

Prairie Song

When you step onto the native prairie park near Leola, South Dakota, it's just like entering a time-machine carrying you back into the past: you see and hear the original prairie in all its majesty.

By Sally Plumb

The Samuel Ordway Memorial Prairie, located on Highway 10 west of Leola, South Dakota, is a wonderful place to drive to and explore. Tall prairie grasses and winding trails reveal a landscape both picturesque and haunting. The stillness and vastness offer an explanation of how the virgin prairie must have appeared many ages ago. Sally Plumb, the writer of this article, lives at the prairie conservancy together with her husband, Glenn, who is the park's research manager associate. Three nature trails through the park are open 24 hours a day from May through September. By the help of descriptive booklets available at the entrances, the public can take self-guided tours through each trail. Other information about the park is available by calling the conservancy's office at (605) 439-3475.



It is surprising how difficult it is to separate oneself from the sights and sounds of 1985. Even here, in the stillness of the prairie, one mile from any road, I find it impossible to escape signs of Man. In the distance I see a windmill, a farm, a fence. From the highway comes the sound of each car, a steady stream of noise which carries long after the vehicle has come and gone.

I did not come here to find evidence of Man today. I came to seek the prairie itself. I came with the hope the prairie would reveal itself to me, show me the proud beauty and dominance, yes, even ruthlessness, which it once possessed in such abundance. I came to seek the voices of the grass, to understand the very essence of the prairie.

Once, Prairie, not so very long ago, you were a monarch, a

golden, long-stretching ruler of destiny.

How could you become a pris-

Short Trips /

oner, caught within the cage of civilization? How can I find your spirit? Where do I begin?

Today I came to look, to listen, and to feel. Here, hidden in your grasses, I hear your constant song. I strain to concentrate on only the voices of the wind, the talk of the



Bison grazing on two kinds of grass: out in the wild (TOP) at Ordway, and the barnyard (BELOW). Sally Plumb unloads hay bales. Both photos from Nature Conservancy.

birds, the drone of grasshopper, fly and bee, the swish of grass as an animal seeks cover, the croak of a frog.

And with your noise, I see your movement. Everything swaying, dancing, flying. A watercolor of purple and yellow, green and brown becomes muted and blurred as it leans and gestures. Every landmark appears and disappears with your dance; every path becomes hidden. Grass-clad waves roll and break as the hills run away with the wind.

And with your movement, I sense your changes. One moment you are a blaze of heat, without trees to offer shade or streams to quench the land. Your breeze is a draft from an oven, your sky a blur

of sun. And you look to my eyes all yellow and orange and red, every shade of every hot color. Yet carried upon the waves of heat comes the thunderstorm. And you change in an instant to a pastel of lavender and blue, a grey sky and a muffled landscape where the sunflowers look scattered and out-of-place.

Ever changing, your grass falls in tangles, your marshes are mazes of rush and weeds, your flowers dance in mad disorder. You lie without symmetry—first rising in hills, then stretching flat. You confuse the senses with your shifts. For first you are arid, then covered with wetlands. First grey, then gold, first hot, then cold.

And here in your depths,

perhaps I see you as you were a hundred years ago. How big you were. How open. How lonely.

You were the land of the bison, the stronghold of the wind, the keeper of the grass.

You were a home to Indians. Once they strayed upon your hills and hunted your game. Bison and deer, antelope and fox, badger and grouse fell prey to the arrow.

Your heights served as watchtowers. Your grass offered shelter.

Indian nomads gave way to the settler. He plowed, fenced, furrowed, and seeded. Your grasses became mixed with foreign seed

Ordway (Continued on Page 10)

A abundant
birdlife thrives
at Ordway.
Ferruginous
hawks (**TOP**)
and Northern
Shoveler
(**BELOW**), the
latter enjoying
a quiet swim.
Both photos
from Nature
Conservancy.



Ordway

Continued

Pasque flower beautifies prairie at spring-time. Ordway has become a popular recreational and educational destination. The preserve is located about nine miles west of Leola, South Dakota, on Highway 10.



Ordway Prairie consists of approximately 7,600 magnificent acres, and is one of the largest prairie preserves of The Nature Conservancy in the U.S. Moreover, of that 7,600-acre tract, it is amazing that only about 400 acres have ever been cultivated. Consequently, Ordway is a splendid—and rare—example of the North American prairie in its virgin state.

More than 400 wetlands ranging from large lakes to small seasonal ponds account for the profusion of wildlife: buffalo, pronghorn antelope, white-tail deer, Canada geese, fox, badger, and other small animals.

One of the primary concerns of Ordway Prairie is research on animal and plant life. But tourists are always welcome.

and your crops were no longer your own. Open space gave way to trees; roaming bison gave way to cattle.

Your water was tapped, your stone extracted, your fires controlled.

You flung out a gauntlet of storms and drought, winds and insects, dust and heat, until at last you bowed your lands in restless surrender.

Oh, Prairie, you deserved far better.

You who were the child of ice, forged and carved by a northern glacier, left fertile by its water and soils.

You who gave home to beast and bird, who renewed yourself with wildfire and grazing animal.

You who asked no favors, yet yielded yourself to the whims of man.

You who gave him your meat, your grasses, your spaces, and your riches.

You were generous, indeed.

To you I write a song. I seek your remembrance. I write to your spirit. □