacated her body and I felt very sad and deeply disappointed, as if someone had let me down, played a dirty trick. Still, I tried to be philosophical: she looked peaceful, the coyotes had not disturbed her, we did our best. I went home and looked up the significance of Deer Medicine and found that deer teaches about the *power of gentleness*, that I should seek the *gentleness of spirit that heals all wounds*.

This is lovely and admirable, but for a week I watched the vultures disassembling the deer in the very spot where we'd tried so hard to keep her alive. And I could not, of course, help thinking that her abandoned fawn would be a small feast for them soon. Then the rains came, flooding the creek, and eventually I could not see anything left of the doe. Nevertheless, I think of her every time I pass that bend in the road.

Since then, we've lost two calves and had a neighbor's bull die in our pasture. The damn vultures have been everywhere. Their presence is haunting; it is inseparable from an awareness of death.

The primary definition of *resurrect* is "to raise from the dead." But there's a second meaning that makes more sense out here: "to bring to view, attention, or use again." In all of my pondering and historical research and writing here, tracing the connections between land and people, trees and deer, barbed wire fence and the taming of wild places, I have resurrected the deer, brought her to your attention, used her again to illuminate several interesting points.

The vultures have resurrected her as well, used her again to sustain themselves. Eventually, through the complex and imponderable cycles of nature, she will live again in the soil that feeds the grass that absorbs carbon dioxide and stores carbon to feed itself. And that grass, if we do not interfere with our plows and pesticides, will return, season after season, a renewable resource that sustains the cattle that provide us with burgers and pot roasts and steaks.

If we had the time, I could keep on calling this circle-dance of death and resurrection all night long. No living thing is exempt from the cycle. We feed and are fed upon. And everything, whether we comprehend it or not, is connected.

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