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Article Summary: Turner's "frontier hypothesis" is a landmark interpretation of American history. It proposes that the ever-receding West was the most important force shaping its institutions. (Billington presented this paper at a meeting of the Nebraska State Historical Society in Lincoln on October 22, 1960.)

*Scroll down for complete article.*

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# THE WEST OF FREDERICK JACKSON TURNER

BY RAY ALLEN BILLINGTON

**I**F history, as a nineteenth-century German philosopher maintained, is "humanity becoming and being conscious of itself,"<sup>1</sup> the historian is endowed with an awesome responsibility. He must shape the multitudinous fragments that constitute the human record into a mosaic that not only accurately records the story of civilization, but that helps chart the course his nation can best follow to live in harmony with other nations in a contracting world. History, in this sense, is a powerful force for good or evil, capable of engendering the passions of nationalism that can lead to war, or the international understanding that can help achieve peace. The historian's interpretation of his country's past, increasingly instilled into each new genera-

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<sup>1</sup> John Gustav Droysen, *Outline of the Principles of History* (Boston, 1893), 48. This volume, which greatly influenced Turner's early thinking, was presented to the Henry E. Huntington Library by Professor Turner.

*Dr. Ray A. Billington is William Smith Mason professor of history at Northwestern University. This paper was presented at the dinner session of the 82nd annual meeting of the Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, October 22, 1960. The study essential to the preparation of this paper was made possible by a Faculty Research Grant from the Social Science Research Council in the year 1959-1960.*

tion as the educational process broadens, determines national destinies no less than the whims of diplomats or the quirks of fate.

Interpretations of American history have been many in the nearly two centuries of the nation's existence. Nineteenth-century writers found in the contest between "Puritans" and "Cavaliers," in the nation's democratic institutions, in the struggle over slavery, keys to an understanding of the past; more acute scholars in the twentieth century have emphasized the mingling of peoples resulting from immigration, the emergence of industrialization and urbanization, and the abundance of natural resources as uniquely important in explaining the distinctive civilization of the United States. No single interpretation of American history, however, is more meaningful today than the "frontier hypothesis" enunciated by Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893.

To Turner the ever-receding West was the most unusual feature of the country's history, and the most important—but by no means the only—force responsible for the distinctiveness of its traits and institutions. "The existence of an area of free land," he wrote in a moment of regrettable overstatement, "its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development."<sup>2</sup> As civilization was repeatedly reborn in successive Wests, Turner believed, inherited democratic tendencies were strengthened, nationalism accentuated, and certain traits magnified to the degree that they marked the American people as different from their European ancestors. "That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness," he wrote; "that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and

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<sup>2</sup> Turner's famous essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," has been often reprinted. It is most conveniently available in Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1920). The quotation is from page 1.

evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier.”<sup>3</sup>

For a generation after its enunciation, this “frontier thesis” was universally accepted by students of American history, many of whom went beyond Turner in ascribing all aspects of the past to its influence. Beginning in the 1920’s, however, criticisms began to mount; these increased in number and virulence after Turner’s death in 1932. Two features of the hypothesis were particularly attacked. How, his detractors asked, could a “continually advancing frontier line,”<sup>4</sup> distant from the centers of population and peopled by only a handful of the most advanced pioneers, have such a profound effect on a whole society? Why, others inquired, did Turner draw all of his examples from the forested eastern third of the United States when the larger western grasslands provided a completely different environment for frontiering? Was it because the thesis applied only in the humid East and broke down completely as an explanation of the semiarid West’s civilization?

Turner never bothered to answer these criticisms, although some of them stung him deeply. “I find myself,” he confided to a friend after reading a hostile review, “like a great grandfather in reference to the essay on *The Frontier*, quite ready to see its imperfections myself, but disposed to pick up the cudgels when someone else finds flaws in its features.”<sup>5</sup> Yet his private correspondence and unpublished essays, newly opened to the use of scholars at the Henry E. Huntington Library, reveal that he not only anticipated his critics but answered them effectively, in his own mind at least. The West of Frederick Jackson Turner was not an

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>4</sup> The phrase was used by Turner in his “Significance” essay. *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Turner to Mrs. William Hooper, February 13, 1921. Frederick Jackson Turner Papers, The Henry E. Huntington Library, TU-H Box 5 Correspondence. Hereafter referred to as the “Turner Papers, HEH.”

