



*Nebraska History* posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

Article Title: Closing Comments, But Not the Last Word

Full Citation: Kent Blaser, "Closing Comments, But Not the Last Word," *Nebraska History* 80 (1999): 33-35

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1999Blaser.pdf>

Date: 11/16/2012

Article Summary: Blaser summarizes the common themes of a series of brief articles written in response to his earlier essay, "Where is Nebraska, Anyway?"

Cataloging Information:

Keywords: Midlands, prairie, heartland, Big Red football, *Omaha World-Herald*

Photographs / Images: potatoes being harvested near Hemingford, August 1, 1919; Chappell, Deuel County, August 1920

# Closing Comments But Not the Last Word

By Kent Blaser

The experience of writing for this issue of *Nebraska History* has been a gratifying one. Academics writing for scholarly journals seldom get much direct reaction and feedback to their work. And even less frequently do they get a chance to publicly amend their own writing and to attempt to address its problems and inadequacies. It is also rewarding to find that others are interested in issues that one thinks intriguing and important. The level of thinking and writing about regionalism and the basic nature of Nebraska from the other participants in this forum is a clear indication of the vitality of these topics.

One of the problems facing scholars writing about complex, open-ended matters is that there is never enough time or space or knowledge to cover everything that one would like to say. So I am particularly grateful to the other writers in this roundtable for dealing with some of the lacunae in my own essay. One excellent way of trying to understand any place is through contrasts with other places. Both Phil Roberts's comparisons of Wyoming and Nebraska and Robert Richmond's similar use of Kansas as a vantage point for understanding Nebraska were enlightening. Roberts's suggestion of the time zone as a logical borderline for the beginning of the West in Nebraska was an original and common sense idea that had escaped me. And because I am a native of Kansas who grew up on the edge of the Flint Hills—and one who after more than twenty years of living in Nebraska still occasionally confuses and annoys my children by referring to Kansas rather than Nebraska as “home”—I find



A place can be identified by what comes from the land. Because of its sandy soil, the area around Hemingford became known for potato production. In 1930, about a decade after this August 1, 1919, photograph was taken, 1,893 carloads of potatoes were shipped from the town, earning Hemingford the title of “Potato Capital of the World.” Condra Collection-2690

the contrasts and similarities between Kansas and Nebraska especially interesting. Professor Baltensperger also adds to the comparative mix with his reflections on Missouri, and in addition brings a grounding in geography, an area where I am a generally unabashed amateur interloper, into the discussion.

Fred Thomas probably knows more about Nebraska than anyone now writing about the state. His discussion of both the diversity-creating and unifying elements that are a part of Nebraska adds significant detail to an important

point. And while I have never been very enamored of the *Omaha World-Herald's* promotion of the term “Midlands” as a regional designation—it seems to me contrived, not very original, and most of all not likely to catch on with a wide audience—it is an alternative that I should have considered.

I must confess that the remaining two essays were personal favorites. Susanne George's emphasis on the role of the prairie in Nebraska history and culture makes an especially important point, one that I belatedly recognized and was

planning to address in this afterword until she did such a good job with it. I too am pleased with the emergence of native prairie grasses—big and little bluestem, buffalo, Indian, and switchgrass—along my driveway and in the unkempt yard of my rural acreage. But I also have to add that I find the concept of “the prairie” somewhat more problematic than Dr. George’s essay indicates, primarily because the term commonly conflates two decidedly different things—the shortgrass prairie of the western Plains and the tallgrass prairie of Illinois, Minnesota, and Iowa. It is not clear to me whether, in referring to Nebraska as a prairie state, we highlight its connections to the Great Plains or to the midwestern tallgrass region. Is calling Nebraska a “prairie state” significantly different from calling it a “plains state?” Are we fundamentally similar to other states like Iowa and Illinois that also lay claim to the “prairie” label? To further complicate matters, in Nebraska as in other states, the tallgrass prairie has almost entirely ceased to exist. How much of an influence does the prairie still have on the intensively cultivated corn, soybean, and hay countryside of many parts of Nebraska? Can the scattered, CRP-inspired replanting of native grasses reinstall the prairie’s original significance? I’m not sure.

Finally, what to say about Michael Farrell’s personal reflection on the meaning of living in Nebraska? Perhaps I liked his essay because I too moved to Nebraska in the 1970s and feel that we share a certain dual perspective on the place. Even more, I find it impossible to resist anyone who actually proposed to bring physical reality and our mental maps more closely into line by constructing a gigantic dotted line around the state’s borders. The idea is as priceless as it is pricey. And I can think of nothing to say about the poignant conclusion of his essay that does not sound trite and superfluous compared to the original. Writing doesn’t get much better than that.

My colleagues were more kind and

gentle in their handling of my essay than it fully deserved. I can think of at least a couple of large inadequacies, to go along with its many small ones. If I were writing the original again (not to worry, that’s only an idle threat), I would be less brief and tentative about the “heartland” concept, and by way of that, Nebraska’s midwestern affiliations. The most fundamental identification Nebraskans have with their state may be that it is neither the East nor the West coast. That is the real significance of the “heartland” concept. One of our nation’s most basic divisions is between our predominantly hyper-modern, urban society—with all of its accoutrements of crime, violence, drugs, long commutes, high technology, concentrations of wealth, and so on—and the more slow-paced, neighbor- and community-oriented life of our rural and small town past. When Americans identify an area as the “Heartland,” they are placing it on one side of that divide. This is not necessarily or completely a regional thing. Small towns in New Hampshire and Vermont share “heartland” values. A recent candidate for the presidency of Wayne State College assured the faculty that much of rural Pennsylvania is midwestern with typical heartland values. One could say the same thing of the rural South. School shootings in Tennessee and Arkansas evoked occasional “heartland” rhetoric. But it is above all the Midwest that people think of in association with the word “Heartland,” to the point that the two labels have become nearly synonymous.

