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Article Summary: Blaser draws on historical, geographical, and literary sources for answers to the question "Where is Nebraska?" (Six other writers contribute their ideas in short articles that follow, and Blaser responds in a concluding article.)

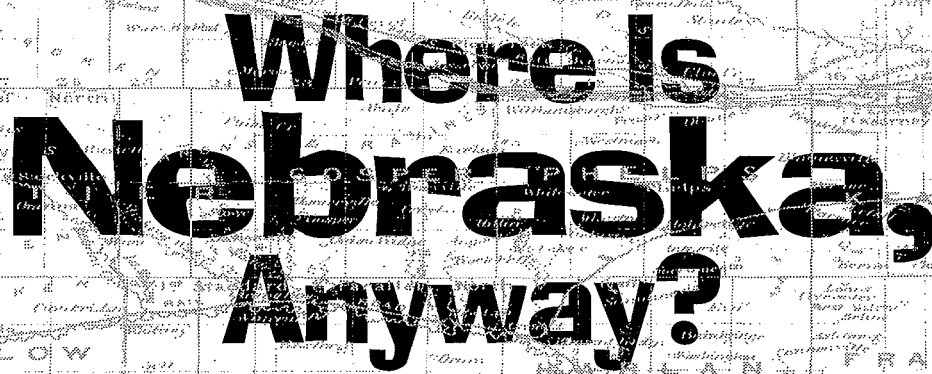
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Photographs / Images: 1882 map showing present-day Nebraska as part of Missouri Territory; outline map showing cultural regions of the US (Raymond D Gastil, 1975); rough Pierre shale near Whiting Bridge, Boyd County, 1912; Nebraska and Kansas Territories as they were from May 30, 1854, to March 2, 1861; Nebraska from March 2, 1861, to March 3, 1863, following the creation of Colorado and Dakota Territories; Nebraska following the creation of Idaho Territory on March 3, 1863



# Where is Nebraska, Anyway?

By Kent Blaser

"Where is Nebraska, anyway?" The question seems silly, especially in this context. There may be plenty of people who need help finding Nebraska, but surely readers of this journal are not among them. You know where Nebraska is: roughly in the middle of the United States and the North American continent, west of the first big northward stretch of the Missouri River, east of the mountain states of Colorado and Wyoming. Or more precisely, with the help of an atlas (or perhaps even without one), between the 43rd and 40th (the 41st for a small western section) parallels on the north and south, and west from the Missouri River to the 102nd and 104th meridians.

But such political boundaries, so often invisible lines of latitude and longitude, are only one, if admittedly a common, way of answering the question, "where?" Most of us also have various mental maps that divide our world into entities less frequently outlined on maps and atlases, but no less real for that. A different way of answering our title question involves locating Nebraska within a regional setting: as part of the Great Plains, or Midwest, or central United States, or whatever. These constructs are less cut and dried than political boundaries, but they are not unimportant. Americans have always thought of themselves in relation to regions. American culture and society are not spread uniformly and homogeneously

across the national map. Different places "look different, feel different, sound different." "Where are you from?" is one of the first questions we ask of strangers, because "where we are from" says things about us. The answer conveys information. "You are where you are from," in the words of Michael Johnson. And regions are a part of "where we are from," as much as states, nations, and local communities. To quote the first sentence of a recent book, "American identities are rooted in . . . regions." This essay originated with a conviction that interesting and worthwhile consequences derive from regional ways of thinking about Nebraska.<sup>1</sup>

So, back to the issue. Where is Nebraska, in senses other than the conventional road map ones? What are some ways of dividing the United States into regions, where does Nebraska fit into these divisions, and why does it matter?

Let's begin with some real basics. One of the oldest and most elemental ways of constructing our geographical universe, of making mental maps, involves the points of the compass. Since more or less the beginnings of human existence we have located things in terms of north, south, east, west. The cardinal directions have frequently had religious, sacred, or spiritual significance. But they are also a practical and still common way of thinking about the United States.

The earliest attempts to regionalize what would become the United States probably involved north/south divisions. Because the American colonies stretched over a long distance from north to south, that was where the larg-

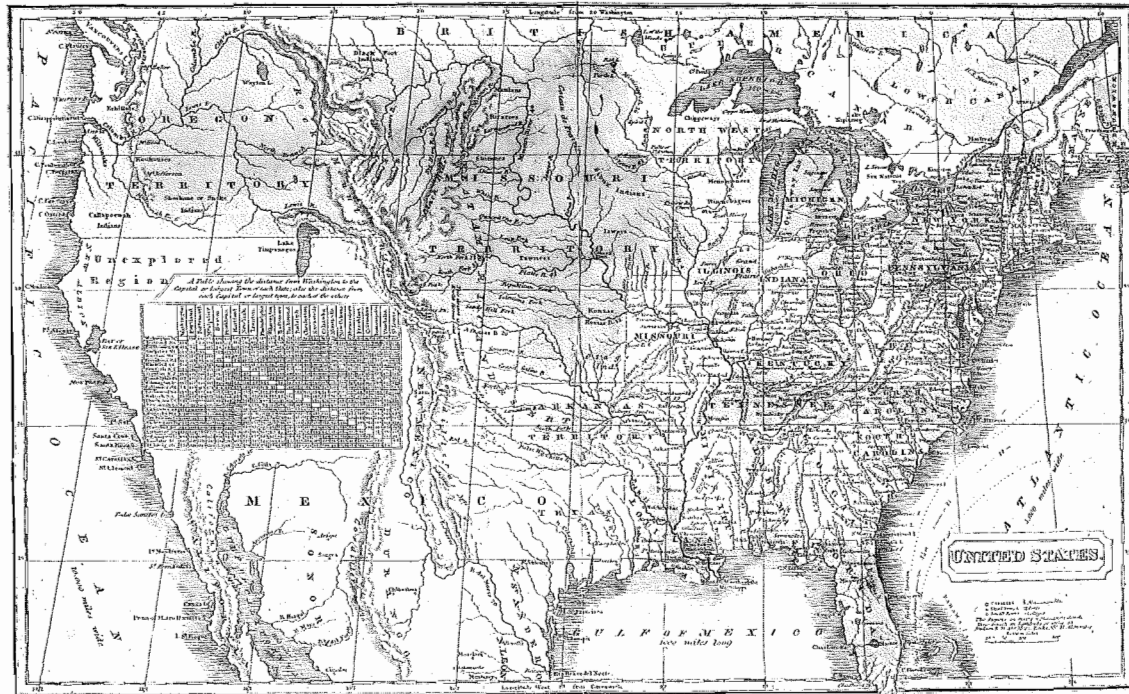
est differences developed. After the American Revolution, slavery became a regional institution, and the tendency to divide the U.S. primarily on a north/south basis grew stronger. Finally, perhaps the greatest defining event in our history, the Civil War, made the North and South (complete with capital letters), into permanent parts of our "mental" map of the U.S.<sup>2</sup>

If one had to choose, Nebraska is of course part of the North. It was settled mainly by pioneers from non-slave states. Well north of the Missouri Compromise dividing line, Nebraska shares far more of its culture with the North than with the South. The state capital is named after the great Union president. The problem of course is that "the North" is defined largely by the Civil War, and Nebraska did not exist as a state when the Civil War occurred. Its cultural and historical association with the North is thus weaker than that of the states directly involved in the war—Massachusetts or Illinois or Iowa. In short, to say that Nebraska is in the North really does not tell us very much about the state.

If North/South does not offer much help as an answer to our question, how about east and west? That initially seems more promising. From the beginnings of our history as a European society there were also significant differences between eastern and western settlements. Those differences derived mostly from the fact that the primary direction of European settlement and migration was from east to west. Eastern society was older, more developed, more urban, more densely settled, more "European," while the West was associ-

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Present-day Nebraska was once part of Missouri Territory, as shown on this 1828 map. NSHS-M73/R56/1828

ated with the “frontier,” with wilderness, with Native Americans, with nature.

