

## WinkWorld September 2002

### Joan's Real World: Prairie Pedagogy

In what follows is a quick glimpse into this past month on the South Dakota ranch. The intense heat of July is gone; the drought continues with a vengeance. We had two rains in the past month: .13 and .08. The prairies are brown in every direction. The wind seems to be the one constant, but the prairie fires controlled the month of August

### August 2002: Prairie Fires

As I write this, Dean is gone again fighting another prairie fire, which have been numerous this past month. Too numerous.

Each rancher has a water tank on the back of the pickup, or on a trailer. The minute a fire is spotted in the community, the phones ring and trucks race down the highway and on to the gravel roads. The community can extend easily 50 miles in any direction. The small towns in a 100 miles radius send their more sophisticated units to help fight the fire. However, it appears that the ranchers are consistently the first on the fire lines.

The most significant fire this month burned approximately 1500 acres and threatened the homes of several. When the call came, it was from a young mom with three pre-K children at home alone, and the fire was approaching their trailer. I'll never forget the terror in her voice as she asked for her husband, who was on our ranch helping us fence.

At the end of that very long day, that particular young family was safe, as was their home. The fire had been stopped within a 100 yards of their trailer house. However, the emotional scars they, and many others carry, will last a long time. There were several near-misses, as pickups bounced through the thick smoke. One young man's pickup stalled out in the smoke; the fire swept over his truck, but the fast-moving flames miraculously did not set it on fire. Another neighbor charged in and picked him up. In the confusion, they drove right back into the smoke, but eventually were able to drive out of it. Another neighbor bounced out of the back of a pickup and tried to outrun the fire. He tripped and was engulfed in flames. A helicopter took him to the nearest hospital 75 miles away. He eventually died. Another neighbor was charged with arson. The arraignment was yesterday.

### The Prairie Wind: The One Constant

Friday, August 16: 100 degrees 6 p.m.

Saturday, August 17: 40 degrees, 7 a.m.

However, this is not a story about a drastic and rapid change in temperature. This is a story about the constant prairie wind.

During the day on Friday, the radio had warned of a weather front with sustained winds of 50 MPH and gusts to 75 MPH was moving directly towards the ranch. We believed the radio, as we have experienced this before. However, we did not know that we would be able to see the front arrive.

Here is how it happened. It was about 6 p.m. and Dean and I were on the screened porch in

the 100-degree heat. Dean decided to go back out to finish his fencing around a bog hole so the cows would not get stuck and die. A bog hole is a dam drying up. Last month I told you that we did not get a single bale of hay. Now, the dams are drying up.

As Dean left through the south door to put on his boots, I walked out with him and looked to the West, where I saw a huge dark cloud, covering the horizon. We stared in shock and assumed it to be another prairie fire.

Dean ran to the pickup, which already had the water tank on the trailer hooked up to it. I looked up the lane as he roared out. I ran to the house for my shoes. In the time it took me to put on shoes and come back outside, I knew that this would not be anything we could stop. The dark cloud now covered the western sky from north to south and was coming right for the ranch.

I ran for my car and flew up the lane. When I came to the top of the north ridge, only a few hundred yards from the house, I could see the entire sky from north to south was an enormous charcoal gray moving wall. The dark sky charged towards me. As it came within a couple city blocks, I realized that it was dust, not smoke. The cattle along the lane stared nervously, also, at the wall of dust. When I arrived at the main road, 3/4 miles away, I knew I had to return to the ranch. On the dirt lane, I turned around in my new little red Saturn VUE. I could see the wall of dust as it rapidly covered the front fender, the car hood, and the front window. I looked up through my glass sun top and watched it move across the top of the car to the back of the car. Within seconds I was totally engulfed in dust. As I drove back, there were many times when I felt the car slipping towards the ditch. There were other times when I completely had to stop, as there was zero visibility.

I eventually got to the ranch and put the car into the garage, and Ginny, my Labrador, and I ran through the dirt and wind to the house. Our 50 MHP sustained wind with 75 MPH had arrived.

All of this time, Dean was out driving around for fear the wind would also bring smoke. It did not. He arrived home about an hour later. The wind and dust howled throughout the night. The next morning it was not only, dirty everywhere, it was also chilly: 40 degrees. The heat had been broken.

## The Drought

Last month I told you what the drought looks like on the prairies. The record books indicate that this is the most severe drought since the 1930's. However, some of the locals who lived through that drought say that this is worse, because during the 1930's, they had hay, even though it was only baled green thistles. Now, we have no bales.

The tomato plants did not set a single tomato, in spite of the fact that they are planted in huge tractor tires which serve as raised beds. The tomatoes had good soil and good water, but still the heat destroyed the blossoms. Now, the plant leaves are burned black from the wind.

## Threshing Bee Dance

The week following the famed Harley Davidson Sturgis Rally, another traditional event takes place near Sturgis: The Threshing Bee. Hundreds of vintage tractors, all in excellent condition arrive from many states. Huge steam-powered tractors with iron wheels and

loaded with wood for their steam engines stage a parade out in the country. The tractors date back to 1913; those that come from the 1920's and 1930's seems almost modern.

We went to the dance in a building, not much larger than our garage. The walls were lined with old cream separators, milk bottles, cream cans, and typewriters. The accordion /piano/drummer band played polkas and waltzes. "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" was the last song of the evening. As we left, we mused on the fact that mine was probably the only little G4 Mac Titanium waiting in the car. I wrote in the car as we drove home 2 hours in the dark.

### The Coyote

We have lots of coyotes, but I had never seen one right in front of our front door until about a week ago.