



Photo courtesy of Betty Moffett

Betty Moffett taught for almost thirty years in Grinnell College's Writing Lab, where she learned a great deal from her students. Her stories have appeared in a number of journals and magazines, including The MacGuffin, The Storyteller, and The Wapsipinicon Almanac. She and her husband, Sandy, write songs for and play with The Too Many String Band.

My Prairie

BETTY MOFFETT

My husband Sandy works with a small, committed group which purchased and is restoring to prairie a tract of land in southern Iowa. They call these rugged 700 acres Pleasant Grove, a name I find inappropriate. It's too large to be a grove and too rough to be pleasant. Though appreciative of its deer, wild turkey, and blackberries, I am put off by the labor this land requires—planting, mowing, burning—and by its size. I could get lost there, and tired.

Tiny by comparison, the patch of prairie I consider my own is across the road, field, and railroad track from our house. Five years ago, Sandy planted this seven acre spot in a mix of native grasses and forbs. Like Pleasant Grove, it had been over-farmed. Some places have eroded badly. It's bounded on three sides by Little Bear Creek, and because areas of it are always damp-to-wet, it attracts Canadian geese as they migrate south in the fall. We coveted what we've christened the Goose Field for years before we were able to buy it in a ninety-nine acre farm package. It's a kind of oblong bowl, sheltered from wind even in winter, and I regard this small, wild place as mine, even though I've done precious little work on the making of it.

Sometimes I feel like a taker in a gathering of givers, since I'm attracted to the prairie largely for what it gives me, not the other way around. When I walk there, I can believe the Earth's heart is still beating strong and steady. I go to the prairie in three ways—with my dogs, on my horse, and with people I like, or may like. Each way is different; each way makes me see the land fresh.

Going with the dogs is good in fall and winter, and it's best when all three dogs can come. Hyde and Shiek (for Poweshiek County) are ours; Lucky is a grand-dog, who visits. Labs all, Shiek is the color of

Iowa topsoil; Lucky, of Fall switch grass; and Hyde is brown. The dogs guarantee action: pheasants rise up, wings clattering; rabbits sprint in zigzags down the path and into the tall grasses; an occasional deer arcs over the creek and disappears up the hill. The ecstatic canine trio run from scent to scent—mouse, raccoon, coyote—and then plunge down the bank to the creek. Depending on the season, they play in the water, slide on the ice, bite at the snow, finding joy in whatever they encounter.

When snow falls on the prairie, the dogs and I all notice tracks, they with their vivid noses, I with my eyes. Rabbits make lines of quotation marks; pheasants, blurry fleur-de-lis. Mice burrow under the snow, and then their tunnels collapse, leaving what looks like the trails of snow snakes.

Seeing the prairie from horseback is an entirely different deal. While keeping company with the dogs draws my attention to the prairie's wild residents, my little horse Gwyneth encourages me to concentrate on plants—first and foremost because she likes to eat them. In the late spring and early summer, before the flies and heat get discouraging, Gwen is tempted by gray-headed cone flowers and bee balm. We strive for compromise. First, on the path around the prairie, she gives me a walk-trot-canter tour of the grasses and flowers. On her back I have the perfect vantage point to see over and into the burgeoning feast. Then I dismount in an especially appealing patch of grasses, and she indulges herself.

Of course, Gwyneth and I encounter fauna as well. A covey of quail sometimes bursts from under her feet; once she kicked and killed a hen pheasant who barked behind her. She feigns fear at each of these meetings, and I have to stay alert to keep my seat. Gwyneth has evolved a game of being scared with a blue heron who fishes every summer in Little Bear Creek. We are trotting rhythmically along. The path curves toward the creek. Horse and heron simultaneously spot each other. Gwyneth snorts, jumps, and wheels. The

heron squawks furiously and lifts off, leaving a stream of white behind him. The next day he's back again, and we repeat the scene.

Taking people to my little prairie complicates the issue. Unlike Gwyneth and the dogs, they have multiple reasons for being there—to exercise, to identify a kind of golden rod, to have a good talk, to plant a willow, let a house-bound dog run, burn reed canary grass, sit in the sun. I don't ask many people, and I prefer that they come in ones or twos. Established friends are fine. We can talk or not, as we pass through the sounds and smells of this piece of country. I pretty much know

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what their reactions will be, and they pretty much understand my obsession. Acquaintances are harder. I dread over-enthusiasm: "Oh, it's just perfect. Can't you imagine the early settlers..." and lack of appreciation: "Looks like weeds to me." So I am cautious.

I do like to bring my grandchildren. Eva and Lilly, one and three, don't yet love my prairie. I think it's too big and open for them, as Pleasant Grove is for me. And negotiating badger holes, horse poop, and grasses four times their height is discouraging. I respect their opinions, and hope they change in time. Alex, at six, likes this land. We sail stick boats down the creek. He has helped build a bridge, plant a cottonwood, and control a tiny prairie fire. He has seen a rabbit killed by a hawk, and he recognizes the tracks of deer, raccoon—and dog. He knows this land is partly, temporarily, his, and that the grasses are feeding it and making it strong again. He will be able to tell stories about this prairie that begin with "When I was a boy..."

Compared to Pleasant Grove's wild expanse, my prairie is a small, mild wilderness. But hawks, quail, deer, milkweed and stiff goldenrod, goldfinches, orioles, and monarchs find refuge there. And so do I. 🌿