Revisiting the Buffalo Commons

By Tom Parker
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When Frank and Deborah Popper first espoused the idea of the Buffalo Commons in 1987, they were rurally reviled as ignorant outsiders meddling in generations-old lifestyles.

During their first post-publication tour of the Great Plains, police escorts were needed to ensure their safety. And then a funny thing happened: rural people began to get a glimmer of what they had spoken about, and they understood that not only had the Poppers been correct, but the changes they foresaw were advancing faster and with more force than anyone could have predicted.

So it was that when Frank and Deborah Popper addressed the annual Kansas Farmers Union convention in Salina on Saturday, their words and ideas weren’t those of outsiders but as members of “the tribe of the Motherlode aquifer,” coining a phrase lifted from a song about the depletion of the Ogallala aquifer by Texas songwriter Andy Wilkinson.

“You are part of the remaining tribe of the Motherlode aquifer,” Frank Popper said. “We know how hard it is to be a member of this tribe — and it’s clearly getting more difficult.”

Others speakers at the convention included Karl Brooks, Region 7 Environmental Protection Agency administrator; Kansas Secretary of Agriculture Josh Svaty; Joe Logan, director of agricultural programs for the Ohio Environmental Council; and Chandler Goule, Kansas Farmers Union vice president of government relations.

The Poppers might live and teach in New Jersey — him at the Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University, her at Princeton University — but they’re no strangers to the Midwest. Since the publication of their seminal work, “The Great Plains: From Dust to Dust,” they have become associate fellows at the Center for Great Plains Studies at the University of Nebraska, and from 2002 to 2009 they were members of the Prairie Writers Circle at the Land Institute in Salina.

What began as a project they felt few would notice took on a life of its own, sending them crisscrossing the length of the nation but particularly throughout the central states.

On a return engagement at K-State in 2004, former governor Mike Hayden publicly apologized to the Poppers for his fierce antagonism toward the Buffalo Commons idea.

“It was the most startling reversal I’ve ever heard from a working politician,” Frank Popper said.

Rural depopulation, climate change and the draining of the aquifer are only part of the challenges faced by today’s prairie residents, ranchers and farmers, he said. Small towns are disappearing almost as fast as small farms and livestock operations even as the cost of goods and services continues to climb with no end in sight.

And yet, he said, the kind of farming practiced by small producers has a long history on the Great Plains.

“It’s how the plains were settled starting in the 1870s with the first homestead in Beatrice, Neb.,” he said. “And it has been proven many times, notably during the Dust Bowl.”
Laboring for something greater than economic gain was best expressed in a term made popular by the Princeton basketball player Bill Bradley, Mr. Popper said.

"He called it 'romantic capitalism,'" he said. "You're doing the job, you're working for a living, but the payoffs are not primarily financial. And you persist. You are, in some ways, the last romantic capitalists in America."

**Shifts in land use**

When in 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner declared the American frontier closed, Kansas was more densely settled than now.

In the frontierless vacuum that ensued with the unraveling of the population, efficiency became increasingly required in all things, not merely in animals and plants but in the remaining people, too, Deborah Popper said.

"We're forced to get more out of the remaining people," she said. "But you know this better than me."

The idea of the Buffalo Commons requires restraint, not austerity or the American ideal of overmastering the land, she said. And if the word "commons" was a bad choice, at once divisive and full of unwanted meanings, its use as a metaphor remained more potent than its use in land planning.

"Metaphor unleashes integrated thinking," she said. "We know that not all of the plains should be set aside with a buffalo on every acre. The best options feature a mosaic of uses. We should think in terms of gradations of agriculture and prairie. The vitality of mixed grasslands relies in its diversity, social and ecological."

Some shifts in land use are already apparent, Frank Popper said. Plains-based non-government organizations and conservation groups such as the Grassland Foundations, the Nature Conservancy and the Great Plains Restoration Council have purchased large tracts of land to set aside for preservation, and banks now routinely lend money for bison operations. Native American tribes in the Dakotas have also increased their bison herds.

"Buffalo are an essential part of land use programs," Frank Popper said.

But, if agriculture plays a lesser role in the future of the Great Plains, how is America going to feed the world, asked Larry Dreiling, senior field editor for the High Plains Journal.

"We're not giving up on agriculture," Frank Popper said. "It might become more regional, such as a shift for cattle to the southeast where there's more rainfall and better grass. The idea of America as the granary of the world is something we're getting away from."

The new farm bill is an example of the diminishing status of agriculture, he said. The majority of the bill involves nutrition over production, a natural outcome of a suburban — not urban — society.

Questions posed to the Poppers ran the gamut from the future of small-owner ag producers to a reworking of suburbia and health care. The latter seemed to take him off guard.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but we don't do health reform. The Buffalo Commons won't, either. My wife has a six-acre brain and even she can't help with that."

What the Buffalo Commons can do is to decide a sustainable future for the Great Plains and its people as populations fade with the underlying water supply, he said.

In the intervening years since broaching the concept of a vast national park encompassing the heart of the nation populated more by bison than people, "the muscle of reality has intruded," Frank Popper said. Two federal censuses have illustrated the continuing exodus of prairie populations, and those that remain have a higher median age than urban residents. "But you've already seen that in your families and your communities," he said.

"This idea that we had, which as I look back was at the right time, the right place, the right people—there was great social comedy in that, and I enjoyed it and I hope some of you did, too," Mr. Popper said. "But there are really important things at stake here."

"There's things like how we treat this vast, beautiful, characteristically American chunk of land. There's questions about how we actually learn to live on the earth. There are other American regions like the Corn Belt, the Lower Mississippi Delta, parts of our largest cities that are also being depopulated, deserted, shrinking in exactly the same way the Great Plains have been for more than a century.

"Our lessons to be learned here are about how to live on the land, what sustainability is, what humanity is about, what it means to be American."