Many of the conflicts in early American history pitted easterners against westerners, maybe because unlike northerners and southerners, easterners and westerners were close enough to each other to make good enemies, and were part of the same colonial or state political units and therefore fought over their policies. In any case, Bacon’s Rebellion in the 1600s, Shays’s and the Whiskey Rebellions in the late 1700s, Dorr’s Rebellion in the early 1800s, to mention just the better known examples, involved east/west conflicts. And as the nation’s boundaries expanded westward, east/west differences grew, so that East and West eventually rivalled North and South as basic regions of the U.S., with the important difference that the dividing line between East and West was a moving one, so they have been more fluid and historically changing regions than North and South.<sup>3</sup>

Nebraska has obviously been more a part of the West than of the East, and in

fact more a part of the West than of the North. The Populist movement was a major example of East/West conflict, and the state’s most prominent political figure, William Jennings Bryan, defined himself largely in terms of East/West differences. “West” is probably the best regional affiliation for Nebraska that we have discussed so far. But there are already some problems with what we have just done.

One difficulty with dividing a geographical unit such as the United States along north/south and east/west axes is that these divisions overlap. Areas that are part of the North or South are also part of the East or West, and vice versa. How do we decide which is the most important affiliation? (The common practice of a four part division of Northeast, Northwest, Southeast, and Southwest, with what is called the North really being the Northeast and the South the Southeast, with the Northwest and Southwest often combined into the West, only partly resolves this problem.) But there is another problem: north/south/east/west criteria may make sense

on the periphery of the map. They are more problematic for areas near the center, which is precisely where Nebraska is. Perhaps it has more in common with other central locations than with any of the compass point regions on the extremes of the map?<sup>4</sup>

In any case, we will now leave behind these rather crude locational approaches for a more detailed introduction to American regionalization.<sup>5</sup> As we have seen, some level of regional consciousness has been present in Americans’ thinking and writing from the beginning. That level was raised considerably in the nineteenth century, both by the Civil War and by westward expansion. A series of regional literary, artistic, and intellectual movements developed throughout the nineteenth century.

In the early twentieth century, along with his epochal work on the frontier, Frederick Jackson Turner developed some of the most important early academic work on American regionalism (he called it sectionalism). Especially between World War I and World War II U.S. regionalism was at an apogee. Re-

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gional trends and developments were among the outstanding features of the interwar American art world. A Southern Renaissance in this period turned the South into the vanguard locus for American regionalism. The Great Depression also prompted the government to consider regional approaches to what seemed to be particular problem areas. The Tennessee Valley Authority was the best known example, but the Dust Bowl brought similar attention to the Great Plains.<sup>6</sup>

Academics in sociology, political science, and history got on the regional bandwagon in the 1930s.<sup>7</sup> But most of the work on regional themes was done by geographers, who made regionalism a (one could accurately say “the”) central concept of their discipline for many years.<sup>8</sup> So we will begin with the geographers.

There are, of course, endless ways of envisioning regions. One can focus on the physical landscape—mountains, plains, foothills, etc. Or natural vegetation—forests, grass, desert scrub. Or climate—hot, cold, wet, dry. Or hydrology, or economic activity, or central urban areas, or cultural or ethnic or linguistic differences. A long running argument developed over the proper criteria for defining geographical regions, and especially the relative significance of physical and environmental versus historical and cultural factors. This debate is still going on, with a steady shift in the past half century away from the environmental emphasis (some would say environmental determinism) of early geographers. But there does seem to be some consensus that both the physical environment and culture and history play important, and even necessary, roles in the development of geographical regions. The relative weight of the factors may vary, but most geographers argue that the interplay between man and nature, the interaction of environment and culture, create what we think of as geographical regions.<sup>9</sup>

Early regional geographers emphasized physiological, economic and particularly agricultural criteria. They liked

to think in terms of “belts”—corn belt, cotton belt, wheat belt, manufacturing belt. And like everyone else, they tended to take a detailed, even microscopic, approach to their specialty. Nebraska was already a problem. A text first published in 1925 divided North America into forty-seven geographical regions (a handful of these were exclusively Mexican or Canadian, but there were still more than forty U.S. regions, including an “Erie Canal Belt,” a “Lower Ohio Valley,” and a “Columbia/Fraser River Basin”).<sup>10</sup> Nebraska, in this scheme, was divided into a Great Plains Ranching region, the classic Corn Belt, and the Winter Wheat Belt. White and Foscoe’s 1943 text presents a convenient summary of geographical opinion. They simply asked leading American geographers for their views of regional labels and boundaries, and followed the consensus. The overall subject is now “Anglo-America”: Mexico has been moved out of the area under consideration. The number of U.S. regions is down to eighteen. But Nebraska is still divided. The eastern part of the state is in the “agricultural interior,” the traditional Corn Belt. The northwest quadrant, the Sand Hills, is located in the Great Plains. And the south-central and southwest is part of an “interior grain belt,” the old Winter Wheat Belt.

Geographers would continue to change and simplify their approach. By the 1970s, the White and Foscoe text (with McKnight added as an author) has reduced the number of U.S. regions to thirteen. The Great Plains incorporates most of the former wheat belts, and the old corn and manufacturing belts have been combined into a large north central “heartland” (essentially the traditional Midwest). The western two thirds of Nebraska is now part of the Great Plains, while the eastern third is in the midwestern “heartland.” But by this time professional geographers had lost much of their interest in regions. Defining and delineating regions turned out to be highly problematic and embarrassing subjective, and the interests of

many geographers turned to other things that seemed more pressing or scientific.<sup>11</sup> That opened the way for a number of amateurs and non-geographers to enter the field, and with a group of human or cultural geographers, to develop regional definitions that were larger, simpler, and more in touch with popular perceptions (and indeed, were often directly based on popular perceptions). At least three works from this 1970s wave of American regional thinking are worth specific mention.<sup>12</sup>

Wilbur Zelinsky was for many years the leading advocate of American cultural geography. In 1973 he published, as a culmination of a prolific career, *The Cultural Geography of the United States*. The criteria for Zelinsky’s cultural regions included numerous linguistic, religious, ethnic, dietary, historical, building style, and other factors. Zelinsky pared all of this down to five major regions—New England, the Mid-Atlantic/Northeast, the South, the Midwest, and the West (though he fudged a bit by dividing some into a number of subregions). He placed the Great Plains in the West. Nebraska is again divided approximately in the middle of the state between the West and Midwest.

Raymond Gastil’s *Cultural Regions of the United States* (1975) almost places Nebraskans within a single region (but you will have to wait just a minute for the answer). Gastil has more regions than Zelinsky—eleven as opposed to five—primarily because he divides the West into four separate regions. In contrast to Zelinsky’s expansive West, Gastil has a large Midwest, which he separates into two regions, the Upper Midwest and Central Midwest. While Zelinsky absorbed the Great Plains into the West, Gastil placed the Plains, and consequently all of Nebraska, in the Midwest. The northeast corner is in the Upper Midwest, the rest of the state in the Central Midwest.

