Kansas 1972 Podcast
Episode 4: Think Globally, Act Locally

SERIES INTRODUCTION

Tracy Quillin:
This series was made possible by the Friends of Humanities Kansas.

Kara Heitz:
Welcome to Kansas 1972. A lot happened during that pivotal year, including the founding of Humanities Kansas. So, in celebration of our 50th anniversary, we'll be telling stories from that era of Kansas history. So, tune in, chill out, and get the lowdown on Kansas 1972.

EPISODE INTRODUCTION

Friends of the Earth PSA, Janis Ian, 1973
[Singing w/ music] "I'm a friend of the Earth and I used to go swimming in clear fragrant waters that rolled in the sun. And I swam real good for as long as I could till the energy crisis begun. And water strained the radiation leaking from the plant by the hill, by the pond, by the sea. And the fish all up and died with me not far behind, and I'll swim no more in the sea…"

[Fade out music as Kara starts talking]

Kara Heitz:
In 1972, the same year Humanities Kansas was founded, Congress passed the Clean Water Act, the United Nations held its first Conference on the Human Environment, the Club of Rome published "The Limits to Growth," and the Keep America Beautiful campaign tried to persuade people to stop throwing trash pretty much everywhere but waste-cans.

The era of the late 1960s and early 1970s is really when environmental issues become important concerns for many Americans. When the first Earth Day was celebrated in 1970, tens of thousands of individuals across the country engaged in community clean up projects and listened to speakers extol the importance of environmental conservation.

And Kansans were part of this larger awakening. In the early 1970s, the Kansas Committee for the Humanities (now Humanities Kansas) issued a number of grants to Kansas communities that facilitated discussions on issues like the effects of industrialization on air and water quality, land use concerns, and how environmental problems would affect Kansans' quality of life.

In today's episode, we'll hear Kansas stories from this era of environmental issues entering the public consciousness.

We'll learn about plans by the US government to put a nuclear waste disposal site in Kansas.

Audio Clip:
The search for a solution has led the Atomic Energy Commission to the prairies of Kansas.

Kara Heitz:
And how a bipartisan political effort in the state eventually quashed this idea.

Audio Clip:
Kansas, and no other state in the Union, is morally or legally obligated to serve as a garbage dump …

Kara Heitz:
You'll hear about early efforts in the 1970s to establish a Tallgrass Prairie Preserve.

Audio Clip:
We've had bills and in and out of Congress for preserving our national park status in Kansas. And because of the local opposition that all those bills died in Congress.

Kara Heitz:
And how one woman's integration of art and science helped bring public attention to the prairie.

Audio Clip:
She saw that something had to be done if we were going to preserve this amazing landscape.

Kara Heitz:
But first, we head deep into the ground in central Kansas.

Segment 1 - Nuclear Waste Disposal Site

Down a mine shaft in central Kansas, more than a thousand feet underground is a huge, abandoned salt mine where the Atomic Energy Commission hopes to literally salt away, steadily mounting piles of radioactive waste.

The Wichita Eagle, Dec. 31st, 1972
"Kansans in 1972 proved they could buck big government and win when they stood together against the Atomic Energy Commission's proposal to set up a nuclear waste dump in Kansas. Their actions prompted Kansas news editors to list the fight as the number 1 Kansas new story of 1972 …"

Kara Heitz:
While the attempt by the US government to use the salt mines outside of Lyons, Kansas as a storage facility for nuclear waste was the biggest news story in Kansas in 1972, the story stretches back a bit farther. The site selection was initially announced in June of 1970, but it took two years for Kansans who opposed this measure to prevail. And they did indeed prevail, since today there is no nuclear waste buried deep underground in Kansas … at least that we know of, right?

But before we get into the specifics of the Kansas part of this story, I wanted to get a better understanding of the larger history of nuclear waste in the U.S. and why the Lyons site was

identified in the first place. To do so, I spoke with Tom Wellock, the historian at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. This is the US government agency that regulates civilian use of radioactive materials and was established in 1974. Its precursor agency was the Atomic Energy Commission, or AEC.

Tom Wellock:
The Atomic Energy Commission was born out of World War Two, but early on it was mostly about secrecy, the Cold War, and protecting our atomic secrets. That ultimately changes. In 1953, Dwight Eisenhower gives his speech to the United Nations, the *Atoms for Peace* address, where he basically proposes that instead of excessive secrecy that the United States was going to bring the blessings of atomic energy to the rest of the world.

Eisenhower, *Atoms for Peace* speech, December 8th, 1953
The United States knows that peaceful power from atomic energy is no dream of the future. The capability, already proved, is here today. Who can doubt that, if the entire body of the world's scientists and engineers had adequate amounts of fissionable material with which to test and develop their ideas, that this capability would rapidly be transformed into universal, efficient, and economic usage?

