



These Centennial Years

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THESE CENTENNIAL YEARS

BY JAMES L. SELLERS

“THE years teach much that the days never know,”
to quote Emerson.

The hundredth anniversary celebrations here in Nebraska began only five years ago. The great significance of these centennial commemorations is that they cause many people to pause and take thought about the meaning of the developments of these passing years. The thoughtful look back and try to choose the significant events that put their communities on their several ways to what they have become today.

Your speaker does not choose to be technical about centennial dates or the geographical delimitations associated with the term “Nebraska.” This region has played an

Dr. James L. Sellers, associated for many years with the University of Nebraska Department of History, has served as President of the Nebraska State Historical Society for the past two years. His observations on Nebraska's past and future stem from almost a half-century of experience as a professional educator, historian, and interested observer of the political scene. This paper was presented at the luncheon session of the 81st annual meeting of the Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, September 26, 1959.

important role in the history of the nation. Its central geographic position, its location in the great central valley of the continental drainage system, its resources of soil and water, its deep isolation from foreign borders are being more and more recognized as of much future significance in this space-piercing age. It is no accident that Offutt Air Base has been selected as headquarters for the Strategic Air Command. The exposure of the sea coasts and borders has given us a new scale of values, and interior, protective distance has come to be prized.

Along with the prospect of a different future it is important that we appreciate the historical role of this area in the past. Captain William Clark, of the famous Lewis and Clark expedition to the Pacific, carved his name on the bluffs on the Great Nemaha. The party left other camp sites on the Nebraska shore of the Missouri including the famous Council Bluffs at Ft. Calhoun where they met in great council with the Oto and Missouri Indians on August 3, 1804. President Jefferson sent messages and presents to the tribes and chiefs along the way. This contact initiated competition with the agents of the British Hudson's Bay Company for the business and fur trade of the Indians on the Upper Missouri and the Pacific Northwest. Until the Oregon boundary was settled the posts and forts along the Missouri were the bases for these rival operations.

Fort Atkinson (1820-1827) was the great military base from which supplies and detachments of troops could be dispatched to places of emergency throughout the Upper Missouri. A succession of events including the fixing of our southwest boundary, our acquisition of the Spanish territorial claims to the area north of the forty-second parallel, and Russia's withdrawal from her Oregon project, shifted the center for the military reserve to Fort Leavenworth. The overland traffic, the telegraph, and Indian uprisings during the Civil War shifted frontier defense to the Platte Valley and Ft. Kearny. The final scenes of Indian military activity were in the Upper Missouri with Fort Robinson serving as the major mustering center.

The Nebraska Legislature in 1955 took steps to preserve a portion of Fort Robinson as a historical museum. The Society is highly pleased with the public interest and response to efforts to preserve this important historical monument. But a museum is not enough to preserve the appearance of the post. If a semblance of the overall character of this last important frontier military post is to be preserved an enlarged enterprise will have to be provided.

The Society hopes that the grounds and the remaining buildings of Fort Robinson can be preserved for the nation. There the setting for the last tribal stand of the Sioux and the death of Crazy Horse revives the whole half century of frontier Indian relations. This last of the great frontier forts can still be preserved for posterity. It has a message for future generations that we should not permit to disappear.

Returning to a century ago, Nebraska on the maps of 1850 was labeled "Indian Country." It was frequently called "buffalo country." The Indians followed the buffalo herds, as their successors, the cowboys and the ranchers, have followed the cattle herds. The transition of Nebraska from the Buffalo Country to the Beef State is an elaborate and intricate story that involves a succession of leading characters and occupations in the historical cavalcade. The fur traders, the buffalo hunters, the land speculators, the cattlemen, the homesteaders, the railroad builders, the specialized grain farmers, the city promoters, the industrialists, the businessmen, the organizers and planners too numerous to describe have all at times had a prominent place in Nebraska's development. The change from a rural society closely attached to the soil, in which the family unit had a complex and significant role, to the urbanized mobile and highly socialized society that we have become, is the topic that we choose to examine.

