

## Flyover Country

*Stan Herd*



A Kansas farm child discovers the world one small intimate detail at a time. When encountered for the first time, a sparrow is as fascinating as the universe. Without majestic mountains or postcard sea coasts for comparison we are forced to focus on subtle detail. Early memories of summers spent roaming the cottonwood strewn valley we call “the pasture” just up over the rise west of our farmhouse are still vivid. Those adventures reveal an abundance of discoveries unending in their uniqueness.

Each season brings new creatures to bluff creek sandbars which trickle through the valley most of the year. Particularly hot dry summers find the stream disappearing altogether except for an occasional deep hole where disappearing livestock and wild animals shared dwindling resources. Every few years a rumbling flood of water rushes down from the north depositing crooked limbs and an odd assortment of debris high up on the ancient cottonwoods.

The names of Calvary Creek and Comanche County came alive as we were introduced to the history of the area through late night stories and in our grade school textbooks. Custer rode with his men one hundred years earlier, only a few miles south, on an unrelenting “winter campaign” to Black Kettles sleeping winter camp. I dreamed history, laying silently on the ridge overlooking bluff creek, imagining those stoic red men on thin Spanish ponies passing below me on their way back from the buffalo grasslands north.

I am still overcome by a feeling of loneliness when journeying south into those gently rolling red hills filled with pastel sagebrush and bluestem grasses. An open car window on still night back road trips in high school days, from the “pan handle” revealed scents of creek water and new mown alfalfa hay between miles and miles of pungent and aromatic sage. My brothers and I would stop on the Cimarron River bridge in momentary silence to catch the distant night owls plea and coyote pups serenading their mother.

The Kansas prairie slipped into my consciousness in small and fleeting ways through my youth as a geographic anomaly from miles and miles of plowed and furrowed fields, seasonally filled with wheat, alfalfa and sorghum. An early quail hunt with my grandfather is my first memory of standing chest high in big bluestem grass and subsequently the slow realization that this “unbroken” field represented a remnant of something that had at one time covered the landscape to the horizons and beyond. Buffalo country!



A decade later after temporary residence in northern New Mexico my wife and I purchased a farmstead in eastern Kansas, with the intention of renovating an old barn for our primary residence. I was amazed at the rediscovery of the sounds and smells of the country, and the heightened sense of self when walking alone down an ancient creek bed. I became acutely aware of the discovery that I had distanced myself from a knowledge I had acquired in childhood...the pursuit of living today almost completely alienates us from experiencing pristine nature. While a majority of inner city dwellers have never experienced it, hunters, canoers, picnickers and mountain climbers often approach nature in groups with specific tasks and defined agendas. Mankind has never experienced such an acute separation from the natural environment.

The contemporary man, or urban man, appears most pleased with himself

when he can fashion nature into a box, gridding prairies into cross roads, meadows into fields and farmsteads, cities into blocks, and finally; fashioning a well appointed box to live in. It occurred to me in my early twenties, after some study, that numerous tribal people still inhabiting this planet at present, live in ways "ancient" and outside that box. Life in a box would be anathema to "living," disconnecting them from the spiritual world of nature. The subject for my first earthwork, Kiowa warchief Satanta, reportedly jumped from a second story prison building to his death rather than face life caged like an animal. The Kiowa whose route to their northern hunting ground included the Bluff creek watershed of my parents farmstead.

Consideration of a comparison between my European ancestry and the dwindling populations of tribal people,

led to one of my most involved earthworks. One that hopefully informs the question of how people who dwell on the plains relate to a place or region which most people see as isolated and without merit—a place to pass through or better yet, fly over.

After creating "fine art" field images between commercial commissions in the Midwest, I found myself questioning deeply the direction of my work and my life. My early acute idealism was giving way to confusion about desires to live more comfortably and an eroding sense that "art" was really separate from "commerce." Andy Warhol had tweaked that theme, skewering the artworld elite with a barrage of blatantly commercial knock-offs of American celebrities living and dead. Warhol's celebrity was his art, and he made no apologies. Postmodernism was making us all dizzy. Art that is not commerce is art that is invisible.

In 1987 I was invited to lecture about my earthworks at the Land Institute in Salina, Kansas, a research farm and think tank created by Wes and Dana Jackson to study, among other things, the nature of contemporary agriculture and its cultural and ecological effects globally. The visit changed my life and answered an important question: could intellectual, essential and even radical thought sprout in the hinterlands? If there was an intellectual wellspring discovered in Kansas, then even indigenous Kansas art might be valid, I reasoned. Further, the erosion of the agrarian culture (something that I had little interest in studying before), was a phenomenon that connected to every culture, ancient and contemporary.

An interest in man's ancient connection to the land, fleshed out by the writings and lectures of Jackson, William Erwin Thompson and others, began to reveal that some deep-seated philosophical gulf



separated all of humanity into two fairly distinct groups of people: those remnant tribal people connected to an ancient homeland and the rest of us, whose forefathers never saw a boat they didn't want to board in search of "the promised land." I have since come to the understanding that things have unfolded quite the way they were supposed to in the universe, but what we do tomorrow is open to public discussion and activism. Art, to be meaningful, had to carry its weight in that arena.