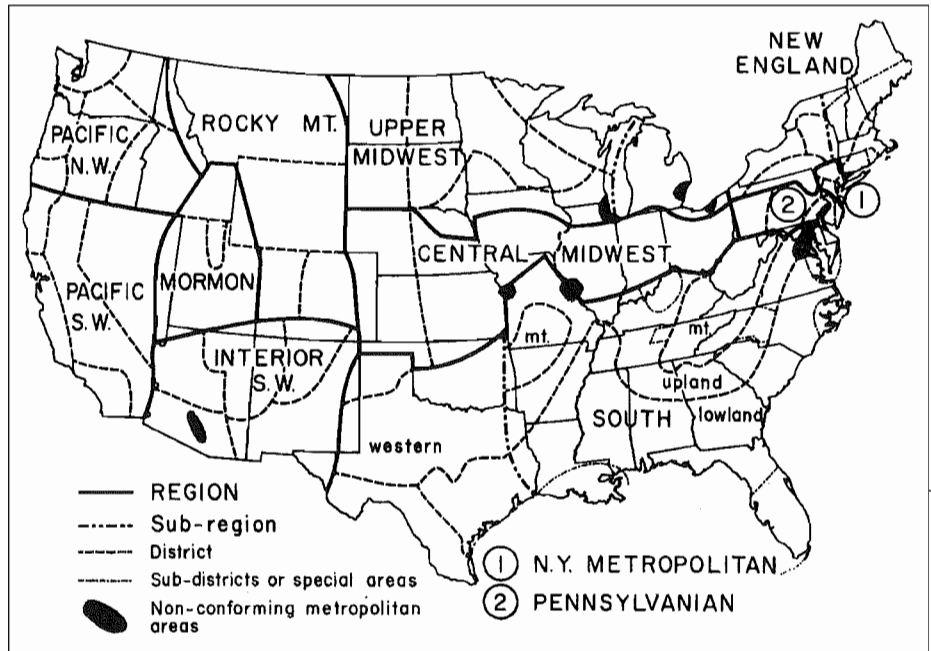
Finally, one of the most thoughtful, and certainly the most popular, 1970s work on regionalism was *The Nine Nations of North America*, by Washington

Post journalist and editor Joel Garreau. *Nine Nations* finally provides Nebraskans with a single, clear answer to where they are. Garreau divides North America into nine regions or "nations," each with its own capital city. But one of these regions is exclusively Canadian (French Quebec) and another, the Caribbean Islands, includes only a small section of extreme southern Florida, leaving the United States comprising seven major regions. In Garreau's scheme Nebraska is located in, and is in fact near the center of, a large interior area he calls "The Breadbasket," which includes all of the Great Plains and most of the traditional Midwest. The West is divided into a Pacific Northwest ("Ecotopia"), a Hispanic Southwest, and a huge mountain "Empty Quarter" that includes most of Canada outside Quebec and Ontario.

This completes a survey of recent regionalist visualizations of the U.S. There have, in effect, been three common answers to the question of where Nebraska is located: The Great Plains, the West, and the Midwest. It is now time to look at each of these answers in more detail.

First, the Great Plains.<sup>13</sup> Though precise boundaries, especially on the east, are notoriously difficult to determine, the Great Plains is still the most sharply defined of the three regions. Perhaps because of its physiographic homogeneity, consciousness of the Plains as a distinctive region was evident with the first European explorers and settlers. The Great American Desert label of the Pike and Long expeditions became notorious. A chapter title from Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth* (1927), "The Great Plain Drinks the Blood of Christian Men and is Satisfied," graphically suggests early European views of the Plains.

Serious consideration of the Great Plains as a geographic and cultural region began in the 1930s with Walter Prescott Webb's *The Great Plains* (1931), the 1936 government study mentioned above, and James Malin's *Grasslands of North America* (1938), a work not widely recognized at the time it was published,



Raymond D. Gastil, *Cultural Regions of the United States* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1975). Reprinted by permission of the University of Washington Press

but that was destined to become influential to later generations of Plains scholars. Webb particularly established the Plains as the most dramatic test case of Turner's thesis of the effects of the frontier environment on European immigrants and culture. He in fact made the Plains, synonymous with aridity and lack of trees, beginning at the 98th meridian (others would argue for the 100th meridian, or approximately the twenty-inch rainfall isohyet), the most decisive obstacle or breaking point of the entire continent for frontier settlement. Malin was more inclined to recognize the success of human ingenuity and technology in conquering the Plains, but he too emphasized the uniqueness of the Great Plains. Scholarly study of the region has continued steadily ever since. Webb's views influenced Wallace Stegner, one of the great literary voices of the Plains and West, as well as the 1950s study, *The Great Plains in Transition*, by geographer Carl Kraenzel, while current New West and Great Plains historian Donald Worster has acknowledged a strong

debt to Malin, his predecessor at the University of Kansas.<sup>14</sup>

Demographic and economic problems in many Plains communities heightened interest in the region in the 1970s and 1980s. The controversial "Buffalo Commons" debate, initiated by the New Jersey academic duo Frank and Deborah Popper in the 1980s, furthered a sometimes unwelcome attention to the Plains as one of America's problem regions. The Plains competed with the South and Appalachia as the "worst" place to live in the minds of many Americans, the "lowest amenity region," in scholarly geographic jargon.<sup>15</sup>

On a more positive note, in the past decade or so, there has been a renaissance (or perhaps just a "nascence") of celebratory literary and artistic work on the Great Plains, including New York writer Ian Frazier's long essay *The Great Plains* (1989), William Least Heat Moon's thick description of a small section of Kansas plains in *PrairieErth (a deep map)* (1991), Kathleen Norris's acclaimed meditation of an easterner re-

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George Condra identifies this expansive landscape as rough Pierre shale near Whiting Bridge, southeast of Spencer in Boyd County, June 24, 1912. Condra Collection-1892

turned to live in rural South Dakota, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (1993), and Richard Manning's journalistic reprise of Malin in *Grassland: The History, Biology, Politics, and Promises of the American Prairie* (1995). Similarly, a wide variety of artists have found inspiration in Plains landscapes, making it a central location for contemporary regional art. Other scholars have also gotten in on the growth of Plains regionalism. Great Plains literature is a widely recognized and growing field. The Northern Great Plains History Conference is now in its thirty-fourth year. Lawton, Oklahoma, boasts a Museum of the Great Plains and an Institute of the Great Plains that publishes *The Great Plains Journal*. Emporia, Kansas, has a Center for the Great Plains, also with its own journal, *Heritage of the Great Plains*. There are similar groups and organizations scattered across the Plains.<sup>16</sup>

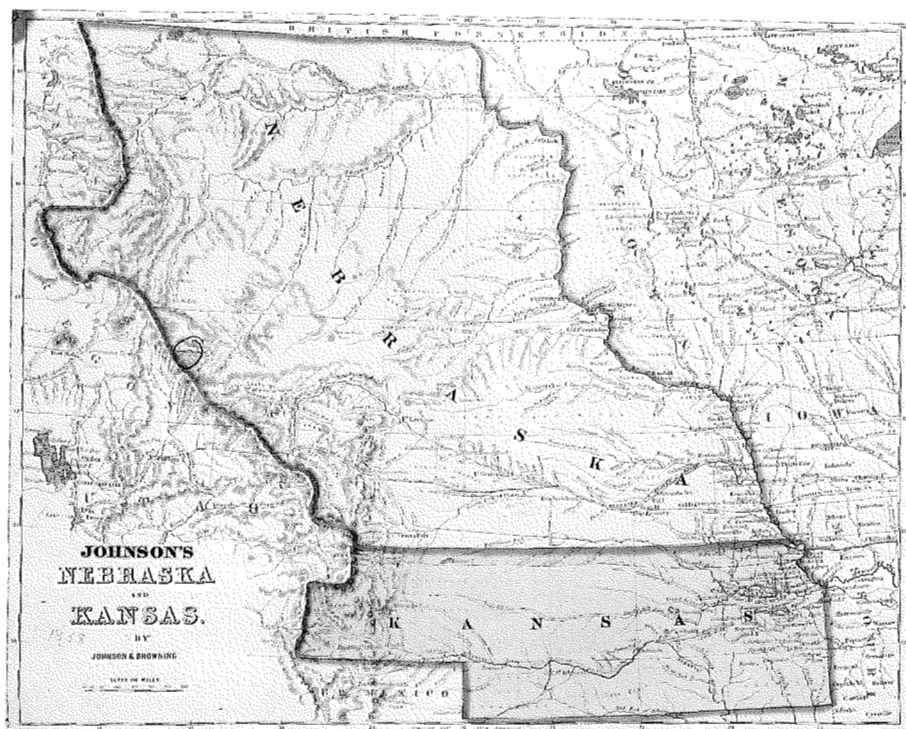
Nebraska has a well founded association with the Great Plains. The Sand Hills, despite a rolling hills physiography, is as close to popular images of the

Plains as a cattle ranching grassland as any part of the country today. Willa Cather, John Neihardt, and Mari Sandoz, three of Nebraska's central writers, were at least in part Plains writers, and contemporary Nebraskans like John Janovy have continued the tradition. Keith Jacobshagen and Hal Holoun are among the leading Great Plains artists. Nebraska Educational Television produced the most ambitious documentary series on the Plains to date, *The Great Plains Experience* (1978). The Center for Great Plains Studies in Lincoln is probably the focal point nationwide for academic study of the region, with its annual conference, the *Great Plains Quarterly*, and *Great Plains Research* providing outstanding research and publication outlets on the Plains. A founder of the center, Frederick C. Luebke, is a prominent Plains historian. Nebraska surely has as much right as any state to consider itself a part of the Great Plains.

