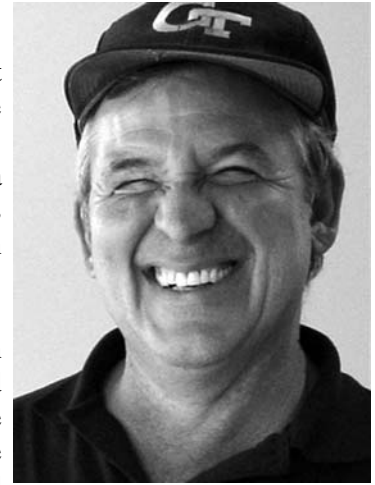




Bison tales hit docents between the ears

When Gene Towne talks to a group, you can be sure it is not only informative, but also entertaining. Thirty docents came to the Saturday, December 4, in-service training on the KPBS bison herd anticipating a worthwhile session and they got it. Dr. Towne is a graduate of Kansas State University and has been working on Konza Prairie since 1992. His expertise is in grazing and pasture management, and he is responsible for the bison herd, the long-term plant inventory and the annual burn program, among other activities.



Gene Towne

Gene started with some statistics from this November's bison roundup. Through the chute 371 bison were counted, including 57 calves. As usual the two-year-old bulls were set aside for the bison/cattle grazing study next year. They stay in the enclosed pasture close to the corral until next spring. Seventy-three animals were selected for sale at the Kansas Bison Association's auction in Salina and six old bulls were sold to a private dealer. The standing herd for 2005 is 292 animals.

Gene explained that 2004 was a poor quality grass year, in spite of the good rains and lush vegetation. The driving factor in bison weight gain is forage quality. This was missing in the grasses this year, which bolted early and afterwards had very low protein content. Even the grass leaves were less nutritious, diluted in the extra growth. Vegetation that looks good may not contain the nutritional value for a grazer. 2004 was not a good year for cattle either. Historically, bison herds would not have stayed in the tallgrass prairie if the forage quality was poor. They would have moved to better grazing areas, probably in the west. The dominant grasses of the mid- and shortgrass prairies, like Buffalo Grass and the grama grasses, have much higher nutritional values than Big Bluestem and Indiangrass in the late summer, fall and winter months. Another reason for the low weights and low calf numbers this year was the hard winter of 2003-2004 and the heat and drought of late summer 2003.

Unsupplemented adult bison generally loose about 11% of their body weight over winter. Calves do not loose weight because they are still suckling. Even Mom's yearling or two-year-old might try to suckle. Calves born in 2004 were lightweight, with an average of 230 lbs for females and 268 lbs for males, compared to the long-term average of 268 lbs for females and 292 lbs for males. Gene related his observations on a birth this year. The event took all of 20 minutes. The cow gave birth in 10 minutes, licked and cleaned her newborn for another 10 minutes. The calf wobbled to its legs and in a few minutes had found an udder. It drank for about 30 minutes and was able to follow as Mom drifted away from the birth site.

Herd management on Konza is all about having a standard effect on the prairie. The grazing influence exerted is considered light, about 25% removal of biomass. Cattle ranchers may take 50% as the norm. Bison "grazing lawns" are hit hard over and over throughout the season. These areas look overgrazed but actually have new growth continually, which provides the nutritious grass bison need, even if it is only 1 inch high. Grazing lawns in the West frequently were on prairie dog towns, where the clipped grass was always green.



Mom and calf

Gene gave us much more information than can be related here. His personal style shows his great enthusiasm for his work. As one docent commented later, "They broke the mold after Gene was born."

Prairie Patter

by **Dr. Valerie Wright, Environmental Educator and Naturalist**

When autumn leaves begin to fall, we all have our memories of the past year. Here are some of the best of mine from the last three months.

Memory #1: The Tallgrass Prairie Workshop sponsored by KACEE was held at Konza Prairie September 9 to September 11. More than 20 people attended. A night hike on the Nature Trail, and a quiet time in the very tall grass to write prairie poetry were highlights. Earl Allen, Nancy Goulden and I led hikes on Godwin Hill along with the docents-in-training Saturday morning.



Chod bakes cobbler



Docent work crew

Memory #2: This September 19th we had the Second Annual Fall Docent Roundup and Hokanson Homestead Workday. Fifteen docents moved wood chips, improved storage in the shed, put up the bird feeders for the winter, weeded the garden and generally spruced things up for September's Visitors' Day. Chod Hedinger cooked up two campfire cobblers, one chocolate with cherries and another "brown bear in an apple orchard". Most of us tried them both with a little ice cream. Doris Burnett and Charlie Given made the final arrangements in the Hokanson barn, with antiques from Doris' collection and historical yarns from Charlie's repertoire. Sixty people came to see Hokanson Homestead on Visitors' Day.

Memory #3: The Docent Graduation and Recognition for 2004 was a happy event for five new docents, especially Larry Loomis, who was named "Docent Trainee of the Year." Some very "experienced" docents did some special things for Konza Prairie in 2004, like leading 20 or more hikes (11 docents accomplished this, an all time high, including Super Docent Wilton Thomas who led 32), like being our Golden Girl and super scrounger (Sue Hunt), or an all round leader (Verlyn Richards), and our Science Guy (Charlie Given). Special congratulations to Gordon Cunningham and Chod Hedinger, who shared the "Docent of the Year Award" for the many hours they volunteered for KEEP.