Tom Wellock:
And so, from that speech, we have a 1954 act, and it gives the AEC a much more public role to promote the blessings of nuclear energy, both for the use of isotopes, nuclear power plants and the like, any kind of uses that might benefit society. So, the AEC by the 1950s and 1960s is interested in trying to encourage the use of nuclear power plants. And so that means you're going to create a new stream of waste essentially that is produced by commercial licensees. And so, by the 1960s that is becoming an increasing concern.

Kara Heitz:
In the 1960s, the AEC initially looked at sites in Washington state and Idaho for disposal of these waste streams. Issues with potential tank leakages raised concerns in Washington. And in Idaho, objections from a prominent US senator from the state eventually took it out the running. By 1970, they needed another option.

Tom Wellock:
So that means that the AEC immediately has to kind of pivot and quickly find a solution to these kind of growing waste concerns. And they had, because of the research that had been done in the 1950s, recommending salt formations, they had begun doing research that and they had basically contracted with a US soil company in the Lyons area to do research. It wasn't, they weren't doing anything with radioactive wastes, they were simply doing tests to see, to answer technical questions about whether salt formations would actually be appropriate.

1971-02-17 ABC_Vanderbilt (nuclear waste).mp4
The search for a solution has led the Atomic Energy Commission to the prairies of Kansas for Project Salt Vault. Scientists believe the vast deposits of salt out here will make an ideal container for radioactive materials. They started some experiments here about three years ago to prove the point.

Kara Heitz:

Large concentrations of salt deposits can be found deep underground across central Kansas. These formed around 250 million years ago, when the ancient ocean that once covered the region evaporated.

Salt mining as an industry in Kansas began in the late 1800s with the Lyons salt mines opening in 1917. Operations in Lyons and elsewhere in the area still continue to the present. Today, probably the best-known salt mines in the state are in Hutchinson, which is home to the Underground Salt Museum. It's actually a pretty cool attraction. I highly recommend it. The Hutchinson salt mines are also noteworthy for providing storage for high-security items that require constant temperature and humidity, such as classic films and valuable artworks.

But there are other possible uses for the salt mines, such as storing materials you kind of want to get far away from people. So, in the late 1960s, the AEC started looking at the Lyons salt mines as a disposal solution for the waste produced by nuclear power plants.

So why put radioactive waste in salt mines?

1971-02-17 ABC_14283 Vanderbilt (nuclear waste).mp4
For one thing, salt is dry. Wherever there is salt, there can be no underground rivers that might be the source of somebody's drinking water. Salt is also stable, unlike rock, which can shift with an earthquake or the passage of time. It's estimated this salt has been here for 200 million years. Burial of the waste is to begin in 1975, here in vaults like this. It'll be shipped here in canisters. A dozen or so canisters will be sunk into holes in a single vault. The holes in the vault will then be filled with salt. Heat from the radiation will fuse the salt into a hard and leak-proof substance.

Kara Heitz:
But the burying of the waste did not begin in 1975. A coalition of Kansans from across the political spectrum made sure that this never happened.

Interestingly enough, much of that opposition did not initially come from many residents of Lyons.

1971-02-17 ABC_14283 Vanderbilt (nuclear waste).mp4
Robert Briscoe, Mayor:
Well, of course, the hopes are real high that this storage of atomic waste in the salt mine will provide jobs locally, real time aid to the economic area here. But, even more important, we hope that this will be a contribution to American power development by providing a place to store these wastes.

Kara Heitz:
That's Robert Briscoe, the mayor of Lyons at the time, being interviewed by a national news program in February of 1971.

1971-09-27 NBC:
Most of Lyon's 4500 people accepted the government proposal not only because federal money would stimulate the local economy, but also, they believed it was their patriotic duty.

1971-03-21 CBS
Walter Pile, Lyons Chamber of Commerce:

We feel like perhaps it's a method whereby we can be of service to our fellow human beings. And sure, there's some hazard. Anybody would be stupid to say there wasn't a bit of hazard. So, if this is the logical way forward, why shouldn't we accept the risk?

1971-03-21 CBS
John Saylor*, Lyons Daily News*:
Basically, it boils down to trusting what the what the AEC says it will do, which apparently the rest of the nation does.

Kara Heitz:
While many residents of Lyons seemed to have faith in the AEC, this sentiment was not shared by others in the state.

1971-09-27 NBC
While Lyons residents didn't object to the project, scientists at the University of Kansas did. They were not convinced rock formations above the salt mine, where the nuclear waste was to be buried, could withstand the extreme heat generated by the radioactive material. University scientists feared the possibility of contamination. It was this argument that convinced a number of state and federal officials that more research was needed. Kansas Congressman Joseph Skubitz was one.

1971-09-27 NBC
Joe Skubitz, Member of Congress from Kansas:
Kansas, and no other state in the Union, is morally or legally obligated to serve as a garbage dump for the privately-owned plants in New York or in California. And to compel any state, Kansas or any state, to agree to do so without first proving the safety factor is just incredible to me.