"advancing line," but a vast receding zone peopled by a variety of pioneer types; that "West" operated as effectively as a catalytic agent in the trans-Mississippi grasslands as it did in the wilderness of Kentucky.

To Turner, the West or the "frontier" was both a "migratory section" and a "stage of society" where civilization was "continually beginning over again."<sup>6</sup> It was, he wrote to Norman Foerster in 1926, "not merely the 'edge of civilization,' but . . . the barometer of a society expanding into the wilderness, into the field of unexploited resources, unsettled lands, etc., with its reactions on the unsettled societies behind this moving edge, and its influence through inherited ideas upon regions once frontier, but no longer."<sup>7</sup> Again he explained that "The 'West' with which I dealt was a process rather than a fixed geographic region: it began with the Atlantic coast; and it emphasized the way in which the East colonized the West, and how the 'West' as it stood at any given period affected the development and ideas of the older areas to the East."<sup>8</sup> As a result of the repeated operation of this process, "American society was not only developing vertically, so to speak, in the older areas; it was also expanding horizontally into new frontiers. American development was continually beginning over on the frontier. The nation was at the same time a mature society and a society just beginning, undergoing the transformations due to creative interaction with fresh supplies of free land, and natural resources, fresh fields for social and political institutions."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Notes for lecture on "Sectionalism in American Politics" given at Pasadena, California, February 20, 1928. Turner Papers, HEH, File Drawer No. 14, unmarked folder. Three years later Turner stated that "the moving frontier line with which I have dealt certainly hardly applies to a merely thinly-settled isolated county." Turner to R. M. Harper, October 12, 1931. Turner Papers, HEH, TU Box 46, Correspondence.

<sup>7</sup> Turner to Norman Foerster, July 27, 1926. Turner Papers, HEH, TU Box 35, Correspondence.

<sup>8</sup> Turner to Merle Curti, August 8, 1928. Turner Papers, HEH, TU Box 38, Correspondence.

<sup>9</sup> Notes for lecture on "The Last Quarter Century, 1890-1916," given at the University of Chicago, 1916. Turner Papers, HEH, File Drawer No. 15, folder marked: "Lecture Univ. of Chicago, 1916."

The greatest impact of this frontiering process, Turner felt, was on the West; he fully agreed with Lord Bryce that "the West may be called the most distinctively American part of America."<sup>10</sup> "While the influence of the frontier permeated East as well as West," he told an audience in one of his last public lectures, "by survival of the pioneer psychology and by the reaction of the Western ideals and life upon the East, it was in the newer regions—the area called 'the West' at any given time—that frontier traits and conceptions were of most importance."<sup>11</sup> "Even today," he felt, "western ideals are strong from the Alleghanies to the Pacific. Thus the West has come to dominate the ideals and the fundamental assumptions of Americans."<sup>12</sup> Commenting on a statement by Norman Ware that "A considerable part of the significance of the frontier lies behind the frontier," Turner added: "Perhaps it would be correct to say *most of its significance*."<sup>13</sup> He firmly believed that "the frontier reached back its influence to the eastern lands which had once themselves been frontier and which could not altogether lose earlier traits as they changed to settled society."<sup>14</sup>

Turner, then, pictured the "West" not as a narrow line on the hither edge of the wilderness, but as a broad, migratory zone peopled by a variety of frontier types, each representing a stage in the advancement of civilization. At the "raw outer edge of this movement," to borrow one of his phrases, were pioneers who had descended far on the road to savagery—fur trappers, hunters, herdsmen, prospectors—bent only on skimming off the surface wealth and

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<sup>10</sup> James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth* (New York, 1888), II, 895.

<sup>11</sup> Notes for lecture on "Sectionalism in American Politics," given at Pasadena, California, February 20, 1928. Turner Papers, HEH, File Drawer No. 14, unmarked folder.

<sup>12</sup> Summary of Phi Beta Kappa Address, University of Minnesota, June 6, 1900, in *Minnesota Daily*, June 7, 1900. Turner Papers, HEH, TU Box 54, Manuscripts & Documents.

<sup>13</sup> Note in Turner Papers, HEH, TU File Drawer No. 14, unmarked folder.

