A Walk Into Nature's Past

It took me 31 years of Iowa living to take my first steps on real native prairie, the kind my great-grandparents must have set upon when they arrived in northwest Iowa in the 1880s. Thirty-one years. Seems like a lifetime.

But then, real native prairie goes at a premium in this corner of the state. You can stumble on a few sloped patches of original grasses along the bluffs of the Big Sioux River, but for decades already the land has been drawn-and-quartered by the endless row crops of a gigantic garden.

I’m told that, topographically speaking, the state of Iowa is home to the most fully transformed eco-system of any of the fifty states. What was once tall-grass prairie has been almost totally transformed by corn and soybeans. The forever grassy landscape that grabbed Lewis and Clark’s breath the moment they set their eyes on it, once used to shiver in the wind, like cat fur.

Not long ago, I took some visitors on a little bus trip around the neighborhood. Today, Sioux County, where I live, is the most altered county of any of Iowa’s 99. Fifty years ago, Sioux County people would have boasted about how good Dutch folks drained out sloughs and creeks and put all this land into production. We’d have sung a hymn of triumph.

Today, that song would sound more like a dirge. “Isn’t it wonderful to know there’s absolutely nothing left of what was?” is a question that answers itself.

But let me describe those baby steps, my first on native prairie.

Dawn came bewitchingly, thick summer haze lay like a mystical, gossamer river through the land’s low spots, casting everything in mellow gold. I stopped beside a 140-acre piece of land called Steele Prairie State Preserve. It’s not far away.

No parallel tassels or shimmering bean leaves to be seen. Those acres look entirely unmanaged—wild sedge meadow and marsh vegetation answering to no one, a chaotic Iowa caucus of plant life. I know good people who wouldn’t find Steele Prairie Preserve at all attractive.

But my first steps on native prairie created a whole different feel than what’s beneath you when you walk on cropland. Native grasses aren’t spindly or scattered. In a half-dozen steps my shoes were wet, pant legs soaked, and I had a whole new sense of prairie schooners slugging through the heavy grasses on bumpy land that hadn’t been plowed and disked, planted and harrowed, but was, instead, a huge natural mess. You can turn an ankle in a minute at Steele Prairie.

I had to slog my way through thick shagginess, a knee-high jungle. But not until you stand there can you imagine the sheer wealth of what has been stripped away.

I didn’t grow up on a farm. I don’t know the earth out here the intimate way my father-in-law came to know it through seventy years of seed-time and harvest. Fifty years ago, if I had lived
here on that Saturday morning I watched the sun rise at Steele Prairie, I wouldn’t have been out there. I’d have been inside a barn, milking cows.

But the morning I walked through the museum of native plant life that is Steele Prairie, I couldn’t help but think that out here in the bountiful northwest corner of state we’d live better if we were capable of giving something back to what so beautifully was by divesting some corn and soybeans, shutting down at least some of what we’ve done. It would be great here to have more prairie, to see more of the tall-grass. Really, it’s what we owe the land.

If our kids could, on some Saturday morning, take a long walk in restored prairie and look over, say, miles of the great ocean of grass that once was here, wouldn’t we all treasure more of what we have?

Wouldn’t it be great if, in the wide expanse of rolling prairie in a faraway corner of the state, we’d all just try a few baby steps toward more fully remembering—and honoring—what once was right here beneath our feet?