Kara Heitz:
Joe Skubitz was a Republican member of the Kansas delegation to the U.S. House of Representatives. Skubitz represented a district that covered parts of southeast and south-central Kansas. And he became one of the most vocal opponents of the Lyons proposal.

Researchers from the Kansas Geological Survey at the University of Kansas had conducted their own study of the site in 1971, and their results were much more skeptical about the safety of the Lyons salt mines for storing this kind of waste. The KU study cited potential problems with leakage issues as well as concerns that the radioactive waste could not be retrieved if something goes wrong.

And this research conducted by local scientists contributed to a sense among some Kansans that the AEC needed to do a lot more to address safety issues.

1971-03-21 CBS_215619 Vanderbilt (nuclear waste).mp4
Ron Baxter, KS Sierra Club:
Our prime reason at this point in time for opposing this project is to make the AEC come in and establish that the project is in fact safe.

Kara Heitz:
That’s Ron Baxter, chair of the Kansas Sierra Club at the time.

Ron Baxter, KS Sierra Club:
They want to pat us on the head and say, “Well, now don't worry about it. Leave all this to us. We'll take care of it, and it'll be safe.” This is the same thing that they told the people on several other projects that it’s turned out have not had the degree of safety that citizens in those respective states thought at the time they were installed there.

Kara Heitz:
Baxter would be instrumental in the fight against the nuclear waste repository in Kansas. His efforts helped bring the story to national attention.

The Hutchinson News, October 18th, 1971
“Associated Press, Denver. The Rocky Mountain Executive Council of the Sierra Club took on the Atomic Energy Commission Sunday for the agency’s statements regarding the … nuclear waste depository at Lyons, Kansas. Ronald Baxter, chairman of the Kansas Sierra Club, said ‘the overwhelming sentiment in Kansas is to get the AEC out of the state. … This project is so bad that no other state will accept it, and the people of Kansas are beginning to get information concerning the poor prior record of the AEC in this area.’”

Kara Heitz:
From the perspective of 50 years later, this kind of position may not seem surprising. However, in the early 1970s, opposition to nuclear power had not really developed that much in the US. That really doesn’t happen until later in the decade, culminating with the Three Mile Island disaster in 1979. But, broader concerns about environmental issues were growing in the American public consciousness in the early 1970s, including in Kansas.

Again, Tom Wellock.

Tom Wellock:
There really is a tremendous movement in public opinion in 1969, in 1970, leading up to the National Environmental Policy Act, that, yeah, is certainly influencing the thinking of Kansas, you know, and good old Republican Kansas at this point has a Democratic governor, right? So, it's an era of possibility where, you know, environmental thinking is really changing dramatically.

Kara Heitz:
It’s noteworthy that the National Environmental Policy Act (which established the EPA in 1970) was passed under a Republican President, Richard Nixon. And while many politicians in Kansas are from the Republican party, like Rep. Joe Skubitz, Kansas had a popular Democratic governor at the time, Robert Docking. And Docking was also not the biggest fan of the AEC’s plan.

***Garden City Telegram*, January 20th, 1972**
Associated Press, Kansas City, Kansas. “Governor Robert Docking, saying he is not sure he can believe anything the Atomic Energy Commission says, has pledged to do everything he can to keep a nuclear waste depository out of Kansas.”

Kara Heitz:
Given the initial response of many Lyons residents, the AEC was not expecting this kind of opposition in Kansas. In retrospect, Tom Wellock says the AEC probably should have done more research on the suitability of the site before officially announcing it.

Tom Wellock:
I think they thought that there was not going to be significant opposition at the local level as long as they did their homework, produce the studies. And I think that leads to a major mistake by the AEC. They basically decide and defend on this location. They designate Lyons as their as their place before they had really completed all of the studies, and this kind of clearly offends people in Kansas. Part of this seems to be a misunderstanding on their part about what state level people wanted as far as research done before they made they made this choice. So, yes, so yet there's a disconnect in their communications with folks at the Kansas level versus what's going on at the headquarters in Washington, D.C.

Kara Heitz:
But even if the AEC had completed all the necessary research prior to announcing the Lyons site, or even if they had conducted additional research to investigate the potential issues brought up by the Kansas Geological Survey, one has to wonder if many Kansans still would have supported it. By 1972, it seems clear there are deeper objections going on than just “more research is needed.”

In February of 1972 the Kansas legislature adopted a resolution opposing the AEC’s proposed nuclear waste repository in Lyons. The resolution mentioned environmental hazards and insufficient research, but also cited objections of a different kind. Sen. Arden Booth (R-Lawrence) expressed these other concerns to the Associated Press on Feb. 7th, 1972.

