

Ripple Effect # 68

Remebering Our Tallgrass Prairie

The sprigs of tall grasses that are showing up in landscaping—might they be a sign that we are remembering our heritage of tallgrass prairies?

These tallgrass prairies, most of us know, are native to central North America, covering at one time a large portion of the American Midwest as well as portions of Canada.

If we are older, we may recall stories about the tallgrass prairie, such as the ones told about frantic mothers whose small children disappeared into the grasses. But most of us have only fragments of knowledge about our tallgrass prairie.

The tallgrass prairie flourished in areas of moderate rainfall, and they required periodic burning to keep their grasses renewed and competing vegetation, such as trees, under control. To the east, where fire was less frequent, beech-maple dominated the landscape of the Great Plains, and to the west, where rainfall amounts were less, were the mixed and shortgrass prairies.

The grasses of the tallgrass prairie such as big bluestem and Indiangrass grew to an average of 5 to 6 feet, with some stalks growing as high as 8 or 9 feet. The amount of organic matter that these year-after-year stands added to the soil resulted in some of the deepest topsoil ever known.

This rich topsoil became the demise of the tall grasses as they were plowed under by European settlers. It is estimated that over 99% of original tallgrass prairie was converted to farmland. In instances where original tall grasses have survived, rocky or wet areas made the land too difficult to till. Or the grasses were used to graze cattle, a use that the grasses were able to withstand.

Tallgrass prairies, of course, consist of much more than tall grasses. The tallgrass was part of a complex ecosystem, often intertwined with marsh and aspen parklands and hosting a variety of plants and animals, some unique to the ecosystem.

Today, you can find restored areas or preserves of tallgrass prairie in Oklahoma, Kansas, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas and Missouri. Closer to home, the Manitoba Tall Grass Prairie Preserve of 6,000 square kilometers southwest of Winnipeg stands on original tallgrass-aspen parkland area that dips into northeast Minnesota.

A bit further south, the Minnesota Glacial Ridge National Wildlife Refuge consists of a core of 5000 acres of tallgrass prairie surrounded by an additional 30,000 acres to be restored over time. Made possible by purchases of land by the Minnesota Nature Conservancy that linked the Pembina Trail preserve with two Scientific and Natural Areas, three Waterfowl Production areas and a dozen Wildlife Management areas, the Glacial Ridge Project became the largest prairie restoration in history.

So, not only do we find more and more tufts of tall prairie grasses in our backyard landscaping, but the real thing is close at hand, right here in the Red River Basin. A heritage that we share in common, one that has been the foundation of the agricultural prosperity in the Red River Basin, and one to appreciate, enjoy and protect.

Until the next Ripple Effect,

The Red River Basin Commission (RRBC)

The RRBC is a grassroots organization that is a chartered not-for-profit corporation under the provisions of Manitoba, North Dakota, Minnesota, and South Dakota law. Our offices in Moorhead, MN and Winnipeg, MB can be reached at 218-291-0422 and 204-982-7254, or you can check out our website at www.redriverbasincommission.org.