

A Short History of the Grasslands

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The Kiowa, Rita Blanca, Black Kettle and McClellan Creek National Grasslands (Grasslands) are four of the twenty National Grasslands managed by the U.S.D.A. Forest Service. The Grasslands are ongoing ecosystem restoration projects whose existence, spawned by the Dust Bowl recovery efforts, reminds us daily of the importance of caring for the land. They also provide forage, wildlife habitat, recreation, energy, and tangible bonds with our past. The history and the heritage of the Grasslands connect us with the uniquely rich cultures that -- then and now -- shape these Grasslands and nearby communities.

The legacies of adapting to life on the High Plains for the past 12,000 years by numerous cultural and ethnic groups form the unique multi-cultural roots of the Grasslands and the surrounding communities. Throughout the Grasslands, we continue to discover, document, and protect the physical remains of the geologic and human histories of the area such as prehistoric sites, rock art, cemeteries, early ranches, and homesteads.

Early Human Adaptations on the Grasslands

Prehistoric peoples have used the High Plains area of eastern New Mexico, western Oklahoma and the Texas Panhandle for thousands of years. The first conclusive evidence of early human or Paleoindian populations in North America was found in the late 1920's at the Folsom site, north of the Kiowa Ranger District. Since that time, numerous additional PaleoIndian sites have been recorded in northeastern New Mexico. The Paleoindian were highly mobile, and their economy in the plains relied heavily on hunting large animals such as mammoth, horse and Bison Antiquus. Little is known, however, about Paleoindian diet in this area beyond the hunting practices. PaleoIndian sites have been recorded in the Texas-Oklahoma Panhandle region, but little systematic research has been conducted here. Nevertheless, the Rita Blanca and Black Kettle Ranger Districts have the potential to contain PaleoIndian remains.

By 6000 B.C., the climate became drier and warmer, resulting in changes in the makeup of the ecosystem. The large "megafauna" were gone, replaced by a number of smaller species including the bison, antelope and deer. The vegetative communities also changed. As a result of these changes, human adaptations shifted from an emphasis on big game hunting to a more generalized hunting and gathering subsistence economy. This period is referred to as the Archaic. Sites from this time period are found throughout the grasslands. Archaic sites often occur in association with playas, valleys, and canyons where water would have been more available. Several kinds of sites have been recorded, including open camps, rockshelters, bison kills, quarries, flint caches, rock art, and burials.

Hunting efficiency improved again around 500 A.D. with the introduction and widespread adoption of the bow and arrow. Domesticated food crops (maize, beans, and squash) were also introduced and became common. Ceramic vessels were first manufactured and led to new food preparation and storage methods. In some cases interregional contact became a more integral part of the economy (Kalasz et al. 1999).

The western portion of the Kiowa District, along the Canadian River gorge, was an area of significant prehistoric occupation. To the west, along the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo range, there was a major occupation of Puebloan peoples. East of this area were to be found populations following an adaptation more suited to a Plains environment. Within this area, the Canadian River gorge represents an "island" of topographic homogeneity and resource redundancy. It would thus have had a magnetic effect on prehistoric peoples.

Little is known about the late prehistory of the eastern Kiowa and Rita Blanca Districts. Plains populations throughout this sequence differed substantially in their land use patterns from prehistoric Southwesterners. Except in a few particularly favored areas (such as the Canadian River), population densities were lower, and settlement was less sedentary. Land use practices were correspondingly extensive rather than intensive, and required movement from locality to locality. Agriculture was practiced in some areas, and provided one of the few exceptions to this general pattern.

Western Oklahoma, including the Black Kettle District, was characterized by a pattern of prehistoric cultural change similar in many respects to that noted in the Panhandle region. The subsistence base was a mixture of agriculture, hunting, and gathering. Corn, beans, and gourd have been recovered from midden areas, as have a variety of natural plant foods and faunal remains. The indigenous population of western Oklahoma was replaced by 1500 A.D. by Kiowa and Dismal River Apache. By 1700 A.D. the region was occupied by Comanche.