***Garden City Telegram*, Feb. 7th, 1972**
“Even if it were safe, and we’re not sure it is according to the best information available, we don’t want the state of Kansas to become known as the atomic waste dump … We’ve had enough problems outlasting the Dust Bowl image. We need to be about improving our state’s image … and being known as the dumping ground for atomic waste certainly won’t help.”

Kara Heitz:
So fundamentally this is perhaps a PR issue. Kansas does not want to be seen as an environmental wasteland, yet again, in the popular imagination. That’s really bad for business.

Couple this argument with the bi-partisan objections of major politicians in Kansas, plus the advocacy of Ron Baxter and the Kansas Sierra Club, and the AEC kind of didn’t stand a chance. By the end of the summer of 1972, the federal government had given up on the Lyons site.

That’s the end of the Kansas side of the story, but like me I am sure you want to know - what happened to the nuclear waste? Where did it go?

Again, Tom Wellock.

Tom Wellock:
The 1970s was a period where you have growing political opposition to nuclear power generally.

You know, so this kind of sort of opposition that occurred in 1970, 71, when Lyons is most controversial, really has become a major full-blown movement by the late 1970s.

***The Nuclear Look*, Westinghouse, 1979**

In the beginning, energy from the atom was greeted as the savior of mankind. It would make the desert bloom. It would control weather. a little pellet would run the family car for a year. That was in the 1950s and early sixties. Then in 1969, in the years that followed, poison pens were directed like arrows at the nuclear power industry. Nuclear decisions became headline topics and subjects of national controversy.

Kara Heitz:
The failure at the Lyons site, combined with this growing opposition to nuclear power in the 1970s, pushes the US government to explore different avenues. Side-note: Kansas experienced some of these anti-nuclear power sentiments in the late 1970s with the construction of the Wolf Creek nuclear power plant, but opponents were unsuccessful and the plant went online in 1985. It's still in operation today, and generates 1,200 megawatts of electricity, which is enough to power 800,000 homes.

But back to nuclear waste.

After research on a number of sites, in 1987 Yucca Mountain in Nevada was identified as the best site for a deep geological depository of radioactive waste. Of course, just like the Lyons salt mines, the story does not end there. But unlike Lyons, the proposal drags on for decades. Opposition by local residents, Nevada politicians, and Native Americans in the region stalled the operations at the Yucca Mountain facility, until it was halted in 2010.

Currently, spent fuel rods and other high level radioactive wastes from nuclear power are stored at about 80 sites in 35 states, mostly at active and decommissioned nuclear power plants. This waste is typically enclosed in steel-lined concrete pools of water or in steel and concrete containers. And it's just sitting there, waiting to be moved to maybe Yucca Mountain or some other long-term storage facility.

Tom Wellock:
And that takes us back to where we are now, where we don't have a full solution to the problem.

Kara Heitz:
And part of me, as a Kansan, is happy it's not stored here. But I also recognize that, no matter one's view on nuclear power, this waste exists and needs to be stored somewhere safer. And all of these "not in my backyard" sentiments ultimately means these decisions will most likely be based on political calculations and not scientific research. In our next story we move from deep underground to the tall grasses above the earth.

Segment 2 - Patrician Duncan & the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve

***Survival on the Prairie*, NBC, 1970**
00:01:06:07 - 00:01:33:19
This is the prairie, sometimes called the American grassland or the Great Plains. It's an open, rolling land, uniquely American in its look and its animals. Yet its richness and productivity reach past our borders to touch the corners of the world. The Great American Prairie is an ancient land created perhaps 50 million years ago when the Rocky Mountains were thrust up, shedding the sedimentary material, which was to become the prairie soil. And the mountains also created the climatic conditions necessary for this vast inland sea of grass.

Kara Heitz:
The North American prairie stretches across the Great Plains from Saskatchewan in the north to Texas in the South, including most of Kansas. It contains three types of grasses - short, midgrass, and tall. The tallgrass prairie found mostly in the eastern portion of this region, at one time covered more than 170 million acres.

This rich landscape was home to indigenous peoples for centuries before European contact. But today only about 4% of the Tallgrass Prairie remains, due to over a hundred years of plowing, grazing, and other forms of agricultural use.

***Survival on the Prairie*, NBC, 1970**
00:02:27:06 - 00:03:09:22
Our buffalo strewn prairie is gone now. A few fence constricted herds are all that remain. Cattle have replaced buffalo in most of the western part of the grassland. And in the eastern part, corn and wheat now grow. But once big bluestem and Indian grass grew tall as a man on horseback. But the character of the prairie cannot be destroyed.

Kara Heitz:
The Flint Hills region of Kansas is where much of the Tallgrass Prairie still survives. And in 1996, a little over 10,000 acres of this vital ecosystem was set aside. Just north of Strong City sits the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, a public/private partnership between the National Park Service and the Nature Conservancy. But the story to protect this vanishing landscape goes back much farther.

