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Photographs / Images: Arbor Lodge, Nebraska City, Nebraska; portrait, J Sterling Morton; Robert W Furnas; Arbor Lodge 1893-1897



ARBOR LODGE, Nebraska City – Following a number of transformations, the original home of J. Sterling Morton, built in 1855, took on the lines of an ante-bellum mansion after his death. The name Arbor Lodge was first applied to it about 1875.

ARBOR DAY —
A PIONEER EXPRESSION
OF CONCERN FOR ENVIRONMENT

By JAMES C. OLSON

This paper was presented at the annual dinner of the Nebraska State Historical Society in Lincoln, October 23, 1971.

Our almost universal concern for the environment should heighten interest next year in the Centennial Arbor Day.¹ Arbor Day was established out of concern for the environment and as a means of improving it.

It is most appropriate that the state legislature of Nebraska should have provided for the commemoration of the Arbor Day Centennial, and wise I think, too, that it turned the responsibility for this Centennial over to the Nebraska State Government and the Nebraska State Historical Society. The commemoration will be in good hands.

One result of the Centennial commemoration might be help in the restoration of our sense of the need for historical studies. We are in serious need of that. Many of the young, and many of their elders who should know better, seem to be obsessed with the present and disdainful of the past. Indeed, among some there is the feeling that the deliberate rejection of the past is the only way to look upon a future of promise. I don't know who is to blame for this rejection of history. I do know, however, that we are a profoundly unhistorical generation — probably more unhistorical than any generation since the Enlightenment. Thomas N. Bonner, formerly professor of history at the then

University of Omaha and now President of the University of New Hampshire, wrote recently:

Not only students but educators approach each problem *de novo*, as if the past had nothing to teach the present. In the liberal arts, including the social sciences and even the humanities, the historical dimension has often been sacrificed to the vogue of behavioral and quantitative studies. The whole thrust of campus and political movements in our time is to challenge the authority of history and to contest the value of age and experience. Whatever is, is *now*, and *now* is an insistent demand that cannot go unanswered. Education, it is seriously argued, must focus on the immediate and the now, around the problems that are seen and felt; and participation is seen as a higher value than thoughtfulness or suspended judgment.²

The more thoughtful among us have always rejected the cult of presentism. They have understood clearly the need for the study of our past — a need which was eloquently expressed by John F. Kennedy in the introduction to *The American Heritage New Illustrated History of the United States*:

There is little that is more important for an American citizen to know than the history and traditions of his country. Without such knowledge, he stands uncertain and defenseless before the world, knowing neither where he has come from nor where he is going. With such knowledge, he is no longer alone but draws a strength far greater than his own from the accumulative experience of the past and the accumulative vision of the future.³

Concern for the environment is not something which has sprung full blown from the present generation. Here in the West, as we all know, concern for the environment has been an enduring theme of our history. It is a theme that occurs over and over again in the pages of our Quarterly Journal, *Nebraska History*, including the current issue.⁴ It was the central theme of the address delivered by Walter Prescott Webb of the University of Texas at the annual meeting in 1953 — the Society's Diamond Jubilee.⁵

I suppose it might be argued that one reason why Nebraskans and other westerners have been so concerned with the environment is that they have usually had too much or not enough. The early travelers almost universally found this land west of the Missouri River forbidding and barren.

Lieutenant Zebulon M. Pike, who went out along the Republican River in 1806 and then down to Santa Fe, wrote of "barren soil, parched and dried up for 8 months in the year," and hazarded the guess that America's western plains would

“become in time equally celebrated as the sandy deserts [*sic*] of Africa.”

Major Stephen H. Long, who explored the Platte Valley in 1820, reported that most of the area between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains was a vast desert wasteland. “In regard to this extensive section of country,” he wrote, “I do not hesitate in giving the opinion, that it is almost wholly [*sic*] unfit for cultivation, and, of course, uninhabitable by a people depending on agriculture for their subsistence.”

Dr. Edwin James, chronicler of the expedition, stated that he had “no fear of giving too unfavorable an account” of the region. It was “an unfit residence for any but a nomad population.” He hoped it would remain forever, “the unmolested haunt of the native hunter, the bison, and the jackal.”

Although a few contradictory voices were raised, most opinion during the first half of the 19th century – or up until the time Nebraska Territory was created – held that the area between the Missouri River and the Rockies was generally a vast, uninhabitable desert.