The Washita River is the least sand-choked stream in the region, and so represents the most reliable water supply in western Oklahoma. It is undoubtedly for this reason that the Washita displays a higher site density than other portions of the region (Lintz 1974: 2,50). Lintz suggests that, during part of this time semi-permanent settlements were maintained on the first terraces of major drainages. The uplands, in turn, would have been used for specialized resource procurement. Several such limited activity sites have been documented on land of the Black Kettle District. However, at least one site has been recorded on the District that appears to be larger and more substantial than would be expected from limited use.

Drought toward the end of the Middle Ceramic period caused severe depopulation in the Central High Plains. With the return of milder climatic conditions in the 1500's, the area was repopulated by Athabascan speakers from the north. Shortly thereafter, Spanish explorers came into the area from New Mexico. In the following century the widespread adoption of the horse and firearms further disrupted native cultures. Caddoan speakers occupied the area to the east of the High Plains, until first Siouan, and later Algonquian, speakers penetrated this area. By the mid-1700's there was considerable turmoil, with the movement of Shoshonean speakers into the area from the west.

Apaches and Navajos appear to have arrived in the Southwest around A.D. 1500, just prior to the Spanish. After the arrival of Apacheans in the Southwest they split into several linguistic and territorial subdivisions. Some moved into the mountainous areas of New Mexico and eastern Arizona, others remained on the Plains. Early Spanish records indicate that some Apaches lived in pueblos and grew crops, much like Puebloans. Until the 1720's the Apacheans maintained contact with each other. Beginning in the 1720's this contact began to be disrupted by Comanches, Utes, and Pawnees. Ultimately all Plains Apache bands were forced off the High Plains by Comanches, Pawnees, the French, and the Spanish.

Increasing Complexity, Expansion, and Competition

Native Americans dominated the social and economic landscape of the southwestern High Plains at least until the 1870s. However, their prominent role has often been underestimated by the relative lack of historical and archaeological data for 15th–18th century native occupation in the region. The region was apparently abandoned by Late Prehistoric groups at the start of the Protohistoric period which coincided with the arrival of the Plains or Eastern Apache and their immediate ancestors, possibly as nomadic bison hunters and foragers (Kalasz et al. 1999:251). In the 1600s, the expansion of cultures from the eastern United States combined with the introduction of the horse by the Spanish caused upheavals and unrest among Native American populations. By 1700, the Comanche and Kiowa who had been displaced in the north had moved into the Southern Plains and dominated the region. They had ties to the east, and a supply of French and English guns that were hard to come by in the Southwest. About A.D. 1725 various Apachean bands withdrew from the area and Spanish expeditions and Comanche incursions increased (Kalasz et al. 1999:250). The area that now includes the Grasslands was known as “Comancheria” by eighteenth century Spanish explorers.

Several important economic systems developed between 1725 and 1846 (the Early Historic period). The comanchero trade between New Mexican traders and Plains Indians had originated as Late Prehistoric and Protohistoric exchange networks (Spielmann 1991). Initially focused on maize and meat, it later included horses, guns, tobacco, sugar, cloth, and other manufactured goods (Carrillo 1990). The comanchero trade expanded after the Spanish defeated the Comanche chief Cuerno Verde in 1779 and negotiated a treaty with them in 1786. Bison hunts became increasingly common after 1786 probably because the Comanche and comancheros shifted away from trade in New Mexico to a Plains-based trade network. At about the same time the ciboleros, Mexican buffalo hunters who supplied food for New Mexico settlements and hides for the Santa Fe-Chihuahua trade, began forays out of the northern Rio Grande valley and onto the Plains. During the first part of the nineteenth century, portions of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes migrated south from North Dakota’s Black Hills region and into the area; the Kiowa and Kiowa Apache entered the Arkansas basin around this time.

Mexico’s independence from Spain in 1821 increased economic activity between Mexicans in the Rio Grande valley and residents of the Missouri valley while the influence of Comanche traders on the Southern Plains declined. The Santa Fe Trail followed earlier Native American travel routes and was open to travelers in 1820.

