

The Universal Beneficence of Grass

When I was a kid, I was active in 4-H, an organization for kids sponsored by what is now called the Texas AgriLife Extension Service. During my time in 4-H, I raised several 4-H animals and at one time I was on the 4-H grass judging team for our county. To call it “grass judging” was kind of a joke because it was really just grass identification contests, and I was really awful at it.

But it did instill in me a deep appreciation and interest in grass that has continued throughout my life. I now know a lot more about our native grasses and I certainly consider them the most important class of vegetation to have on the land, both because grass is best at holding water and preventing erosion as well as building a fertile soil.

So when I read the following essay, written well over 100 years ago, probably sometime after the civil war, I immediately wanted to share it with you.

“GRASS”

“Next in importance to the divine profusion of water, light and air, those three physical facts which render existence possible, may be reckoned the universal beneficence of grass. Lying in the sunshine among the butter-cups and dandelions of May, scarcely higher in intelligence than those minute tenants of that mimic wilderness, our earliest recollections are of grass and when the fitful fever is ended, and the foolish wrangle of the market and the forum is closed, grass heals over the scar which our decent into the bosom of the earth has made, the carpet of the infant becomes the blanket of the dead.

“Grass is the forgiveness of nature—her constant benediction. Fields trampled with battle, saturated with blood, torn with the ruts of cannon, grow green again with grass, and the carnage is forgotten. Streets abandoned by traffic become grass grown like rural lanes, and are obliterated; forest decay, harvest perish, flowers vanish, but grass is immortal.

“Beleaguered by the sullen hosts of winter, it withdraws into the impregnable fortress of its subterranean vitality and emerges upon solicitation of spring. Sown by the winds, by wandering birds, propagated by the subtle horticulture of the elements, which are its ministers and servants, it softens the rude outline of the world. Its tenacious fibers hold the earth in its place, and prevent its soluble components from washing into the sea.

‘It invades the solitude of deserts, climbs the inaccessible slopes and forbidding pinnacles of mountains, modifies the climates and determines the history, character and destiny of nations. Unobtrusive and patient, it has immortal vigor and aggression. Banished from the thoroughfare and field, it bides its time to return, and when vigilance is

relaxed, or the dynasty has perished, it silently resumes the throne from which it has been expelled, but which it never abdicates.

“It bears no blazonry of bloom to charm the senses with fragrance or splendor, but its homely hue is more enchanting than the lily or the rose. It yields no fruit in earth or air, and yet, should its harvest fail for a single year famine would depopulate the world.”

John James Ingalls, (1833-1900), Author, orator, lawyer and Kansas senator. My thanks to Ricky Linex, of the USDA/NRCS, for bringing this essay to my attention in his book, “Range Plants of North Central Texas”.

I assume, from the location and time that the author lived, that he was primarily thinking about the native prairie grass that would have been growing in the Tall Grass Prairies of Kansas during his time. This grass kept the soil in place and made for the most fertile land in the country—the breadbasket of the world! Unfortunately, most of the Tall Grass Prairie is gone and the non-native lawn grasses most folks have around their houses have few if any of the beneficial properties of our native prairie grasses.

Until next time...

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