This area of Kansas has been used by people for thousands of years, but it has changed dramatically in the last century and a half. Until the 1850s, it was predominantly prairie. The lush grasses and wildflowers provided food for bison and other native animals. Grazing by these animals and regular natural fires—along with later management by native peoples—kept the native prairie stable and healthy. However, a new era of drastic ecosystem modification began in the 1850s and 1860s with the influx of Euro-Americans. They rapidly established farms, roads, towns and commerce. In the 1850s, 95 percent of Douglas and Jefferson counties was tallgrass prairie. Today less than 1 percent remains.

Southern Illinois, 1903. "Rattler Ledge," a limestone ledge on the KU Field Station's Rockefeller Tract. The photo was originally published in Henry Fitch's A Kansas Snake Community, published by the KU Museum of Natural History in 1960. The book is the first and only comprehensive treatment of snakes in Kansas and is still in print. The 590-acre area was known as the "Robinson Farm" and was leased by KU for farming and grazing.

"I was bitten twice by rattlesnakes [in 1861 and 1866]—I never regretted it. I wouldn't change any of it. The land was an ideal setup for raising a family. There was plenty of outdoor space for kids to play. They were free of some of the bad influences that kids would have in the city and there were plenty of jobs to keep them out of mischief. They enjoyed the tasks I put them to."—Charles Robinson, the first Governor of Kansas, and his wife, Sara, acquired 1,300 acres of land in Grant Township in the late 1860s. These holdings included Kansas River floodplain (surrounding what is now the Lawrence airport), hillside land to the north of that (known as Oakridge, where the Robinsons built a home around 1870), and the land where the Fitch Reservation is now located (known at the time as the Robinson Pasture). The Robinsons bequeathed their lands to KU, and in 1911, when Sara died, KU assumed ownership.

ca.1860–1911

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Fitch’s book A Kansas Snake Community, published in 1960, reports that snake-gatherers during a 10-year study that included 18 snake species and more than 12,000 snake records. It represents one of the most thorough studies of snake ecology and behavior ever undertaken. The comprehensive study of the book and its work on which it was based. Frequent references to Charles Robinson. Author: "Quite possibly no one has sought more snakes than Henry Fitch." Another reference: "Dox hominum." "What a difference 20 years makes between this study and virtually any study done on snakes a mere 20 years ago," Fitch wrote in reviewing his own work. Reference to the manuscript of the book and of the work for which it was based. Frequent references to D. L. Stager. Author: "Quite possibly no one has sought more snakes than Henry Fitch." Another reference: "Dox hominum." "What a difference 20 years makes between this study and virtually any study done on snakes a mere 20 years ago," Fitch wrote.

The 590-acre area was known as the "Robinson Farm" and was leased by KU for farming and grazing. During the 1930s conservation activities took place (fencing some hillsides to exclude livestock and promote timber growth, and building check dams to control erosion). In the 1940s, conservation loss emphasis (overgrazing and unsupervised harvesting and hunting of native plants and animals).