This is too large a theme for the brief treatment possible here, but some observations on these great changes will be called to your attention. The numerous changes in

agriculture have wrought a great reorganization of our social structure. The coming of railroads provided an outlet, if not a good market, for the agricultural products. The numerous inventions increased the productivity of labor and tended to enlarge the size of the farms. Gang plows, improved drills, reapers and threshers all relieved the pressures for laborers on the farms. The use of motorized plows on the farms and for transportation gave the decisive blow to the family farms and the retention of the farm population in the country. It is estimated that one man now does the work performed by twenty, one hundred years ago. Motors not only made it possible for each farmer to handle more land and to travel considerable distances between his place of residence and the location of his work, but the investment involved made it imperative that extensive operations be adopted to support the investment. The social order of the countryside has been revolutionized as small farmers were squeezed out, and large operators frequently found that their families preferred to live in the towns or cities. But the decreasing number of farm units and operators has not decreased agricultural production.

One development within this state during the past thirty years has had a profound impact upon its economy. The conservation of the state's water resources has already gone a long way toward stabilizing both agriculture and industry. While it may be said that Nature bestows its climatic summer smiles on Colorado and directs its winter glow to California and Florida, Nebraska's climate has provoked almost every variety of description from the sublime to the profane. Few can deny that all the descriptions fit it at some time. The early promoters and settlers were optimistic. They offered the hope that "rainfall follows the plow." Time proved that if it did follow the plow it was an intermittent pursuer. Many early pioneers, including families of some here present, parted with their hard earned savings because of the vagaries of the Nebraska climate.

In Nebraska Mark Twain's apt observation on the weather, "Everyone talks about it but no one does any-

thing about it," applies, but with exceptions. Individually, man can do little about the weather, but collectively and through government, society can do considerable about it. Some small irrigation projects along our streams date back to the 1890's, but these did nothing to conserve the flood waters that laid waste the rich valleys.

The idea of utilizing a supplemental water supply from wasted flood waters to enlarge crop yields seems to have been first convincingly advocated by C. W. McConaughy. He saw what happened to wheat and other crops where the snow drifts had lain. With his associates he spent more than thirty years battling against all the forces that man and Nature could combine before funds, for relief from the worst depression in our nation's history, could be turned into the constructive channel of water and soil conservation and the production of public power. The Tri-county project is only one of nearly two-score projects within this state that have operated in various ways to control and supplement Nature's irregular and sometimes extreme dispensations, but the Tri-county pioneers did more to keep the objective before the public and ultimately to win over government support to a moderate and practical program than any group that battled the endless vicissitudes of this climate.

The extension of ditch and pump irrigation to 2,593,000 acres in this state has gone a long way toward insuring a stable agriculture. The efforts of McConaughy, Kingsley, Johnson, Cochran, Lawrence, Norris and numerous other persistent supporters deserve the lasting gratitude of the people of this state for their constructive vision in behalf of the state's future economic security. Nebraska was the buffalo country, the mecca of the long drive and the rancher's cow country on Nature's bounties of grass—but it could never have become the Beef State rival of Iowa and Illinois in feed yards without the dependable crops, from our more than two and a half million irrigated acres. The number of cattle imported into Nebraska feeding yards this year is up by 15 percent over the record import of last year.

The reserve of last year's corn indicates that there is still growth to come.

The promise of Nebraska's agricultural production, the government's policies of decentralization and defense, business and industry's interest in dispersion all point to a more stable economic future for this area. They indicate a certain population increase. These economic and social changes have brought a new outlook to Nebraskans in the past two decades.

The questions that the reflecting observer raises concerning these changes in our ways of living and activities for livelihood are: What have they done to our people? What are they doing to the children of our time? What kind of men and women will these new conditions produce?

A few years ago H. C. Filley published a little volume on his boyhood and youth in nineteenth century Nebraska entitled *Every Day Was New*, which gave a delightful picture of boyhood in rural Nebraska. The boy was engaged in useful and constructive activity. Time was never heavy on his hands. It was the age of the family farm when all of the family members had useful things to do in a mutually co-operative unit. There were no elaborate and expensive recreational programs for youth. Children were busy. Their activities were constructive and productive.

