



A CONSERVATION NOTEBOOK by Homer Stevens

In the last installment of these documents, it was stated that they were never meant to be political. However, isn't it true that the two most likely topics of conversation are the weather and politics. If folks don't get too serious, speculation on these topics can be fun. For instance, if climate changes had never occurred in the history of the earth, wouldn't we still have dinosaurs. Even more recently it was pointed out that Big Tooth Maples became confined to a relatively small area because of warming temperatures. When hydrocarbons burn, there are two products--carbon dioxide and water. ($\text{CH}_4 + 2\text{O}_2 \rightarrow \text{CO}_2 + 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$) Why do we only hear about the (CO_2)? Determination that the earth's climate is changing does not seem to be even basic science, just simple observation.

"Grasses are arguably the most important component of the landscape. Of the three types of vegetation (trees, forbs, and grasses), grasses are the best at keeping the soil in place and in good condition which is the prerequisite for a long-term sustainable habitat." This comes from Jim Stanley's book *A Hill Country Landowner's Guide*.

Many accounts of the Texas Hill Country dating to the 1820's describe a tall grass prairie. With grasses growing stirrup high to a man on horseback. These grasses would have been predominantly Little / Bluestem, Big Bluestem, Yellow Indian Grass, Switchgrass, and a few others. All of these are found growing here on The Farm and may possibly be treated individually in subsequent notes. However, in this edition the species of choice will be a personal favorite, Eastern gamagrass. This is arguably the most desirable of all so far as livestock and wildlife grazing is concerned.

"Native American Seeds--Ecological Solutions" has this to say about Eastern gamagrass. "The most productive,

nutritious forage grass on the planet. Grows in dense clumps and can be used as a buffer or screen. Seed must be exposed to cold, moist conditions before sprouting in the spring. An ancestor of corn, with intriguing pollination and seed-bearing parts that break at the joints when mature. Good larval food source for butterflies, provides cover and food for turkeys and other game birds. Cattle nearly grazed this highly palatable forage grass to extinction." They then quote their seed price as \$24.57/lb. The drawback to this grass is that it typically has a low seed germination making the pricing even more interesting.

Early on, the Range Management folks at TAM Extension Service taught that Eastern gamagrass seed was sterile and that it had to be sprigged. In the early 60's a small plot was plowed on relatively fertile ground here on The Farm on the west side of Pue Rd. Clumps of the grass were dug up over on the banks of Laxon Creek separated and transplanted in the newly cultivated area. The results were reasonably good. In a little over a year there was a semi solid stand of the rare grass. Then during the drought of 2014 there seemed to be little evidence of Eastern gamagrass anywhere in the plot. It seemed to have been taken over by a mixture of Little Bluestem, Lindheimer muley and Klein grass. Axis deer and Black Buck antelope were given the blame for grazing it into extinction. These species are roundly referred to with vulgarities anyway.

Then came the rains of the winter and spring of 2015 and the result was a thick mat of Eastern gamagrass probably more than ever before. Good sized clumps have appeared on fence lines in several ungrazed areas. These

observations along with the "for sale" offerings of the Native American Seed Co. would indicate that some live seed are being produced.

For many, many years Agrilife Extension Service and Natural Resource Conservation Service policies have been to advocate livestock grazing techniques based on a take half, leave half concept. That means that livestock owners should watch their properties closely and when more than half of the more desirable forages have been eaten, either move the stock to another pasture or sell the livestock. This would allow the remaining grasses to regrow at an efficient rate. This is a far-fetched idea, but wouldn't a small plot of Eastern gamma in each pasture serve as a point of observation that when one half is gone the pastures should be rested. There would be less erosion, greater soil build up, and more water filtering through the plant roots into the aquifer. The folks following this suggestion would then be doing their part to show climate change. Keep in mind that $6\text{CO}_2 + 6\text{H}_2\text{O} > \text{C}_6\text{H}_{12}\text{O}_6 + 6\text{O}_2$ is photosynthesis. Note that carbon dioxide is being removed from the atmosphere and oxygen returned. Grasses do this best.

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