



# Call to Justice

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

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“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.



United States Province  
Justice and Peace Office

2 Pioneer Lane

Red Bud, IL 62278

618-282-6229

Fax: 618-282-3266

[www.adorers.org](http://www.adorers.org)

## LAND ETHIC OF THE TALL GRASS PRAIRIE - I

By Helen Ridder, ASC

*This is the first of two parts of Sister Helen's article recounting the history and challenges of one small Kansas county in living with the land in responsible ways. While spring is the season that sets the scene, the subject is indeed one for all seasons.*

There is a stirrin' in the land, before even one blade of green appears. I know it's happening because I feel it in my very bones. I'm ready to move, to get out and breathe in again the fresh air, to shed some of the layers of clothes even as the cats and horses and other animals are getting shaggy and shedding their winter coats. It is a time of a certain impatience for the spring; for opening windows and shaking out the dust of the house, of the mind, of the spirit. All around there is a feeling, a smell in the air, an expectation for the coming of a new year by nature's calendar. Spring is here.

Looking out across the vast prairie expanse, the tree branches are lightening up, tinges of pink, purple and yellow brighten the branches in a sheen of delicate color. The layers of rock are clearly visible on the hillsides marking the millennia of time for all to see. Smoke from the spring prairie fires is visible as black ashes mark where old growth was.

Sitting by the river, seeing how the flooding waters changed the river bed, I am awed by nature's ability to create such exquisite designs created in the reflections of rock, water, sunshine and shadow.

Walking across the prairie, I am awed that it has been in existence for ten thousand years, providing sustenance for massive herds of buffalo, elk, deer, as well as the majestic eagle, buzzards, and millions of other birds and small animals as well as the thousands of Indians who lived well and lightly on the land. I share the natural history of this place in the year 2005.

What beauty there is in the flow, in the circles of life that dance in the thrust for life and goodness!

Under ground reveals even more the beautiful interdependence of one species upon another. The tall grasses' roots grow 25 feet down into every nook and cranny in the rocks to bring up water from the depths of the earth. The smaller plants, having shorter roots, are sustained by the moisture provided by these grasses. Microbes play their part in the nurturance of the prairie. The prairie dogs as well as other burrowing animals stir up the land providing carbon dioxide to the roots, aerating the soil, helping to make the

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rocky land more hospitable for the plants.

Only a little more than a hundred years ago, mighty herds of buffalo roamed the prairie. They too added to the circle of life by churning up the prairie making room for new growth and providing much needed fertilizer. Lightning provided nitrogen to the soil and fire to burn the seedlings to make room for the tender grasses of spring. With rain the prairie bloomed with every imaginable color and variety of plants. When the long drought set in, the deep roots of the grasses sustained the prairie until there was again the miracle of rain. How marvelous is nature and her ways! So the prairie has thrived for ten thousands of years.

Then came the white man. At first the mid-section of the country was considered a wasteland. Explorers looked for the mythical Eldorado, exploring for gold not realizing the gold was at their feet in the prairie grass itself. Later other gold hunters raced through. "California or bust!"

With the signing of the Kansas Nebraska Act in 1854, President Pierce opened the Kansas Territory to settlers, and as a result the Indians were being forced out of the territory. Another treaty had been broken by the United States. In 1855, James H. Fisher was the first to settle in Territory of Chase County, Kansas. After the establishment of the Kansas Territory, 100 new families settled in the county in the space of thirty days. The Indians fought back as the white flood came infesting their sacred hunting grounds.

Who were these immigrants? Mostly they were people from Ohio, Indiana and Iowa, who had come from England, Germany, Sweden and other European countries. Like the Ingalls family of *Little House On The Prairie* fame, they moved their families once again, for many different reasons but mainly for open land.

They came from totally different eco-systems. They saw the beauty of the prairie (It is in their writings.) and with government incentives began immediately to plow it up. Only the Flint Hills, which was mostly chert and flint and limestone, covered with a thin layer of topsoil to which the prairie grasses clung, resisted the plow.

It was a hard life for these first arrivals. They did



what they were best at, farming. But they were in a new eco-system. At first the crops were good because the newly turned prairie was rich in nutrients and there was adequate rainfall. Then came the drought of 1874. Crops shriveled and swarms of grasshoppers ate everything that was visible. The wind blew across the barren land blowing the precious top soil. The people were desperate. This was the first, "land slide" so to speak.

There was a gigantic relief effort. President Pierce foreclosed on the land of the people who were unable to pay the small fee necessary to keep their land. Many people left the area because they were unable to pay the fee. Others, too poor to move, stayed on still hoping for next year's promise of a good crop. That became the prairie mantra, "There is always next year."

When the government auction took place, the local men gathered together and threatened that anyone who bought the land of people who still lived here would be killed. So the land was saved for the farmers who had broken the sod. People with money could buy the land "dirt" cheap.

Many of the small towns that grew in Chase County, as in other areas of the mid-section of the country, served the surrounding area of ranches. This was a thriving time. There was excitement in the air. It was a good time which the elders of Matfield Green still remember. A new fangled contraption, the invention of the automobile, helped the ranchers get to town faster and made life easier for all concerned. The dark side was that it made travel easier to Eldorado and Emporia where ranchers could get their supplies much more cheaply. This invention was the beginning of the end of small town America.