

PRAIRIE FIRES

Finney County, Kansas

Written by Delora Black

Consultants: Mr. George Dillion and Mr. Will Holmes, both of Garden City, Kansas

In the early days of Finney County's history and practically all of the prairie counties, prairie fires were a common thing. Just as the dust storms of the middle 1930s came in the winter and spring, so were the prairie fires of early Finney County history. Opposite of the dust storms, the fires were the result of too much dry vegetation, while on the other hand, the dust storms were the result of not enough vegetation in the ground to keep the soil from blowing away. When there is nothing in the ground to hold the dirt, the winds take it up into the air, forming great dust clouds. Prairie fires resulted from dense dried buffalo grass grown in bunches so close that one bunch catching fire would soon spread to other bunches surrounding it and widen into a large territory. The fire blew as fast as the wind itself, sweeping down on anything in its path, spreading in width as it advanced.

Not known is the exact origin for prairie fires. Some thought they started from the sun's reflections on glass bottles and tin cans. Sparks from passing trains were responsible for creating a large number of fires. However, the most significant cause was from careless campers leaving fires to spread instead of tromping them out, as they should have done.

A man who was plowing in a field caused one of the most massive prairie fires in Finney County. He accidentally dropped a silver matchbox that he was carrying. There were several matches inside the box, and when it dropped in front of the plow disk, it started a fire. Before he knew what was happening, the fire had spread beyond his control. When it burned its way to the river, it finally stopped.

The sight of approaching prairie fire smoke in the distance was a call to go and find every man available in the town. Preparations for fighting the fire, such as plows, rags that could hold water, shovels, and barrels, were kept close at hand at all times so that they would be ready to use at a moment's notice. Practically everyone in the town and many folks from other places who had sighted the fires came to help. The women stayed at home to protect it, in case the fire should come their way. They would round up the children who were not old enough to help fight the fires.

The widest part of an oncoming fire was called the head fire. As it ate its way along, it would widen all the more until, at times, it would be more than 20 miles in width and yet keep widening all the time. To fight in front of the head fire was time wasted, so the men would fight it from the sidelines, trying to narrow it down as much as possible. They would use wet sacks to smother it, but a drawback in fighting fires this way was getting enough water to keep the bags wet. Shovels were often used to shovel

dirt on the fires but were not as efficient as other ways of putting it out. A short grass fire with the wind in the right direction traveled very fast, much faster than a fire in heavy grass, as the high blades of grass seem to retard the speed of the fire. A better method was to take a reasonably long piece of chicken wire covered with dirt, and with a man on a horse on each side of it, pull the wire over the fire. They had to change the horses often, as the job was challenging and very hot. They could go only for a short time without rest.

Backfiring was also a suitable method in those days. There were no main roads, merely trails over the country, and these trails ran in no definite direction. They crisscrossed all over the country. If one of those trails ran into a fire, it made an excellent place to backfire, starting the fire at the road and letting it travel slowly against the wind till it met the big fire. The two generally rushed together and then died out. Of course, this was providing that the backfire had become well enough underway. If it had not, the big fire rushed on as if nothing had been in the way, and all was to no avail.

A man on a horse caught out on the prairie in a fire could either attempt to outrun the fire or stop and backfire at a spot large enough for his horse and him to stand while the fire went around them and large enough so that he would not feel the heat strongly. If he did not have time to stop and start the backfire procedure, he usually attempted to jump through it. He would pick a place in the line of the fire that was not a solid wall of fire, and if he could get his horse to jump through it, he was safe on the other side, where it had already burned over.

Once in the fire, however, the horse would sometimes become confused, and it was up to the rider to control him. Few riders and horses burned to death fighting the fires this way, but sometimes the horse would get his hair singed and maybe burned while the rider might be temporarily blinded by the intense heat or slightly blistered. Yet this was far better than trying to outrun the fire and hoping there was a river close by.

Rivers were a sure means of stopping a fire. The small animals of the prairie were the ones to suffer the most. Snakes often burned to death, and sometimes rabbits had singed hair. A few cattle died, but usually herded back to safety after riders noticed smoke in the distance. It was common to see cattle with singed hair.

One of the first things built at the start of a new home was the fireguard. They would plow a strip of ground around the house and outbuildings. They kept the area free of all dry grass and weeds. This way, the fire burned around the fireguard, and strips of about one hundred feet of plowed ground or strips plowed alternately made up the fireguard. Even the fireguard was not a thoroughly safe means of protection, as the people sometimes had to deal with rolling tumbleweeds. The tumbleweed is gradually becoming extinct in the prairie country, and in its place comes the Russian thistle. The old-timers of the country know the difference between them. The Russian thistle grows smaller than the tumbleweed and has prickly thistles. It has the same ability to

roll around the prairie just as the tumbleweed. Many thought the thistle was brought to this country when shipments of sheep arrived here from Australia and Russia. The sheep carried the Russian thistle seeds in their wool.

Tumbleweeds were common in those days, and they would carry the fire for a long distance. They could easily cross the fireguards to the homes and buildings.