



Call to Justice

Newsletter of the Justice & Peace Office of the Adorers of the Blood of Christ

Vol. 2, No. 6

December 2005

“Call to Justice” is a bi-monthly newsletter from the Adorers of the Blood of Christ Justice and Peace Office. It is published to clarify, update, and focus ASC efforts for justice and peace and to encourage solidarity among us as we speak and act for the welfare of all people and our Earth. Insights and input from ASCs and associates are welcome.



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LAND ETHIC OF THE TALL GRASS PRAIRIE – PART II

By Sister Helen Ridder, ASC

In Part I [Call to Justice, October 2005] Sister Helen described the ecosystem of the area known as the Flint Hills in Chase County, Kansas, and the early political and social incursions on this prairie Eden that changed it, damaged it, to the point where only today are there strong signs that it may recover, both ecologically and economically. Here in Part II Sister Helen takes a look at some of the ways the land remains in danger but also some of the signs of hope she saw in her seven years of ministry in Matfield Green, nestled in these hills.

Today, 80 percent of Chase County is owned by people outside the county, many by wealthy people for their vacation/hunting lodges and big agri-business. Many local ranchers do not own their own cattle herds. Ranchers from Mexico and Texas truck their steers to Chase County for 30 to 90 days to feed on the rich prairie grasses. In late July or the end of October they are trucked once again to feed lots where they are corn fed to marble the meat before marketing them. There are different arrangements, depending on the contracts made between the two parties.

For the land owners here this seems to be a good solution: They manage the herds, are paid for the use of the land by the cattle owners, and do not have to incur the tremendous overhead and shipping costs. The dark side to all of this is it takes away the possibility of small ranchers making a living from their own work on the prairie. The cowboys who work the herds are paid minimum wage, helping to depress the local economy. And, of course, there is always a concern about overgrazing which can destroy the prairie in a few years.

One fourth-generation rancher, whose great-grandfather had a vision of the prairie — after discovering the back breaking work of plowing this inhospitable land — focused his attention on ranching, of working with the prairie as a partner instead of trying to conquer it. Now, more than a century later, his great-grandson, Pete Farrell, continues the family tradition. He has platted his ranch land into sections, called paddocks. Each paddock has a water source. When the first semi trucks arrive, the cattle are let out onto a lush prairie in the first section of land bordered by one electric fence wire. The cattle graze intensely for a very short time, then one of the electric wires is let down and the cattle seeing a fresh grazing ground move into that space with no prodding. The wire is then replaced. The cattle are allowed into new grazing grounds while the earlier paddocks are left to grow and flourish. It is the modern version of the buffalo feeding, churning up the prairie and adding natural fertilizer. As a

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result the prairie is thick and lush, a healthy eco-system. The work is done by one full-time person and one half-time person.

The farm subsidy program is of great concern to the small family farmers of Kansas and elsewhere. The Environmental Working Group publishes a *Farm Subsidy Database* on the internet. They found that 60 percent of all farmers and ranchers do not collect government subsidies because they don't qualify. Of the 40 percent who do receive subsidies, the top 10 percent were paid 62 percent of the total amount available, most of which were large corporate farms. Some farmers are also paid subsidies for *not* planting a certain crop. So, not only does the farm subsidy bill aid huge corporate farms, it also serves the purpose of making it impossible for foreign markets to compete with U.S. markets. Small farmers in this area of the Flint Hills, as on an international scale, are hurt by this subsidy program because it limits their work to the four crops that everyone raises. That is why it keeps the prices lower on these crops, which is good for the middle man but not for the producer or the consumer.

Recently a large tract of land with a wonderful lake was for sale. Of course it would be sold to the highest bidder, the local agri-business who paid \$940 an acre. Because of the policies of the farm subsidy program which pays by the acre, this business receives the highest amount of money. As a result, it can use this money to buy more land without touching the money needed to run the operation.

All of this contributes to a depressed local economy. In an issue of *Chase County Leader*, the editor Jerry Schilling's editorial is headlined, "Last One Out, Turn Out the Lights." In it he writes, "Things are looking dim on the retail scene these days in Chase County. We've lost the NAPA store, the Prairie Rose, Holiday Boutique, the Rolling Hills Café and the Prairie Coffee Company all in recent memory and now Duckwalls, our variety store closed down because it was not profitable enough for the corporation. When we make the local store the fill in for the things we've bought at Wal-Mart we don't understand how that contributes to the closing of stores in our community."