Settlement on the prairies of eastern Nebraska demonstrated the fallacy of the desert theory so far as that part of the West was concerned. There was no question, however, but that as you went west – somewhere between the 98th and the 100th meridians – or somewhere between the present cities of Grand Island and Cozad – you began to get into country characterized by an important environmental deficiency – a lack of water, with, as an important by-product, a lack of timber. These environmental shortcomings posed some very serious problems for the westward-moving American pioneer. In his seminal book, *The Great Plains*, Walter Webb put it this way:

As one contrasts the civilization of the great plains with that of the eastern timber land, one sees what may be called an institutional *fault* (comparable to a geological fault) running from middle Texas to Illinois to Dakota, roughly following the 98th meridian. At this *fault* the ways of life and living changed. Practically every institution that was carried across it was either broken and remade or else greatly altered. The ways of travel, the weapons, the method of tilling the soil, the plows and other agricultural implements, and even the laws themselves were modified. When people first crossed this line they did not immediately realize the imperceptible change that had taken place in their environment, nor more is the tragedy, did they foresee the full consequences which that change was to bring in their own characters and in their modes of life. In the new region – level, timberless, and semi-arid – they were thrown by mother necessity into the clutch of new circumstances. Their plight

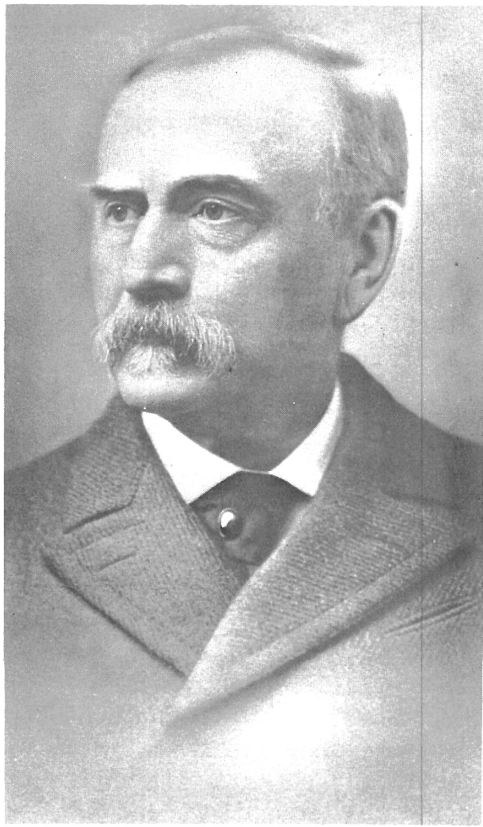
has been stated this way: East of the Mississippi civilization stood on three legs – land, water, and timber; west of the Mississippi not only one but two of these legs were withdrawn, – water and timber, – and civilization was left on one leg – land. It is a small wonder that it toppled over in temporary failure.⁶

There were two basic reactions to the new conditions in which the Nebraska pioneers found themselves. One reaction was to pretend that the new conditions didn't exist or that if they did, they would go away. The other was to recognize frankly the shortcomings in the environment and to try to do something about them. Both reactions played their role in Nebraska history.

The temptation of many of the early pioneers to ignore the environment is understandable. Thousands of them had invested everything they had in the land west of the Missouri River, and they were gambling that the desert concept was erroneous. Understandably, they reacted vigorously to any suggestion that it was not.

When, for example, Major John Wesley Powell, chief of the Department of Interior's Survey of the Rocky Mountain Region, stated in 1878 that non-irrigated farming was impossible in western Nebraska, a host of Nebraskans, including the State Board of Agriculture and Samuel Aughey, first professor of natural sciences at the University of Nebraska, declared that the Powell Theory was erroneous, that while in its primitive state Nebraska may have suffered from inadequate rainfall, such was no longer the case. Rainfall was adequate and was actually increasing.

Dr. Aughey developed the theory of increasing rainfall as the result of cultivation. In other words, rainfall followed the plow. This idea was popularized in a widely circulated book by C. D. Wilbur, *The Great Valleys and Prairies of Nebraska and the Northwest*, published in Omaha in 1881. It was given further currency by Orange Judd, widely known and highly respected editor of *The Prairie Farmer*, published in Chicago. Speaking at the Nebraska State Fair in 1883, Judd extolled the virtues of Nebraska as an agricultural state and advanced the view that an important feature of Nebraska's climate was that its rainfall was increasing annually as a result of the extension of agriculture westward. Nebraska stood to benefit not only from its own development but also from that of Kansas: "As neighboring



*J. Sterling Morton (1832-1902)
is credited with the
founding of Arbor Day.*

Kansas settles up and breaks its prairie sod away out to its western border, those parching winds that formerly came up into Nebraska, and still come at some points, will be heard of no more.”

