Nebraska—One Hundred Years

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

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Article Summary: In this brief centennial history Sellers explains that Nebraska's statehood reflected the nation's need to use its flat valley for a transcontinental railroad bed. He shows how the severe droughts of the 1890s and the 1930s produced our indigenous political issues and our best-known leaders.

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NEBRASKA—ONE HUNDRED YEARS

BY JAMES L. SELLERS

THE thirty-first of May next will be the one hundredth anniversary of the enactment of the Kansas-Nebraska law. This act authorized governments for the two territories and opened the territories to white settlement as the Indian claims were extinguished. The area extended from the Missouri River to the top of the Rocky Mountains and from the south boundary of Kansas to the Canadian border. Nebraska comprised the area north of the fortieth parallel, our present Kansas-Nebraska state line, and extending to the Canadian boundary.

The real immediate pressure for the territorial organization in 1854 was the urgent demand for a transcontinental railroad to connect the Mississippi Valley and the western settlements of California, Oregon, Utah, and New Mexico. These western developments were very recent, but they were expanding rapidly.

The War Department had explored five possible routes to the Pacific and reported its findings in 1853. With this information in hand, Congress was ready to take up the problem of locating the transcontinental railroad line that it should first support. But preliminary to such action was the territorial problem west of the Missouri. No area

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that was not open to white settlement was likely to receive favor in locating the railroad. It was for this reason that Stephen A. Douglas of Chicago had introduced his several Nebraska territorial bills throughout the preceding ten years.

The valley of the Platte was "the Great Overland Route to the Pacific." The army surveys that Secretary of War Jefferson Davis reported in 1853 showed it to be the least expensive route over which a railroad to the Pacific could be built, and this gave the territorial bill an urgent priority with Congressmen in the central area but made the Congressmen of rival areas the more determined to defeat it.

The sectional struggle over the expansion of slave territory had been agitated to the flaming point during discussion of the Mexican War annexations and the compromise measures of 1850. When the Nebraska bill was reported in 1854, the old emotions associated with the slavery division enveloped this measure and surged to new intensity in the Kansas struggle. Not until the struggle had run its course in secession and civil war was the country able to get back to the construction of the transcontinental railroad up the valley of the Platte and the settlement of the higher plains and other profitable areas along its course.

It is true that there were settlements along the eastern edge of Nebraska in 1854, but the great popular attention was turned to Kansas. Emigrant Aid societies in many parts of the country but especially in the Northeast busied themselves in dispatching settlers to Kansas but paid little attention to Nebraska. The Kansas struggle and the Civil War delayed developments in Nebraska by eight to ten years.

At the end of the Civil War construction of the Union Pacific was begun at Omaha and carried forward rapidly until it was completed in the spring of 1869 at Ogden, Utah, by connection with the Central Pacific. If any state could be termed a railroad state, it is Nebraska.

While the great enterprise in Nebraska was transportation because we supplied that converging point of migra-

tion and movement between the East and the West, our early settlers were not all engaged in transportation and railroads. Many of the early travelers were attracted by other features of the Nebraska scene.

Nebraska lacked the lure of the precious metals that carried many of her first visitors on to Gregory's Diggings in Colorado or the Comstock Lode of Nevada. Nebraska's chief asset was her land. Hunters, cattlemen on the open range, community builders, even speculators saw possibilities here, but home seekers on the Plains were best adapted to this state. The Nebraska experiment has not been a simple and certain one. Our pioneers, like people of today, were dealing with several unknowns and many variables. The railroad leaders were the most assured promoters, because they had a great national mission to perform and a great subsidy in land whose value depended upon the development of the social and economic life of the area. They could not permit themselves to doubt even the uncertain climate of the High Plains. They promoted immigration by flattering descriptions and positive assurances. They even attracted many of our settlers from foreign lands. But the nucleus of Nebraska's settlement began with native stock migrating from neighboring states. The nearer states of Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin, Indiana, Ohio, Missouri, and Kentucky took the early lead in supplying settlers. Many of these pioneers had migrated before and had lived on previous frontiers.

Early Nebraska was predominantly rural. Here life was tempered by the seasons. But the climate and the seasons in Nebraska called for adaptations that the settlers had not forseen, because they had been unnecessary in the more dependable rainfall areas from which the newcomers had migrated. Thus the struggle for survival sometimes took on new severity in the Nebraska homesteads. The great American Desert which Major Long described in 1820 was almost realized in the 1890's and again in the 1930's. The developments of these years of drought and bitter struggle for survival naturally deserve our most careful study. They are the years that produced our indigenous political

issues and our best-known leaders. In those years our frontier forbears pondered their situation and produced solutions that were based upon the hard facts of their local environment.

