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Dalbey section prime example of virgin prairie

By Richard Peterson Wachiska Audubon

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Dalbey section

COURTESY TIM KNOTT

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In Gage County there is an entire 640 acres, one complete section, of unploughed prairie. That section is today the property of the University of

Nebraska.

The section is four miles south of Virginia and came under the university's control in 1944. Dwight S. Dalbey gave Section 35 (T3N, R8E) in Sherman Township to the University of Nebraska Foundation as a memorial to his late wife, Hannah Virginia Lewis Dalbey, and her late father, Ford Lewis.

The land was described as “virgin prairie, untouched by the plow and now in the same state as it was at the time the sturdy pioneers came west in search of opportunity and began the building of a new empire in America.”

Dalbey did have a condition on the gift: “... that this bit of this great inland empire be preserved in its natural state.”

Ford Lewis was born 1829 in New Jersey. He married Elizabeth Davies in 1864. They had one child, Hannah Virginia. Ford made his first visit to Nebraska in about 1866. One newspaper article reported that when he was finished he had purchased 52 sections (about 34,000 acres) in Gage, Pawnee, Johnson, Otoe, Wayne, Lancaster and Dakota counties while operating out of his home base in Jerseyville, Illinois. Among the tracts were the town sites of Virginia in Gage County and Lewiston in Pawnee County. He purchased Section 35 for \$6,000 in 1898. He died in Jerseyville in 1901.

Dwight Stout Dalbey graduated from the University of Illinois in 1902 and was on the agronomy staff there until 1907. He then moved to Beatrice to manage the extensive holdings of his father-in-law. Dalbey served in the Nebraska Legislature from 1915-21 and was Speaker of the House all three terms.

Today, the Dalbey section is part of the 1,120-acre Dalbey-Halleck Farm and is one of the University of Nebraska's Research/Extension Centers. From 1944 to 1958, the section was principally used for haying and feeding studies, with the remaining acreage rented for pasture. In 1958, an additional 480 acres were purchased with the proceeds of land sold that was a gift from Milo M. and Emily Halleck. The site

then became part of the Department of Animal Sciences research focused primarily on Angus cattle breeding studies.

Today, the Dalbey section is being grazed, with the tenants' contract ending in October.

The property was surveyed in 2014 by the Northern Prairies Land Trust. The trust reported that the meadow is as good as it gets from a prairie-quality standpoint. Any invasive species issues are minor and/or easily fixed. The trust concluded it is “in an important location from the perspective of conservation of grassland-dependent wildlife in Nebraska.”

The University of Nebraska is indeed fortunate to have this piece of Nebraska history under its stewardship.

Richard Peterson is a professor emeritus from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

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