It was this spirit which refused for a time to recognize the seriousness of the grasshopper plague of 1874-1875. It was this spirit also which denounced advocacy of irrigation as an unpatriotic recognition of the shortcomings of Nebraska’s environment. As M. A. Daugherty of Ogallala told the third annual convention of the Nebraska State Irrigation Association in 1895, “Through these early years to speak of irrigation as the solution for crop raising was to invite condemnation upon oneself.”

So much for that. I want to spend the rest of my time this evening discussing the other reaction – the frank recognition of the shortcomings in the environment and the efforts to do something about these shortcomings. This is what built Nebraska.

It was this spirit which made possible the great developments in irrigation and conservation which have transformed

Nebraska's agriculture and, indeed, all of Nebraska's life. Above all, it recognized the need for education and research in the solving of Nebraska's problems. This recognition was expressed very well in 1895 by W. J. Whitmore, president of the Improved Stockbreeders Association. In an address on "The Lessons of the Drought" he said:

There is wealth in our state, in her consummate combination of soil and climate, for those who know enough to get it. The progress of civilization is opening new fields for the play of intelligence. The scope of knowledge that enabled the farmer of 50 years ago to not only earn a living, but to hold his rank among the agencies of society and keep a touch of elbow with the marching column of progress, now would leave him far behind, a hopeless despairing loser in the race for power and supremacy. . . .

The time has come when the farmer must mix brains with his soil or fall to the rear.

There were so many who were mixing brains with the soil. The State Board of Agriculture, under the leadership of men like Robert W. Furnas and W. R. Mellor, carried on a continued program of popular education, urging farmers to try new methods. George W. Holdrege of the Burlington Railroad constantly sought to encourage the development of new methods and was particularly supportive of the dry farming experiments of Hardy W. Campbell carried on in the western part of the state. The College of Agriculture at the University of Nebraska and the agricultural experiment station were major forces in research and educational programs. Among those from the University who contributed mightily to the understanding and improvement of our environment were Erwin H. Barbour, Charles E. Bessey, Samuel R. Thompson, Frank S. Billings, Lawrence Bruner, and George E. Condra.

Conservation and irrigation were political matters as well as educational, and this state and nation are the richer for political struggles carried on by men of the 20th century who caught the vision of mixing brains with the soil – men such as Phil Hockenburger, Keith Neville, R. O. Canaday, C. W. McConaughy, George Kingsley, George W. Norris, James E. Lawrence, and C. Petrus Peterson.

The beginning of this concern for the environment in Nebraska can be traced to the establishment of Arbor Day and to the leadership of three young men who came to Nebraska

Territory in the 1850's: Robert W. Furnas of Brownville, George L. Miller of Omaha, and J. Sterling Morton of Nebraska City. Morton, the founder of Arbor Day and later Secretary of Agriculture in the cabinet of President Cleveland, is the best known. The other two, however, played major roles in the early history of the state.

All three were active in public life. Furnas, a Republican and editor of the *Brownville Advertiser*, served as Governor. Miller served as the founder and for many years the editor of the *Omaha Herald*. Morton, as editor of the *Nebraska City News* and frequent candidate for public office, was the leading spokesman of the conservative wing of the Democratic party throughout his lifetime. Furnas and Morton were natural political enemies. Miller and Morton, though both Democrats, found themselves on opposite sides of many issues largely



*Robert W. Furnas (1824-1905),
Nebraska's third governor,
retired to his apple
orchards at Forest Park
Place in Brownville.*

because Miller saw things through the eyes of the North Platte section of the state and Morton through the eyes of the South Platte region. There was one subject, however, upon which all could agree – the importance of planting trees on the treeless plains. As editors they continually urged their readers to plant trees, and they devoted many columns to the enlightenment of those who wanted to improve the environment of their farms and homes. This was but one aspect of their interest in the general improvement of agriculture.

