



Wolf Creek 1945

Under a Wide Sky

GROWING AT THE SOUTHEAST CORNER of the Moore house, the giant Siberian elm, its trunk fifteen feet in circumference, dwarfs the ruins of the old homestead. Towering cottonwoods and locusts shade the concrete outline of the boarding house foundation. North, out past the flat of sage and grass, Wolf Creek is screened from view by a running stand of hackberry trees, willows, western soapberry and cottonwoods. Salt cedar and eastern red cedar—both invasive, introduced species—fill in among the native trees.

Pictures of the homestead, taken about 1904, show a few thin trees planted along the yard fence. Outside the fence no sage is in evidence, but the grass has been grazed down to bare ground. The Wolf Creek flood plain, heavily grazed and scoured by regular floods, appears as a wide sandy expanse with the occasional cottonwood holding onto a steep bank, and small groves of native trees up side draws and creeks.

A 1919 photo shows that the trees around the house provided good shade. The huge Siberian elm that shades the house now is not even in evidence as a seedling in the photo. Out south of the house, a heavy growth of sagebrush is established on the hard-grazed pasture. Another photo from this period pictures May Moore Wright sitting atop the root ball of a large cottonwood toppled in a Wolf Creek flood.

Thanks to a shallow water table the yard trees



*May Wright after
Wolf Creek flood*



Wolf Creek Valley circa 1905

hung on through the drought and dust of the 1930's. Pastures still showed heavy grazing use and lack of adequate moisture. Better rainfall returned in the 1940's. The results of flood control and better conservation, which cut wind erosion and overgrazing, are evident in a 1945 photograph showing the grass-covered banks flanking a narrowed Wolf Creek.

Hard-grazed, drilled, plowed, and pumped, the Texas Prairie Rivers Region—in the historically short span of time between 1887, when A.B. Moore settled on his Wolf Creek section, and the present—has seen incredible change. In combination with the drastic climate swings of the Plains, the human-wrought changes—either knowingly or resulting from the best of intentions—have at times been destructive, even approaching cataclysmic.

But the hard lessons of nurturing and sustainable care of the land also figure into the equation of change. The land under the wide sky can be helped to heal. Increasing and thriving along Wolf Creek, wild turkeys use the giant elm on the Moore place as a nightly roost. Flocks of lesser prairie chickens fly long and low into wide sweeps of bluestem grass where there once were meager patches of plowed ground.

“The prairie, in all its expressions, is a massive, subtle place, with a long history of contradiction and misunderstanding. But it is worth the effort at comprehension. It is, after all, at the center of our national identity.”

WAYNE FIELDS, FROM “LOST HORIZON” (1988)



The shell of a long-dead cottonwood tree is held together with baling wire and a broken parlor stove section. Roof tin, backing the crack in the gray wood, hints at the great reservoir of underground water that nourishes life on the plains. A door of worn Moore house kitchen flooring, with a brass spool from a windmill check for a pull, frames out a random collection from the land: (top to bottom) armadillo vertebra and a wingless “locust” grasshopper; then devil’s claw and jimsonweed seed pods with armadillo plate; a deer vertebra with turtle shell plates and a sagebrush stob; and finally a calf vertebra surrounded by some 1877 Brunell four-point barbwire from the Wright ranch near Glazier, Texas. Inside are critters and scenes from the rolling plains country drained by Wolf Creek and the Canadian River.

