

## A PAUL MATHEWS MEMORY

by Jim Eidson



I joined The Nature Conservancy in October 1994, as the North Texas Land Steward. It was very shortly after that I met Paul Mathews. We immediately became fast friends. Nothing particularly special about me, but Paul made friends and kept them easily.

At 90, Paul was still pretty spry, and we managed to make our way around his gilgai prairie, Paul hanging onto my arm, all the while telling me stories. Not long before his death, Paul told me that when an old man died, a library burned down. And when Paul died, we lost a big one.

I had more than a few of those metaphorical books checked out when he passed, so not all of them were lost. So for you I attempt to paint a picture of Paul, his life, his times and his prairie.

One can hardly imagine the expanse of grassland that was once that part of Hunt County. Tall and often lush, with trees confined to the rivers and little creeks that divided the relatively flat land. Mathews Prairie was in a place where forty or more inches of rain fell in a year, a wet place where only fire and grazing kept it from going to shrubland and woods.

I am sure Paul's ancestors saw at least the last glimpse of what John Graves called "the big spraddling mess" of unspoiled grassland wildness. By the 1880's the rail had accessed Hunt County, and that was the beginning of the cotton boom and the end of the Texas Blackland Prairie.

A quote from a source long forgotten has it that, upon the closing of the frontier, an old drover looked over the vastness of the prairie and said, "Shan't be long before it is all Baptists, cotton and Johnsongrass." He was right.

Paul was born in Floyd, Texas in 1904, just a couple of decades after the cotton bonanza began. Floyd appeared to be a town with one or two churches per ten residents, banks, grocery stores and schools. With the exception of a few teachers, preachers and merchants, everybody farmed.

The territory around Mathews Prairie is now go-back land, full of those struggling weeds and exotic grasses that can make a living on exhausted soil. But in those days, every square inch of rich, black ground was committed to row crop, and of that almost all cotton.

There was one place, just north of Floyd, however, which had escaped the plow. It was a 200-acre prairie hay meadow, kept for the purpose of producing fodder for the draft animals. Ironically, the calories produced by the rich native grasses were expended on plowing under the last of the rich native grasses.

As a young boy, Paul ranged widely this part of northwestern Hunt County. He explored the creeks, probably rode his horse farther than he should have. He talked of certain boundaries he would not trespass, referring to "some big ol' boys" who lived "back in the sticks," and who would cut your throat if they could catch you.

But, this last piece of neighborhood prairie was a paradise for Paul as a young boy. He explored there and hunted rabbits. I imagine laid on his back in the tall grass, admiring the sky, sheltered and warm on a windy winter day. In so doing, he became infected with the spirit of the place, as many of us do with our first love — the land we connect with as children.

In the 1960s, Paul had a ranch on the Sabine bottoms, part of which was condemned to make way for Lake Tawakoni. Now, with a little cash on hand, he cast about for another piece of land to replace it. It happened that 100 acres of a 214-acre prairie patch near Floyd was available. It was half of his boyhood paradise. Paul bought it to produce hay for his livestock, he said. But I knew he bought it for the love of the land.

Paul was a man of great Christian faith, and he told me the prairie was exactly as God had made it. To him, it was a sacred place, and owning it imparted on him a sacred obligation. He wanted it preserved so that future generations could see what God hath wrought.

In the late 1980s, Paul donated a conservation easement on his land to The Nature Conservancy to provide for its perpetual conservation. Unfortunately, the 100-acre prairie parcel adjoining Paul's was plowed in the late 1970s, a victim of high demand for wheat. But for Paul's foresight, his beloved prairie meadow would have gone that way as well.

Paul used to call me, at least monthly during the growing season and say, "Jim. They's sticker bushes comin' up on my prairie meadow. Can ya help me?" In those days,

I was limited to limb loppers and bow saws and a little squirt bottle to stump treat the cut honey locust. He would follow me across the prairie in his pickup truck, jouncing over the gilgai, and occasionally spinning out in one.

Early on, he used a local with a 5-foot sickle bar to cut the prairie. The old hay cutters eventually retired or passed on and were replaced by younger ones with disc mowers and expensive apparatuses. Several of the latter rattled to their last stop negotiating the deep gilgai.

Paul loved a gala, and was a frequent attendee of TNC fundraising events in Dallas. He seemed to thoroughly enjoy them, and was always a greatly appreciated guest there. Paul always seemed to be in love with life; he knew how to have fun, and he never knew a stranger.

In the early 2000s, I nominated Paul for the Texas Land Steward Award. He won the statewide award, and shook then governor George Bush's hand. I was unable to go to Austin with him, but he called me around 1 a.m. on his trip home. He was a very happy man, to say the least. If he had been capable of a cartwheel, he would have.

Paul Mathews was a pillar of the community: a banker, church officer, and philanthropist. He was instrumental in establishing the Audie Murphy Cotton Museum in Greenville. He was well known and loved across much of northeast Texas.

Paul once asked me to take him to Lennox Woods, a TNC preserve north of Clarksville in Red River County. On the 2-hour trip to the preserve, he regaled me with stories. On the way back, he asked if we could make a stop along the way so he could say hello to an old friend.

The return trip was 4 or 5 hours. Turned out there were about a half dozen such stops along the way. He knew everyone and everyone knew him.

I miss Paul, but am so glad to have had his friendship. I am glad Paul found his land and had a land ethic that preserved it. I congratulate NPAT on its acquisition. I am relieved and happy that it is in capable hands. I am sure Paul would approve.

Jim Eidson served as the steward for the Texas Nature Conservancy's Clymer Meadow, an 800-acre remnant of the tallgrass Blackland Prairie in Hunt County. Trained in range land ecology and management at Texas A&M, Mr. Eidson used his skills to maintain and restore the Meadow and adjacent private tracts, through prescribed burns, reintroduced native grass and forb seed, periodic bison grazing, and exotic plant and woody species control.