In contrast with Dr. Filley's family farm we have large scale commercial agriculture. The fields may produce more, but the social life of the countryside is in large measure gone. Youth is gathered in the cities. In many cities youth gangs force even police officers to travel in pairs and schools are unsafe at times even for the teachers. Conditions that beset our populous centers are reminiscent of the Prohibition Era of the 1920's. We may say that this applies only to Harlem, or Philadelphia, or possibly Los Angeles, but actually these conditions are widespread. The failure of society to meet the needs of childhood and youth is more general.

Up to the twentieth century the family farms and the country schools were the nurseries of our nation, and they have not been successfully replaced. Many will say that this is old fashioned. We have Scouts and Camp Fire and Four-H. We have organized sports of all kinds and parks and recreation grounds. All this is granted, but children are interested in real things. They are more interested in work than in play. They are more interested in tools than in toys. Children need a chance to be with and to work with their families as well as to be thrown into gangs.

In the forty-seven years since I first taught in a country school I wonder if the quality of our education has very much improved. Fewer in percentage of our secondary school people are exposed to mathematics. Fewer in percentage are exposed to a foreign language. I had Latin teachers and mathematics teachers who knew their subjects. I am told qualified teachers in these subjects are difficult for schools to find today. I know of one high school that last year lost a history teacher and replaced him with three coaches. Will such employment practices bring back teachers qualified in subject matter? What will it do to the interest of students in the solid subjects that they must master? The triumph of Russian science, engineering and language frightened many of our nation's leaders and educators, but it seems to have made too little imprint here in Nebraska.

The development of Nebraska has moved ahead to a more substantial footing for its economic future. Does it offer better development for its children and youth? The family farm has been pared away until few of our citizens feel its nurturing influence. We have built and are building centralized schools and we trundle students around in buses with the students throwing eggs at the drivers. Smaller schools where the students are better known by the teachers, by the principals and by their fellow students have their advantages. Some emphasis on teachers qualified in subjects taught and less preoccupation with an organized administrative system would give much more op-

portunity for children to get the desired development of mind and character.

We know that the family farms and country schools of nineteenth century Nebraska turned out a generation of substantial character and a good many well-equipped minds. There was much self-development. Children were busy in and out of schools storing the mind with useful knowledge and the nervous mechanism with habits constructive and productive. These were a by-product at least in part of the family farm and the country school.

Nineteenth century Nebraska, when youth divided time between the family farm and the country school, offered to children two excellent contrasts in activity. School was a relief from the labors and sometimes the drudgery of the home. It provided group and social activities as well as the intellectual stimulus of new knowledge. It offered the beauty of poetry, the imagination of literature and fiction, the new acquaintances from past generations and broader horizons of history. The new mysteries of science and the challenges of mathematics pushed back the curtains of the child's limited world. But the home offered competition for the school. There was the appeal of Nature's out-of-doors. On the farm were new animals, and new machinery to master. Learning to operate a plow, a mower or any other labor-saving device was a challenge, and success added to a youth's self-confidence.

After a hundred years, school attendance has become compulsory. Child labor is prohibited by law. Competition between the school and the home for the child's time and interest has largely disappeared. Educators and some teachers have too often accepted a custodial attitude toward their teaching responsibilities. The school must be made a pleasant place to pass the time away, and the child must not be confronted with responsibilities or made to share the burdens of the family or the community.

The superconfident feeling of the 1920's and a partial return to it in the mid-1950's have not served our youth

well. We had rude awakenings from the depression of the 1930's and from the Sputnik of 1957. Our educational programs and practices had not equipped our people to cope with such contingencies.