So why should we not end our quest at once, and place Nebraska in the Great Plains? Several reasons. First of all,

by even the most expansive definitions of the region, a significant part of Nebraska is not in the Great Plains. Especially, the majority of Nebraskans do not live on the Plains. And while there has been a growing consciousness of the Plains as a region, it still does not approach the identity level of traditional regions such as the South or New England. Part of the reason may be that the Great Plains squares so poorly with state boundaries. No single state lies wholly within the Great Plains. And while political boundaries may seem arbitrary and shallow to geographers, they do develop an important reality of their own. States form one level of our basic geographical identity. Belonging to a state makes a difference. Regionalization seems to work best when it coincides with and is reinforced by state boundaries.<sup>17</sup>

Another factor is the enormous north/south expanse of the Great Plains, which stretch from northern Mexico to central Canada. Nebraskans surely have more in common with nearby non-



Nebraska and Kansas Territories as they were from May 30, 1854, to March 2, 1861.  
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Plains states such as Iowa or Minnesota than they have with Texas or Saskatchewan. In any case, regionalists regularly subsumed the Great Plains into either the West or the Midwest.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps the “Great Plains Renaissance” will eventually change that, and establish the Plains as a primary regional identity. But for now locating Nebraska on the Plains appears to be a less than completely satisfactory answer, especially for the majority of Nebraskans living in the eastern part of the state.

How about the West, then?

The West has been more the creation of historians than geographers (and more the creation of the American people and the popular culture industry than historians). Geographers seem to find it too large and unwieldy for their predilections. Most divide the West into at least three or four separate regions—a Hispanic, desert Southwest, the atypically wet Pacific Northwest, the Rocky Mountain interior, perhaps the far west

Pacific Coast, and sometimes the Great Plains.<sup>19</sup>

Historians have remained more committed to the concept of a single West. That may be one of the unappreciated legacies of Frederick Jackson Turner. Western history did not begin with Turner. The concept of the West was already well developed in popular culture when he came along.<sup>20</sup> But he did almost single-handedly bring the idea of the West into academic study. Turner elegized the monumental significance of the frontier experience. The frontier, he argued, was the single most important factor shaping American history and society. It had been responsible for almost all of the important characteristics that made America America. For Turner the West was a moveable place, a border zone between civilization and wilderness, European and native Americans, a place where nature still exerted an overpowering presence on human society.<sup>21</sup>

If all of America had at some time

been the “West,” as Turner argued, it was nonetheless easy to make the regional West into a particularly Turnerian place, the last, largest, longest frontier, the place where the magic of the frontier worked in an especially thorough way, where the frontier and its characteristics had never been overwhelmed by European style civilization, had never really disappeared. (Of course, Turner had enormous help from the popular culture industry, especially movies and television, in turning the West into a national mythology.)

Historians (and much of the American public), in any case, held onto the concept of a single West. If for Turner all America, or at least all trans-Appalachian America, was a frontier, and thus a West, later western historians were only slightly less imperialistic. The recent New West History movement, insisting against Turner that the West is a region, a specific place versus a moving frontier process, and that it is defined by specific regional characteristics more than by a frontier past that it shares with the rest of America, nonetheless routinely makes that “place” cover almost two thirds of the United States (everything west of the Mississippi River).

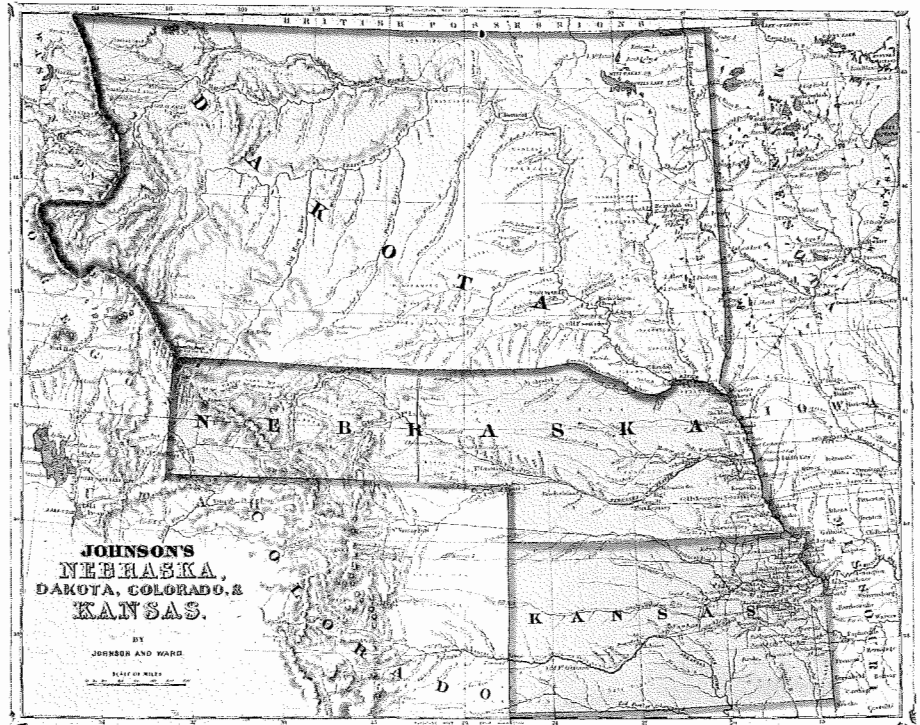
This large West is an important region for historians. Courses in Western history are routine throughout the country. Historians do not think it odd that Harvard and Yale have major programs in Western history, and do not expect Berkeley or Stanford to do the same for New England or Eastern history. St. Louis is treated by historians as a western city, because of its association with the fur trade and Louisiana Purchase. The Western History Association and the *Western Historical Quarterly* are major regional organizations and publications. The New Western History has been one of the main developments in the entire profession in recent years.

Again, it was the creation of an expansive and historically significant West in American popular culture that created the foundations for a similar perception in the historical profession.

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And popular culture interest in the West seems to be reviving. Both the boom in interest in Western history in the past two decades, and the “Great Plains Renaissance” described earlier, were in fact riding the crest of a much larger wave of public interest in things western. This has been a large and complex development. Describing it fully would require hundreds or thousands of pages; we will try to make do with the briefest of summary lists:<sup>22</sup> the return of western movies, including *The Unforgiven*, the first western to win a best picture Oscar since the 1930s, and *Dances with Wolves* (Clint Eastwood has just replaced John Wayne at the top of a poll of America’s favorite movie stars); the growth of country music, and especially the phenomenal popularity of Garth Brooks, who has sold more albums than any musical act except the Beatles; an enormous output of western literature and poetry, from Bernard DeVoto and Wallace Stegner to Larry McMurtry, Cormac McCarthy, and a long list of Native American, Latino/a, and Asian authors; the popularity of television documentaries, from *West of the Imagination* to *The Oregon Trail* to *The Way West* to Ken Burns’s *The West*; the huge popularity of Stephen Ambrose’s recent book, *Undaunted Courage*, on the Lewis and Clark expedition, and the notoriety of the New West history movement; a widely generalized “cowboy chic,” which shows up in endless ads and commercials featuring Montana and Wyoming, and has attracted celebrities such as Robert Redford, Mel Gibson, Ralph Lauren, and Ted Turner to those states.