***The Wichita Eagle*, April 28th, 1972**
The Wichita Eagle, April 28th, 1972. The best remaining areas of prairie tallgrass are in Kansas, and something will have to be done soon in Kansas if natural stands of this grass are to be preserved. A grassland park here would preserve, not only the native prairie grasses for viewing by future generations, but the animals using the grasslands.

Newsweek interview with Patricia Duncan, 05-26-1985
Well, as far as I can find out, it supported about 300 species of mammals and thousands of kinds of insects and other kinds of life, and I don't think the species of plants have ever really been counted. It's just almost countless. Well, the large mammals, of course, the buffalo, we uh, really characterizes the tallgrass prairie the most, I think. There are some elk still surviving. The grizzly bear long ago, left for the mountain regions. Some of these some of the mammals that we think of are just as mountain animals really were prairie animals, also. The eagle is almost gone. That's about it. There are lots of coyotes still out. There are no more prairie wolves, I believe of the prairie wolf, the large white wolf is gone.

Kara Heitz:
That’s Patricia Dubose Duncan, speaking on a national news program about the Tallgrass Prairie in Kansas.

The actions of many individuals and organizations were necessary to make the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve a reality. Efforts to conserve portions of the tallgrass prairie actually stretch back to the 1920s, with legislative attempts to create a Tallgrass Prairie Park emerging in the 1950s. But it’s the 1970s when the political momentum really starts to build. Larry Winn, a Republican member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Kansas, introduced bills to establish a Tallgrass Prairie National Park pretty much every year from 1971-1979. But

opposition from other local politicians and area ranchers blocked these efforts. It would take until the mid-1990s before a compromise was reached. The road to establishing a Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve was a long and complicated one.

For today, we're focusing on just one individual in this larger story, the artist Patricia DuBose Duncan, whose efforts in the 1970s were instrumental in spreading awareness about the both the beauty and scientific importance of this ecosystem.

Linda Duke:
She was a painter, a print maker, an expert at Japanese woodblock printing, a photographer, a naturalist and a student of the ecosystem, an activist who organized people on behalf of saving what's left of the tall grass prairie and really quite a special writer and the author of several books.

Kara Heitz:
That's Linda Duke, the director of the Beach Museum of Art at Kansas State University. We'll be hearing more from her throughout this story.

Patricia DuBose was a nature lover long before she became an artist. The daughter of a Boy Scout executive, her childhood was filled with camping, riding horses, and being exposed to the beauty of the natural world. She received an art degree from Washington University in St. Louis, where she met Herb Duncan, an architecture student. They fell in love, got married, and started their long life together.

Herb Duncan joined the Navy during the Korean War, and for part of his service they lived in Japan. During this time, Patricia became deeply connected to Japanese art and culture, including woodblock printmaking, an artform that would influence her work for the rest of her life.

In the late 1950s, Herb's service ended, and they moved to the Kansas City area, where Patricia continued to create and exhibit her artwork.

She applied to the MFA program at the University of Kansas in the 1960s, but was turned down, because, as her rejected letter stated:

KU MFA rejection letter
"... you are a mother with two children, in spite of your very impressive record of exhibitions and recommendations, we suggest that you stay at home with your children, and because our MFA program is very small, we must leave room for all male students as they, in time, will need to support a family."

Kara Heitz:
And we know from previous episodes of this podcast that kind of sexism was pretty common at the time.

Undeterred by this rejection, Patricia attended classes at the Kansas City Art Institute, and later became an instructor there. But she was restless. She wrote in her journal in January of 1967: "I must paint … it is the act of doing that seems to be the thing with me."

And just a few years later, her need for doing would be transformed, into a new medium - photography - and a new subject matter - the preservation of the Tallgrass Prairie.

Kara Heitz:
To help better understand Patricia Duncan's life and work, I spoke with Herb Duncan, a retired architect and Patricia's husband. Herb told me the story of how Patricia first learned about the tallgrass prairie.

Herb Duncan:
It all happened in June of 1971, when she saw an article in the *Kansas City Star* about a professor at Mammalogy at the University of Kansas, who has been trying to get a national tallgrass prairie park formed by the government for years. And he and other scientists had been trying to do this but getting nowhere because the public thought of the prairie as a place to drive across the state of Kansas as fast as possible to get to the Rocky Mountains. That's the perception, and they couldn't change it because their orientation was scientific and there was no excitement about the prairie the way that they presented it. So they were getting nowhere with the park.

Kara Heitz:
That mammology professor was Dr. E. Raymond Hall, a well-respected academic who had been at the University of Kansas since the 1940s. After reading that article, Patricia Duncan contacted Dr. Hall and together they visited a prairie preserve near Manhattan, Kansas.

Here's Patricia Duncan speaking about her first visit to the Tallgrass Prairie, in an interview from the 1980s.

