*PrairyErth* Notes for Great Plains Conference on Accelerated Learning



1. *PrairyErth* (1991) is a different kind of book compared to others we have used in ALP classes.
2. It’s “about” Chase County, Kansas—name *something* to do with the county at any time in history up to the mid-‘80s, and it probably touches on that subject.
3. It isn’t chronological in its arrangement.
4. It’s a big book—over 600 pages long.
5. It doesn’t build any arguments except over time and by accretion—and very indirectly.
6. My chief challenge: How to structure paper assignments for the class based on students’ reading.
7. William Least Heat-Moon’s chapters correspond to a grid laid over the county that mimic the U.S. Geological Survey maps of the county—think also of the string grids stretched over an archaeological excavation; each chapter (called a quadrangle) takes as its subject various features, “natural” or human, of that quadrangle.
8. Hit upon a “portfolio” strategy:
9. For first four papers, I created five broad categories of topics—Geography, Flora & Fauna, History, Culture, and Economy—each with several prompts. Students choose one prompt from each of four of the five categories.
10. Synthesis paper: Heat-Moon’s main thesis is that in a place, everything, sooner or later, is connected in some way; thus, students choose any two of their first four papers and look for and write about point(s) of intersection between them.
11. Argument paper: 3 options, ranging from imagining how BCC might use its Flint Hills campuses’ course offerings to more directly prepare students to serve the local economy of the area, to pursuing a personal interest arising out of our reading/discussion.
12. Other writing assignments and activities:
13. Students will make a map of their childhood neighborhood, with an accompanying narrative.
14. *PrairyErth* is imbued with a sense of the place that is its subject; thus, in the Fundamentals class, students write essays in the various modes that engage with a place that they have chosen to reflect on in their writing. Also, they have some additional readings (some theoretical, some straightforward descriptions of specific places).
15. Class blog: *Chase County XTK* (students are encouraged, via extra credit, to contribute content (essays and pictures) to the blog, including a list (with links when available) of works Heat-Moon quotes from or otherwise makes use of in *PrairyErth* (the book itself has no index or list of references).
16. Two optional field trips to Chase County: a driving tour of the county in which we visit some of the villages and ghost towns mentioned in the book; and a visit to Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve.

***PrairyErth*: Writing Prompts for Your First Four Papers**

**Instructions:** For your first four papers for this class, choose a prompt from each of four of the five categories of topics here—that is, you will not choose two prompts from one category, and you will have one category left from which you will not select a prompt. You may take up these topics in any order that appeals to you; moreover, note that some of the topics have their origin in chapters not assigned for class discussion.

These papers should be about 750-1000 words long and should appear in MLA format.

Note and take seriously those prompts that will require you to travel to Chase County or that will require some outside research: for them, you will need to do some advance planning.

