

Flesh and Grass

By Tom Lyons*

A Dakota Pioneer dies where the Prairies turned into the Dust Bowl.



"Well," my father said, "it was a great mistake to break up all of Dakota. I believe it would have been better if the government had made it a condition of homestead entry, that only half of the land should be broken. Of course, hindsight is always better than foresight. But, poor Dakota--when I remember the great days, the wonderful hay crops--the harvest--when wheat went 30 bushels to the acre, in the '70's --the tremendous vegetable crops."

IN 1934 when the Dakota dust storms raged furiously and the United States government was compelled to purchase and slaughter emaciated, starving livestock, my father, in the last month of his life, described again for us the beauties of the magnificent Dakota prairie in 1873. The region from Omaha to Fort Buford was called the Upper Missouri country, and, except for a few garden patches and some tillage and cultivation as far up as Charles Mix County, it was one great ocean of grass.

***Tom Lyons writes of his father, Richard Lyons in Vermillion, South Dakota where he had been mayor of the city. His picture hangs in the city hall. "Uncle Will" is my grandfather. The story was published Jan 23, 1942 in Commonweal Magazine.**

The natural phenomena of the mighty prairies awed astonished and delighted all beholders. The mysteries of the mirage fascinated them; the glories of the northern lights (aurora borealis) had a mysterious influence of wonder, slightly mixed with fear; the "sundogs" which appeared on each side of the sun in the sharp, frosty winter mornings were the subject of much discussion. In summer, when the thick carpet of the Buffalo grass closely covered the earth, and the strong stems of the bunch grass grew as high as a horse's shoulder, there were many hypotheses offered by amateur naturalists to explain the fact that the prairies which produced grasses so abundantly and luxuriantly were devoid of trees. My father's explanation was that the great prairie fires, several of which he had seen raging across the plains, licked up everything in their path and prevented young trees from getting a sufficient growth to survive. The banks of the streams were fringed with willows and cottonwoods, and he deduced from this fact that they received sufficient moisture through their roots, which went down into the water courses, to enable them to survive. He explained that, in the early years, even in times of severe drought, there were no dust storms, because nature's preventive --the Buffalo grass--held even the loose, dry soil in place against the force of the heavy winds. When, however, all of the land "East of the River" had been broken up and put into crops and all the lakes and marshes were drained and a system of drainage ditches had practically destroyed the small rivers, nature's protecting blanket had been destroyed. This, of course, was merely another manifestation of the vulture aspect of the boasted "Anglo-Saxon civilization" which had destroyed the great horse herds, buffalo herds, and Indian tribes which had dwelt, from time immemorial, on the prairies of Dakota, to whom the Sioux Nations had given their name.

In 1917, when the World War stimulated wheat prices, the thirty thousand square miles of range "West of the River" were invaded and put in wheat. A season or two of excessive rainfall gave sufficient moisture to mature the crops, but when normal conditions returned, it was soon evident that the region had been intended by nature for a short-grass country--good only for grazing. Then, when the droughts came, there was no carpet of Buffalo grass to hold the soil and the high winds whipped it aloft hundreds of feet into the air and hundreds of miles in distance so that Dakota dust was seen in the streets of Chicago.

My father was 86, and had told us all, bluntly, in the Dakota harvest phrase, that he was near his end, saying most calmly, in the presence of Uncle Will and myself, "It is near quitting-time for me, and while I might like to stay to see some of the grandchildren get started right, still that is not to be, and, I guess things will manage to move on some way without me."

Uncle Will read aloud a telegram which had just come from Senator Peter Norbeck to my father, telling him that he understood he was pretty sick, but that he must hang on a while longer, as South Dakota could not spare him just then--in the critical days of drought and depression, in which my father's encouragement had, on previous occasions, been so valuable to the pioneers. Uncle Will and my father then turned to a discussion of the "virtues of the buffalo grass; how it cured on the stalk in the fall; and that the oil it contained nourished stock all through a Dakota winter, so that they would come in fat in the spring."

My sister had received a Bulletin from the US Department of Agriculture, and I read aloud a statement *re* the buffalo grass:

Buffalo Grass (*Buchloe dactyloides*) is the dominant grass in short grass regions. It grows on uplands and may be heavily grazed by stock. Buffalo grass is palatable and nutritious to all classes of livestock. It will stand extremes of drought and very heavy grazing. Buffalo grass cures in the fall and makes good, nutritious winter forage. It spreads by vigorous runners, though it needs surface moisture for the stolons, or runners to develop roots. Its seed production is light, except in favorable seasons.