Newsweek interview with Patricia Duncan, 05-26-1985
A very famous professor at Kansas University. Dr. E Raymond Hall, kind of took me under his wing. He's one of the great prairie scientists of the world and great mammologist, and he we went on many trips together and he painstakingly taught me from scratch what native grasses and plants and wildflowers and animals were on the prairie and what it used to look like.
And I just felt like it was an underdog landscape and needed some a champion.

Linda Duke:
Before that time, she had done various kinds of landscapes and experimented with different styles. But I really think from that point on her activism and her work as an artist just meshed completely.

Kara Heitz:
This meshing of art and activism, as Linda Duke just put it, came together through her love of the prairie. Again, Herb Duncan.

Herb Duncan:
And so Pat saw all the beauty there, and I think that's the day that she fell in love with the prairie because from then on, it was a seven-year adventure as an advocacy for the tallgrass park and probably the biggest proponent of it, from the standpoint of the beauty of the prairie, not the scientific part of just preserving a piece of land.

She told Dr. Hall., "You know, I can help you with this because if I photograph these beautiful flowers and the grasses and show them to people in presentations, they can't help but see why there should be a park."

Kara Heitz:
To deepen her artistic understanding, Patricia Duncan became a devoted student of the Tallgrass Prairie.

Herb Duncan:
Pat started out by going to the prairie and making herself familiar with the grasses and the prairie flowers. She really became an expert at what they were. Their common names, they're scientific names, and knew scientific equal to a scientist would know about such things. And she took photographs with her, with her camera and created slides of all these images.

Kara Heitz:
The preserve she visited is known as the Konza Prairie Biological Station, which is located outside of Manhattan in the Flint Hills region of Kansas. It was established by Kansas State University in 1971 for research and educational purposes.

But since Konza is a space for scientific investigation, it has limited public access. Duncan and others felt a separate park elsewhere in the Flint Hills was needed for the general public's enjoyment. So, she began using her camera to promote this idea.

The Wichita Beacon, July 8th, 1973:
The Wichita Beacon, July 8th, 1973. Patricia Duncan is a artist-photographer who is one of many Americans determined to save the lush native tallgrasses that once covered 400,000 square miles of prairie. Their beauty and variety are indicated in her photos. The pictures reflect the greatness and subtlety of the prairie in long-range views and closeups of grasses, sunflowers, milkweeds, and other native plants. She would like others to be able to grasp the beauty and cohesiveness of the prairie ecology and see the contrast between closely-cropped pastures and the luxuriant growth on the original prairie.

Kara Heitz:
Duncan would travel around the state, giving slideshow presentations of her photographs, sometimes with Dr. Hall lecturing about the prairie environment. She also exhibited her photos at various sites, helping people to visualize both the beauty and ecological complexity of the tallgrass prairie.

In 1973, Patricia was one of the founders of a group called Save the Tallgrass Prairie, a grassroots political action group dedicated to persuading lawmakers to set aside a portion of the tallgrass prairie for protection. While they were one of multiple organizations promoting the idea of the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in the region, Save the Tallgrass Prairie was notable for organizing a series of conferences, the first one taking place in 1973.

Again, Herb Duncan.

Herb Duncan:
It was a real well-attended conference, and they had a program of 16 speakers. And Pat was the moderator and connected to all this. And the people that came David Barrett, who is the president and founder of Friends of the Earth. Richard Curry, who is with the United States Department of Interior. Dr. Hall was there who was still advocating and supporting Pat, Dr. Hulbert, who was the founder of the Konza Prairie that became a favorite place for a path to photograph, Ron Kataski Who was the head of the National Audubon Society in Kansas, Gerald Onefeather who was the president of the Oglala Sioux Landowners Association. All these

people came and gave talks, and they had a stimulating meeting. They just we were always supportive the park.

The Iola Register, October 1st, 1973

Associated Press. Elmdale, Kansas. October 1st, 1973.
An estimated 300 people interested in a proposal for a tallgrass prairie national park gathered here this weekend. And some of them left feeling they were at least one step closer to a park. The conference brought together park supporters, environmentalists, and a good number of Flint Hills residents and cattlemen. Rep. Larry Winn, Republican from Kansas, who introduced a bill in July to authorize Congress to fund a prairie park, said his bill faced an uphill fight.

Kara Heitz:

So why exactly was the park an uphill battle? Why were some Kansans opposed to the idea of a Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve?

Herb Duncan:

I mean, it sounds like everybody would love the beauty of the prairie. But there were also the people that own the prairie. The ranchers and the ranchers were absolutely, totally opposed to the idea of a national park because they thought it would be like Disneyland and people would come and tear up the park, the prairie with their cars and too many people.