**Geography:**

1. Read and think about Wayne Fields’ quote on p. 5; then, find a chapter anywhere in *PrairyErth* (other than “On Roninger Hill”) that seems to you to confirm Fields’ claim. Write a paper in which you argue that what you learn in that chapter is in some sense, literal or figurative, a confirmation of the claim that the prairie is “at the center of our national identity.”
2. Find current census data for Chase County (you will find a link for this at *Chase County XTK* by clicking on any of the posts on the first page and then looking on the right-hand side of the screen), and compare it with the data Heat-Moon provides on pp. 16-17. Obviously, there will be differences, but what differences in particular catch your eye? Are you able to account for those differences?
3. Closely read p. 182 in “In the Quadrangle: Bazaar” and think about the two implicit definitions of “town” in that paragraph. Then, either stick with Bazaar or choose one of the other cities (other than Cottonwood Falls or Strong City) or unincorporated places listed on Chase County’s Wikipedia page (note that there is also a Chase Co. in Nebraska—be sure you select the correct one), and pay it a visit. (Note that our driving tour will visit many of these places, but you’re encouraged to make your own visit.) As you look at and think about the city or unincorporated place you have chosen, what (if anything) seems to be the “glue” that keeps it going? If the place does *not* seem to be a town to you, what does it lack?
4. The first two quotes in *PrairyErth* offer advice to travelers on what to take with them on a trip to Kansas; later, in “On the Town: Gabriel’s Inventory,” Heat-Moon lists all the possessions in Gabriel Jacobs’ estate when he died in 1860, noting that “there is not one thing to ease a long winter day or fill a quiet hour” (171). These days, of course, even rural life is very different because our various technologies make work much easier and quicker, and we are more protected from the elements. Even so, have you ever lived somewhere that caused you or your family to borrow or buy a piece of equipment by virtue of that place’s geography or climate? What was it? Why did you need it?
5. In various places in *PrairyErth*, Heat-Moon returns to the subject of “the National Survey of 1785” (15). This survey, commissioned by Thomas Jefferson, divided up much of what would become the United States into a grid whose sections measure 640 acres. In “In the Quadrangle: Homestead,” Heat-Moon writes compellingly on pp. 363-365 about how, by visiting the Homestead quadrangle at night, he hopes to “turn a graph-paper land into a blank sheet that might open to dreamtime” (365). Write a paper in which you identify some of the ways Heat-Moon talks about how this grid affects how Chase County was settled and how it affects people’s lives today. Do you think Heat-Moon overstates those effects? Why or why not? As you think about this prompt, consider also the possibility that this same grid affects the place where you live as well by looking at a map of the county where you live.

**Flora and Fauna:**

1. In various places in *PrairyErth*, but especially in “*Ex Radice*,” Heat-Moon identifies numerous native plants, some of which are edible. Do some research on one or more of the edible plants mentioned in that chapter; you can begin your research by looking online for a page titled “Kansas Prairie Wildflowers” (spuds.agron.ksu.edu/wildflw.htm) to see pictures and descriptions of all the plants mentioned in that chapter (plus many others); another resource is the garden at the Mid-America Indian Center in Wichita. Then, go out into the country and look for the plant(s) you’re interested in (many of these grow in Sedgwick and Butler counties, too, in ditches along the side of unpaved county roads). You are welcome—***but by no means required!!!***—to taste them, too. Report on your findings.
2. "Between Pommel and Cantle" and "About the Red Buffalo" have discussions about the controlled spring range fires that Flint Hills ranchers set. Read it carefully, and read as well "Air Pollution: Fire's in their genes . . . " (found in the Canvas module titled "Flint Hills Articles") and one other article on the subject of the range fires. As you think about what you read, consider the range of opinions and arguments regarding the range fires--not merely "pro"/"con" arguments but what best practices for range management in the Flint Hills might be that also take into account air quality and health concerns of people in the region. What suggestion(s) might you make, based on your reading and thinking?
3. On p. 329 of "In Kit Form: The Cottonwood Chapter," Heat-Moon mentions cottonwood ice cream and that "no one remembers the recipe, and people no longer know how to eat a cottonwood." Try to find information on these subjects, and write about what you find (or, if you find nothing, write about where you looked, what references to the topic you encountered, if any, etc.).
4. The chapter titled “Amidst the Drummers Desirous” is about prairie chickens, yet Heat-Moon’s writing style for most of it is unconventional. Either read an account about prairie chickens or look for a video of their mating dance and compare it to Heat-Moon’s writing. What, if anything, do he (and the reader) gain from his style when it comes to learning something about prairie chickens?

**History:**

1) Look closely at "Toward a Kaw Hornbook"'s entries, and note the tone of the various writers toward the Kaw. To what do you attribute their shift in tone? (It might be helpful to note the dates of the entries and think about what was happening, in general terms, in the territory/state during those years.) Also, look up the meaning of *hornbook* and discuss why it is (or is not) an appropriate label for this chapter.

2) Throughout *PrairyErth*, William Least Heat-Moon names various cartographical and technological innovations that aided in the settlement of the Flint Hills and, by extension, the prairies and Great Plains. Of those he names, which of these do you think is the most significant, and why? Or, if Heat-Moon does not name one you think is more significant than those he does name, which is it? Why should it be included?