Defining such a large and protean region is not easy. But by many definitions, Nebraska is part of the West. It has shared in the major episodes of Western history, beginning with Lewis and Clark. The Great Platte River Road, in Merrill Mattes’s apt phrase, became the main pathway for European settlers entering the West. The fur trade, the Oregon, California, and Mormon Trails, the Pony Express, the transcontinental railroad,



Nebraska looked like this from March 2, 1861, to March 3, 1863, following the creation of Colorado and Dakota Territories. NSHS-M78/186a/J63n

all passed through Nebraska. It was a locus for Plains Indian conflicts, and the cattle drives and ranching industry. Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West show originated in Nebraska. Nebraska was also a prime place for Turnerian pioneering farmers, and claims to have had the first official homestead filed under the Homestead Act.

Nebraska seems equally a part of the contemporary West. When I ask students, on the first day of my class on the American West, what they think of when they think of “the West,” their responses are similar to those given to other professors from whom I shamelessly stole the idea—the West is defined largely in contrast to the East: dry, windy, relatively empty and underpopulated, less urban and congested, nature is more imposing and less hospitable. It has cows, horses, cowboy hats and boots, and pickup trucks. Sometimes they mention Turnerian characteristics—individualism, freedom, pragmatism (or practicality), materialism, anti-government ideologies. Western historians have added other features to the traits of “the West,” including a large federal government influence, with government ownership and control of much of the land, a particularly dramatic and inspiring landscape, even geometric state and local boundaries that seem to defy nature and the environment.

By many of these criteria Nebraska fits as comfortably into the West as a cowboy does into his jeans and a saddle. The state is dry, with much of its agriculture requiring irrigation. It has one of the nation’s premier ranching areas. Mother Nature has all the requisite nastiness: blizzards, tornadoes, wind, drought, heat, cold, hail, floods, even grasshoppers. Nebraska is sparsely populated: the entire population could fit easily into what in many places would be one decent sized city—Kansas City or Minneapolis or Denver, not to mention New York or Chicago or Los



Angeles. In Wright Morris and John G. Neihardt Nebraska produced two of the leading western literary figures of the twentieth century. Our literary journal is titled *The Prairie Schooner*. We have our share of horses and cowboys, even if we don't show them off quite as ostentatiously as Wyoming or Montana. There are still Indians in Nebraska, though most were long ago driven out to the Dakotas or Oklahoma.

Are there any reasons not to put Nebraska in the West and be done with it? Well, I'm afraid, yes. Some reservations are similar to those involving the Great Plains. Parts of Nebraska are more "West" than others. A greater concern is with the concept of the West itself. There is still a strong popular culture influence keeping the West unified. We all pretty much know what western novels, or western movies, or western clothes, or western music are. There must be something coherent behind all of this.

But here I find myself siding with the geographers. Most of what makes the West cohere is the past. The present is more problematic. Perhaps the West is simply too large and diverse to retain a single regional identity.<sup>23</sup> Is it useful to put the Southwest and Northwest, some of the driest and wettest places on the planet, in the same category? Or multicultural southern California and homogenous Kansas or North Dakota? Something about putting Cherry County in the Nebraska Sand Hills and Marin County in northern California into the same regional mold strains even my latitudinarian credulity. The real regional units of the West seem to me more those of the geographers and other regionalists than the single region of the historians and popular culture. Even admitting the strong influence of history on regional identity and the generally unifying influence of Turnerian frontier on Western history, not to mention the power of popular culture, I suspect that the West will more and more come to be thought of as several different places.<sup>24</sup> Already, while historians pay lip service to the West as the trans-Mississippi, their real

West begins, at most, with the Great Plains. Minnesota, Iowa, Arkansas, Missouri are included in the definitions and maps, but they have almost none of the characteristics of the historians' West and little role in their stories. California and the Pacific Northwest are gradually being written out of the definition too. Common sense tells everyone that much of the West Coast resembles the East more than it does Nebraska. San Francisco and Boston, Hollywood and Broadway, have more in common with each other than they do with Omaha or Minneapolis or Kansas City. And if there is not a single "West," or if Nebraska is not clearly related to whatever there is of it, that still leaves us without a good place to put Nebraska.

A final possibility: The Midwest.<sup>25</sup>

The Midwest as a region is at least as problematic as the West, in some ways more so. The Midwest has the weakest sense of historical and cultural identity of the nation's major regions. There is no tradition of Midwest history comparable to Southern or New England or Western history.<sup>26</sup> There are not Midwest novelists or artists that we think of on the same level as western or southern writers and artists. We do not get television documentaries on the Midwest, or music or movies that we call midwesterns. Farmers have never matched cowboys as popular icons. And yet, for all this, the Midwest also has had a compelling power as a region. Thus, Paterson insists that the Midwest is "one of the greatest realities of American life and thought," while Garreau argues just as vehemently that "there is no such thing as the Midwest."<sup>27</sup>

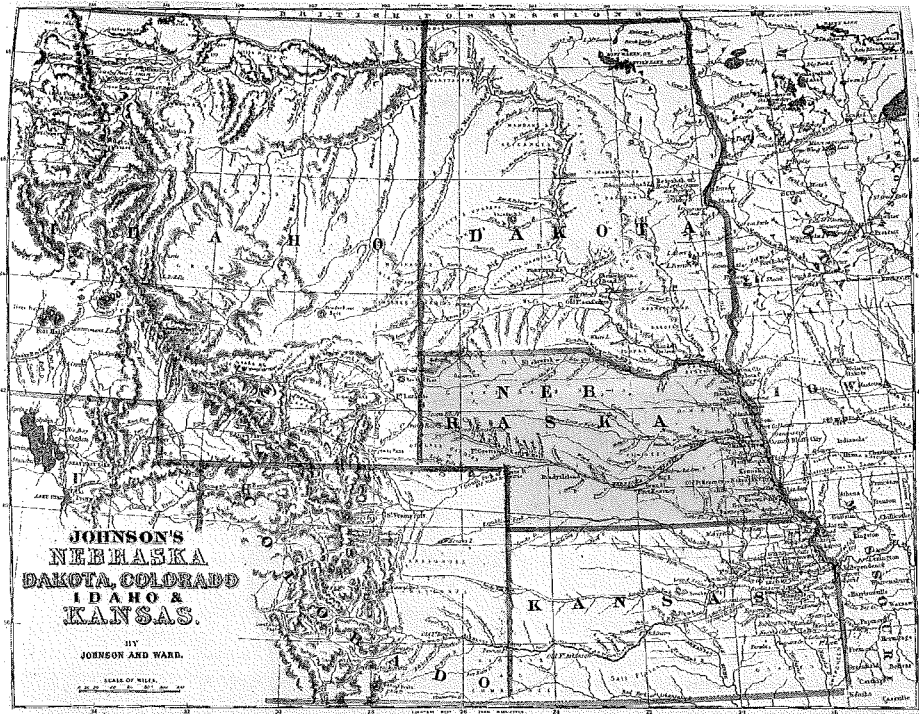
For most of American history Garreau was certainly right. There was no need for a Midwest until the development of the far West in the late nineteenth century stretched the country out so much that we needed a new label for the huge interior region that had previously been the West. The Midwest (actually, at first, the Middle West), became a popular regional label only in the early twentieth century. But it had already

achieved an impressive place in the nation's consciousness; only the name was lacking. Jefferson's agrarian, yeoman farm version of the American Dream centered on the area that would later become the Midwest, even if he called it the West. And listen to Abraham Lincoln nail both the concept and the geography: "The great interior region, bounded east by the Alleghenies, north by the British dominions, west by the Rocky Mountains, and south by the line along which the culture of corn and cotton meet . . . is the great body of the republic. . . . This great interior region is . . . one of the most important in the world."<sup>28</sup> Or William Jennings Bryan's famous "Cross of Gold" speech: the nation's "great cities rest upon our broad and fertile prairies. Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country."