Larry and Charlie

Memory #4: On the afternoon of October 14, all five of the past Docent Coordinators got together with KEEP staff, the Director, Dave Hartnett, and Site Manager, Tom Van Slyke, to celebrate their contributions to KEEP by officially installing the recognition plaque in the Hokanson Homestead Wildlife Observation Lean-to. I was particularly pleased to see the big smiles on their faces as they heard from Dr. Hartnett the thanks that they truly deserved for hours of work, sometimes frustrating, in scheduling docents for various events.

Memory #5: On October 23 eleven docents came out for the Fall Plant Inventory. I can still see them kneeling in the tall grass of the restored field below the ranch house counting stems and identifying crisp brown forbs. We went to all three restored fields and got a good handle on the diversity (or lack thereof) in these old ag fields planted with native grasses. The oldest was the plot restored by Joe Gelroth in 1978. Those species we could "id" in their late stages of the season totaled 43, where the more recently planted fields boasted only 14 species. In the spring we'll walk through the restored plots again to see what we can add to this list.

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SPOTLIGHT! on Brock Dale *By Annie Clark and Brock Dale*

Brock Dale was among the first docent class, recruited by Phoebe Samelson. He enjoys hiking and is interested in flowering plants and geology. Second through fourth graders are his favorite ages because they are interested in everything and still well behaved!

Brock's love for the outdoors began as a boy, camping during family vacations. Brock's parents were very interested in the names of all natural things, such as fossils, flowers, minerals, and sea shells. His family often camped on Gulf Coast beaches, and Brock remembers a cabinet in the dining room filled with sea shells each labeled with its scientific name and where it was collected.

Music is also an important part of Brock's life. He began playing the violin at age six or seven, and played flute in his high school band. Brock began his college career as a Music Education major, and played for a Works Progress Administration (WPA) orchestra during the summer of his sophomore year. Today, Brock still practices the violin and enjoys playing in quartets, which he "secretly regards as the ONLY really civilized form of recreation".

Brock grew up in Oklahoma City, graduated from Central High School, and attended Oklahoma City University for one year. Brock completed his BS and MS in Physics from the University of Oklahoma. During completion of his Master's, Brock worked on a seismograph crew in Texas and was a physics lab instructor for soldiers and sailors during World War II.

Brock began his career at Phillips Petroleum Company in Borger, Texas, where he set up and worked in a lab for 3½ years. Then, he earned his PhD in Physics from Ohio State University. Next, Brock worked for Battelle Institute, a research organization in Columbus, OH, for 5 years, developing transistors. In 1957, Brock came to Kansas State University, where, as a professor, he enjoyed teaching and researching, until he retired in 1989.

Brock married Bettie in November 1946. They met while working at Phillips Petroleum Company, where Bettie was a chemist. Shortly after their marriage, they moved to Ohio to complete their PhD's at Ohio State University. Bettie received her PhD in Chemistry. Brock and Bettie have three children, two boys and one girl. They enjoy traveling and spend most winters in Mexico. They have visited Spain, Japan, Bali, Peru, Ireland, Guatemala, Honduras, Norway, Denmark, and France. Brock especially enjoyed the Bali culture, music and dance.



Brock Dale guiding kids

Pastperfect Histories

Sioux Falls, South Dakota

Dear Folks,

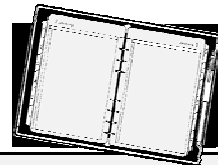
Enclosed is my check for membership in your Friends of Konza Prairie program. This membership fee is dedicated in honor of my cousin, Chod Hedinger, a docent with the Konza. While I took an undergraduate degree at K-State and continued on with an MS in Environmental Interpretation from Colorado State University, it is my cousin Chod who—with no degree initials to place after his name—has made prairie ecosystem learning and teaching his passion. I am proud of him and grateful to him and the Konza for continued research and education on the tallgrass prairie.

Sincerely,

Beverly Angell Oliver

Personal Historian

Mark Your Calendar



Saturday, January 29, 2005 – Docent Roundup will be held at the Education Center of Konza Prairie Headquarters from 9:00 a.m. to Noon. Dr. Anthony Joern will be the speaker. His talk is “Little Bison, Big Effects? Grasshopper Interactions in Tallgrass Prairie.”

Anthony Joern hails from Wisconsin, receiving a BS in Zoology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He was always interested in ecology and managed to make this passion a career. Joern has studied grasshopper biology throughout his research career, beginning with graduate studies in Zoology at the University of Texas at Austin. After completing his PhD, he was on the faculty at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln until just this year when he arrived at Kansas State University. While he is definitely interested in grasshoppers and their biology for their own sake (what organism isn't interesting?), they also provide excellent opportunities to study many critical questions and hypotheses of general ecological interests. Joern still spends a large part of the summer doing field research - with gusto.

Special interest break-out sessions are also being planned for the Docent Roundup. Note the change in time and location. In prior years, Docent Roundup has been an evening meeting on the Kansas State University campus. Please plan to come and participate as we gear up for another successful season on the Konza.

Saturday, February 19, 2005 – New Docent Orientation will be from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. at the Konza Prairie Headquarters. This also has changed from an evening meeting on the Kansas State University campus. If you know of someone who might be interested in becoming a Konza Prairie docent, please bring them to this meeting.



Tallgrass Gazette

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