

Plains Dames

Nebraska ranchers are experiencing the perfect storm. By Tim Findley

They are on a roll. Straight off the Northern Plains and ready for any forum smart enough to invite them, Sherry Vinton and Tanya Storer play off each other's individual charms and natural enthusiasm like a vaudeville team with Powerpoint. "A public example of class," as one western columnist describes them.

It's a performance the two ranch wives don't even practice, and at root it is really just a recounting of their personal experience with the "perfect storm" they saw coming their way in a long-term leftist plan to restructure their family's lives. "The way it is," says Tanya, 38, "and the way it won't be," says Sherry, 44, finishing off another sentence between them like a fashionable Abbott and a svelte Costello starting on first and taking you home the way they see it.

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The wagon-sized black tar roads rise and plunge and rise again through the deeply rolling grasslands of northern Nebraska, tempting you to imagine you can

hear approaching thunder rumbling across the prairie with thousands of buffalo running wildly ahead of fearless Kiowa or Arapaho horsemen. But it is just a dream of generations long since gone and probably never to return. The truth hums with all the courage you can muster to speed on along the one-lane road, too fast even to catch clear sight sweeping by of a true remnant of this land's history.

The old ranch sits in a south-facing crease of a hill, snug there against the savage howl of Arctic-born blizzards, built not to be seen, but to survive in an unforgiving region where what trees there grow huddled together, not daring to reach too high beyond their own shadow. They call the



NEBRASKA RANCH © CHARLES W. GULDNER

PHOTO © TIM FINDLEY



Tanya Storer shows Ted Turners' property, in two great ovals on the map, unfinished with yet one more parcel that environmentalists suggest should link the mogul's grasslands together—and probably destroy the six generations of caring by the Storer family. RIGHT: The deeply rolling grasslands of northern Nebraska tempt you to imagine you can hear the approaching thunder rumbling across the prairie with thousands of buffalo running wildly ahead of fearless Kiowa or Arapaho horsemen. And then came the wagon trains, with the settlers, who have been out here since the 1800s.



buildings “soddies,” for the living grass bricks cut from the ground to construct the walls of a secure space where a family, or a school room or even a store could shelter them from the weather, and the Indians, and even from the buffalo themselves. Many descendants of those who built the soddies still live nearby in fine, insulated homes with panoramic views and connections to the high-speed Internet. Yet without the nostalgic care given them each year by folks with respect, what few soddies remain would have already settled into forgotten mud.

The old wagon roads, cut straight like spokes out from little towns like Arthur, Neb., now speedily laugh at the past with their unrutted new pavement, commanding only that you respect the pickup likely to arise suddenly and head-on at the next hilltop.

FOR MOST OF THEIRS AND THEIR FAMILIES' LIVES, THOSE WHO CAME TO THESE CHALLENGING GRASSLANDS DID NOT EXPECT TO BE MUCH AGAIN PART OF THE WORLD THEY LEFT BEHIND.

For most of theirs and their families' lives, those who came to these challenging grasslands did not expect to be much again part of the world they left behind. It is still that way in the vast flyover country where neighbors live miles apart, as they were meant to, meeting each other most likely only through the activities of their cherished children at school or church.

Now and then, like when the county gun club hosts a Friday pancake supper, things can get a little rowdy at Chad Cooney's Bunkhouse Bar in Arthur. But aside from a few clinking beer bottles near the piano player, it's no problem bigger than Chad himself. Life in these parts follows predictable paths, from a working week in the fields and barns to a Friday or Saturday night blowing off steam and starting again with Sunday and church, no argument about it.

For the most part, if you want to go to the trouble to find them and then say something pretty common about it being so like the “Little House on the Prairie,” folks here will understand and welcome you in from the porch, and if you happen to know something about Nebraska foot-



ball, you can probably stay for dinner.

It was that kind of luck that first brought a Lincoln nature photographer to meet Chris and Sherry Vinton about a decade ago. He had even played quarterback at a Lincoln high school and had a fair appreciation of his state's great grass heritage that he was taking on as a lifetime photographic project. Chris and Sherry were glad to see him and the family he brought with him, over all those years when he dropped by in the 1990s. The Vintons still proudly display on their living room walls two of his gorgeous prints capturing the countryside with its powerful atmosphere pounding over a lilting grassland grace.

Sherry, unstoppably enthusiastic in

unpredictable directions, at first loved the pictures. It was like *House Beautiful* making their property a cover story, even in the *National Geographic* where some photographs by another cameraman appeared.

But in the apparently enduring friendship they were establishing with the photographer and his young family was a small difference in focus that would lead to heartache.

Sherry's friend Tanya, who lives a mere 60 miles or so north on the blacktop, is less inclined to such ping-pong bouncing exuberance as Sherry expresses, but she is just as motivated to share something that gets her thinking. And Tanya was thinking a lot in 2000 about what she had read in farm publications concerning the IUCN, known



Sherry, left, and Tanya, above, worry about the plans being made to quietly capture some 400,000 acres of the prairie for “conservation” purposes. Their own ranches—cared for, nurtured and loved for five generations and more—were coveted by groups such as the World Wildlife Fund, and many other local groups, as part of an “American Savannah” like that of Africa. BELOW: Their home town of Arthur, Neb.



as the World Conservation Union. The more she probed the Internet for information, the more she found that the United Nations’ organization, along with the World Wildlife Fund and other “global” ecologists, had already targeted prairie lands and were drawing their focus down to the grasslands of America’s Northern Great Plains, laying out a strategy to save them from vaguely implied abuse by ranchers and farmers.

