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Article Title: To Reclaim the Wilderness: The Immigrant's Image of Territorial Nebraska

Full Citation: Orville H Zabel, "To Reclaim the Wilderness: The Immigrant's Image of Territorial Nebraska," *Nebraska History* 46 (1965): 315-324

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1965Wilderness.pdf>

Date: 6/09/2016

Article Summary: Nebraska's leaders realized that they needed to create an image that would attract immigrants who had heard the area described as a desert. Unfortunately their reluctance to spend territorial funds to publicize that positive image limited the success of their campaign.

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Cataloging Information:

Names: Samuel W Black, Mark W Izard, Thomas B Cuming, William A Richardson, Alvin Saunders, J Sterling Morton, Algernon S Paddock

Keywords: Kansas-Nebraska Act, transcontinental railroad, Homestead Act, timber, Platte Valley Emigration Company, Nebraska Immigrant Association, Board of Immigration, geological survey

Photographs / Images: emigrants entering Loup Valley in the 1880s, promotional pamphlets issued by the Nebraska Territorial Board of Immigration

TO RECLAIM THE WILDERNESS: THE IMMIGRANT'S IMAGE OF TERRITORIAL NEBRASKA

BY ORVILLE H. ZABEL

"IMAGES" are a major concern in our time of high-powered advertising and public relations programs. It is almost trite to suggest that Nebraska is now concerned about its image as the farm exodus continues, industry hesitantly moves into the state, population grows slowly, and many college graduates go elsewhere for their first jobs. State advertising, including the emphasis upon increased recreational facilities, reflects current concern with Nebraska's image.

A survey of official documents suggests that a century ago Nebraska territorial officials, although they never used the term, were also very much aware of what would now be called the "image" of Nebraska. Governor Samuel W. Black reminded the legislature in 1859 that when people rushed into a new territory their first duty was "to re-

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claim the wilderness" and to lay the foundations for a prosperous commonwealth.¹ The "wilderness" facing Nebraskans in 1854 was different than any previous wilderness American pioneers had experienced in the national period. One difference was that Nebraska had recently been forbidden Indian Country. The pre-1854 permanent white population concentrated at Fort Kearny and Bellevue had not totalled over 200. Tribes along the Missouri's west bank had ceded their lands only two and a half months before the Kansas-Nebraska Bill which opened the territory to white settlers was signed on May 30, 1854.² Thus, the white man's invasion of Nebraska was precipitous. A second difference was that Nebraska was in the relatively treeless and waterless Great Plains as Walter Webb pointed out so well. The lack of readily available timber and water was quite apparent to early Nebraskans and they attempted to compensate for it. Finally, the Nebraska wilderness already had a strike against it in 1854 because, for half a century, explorers and travellers had described it as a desert.

In moving to reclaim this new kind of wilderness, what did the official territorial agencies do to create the desired image? First, like modern public relations men, they expressed exuberant faith in the product—in this case Nebraska as a home for immigrants and a location for capital investment. These expressions of faith in the future sound exaggerated to the modern ear. In December, 1855 Governor Mark W. Izard proudly told the legislature that the Territory was prosperous, that towns and cities were springing up along the eastern border and at favorable points to the west, and that the fertile prairies were rapidly being converted into productive fields. Two years later, Acting Governor Thomas B. Cuming praised the cli-

¹ *Messages and Proclamations of the Governors of Nebraska: 1854-1941* (Nebraska State Historical Society, 1941), I, 116. (Other references in the article to governor's comments are derived from this excellent source.)

² Addison E. Sheldon, *Land Systems and Land Policies in Nebraska*, Publications of the Nebraska State Historical Society, Vol. XXII, Lincoln, 1936, p. 25.

mate, productive soil, and natural advantages of Nebraska. These characteristics, he felt, would attract immigrants from the Old World. The resulting increase in population, he predicted, would give Nebraskans some control over the country's political destiny. In 1858 Governor William A. Richardson likewise referred to Nebraska's fertile soil, healthful climate, and industrious people. He foresaw the wilderness being converted into a garden and a splendid destiny for the future State of Nebraska. In December, 1860, as the Union collapsed, Governor Black asserted his confidence in the future of Nebraska, insisting that "a soil so rich and prolific, a climate for most parts of the year so pleasant, and at all seasons so full of health, was not meant for a waste place nor a wilderness."