Between 1821 and 1880 thousands of wagon trains crossed the Trail between Missouri and Santa Fe. The Santa Fe Trail increased contact between Native Americans and Hispanic and European Americans. In the first half of the 1800's, Spanish sheepherders began to move into northeastern New Mexico, to the Canadian River. They may also have seasonally herded sheep as far east as the western Texas Panhandle.

Having been relatively quiescent since the late 1700's, the Comanches were spurred into action by this encroachment. They resented in particular the establishment of Anglo ranches in northeastern New Mexico. Often, Comanche attacks concentrated on Anglo-American ranchers, leaving Hispanic settlers alone. By the middle 1840's Fort Bent had been established in the Panhandle, along the Canadian River for trade. Indian hostilities caused its abandonment by 1848. After attempts to reopen the fort, it was destroyed in 1849.

Accelerated Settlement and the Transition from Bison, to Sheep, to Cattle, and then Farming (1846 – 1930s)

After Mexico's 1848 defeat in the Mexican-American War, activity along the Santa Fe Trail expanded. However, although wagon trains to California did pass through the area, the Southern Plains were largely overlooked in the 1860's and 1870's as settlements filled in the surrounding area. It served, thus, as a refuge for the Indians. Buffalo hunters, operating out of Dodge City, began to establish settlements/trading posts in the Panhandle, and to decimate the bison herds. Indian attacks subsequently developed. This situation was exacerbated by the Comancheros, who in the early 1860's began to increasingly trade firearms and liquor to the Plains Indians often receiving stolen Texas cattle in return. Military campaigns to suppress the Indians were conducted in the 1860's and 1870's. The Battle of the Washita occurred on November 26, 1868. Between 1867 and 1872 the Comanchero trade was suppressed. The major campaign occurred in 1874-1875. By 1876 the Indians had been expelled from the Panhandle.

In 1874 the Panhandle was divided between the Jack and Clay land districts. Wheeler County, in 1879, was the first to be organized. The 1880 Federal census shows 1,607 persons, of whom more than half lived in the eastern counties of Hemphill and Wheeler, near military posts. The Fort Worth and Denver Railroad created townsites along its route, attracting businesses and settlers. The effect of this is apparent in the 1890 census, which shows a population jump to 9,452.

Hispanic sheepherders from northeastern New Mexico occupied the area along the Canadian River before permanent Anglo-American occupation. This settlement occurred probably no earlier than 1876 and continued into the 1880s. But it wasn't long before cattlemen came into the area, where they acquired title to the land and fenced it. By 1890 sheep were on the decline and soon the sheepherders moved back to New Mexico.

Texas landholders had large cattle herds, but no local market. The herds were driven north to railheads, often through the Indian Territories in Oklahoma. By the 1880's there was large scale cattle ranching throughout the Indian Territories. Conflicts with homesteaders developed, and cattle raising gradually began to decline. The breakdown of the cattle empire gave rise to farming of wheat, corn, and cotton. The year 1889 marks

the technical date in which unallotted land was opened up for homesteading. Settlement was rapid thereafter. What is now Roger Mills County experienced its land run in April of 1892. The Oklahoma Panhandle was unassigned to any state or territory prior to 1890, when it was finally added to the Oklahoma Territory.

The Dust Bowl Years and the Decline of Agriculture

Periods of drought in this part of the country were not unusual, and typically occurred around every 25 years. But settlers were ill prepared for the consecutive years of drought between 1933 and 1936. The southern plains had once been covered with grasses that held the fine topsoil in place and provided habitat for wildlife, not the least of which were once-numerous bison herds. Cultivated crops, such as the wheat which was in high demand during World War I, exhausted the topsoil. In addition, the farmers had ploughed large tracts of marginal lands, a method unsuitable for dry land farming in the arid west. Overgrazing by cattle and sheep herds also stripped the prairie of their vegetative cover and life-sustaining grasses. The lack of moisture, grasses, and plant cover combined to create a disastrous loss of topsoil and the Dust Bowl conditions of the 1930s.