By 1890 settlers had spread over the entire state except for the sandhill area. The railroad net, too, was well-developed. The vast new grainland that had been brought under cultivation had accumulated an excessive grain surplus that glutted the markets and depressed prices, but the transportation and production costs had remained excessive. Farmers were caught in the pinch of debts, low prices, and excessive costs for farm implements, transportation, and the living necessities that they had to buy. Grain prices did not pay for the production and marketing. Farmers who had been content to struggle to improve their farm home found themselves foreclosed for debt. The good years left them in debt, but the bad years extinguished incomes to the point that token payments on contracts as well as all the commercial goods that were needed for human comfort and well-being were lacking. Financial conditions that were ruinous were so nearly universal that the farmers were almost spontaneous in their response to the Populist leaders' appeals. In fact, the nucleus of the Populist movement was the farm communities, and such communities supplied the leaders. Governor Silas Holcomb came from Custer County; Senator Charles H. Van Wyck was a farmer in Otoe County; Governor William Poynter came from Boone County.

The economic pinch was so severe that the suffering fixed attention upon economic factors. The obvious evils of low prices for basic farm products, excessive costs of manufactured machinery, outlandish railroad rates, and rank favoritism supplied the issues. It was from facts such as these that the Populist political program was fashioned. The program swept the communities in which politics were responsive to the wishes of the working people. This response was very general in the newer farm communities of the West, but less general in the commercial and industrial centers of the East. It was the West that recognized

William Jennings Byran, the Great Commoner, as the leader of the movement.

In this period of Populism, succeeded by Progressivism, Nebraska made a great contribution to national politics. It was not because free coinage of silver was or was not the solution to our money problem. It was because the leaders here in their efforts to analyze our acute economic distress helped to bring home to the nation a realization that the distress and economic deterioration here on the semiarid border was destructive to the economy of the whole nation, and that the solution called for more than local action. Numerous modifications of our federal laws followed, including the Kinkaid Act for enlarged homesteads, legislation on conservation and irrigation initiated in the Carey Act of 1894 and the Newlands Act of 1902. The forestation programs from J. Sterling Morton, Charles E. Bessey, and Gifford Pinchot to Franklin Roosevelt were initiated in these harsh years. The Halsey forest reserve was started at this time. The struggle with representatives of intrenched interests produced political reforms of great importance, including the Australian or secret ballot, primaries to reduce the power of party machines and conventions, nonpartisan ballots, the registration of voters, and direct election of U.S. Senators.

From the middle 1890's to the end of the First World War the Great Plains experienced an easing of economic pressures. Outside interests in world affairs, including the Spanish War, the Philippine Insurrection, and the World War with their attendant problems, occupied in large measure the public attention. Nebraska had its own heroes in these struggles, including among others General Pershing and Colonels Bryan and Stotsenberg, and it followed these local celebrities with devoted interest. But of greater importance in quieting the political agitation of the 1890's were the reforms of the Theodore Roosevelt and the Wilson administrations. Through these measures the discontent of misery was being channeled into constructive actions, and the frustrations of deadend economic situations were relieved. The first two decades of the century were the best

economically and psychologically that the state had known. "The promise of American life," to borrow a phrase from Herbert Croly, was being realized by a large part of the American public. People were bettering their condition economically, and they believed that their children were getting a better education and would enjoy a rising standard of living.

Then came the defeat of Wilson's ideals, the rejection of many of the Roosevelt and Wilson reforms, the transformation of agricultural prosperity into Coolidge prosperity. Coolidge prosperity was favorable to business and industry, but it sacrificed agriculture and natural resources. The bitter years for agriculture lasted almost a decade before the paralyzing effect shattered the entire economy of our society and tottered the whole economic structure into the greatest depression of history.

The long agricultural decline of the 1920's, followed by the most devastating general depression that the country had ever known, forced people to ponder the entire situation. Prosperous business and industry that had refused to heed the agricultural depression at home or international paralysis abroad at last took a look at the wasted masses who should have been their best customers, but their interest came too late. Nebraska was in the same condition as other agricultural areas except that her agriculture was less diversified than it was in many states, and she was located on the border land of the High Plains where the vicissitudes of Nature are more extreme. Dame Nature chose at this point to exceed her wanton habits, and after years of abundance the drought and heat—sometimes varied by flash floods—of the middle 1930's made many people wonder if this Nebraska land was really meant to be used as the home for man. Some sixty-two thousand of her citizens sought homes elsewhere. This was the crisis that Nebraska was unable to meet, and for which only the resources of the nation could offer solutions of comparable magnitude.