Frederick Jackson Turner was an early user of the term; he published an article on "The Middle West" in 1901. Booth Tarkington used the same title for a 1902 essay in *Harper's Monthly Magazine*. But Turner and Tarkington still used the terms Middle West, West, and central states interchangeably, suggesting that while the concept was common enough, the terminology was still in flux. Ohio, Indianapolis, and even Buffalo, New York, are "West" for the easterners caricatured in Tarkington's essay.<sup>29</sup>

The Midwest, then, had from the beginning expansive and ambiguous aspirations and boundaries. The main identifying characteristic of the Midwest was farming—it was a pastoral, rural region. Even more Turnerian than the West, it embodied the best and most typical images of America.<sup>30</sup> The Midwest was the most American part of America, the most honest, hard-working, middle class, democratic, egalitarian (and of course Anglo-European)—the least aristocratic and decadent—part of the nation. Abraham Lincoln was the first midwestern hero, though Jefferson and

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Nebraska assumed its approximate current configuration when Idaho Territory was created on March 3, 1863. NSHS-912/xJ63/1864

Jackson's yeoman farmer agrarianism were assimilated into the midwestern identity. The Midwest has been Peoria and Dubuque, Truman and Eisenhower, Dorothy and Auntie Em and Uncle Henry (no midwestern witches in Oz), Main Street in Disneyland and Lawrence Welk, Middletown and Jonesville for social scientists, Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon, a place free from violence and discord, poverty and riches, where "the men are all handsome, the women all hard working, and the children all above average." (I hesitate to mention another major icon of American popular culture associated with the Midwest, the long running television program *Hee-Haw*.) Geographer J. Russell Smith called the Corn Belt "the gift of the Gods" to America. For William Carter the Midwest was what America was like "before America moved to the city." For contemporary scholars the Midwest is still "the most representative part of America"; the "heartland," "the 'core' region of Anglo-American society," "one

of the most productive, prosperous, and self-sufficient regions in the world"; the part of America that "works best," that is "most at peace with itself," a place whose citizens think it "the best place to live in the whole world." George Will offered the ultimate compliment: if God were an American, Will was sure he would be a midwesterner.<sup>31</sup>

But the Midwest has also had from the beginning a schizophrenic character, and several severe identity crises. It has two different components—the Old Northwest, bounded by the Alleghenies, the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers (the Corn Belt of the early geographers), and the area from the Mississippi to the Rockies, including the northern Plains. At the same time that the development of the far West was making the concept of a separate Midwest a necessity, the development of the industrial Northeast was spreading out from New York and New England into the Old Northwest. The growth of Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland sharply bifurcated the region.

To preserve the rural and agricultural identity of the region, perceptions of the Midwest slowly shifted westward. Michigan and Ohio, particularly, lost most of their credentials as midwestern states, developing more affiliation with the industrial Northeast.

On the western border, the dividing line between the Midwest and the West, and thus the relationship between the Great Plains, the Midwest, and the West, has also long been ambiguous. Western historians, and many other Plains enthusiasts, have tried to separate the Plains from the Midwest, arguing in agreement with Walter Prescott Webb that the aridity of the Plains creates a fundamental cultural, historical, and geographical fault line along the eastern edge of the Plains, so that the Plains clearly belong to the West. Occasionally they have seemed convincing. In the Dust Bowl days of the 1930s, when Plains agriculture was especially tenuous, there was a short-lived tendency to remove the Plains from the Midwest. But as that crisis passed, and as agriculture again dominated the Plains after World War II, in vernacular thinking and language the Plains returned to a midwestern location. Many residents even of Wyoming and Montana, for example, think of their location as midwestern.<sup>32</sup>

Farming seems the key point. The farm crisis of the 1980s seems to have reinforced the unity of the Midwest and Plains. The West is more and more associated with other things: tourism, skiing and recreation, a scenic but empty grandeur not amenable to agriculture, mining and energy boom and bust, national parks and federally owned land, forests and lumbering, ranching, perhaps even the heavily irrigated and subsidized agribusiness of California, but altogether a past and present very different from the solid and stolid family farms and small towns of the Midwest. The real fault line in America, in this view, runs not along the 98th or 100th meridian, but along the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains, separating Vail and Aspen and Jackson Hole much more sharply

from the small towns of eastern Colorado or the Dakotas than those Plains towns are separated from similar communities in eastern Kansas or Nebraska.

The interwar years, the heyday of American regionalism, were also a high point of midwestern self-confidence. Midwest painters John Steuart Curry, Grant Wood, and Thomas Hart Benton defined the regional art movement. Sinclair Lewis received a Nobel Prize in literature for his Midwest-based novels, though many would claim that F. Scott Fitzgerald was the region's best writer. After World War II the prestige of the Midwest declined; it became an old fashioned backwater in a cosmopolitan and modernizing era, the home of out-of-touch isolationists, cranky anti-New Deal conservatives, and square fuddies generally. Nor were the 1970s and 1980s good years for the Midwest. People fled southward and westward in droves, leaving behind pejorative new labels like the Rust Belt or Snow Belt.<sup>33</sup>

Still, there has been a revival of midwestern identity in recent years, a paler echo of the New West and Great Plains regional booms. Mostly, this has to do with things rural or "country." The popular success of *Midwest Living* is one example (the magazine's touting of the Midwest as a region of "clean air, genuine friendships, appreciation for the land, and family-oriented values" struck a commodifiable national chord). At least since the 1960s, America's problems have increasingly been associated with urban areas, and thus both the East and West coasts. Rural/urban divisions have become sharper, and the sense of midwestern identity seems to have grown stronger.<sup>34</sup>

Both midwesterners and those from other regions have recently promoted a blatantly adulatory new label for the region, the "Heartland" of America. The term "Heartland" has been associated with the Midwest as an adjective or modifier for many years, but it is now a common primary label.<sup>35</sup> Heartland perhaps avoids some of the ambiguities of the term Midwest, though it is even

more expansive, including virtually the entire country between the East and West coasts. (Midwest had a distinctly northern bias that Heartland lacks; Midwest was really the north central U.S., while "Heartland" unambiguously embraces the Great Plains. Oklahoma City, for example, was incessantly referred to as "Heartland" in the aftermath of the Murrah Building bombing, but seldom as Midwest.)

Whatever the label or perspective, Nebraska's association with this region is also a strong one. In fact, along with Kansas and Iowa, Nebraska is generally considered the most typically midwestern state, both by its own residents and by those in other parts of the country.<sup>36</sup> William Jennings Bryan and Cather's Antonia Shimerda are quintessential Midwest icons. Adopting a unicameral legislature to save money and avoid bureaucracy, or building the state capital on a pay-as-you-go basis to avoid bonds, were classic demonstrations of small town/rural values and traditional midwestern frugality. Even the slogan, "Nebraska: The Good Life!" seems midwestern in tone. And Midwest is the only label that applies reasonably to all of the state.<sup>37</sup>

As with our other answers, there are difficulties here too. The terms Midwest and "Heartland" may be so large and inclusive that, like "the West" they become almost meaningless. Heartland could easily be an ephemeral media creation. The more traditional Midwest is still an amorphous creature: western Nebraskans may justly feel that they have little in common with Indiana or Illinois, and even less with Ohio and Michigan.

Perhaps, then, the best that we can do is to say that there are several different answers to the question "Where is Nebraska?" Concepts like the Midwest or West are subtle and subjective. Whether Nebraska is thought of as part of the Great Plains, the West, or the Midwest may depend on both the specific people and places in Nebraska being referred to, and on who is providing the

answers. And the answers change with time. For now, and for me, the Midwest offers the strongest and most logical regional affiliation for Nebraska. But I have colleagues who disagree, and partisans of both the West and Great Plains have been vocal and persuasive in recent years. So even among people who know their geography, you can still get a good argument from the question, "Where is Nebraska, anyway?," even if it is hard to get one good answer.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Regionalism has a long and illustrious history. "Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres," Caesar tells us in the first sentence of *The Gallic Wars*, belatedly giving me the opportunity to show off my eighth grade Latin I erudition from nearly forty years ago. The popularity of regional materials at almost any bookstore, even the national chain stores, is one indication of the continuing pervasiveness of regionalism in American society.

