

Creative Creatures

The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.



#5 / Elaine Shea Jones, photographer, illustrator, environmentalist, Matfield Green, Kansas

She says she is 76 years old, but I don't believe her. She cannot be. She looks much younger and behaves younger than many a woman age 38 that I know. She beats them for beauty, too. With an unmatched amount of energy paired with one of the sharpest minds and a great sense of humor, not to mention her almost unreal sweetness and tenderness, she is one of the few people I want to introduce everyone to and at the same time keep exclusively to myself.

Elaine Shea Jones lived in Kansas City, Missouri when, in the early 1970s, she discovered the Flint Hills and started taking photographs of the tallgrass prairie, its old barns, its limestone rocks, its fences. She was one of the first few who took notice of the prairie's unique beauty; she also became aware of its environmental importance. An activist of the first hour who became the Executive Director of Save the Tallgrass Prairie and, later, Director of the Grasslands Heritage Foundation, Elaine strongly promoted the preservation of the prairie and sought and fought for the establishment of the Tallgrass Prairie Natural Preserve. By then, she herself had moved to the Flint Hills. I first met her in 1996 when the house she had bought in Matfield Green was still practically a ruin and she had a crew of crazy guys who'd moved from the East Coast to Kansas working to transform it into a most pleasant *casa*.

Elaine's prairie photographs appeared in books and magazine articles supporting the preservation effort. As a U.S. Delegate to the 1983 International Conference on New Directions for Conservation of Parks, at the Lüneburger Heide in Germany, her audiovisual program brought a surprise reaction. The conference chair said: "We Europeans have a keen interest in seeing the preservation of the tallgrass prairie because, remember, it was our people, the Dutch, the Germans, the Swedes, who first settled it. *Our* ancestors!" This expanded worldview inspired Elaine; preservation became her life's work.

Today, she is as active as before. For a time she was involved with The Land Institute's activities in Matfield Green; she is a strong supporter of the Symphony in the Flint Hills; she is a member of the arts commission at Pioneer Bluffs; and she's a colleague of mine on the board of the Center for Living Education in Matfield Green, which is working on the restoration of the old bank building, and planning to organize a variety of cultural events. The ultimate goal is to keep Matfield Green, "the town that won't give up" while so many others in the Midwest disappeared, alive and kicking.

Elaine, alas, is only six months of the year available to us poor folks in Matfield Green. Each year in May she departs for Peaks Island off the coast of Maine where her deceased second husband Bill left her his house and his family, which became hers. If we Kansans are lucky, she returns before Thanksgiving to spend the winter and spring with us—for the Atlantic Coast is much colder and greyer and nastier than the prairie in wintertime.

With the advent of digital photography Elaine closed her dark room and turned to candid photos of locals and images of small town life. Also, she began to preserve historical photographs "in an effort to honor the past and to build pride and a sense of place. As modern life alienates us from our roots, it is important to find ways to reconnect, to learn about the past in a lively and creative manner. This place-based knowledge helps us know ourselves." Elaine's images were used in Jacques Cousteau's 'Rivers of the World' documentary film; she herself produced a television special for PBS and curated many photography shows. Her own photography—her negatives and original prints; the magazines that published her work--today is stacked away in boxes. One day, I am sure, its importance will be rediscovered, its content will be newly appreciated. "You know," says Elaine, "seeing the world through the long lens of a camera has given me a glimpse of the infinite beauty of this place we call home. My life has been enriched beyond measure."