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Land of the Wind

By Don Coldsmith

Our tallgrass prairie is unique in all the world. “Outlanders” usually have one or the other of two reactions when they are exposed to it. Some understand its charm, relate to it, love it, and often stay. I once had a New York editor who would plan a business trip to see us at regular intervals. Often, it would be a matter that we could have handled on the phone, but he would plan the trip to include a half-day (at least) in the Flint Hills of Chase County. He had been charmed by the spirit of our grassland, and kept coming back.

At the other extreme are those who see “nothing but land and sky,” and will never understand the importance to mankind, of the prairie. It’s a delicately balanced biosphere, which must be grazed and periodically burned. It has served the same purpose for thousands of years. The growth of the complicated mix of grasses and forbs has fattened ruminants to serve as nutritious protein for humans. This is still its prime use, though the species of the ruminants has changed occasionally.

One of the most memorable features of the area is the wind, which lends its name to the area. “Kansas,” with as many as sixty variant phonetic spellings, is usually translated, “Wind Place” (or “People”).

An early European settler, nicknamed “Wind Wagon Smith” envisioned wind-driven ships on this ocean of grass. He built such a wagon, and actually sailed it to some extent, eventually capsizing in an unexpected canyon, I understand.

More recently, there’s been a search for new and renewable sources of energy, as oil becomes scarce. How about wind power? A few years ago I had occasion to research such possibilities. We were considering a move a little farther away from town, and the destructive spoiling of our natural habitat by “development.” The area we considered was remote, and availability of utilities seemed questionable. I learned of various people who had had experience with solar power, underground thermal, and among others, wind power. A gentleman in another part of the country had installed a wind generator at his suburban home, relatively successfully. He had the utility company to fall back on in case of calm days, but his main objection was the noise of the generator. His neighbors were irate, too, because the grinding whirr could be heard for nearly a mile.

Present proposals to install “wind farms” in virgin Kansas Flint Hills prairie seem extremely irresponsible to me. The tower mentioned above was only a hundred feet tall. Those currently proposed by the dozens and hundreds would be forty to fifty stories tall, despoiling the delicately balanced environment with both sight and sound. Studies have already shown a rapid decrease among bird and animal species in similar areas where these massive machines have intruded. This, aside entirely from the destruction of pure natural beauty. If that’s no problem, why don’t we put rows of the ugly things along the rim of the Grand Canyon, or at Niagara Falls? And, take note: A

thousand of these eyesores would only generate about one-tenth of one percent of the power needed nationally.

I understand that Sen. Ted Kennedy was vigorously backing legislation to promote wind energy until such a wind farm was suggested along the beach near the Kennedy vacation retreat. He then quieted somewhat. Obviously, this is likely to boil down to the factor that gains the most attention, with alarming regularity: money talks.

Old-line American manufacturers are closing their factories, their established and trusted brand names now “made in China,” (or Taiwan or India), all for financial gain. Nobody seems to have a sense of responsibility for anything, as long as they can make money. The concept of pride in workmanship is becoming pretty scarce. This is a different subject, but not really, is it? Money has become so important that it’s hard to “buy American” to support our friends’ and neighbors’ jobs. And how long since we heard the expression “earning money?” An odd concept ...

Back to “wind power.” For the sake of coming generations, let’s not rape our virgin prairie and sell her into prostitution, just because there’s money in it. Her recovery might take a thousand years, even if it would be possible at all.

See you down the road.

note: Don Coldsmith award winning author was Distinguished Kansan of the Year 1993