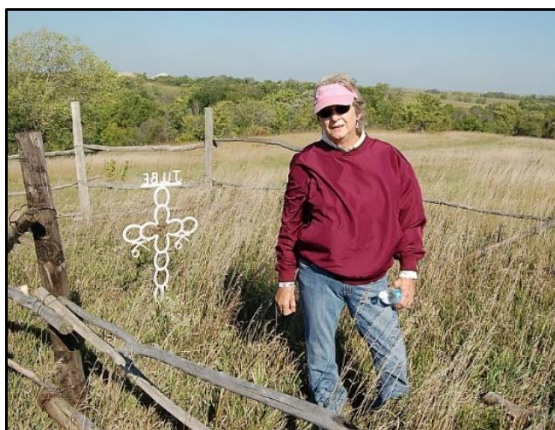


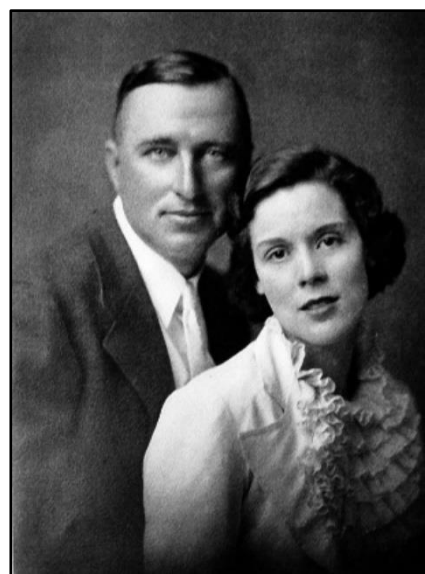
Kathie O'Brien and Spring Creek Prairie

By Matt Steinhausen



On a crisp, clear and sunny September 2006 morning I first met Kathie O'Brien at Spring Creek Prairie. It was a Saturday as I recall, and there was an autumn breeze ruffling the prairie grasses, which were fully seeded and at their peak splendor. I don't recall the details of my conversation with Kathie clearly considering it was over a decade ago, but I've written a short story about Kathie and the O'Brien Ranch from what scraps and notes I'd assembled in conjunction with what memories I could conjure from my mind. This story would not have been written without the guilt and duress applied by DCHS member and Spring Creek Prairie volunteer Jane Reinkordt, so she should get some of the credit (or blame) for this article.

Kathie O'Brien was the former owner and operator of the O'Brien Ranch about 3 miles south of Denton, Nebraska. In my notes I recorded the 600+ acre ranch was purchased by Kathie's grandfather and uncle, Joseph and Philip O'Brien in 1901. However, in notes on O'Brien family photos it is written the ranch was purchased in 1903 by Philip and Jim O'Brien, not Joseph. In St. James Cemetery at Cortland there is a Philip, Joseph and James O'Brien, and I'm unable to discern Kathie's grandfather from her uncles, but there are some clues. We do know Philip O'Brien came to the USA from Ireland, first living in Minnesota before coming to Nebraska. Philip was born in 1852, died in 1939, and was married to Frances (nee "Krapp," b.1871 - d.1949). Joseph was born 1857, died in 1929, and James was born in 1850, died in 1931. There was also an Alice O'Brien (1876-1924) in the cemetery that appears to have been married to Joseph; Alice and Joseph have separate markers, but their stones are matching and say "Father" and "Mother" thus one might assume they could have been the parents of Kathie O'Brien's father, also named "Joseph" and it says on the back of her parent's wedding photo her mother's name was "Frances" just like Philip's wife, which confuses matters a bit.



During much of the early to mid-1900s the O'Brien family rented out the ranch to tenant farmers, but Kathie's dad decided he wanted to move his family onto the ranch, so he convinced the tenants to relocate to a different farm. In 1949 Kathie and her parents moved onto the ranch where it was Kathie's home until she sold it to Audubon Nebraska in 1998, at which time the O'Brien Ranch was renamed Spring Creek Prairie.