At this point the people of Nebraska and throughout the nation became acutely conscious that no state or no

part of the nation is economically self-sufficient, but every part is interdependent upon every other part. The greedy individualism and exclusive protectionism that had been fostered by the government policies of the 1920's had brought forth its fruits in the world depression that was decried so bitterly by Herbert Hoover after it took the prosperous East into the cataclysm.

The New Deal program of the 1930's salvaged an almost desolated and certainly a discouraged society. It was not Nebraska alone that was benefited. The entire nation, even the wealthiest states, were rewarded manyfold by the results of water conservation and irrigation, soil rebuilding, coverage crops, and shelter belts that have changed the character of the country. Flood prevention has permitted stream forestation and altered the appearance of numerous valleys.

The emergency in Nebraska and in most other states has made men think of the extremes and try to temper Nature by manmade devices. Inventions and power machinery have made it possible for man to take great liberties with the works of Nature. Man has re-divided the water drained from the two slopes of the Continental Divide, but in lesser watersheds there are still too many who are unwilling to alter an arrangement of Nature, even though they are unconsciously practicing many such alterations in minor ways both as groups and as individuals.

This hundred years of Nebraska history has called for a great adaptability of its people. Its diversity and variability of climate and rainfall from year to year can be realized only by a long accumulation of records. More recently these have been sufficiently comprehensive to become useful. Weather forecasting and radio bradcasting have helped much with temporary emergencies. The value of long-period records and long-period programs is yet to be generally appreciated. The fundamental deficiency of moisture in dry years can only be met by the most elaborate long-term program of water storage. Every additional acre-foot of water is added insurance for the stable productivity

of this area, and this in turn means added population and increased business and greater resources.

The improvement of Nebraska's climate is not a hopeless task. The presence of bodies of water lends stability to temperature changes. Most important in the hot season is the establishment of green coverage over the land. If you are a doubting Thomas, on a hot August day betake yourself to the leeward edge of a great stubble field and pause until you sense the searing effect, and then move to a similar position by a lush field of alfalfa. The contrast is impressive. By expanded irrigation and carefully selected and protected coverage crops the sun-baked land can be somewhat cooled, and the shelter belts will retard the hot blasts that blow across it.

Nebraska in the late 1930's and the favorable 1940's made great progress in improving her Nature-beaten resources. The financing, planning, and program execution of the Federal Government were responsible for this vast change, but even this is much decried by voices from the grass roots who hate bureaucrats in Washington. This seems hardly a reasonable attitude. Let us not in moments of seeming security and fading memory forget the sources of our betterment and thus invite back the blight of the locusts.

Much as we cherish state and local pride, Nebraska can profit much from recognizing her true role throughout her history. (1) She was organized as a territory, not because the majority of the United States people wanted a new territory or a new state, but that they might have her great flat valley for a transcontinental railroad bed. (2) The exigencies of politics created two territories, and Kansas attracted the earlier migration and thus preceded Nebraska to statehood by six years. (3) The group that used Nebraska as a transcontinental railroad route also dominated her politics and were a powerful factor in her development. (4) The assertion of popular local control came with the crisis of the 1890's and stimulated reforms that were national in scope, and these occupied the attention of the nation for two decades. (5) The great economic crisis of

the 1920's and 1930's had led to vast new developments in agriculture. These have been promoted on a national scale and financed by the national government. Even the scientific work of our agricultural colleges and university experiment stations, originating with the Morrill Act of 1862, are largely financed by the federal government. This work involves not only regional developments and resources, but its successful continuance is sustainable only by national and international controls and agreements. (6) In the great Missouri Valley development Nebraska is in a dilemma because of the dual threat of both drought and flood. She needs both reserviors of water for irrigation and empty basins to control floods. In addition she has the historical tradition of George W. Norris who saw no sin in the state using for the benefit of the people the by-product of electricity from the multiple-purpose dams paid for at public expense. In this complex situation the state needs much detailed and finely calculated education, for we must avoid the frustration and paralysis of mind among men of small vision who can see only one aspect of a problem.

Nebraska's role in this past one hundred years has been framed in reference to the sectional and national developments of which we have been, and are, a part. The courses of action that have constituted and that will continue to constitute our history must always be fitted into the current developments. The wisdom of a people is reflected in the success of their adjustment to times and circumstances. This rapidly changing scientific age calls for new adaptation in our thinking. If we study our past thoroughly we should sense the general direction and many of the variants in the concourse of human affairs. We now have the riches of one hundred years of maturing experiences in our history. This accumulated experience of the first century of our history is valuable if we master its content and ponder its meaning.