<sup>14</sup> This statement was made in one of the Lowell Lectures delivered by Turner in Boston in 1918. Turner Papers, HEH, File Drawer E, folder marked "Lowell Lectures 1918."

moving on; they made little attempt to perpetuate the civilization that most had renounced. Behind these shock troops of expansion came the farmers, and on their heels the merchants and town builders and primitive manufacturers who would hurry the process of civilization as the "West" passed on toward virgin lands. Frederick Jackson Turner recognized that a clear distinction must be made between these pioneering classes; each, in the progression from east to west, represented a stage in the rejection of past culture and the acceptance of primitive values and practices. "Obviously," he wrote in his later years, "'mental ability,' 'literary skill,' etc., would not proceed from the outer edge of society, and I have never for a moment thought of such things as the 'basic premise' of my essays on the frontier."<sup>15</sup>

Any analysis of the frontier process as it operated in the wilderness east of the Mississippi substantiates the correctness of Turner's theories. This is true even when that analysis deals only with one frontier type: the pioneer farmer. For that all-important individual was not one but three persons, each mirroring a phase of the corrosion of civilization under its impact with nature. On the western borders lived the "backwoodsman," or "squatter," or "first settler," as he was known to contemporaries; behind him was the relatively propertyless small farmer; still further to the east was the domain of the propertied farmer, the first to make a lasting impression on the wilderness. These three types, as they existed in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys in the first half of the nineteenth century, formed a cultural spectrum that reveals the operation of the frontier process.

The backwoodsmen were restless nomads who lived in brush shanties or half-finished log cabins, made a pretence of planting a few acres of corn among the still-standing girdled trees, owned nothing save an occasional cow or a few pigs, and lived largely on the game that abounded on the outer edges of the settlements. Tall and pale, with sal-

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<sup>15</sup> Turner to L. L. Bernard, November 24, 1928. Turner Papers, HEH, Box 40, Correspondence.

low complexions "like vegetables that grow in a vault, pining for light,"<sup>16</sup> they were lazy to the point of indolence, dirty, sickly, and wild-looking.<sup>17</sup> "They neglect the cultivation of their lands," noted a traveler; "their buildings go to decay, their fences generally made of brush, are levelled to the earth by the passing wind, and are never rebuilt unless imperious necessity requires it."<sup>18</sup> Only their migratory instincts related them to the better-known pioneers; "these people," wrote one who knew them well, "retire, with the wolves, from the regular colonists, keeping always to the outside of the civilized settlements."<sup>19</sup> Usually, when he moved on, the squatter had nothing to sell but his "improvements," for he never bothered to purchase land. "He has often no place in view," a traveler observed, "but journeys on, always toward the setting sun, for he knows that freedom such as he seeks has retreated thither."<sup>20</sup>

These were the frontiersmen who, despite their scant numbers and brief occupancy, gave the West its reputation for lawlessness, brutality, and savagery. Scarcely a traveler from the East or Europe in the 1830's and 1840's who did not return from the west with harrowing tales of pitched battles between men of this ilk—"tearing, kicking, scratching, biting, gouging each others eyes out by a dexterous use of a thumb and finger, and doing their utmost to kill each other, even when rolling over one another on the ground."<sup>21</sup> One visitor told of commiserating with the victim of such a battle whose nose had been bitten off. "'Don't pity me' said the noseless hero, 'pity that fellow there,' pointing with one hand to another who had lost an

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<sup>16</sup> John Melish, *Travels through the United States of America, in the Years 1806 and 1807, and 1809, 1810, & 1811* (London, 1818), p. 373; Morris Birkbeck, *Notes on a Journey in America* (London, 1818), p. 125.

<sup>17</sup> George W. Featherstonhaugh, *Excursion through the Slave States* (New York, 1844), pp. 81-82.

<sup>18</sup> George W. Ogden, *Letters from the West* (New Bedford, Mass., 1823), pp. 16-17.

<sup>19</sup> Birkbeck, *Notes on a Journey*, p. 92.

<sup>20</sup> Eliza W. Farnham, *Life in Prairie Land* (New York, 1846), p. 329.