The O'Brien Ranch was a target property for Audubon Nebraska because it was part of one of the largest continuous parcels of tallgrass prairie in the state. The Audubon Society saw Spring Creek Prairie as a premier site, with the potential of having a nature sanctuary and visitor center, which have come to fruition.

When I met with Kathie at the prairie in 2006, she was back at the ranch for the dedication of the newly constructed Spring Creek Prairie Visitor Center. Kathie had some free time that Saturday morning so we took a walk through the prairie where we discussed her days of barrel racing, raising horses, ranching, pets, friends, and life.

I had many connections to Kathie despite the fact we'd never met: 1) my family owned one of her old pickups; 2) I salvaged two of Kathie's old barns that needed to be razed for the creation of the new visitor center at Spring Creek, 3) I was acquainted with some of Kathie's friends, classmates and former neighbors, and; 4) I'd been raised on a farm just 6 miles east of Kathie's former ranch.

I was a bit intimidated to meet Kathie because I'd heard so much about her from people in the community, and I did not know what to expect. 20 years prior I'd visited the O'Brien Ranch with a friend and his mom, but never got out of the car because I was told by my friend's mom the property's owner didn't want strangers on the place, though I was unsure if it

was true. Another one of Kathie's old friends and classmates had told me Kathie found God and was a changed person with rigid convictions. I did discover Kathie was indeed a devout Christian who was dedicated to her beliefs, but didn't find her to be fanatical at all.

Meeting Kathie was an enjoyable experience. She was easy to talk to, glad to answer my questions, and she posed for my photos. We set out on a walk through the prairie accompanied by her dog despite the fact pets aren't allowed on the trails as per the Audubon Society's rules. Kathie told me one of the conditions of the sale of the land was that she'd be allowed to return whenever she'd like, and her pets would be allowed to accompany her into the prairie, regardless of the 'rules'.



Kathie loved animals, especially horses and dogs. Kathie did barrel racing with her horses, and shared fond memories of her champion racing horse "Jube".

A July 27, 1969 Lincoln Star article titled "Denton Gal National Champ" described Kathie O'Brien's barrel racing days: Kathie, a graduate of Crete High School, got the feel of horses at a very young age on her parent's farm. While attending the University of Nebraska she became interested in amateur rodeo, riding in the annual rodeo held on the East campus. She became professional three years ago when she joined the Girl's Rodeo Assn (GRA) The woman's equivalent to the Cowboy Rodeo Assn (CRA). Last year she earned \$6,000 in rodeo winnings from 32 performances. "That isn't net," Kathie explained. "Every rodeo requires an entrance fee and travel is expensive, especially when you travel with a horse."

A seven-year-old quarter horse called "Jube" is Kathie's working partner. Looking to the future Kathie has purchased a young horse Bar-Joy, called B. J., which she plans to begin training. "It takes a long time to train a champion performer," Kathie said.

Another expensive expenditure for the professional rodeo performer is clothing. Rodeo rules require attractive attire — bell bottoms are a favorite, in cotton with cotton shirts for summer wear, but in winter satin and lame are in vogue.

"But there are definite advantages to this kind of life too," Kathie said. "I am absolutely free to go when and where I want to. I am not a slave to an eight-hour day and I get paid to do what many people do for fun." While barrel racing may seem to be a different pace than some rodeo events, the combination of the pressure of competition with the speed and skill required make it an "anything can happen" type sport.

Kathie won the 1968 National Rodeo Finals barrel racing championship in Oklahoma City, beating out another Nebraskan, Kay Whittaker, formerly of Valentine.



Kathie was at home last week visiting her mother, Mrs. Joe O'Brien. Her father is deceased. She left again Tuesday for a rodeo in Kansas City and plans to spend the rest of the summer on the circuit in states surrounding Nebraska. Always coming or going, Kathie has put 19,000 miles on a car purchased in January. She put a lot of mileage on Jube too - fast, accurate miles, whisker close to the barrels in the rodeo arena.