The Civil War's threat to the Union tempered gubernatorial predictions about the future. Governor Alvin Saunders, who served the Territory from 1861 to 1867, was more restrained than his predecessors. While the legislative measures he recommended continually reflected concern for making Nebraska attractive to immigrants, his public pronouncements about the future were less effusive. On December 2, 1861, for example, he reminded the legislators of the importance of their work in laying the foundations for a powerful State. In 1867 in his farewell proclamation as the last territorial governor, he expressed appreciation and pride that "no country can truthfully boast of greater peace or more genuine prosperity than can Nebraska."

Just as modern public relations men know there is more involved in selling a product than singing its praises, so the Nebraska territorial officials also recognized the need for action.

Because of its territorial status, Nebraska was dependent in many ways upon the Federal Government. Such status meant that some developments waited upon Federal action. A steady stream of requests in the form of joint resolutions and memorials flowed from Omaha to Washington. Common requests included provision of troops for

protection from Indians, the location and building of a transcontinental railroad through the Platte Valley, granting of free land to settlers, and appropriating funds for a geological survey. Statehood itself, of course, depended upon Federal approval. Two of the pleas were answered in 1862 with the passage of transcontinental railroad and homestead acts. Final solution of the Indian problem awaited the end of the War, statehood came in 1867, and the geological survey was never approved by Congress. Each of these proposals was supported as contributing to Nebraska's attractiveness and thus encouraging immigration.

While Federal initiative was necessary to accomplish certain desired ends, the territorial government was competent to implement other measures to improve Nebraska's image and to encourage immigration and investment. Whether appealing to the Federal Government for aid or justifying their own actions, territorial officials kept the image of the area as it would appear to potential immigrants uppermost in mind. In fact, seeming disadvantages were sometimes presented as advantages. These advantages were visualized as relating to certain characteristics of the area: location, land, and minerals.

Nebraska's remote location was turned to advantage. The key element was the Platte Valley which since the early forties had carried an increasing stream of emigrants westward. Acting Governor Cuming, addressing the first territorial legislature in January, 1855, emphasized the importance of a Pacific railway and suggested that the legislators could powerfully influence the construction of such a railroad up the Platte Valley. In supporting a memorial to Congress, he used arguments favoring the Platte route which were to be used again and again in official statements. Said he,

Many reasons lead to the conclusion that such a memorial from you will be of practical efficacy in contributing to the speedy consummation of such an enterprise—an enterprise of such absolute necessity as a means of intercommunication between the Atlantic and Pacific States, and as the purveyor of a lucrative commerce with India, China, and the Pacific

Islands. Among these are the facts that the valley of the Platte is on the nearest and most direct continuous line from the commercial metropolis of the East, by railroad and the Great Lakes, through the most practical mountain passes, to the metropolis of the West; that it is fitted by nature for an easy grade; and that it is central and convenient to the great majority of grain growing states, and of the northern portion of the Union, being situated in latitude 41 degrees north, while the majority of the people of the whole country are between the 38th and 46th degrees of north latitude.

Again and again official statements reiterated these arguments and asserted that such a railway would encourage rapid development of Nebraska. For example, in 1866 in almost the same breath in which he reported fifty-five miles of the railroad completed, Governor Saunders observed that every intelligent citizen could see the importance of this great national thoroughfare to the agricultural, commercial, mechanical, and financial interests of the Territory.

A second characteristic of Nebraska which was used to build an attractive image for immigrants, was land. One senses, as he reads the documents, that, from the beginning, territorial leaders perceptively concluded that abundant land was the most attractive feature of Nebraska. The House Committee on Agriculture of the first legislature in 1855 described what it called "the great financial embarrassment prevailing in the eastern cities." It continued by suggesting that Nebraska

proclaim to the world, that so far as we are concerned, the exile, the homeless, the over-labored, the landless and all, where hearts are yearning for a home of their own, where they may not only be invested with the rights, but experience the sensation of the owner of a fee in the soil, we will greet with a grip of heart-felt God speed welcome, with an earnest baptism into the brotherhood of Nebraska.³

In 1861 Governor Saunders, addressing the legislature, predicted that Nebraska would soon become one of the best grain-growing and stock-raising countries in the world. Therefore, he warned the legislators, they should endeavor, by their legislation, to make it a desirable home for indus-

³ *Journal of the House of Representatives of the First Regular Session of the Assembly of the Territory of Nebraska 1855, 141.*

trious, intelligent, and frugal people. Five years later the Governor still was convinced of the importance of fertile land. He told the legislature that Nebraska was clearly an agricultural country and compared her valleys and prairies to a bank of deposit from which the wealth of both present and future populations must be drawn.