3) Find *and visit*—this is **required**—a cemetery in Chase County; pick a headstone that for whatever reason holds your attention, photograph it, and research the person who is buried there. Be sure that you include the photograph with your paper and note the name of the cemetery.

4) Read "At the Diamond of the Plain" and pay close attention to the juxtaposition between the importance the travelers' accounts assign to Diamond Spring and the state Heat-Moon finds it in. Why does he react to what he sees in the way that he does? In your own experience, is there a place that you think of as being as significant as Heat-Moon thinks Diamond Springs is, but which is neglected or overlooked? What is it? Where is it located? Tell its story.

**Culture:**

1) Throughout *PrairyErth*, Heat-Moon himself, and many sources he quotes in the "Commonplace Book" chapters, make the claim that Kansas is in some sense the embodiment of American culture and character. See, for example, the quote by Carl Becker from his essay "Kansas" on p. 7 of Heat-Moon's book. Assume for the sake of argument that this is true, and write a paper in which you describe them--this will require you to do some thinking about those attributes that make us distinct as a nation.

2) On p. 24 of the "Commonplace Book," the quotes note extremities of weather in Kansas and how weather seems to bind Kansans together as people. Think about those quotes as you read "Upon the First Terrace" and, in particular, its last paragraph (p. 39). Do you think this is true of Kansans? What evidence can you provide as support? Do you think this might also be true for other places besides Kansas?

3) Look at the quotes concerning the name "Kansas" on pp. 98-99, and carefully read "By Way of Spelling Kansas." Note also Blanche Schwilling's implied explanation for why the people of Bazaar didn't let the name "Mary" stick for their town, on p. 184. Think in general terms about the value of the appropriateness of a name for a place. Most places either had other names before their current ones, or other names were considered before the current one was chosen. Think of the name for a place you are fond of, and try to learn what other names it once had or were considered for it. Do you think its current name fits? Why or why not?

4) In "Above the Crystalline Basement," read and think about the paragraph on p. 159 that begins, "Chase County is as it is . . . " and the one that follows it. as you do, think also about places you have lived or felt a deep emotional attachment to, and write about a moment when something you read or were told about that place made you feel connected to, or at least deeply aware of, the *past* of that place. Did learning this make you like the place more, or did it complicate your feelings about it? Did learning this help to explain something about the place that you had not understood before? Do some outside research on this event or person or piece of information, especially if facts, dates, etc. are important.

5) A recurring theme in *PrairyErth* is that Chase County's people want to see people come and live and invest in their county, but they don't want to see things change. As Jane Koger says, "[T]hey talk about economic development in Chase and at the same time they don't want anybody to achieve anything" (190). Although the county is politically conservative, this mindset is a kind of social and cultural conservatism that does not necessarily correlate to politics. Write a paper in which you speculate on the causes of this mindset. Have you encountered it elsewhere? How did it manifest itself? In your paper, if you can, include an idea or two on how to overcome such a mindset.

6) In his book *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, John Brinckerhoff Jackson describes what he calls “inhabited landscape” this way:

[T]he inhabited landscape sees itself as the center of the world, an oasis of order in the surrounding chaos, inhabited by the People. Insularity is what gives it character; size, wealth, beauty have nothing to do with it; it is a law unto itself.

 Actually not a law, but a set of habits and customs accumulated over the centuries, each the outcome of a slow adaptation to place—to the local topography and weather and soil, and to the people, the super-family which lived there: a special accent, a special way of dressing, a special form of greeting; special dances and holidays—all the picturesque idiosyncrasies that are the stuff of tourist folklore, and then some: passwords and gestures, taboos and secrets—secret places and secret events that exclude the outsider more than any boundary. [. . . Experiences] such as these are never entirely forgotten; not that they are much thought about, but they remind us that we are where we belong—and equally important, I think: they are not shared with outsiders. (54)

In *PrairyErth*, find and describe at least three examples of people’s behaviors that to your mind serve as illustrations of what Jackson describes here.

