

## Flint Hills featured in Smithsonian magazine

Do the residents of Marion County appreciate being on the western edge of the Flint Hills? Have they taken the time to drive through the heart of the area?

I opened an international magazine, and there she was, Annie Wilson, with her guitar around her neck, looking back at me from page 25.

"This might be the most beautiful place in America," the story began.

Author Jeff MacGregor was writing about the Kansas Flint Hills in the November issue of Smithsonian magazine.

The 15-page article, "American Rhapsody," included four double-fold photos exhibiting the beauty of the Flint Hills.

MacGregor used Wilson as the backdrop to the story, focusing mainly on the area that touches Marion County on the east.

Wilson, the official Flint Hills Balladeer and her husband, John, live on a ranch a few miles west of Elmdale.

She has devoted her life to promoting education about the Flint Hills, providing curriculum and maps to area schools.

Jim Hoy and his Cedar Point ranch, run by his son, Josh, were noted for taking the lead in establishing conservation easements on the land to preserve it from future development.

MacGregor wrote about the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve at Strong City, and Senator Nancy Kassebaum's idea to keep most of it in private hands. The preserve encompasses almost 11,000 acres, of which the National Park Service owns 34.

MacGregor attended the latest Symphony in the Flint Hills in June at a Rosalia ranch. He saw how people were emotionally moved by being out in the open environment of the Flint Hills. Even members of the orchestra were wowed by the vastness of the prairie.

Annie Wilson and her band, Tallgrass Prairie Express, which includes Jim Versch of Marion, performed during the event.

Former governor Kathleen Sebelius and Kassebaum worked together to start the event, which is coming up on its 12th year. MacGregor described what went on at the festival – cowboys on horses, covered wagons, information booths, dancers, poetry, and the Kansas City Symphonic Orchestra.

The concert closed with everyone singing, "Home on the Range," as the sun set in the west.

MacGregor mentioned the National Scenic Byway that runs from Council Grove to Cassoday on KS-177.

"It is an astonishment," he said. "Don't hurry. You'll find yourself pulling over more than once."

My husband and I have driven it numerous times. In my estimation, it is well worth the drive, encompassing hills, valleys, and, mostly, the last remaining remnant of tall prairie grass in America.

– ROWENA PLETT

*Last modified Nov. 1, 2018*