The legislature acted in numerous ways to improve Nebraska's agricultural image. Not only did it repeatedly urge granting of Federal land free to settlers (the Homestead Act of 1862), but it legislated to protect the settlers' land and to encourage experimentation with various crops. Perhaps the most important move to protect the settler's land was the Homestead Exemption Act of 1860 which prevented attachments, levy or sale upon execution, or any other legal process from being enforced against the actual homestead of the debtor. An editorial in the *Nebraska City News* of January 21, 1860 expressed the popular reaction:

Circulars should be sent all over the country informing the despondent, but honest, poor men that Nebraska invites the homeless and houseless to her fertile soil. — Come to Nebraska! Snap your fingers in the face of your creditors—here be men again, and secure for yourselves farms, homes—then pay off just demands against you, here or elsewhere.⁴

Territorial officials also quickly moved to counter the impression that Nebraska was not suitable for agriculture. Previous frontiers had been amply supplied with timber which had furnished fences, fuel and habitations for settlers. In Nebraska, except along eastern streams, timber was scarce. Concern was repeatedly expressed over the lack of timber as a major limitation of the Territory. Acting Governor Cuming advised the first legislature that the welfare of the Territory would be promoted and immigration increased if a supply of timber could be assured. He continued, optimistically, that cultivation of timber would prove it just as profitable to raise forests upon the prairies' arable soil as to cut heavily timbered lands and prepare them for cultivation. Interest in timber cultivation resulted in an act of 1861 encouraging tree culture by exempting

⁴ Sheldon, *op. cit.*, p. 82.



Emigrants entering Loup Valley in 1880's.

L. C. ...
Dr. ...

Nebraska.

En kortfattet Beretning
 om
 Jordbessaftighed, Clima og Producter
 samt
 Landbo- og øvrige Forhold
 i
 Staten Nebraska.
 Til Vejledning for Indvandrere og andre Personer,
 som ønske at bosætte sig i Vesten.

Udgivet af den amerikanske Regjering.

Udgivet af den amerikanske Regjering.

Printet i Nebraska, Omaha, 1870.

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 97.65
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N27
 17-8

NEBRASKA.

CONTAINING A BRIEF ACCOUNT
 OF THE
 SOIL, PRODUCTIONS,
 AGRICULTURAL
 AND
 MINERAL RESOURCES,
 AND OTHER
 INFORMATION IMPORTANT
 TO
 IMMIGRANTS AND PERSONS
 DESIRING TO
 LOCATE IN THE WEST.

ISSUED BY THE BOARD OF IMMIGRATION FOR NEBRASKA, PURSUANT
 TO LATE ACT OF THE TERRITORIAL LEGISLATURE.

NEBRASKA:
 1868.

Printed and Published by G. W. ...

Promotional pamphlets issued by the Nebraska Territorial Board of Immigration.

\$50 from taxable value of real estate for each acre of trees planted and under cultivation. This act was repealed in 1864, but provision was then made that trees would not increase the taxable value of land. It is no wonder Arbor Day was a Nebraska invention and that Nebraskans were Treeplanters before they were Cornhuskers! For brief periods the territorial legislature also encouraged grape culture and wool production by tax exemption and sugar production by direct bounty.

As early as 1859, in his address at the First Territorial Fair, J. Sterling Morton proudly announced that the bountiful harvest of 1855 had proven that Nebraska could support a large population and the fields of golden grain "gracefully beckoned the weary emigrant to share of healthfulness and abundance."⁵ In December of the same year Governor Black used a large portion of his address to the legislature to correct what he called serious errors which had been instilled in the public mind and which were injurious to Nebraska's prosperity. "Nebraska," he angrily announced, "should be vindicated against the false impressions produced by ignorance or interested perversion." He then listed the crops which had been successfully produced.