Miller, for example, dedicated much space in the *Herald* to singing the praises of Nebraska and to urging easterners to move to the new state. The country was “filled with untold mineral riches and an exhaustless agriculture.” The climate was pronounced as “one of the most salubrious in the world.” It was favorably compared with that of New England: “The New England typhnoid [*sic*] is hardly ever seen here.” If one needed an inducement to immigrate, he only had to consider the summers: “Our summers . . . [are] . . . not only healthful but intoxicating to the senses.” Finally, in the extended editorial on Nebraska’s climate, Miller admitted, “Men die in Nebraska, it is true, but under like circumstances, and everything being equal, our climate certainly does furnish a greater immunity from fatal disorders than any other in the known world.”⁷

We can smile at some aspects of Miller’s praise for the climate of Nebraska, but I think it is safe to say that the redoubtable pioneer editor of the *Herald* would only remark, “I told you so,” if he were shown current statistics about longevity in Nebraska. These pioneer editors not only sang Nebraska’s praises, they exhorted Nebraskans to improve their environment. In 1865, Miller editorialized:

“Men struggle, animated by paternal regard for their children, all their lives, to get bank stock, government bonds, commercial interests and so forth for their future reliance. They seem never to think that smaller investments in the bountiful earth are more valuable, become more enduring than all these, and simply because they are permanent, lasting and sure.”

During the State Fair in 1869, twenty-three men including Morton, Furnas, A. H. Masters, a Nebraska City orchardist, and Chief Justice Oliver P. Mason, organized the Nebraska State Horticultural Society. The meetings of the Horticultural Society usually were held in connection with those of the State Board

of Agriculture inasmuch as several of the men were members of both groups. The Horticultural Society was mainly an agency for getting the fruit growers of the state together to share experiences and exchange views. This, of course, was important. They had little scientific information. Practical experience was their only reliable guide.

At a meeting of the Society held in Brownville October 5, 1871, a resolution was passed appointing Morton, "a committee to prepare and publish an address to the people of the state setting forth all important facts relative to fruit growing in Nebraska."

In this historic address Morton presented the facts of fruit growing, but he went on to sing the praises of Nebraska as a fruit growing region and urge the necessity of more fruit trees in the state. He concluded by saying:

There is beauty in a well ordered orchard which is a joy forever. It is a blessing to him who plants it, and it perpetuates his name and memory, keeping it fresh as the fruit it bears long after he has ceased to live. There is comfort in a good orchard, in that it makes the new home more like the old home in the east, and with its thrifty growth and large luscious fruits, sows contentment in the mind of a family as the clouds scatter the rain. Orchards are missionaries of culture and refinement. They make the people among whom they grow a better and more thoughtful people. If every farmer in Nebraska will plant out and cultivate an orchard and a flower garden, together with a few forest trees, this will become mentally and morally the best agricultural state, the grandest community of producers in the American union. Children reared among trees and flowers growing up with them will be better in mind and in heart, than children reared among hogs and cattle. The occupations and surroundings of boys and girls make them, to a great extent, either bad and coarse, or good and gentle.

If I had the power I would compel every man in the state who had a home of his own, to plant out and cultivate fruit trees.

This "Fruit Address" was delivered at a meeting of the Horticultural Society in Lincoln, January 4, 1872. The State Board of Agriculture was meeting in Lincoln at the same time. Morton apparently attended both meetings. At the State Board of Agriculture's meeting he introduced the following resolution:

Resolved, that Wednesday, the 10th of April, 1872, be, and the same is hereby, especially set apart and consecrated for tree planting in the state of Nebraska, and the State Board of Agriculture hereby name it Arbor Day; and to urge upon the people of the state the vital importance of tree planting, hereby offer a special premium of \$100 to the Agricultural Society of that county in Nebraska which shall, upon that day, plant properly the largest number of trees; and a farm library of \$25 worth of books to that person who, on that day shall plant properly, in Nebraska, the greatest number of trees.



Arbor Lodge looked like this when Morton was Secretary of Agriculture in the second Cleveland Administration (1893-1897).

After some discussion as to what the day should be called -- some wanted to designate it Sylvan Day -- the resolution was unanimously adopted.

The Morton farm near Nebraska City -- soon to become known as Arbor Lodge -- already had a substantial orchard, but Morton made great preparations to celebrate the first Arbor Day. He ordered 800 trees. Unhappily, they did not arrive by April 10. Eventually, however, they did come and were set out. The idea really took hold in Nebraska. More than a million trees were planted in the state on the first Arbor Day.

Arbor Day was but one of a number of efforts designed to encourage tree planting. In 1869 the Legislature had exempted \$100 worth of property from taxation for every acre of forest trees planted and kept in cultivation. In 1873 the Congress passed what was known as The Timber Culture Act. The Act introduced by Nebraska's Senator Phineas W. Hitchcock -- Gilbert Hitchcock's father -- provided that anyone who could homestead could acquire an additional quarter section by planting forty acres of that quarter section to trees and tending them for ten years.