Huge dust storms started in the plains and Midwest, sending black blizzards of earth and dust toward Chicago and Washington D.C. There were 72 such storms of regional extent in 1937 alone before at last they began to drop off. On the southern plains in particular – Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Colorado, and Kansas – the blowing dust went hand in hand with bankruptcy and welfare. By 1935, in some counties, as many as 80% of the families were living on relief, and from 1934 to 1936 about 5 million acres of land were blowing severely (1998, Fletcher). Most marginal farms and ranches could not be maintained; many destitute families in the region abandoned their farms and ranches, while others were forced out by bank foreclosures (2000, CNF GAA). The Dust Bowl exodus was the largest migration in American history: by 1940, 2.5 million people had moved out of the plains states. The population of the area has never recovered from the double blow delivered by the Depression and the Dust Bowl. Remains of their homesteads are scattered throughout the area.

A New Grasslands Management Focus: Conservation and Multiple Use

The U.S. Congress recognized that strong measures were needed to repair and begin restoring the land. It encouraged the federal acquisition and restoration of severely eroded farmlands and passed the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933. The Taylor Grazing Act, signed by President Roosevelt in 1934, allowed the removal of up to 140 million acres of federally-owned land from the public domain and established monitored grazing districts. One of many New Deal efforts, the program helped arrest the deterioration, but could not undo the years of environmental damage.

Beginning in 1935, federal conservation programs were created to rehabilitate the area: changing the basic farming methods by seeding areas with grass, rotating crops, using contour plowing and strip plowing, and planting trees as wind breaks.

From 1937 through the late 1940s, under the authority of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act (Title III (1937)) the U.S. Department of Agriculture bought 2.6 million acres of submarginal land. Added to some 8.7 million acres purchased by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and successor agencies (Lewis 1988), these lands were managed as “land utilization projects” (LUs). This federal effort exemplified new ways of thinking about managing natural resources in grasslands. Efforts that focused on removing submarginal cropland from production and restoring severely eroded lands provided real-world demonstrations of appropriate land use and conservation practices (Lewis 1988).

In 1954, LUs were reviewed to determine their futures. Some lands suitable for certain uses were transferred to the Fish & Wildlife Service and to the National Park Service. Some in Western states were transferred to the Bureau of Land Management. Four million acres of LUs (mostly in the Great Plains) were transferred to be managed by the U.S.D.A. Forest Service.

In 1960, with the establishment of the National Grasslands, responsibility for the administration of the Bankhead Jones Act was transferred to the U.S. Forest Service. The Kiowa, Rita Blanca, Black Kettle, and McClellan Creek National Grasslands were designated with the initial authorization of the National Grasslands.

The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act, which directs the acquisition, disposal, and administration of these lands, is one of the principal laws governing the Forest Service’s administration of the Grasslands. The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act does not mandate livestock grazing as the preferred or dominant use of the National Grasslands; rather, it portrays livestock grazing as one of the multiple uses of the National Grasslands. Among the statutory authorities enacted since the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act are the general regulations pertaining to the National Grasslands; these are set out in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR)--36 CFR 213 and direct that the National Grasslands be administered under “sound and progressive principles of land conservation and multiple use, and to promote . . . sustained-yield management of the forage, fish and wildlife, timber, water, and recreation resources. . . .” The resources of the National Grasslands are managed to “maintain and improve soil and vegetative cover and to demonstrate sound and practical principles of land use for the areas in which they are located”; and, to the extent feasible, policies for the administration of National Grasslands “exert a favorable influence for securing sound land conservation practices on associated private lands.” The 213 regulations provide that other regulations applicable to National Forests are incorporated and apply to regulate the protection, use, occupancy, and administration of the National Grasslands to the extent that they are not inconsistent with the provisions of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act.

The Grasslands Today

The Grasslands, officially designated by Congress in 1960, include four units administered by the Cibola National Forest (headquartered in Albuquerque, New Mexico). Since that time, the administration of the four National Grasslands was restructured into two Ranger Districts- one for the Kiowa National Grassland and Rita Blanca National Grasslands (headquartered in Clayton, New Mexico), and one for the

Black Kettle National Grasslands and McClellan Creek National Grasslands
(headquartered in Cheyenne, Oklahoma).

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