The Parsons Sun, August 30th, 1973

The Parsons Sun, August 30th, 1973. Tallgrass Prairie National Park advocated and opponents squared off today in testimony before the Kansas Legislature. Representatives of Save the Tallgrass Prairie Inc. urged preservation of a park area where the public could “learn about a major ecological system.”
…
Claire Robison, president-elect of the Kansas Livestock Association said “this land is in pretty good hands. People are trying to manage it. Nobody wants to destroy the land.”
Paul Fleener, lobbyist for the Farm Bureau, testified that the establishment of a park would have adverse effects on agriculture generally and livestock production in particular. “These lush grasses have been maintained through the years by the tireless efforts of livestock producers and are, today, in the best condition they have ever been in.”

Kara Heitz:

Throughout the 1970s, during all these conflicts over the preserve, Patricia Duncan kept a journal while she was visiting the prairie and taking photographs. In 1978, these writing and photos were published as a book called “Tallgrass Prairie: The Inland Sea.” It’s a beautiful collection of images and words about the Tallgrass ecosystem from one of its fiercest advocates. You can still find used copies around. I picked on up and found it incredibly moving.

I spoke to Linda Duke about this book.

Linda Duke:

I was looking at Patricia's book. It's really a beautiful book of her writing and photographs called Tall Grass Prairie, the Inland Sea and Stewart Udall, who had been the secretary of the interior under both Kennedy and Johnson, was an ally of Patricia's. She sought his help in this effort to save the tallgrass prairie. And I was really struck by something, he wrote in the foreword to her book. He said that there was hostility locally and lack of awareness nationally to the idea that we were losing this precious ecosystem. And so there there was quite a lot of effort put into how not only the general public, but lawmakers could be educated on that point.

Kara Heitz:
Probably Duncan's most significant effort at educate people about the tallgrass prairie was an exhibit for the Smithsonian Institution she created in 1976.

Linda Duke:
She began working with the Smithsonian to put together a traveling exhibition that was made up of her photographs and based on the research that she gathered, it consisted of 40 panels. The title was *The Tall Grass Prairie: An American Landscape*, and it was toured by the Smithsonian and visited, I believe, all 50 states between 1976 and 1986. So, it was a huge effort to get more people to understand how unique and precious that landscape was.

Herb Duncan:
Her exhibition turned out to be one of the most popular ones. It went to all 50 states. There were three copies that went by overland truck for 10 years all over the country, and it was spectacular. I mean, she organized it. She found all the images. There were 40 framed pictures of our panels, actually, that were oak framed. They were 40 by 30 and 20 by 30 of the historic prairie and the prairie today, which was 1976. It was a wonderful presentation.

Kara Heitz:
By the time her Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition ended its run in the mid-1980s, Patricia Duncan had been advocating for a Tallgrass Prairie Preserve for over 15 years. In a 1985 interview, Duncan expresses her optimism a preserve would soon be established.

Newsweek interview with Patricia Duncan, 05-26-1985
Well, at this point after I have really been battling for this thing myself since 1970 and we've had bills and in and out of Congress for preserving our national park status in Kansas. And because of the local opposition that all those bills died in Congress. But this new preserve idea, I think, presents the best and the most realistic chance to tie up the land. At least, you know, we're talking many, many generations to come, and we want something for our children to experience what, for instance, my grandmother experienced.

Kara Heitz:
It took another decade of negotiations, but in the 1990s, an agreement was reached after Kansas Senator Nancy Kassebaum created a Commission that brought together the various advocates and skeptics to find a compromise. And in 1996, the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve finally opened as a public/private partnership.

Herb Duncan remembers when Patricia attended the opening ceremony.

Herb Duncan:
She was there at the dedication in 1996 and was singled out by Nancy Kassebaum for what she had done and for the fact that she had had a major part in creating a park or the beginning of a park, which exists today and is seen by hundreds of people every year.

Kara Heitz:
That could be the end of the story how Tallgrass Prairie Preserve supporters like Patricia Duncan finally realized their dream decades later. However, the influence of Patricia's work about the prairie does not end there.

Herb Duncan and Linda Duke tell the story of the second life of Patricia's traveling Smithsonian exhibit.

Herb Duncan:
Years later, Pat got a call from the dean of the School of Architecture at Kansas State University, who happened to be a friend of ours. And he said that a janitor had found these boxes in the bottom of the School of Architecture building under a stairway. And he thought Pat was related to them. And we went up and opened the boxes, and it was a copy of the exhibition all years later.

Linda Duke:
They had found these 40 large photographic panels that make up the exhibition, and they had to go. And so, they wanted to know if the museum could take them. And they are big and heavy, and we are really pressed for storage space here at the museum. And Cheryl Collins, the late Cheryl Collins, who is the director of the Riley County Historical Museum, agreed to take them on a pretty temporary basis. And so we did get them moved over there and they stayed there for a couple of years. But then I got the call from Cheryl to say, "You know, I'm really sorry, but we just we can't keep these." And so, at that point, I was able to get a photographer to go over and take professional, high quality digital photographs of each panel. We had the idea to preserve those both on our website and on a large touchscreen installation that we were working on as part of the Prairie Studies initiative. We wanted people to be able to learn about Konza Prairie, to be able to learn about native plants and to be able to learn about artworks in the museum's collection that were directly inspired by this landscape.