<sup>21</sup> Fortescue Cuming, *Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country* (Pittsburgh, 1810), p. 118.



eye, and shewing the eye which he held triumphantly in the other."<sup>22</sup> Others recorded meetings with men who had lost eyes or noses or ears,<sup>23</sup> or visits to jails where the prisoners were charged with such crimes as eye-gouging, nose biting, and stabbing in the back.<sup>24</sup> At one frontier camp meeting a traveler saw a reformed tough of this sort struggling with the Devil as his friends shouted, "Gouge him, Billy!—Gouge him, *Billy!*—*Gouge him!*"<sup>25</sup>

To backwoodsmen who descended to such acts of brutality, all contacts with the civilization from which they had fled were distasteful. "They are a race," one visitor recorded, "which delight much to live on the frontiers, where they can enjoy undisturbed, and free from the control of any laws, the blessings which nature has bestowed upon them."<sup>26</sup> A promoter who told a group of this sort that he planned to effect improvements that would assure them "civilization, intelligence, comfort and wealth" was told in no uncertain terms that most of them had come there to get away from civilization, and that if it followed them, they would leave the country.<sup>27</sup> One New England school master who attempted to civilize the squatters on Indiana's remote frontier was forcefully told that all they wanted was the three R's, "except a little 'Jografree,' and 'Surveyin' enough to run lines around a quarter section: which were 'naturally allowed to be sorter useful like.'"<sup>28</sup> A little later this harried teacher confessed that "I have only three pupils professedly studying even Latin! and that only to understand *law-terms*. The rest are literally in the R.R.R.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 118-119.

<sup>23</sup> Timothy Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years* (Boston, 1826), p. 98; Thomas Ashe, *Travels in America, Performed in 1806* (London, 1808), I, 230-231; James Flint, *Letters from America* (Edinburgh, 1822), p. 114.

<sup>24</sup> Melish, *Travels through the United States*, pp. 414-415.

<sup>25</sup> Baynard Rush Hall, *The New Purchase: or, Seven and a Half Years in the Far West* (New York, 1843), II, 158-159.

<sup>26</sup> Francis Baily, *Journal of a Tour in the Unsettled Parts of North America in 1796 and 1797* (London, 1856), p. 217.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in F. Garvin Davenport, "Culture versus Frontier in Tennessee, 1825-1850," *Journal of Southern History*, V (February, 1939), 24.

<sup>28</sup> Hall, *New Purchase*, II, 171.

and Jografree!"<sup>29</sup> This was enough "book larin" for semi-barbarians who had consciously divorced themselves from civilization.

Although the squatters attracted unusual attention from visitors, giving the whole frontier its reputation for lawlessness and brutality, they were far from typical of the pioneers. Less glamorous, but far more numerous and important, were the relatively propertyless small farmers who constituted the second group noticeably on the agricultural frontier. These pioneers could be distinguished from the backwoodsmen principally by a greater ambition; most hoped to make their new homes permanent and to reproduce in the West the civilization they had known in the East. Hence they welcomed schools and newspapers, cleared away the trees from thirty or forty acres, and built a substantial log cabin. Usually they owned a few domestic animals and sometimes they planted orchards, but they made no efforts to grow hay or to provide winter feed for their stock. Their manners, although crude, were slightly more refined than those of the squatters, and they were somewhat more willing to submit to legal authority while "still preserving that unconquerable principle of independence and equality which is naturally attached to Americans in general, but more particularly those who inhabit these western countries."<sup>30</sup> Like their predecessors, the propertyless small farmers usually moved four or five times in a lifetime, for most of them lacked the determination necessary to grow up with the new country. A transitional group, they gained their livelihood by enduring the hardships of pioneering, for they accumulated capital only by selling out their "improvements."

The propertied farmers to whom they sold were usually experienced agriculturists with sufficient capital from the sale of a farm in the East to buy 160 acres or more, build a substantial frame house, and enlarge the area under cultivation. This allowed the production of surpluses for

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 173.

<sup>30</sup> Baily, *Journal of a Tour*, p. 218.

the winter feeding of stock or for conversion into exportable flour or meat. The marketing of these surpluses required roads to link the new settlements with those further east; merchants, processors, lawyers, and bankers also were demanded to handle needed transactions, and as they clustered at central points, villages and towns began to emerge. Thus the frontiering process slowly reached its end, for the propertied farmers, unlike their predecessors, seldom moved on; their object was to grow up with the country, and to transform it into a replica of their well-remembered eastern homes. "I know no reason," one of them wrote, "why the fullest expanding of the intellect is incompatible with the handling of an axe, or the most luxuriant development of the imagination with following the plow."<sup>31</sup>

Fully aware that by merely moving westward they had weakened the bonds that united them with a rich cultural tradition, their all-consuming ambition was to re-cement those ties as rapidly as possible. Books, often carried westward at great expense and inconvenience, were commonly evident in the homes of this class of settlers. "In travelling through the country," a traveler noted, "one will meet with a well thumbed and select library in the log cabin;"<sup>32</sup> another agreed that he always found "many standard and historical works, together with the new novels" in the homes of Westerners.<sup>33</sup> Every school child of today knows that the youthful Abraham Lincoln had to tramp through the snow to borrow books from a neighbor; most of us forget that he found many neighbors with well-stocked libraries who were willing to lend. Newspapers also provided a link with culture and were generously patronized. By 1830 the Mississippi Valley boasted no less than three hundred weekly or daily publications, with an estimated circulation

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<sup>31</sup> Charles F. Hoffman, *A Winter in the West, by a New Yorker* (New York, 1835), I, 265-266.

