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Article Summary: An address delivered at the banquet of the Native Sons and Daughters of Nebraska, October 23, 1971, Lincoln



BILL VAUGHAN  
LOOKS AT NEBRASKA HISTORY

By BILL VAUGHAN

*An address delivered at the noon banquet of the  
Native Sons and Daughters of Nebraska,  
October 23, 1971, in Lincoln*

I KNOW IT IS CUSTOMARY for the speaker to say he is glad to be wherever he is, but I am particularly happy to be here on this particular Saturday, since I assume the proceedings in Stillwater [where Nebraska University's football team, Number 1 nationally, was defeating Oklahoma State, 41-13] need not absorb us unduly.

I recall one time I endeavored to address a convention while a World Series game was in progress. My pleasantries were greeted by groans and my most poignant and inspirational messages drew loud laughter. It was rather an eerie experience until I realized that half the audience had transistors wired into their ears and were reacting to the game, and not to me.

And, of course, it is impossible for me to feel anything but at home in this great Midlands area of America, where I have spent all my life. I love this part of the country, its sweep, its variety, its peculiarities. I come, for example, from Missouri, the only state in the Union whose natives can't agree on how to pronounce it.

We do have a little image problem here in the Middle West. Kansas City, is generally thought of by outlanders as a treeless plain, and they are amazed to find that we have hills and foliage. The fault, of course, is in the name. Kansas City had a perfectly beautiful and meaningful name available to it, Westport, but for some reason it passed it up and opted for Kansas City. Almost any name — Omaha, anything — would have been preferable.

In World War II when I was transferred to western Nebraska I must admit that I had a preconception. I thought it would be a barren wasteland — uh, well. But I must say that although I was never really won over by the beauty of the Sand Hills, I never encountered warmer or friendlier people.

Nor am I disheartened, as some people are when census figures show a tendency for Americans to move to California or the Eastern seaboard. My own feeling is that this is fine. Let everybody who wants to, go to the coasts and run over one another. Thus we will be left here with a good supply of that increasingly scarce commodity, elbow room. I suppose I need not say that I have never found a Chamber of Commerce that agrees with me on this point.

I should make it clear that I am very much of an amateur as far as history is concerned. Still, I get a warm feeling when I realize that I live on the battleground of Westport, often referred to as the Gettysburg of the West, except in Springfield, Missouri, where Wilson's Creek is referred to as the Gettysburg of the West. Visit Gettysburg and you'll find they never heard of either of them.

Across the street from me the Jackson County Historical Society is renovating the old Wornall home, which was used as a hospital during the Civil War. As what home wasn't? If I were in the mood I could throw a stone and hit four or five historical markers in my neighborhood. I drive to work along the Santa Fe trail, or at least that's my theory.

When Jules Loh of the Associated Press came through Kansas City in preparing his excellent article retracing the voyage of Lewis and Clark, I was able to tell him that Clark's Point, overlooking the confluence of the Missouri and the Kaw was

not named after *that* Clark as most people think, but after Charlie Clark, a stalwart alderman of the Pendergast era. That is the kind of historical fact that I enjoy.

Of course, whenever I get the feeling that I am surrounded and deluged by history, I have an experience such as occurred recently when I went back to visit my son and his family in Richmond, Virginia. History there is wall to wall. I felt a twinge of jealousy. In a federation of equal states it seems unfair that the history should be so inequitably divided. Surely it should be redistributed. If our ideal is to be one man one vote, why not one man one historical site? I could get along quite nicely with Colonial Williamsburg next door.

Again, much as I glory in our history here on what was the frontier not too long ago — and that is one reason I have always had a certain admiration for the Kansans and Nebraskans. They pushed on. My own folks ran out of money about where the St. Louis airport is now. Anyway, as I say, I glory in this heritage, but I am reminded of an incident a few years back when a group of Kansas students were being shown through an old mansion. The guide told them that it was nearly 100 years ago. One dark-eyed young man was visibly impressed. “Boy,” he said, “wait until I tell the folks back in Damascus about this.”

We are, after all, most of us only foot soldiers in the battle of life. We don't see the big picture from headquarters of an army. We are fortunate if we even get a view as broad as that from a battalion command post. Our war is a hill taken or a creek forded and we may never know what it had to do with the grand strategy.