7) Read “In the Quadrangle: Cedar Point” and meditate for a while on this passage in particular: “A couple of days ago a man in Cottonwood said to me, *Nothing happens anymore in Cedar Pointless*. For years I’ve made a practice of seeing ‘nothing’ because I believe the American idea of ‘something’ usually ends up harming our perceptions and use of the land” (485). Make a visit to Cedar Point (or any of the towns other than Cottonwood Falls or Strong City) that you are curious about because of Heat-Moon’s description of it in the book, and plan to stay there for at least a couple of hours. (Note: Though we will be visiting several of these towns on our driving tour of the county, we will not stop at any one place for very long.) What do you observe there? Do you see anyone there? Does anyone speak to you while you are there? If so, what do you talk about? Assuming that what you see there, even if “nothing,” has any value, what might be lost if “the American idea of ‘something’ were imposed on it? Or, for that matter, what might be gained?

**Economy:**

1. Two chapters of *PrairyErth*, “Between Pommel and Cantle” and “In Ecstasy,” are about ranching in Chase County, told from different viewpoints. As you read, what details stand out to you as odd, curious, surprising, etc.? In the 20-odd years since *PrairyErth* was published, have any of these details changed for the better (or worse)? Do some research to find out.
2. Chase County has several small towns that, even 20-30 years ago, were in danger of dying completely. (This of course continues to be true of towns throughout rural America.) Even the larger towns of Cottonwood Falls and Strong City struggle to attract and keep businesses open. For this prompt, pick any of the towns described in *PrairyErth*, read its description carefully, and go out and pay it a visit to see how it compares with that description. (Note that our November field trip will consist of a driving tour of many of these towns, but we will not be stopping at any of them for very long.) Also, read the article “What’s the Use of Small Towns?” (found in the Canvas module titled "Flint Hills Articles"), keeping in mind that though this article is 50 years old, its thinking about small towns is still very much relevant today. Assuming that a thriving community is one that meets its citizens’ basic needs, discuss what the town you have chosen has or lacks that makes it or keeps it from being a healthy community. What businesses, if it has any, seem to exist to serve residents who actually live there, and which ones seem intended to serve tourists or travelers?
3. “On the Town: The Emma Chase” is a story about one restaurant, but it is also the story of the difficulties restaurants and other businesses face in small towns. (You may be interested to know that right around the publication of *PrairyErth*, someone re-opened the Emma Chase and kept it open until 2014; in 2015, the space became Keller Feed and Wine Co., but it closed in 2017.) Call or e-mail a business owner in Chase County or contact the Chase County Chamber of Commerce and ask them to share with you some of the positives and negatives of starting and running a small business in that area.
4. Read closely Lloyd Soyez’s description of farming in “Beyond the Teeth of the Dragon.” What do you learn about how farming in the Flint Hills was conducted during the time Heat-Moon was writing the book (mid- to late-1980s)? Do some research into the state of farming in the Flint Hills today—information such as the amount of land under cultivation, kinds of crops grown there, etc.—and draw comparisons between Soyez’s account and what you learn.
5. Read and think carefully and seriously about Heat-Moon’s conversation with Wes Jackson of The Land Institute in “To Consult the Genius of the Place in All” (and be sure to think about the meaning of that title as well). Jackson’s description of agriculture is very different from Lloyd Soyez’s description of farming in “Beyond the Teeth of the Dragon,” and also very different from much agriculture today. Indeed, what Jackson describes, if it were adopted on a large scale, would reshape far more than farm work. Even if you don’t live in a farming town, how do you think your life would be different if such practices were to become widespread in this country? Do you think your life would be “better” or “worse” than it is now? Why?
6. Carefully read and think about pp. 423 (bottom paragraph)-429 of “In the Quadrangle: Elk,” in particular about how Chase County’s history and present existence are shaped by the fact that much (most?) of the county’s land is owned by people who don’t actually live there, and that one of its most important industries, tourism, encourages people to visit and spend money, but not stay.