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# Ad Astra

*with Michael Shonrock*



## *Our Sense of Place*

When I'm having one of those days, I like to go for a drive in the Flint Hills. I find there is always a new discovery over every hill – something I could not have found from the confines of an office.

When I first arrived in Kansas, one of our faculty members, a lifelong cowboy, and resident Flint Hills expert, Jim Hoy, told me:

“The Flint Hills don't take your breath away; they give you a chance to catch it.”

And he is correct. Driving about in the Flint Hills gives me the opportunity to discover all that is unique about this region of Kansas, our heritage, our university, and quite often something new about me.

I think our landscape, our geographic placement on this earth, is the one thing we own as unique among other communities – be they universities, municipalities, or nations.

The Flint Hills were formed more than 250 million years ago during the Permian period. They were shaped from erosion, not upheaval, and from a distance they are gentle, not rugged. But at the core, up close, they are rocky and rugged.

The first American explorer through this region is credited with giving them their name. A journal entry dated September 1806 from the diary of Zebulon Pike, reads:

“Passed very rough flint hills. My feet blistered and sore.”

It is exactly this tough interior that has protected the Flint Hills and why they remain the last stand of native tallgrass prairie in the United States. Today, the Flint Hills represent just 5% of what was once a sprawling mid-continent sea of native prairie grasses. The rocky core saved this land from the farmer's plow.

On my treks through the Flint Hills, I often encounter the lone pickup truck on the back roads. A single, subtle lift of the index finger, one driver to another is enough to say hello, I see you there, I respect your business among these hills.

I am always stunned by the expanse and grandeur of the Flint Hills compared to the remarkable economy of words and gestures among the human inhabitants. We are not a chatty people and rarely do we toot our horns. Like the Hudson River School painters of the 19th century we understand our place on the land and the depth of our roots.

Similarly, the roots of public education in Kansas run deep. Just two short years after being admitted to the Union, Kansas lawmakers set out in 1863 to create our public universities. Each university is as unique as the rises and valleys that make up the Flint Hills. Yet all of it, schools and land, is part of our Kansas commons.

At ESU, a student can find the only Engraving Arts program in the United States or pursue studies in Library Science not found elsewhere in our state. Community members come together on our campus to enjoy the entertainment and scholarly achievement of the longest running summer-stock theater in Kansas.

The success of future generations will very much depend on our present ability to cultivate new opportunities while caring for our public commons. Such a task is neither easy nor quick. Catching your breath in the Flint Hills is a good place to start.

***Michael Shonrock is the 16th president of Emporia State University, an undying optimist, and self-described futurist. He welcomes reader comments at [adastra@emporia.edu](mailto:adastra@emporia.edu)***

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