And that is why, I think, we are fascinated by local and regional history. We know that what happened centuries ago in the Valley of the Nile still has its impact on our world. But it is a little easier to grasp the fact that, for example, on this very spot once stood the drug store where the ice cream soda was invented. You're safe on that. Every town has, or once had, the drug store where the ice cream soda was invented.

I suppose there is a danger of local history's becoming confused with trivia. But who is to say what is trivial? In a substantial way, your task is the preservation of history that is

not found in the history books and would never be recorded if it depended upon students of big pictures.

What do most of us want from history? Maybe I shouldn't say most of us. I tend to confuse my own interests with those of the majority — not a unique failing. But if I can speak, perhaps inaccurately, for most of us, I would say we want to know how it was in those old days. What was it like to be a private soldier under Napoleon, a Christian slave, a shoemaker in New England, an Indian on these plains, a goldminer in the Klondike? What was it like, not in grand economic, political, and social terms, but just in getting through a day, a year, or a life?

That is where we derive so much benefit from the mining of letters, diaries, business transactions, photographs, all the details of everyday life. Plus the wonderful new tool, the recorder. How many of us break our hearts thinking about the people we have known—cowboys, railroaders, newspapermen, teachers, jazz pianists—in each place that we were going someday to get down on tape and never did?

I can't imagine a duller, less rewarding life than living in surroundings of whose history you have no knowledge. Perhaps a thesis could be developed that much of the disaffection of our time arises from a lack of a sense of continuity. Regional history seems to me to be particularly important in these days when our population is so mobile, where the man who lives out his life in the land of his fathers is the exception rather than the rule. The man who moves to a new community is likely to be unacquainted with its traditions, its myths, its apocrypha, its legends, its heroes, its villains, its accomplishments and its failures. Unless he remedies this ignorance he will miss much of the spice and savor of life.

But not only does the historically illiterate person suffer from an impairment in the quality of his life, he is not likely to be as knowledgeable a citizen as he should be. Often a voter's judgment of a political issue cannot be truly informed unless he knows the historic background of the city or state.

These then are some of the reasons why the collecting, analyzing and storing of history are important. Equally vital, it seems to me, is the dissemination of historical information and

commentary. Scholars must, of course, speak to scholars, but the substance of this dialogue must be available to the general public.

Popularization is sometimes regarded as a naughty word. But after all, history comes from the people, and it seems to me that the historians have a responsibility to give at least some of it back to the people, even if it involves such unscholarly behavior as a lively prose style and attractive format. I would like, for example, to see more good history written for newspapers where too often it is provided by hobbyists whose enthusiasm may outrun their competence.

If I may make one more suggestion about the role of your membership, it is that I have always felt that a sort of Gresham's Law applies in history. *Bad* history drives out *good* history. Anyone who has ever suffered through a misguided tour of a "historic site" of the tourist trap variety will know what I mean. What is being sold, along with the knick-knacks and postcards is, at best, cryptohistory.

We try to make sure that our children receive sex education in the schools so they won't pick up an inaccurate version on the street corner. Yet in the field of local and regional history we have a vacuum which is filled by the admission \$1.50 people. Of course, you do get a bumper sticker. I must admit that the sex I learned on the street corner was more amusing than the official version, and I suppose the same can be said of history acquired from studying motel brochures. But there are inherent dangers in both cases.

Most tourists are so historically unsophisticated that I have often thought we could franchise a chain of historic sites. They would be the reconstruction of the birthplace of some mythical statesman or general. The basic kit would include the great man's walking stick and dentures, his cloak and framed portraits of his family and so on—all in plastic.

These places would be clean, well-kept and conveniently situated. The rest rooms would be spotless and the food reasonable and adequate. The traveler would have a *feeling* of having been enriched, and the franchise holder would *be* enriched by at least \$3.50 a person.

Too many actual historical persons were not born on the Interstate highways. So I think this would be a service. And I think it would be preferable to the debauched non-history being foisted on the tourist today. A much preferable solution, of course, would be to make sound, accurate history more readily at hand.

