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INTRODUCTION

I live two streets over from the Fromme Prairie. I moved here in search of open space and a view of the mountains. I appreciate open, treeless landscapes, but the grasslands did not strike me as particularly dynamic or exciting. It came as a pleasant surprise to see prairie dogs and red-tailed hawks during my evening walks on the prairie.

I moved here in April 1997, and during the succeeding months I watched as the prairie greened into spring and then ripened into summer. Meadowlarks serenaded outside my windows in the cool mornings, and I heard the yips and howls of coyotes at sunset. I watched autumn turn the grasslands golden. During my winter walks, the



View west across the Fromme Prairie.

bald eagle that likes to perch in the cottonwood trees on the prairie's northeastern corner turned its head to follow my progress.

I watched with dismay as the undeveloped lands surrounding the prairie steadily filled with housing tracts. I felt less satisfied with my new house when I learned that the prairie dog colony on the land in my development was gassed before the houses were built. I began to read about prairie ecology and to observe more closely.

Something similar must have happened to Cathy Potter Fromme. She lived two streets over from mine, on the prairie's northern border. Hers is an older development; the houses look more settled and comfortable in the landscape. She moved to the city of Fort Collins in December 1987. In April 1991 she was elected to the city council. She made the preservation of open space one of her priorities in this rapidly growing community.

Within a month of her election, Cathy Fromme was diagnosed with an advanced case of breast cancer. She was known among her

friends and colleagues for her intensity. As she endured the traditional treatments for breast cancer, she joked that although she normally put in 180 percent effort, the cancer cut her back to 150 percent.

The traditional cancer treatments failed, and Cathy Fromme traveled to New York for a bone marrow transplant. She died in Rochester at her mother's home on November 16, 1992, her husband, daughter, and son with her. She was thirty-two years old. On November 17 the Fort Collins City Council named the Fromme Prairie in her honor.

Those who knew Cathy Fromme testified to her passion and honesty. She was not afraid to disagree with colleagues and constituents, yet she retained their respect. Environmental preservation was one of many issues about which she felt strongly and for which she worked consistently. The Fromme Prairie was her backyard project, and this book honors her memory.



The prairies described by the first Europeans to explore central North America are largely gone. Ninety-eight percent of the tallgrass prairie has disappeared from the swath of states stretching from North Dakota, Minnesota, and Iowa down to Texas and Oklahoma. The mixed grass and shortgrass prairies of Wyoming, South Dakota, Colorado, Oklahoma, and Texas are heavily altered and fragmented. As the landscape changes, the species dependent on it vanish. Estimated numbers of black-tailed prairie dogs in Colorado dropped from 630,000 in the late nineteenth century to 44,000 today. Fifty-five grassland species were threatened and endangered in the United States at the end of the twentieth century, with another 728 species as candidates for listing. Bird species of the Great Plains suffered a sharper population decline during the 1980s—25 to 65 percent, depending on the species—than any other single group of continental species.

This landscape of interior plains first defined the vast spaces of the American West and fostered the immense bison herds and enormous cattle drives, but American culture has been marked by a lack of appreciation for the interior grasslands. The resurgence of literary fiction and nonfiction devoted to this region during the past decade suggests that a renewed appreciation is growing even as the landscape vanishes into suburban sprawl, energy development, and agricultural

fields. This renewed appreciation cannot come too soon. Islands and archipelagos of grass are virtually all that remain of the once vast interior grasslands early European Americans described as a sea of grass.

This book is my contribution to the literature of place that celebrates these islands and archipelagos. Living near the Fromme Prairie, I came to realize that I do not have to travel to the vast wildernesses or national parks that still exist in the western United States in order to appreciate the workings of a rich and diverse natural environment. The small island next door brings me the same sense of wonder and delight, and because it is more readily accessible, I can easily watch the seasonal changes and the ways the plants and animals of the prairie alter from year to year.

As humans, we leave a large footprint on the land. Every organism alters its environment, but our alterations are so intense and widespread that we collectively reduce other species' ability to survive. Each of us alters one patch of ground in choosing to live on it. But if we are fortunate, we look more closely at the next patch of ground beside us. We realize the losses that unrestrained human growth can cause the natural world, and we work to restrain that growth. We look with renewed appreciation and humility at the world around us. We try to walk more softly among the islands of grass.

This book opens with an introduction to the prairies of central North America, which once covered approximately 40 percent of the continental United States, as well as portions of south-central Canada. Chapter 2 examines the importance of scale by comparing plant and animal species and disturbances on the 15,500-acre Central Plains Experimental Range with those on the 1,082 acres of the Fromme Prairie forty miles to the southwest. The remainder of the book then uses the Fromme Prairie to explore in greater detail the shortgrass prairie communities that occupy the western Great Plains. Chapter 3 begins in springtime and summarizes the intricate soil ecology of the shortgrass prairie, using native blue grama grass as a central character in the drama of spring's renewed growth. The four succeeding chapters follow the progress of spring, summer, and autumn. Each chapter focuses on a specific animal—a brownspotted grasshopper, a prairie dog, a coyote, and a red-tailed hawk, respectively—and briefly describes some of the other plants and animals sharing the prairie



Grass at the Fromme Prairie.

with the chapter's central character. My descriptions of each animal's activities come either from my own observations while on the prairie or from scientific studies. I catch only fleeting glimpses of coyotes on the Fromme Prairie, for example, so I used detailed daily observations in the dissertation of a graduate student studying coyote behavior at the nearby Maxwell Ranch.

The daily activities and life cycles of all the organisms of the Fromme Prairie together create a complex exchange of carbon and other nutrients that binds these organisms into an ecosystem and ties it to every other point on Earth. This book is not an in-depth examination of the shortgrass prairie or an exploration of the people who live on the prairie. It is rather an introduction to the millions of non-human lives that are lived out on this landscape, through a series of brief glimpses such as one might experience during walks across the prairie in various seasons.

The Fromme Prairie visually forms an island of grass surrounded by a sea of housing developments, yet the survival of the prairie as a functioning ecosystem depends on both the wider world and local decisions. Let us all walk more softly.