Our struggles in the future will not be with the uncultured and unorganized Indians and the great resources of an unexploited natural abundance. We have developed enviable riches which we shall have to defend, and share with the less fortunate populations of Asia and Africa. We need to know more about these people and we must learn to live with all the world which modern science has brought to our doorstep. The nation that takes seriously the necessity of communicating with these "new" peoples in their own languages will have the best prospect of survival in this new space age.

This country has preached the doctrines of competition and individualism. Yet we have eliminated competition and discouraged individualism in our public schools except in the field of competitive sports for the limited few and perhaps in some of the fine arts.

A century has wrought great changes in our society, but human nature is not fundamentally changed. Society must not permit its goals to be set by the ignorant and the inexperienced or by slovenly and lazy leadership. But these are dangers that threaten our state and our nation. You would not think of permitting a six- or ten- or fifteen- or eighteen-year-old to run your business or farm or direct your investments. Yet many of our schools have gone far toward letting children take them over, and they often waste the early development that is so essential for full success in life. This is no individual matter. Our survival in this age depends upon our young people successfully competing with nations that permit no such waste of their human talents.

Nineteenth century frontier conditions made it necessary for Nebraskans to cope with their immediate environment. This produced individualism and self-reliance. The

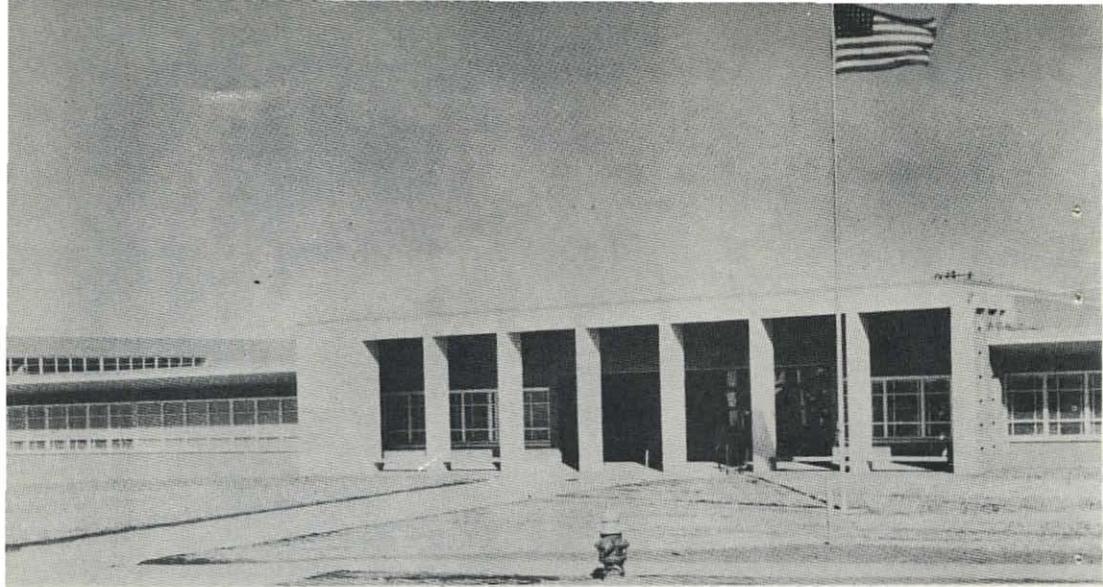
circumstance of this generation requires that we cope with situations at the far ends of the earth in competition with the most thoroughly trained and disciplined agents of a completely planned and organized system. This system has made no mistakes about useful knowledge in this international competition. Production of food supplies, and improvement of living for the fortunate and the most competent, will in no sense guarantee our future security. Our position at the forefront in science and in friendship is required.

The years and the century show us that our security depends upon a long foresight from a historical background into a future which is rapidly changing. Our best security lies in the continuous conditioning of our youth for a relentless competition in a rapidly changing world of science. With almost every global broadcast the days show us a world growing smaller and a world growing large. The days show us that man cannot become adjusted to his world; he can only reconcile himself to continuous adjusting.



The family farm kept children busy at constructive and productive activities.





Education in Nebraska—the New and the Old