If location and land were important image builders, early Nebraskans were also quite aware of the relationship between mineral deposits and immigration. The House Committee on Agriculture of the first legislature, for example, saw the relationship clearly. It insisted that, coupled with the fertility and beauty of Nebraska Territory, the knowledge of untapped mineral treasures would "in an incredible short space of time, pour a tide of emigration into our borders, such as no country has ever witnessed even in this land of miracles. . . ."⁶

Knowledge about assumed mineral deposits, however, was unavailable. To remedy this defect and under constant

⁵ J. Sterling Morton, *Illustrated History of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1905), I, 390.

⁶ *Journal of the House of Representatives of the First Regular Session of the General Assembly of the Territory of Nebraska 1855*, p. 140.

urging by the territorial governors, the legislature again and again, but to no avail, sent memorials to Congress asking that the Federal Government undertake a geological survey of Nebraska Territory. If one were to judge from these official statements, there was no lack of faith in the eventual discovery of copious supplies of minerals hidden under the Nebraska prairies. If one judges faith by works, however, he notes that the legislators were unwilling to spend territorial funds for a geological survey. Finally, on January 11, 1867 in the twilight of territorial days, Acting Governor Algernon S. Paddock proposed to the last territorial legislature that no more requests be made to Congress for aid, but that Nebraska should at once undertake a geological survey on her own. Except for chartering a few mining and salt companies and appropriating \$500 for an accurate survey of certain saline lands, the legislature did little more than talk about developing the territory's mineral resources.

Modern public relations men express faith in their product and try to prove its usefulness, but they also advertise it. While territorial officials did not wish to hide their light under a bushel, they were, as in the case of a geological survey, hesitant to use funds to advertise and actually promote immigration. The first territorial legislature incorporated the Platte Valley Emigration Company whose object was to provide aid and information to those who wished to emigrate into the Platte Valley. The company was to invite immigrants and to improve public or other lands so as to "enable inexperienced emigrants to settle profitably on such lands immediately upon their arrival."⁷ The same legislature also passed an act authorizing the governor to appoint emigrant agents to distribute information about Nebraska Territory among emigrants. The legislature thoughtfully provided, however, that "the services of such emigrant agent or agents shall constitute no

⁷ *Laws of the Territory of Nebraska 1855*, p. 360. This source will hereafter be cited as *Territorial Laws* followed by the appropriate date.

charge against the Territory of Nebraska or the government of the United States.”⁸

In 1861 Governor Saunders encouraged employment of a travelling emigrant agent and observed that several other new states and territories had done so with great success. A bill for this purpose was introduced but failed to pass.

The Nebraska Immigrant Association was incorporated in 1864 to make Nebraska’s advantages known abroad and to encourage immigration both from Europe and the eastern states. The act contemplated county and city associations subject to the parent organization.⁹

In 1866 Governor Saunders again reminded the legislature that other states and territories were imparting information in regard to their advantages and urged it to provide for employing one or more emigration agents whose sole business would be making Nebraska’s advantages known abroad. Urged by the governor, the legislature created a Board of Immigration to disseminate information about Nebraska in English and German, to appoint an emigrant agent, and to cooperate with the Federal immigration bureau. It appropriated \$2000 for the Board’s use.¹⁰

After the first year’s operation of the Board of Immigration, Acting Governor Paddock recommended enlargement of its activities with at least four agents, two of whom would travel in Europe. At least one agent should speak German and one a Scandinavian language. He insisted that other states were gaining vast additions to their populations by using such agents. Moreover, he said, to neglect making known the rare inducements of Nebraska to those seeking homes would be dereliction of duty on the part of territorial officials. Later when Governor Saunders gave the official report of the Board of Immigration, he described what had been done with the limited resources—mainly the printing and distributing of pamphlets and the

⁸ *Terr. Laws* 1855, p. 179.

⁹ *Terr. Laws* 1864, pp. 232-233.

¹⁰ *Terr. Laws* 1866, pp. 737-738.

engagement as agent of a person already established in New York City. He recommended an appropriation of not less than \$5000 and justified the sum by suggesting that rapid increase in population would add to the territory's wealth. He concluded that "no reasonable effort should be lost to invite immigration among us." The legislature debated enlarging the appropriation, but apparently took no action.

Nebraska's territorial leaders realized that, if they were to reclaim the wilderness, they must create an image attractive to the immigrant. They considered central location, abundant land, and presumed mineral resources as elements from which an image could be formed. They hesitated to spend territorial funds to develop that image and the future would show the limited nature of their success; Nebraska's population at statehood was only an estimated 50,000.