The O'Brien Ranch was the base of Kathie's barrel racing operation. The farm had a horse barn complete with a granary, hayloft, horse stalls, a tack room, and office. There was also a large open shed with an outdoor arena where she and the horses could practice. Kathie drove back and forth across the country participating in rodeos and other barrel racing competitions. Prior to Kathie's parents moving out to the ranch in 1949 it was occupied by tenant farmers Claude and Margie (Lynch) Strelow.

According to Everett Smith, Claude Strelow's nephew and long-time DCHS member, the Strelows farmed about 110 acres of the ranch, and the remainder was prairie grass.

Smith often visited the ranch when he was young and shared some of his memories during an April 23 (year unknown) DCHS presentation on the Strelow families of the Denton area. Smith said he'd often walk across the O'Brien Ranch when visiting his aunt and uncle. He said when the O'Briens moved out to the ranch the Strelows moved to a farm south of the prairie he called the "Schultz" place, which Claude eventually purchased (portions of the former Schultz farm have since been purchased by Audubon Nebraska and prairie restoration is in progress on that farm). Kathie told me Claude didn't want to move off the O'Brien ranch, but her father talked him into it.

Kathie's mom had multiple miscarriages. Kathie had been adopted through Catholic Social Services of Council Bluffs, IA. Kathie and her parents lived in Princeton, NE before they moved on to the ranch.

Kathie said her mom loved living on the ranch, but living on the ranch was a challenge. Kathie said fences always needed fixing. Heavy rains would wash out the various dams on the property that were put in for erosion control and for watering the cattle and horses. Though most of the farm / ranch was untilled, there were areas of the farm where the prairie had been plowed under for crops. Kathie said the areas where alfalfa had been seeded grew excellent hay. During our walk Kathie and I sat on a hill where her horse Jube was buried, along with three of her dogs. Kathie had placed three large crosses on the hill where she hosted Easter services while she lived on the ranch, but those crosses were long gone. There was a rotted split rail fence at the spot surrounding the cemetery where a grave marker made partly from horseshoes marked the burial site of Jube. Kathie was disappointed to see the condition of the fence and gave my son and I \$100 to rebuild it. Over the next two days my son and I harvested rustic hedge logs from Osage trees and rebuilt the fence, which has held up relatively well over the last 10+ years. The fence and small cemetery are a destination for many of the visitors to the prairie and the site has a bench to rest where one can sit and soak in a beautiful view of the prairie.

The 600+ acre tallgrass prairie ranch wasn't fruitful enough to sustain the costs of maintenance required to tend and mend aging fences and buildings, plus the ranch was more than Kathie could handle alone, which put her in the difficult position of having to decide what to do with the land that had been in her family for almost 100 years.

In 1998 Kathie sold the O'Brien Ranch to Nebraska Audubon who was attracted to the property by the native grasses, wildlife, and areas of undisturbed earth where the ranch had never been plowed. Kathie's desire was to preserve the property as much as possible, and Nebraska Audubon ensured they would see to that.

Subsequent to the sale of the O'Brien Ranch, that land and many neighboring properties have been preserved and/or restored to tallgrass prairie. In addition to having hundreds of acres of undisturbed native prairie, the O'Brien Ranch has wagon ruts from the old migration and freighter trails that connected east to west. Between 1862 and 1868 the O'Brien Ranch was crisscrossed by the Fort Kearny Cutoff - a segment of the Oregon Trail between Nebraska City and Ft. Kearny that was one of the most heavily traveled segments of migration trails in the country. Spring Creek Prairie's features make it an attraction for history buffs and nature lovers alike.

Kathie moved to Oklahoma after she sold the ranch, and as of this writing she was still living in the sooner state to the best of my knowledge.



On the weekend of our visit back in 2006 Kathie was recognized and honored at the dedication of the Spring Creek Prairie Visitor Center. Some of the materials that went into the construction and finishes of the visitor center were salvaged from an old shed that stood on the same site as the visitor center.

Kathie's difficult decision to sell the ranch was made easier knowing the land would be preserved and appreciated. In my meeting with Kathie I realized that owning a farm or other property isn't permanent or exclusive because we're all merely temporary stewards. Kathie O'Brien and her family's stewardship will be recognized by visitors to Spring Creek Prairie for many generations to come.