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FOREWORD

The Place of Time

Does time pass, or does it take place? This was one of a series of spontaneously emerging questions that led me to propose this exploratory theme issue of *Nebraska History* quarterly. Though the timing is later than originally intended—and the scope somewhat different—we might now just as well allow the synchronous juxtaposition of this number of the quarterly with the turn of the millennium. Whatever the fascination with the appearance of so many zeros in a date, this conjunction certainly provides an opportunity to reflect upon the concept of Time.

On the surface, time is the special province of history. But it is also a special concern of us all. We all exist in time and our time becomes an intimate part of us. While we mark our personal times using the same numerical system as historians, and we might even think in terms of personal histories, few of us will probably consider our lives as history, at least in the same sense as we have, say, Willa Cather's or William Jennings Bryan's.

But neither history nor time, as such, were the impetus for this project. One impulse is outlined in my own essay in this collection; another came about from a realization that my memory of time past—the internal “record” of my own personal history—was set in places, not in times. At least it wasn't set in the absolute Time that is measured by clocks and calendars. Recognizing that there could be many reasons why I do not remember experiences in terms of dates, the question that opens this introduction was nonetheless one that emerged. The phrasing of the question does seem to capture two quite different but fairly common ways of characterizing time: Is it just a “passing” out there somewhere that we have somehow figured out how to measure with clocks and calendars, or is it instead a kind of emplacement?

I posed the question, “Is there a place for time?,” to a few people of varied perspective to see if I might elicit some interest in this theme. The essays of those who were in a position to write their thoughts are presented here. They are diverse enough, and they raise some provocative issues.

Bob Diffendal recounts the evolution of western perceptions of time in his historiographical essay on the development of various means of measuring Earth history through geology. He concludes with graphic examples that show how the context of history has been changed by the accumulated spatial evidence of time in Earth. Paul Olson turns his essay on the

Proustian notion of simultaneity and uses a personal experience to peer into the essence of time, which he concludes is spatial. He then investigates four historical visions of time, noting how Plains architecture either directly reflected a time-space simultaneity, or attempted to establish such a sense through the use of “quotation” from buildings of other times. His narrative establishes a context within which to review our current paradigm of absolute Time as a linear progression. Finally, I summarize how western culture created the artifact of linear time from the cosmic cycles—and the concept of flat space from the Euclidian geometry—then attempt a non-mathematical explanation of the Einsteinian concept of spacetime. I conclude by searching for ways to bring the spacetime notion “down to Earth,” and find that place, as an experiential matrix of spaces-and-times, provides an authentic point-of-departure for further exploration of this new paradigm.

Interspersed with the major essays are two others that were initially conceived as sidebars. Their topics worked so well with the thematic question of this issue, as it developed, that they were expanded into historical articles. One by Janet Jelfries shows how space was used to mark time in Crete, Nebraska, after nationwide Standard Time had replaced local time and rendered local synchronization obsolete. Her article provides a brief history of the Boswell Observatory at Doane College, the functions of its various clocks, and the use of its time ball. In the other, Gene Thomsen shows how time was used by U.S. Government surveyors to establish their location in space. His article details how stars were used as timing signals, and the role that they played in laying Nebraska's western borders down upon the land.

I want to thank all of the authors for many interesting exchanges, and for enduring the longer-than-anticipated process of assembling this issue. Much deserved thanks is also due to my colleagues here—including individuals whose discussions unwittingly raised the question—but primarily to those in the Research and Publications Division. Special appreciation goes to James E. Potter, editor of the quarterly, and assistant editor Patricia C. Gaster. Their patience with this project has been extraordinary, not only in dealing with delays but in working these articles to completion.

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