Another current debate is over "Wind Farms." Alternative energy is something I have believed in for a very long time. People in Chase and Butler Counties have been debating the issue for months. There is a strong reaction against the wind farms. A few weeks ago the Governor's task force met at the Lumber Yard, [the house I lived in] basically to map out just where the boundaries of the Flint Hills are. I asked to sit in on the conversation.



As the afternoon progressed I talked about my own internal conflict of understanding the importance of alternative energy but also the importance of saving the last scrap of the original prairie that survived the plow.

These are some of the thoughts that go into considering a land ethic. All together Chase County is like a small town with about 3,300 people. The people participate with each other's communities in the county and are related to most.

This is the picture of small town America today. Small towns are dying; communities are too small to support a school, or church or a local grocery store. In losing the church and the schools, the heart of the towns is lost. In Matfield Green there are 10 children and about that many people over age 80 in a town with a population of about 60, max. When the young people graduate from high school, their graduation party is their farewell party, as they go away to college or move away to get jobs that are unavailable in the county.



There is hope, however. Ranchers like Pete Farrell do love the land and are interested in preserving its health. Another effort to preserve the prairie is Wes Jackson's Natural Systems Research Center, now located in Salina, Kansas. Scientists there have spent 25 years studying how the prairie has thrived over the millennia. Studying the ecology, sociology, archeology and several other "ologies," they hope to develop a way for people to live well and at the same time allow the prairie to thrive on the Great Plains. For example, the scientists now have in the greenhouse perennial wheat and sorghum that have roots that go down 25 feet instead of maybe a foot. In this way we will have food for humans and animals while keeping the precious top soil intact.

The Kansas Land Trust is another group that works with willing land owners to create conservation easements that will protect the land in perpetuity from future development. These easements keep the land in private hands and do not restrict the use of the land by its owners. There is only one paid person in the program; the rest are volunteers. The two women working in the Flint Hills stay at The Lumber Yard while they contact the ranchers in this area. They were excited that they have had a positive response. Most of the farmers and ranchers whose land is adjacent to the turnpike have signed up to participate in the program. The easement will prevent the development of the precious prairie.

These are only a few of the problems facing the mid-belt farms and ranches as well as some of the solutions that seem to be taking hold. A speaker in one of the farm meetings I went to in the '60's in Marienthal, Kansas said that whatever the large city problems are, they are also the problems of rural America. City and country folks are not adversaries. Unless we all hang together, none of us will survive let alone thrive. That is true, not only here in the United States but more than ever in 2005, when at last we have become intensely aware of being Earth people. In both cities and rural communities people are more aware that we are part of the world community that what we do "here" or "there" affects us all.

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To be in solidarity with the poor on the prairie is to address the root causes that lead to such exploitation. After awareness comes action, such as is taking place in the beautiful Flint Hills of Kansas. We are not alone. One blessing of the internet is to hear more and more “little” people all over the world becoming more fully aware that they themselves have it in their power to address these issues in their own regions — saving their water, mountain, forest, rain forest, ice bergs, oceans or any other local concern. When these issues are addressed locally they have a tremendous impact on the whole rest of the world. Because Earth is a living body; what is healing to one organ is healing the whole body.

We Adorers of the Blood of Christ are very much a part of the story. When I hear the local tangible stories of the Sisters working all over the world, there is a thrill of hope that in Brazil, the Sisters are working with the people for justice. In Bosnia, the Sisters are an influence for healing of wounds that have festered for years. In Africa the Sisters are entering in with the people to overcome the difficulties of their time and space. The problems seem overwhelming.

But there is a stirrin’ on earth. In the depths of winter, there is the breath of the promise of spring. On the mountainsides, in the desert, prairie, watershed, forest and coasts, there is movement of the ordinary people living their ordinary lives, addressing the issues that threaten their very existence. Groups all over the world are not just confronting the powers that be, which is necessary, but are also doing what needs to be done, locally, specifically and uniting together to address the issues.

This is the Good News, God is Incarnate in all of this.