The Timber Culture Act was subject to serious abuses. In

many areas it was impossible to grow trees, even with the best of care. In many other instances, the Act was used simply to increase land holdings with little effort being made to produce timber. In his annual report of 1883, the Commissioner of the General Land Office wrote:

My information leads me to the conclusion that a majority of the entries under The Timber Culture Act are made more for speculative purposes, and not for the cultivation of timber. Compliance with the law in these cases is a mere pretense. . . . My information is that no trees are to be seen over vast regions of country where timber culture entries have been most numerous.

Again, in 1885, the Commissioner quoted from a field inspector as follows:

I have traveled over hundreds of miles of land in western Kansas, Nebraska, and central Dakota, nearly one-fourth of which had been taken under the "Timber Culture Act," without seeing an artificial grove even in incipience, and can scarcely recall an instance in any one day's travel where the ground had been more than scratched with a plow for the purpose of planting trees.

There was another side to the story, however. In 1897, Ezra R. Stephens, founder of the Crete Nurseries and a prominent pioneer Nebraska nurseryman, presented a paper before the State Horticultural Society entitled, "What Has the Timber Claim Law Done For Nebraska?" Mr. Stephens stated that he had planted seven million trees for customers on four-year contracts and had sold millions to others. He estimated that during the years 1885 to 1890, as many as 100 million trees a year had been planted in the state.⁸

An important feature of the tree planting was the establishment and maintenance of farm groves and windbreaks. Even today, remnants of the old tree claim groves can be found providing shade and shelter on Nebraska's farms.

The successful attempts by Lawrence and Uriah Bruner to grow trees in the Sandhills were also in the Arbor Day pattern, as was Dr. Charles E. Bessey's fight for the establishment of a man-made national forest in the Sandhills — a fight which saw victory under the administration of Theodore Roosevelt.⁹ Twentieth century examples of the tradition are the millions of trees set out each year on the farms of Nebraska through the Clark-McNary program and the windbreaks planted across the plains as part of the New Deal's Shelter Belt program of the 1930's.

But to get back to Arbor Day. There is no record that Arbor Day was celebrated in 1873, but in 1874 the State Board of Agriculture passed a resolution making the day an annual occurrence and designated the second Wednesday in April of each year as such. The governor was also memorialized to call attention to the day each year by official proclamation which would request the people of the state to plant forest, fruit and ornamental trees. It is appropriate that Robert W. Furnas, who just after he had been elected, wrote Morton, "Now the election is over let us talk tree again," was the governor to issue the first proclamation.

The Arbor Day idea continued to spread, and in 1885 the State Legislature designated J. Sterling Morton's birthday, April 22, as Arbor Day, and made it a legal holiday. Arbor Day did indeed transcend politics. The Legislature was Republican and Morton was a Democrat. By the turn of the century, Arbor Day was celebrated in every state in the Union except Delaware, and it was observed in many foreign countries.

A practice particularly gratifying to Morton was the observance of Arbor Day in the schools. This observance was begun in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1882, when the school children of that city, during a conference of the American Forestry Congress, planted trees in a park. In 1884 a paper was read at a meeting of the National Education Association in Washington on, "Arbor Day in the Schools." There was some objection to the inclusion of the subject in the session of the NEA, but in August of the same year, the Association, meeting in Madison, Wisconsin, unanimously adopted a resolution favoring the celebration of Arbor Day in the schools of the country.

The celebration of Arbor Day in the schools appealed particularly to Morton's sense of the fitness of things. He was fond of saying, "Other holidays repose upon the past; Arbor Day proposes for the future."

Literally millions of trees have been planted on Arbor Day throughout the years. This is important, and tree planting, I assume, will be a significant part of the the Centennial. Even more important, however, is the spirit of Arbor Day. I would like to hope that it could be the spirit of our new concern for the environment and ecology. I sometimes feel that the spirit of

that movement is negative in that it would seek to do away with many aspects of technological progress, more in the spirit of the English Luddites of the early nineteenth century than of any other historical precursor.

The spirit of Arbor Day, which was the spirit which transformed Nebraska from the great American desert to the great agricultural state which it is in the mid-twentieth century, was a creative spirit. It is the spirit which, indeed, "proposes for the future."

NOTES

1. Except where otherwise indicated, the sources for this paper are: James C. Olson, *J. Sterling Morton* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1942); and *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955, 1966).
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3. John F. Kennedy, "On History," *American Heritage*, XV (February, 1964), 3-4.
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6. Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1931), 8-9.
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9. Raymond J. Pool, "Fifty Years on the Nebraska National Forest," *Ibid.*, XXXIV (1953), 139-180.