<sup>32</sup> Abner D. Jones, *Illinois and the West* (Boston, 1838), pp. 102-103.

<sup>33</sup> W. R. Smith, *Observations on the Wisconsin Territory* (Philadelphia, 1838), pp. 99-100.

of 224,000 copies, or at least one for every three families.<sup>34</sup> Wrote an Englishman living in the Indiana back country in 1819: "We have abundance of newspapers, some of which are judiciously conducted, and in which many excellent original articles are to be found; and all of them devote a part of their columns to the public occurrences of Britain. I occasionally read some of the latest publications from your country, and have frequent opportunities of seeing the Reviews, and Literary and Scientific Magazines."<sup>35</sup>

Schools were no less in demand, for they not only assured the perpetuation of culture but laid the basis for a still richer civilization in the future. A traveler in interior Tennessee found no less than five schools and four places of worship in a farm area that had been settled only two years before.<sup>36</sup> Nor was the emphasis in these infant institutions solely on such practical subjects as the three R's or surveying. A writer in the *Western Review* spoke for many of his fellow pioneers when he declared: "Should the time ever come when Latin and Greek should be banished from our Universities, and the study of Cicero and Demosthenes, or Homer and Virgil should be considered as unnecessary for the formation of a scholar, we should regard mankind as fast sinking into absolute barbarism, and the gloom of mental darkness as likely to increase until it should become universal."<sup>37</sup>

This allegiance to the past was common, if not typical, in the West that Frederick Jackson Turner knew so well. There the descent toward barbarism was marked on the outer fringes of the frontier zone; there the climb back toward civilization occurred with startling rapidity as propertied farmers sought to resist the corrosive impact of the wilderness and to reproduce in their new homes the unchanged culture of their old. But did these alterations take

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<sup>34</sup> Robert Baird, *View of the Valley of the Mississippi or the Emigrant's and Travellers Guide to the West* (Philadelphia, 1834), p. 324.

<sup>35</sup> Flint, *Letters from America*, p. 269.

<sup>36</sup> Adam Hodgson, *Letters from North America, Written during a Tour in the United States and Canada* (London, 1824), I, 269.

<sup>37</sup> *Western Review*, III (October, 1820), p. 145.

place in the same manner when the pioneers left the forests and began their conquest of the Great Plains? Did the frontier process—implying, as it does, a recurring rebirth of society on the hither edge of the area of free lands—operate in the vast grasslands of the trans-Mississippi West?

In Nebraska and her sister states a comparable transformation in the social order did take place, but with significant variations. There one group of pioneers—the propertyless squatters—was largely eliminated; the higher cost of pioneer farming on the Great Plains, where the best lands must be bought from speculators, farm implements and well-drilling machinery purchased, fences and fuel imported, and farm buildings erected at considerable cost, tended to restrict settlement to the better-off. Hence this agricultural frontier, almost from the beginning, was peopled by men and women who wished to perpetuate rather than escape civilization. Yet the shocktroops of expansion who swept westward before the farmers reflected the same attitudes and exhibited the same tendencies as the squatters of the Ohio or Mississippi valleys. The fur trappers, the buffalo hunters, the cowboys, and the railroad builders had made a clean break with the past; many were social misfits unhappy in older societies, all were transitory and had every intention of moving on as soon as the surface wealth had been skimmed off. Like the squatters they succumbed to the primitive environment as they happily discarded the values as well as the habits of civilization. Wrote a Swedish Lutheran missionary as he reached Omaha in the spring of 1868: "The bandits which once frequented the area around Omaha have now retired westward, and more respectable people are coming to the city. Now is the time for Swedish Lutherans to come."<sup>38</sup>

Among these precursors of empire, the fur trappers found little to attract them to Nebraska, for beaver were few in the sluggish streams of the plains, but the construction crews that laid the Union Pacific tracks across the

