# Stewards of the Land

ONE RECENT JUNE Sunday two friends and I were driving home along a blacktop road through south-central Kansas, Mennonite country. The previous night, and continuing into the morning, much of the state had experienced hard rains, in some places five inches and more. Such storms are not infrequent in Kansas. From earliest childhood, native Kansans, indeed all Great Plains people, are keenly aware of the hair trigger which stands between drought and instant drenchings, which are often accompanied by spectacular lightning displays and high winds.

As we drove through this relatively flat and prosperous Mennonite country, with its tidy fence lines and well-kept houses and farm buildings, we saw roadside ditches and newly opened furrows. They probably contained milo sorghum seeds, but were so full we could not tell whether the crop had germinated or not. The ditches and furrows were not full of water, but of rich black mud—that blackness characteristic of fertile prairie soils. This particular landscape has little topographic relief, but what little there is had been accentuated in the past few hours by diagonal washes, five feet wide and more, leading down to the ditches which were now level with the adjacent fields. The little streams of the area were running full and muddy.

A hundred years ago the German-speaking, Russian-born ancestors of these Mennonites had introduced hard winter wheat to the United States, and with it the easily copied cultural

practices that eventually gave the Great Plains region its well-deserved reputation as a breadbasket. These farmers, like their close religious relatives, the Amish, believe the highest calling of God is to farm and be good stewards of the soil. Within an agricultural context, they are usually regarded as the most ecologically correct farmers of any in America. The strong ethic of land stewardship is, without a doubt, largely responsible.

Less than an hour's drive to the east, my friends and I had spent a memorable, leisurely afternoon surrounded by several thousand acres of tall grass prairie country in our state's lovely Flint Hills. We had met other friends and together had botanized, birded and picnicked under a still cloudy but unthreatening sky. Upland plovers were everywhere joining their sounds with the nighthawks, scissor-tailed flycatchers, and meadowlarks. The storm seemed to have immediately invigorated such attractive plants as Showy Evening Primrose, Pale Echinacea, Plains Larkspur, Butterfly Milkweed, and Lace Grass. It was clear on this rich prairie that the rain was being retained long enough in the spongy mass to give the soil a chance to slowly soak it in and then become a reservoir of water for future needs.

In the Mennonites' field, the water had run off, except where it stood idle in puddles. Soil that had become mud was deathly quiet. Even the most casual observer of nature would not fail to see the contrast. The hills are living, and, so long as they are clothed, eternal; the relatively flat lowlands, put to the plow by scarcely three generations of land stewards, are ephemeral.

As we stopped to photograph one severely eroded field, my mind turned to the owner of that field and tried to imagine what was going on in his head on this wet Sunday. First of all, he will have to replant. It will be substantial, he will think, but necessary and affordable. But in this late afternoon, before chore time and evening church services, is he wondering how many more rains like that his fields can take, and is he asking what, after all, is the meaning of land stewardship, which is central to his faith?

A Mennonite at a rodeo is unlikely. Rodeos are wild places; the boisterous sons of ranchers are not known for their piety. But these cattlemen are stewards of the grasslands—though they probably don't think of themselves in that language—and they need only one ethic. It is simple, straightforward, and easily taught to their children: "No more than one cow-calf unit to about seven to ten acres, and start moving them off when it's dry." The rancher knows it can rain and blow, and his sons can attend the rodeo, chew tobacco, drink beer, miss church, and never mention stewardship, let alone think about its implications. Many ranchers do overgraze and their soil does erode, but even with overgrazing, poor ranching, and no ethic, the land fares generally better when grazed than when put to the plow.

For some soil types, under some climatic conditions, a strong stewardship ethic works—but this is the exception rather than the rule.

In the earliest writings we find that the prophet and scholar alike have lamented the loss of soils and have warned people of the consequences of their wasteful ways. It seems that we have forever talked about land stewardship and the need for a land ethic, and all the while soil destruction continues, in many places at an accelerated pace. Is it possible that we simply lack enough stretch in our ethical potential to evolve a set of values capable of promoting a sustainable agriculture?