“They were talking about us!” Tanya realized. Gradually she saw more pamphlets and papers and even the creation of a Sand Hills Task Force drawing ranchers themselves into an entirely new future in the plains meant to “restore abundant wildlife and revitalize rural communities” over the next five years.

The elaborately illustrated full-color booklets and pamphlets suggested developing “community support” that would bring together a great conference to begin by 2010 on “large-scale development of grassland reserves and native grassland conservation.” What would have to go, the agenda suggested, was at least part of the cattle industry in the region. That, the slick publications suggested, would be no real problem.

With each new discovery, Tanya called Sherry. Neither of them were naïve about such things. They had heard before about the Wildlands Project and other schemes to create wilderness out of working farms and ranches in the Midwest. But Sherry, pepped up by projects more than postulants, saw it as just a little boring. “It sounded scary, but it was unrealistic,” she says. “Who could we even question about it? It just couldn’t happen.”

Tanya thought otherwise. The more she read, the more she found that plans were being made to quietly capture some 400,000 acres of the prairie for conservation purposes. Rural Nebraskans need not worry, one pamphlet said: “There are nearly two million cows in the state and only about 20,000 head—or about one percent of the state’s breeding herd—is in Arthur County.” Removing them would hardly impact the industry, the pamphlet assured. It was just a question of “whether enough people in western Nebraska want change.”

“Sherry? Tanya.”

It wasn’t just the plains in general. Their own ranches—cared for, nurtured and loved for five generations and more—were coveted by groups such as the World

Wildlife Fund, as part of an “American Savannah” like that of Africa.

“Well, I’ll tell ya the truth, after a while, I got call waiting,” confesses Sherry. “I knew that if I answered it, I’d be on the phone

art to buyers with varying agendas, and the breaking point was not really over the photographs. It was over something Sherry remembers him saying in one discussion when he suggested that “there are plenty of

warning to others.

Only a short 12 miles away, a neighbor of Eric and Tanya Storer’s ranch, are the two huge parcels owned by Ted Turner, part of his building an empire of buffalo to replace the Black Angus now more common on the plains. The maps show Turner’s property in two great ovals, unfinished with yet one more parcel that environmentalists suggest should link the mogul’s grasslands together—and probably destroy the six generations of caring by the Storer family, beginning when Tanya’s grandfather first homesteaded there in the 19th century.

These really are tales of the modern West, but perhaps never more attractively and amusingly well told as by two dames off the plains. Husbands Eric Storer and Chris Vinton, as well as the three kids in each family, hold them in awe. They are as amazed as audiences from Lincoln to Salt Lake that it’s just the two of them with their supporting cast of family, but without committees, agendas or even joke writers, aside from what the girls wing on their own.

The Powerpoint display, with photos and documents aplenty of the awesome working grasslands, makes a large part of the case. But the banter between the two on stage—Tanya the careful analyst with her maps and charts, and Sherry, the off-the-wall commentator holding a surge protector over her head as a prop (“Who turns it on and off? Who has the power?”)—is what wins the crowds.

“People just didn’t know,” says Sherry. “What we found out is that they just don’t expect anything like it to happen to them.”

“We just tell the truth,” says Tanya. “I like freedom, and I know they do too. I think we make it worth hearing.”

Part familiar political outrage at the plots to snatch private land, part recalling Lucy and Ethel retelling their own experience, and part state-of-the-art technology reveals how much is truly at stake. Their story is also, inevitably, a bit of home-grown soap opera in the sad way it must leave behind lost friends at a time of challenge and survival.

It’s a performance they seem to come to naturally, as part of their heritage. Hard work as it obviously was, it seems likely that having a sense of humor must have helped in building a soddie, too. ■

Tim Findley’s given name by the Crow means “helps the buffalo return.”

PHOTO COURTESY TANYA STORER



They call the original prairie buildings “soddies,” for the living grass bricks cut from the ground to construct the walls of a secure space where a family, or a school room, or even a store could shelter them from the weather, and the Indians, and even from the buffalo themselves.

with Tanya for two hours.”

Maybe, if it had not come home in one of the photographs they found in the growing pile of conservation propaganda, the “team” of Storer and Vinton might never have materialized. It was a supposedly threatened prairie chicken in mating “show” posture that Sherry knew her family’s cameraman friend had photographed not far behind their home.

By their numbers alone the Vintons did not regard prairie chickens to be threatened. Even worse was the sense of betrayal they felt from their friend who was displaying their land as part of the “cause.” Still more photographs taken on their property appeared in other magazines, including *RANGE*, suggesting the area as part of a future biosphere under international control.

Sherry, who describes herself as a “head ’em up, move ’em out,” type in contrast to her more thoughtful friend, hit the phone herself this time, looking for the photographer about like Sitting Bull sought Custer.

We have omitted the photographer’s name here at both his and Sherry’s request. His profession makes it necessary to sell his

people who could manage the grasslands even better than you do.”

That comment crossed the line between the pride of five generations of Vintons and the legalized “perpetuity” that The Nature Conservancy sought with funds to “nest egg” conservation easements offered by the Sand Hills Task Force beginning in 2005. Ranchers gradually brought in to such easements would effectively become tenants from restrictions imposed on the use of their land by those who “knew better.” Sherry felt the use of the photograph betrayed her hospitality.

The photographer, involved in the environmental movement, but certain that he knows of no better stewards on the grasslands than the Vintons, denies he ever said anything quite like what Sherry remembers. Reached by her call on assignment in South Dakota, he immediately drove to the ranch home where he had so often been a guest. Chris and Sherry were waiting for him on the porch to tell him he would never again be welcome.

It was a personal tragedy to both families really, but it was the trigger for the two lady pals to begin retelling their story as a