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<sup>38</sup> *The Hemlandet*, December 22, 1868, quoted in James I. Dowie, *Prairie Grass Dividing* (Rock Island, Illinois, 1959), p. 20.

territory matched even these semisavages in lawlessness and sheer animalism. Numbering several thousand, and with an equal number of gamblers, saloon-keepers, dance hall girls, and assorted desperados anxious to relieve them of their earnings, the graders and track layers lived in a peripatetic "Hell on Wheels" that shifted constantly westward with the gleaming iron rails. At its temporary stopping places—Omaha and Kearney and North Platte in Nebraska, Julesburg in Colorado, Cheyenne and Green River in Wyoming—crews hastily assembled the disreputable assemblage of tents and shacks that provided every device necessary to cater to the most discriminating tastes in debauchery. One journalist counted twenty-three saloons and five dance halls in addition to the "Great Tent," a structure one hundred feet long and forty wide where a giant bar and a battery of gambling devices were ready to relieve the workers of any money left them by the dance hall girls and harpies. Every few weeks or months this whole elaborate structure would be dismantled, loaded on boxcars, and carried to the end of the track to be reassembled anew. Wrote one disgusted visiting journalist: "It fairly festered in corruption, disorder and death, and would have rotted, even in this dry air, had it outlasted a brief sixty-day life."<sup>39</sup>

Matching the debauchery of the railroad towns was the exuberant lawlessness of the "cow towns" that sprang up as shipping points for the herds driven northward over the Chisholm and Texas trails. Nebraska's most famous "cow town," Ogallala, never captured the nation's imagination as did Dodge City or Abilene, but for a community of only one hundred inhabitants its contribution to the history of sin and sudden-death was by no means insignificant. During most of the year Ogallala drowsed in respectable quietude, but from mid-June until autumn about 100,000 longhorns were driven in over the Texas Trail, all of them tended by trail hands eager to blot out the memory of the long weeks in the saddle. The regular citizens gave them every opportunity to do so. Railroad Street, just south of

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<sup>39</sup> Samuel Bowles, *Our New West* (Hartford, Conn., 1869), p. 57.

the Union Pacific tracks, boasted two sumptuous saloons—the Cowboy's Rest and the Crystal Palace—as well as dance halls, gambling emporia, and “the most substantial jail west of Omaha.” Seventeen victims of gunplay were buried in Ogallala's “Boot Hill” between 1874 and 1884, a respectable number for a community of one hundred inhabitants. The town's most spectacular crime spree occurred in 1877 when a Texan named Joel Collins appropriated the cash from the sale of a Texas herd and took out for the Black Hills gold rush, only to return a short time later with a partner called Sam Bass. With four other desperadoes they held up a Union Pacific train just west of Ogallala, escaping with \$60,000. Collins and most of his crew were shot down at once, but Sam Bass escaped to Texas for ten more months of lawlessness before succumbing to the bullets of a ranger. His fame lives on in one of the most celebrated cowboy ballads.<sup>40</sup>

Ogallala's place in the criminal sun was brief, for by the mid-eighties the farmers' frontier was pushing into western Kansas and Nebraska, and with it came a new respectability. By 1886 its population had skyrocketed towards five hundred, and the town boasted two newspapers, a Congregational church, a bank and lumber yard, several merchant establishments, the O'Brien and Boile Millinery Shop, and only three saloons.<sup>41</sup> These new arrivals, whether at Ogallala or elsewhere, were farmers who had come to stay and grow up with the country. All were men of some property; all were determined to perpetuate in the West the customs and culture that they had known in the East. One woman reflected the ambitions of this whole class when she wrote: “I have read in books that the people of the frontier kept moving ever westward to escape civilization. But if my experience counts for anything, such people were the exceptions. So eager were we to keep in touch with civilization that even when we could not afford a shotgun

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<sup>40</sup> Norbert R. Mahnken, “Ogallala—Nebraska's Cowboy Capital,” *Nebraska History*, XXVIII (April-June, 1947), 85-104.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 105-109.

and ammunition to kill rabbits, we subscribed to newspapers and periodicals and bought books."<sup>42</sup>