On mental maps see Peter Gould and Rodney White, *Mental Maps* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1986). The "look different" quote is from Joel Garreau, *The Nine Nations of North America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981); I. Michael Johnson from *The New Westers: The West in Contemporary American Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996). "American identities" is from Edward L. Ayers et al., *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and the American National Character* (New York: George Braziller, 1961) is the classic study. The introduction and first three chapters of Ayers, *All Over the Map*, is a good update.

<sup>3</sup> The literature on east/west regionalism is so vast it is hard to suggest a suitable starting point. Almost any critical study of Frederick Jackson Turner, the frontier thesis, or the more recent New West History will afford an entry into the topic. One of many possibilities is Kent Blaser, "Something Old, Something New: Understanding the American West," *Nebraska History* 77 (Summer 1996): 67–77.

<sup>4</sup> Going strictly by locational criteria, and ignoring historical or cultural or physiographical criteria, "north central" is the most accurate regional location of Nebraska. This label occurs occasionally, but not widely, in popular regional language. The classic scholarly example is Wallace Akin, *The North Central United States* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Co., 1968). An excellent recent update is John R. Borchert, *America's Northern Heartland: An Economic and Historical Geography of the Upper Midwest* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). As we shall see shortly, Midwest has

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become largely interchangeable with north central.

<sup>5</sup> The best place to begin further exploration is probably a basic regional geography textbook. The primary ones used for this essay were, in several different editions, Tom L. McKnight, C. Langdon White, and Edwin J. Foscue, *Regional Geography of Anglo-America* (New York: Prentice-Hall) (McKnight was not an author of the earliest editions), and J. H. Paterson, *North America: A Geography of Canada and the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press).

<sup>6</sup> The *locus classicus* on Turner and sections is *The Significance of Sections in American History* (New York: P. Smith, 1932). The best introduction to regionalism between the wars is Robert Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

University of North Carolina sociologist Howard Odum was one of the leading advocates of southern regionalism, and published (with Harry Estil Moore) *American Regionalism: A Cultural-Historical Approach to National Integration* (New York: Henry Holt, 1938), perhaps the most important academic study of American regionalism in this period. Faulkner and the Southern Agrarians brought southern regional writing to the forefront of American literature. Southern history, with the founding of the Southern Historical Association and the *Journal of Southern History*, was almost as vigorous as southern literature during this era. Wilbur J. Cash's *The Mind of the South* (New York: Random House, 1941) is in a category of its own as a regional meditation. The New Deal interest in the Great Plains had rather modest results—a government commission that produced a book length report, *The Future of the Great Plains* (1936).

<sup>7</sup> In addition to the works by Turner and Odum mentioned above, the classic foundations of regionalist scholarship in the U.S. include political scientist Daniel Elazar's *American Federalism: The View from the States* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1966), and a collection of essays edited by historian Merrill Jensen, *Regionalism in America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951).

<sup>8</sup> According to White and Foscue's 1943 textbook, "probably the only thing on which all geographers see eye to eye is the fact that regional geography is the core of their subject." They quote one of the deans of the discipline, Carl Sauer, writing "The final goal of all geography is regional geography." Regional geography was "the culminating branch of the science," "the one thing that is first, last, and always geography," according to two other leading practitioners. All of the quotes are collected in White and Foscue, *Regional Geography*, 35–36.

<sup>9</sup> For early regional geographers, "economic activity" seemed the main meeting ground of culture and the environment. According to White and Foscue (1943), there was a consensus among geographers that "predominant economic activities"

were "the best basis upon which to group human beings" (p. 42). By the 1960s and 1970s, more subjective and cultural criteria had complicated the process of regionalization. An important criteria for creating a region, in one view, was that "people think it's a region." Another based regional creation on what "feels right," on "what [it's] like," on the myriad ways that regions "look different, feel different, sound different." Even professional geographers admitted that regional definitions ultimately came down to subjective judgments synthesizing many factors. See Paterson's (1979) discussion of regional "personalities," in *North America*, 122–23.

<sup>10</sup> J. Russell Smith and M. Ogden Phillips, *North America: Its People and the Resources, Development, and Prospects of the Continent as a Home to Man* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1940).

<sup>11</sup> A widely used text from the 1970s, Paterson's *North America*, reveals these trends clearly, with only eleven regions, and enough wariness of the whole concept that regions are not given specific boundaries and no regional maps are included. But Nebraska is still apparently divided between the Midwest (the "agricultural interior") and the Great Plains.

<sup>12</sup> For a general overview of regionalism in the 1970s see Richard Maxwell Brown, "The New Regionalism in America, 1970–1981," in William G. Robbins et al., eds., *Regionalism and the Pacific Northwest* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1983); Michael Steiner and Clarence Mondale, eds., *Region and Regionalism in the United States: A Source Book for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (New York: Garland, 1988), and Michael Bradshaw, *Regions and Regionalism in the United States* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1988). Barbara Allen and Thomas Schlereth, eds., *Sense of Place: American Regional Cultures* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1990), and Wayne Franklin and Michael Steiner, eds., *Mapping American Culture* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992) provide examples of cultural regionalism in an American Studies context.

<sup>13</sup> Beyond the general works mentioned in the text and notes above, good introductions, all with more extensive bibliographies, include: E. Cotton Mather, "The American Great Plains," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 62 (June 1972): 237–57; Frederick C. Luebke, "Regionalism and the Great Plains: Problems of Concept and Method," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 15 (January 1984): 19–38; Luebke and Brian Blouet, *The Great Plains: Environment and Culture* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979); Elliott West, *The Way West: Essays on the Central Plains* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), and Neal R. Peirce, *The Great Plains States of America: People, Politics, and Power in the Nine Great Plains States* (New York: Norton, 1973). I also found Richard Etulain's keynote address at the 1997 Center for Great Plains Studies annual conference, "Telling the Story of the Great Plains,"

very helpful. Geographer J. R. Borchert and historian Donald Worster are two of the best and most prolific current Plains scholars, with a large number of works on the region. Finally, the *Great Plains Quarterly* and *Journal of the Great Plains* are excellent sources on Plains scholarship.

<sup>14</sup> See Allan Bogue, "The Heirs of James C. Malin: A Grassland Historiography," *Great Plains Quarterly* 1 (Spring 1981): 105–31. In the past two decades there has been a backlash against Webb in particular, not only in regard to his reactionary political views, but also against the environmental determinism implicit in his exaggeration of the harshness and difficulty of Plains settlement. See Mather, "The Great Plains," and the book and article by Luebke cited in note 13.

<sup>15</sup> The bibliography of the "Buffalo Commons" debate is obscure and difficult to follow. The best introduction is Anne Mathews, *Where the Buffalo Roam* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1992). See also the 1995 PBS video, *The Fate of the Plains*.

The "amenity region" quote is from Paterson, *North America* (1979), 165. A recent poll found Kansas the dead last favorite vacation destination for American tourists, followed by Nebraska, Oklahoma, and North Dakota. See James Shortridge, "The Expectations of Others: Struggles Toward a Sense of Place on the Northern Plains," in David Wrobel and Michael Steiner, eds., *Many Wests: Place, Culture, and Regional Identity* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 114. Eric Sevareid once referred to North Dakota as "a rectangular blank spot in the mind of the nation," a comment that became more apt than he could have imagined in 1989 when the Rand McNally atlas not only omitted the state, but added insult to injury by not deeming the error significant enough to correct until the next edition (quoted in Shortridge, "Expectations," p. 127). An infamous 1980s essay asked "Is the State of North Dakota Necessary?" while the 1997 Northern Great Plains History Conference in Bismarck raised the question, "Is North Dakota a Third World Country?"