Nebraska, along with Kansas and Iowa, has as strong a claim to the “heartland” label as any state. Both the “Cornhusker State” and “The Good Life” slogans have heartland connotations. The West means something different—even the nearby West of Denver and Vail and Aspen or Wyoming and Montana. But all of Nebraska fits the Midwest/Heartland stereotype. The popular recent PBS documentary, “The Farmer’s Wife,” which featured a Nebraska couple who have now become minor

celebrities, was a vivid example of the Nebraska/Heartland association. The *Omaha World-Herald’s* 1998 election coverage gave in to this trend, dividing the nation into five regions—Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Rocky Mountains, and West Coast—with Nebraska being in the thirteen-state Midwest.

One poorly answered question from my original essay is the degree to which Nebraska can or should be considered a single place. We all recognize that different parts of Nebraska fit the rural-urban divide in different ways. One of the most common themes of writing about Nebraska is its internal divisions, the argument that there are really two Nebraskas, one primarily Lincoln and Omaha and the other everywhere else. Recent issues such as the prison location debate, Amendment 413 to limit taxes, and above all, the collapse of farm commodity prices and the specter of another devastating farm crisis in the midst of stock market-driven urban prosperity, have highlighted those differences.

Still, states have strong unifying identities. Big Red Football is almost universally mentioned in this regard. I would add to that the pervasiveness of the *Omaha World-Herald* as another unique and powerful force for cohesiveness. But every state has such factors. Baltensperger’s essay makes the point clearly and effectively, if briefly. While we all acknowledge that the answer to “Where is Nebraska?” depends on who is asking and where in Nebraska they are asking from, my whole essay is predicated on the assumption that the forces that unify Nebraskans are, at least for the present, stronger than the ones that divide them.

I have by now imposed on my readers’ patience for a longer time than I intended. The primary purpose of all of this has been to raise provocative questions and to suggest thoughtful perspectives and sources of additional information for those who are interested. I will resist the temptation to try to provide final or definitive answers to such complicated and controversial issues, and in-

## Closing Comments

stead conclude by simply adding a few more items to an already long list.

Several months after I completed my essay a *National Geographic* with an article devoted to Nebraska arrived in our mail (November 1998). It especially caught my attention because it prominently featured a bit of occasionally embarrassing local silliness, the Chicken Show, from my hometown of Wayne. The article was predictable and perhaps slightly disappointing to anyone hoping for deep or original insights into the state. Big Red football appeared in the first paragraph, and again in the conclusion. The contrast between the urban gangs, drive-by shootings, and frantic pace of a telemarketing center in Omaha with the small towns, farms, and ranches of the rest of the state was conspicuous. But so was the unifying "heartland" motif, with comment on both Nebraska's "heartland location" and its "heartland values." Even in Omaha, one local interviewee reported, Nebraska is "like America used to be when we were kids." Despite the slightly ambivalent "Standing Tall Again" subtitle, *National Geographic* was suitably upbeat about the state.

That article sent me looking through earlier *National Geographics*. Two previ-

ous articles, in May 1945 and March 1974, presented general overviews of Nebraska similar to the 1998 issue. The 1945 essay, "Nebraska, the Cornhusker State," was especially positive, depicting the creation of a "land of plenty" from the "Great American Desert" of pioneer days. It noted Nebraska's legendary thriftiness—no state debt, no income or sales tax, the unicameral legislature and pay as you build Capitol—along with a strong emphasis on a frontier/pioneer heritage and its farming and ranching legacies. "Neighborliness" and community were prominent Nebraska traits, ideas echoed in the other two articles as well.

The 1974 version was subtitled "The Good Life." It too featured "peaceful hamlets" and pioneer values, though a few darker notes, particularly east-west divisions and the problems of the Native American population, crept into the narrative. Mostly, it followed the themes and patterns of the 1945 and 1998 articles. While *National Geographic* is not likely to tell native Nebraskans much about their state that they didn't already know, its views provide another useful contribution to the discussion.

For Great Plains enthusiasts, the University of Nebraska will soon publish

*The Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*, an impressive effort that should substantially strengthen Great Plains regionalism generally, as well as solidifying Nebraska's identification with the Plains. From a different angle, the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City recently featured an exhibit on John Steuart Curry titled "Inventing the Middle West" that illustrated several of the themes raised in this discussion. And while the Joslyn Museum in Omaha has been mentioned as a prime venue for regional art, both the new Sioux City Art Center, specializing in midwestern art themes, and the Nebraska Art Museum in Kearney are also worth attention.

One especially useful result of this project is that I am reassured that thinking about regions and regionalism, and about Nebraska, is a fun and significant endeavor, and one in which many Nebraskans share an interest. I would like to thank my colleagues for their comments and assistance. For readers who share our interests, I hope that we have given you ideas, avenues, and leads to continue an ongoing and fascinating exploration into the history and nature of Nebraska.



The town of Chappell rises from the plain across the Lodgepole Valley in Deuel County, August 1920. Condra Collection-223