This urge to reproduce familiar cultural patterns was nowhere better expressed than in the literary or debating societies that blossomed mushroom-like among the first agricultural pioneers on the Great Plains. At Brownville, Nebraska, a lyceum association and debating society were organized within the first months of settlement, with a yearly fee of one dollar for membership, and weekly programs that included readings from Shakespeare's plays and talks on such civilized subjects as "Manifest Destiny," "Philosophy, Greek and Roman," "The Historian, Statesman and the Divine."<sup>43</sup> A homesteader near Columbus, Nebraska, found when he arrived in 1871 that the community, which had been open prairie only a few months before, contained only nine persons, but that they had already formed a literary society with weekly meetings where home-composed papers were read. "It seemed to afford a little pleasure," he wrote, "and helped to pass away the time with less danger to moral character, perhaps, than might have been the case with some other forms of amusement."<sup>44</sup> A similar society at Rock Creek, Nebraska, filled the local school house at its fortnightly meetings, for farmers drove in from three or four miles away to attend. Its programs, which have been preserved, reveal that local talent was called upon for recitations, readings, spelling drills, musical numbers, and dialogues, followed by a brief recess and then a debate on such subjects as: "Resolved, that fear of punishment has a greater influence over human conduct than does the hope of reward."<sup>45</sup>

Newspapers were as effective as literary societies in linking the new settlers to their past lives, and these also multiplied in pioneer Nebraska. Sometimes they even pre-

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<sup>42</sup> Elise D. Isely, *Sunbonnet Days* (Caldwell, Idaho, 1935), 180.

<sup>43</sup> Everett Dick, *The Sod House Frontier, 1854-1890* (New York, 1937), 70-71.

<sup>44</sup> John Turner, *Pioneers of the West* (Cincinnati, 1903), 62.

<sup>45</sup> Edward E. Dale, "The Frontier Literary Society," *Nebraska History*, XXI (September, 1950), 167-182.



ceded farmers into a new community, for land speculators and promoters recognized the value of publicity and often endowed a journeyman printer with a few hundred dollars worth of type and a hand press, and told him to set up shop on the prairie. The editor of the *Huntsman's Echo*, which began publication at Wood River, 150 miles west of Omaha, in 1860, complained in an early issue that buffalo herds regularly trampled his garden, but hoped that a town would soon grow up around him.<sup>46</sup> Similarly the *Omaha Arrow* made its first appearance on July 28, 1854, only weeks after the territory had been opened to pioneers, and at a time when Indians still claimed the land and charged ten dollars to anyone who wanted to build a house. The editor recorded in his first number that he was "seated upon the stump of an ancient oak, which serves for an editorial chair," writing on his "badly abused beaver for a table."<sup>47</sup> These primitive beginnings led to a lusty growth of newspapers; as early as 1859 the thirteen editors of Nebraska Territory met to form the "Editors and Publishers Association of Nebraska," while by 1874 no less than one hundred papers appeared regularly.<sup>48</sup> Eastern visitors never ceased to marvel that towns of only a few hundred people could support one or more newspapers that were "not only read but devoured by everybody."<sup>49</sup> Another visitor, when inquiring of a native how such a tiny city could keep up four newspapers, was told that "it took four newspapers to keep up such a city."<sup>50</sup>

The thirst for education was as great as the thirst for news among Nebraska's pioneer farmers. Instances abound of infant communities that gave their attention to schools even before the first crops were planted. Thus in Buffalo County a group of new settlers who arrived in April, 1871,

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<sup>46</sup> Dick, *Sod House Frontier*, p. 419-420.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 420.

<sup>48</sup> *The Pioneer*, December, 1883, quoted in Dowie, *Prairie Grass Dividing*, p. 18; Henry A. Brainerd, "Nebraska's Press History", *Nebraska History*, XIII (October-December, 1932), 266-271.

<sup>49</sup> Featherstonhaugh, *Excursion through the Slave States*, p. 96.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Robert G. Athearn, *High Country Empire* (New York, 1960), pp. 240-241.

when only four claims had been filed in the entire county, met to form a school district only eight days later and when all were still living in the railroad boxcars that had brought them west.<sup>51</sup> Within three months they had opened their first school. The universality of this spirit was reflected in the first territorial school law, passed on March 16, 1855, when the territory was only a year old. The elaborate educational machinery provided by this pioneering measure failed to operate effectively in a country so new that little land was on the tax rolls, but the basis was laid for an effective system.<sup>52</sup> In the meantime individual communities cared for their own needs through common effort; after one meeting to discuss the problem in a pioneer settlement, one who was present recorded that "everybody promised to work; nearly everybody signed for six days—some included their teams."<sup>53</sup> Such self-sacrifice in a land where primal needs were many made clear the frontiersman's desire to perpetuate civilization. A hymn sung at the letting of the contract for the construction of the first building of the University of Nebraska in 1869 mirrored their idealism:

"Upon this wild and lone frontier  
Behold the edifice we rear;  
With yet no homes to call our own,  
Man cannot live by bread alone."<sup>54</sup>

Schools and newspapers may have been partially inspired by a desire to boom real estate values as well as to perpetuate culture, but the same cannot be said for the remarkable support given to theatrical companies on the Great Plains frontier. Nebraska's pioneers enjoyed their first theater on May 28, 1857, when a company of three men and one woman played "The Merry Cobbler" at "Armstrong and Clark's new frame storeroom" in Omaha. Rather than being grateful for this renewed contact with the arts, the editor of the *Omaha Nebraskian* complained that the

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<sup>51</sup> Dick, *Sod House Frontier*, p. 315.

<sup>52</sup> Helen Siampos, "Early Education in Nebraska," *Nebraska History*, XXIX (June, 1948), 113-133.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Athearn, *High Country Empire*, pp. 233-234.

<sup>54</sup> Othman A. Abbott, *Recollections of a Pioneer Lawyer* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1929), p. 152.

actors failed to realize the high cultural level of the community. "We would, in all kindness," he wrote, "suggest to the company, that a higher order of plays would be more acceptable to a refined audience." Then, in a slightly mellow mood, he went on to accept the fact that "there must be a beginning—as well as an end—to all things. Three years ago, the streets of our city were trodden by the deer and the timid prairie wolf, and our 'corner lots' were the homes of the gopher. Three years hence and our population of 1800 may have increased to almost as many thousands, and 'stars of the first magnitude' may be proud to play at our theaters."<sup>55</sup>

Typical frontier optimism distorted this editor's powers of prophecy, for Nebraska was to wait a full decade before performances worthy of Omaha's "refined audiences" were given. In the interim the people patronized a variety of performers of lesser merit. Thus in 1864 they were offered such varied fare as the National Harmonists, a Boston organist named Henry L. Raymond, a ventriloquist who called himself Captain Haskell, and Mrs. Fanny Hernandez's Rocky Mountain troupe of child actors. The quality of these entertainers was suggested by the disastrous experiences of one Mr. W. Davis, who was billed as a "celebrated Irish Comedian." His first number ended abruptly when "the vocalist excused himself on the ground of being 'too drunk' [to sing] but informed his hearers, if he 'was sober, he could sing bully.'" During his second number the celebrated Mr. Davis broke down, and "scratching his head, made a prolonged pause," then exclaimed, "'Hould on! now I have id!' and changed the tune to 'Teddy Regan.'" But better times were coming, for in the spring of 1867 a spacious hall, melodiously named the Academy of Music, was opened in a new block of buildings on Douglas Street. When a troupe from St. Louis under Henry Corri began its per-

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<sup>55</sup> *Omaha Nebraskan*, June 3, 1857, quoted in Robert D. Harper, "Theatrical Entertainment in Early Omaha," *Nebraska History*, XXXVI (June, 1955), 94. The brief account of Omaha's early theatrical history above is drawn from this excellent article.

formances there, the theater had come of age in Omaha, and was to thrive for generations to come.<sup>56</sup>

These scattered examples of cultural hunger demonstrate that the propertied farmers and town dwellers of the Great Plains frontier were no more willing to abandon their heritage than their counterparts in the Ohio or Mississippi valleys. Yet they, like the track layers and fur trappers and cowboys who were in the van of civilization's march westward, had been altered, if more subtly and in lesser degree, by the frontiering experience. They might aspire to perpetuate the East's culture in their new homes, but the differing environment, the accident of separate evolution, and the exchange of ideas among the people of different backgrounds who mingled on the frontier, all contributed to the modification of both their ideas and practices. On each a little of the West had rubbed off; each had been endowed with new ideas, new energy, new ideals, that were typically American. In such men Frederick Jackson Turner found hope for the nation's future. "The West that has evolved from the frontier," he wrote a friend in 1911, "will continue to be fundamentally important, and there is much Western settlement, social and political construction, still to follow. The end of free lands, doesn't mean the end of creative activity in the West. It is still in its infancy."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 96-104.

<sup>57</sup> Turner to Carl Becker, January 21, 1911. Turner Papers, HEH, TU Box 14 Correspondence.