

THE FLINT HILLS - HIGH SCHOOL TEXT

HUMANS IN THE TALLGRASS PRAIRIE

BISON & NATIVE AMERICANS

Commonly called buffalo, American Bison are the largest native animal in North America and once numbered in the tens of millions. Kansa, Osage, and other Indian Peoples obtained food, shelter, and clothing from this magnificent animal with whom they maintained a strong spiritual relationship. However, due to high demand for Bison robes in the industrialized East and to make way for white settlement, the bison were exterminated from the area, ending the Native Americans' way of life here.

TALLGRASS PRAIRIE AND FIRE

Periodic “prescribed” burning is necessary to maintain tallgrass prairie. Because vulnerable growth points of warm season grasses are below the soil's surface, they quickly recover from spring burning and moderate grazing. In contrast, the growth points of woody invasive species are high on the plants, so fire retards their growth. Fires ignited by lightning and Native Americans prevented trees and brush from overtaking the prairie. Today, ranchers continue to use fire to improve forage quality and keep trees and shrubs in check - without the use of chemicals.

COWBOY & COWGIRL CULTURE

The Flint Hills cowboy and cowgirl are hard-working professionals and enduring symbols of the West. Fixing fence, burning pastures, putting out salt, counting cattle, doctoring sick animals, and gathering herds to ship, they often **work on horseback in remote places of great beauty** and enjoy telling stories of their adventures. Whether land-owning ranchers, custom-grazing pasture-men, or day help, they choose their classic leather boots, belts, chaps, and saddles with great pride.

CATTLE RANCHING & BEEF PRODUCTION

Unlike most agriculture that replaces natural vegetation with domestic crops requiring fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides, **Flint Hills beef production depends on conserving the native tallgrass prairie ecosystem.** Over 500,000 yearling steers & heifers graze Apr. to Sept. coming in weighing 500-700 lbs. and leaving 250-300 lbs. heavier, gaining 2-3 lbs. a day! Along with year-round cow-calf herds, this adds up to over a million head of cattle each year.

BEAUTY – ART & RECREATION

The Flint Hills' rare, unspoiled horizons inspire imaginations of artists and writers. Painters flock to the area in all seasons setting up on site (*en plein air*) to capture its beauty. Photographers shoot landscapes, prairie fires, and portraits of wildflowers and cowboys. While songwriters and poets share the mystical wonder of the hills, other visitors enjoy hiking, bicycling, horseback riding, canoeing, kayaking, bird watching fishing, hunting, picnicking, camping, sunset-watching, and star-gazing truly dark skies.

CONSERVATION

Good ranchers are also conservationists—preserving the native prairie, preventing soil erosion, and keeping streams clean. They sustainably manage stocking rates to avoid overgrazing, and also fight invasive species such as *Sericea* *Lespedeza*. They maintain biodiversity in their grasses, forbs, and legumes, optimizing both plant production and profitability. The native prairie needs no fertilizers or pesticides, and its massive root systems grip the soil, preventing erosion.