Kara Heitz:
You can view digital images of all the original 40 exhibition panels both at the Beach Museum of Art at K-State and on the Beach Museum's website. An additional digital panel was added in 2015, with new text by Patrician Duncan reflecting upon the history of the exhibit. Patricia Duncan had an over six-decade career as a multi-disciplinary artist, but the prairie was never far from her mind. The Duncans moved from Kansas City to Maine in 2003, although Patricia had had a studio there since the 1980s. Herb Duncan told me the ocean waves of the Maine coastline reminded Patricia of the movement of the tallgrass prairie, blowing in the wind. Perhaps Duncan's most iconic work is her painting "Red Prairie with Bison," often referred to as just "Red Bison," on view currently at the Beach Museum of Art.

Herb Duncan:
It's really Pat's signature painting because she was always a painter first. It shows a sort of ghost-like bison on a red prairie with a bright blue sky in the background.

Linda Duke:
Red bison is, like many of Patricia's works, kind of complicated. It's a collage work, so it's a painting, but there are pieces of paper glued onto it and there are even pieces of photographs glued onto it and then painted over. This looming form of a bison is the main feature. But the bold red color just conjures up so many things about the prairie to viewers, not only the majestic sunsets that we often see over the prairie, but also the power of prairie fires.

Duncan's legacy, science and art

Kara Heitz:

Duncan painted Red Bison in 1990 but it was gifted to the Beach Museum in 1998 by former Senator Nancy Kassebaum, who, if you remember, was another instrumental figure in the establishment of the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve.

And this connection between political action and art reminds me of another connection in Duncan's work - the interplay of art and science.

Earlier in the episode, Linda Duke mentioned the Prairie Studies Initiative. This is a program at Kansas State University that brings together artists, scientists, and others with a deep knowledge of the prairie to create conservations across disciplinary divides. Part of their mission is to employ the arts to make academic research about the prairie accessible to a broader public.

Patrician Duncan participated in multiple events at the Prairie Studies Initiative, and her work is the perfect example of this intertwining of art and science.

Linda Duke:
I think Patricia is, to me, an interdisciplinary figure, not only in that she pursued with great skill many works in very different media, but also her ongoing passionate interest in science and the science that allowed her to learn about and argue on behalf of the land. Patricia is a good example of the ways art can help us understand complicated things. And anything to do with the science of the environment are all the things we've learned about the microbial qualities of the soil underneath the unplowed prairie, or about the potential of the grasses and other plants that grow there. They're all complicated interrelationships. And I think Patricia lived that as an artist and maximized that in her efforts to help people understand the landscape.

Kara Heitz:
Patricia Duncan passed away in September of 2021. But her legacy lives on in her incredible body of artistic work, which you can find at the Beach Museum of Art at K-State, the Spencer Museum of Art at KU, and other museums in the region and across the country. You can also feel her legacy when you walk the trails of the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve or anywhere you catch a glimpse of this vanishing ecosystem.

Survival on the Prairie, NBC, 1970
These are the gardens of the desert. These the unshorn fields, boundless and beautiful, for which the speech of England has no name. The prairies. So said William Cullen Bryant. The Prairies born developed grown to maturity over thousands of years by trial and error. Which grasses will live to be born over and over again? Which will die out quietly and be lost forever?

EPISODE CONCLUSION

Kara Heitz:
Five decades ago, in the early 1970s, environmental issues were reaching into the broader American public consciousness. And as we saw today's stories, Kansans were a part of this ecological awakening. This was a broad shift, encompassing long-standing interests in conservation and preservation, as well as newer concerns about pollution, waste, and sustainability.

And just like today, the politics of environmental issues were very complicated and oftentimes divisive.

In this US Dept. of Energy documentary from 1972, we hear perspectives that are eerily familiar to 2022 ears.

***Endless Chain*, US Dept. of Energy, 1972**
Some ecologists feel the damage man has committed is irreversible and that the biosphere as we know it is doomed. The more hopefully outlooks are based on man's accepting the fact that nature is not endlessly bountiful and does not exist just for man to conquer.

Kara Heitz:
Just like 50 years ago, Kansans know today the beauty, diversity, and sustainability of their land and resources is not guaranteed. It's up to us to think globally and act locally.

SERIES OUTRO

Kara Heitz:
Catch you on the flip side!

Tracy Quillin:
Humanities Kansas is an independent nonprofit leading a movement of ideas to strengthen Kansas communities and our democracy. Since 1972, HK's pioneering programs, grants, and partnerships have documented and shared stories to spark conversations and generate insights. Together with statewide partners and supporters, HK inspires all Kansans to draw on history, literature, and culture to enrich their lives and to serve the communities and state we all proudly call home. Join the movement of ideas at humanitieskansas.org.