It was an invitation by the Salina Arts Commission to consider an image back in the vicinity of the Land Institute, which sparked my interest and opened the door for a work that I could synchronize my mind to. "*Little Girl in the Wind*," a two acre portrait of a young Kansas Kickapoo woman would be my attempt to bring to focus the plight of indigenous people in their ancestral homelands and a possible relationship

to the Land Institute's philosophy of a return to a sustainable agriculture. (Jackson and other activists suggest agribusiness and rampant development are not an evil, but a shadow of global consumerism run amuck.) What effect does our reliance on technology and progress have on remnant land-based people? Can the earth sustain the current level of pollution, degradation and overpopulation without catastrophe? Legitimate science seems to suggest it cannot.

A trip to Costa Rica to help the environmental organization Project "Lighthawk" led to my choice of subject for the Salina earthwork. Two weeks before departing to the capitol in San Jose I happened upon a documentary film about the country entitled, *La Nina y el viento* (Child in the Wind) which issued from a woodblock print by one of Costa Rica's most prominent artists, Francisco Amighetti. The portrait of

youthful feminine innocence buffeted in the worldly winds of male-dominated cultures, was used in the title sequence of the film to portray Costa Rica.

Lighthawk founder Michael Stewart coordinated pilots and photographers in an effort to protect pristine natural areas under assault by development and deforestation since founding the organization in 1988. An invitation from Costa Rica was the first opportunity for Project Lighthawk to take the effort out of the continental United States. My friend and photographer Daniel Dancer invited me to assist him after donating funds and expertise to the project. In 1989 the assault on much of Central America's rainforests was just starting to catch attention globally.

A trip to visit the Cultural attaché at the embassy ended up with an invitation to the studio of Don Francisco Amighetti. I was stunned to find such an important

artist seemingly outside North American artworld consideration. His artistic statement was so strong that a single woodblock print held in its line, color and expression, the face and destiny of a nation.

On my return flight to the States I began to first consider the concept of creating portraits of native women in their ancestral homelands. A portrait out of native Kansas prairie grasses of a young plains Indian woman would be my next work, as the first in a series of portraits of indigenous women around the world.

The story of the Kansas Kickapoos added an unanticipated twist to the work. The Siouan speaking tribe was actually indigenous to the Great Lakes area, having been pushed to their new homeland in the 1870s while Kansas was still a territory. At first given a 150,000 -acre reservation, by the mid-1900s they ended



up with their current allotment of 574 acres.

I was introduced to Kickapoo tribal chairman Steve Cadue and his family a year prior to my trip to Central America. Upon my return I invited them to our home in Lawrence requesting their permission to approach their daughter Carole for my first portrait in the Nations series. After explaining to Steve and his wife Karen the long, drawn-out story of how I came to this idea, they were visibly startled when I mentioned the title *Little Girl In the Wind*. Carole's given name "Pahe Dahts No Qua" roughly translated "the first gust of wind from an impending storm" had been given to her a year earlier in a special ceremony.

With Carole and her parents' permission I began the process of creating the two-acre portrait by subtly mowing and then burning areas of the portrait into a natu-

ral prairie without disturbing the soil by plowing. Nearby Land Institute staff and interns offered consultation, helping me choose native plants to hand plant in some graphic areas. Respect for the natural state of the prairie was paramount in the creation of the work.

The portrait of Carole Cadue was not created on a pristine prairie. On the edge of development the ground had been mowed, grazed and probably broken from sod at some point twenty or thirty years earlier. It consisted of a couple dozen native plants, mainly little blue stem, big bluestem and Indian switchgrasses. A typical acre of pristine native Kansas prairie held 360 species that evolved in unison over the millennia, working to build soil with the help of hundreds of species of creatures from buffalo to microorganisms. Current agriculture practices can mine that tract of ground to a material that can only support weeds in a few short years, without heavy chemical inputs. Big

bluestem is the most common native grass of the tallgrass prairies. The Chippewas, Comanches, Kiowa-Apache all used parts of the plant for either medicinal or ceremonial purposes. The Omahas and Poncas called big bluestem "hade-zide" (red hay) making a medicine from the plant for treatment of fevers and also using its thick jointed stems in their earth lodge construction.

A prairie is a natural ecosystem, which has evolved over the millennia, with grasses the most visible species. Teachers like Wendell Berry and prairie plant specialist Kelly Kindsher remind us that we are driving past things we should know something about. Wes Jackson suggests that "we cannot know what we stand for, until we know what we stand on."

To date I have been unsuccessful in pursuit of the second portrait in the series. In the few years since the first work I have heard stories of at least

two tribes of native people whose time is running out, one in the South American Amazon and the Kaw tribe, native to Kansas, with only two old men of full blood left.

Like many of you, I am hopeful that my work makes some difference. I am less strident in presuming that my art can change the world. I am, however, left with one simple conclusion—that art, agriculture and architecture all have in common a need to mine the "essence of place": to fully understand place and to ethically manipulate it. It takes great commitment to view a meadow of native grasses with the focus of a child...one intimate detail at a time.

