

Why director was compelled to tell world about Wes Jackson in 'Prairie Prophecy'

He's been called the "most important environmentalist most people have never heard of," and now Salina's own Wes Jackson is the subject of a film premiering in the city next month.

Ahead of its 6 p.m. April 26 premiere at the Stiefel Theatre, "Prairie Prophecy" director Michael Johnson spoke with the Journal about his reasons for highlighting Jackson and The Land Institute in this project.



Mesmerized after meeting Jackson for the first time

Throughout his career, Johnson said he's always been interested in mankind's role in the environment, particularly the soil.

"In 2003, somebody had handed me a book by a man, a novel, from somebody named Daniel Quinn," he said. "He wrote a book called 'Ishmael' that I have since learned is a kind of a bit of a global phenomenon."

The book goes into a lot of the issues that Wes Jackson has been working on over the past 60 years or so of his career, particularly sustainability in agriculture.

After reading the book, Johnson said he knew that at some point in his future, he would want to do some kind of project involving agriculture. This eventually led him to meeting Jackson at a conference in 2015 in California with leading ag, ecology and environmental experts.

"I was working on a different project at the time, but I met him and interviewed him," he said. "It blew my mind."

What was originally supposed to only be a 20-minute interview for Johnson turned into over an hour with Jackson, much of which was a conversation.

"He's always kind with anyone who's ever interviewing him," Johnson said. "He asks you more questions than you get a chance to ask him right up front, because he wants to know who he's talking to."



Johnson returning to his Kansas roots with this film

A native of Kansas who now lives in California full time, Johnson said he'd been back to the Sunflower State a few times.

Following that conference in California and after learning more about Jackson and his life, Johnson found himself making a trip to Salina to visit The Land Institute for a few days.

"This time when I came back to Kansas and I landed in Wichita, I had this overwhelming urge to kiss the ground," he said. "I didn't actually do that, get California weird on everybody, but I felt like I was home and I felt like I felt a connection to the place."

He said going to the Land Institute was a special experience.

"I got to meet all these incredible people, the scientists and others who are doing really important work that is not being done anywhere else in the world," he said. "They're all normal people working on big problems."



Telling the story of Jackson and The Land Institute

The more he learned about what Jackson helped create in Salina with the institute, the more he felt compelled to tell some of his story.

"I didn't know Wes Jackson wasn't a household name, and I thought maybe we can change that," he said.

Initially, Jackson — who grew up on a farm near Topeka — was hesitant to get involved with such a project, but another opportunity opened up and this project got underway in 2019.

Johnson said he wanted to make this film about more than just the man of Jackson, but on The Land Institute, in hopes that more people come to know and appreciate the work it does.

"It's about Wes Jackson, the people he's inspired and the work of the fine folks at The Land Institute," he said. "Maybe make it for them to gain some partnerships just greater visibility in general."

In addition to looking at the history of the organization, Johnson said he hopes to let the audience know about the overall worldview that has been created and nurtured at the Land Institute.

Tickets for 'Prairie Prophecy' premier available now

Johnson said it was important to have this premier in Salina, a place that Jackson and The Land Institute calls home.

"This is where this film needs to have its first kind of showing for people," he said.

He said when making the film, he had several milestones in mind for its release. One was allowing Jackson to see what has been made and get his feedback, which happened in fall 2024.

"(Another) one then was I would like to have the film in a finished condition to be able to screen at a location that was convenient for him and all his colleagues at the Land Institute," he said. "To have a little celebration around it.

"I wanted to honor Wes to have him be able to experience what that's like to sit in a room with this film that I've been working on for a while, surrounded by the people who care about him and to be able to enjoy that experience."

"Prairie Prophecy" is set to make its world premiere right here in Salina at 6 p.m. April 26 at the Stiefel Theatre. Tickets can be purchased now from [the theater online](#) or through the box office.

Johnson and Jackson are scheduled to be at the premiere, including a Q&A with them and others following the film.

For more information about "Prairie Prophecy," visit the film's website at www.prairieprophecy.com. Additional information about The Land Institute can be found at landinstitute.org.