<sup>16</sup> On literature see Diane Quantic, *The Nature of the Place: A Study in Great Plains Fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995). There have been a number of nationally recognized exhibits featuring Plains art in the past decade, including "West of America," "Visions of America," and "Plains Pictures," which showed at the Joslyn Art Museum in 1997.

<sup>17</sup> There is a brief discussion of this topic in James H. Madison, ed., *Heartland: Comparative Histories of the Midwestern States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 6–7. Studies of regional self-identity and vernacular labels have seldom found a strong Great Plains regionalism.

<sup>18</sup> While White and Foscue argue (1979) that the Great Plains is "one of the most universally recognized and precisely bounded regions of Anglo-America" (p. 94), Zelinsky, Garreau, and Gastil are typical in not thinking the Great Plains a primary U.S. region.

<sup>19</sup> Wilbur Zelinsky and Donald W. Meinig are the most important exceptions. Meinig discusses the issue of geographers and western regionalism in "American Wests: Preface to a Geographic Interpretation," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 62(June 1972): 159–84.

<sup>20</sup> In the words of Richard Etulain, the West was already seen as "a place apart" at the turn of the century. *Re-Imagining the Modern American West: A Century of Fiction, History, and Art* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996), 3.

<sup>21</sup> A massive and fascinating study is Richard Slotkin's trilogy, *Regeneration Through Violence* (1973), *The Fatal Environment* (1985), and *Gunfighter Nation* (1992).

<sup>22</sup> Michael Johnson's *New Westers* is a good introduction.

<sup>23</sup> In the 1970s many geographers, including Donald W. Meinig, seemed to foresee the gradual erosion of regionalism under the homogenizing forces of increasing mobility, the mass media, corporate capitalism, and international consumerism. See the conclusion of Meinig's "American Wests." But more recently many regionalists have argued that tourism and other elements of modern society actually reinforce regional differences.

<sup>24</sup> Wrobel and Steiner, *Many Wests*, offer some support for this idea.

<sup>25</sup> Midwestern historiography has been more obscure and scattered than that of the Great Plains or the West. That has changed significantly with the publication of James Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989), easily the best general introduction to the subject. Other than appropriate sections of the various regional studies discussed in the text, J. Fraser Hart, "The Middle West," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 62(June 1972): 258–82, is a good beginning. The *Journal of Geography* (1985) has a special issue on the Midwest, but it is narrower in focus than Hart's article; J. Madison, *Heartland*, has some excellent essays; Graham Hutton, *The Midwest at Noon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), by a British diplomat, is still worth reading. Andrew R. L. Cayton and Peter S. Onuf, *The Midwest and the Nation: Rethinking the History of an American Region* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990), focuses on the Old Northwest in the nineteenth century. Standard older accounts include J. H. Garland, ed., *The American Middle West* (New York: 1955). J. W. Brownell, "The Cultural Midwest," *Journal of Geography* 58 (1960): 81–85, is a brief version of Shortridge's focus, while Carl Becker's "Kansas" is a classic essay (in *Everyman His Own Historian: Essays in Historiography* (New York: F. S. Crofts, 1935), 1–28. Carl Ubbelohde, "History and the Midwest as a Region," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 78 (1994): 35–47, is an excellent up-to-date survey.

<sup>26</sup> A computer search of Midwest as a title term or key subject word on various historical data-

bases, such as *America: History and Life*, for example, generally gets about 1/5 to 1/10 the number of hits as a similar search for West (for the curious, the West still lags behind the South). Carl Ubbelohde comments on the general lack of historians' interest in the Midwest in "History and the Midwest As a Region," 35–47. Ubbelohde did a similar search of historical dissertations, with similar results (p. 44).

<sup>27</sup> Paterson, *North America*, 230; Garreau, *Nine Nations*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Cited in Shortridge, *The Middle West*, 21.

<sup>29</sup> Many contemporary geographers still include substantial sections of western New York and Pennsylvania in their Midwest region. See White and Foscoe, Paterson, Zelinsky, and Gastil. Turner, "The Middle West," is in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1920).

<sup>30</sup> Recent Midwest historians have claimed, with good reason, that Turner is primarily a midwesterner rather than a western historian. See Cayton and Onuf, *Midwest and the Nation*, 125.

<sup>31</sup> Hart, "The Middle West," has a good discussion of midwestern cultural traits. Smith, *North America*, 360; Carter, *The Middle West Country*, quoted in *Growing Up in the Midwest*, vi; Zelinsky, *Cultural Geography*, 128; White and Foscoe, *Regional Geography*, 272; Garreau, *Nine Nations*, 331. Will quoted in Shortridge, *The Middle West*, 143.

<sup>32</sup> Gastil, *Cultural Geography*, 232, argues that most Great Plains residents self-identify as midwesterners. Garreau implicitly agrees. Much of the evidence comes from Ruth Hale's 1971 Minnesota dissertation, *A Map of Vernacular Regions in America*.

<sup>33</sup> There has always been a darker side to the Midwest. H. L. Mencken included the Midwest along with the South in his diatribes against the "booboisie" from "the Sahara of the Bozart." William Jennings Bryan and the Populists, and later Joe McCarthy, represented for many contemporaries, and especially for scholars, the negative side of the Midwest. Novelists have ranged from the relatively gentle criticism of Sinclair Lewis's Carol Kennicott in *Main Street* or of Lewis himself in *Babbitt*, to the darker edges of Robert Waller's incredibly popular *Bridges of Madison County*, to the positively grim vision of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. Jesse James, Bonnie and Clyde, Charles Starkweather, and Timothy McVeigh were Midwest characters. One of the most perceptive recent portraits of the region, Jane Smiley's Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Thousand Acres*, offers a decidedly revisionist view. The movie *Fargo* achieved some of its quirky critical success partly by playing on these paradoxes.

<sup>34</sup> Academics, too, have produced a number of important Midwest studies in recent years. In addition to the works cited in note 25 at the beginning of this section, for literature see Clarence Andrews, ed., *Growing Up in the Midwest* (Ames: Iowa State

University Press, 1981). The Midwest-centered *New Rural History* is a significant part of this trend. David Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) is the best introduction to the subject. See also Emery N. Castle, ed., *The Changing American Countryside: Rural People and Places* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), and Robert Swierenga, "The New Rural History: Defining the Parameters," *Great Plains Quarterly* 1(Fall 1981): 211–23. Indiana University Press has published a number of books under its Midwest History and Culture Series.

<sup>35</sup> White and Foscoe used the label "Heartland" in the 1970s editions of their text, and they used the term even earlier. Garreau, Shortridge, Paterson, and Zelinsky also use the term "heartland" to apply to approximately the Midwest, though they do not make it their primary label. Geographer John Hudson titled a recent book *Crossing the Heartland: Chicago to Denver* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992). One of the major recent books on the region is Madison, ed., *Heartland: Comparative Histories of the Midwestern States*. The Midwest volume in the recent *Smithsonian Guides to Natural America* is titled *Heartland* (by Omaha author Susanne Winckler, Random House, 1997).

<sup>36</sup> Shortridge concludes, "Americans are now in general agreement that the central-plains region is the perceptual heartland of the Middle West" and that Nebraska is "a somewhat better representative than either Kansas or South Dakota." *The Middle West*, 130.

<sup>37</sup> The term seems widely used throughout the state. The Omaha Steaks Company advertises its products as the "finest Midwestern steaks." Scottsbluff, in the far western panhandle, has its Midwest Theatre on the National Register of Historic Places. In between, billboards promote York as the "crossroads of the Midwest." We purchased our house in Wayne from the Midwest Land Company.

A perusal of telephone directory yellow pages reveals that "Midwest" or "midwestern" is commonly used throughout the state in names of businesses. Midwest is a much more common name than West in Omaha, Lincoln, and Norfolk, while the two occur with about equal frequency from Kearney-Grand Island-Hastings westward (a few western cities have a preference for West over Midwest). The term "heartland" is also quite popular, outranking both West and Midwest in Hastings and Grand Island, for instance.