My father and Uncle Will agreed that this account of the great buffalo grass accorded with their findings, based on more than 60 years of observation. Uncle Will asked me if the bulletin told anything about the "blue-joint," which, in seasons of sufficient rainfall, grew higher than an Indian pony's head. I found an account under the name of "Big Bluestem (*Andropogon furcatus*)," which described the Dakota grass called "Bluejoint." The bulletin stated:

Big bluestem is the dominant native perennial grass in the bottom land type of pasture. Originally big bluestem was the principal grass in the richer prairies of Eastern Dakota, now all under cultivation.

Big bluestem is very palatable and nutritious in its earlier stages of growth and the protein content is about 14 percent. In September, when the crude fibre has increased, and the grass has matured, the fibre is about 33 1/3 percent.

Big bluestem is a sod grass, spreading by root stocks which greatly add to its ability to withstand grazing, and to its value as a pasture plant. The fact that it does not joint and mature seed until late summer makes it especially valuable for supply forage during the summer months.

The root system of the big bluestem is rather coarse, and consequently not so drought-resistant [as buffalo grass]. Late spring freezes may check the growth of this grass, but, even so, it usually makes a good growth in May and June. The roots have a working depth of from 5 to 8 feet. It begins flowering in August and continues until frost. It will stand close grazing.

My father and Uncle Will were delighted with this description. My father remarked that this big bluestem, or blue-joint, as it was invariably called in Dakota, was the grass that gave the prairie fire the fuel which enabled it to out-travel a racehorse, when driven by a high wind. He remarked that he had seen the prairie fire jump 40 rods of "braking," which the pioneers had depended on as a secure fire-break. Uncle Will remarked that no fire-breaks could be depended on to stop a prairie fire driven by a Dakota fall wind, and that the only safety lay in a "back-fire." The mysteries of the back-fire were fully explained for some young visitors. I had had the good fortune to see Uncle Will and Uncle John Rei with their crews set the back-fires which saved the Prairie Queen section "improvements," which consisted of dwelling house, stables for 100 horses, a corn crib, and granaries holding 40,000 bushels of small grain (wheat, rye, barley, oats and flax). The technique of the back-fire consisted in stepping off 20 rods from the fire-break, in the direction from which the wind was blowing. There the fire was started, and the wind blew it, of course, toward the fire-break, where it was stopped, not having gained much momentum in the short distance. The burned space was consecutively increased by new hack-fires. A crew of men stood ready, with soaking gunnysacks, to snuff out any brands which might escape and start a fire inside the area protected by the fire-break. By the time the raging prairie fire was at hand, Uncle Will and Uncle John had a fire-break 60 rods wide. However, the voracious prairie fire snuffed out the beautiful grove which had taken 15 years, from 1873 to 1888, to develop, and which was one of the show places of the Sioux valley, containing, as it did, 20 acres of fine shade trees.

My father then asked me if the bulletin contained any description of the short blue grass which grew in bunches, but did not reach the height of the ordinary blue-joint. I found a description of red bunch grass, which he identified as the "Little Blue-joint." It read:

Little Bluestem (*Andropogon scoparius*) is a bunch grass having a fine, very much divided root system making it well adapted to absorb moisture in relatively dry soil. It is a dominant upland grass. It has about the same growth habits and feeding value as big bluestem. Considerable seed is produced in years when favorable growing conditions prevail. After the seedling is established it tillers profusely, soon forming a large bunch.

Uncle Will said there was another grass which will grew along the railroad right-of-way, and could stand a burning summer drought, which he called "plume grass," on account of its plumpy head, but that stock did not care for it, and would only eat it in times of excessively dry weather when the pastures were burned up.

"Well," my father said, "it was a great mistake to break up all of Dakota. I believe it would have been better if the government had made it a condition of homestead entry, that only half of the land should be broken. Of course, hindsight is always better than foresight. But, poor Dakota--when I remember the great days, the wonderful hay crops--the harvest--when wheat went 30 bushels to the acre, in the '70's --the tremendous vegetable crops. Why, in the Chicago restaurants when I used to take a trainload of cattle up there, they would advertise that they were serving Dakota potatoes. Well, you can all imagine what a heart breaker this terrible season is. I have seen the days of the blizzard, and the prairie fire, and the drought and the grasshopper, but this beats it all for disaster. I wonder how the poor people will survive and manage to hold their land. Perhaps it is just as well that I am going to turn in my checks this summer, and won't be here to see the fall."

My father did not live to see that fall, nor even the summer through but about the time the bluegrass would ordinarily have been making its best growth, he went to his appointed place, and we buried him under Dakota sod.

**Only the actions of the just,
Smell sweet, and blossom in the dust.**

NOTE: Tom Lyons writes of his father, Richard Lyons, who led a wagon train of 44 Irish immigrants to Dakota Territory with his younger brother, Will, Tom's uncle (my grandfather). Richard died in Vermillion, South Dakota where he had been mayor of the city. His picture hangs in the city hall.

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-BOB LYONS, Kennebunkport, Nov. 17, 2012