We hear the suggestion from time to time that our system of government would work more efficiently if some of the old state divisions were abolished and we functioned with perhaps 17 administrative units rather than 50. There is a certain attraction to the idea, although it would deal a death blow to the great American sport of boasting that our own legislature is worse than anybody else's.

But of course our feeling of identity as a Nebraskan, or a Virginian, a Missourian, Iowan, Minnesotan, really has very little to do with administrative and tax-collecting units. It has to do with roots and memories and traditions. Plus the fact that it is fun. Much of the early humor of this country depended upon the interplay of regionalism—the Yankee trader against the deceptively slow-witted backwoodsman; the greenhorn being swindled in the city and the city slicker being, in turn, taken by the rubes.

It may be that we are kidding ourselves in these days of a population constantly on the move to think that there really is such a thing as a character or personality peculiar to each state. Rationally I suppose there should no longer be any difference between, let's say Missourians and Kansans, but don't mention that heresy along the state line which runs a couple of blocks from my house. There are those newcomers who think that a Kansas-Missouri football game is simply that. They don't realize that it is a replay of the Civil War. It is Quantrill against Jim Lane and the rattle of muskets along the Wakarusa.

I think there is something fine—a bit ridiculous perhaps—but still fine, in this way we cling to an affectionate loyalty for the state where we were born or have spent most of our lives. There may be times when our neighbors don't particularly appeal to us, but consider how we welcome a fellow Nebraskan or whatever, if encountered in, let's say, New York or Paris. And

we will forgive a movie or television entertainer almost anything if he is a home state boy.

Perhaps we have become a little too sophisticated for it, or maybe it's just because cars have become too numerous. But remember how, when touring in Arizona or Ohio, we would honk our horns if we passed a car bearing the beloved license plate of home? And I think it is revealing that we tend to take delight in the cantankerousness of our fellow citizens, we remember the "characters"; there is even a sort of perverse pride in the bitterness of the climate. My goodness, what would a boy who grew up on a farm in Florida have to talk about in later life?

I suppose this is a reaction against the bland, grey sameness which we feel engulfing American life today. Drive across the continent—the same four lane rivers of concrete. You eat the same meals at the same restaurants and stay in what appears to be the same motel room every night. The voices on the car radio are all the same, playing the same music. About the only touch of regionalism you are likely to find is if you are lucky enough to encounter a toll booth attendant with a drawl or a brogue.

We break away from this pervading feeling of being buried in some sort of homogenous mass by reiterating and remembering the place of our origin. That is why it is good to be a Nebraskan, or a North Dakotan, or a South Carolinian—even, though I hesitate to say so in this particular place—an Oklahoman. It is not *pride* of place, it is *consciousness* of place. Awareness of it.

I am sure your historical magazine goes to members all over the world who, no matter where they are living, are Nebraskans. Perhaps they would find it hard to explain exactly why. But I think it is a matter that lies very close to the wellsprings of life.

I have seen, as I am sure you have, how young people grow up contemptuous of anything smacking of genealogy. Then, suddenly, they become interested in who great-grandfather was. How did they get in this particular place at this particular time? They don't care about finding nobility or fame on their family tree. I'm sure they would be more delighted with a horse thief than a merchant prince. The horse thief makes a better topic of conversation.

The important thing is that there seems to come eventually a realization that it didn't all start 20 years ago. Take youth's current concerns with ecology, a concern which I hope goes beyond a momentary fad. You cannot understand the environment of the Upper Missouri river, let us say, or the Great Plains, without knowing their history. And if you try to act on that environment without understanding its history, you can make serious mistakes.

Well, I have wandered here today in the tortuous manner of the Western rivers before the corps of engineers got them to shape up. All I have hoped to do is give a few thoughts of a layman on the subject of local history.

We had a beloved reporter on *The Star* for many years who covered Missouri. He could not be called an unreconstructed rebel because he never saw that there was anything to be reconstructed from. And whenever his job would take him up the forks and branches of the streams and into the hills or the tobacco lands, or the courthouse squares, he would say, "There's a lot of Missouri in Missouri still." I was never sure *exactly* what he meant, but I think I caught a glimmer of what his state meant to him. And in that spirit I would like to say that I hope you will continue to find there is a lot of Nebraska in Nebraska still.