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My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean of Grass

By Michael Martin Murphey

Somehow I managed to fall in love with a cowgirl from Illinois, who lives in Wisconsin. Yes, there are cowgirls and cowboys, horses and beef cattle in Illinois and Wisconsin—far more than a westerner would think. And yes, my friends thought I had lost my mind!

They didn't think I'd gone crazy because of the cowgirl, who eventually became my wife, but because of my decision to leave the Rocky Mountains for the rolling prairies of the upper Mississippi River valley. My western pals (and some eastern pals) just couldn't fathom how any woman, regardless of her goodness and beauty, could be reason enough to leave the Holy Rocky Mountains.

At the time I fell in love with that cowgirl, I was living in a log cabin 10,500 feet up in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of New Mexico, bordering the Kit Carson National Forest. I was living the dream of many a man who has heard the call of the wild. On a summer night, I could throw open the windows and become intoxicated with the smell of the pines, especially after the rain.

When morning came, I could saddle my horse and strike out across the sunlit mountain trails. The calls of coyote, bear, elk, mountain bluebirds, crows, hawks and eagles echoed against the pinnacles of granite and resonated in my muscle and bone. Hunting rifles and shotguns, fishing tackle and traps decorated the walls of my cabin, and animal skins covered the wood floors. In the winter, I lay in front of a popping piñon fire as the snow piled up to the windows.

When I lived in the mountains, before I

met the cowgirl from Wisconsin, I became an investor in several cow outfits. The scenery where these grazing operations were located was picture perfect from a camera's perspective: horseback cowboys watching over and moving cattle as they grazed over endless sagebrush and cactus ground with sawtoothed ranges of snowcapped peaks in the distance. It worked well as the photographic confirmation of a romantic myth—for a calendar perhaps—but the reality of ranching in that country was a different story.

When the very real Vampire of Drought sucked the lifeblood out of the land, a tragic pall set in that words cannot describe. And night after night, I would lie awake in fear of the dry lightning strike that would send a rolling tornado of fire over my house made of logs and shake shingles. And I began to realize that I was living very far from 33 inches of annual rain, ranching on leased land to which I would never hold title. Government bureaucracy that favors recreation over ranching guaranteed it. In my gut, I knew I had to give up the myth of the West, but little did I realize that I was about to find the real West.

The cowgirl I loved could not leave Wis-

consin. So I began to cross and recross the great American prairie to be with that cowgirl of the north. And as I crossed the long miles to Wisconsin, over eastern Colorado, eastern Wyoming, Nebraska, South Dakota, Kansas, Iowa, Missouri or Minnesota on my journey to the crossing of the Mississippi, I gradually fell in love with something else. Along my journey, I became a lover of the great American heartland prairie.

The prairie was once the largest part of the natural American landscape, supporting millions of grazing animals. Its biomass was staggering, and it's still considerable, although little of it is left in its original state. It was the first part of the natural American landscape to be developed. It was promoted as an agricultural paradise, and today most of it has been plowed under. Much of it is now dedicated to produc-

ing ethanol, which is hurting those who graze animals and depend on feeding them corn. But underneath the surface of what is called "cropland" is the story of the Old West and the hope of the New West.

The prairie will not captivate you at first, but it gets under your skin. Those rolling open spaces, though now much filled with plantings, are gently calming and exquisitely beautiful in a subtle way. Here you will not find many highly developed recreational



Singer, songwriter, entertainer Michael Martin Murphey finds subtle beauty and a calming influence in the rolling prairies.

areas. Yes, there are downhill ski areas in Iowa and Wisconsin, but don't look for a lot of long, vertical, powder skiing action. There are golf courses, but most of them are places where the public has easy access, and fees to play are not as much influenced by the country club set.

In "Our Natural History: The Lessons of Lewis and Clark," Daniel Botkin laments the loss of the prairie by saying: "It was as if the Midwest had cut off its feet, and no longer knew where it had walked. For in searching for the prairie, we were searching for ourselves, for our heritage." Botkin is right. It takes a lot of crisscrossing of the American prairie to realize that the prairie is just as worthy of preservation and restoration as other more scenic landforms.

Those who lobbied so hard for including ethanol in our gas tanks are getting rich. Yet the current glut of ethanol production casts a dark shadow across the American landscape. Ethanol uses huge amounts of water, and this at a time when vast spaces of the West are suffering from drought and a loss of groundwater. Large amounts of corn and other grains are being used for fuel, not food. And the soil is being depleted of nutrients for a long time. Native grasses do not deplete the soil or use huge amounts of water, and sustainability is "forever."

It isn't too late to act to save the Great American Prairie. Full restoration to native grasses can be achieved in three to five years. But government isn't too likely to help, since it's heavily invested in ethanol and the price supports that go along with it. So don't count on getting a state park built. Rather, find some good land and buy it. Then manage it for native restoration. Your horses and cattle will not complain about the loss of ambience or scenery. Horses and cattle don't eat scenery.

Water and Grass—that's the true hope! Move to a place in the Midwest that has good average rainfall, plant native grasses and forbs, intentionally encourage all forms of wildlife, and start riding those horses. You will be much closer to "The Spirit of the West."

My bonnie lies over the ocean,
My bonnie lies over the sea,
It's a great sea of grass called the prairie;
Oh bring back that prairie to me.

And remember, the Chisholm Trail didn't run to Aspen and Vail! ■

Michael Martin Murphey stays close to the ground, traveling to his concerts by car, bus or train. He sees more than he could from a plane. Check www.michaelmartinmurphey.com.