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Article Title: New Horizons on the Oregon Trail

Full Citation: Merrill J Mattes, "New Horizons on the Oregon Trail," *Nebraska History* 56 (1975): 555-571.

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1975OldOregonTrail.pdf>

Date: 3/30/2016

Article Summary: This article presents the address given by Merrill J Mattes before the Nebraska State Historical Society at Lexington, Nebraska, June 14, 1975. It is primarily a descriptive of the first Bicentennial celebration at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, in April of 1975 and a journey along the Oregon Trail that the presenter had taken.

Cataloging Information:

Photographs / Images: Merrill J Mattes receiving the 1969 Western Heritage Award in the nonfiction category for his *The Great Platte River Road*.

NEW HORIZONS ON THE OLD OREGON TRAIL

By MERRILL J. MATTES

**Presented at the Spring Meeting of the Nebraska State Historical Society
at Lexington, Nebraska, June 14, 1975**

This spring meeting of the Nebraska State Historical Society at Lexington is a very special occasion, and I hope my remarks will convey to you why I consider this a red-letter day. June 14 is Flag Day, and the flags are on display because this is the anniversary of the birth of the Armed Forces of the United States. It was on this day exactly two hundred years ago that the Continental Congress authorized the formation of an Army to fight the British. Formed from colonial militia units, this embryonic, ragtag Army, under the command of a Virginia gentleman named George Washington, then began a seven-year war for American independence. Not only Flag Day but the entire year 1975 is a special one, a red-letter year, or perhaps it would be more patriotic to color it red, white, and blue.

If I may be forgiven a personal reference, it was forty years ago in June, 1935, that I officially joined the National Park Service, first as a ranger at Yellowstone Park and then the following October as the first full-time salaried superintendent of Scotts Bluff National Monument. Since the National Park System is quite large, I might have been sent any number of other places — like Fort Pulaski in Georgia or Sitka in Alaska — but it was my great good fortune to be sent to Scotts Bluff, where I became acquainted with and began a lifelong love affair with the Oregon Trail. As a 24-year-old greenhorn with a Civilian Conservation Corps work camp to supervise, and a national

monument that had never before known any significant protection, interpretation or development, you can imagine how staggered I was by my awesome responsibilities. Fortunately the National Park Service recognized my predicament and sent an engineer, C. E. Randels, to boss the work projects while I concentrated on research and museum work.

Fortunately also there were several public-spirited citizens of western Nebraska who kindly volunteered to share their knowledge of and enthusiasm for Oregon Trail lore. Prominent among these was Tom Green of Scottsbluff city, for many years on your Board of Directors, and Paul Henderson of Bridgeport who, with his wife Helen, sits at the head table today to receive an award for his research achievements. I hadn't been stationed at Gering but a few weeks when Paul whisked me off to show me the whereabouts of a couple of old Pony Express stations. I am proud to say that for forty years I have known Paul and counted him among my most valued friends. His selflessness in sharing his knowledge with me, as with others, has certainly been a factor in whatever inspiration I have had to pursue my Oregon Trail research and writing.

Another gentleman who showed up at my Gering office in 1935 was Dr. A. E. Sheldon, who introduced himself as Superintendent of the Nebraska State Historical Society. In no time at all he extracted two dollars from me to become a personal member of the Society. I am proud to say that I have shelled out annually ever since -- until a few years ago when I decided to throw in the sponge and invest fifty dollars to become a Life Member. So 1975 also marks my fortieth year as a dues-paying member of your Society.

Now to get into a larger realm of American history, it was 150 years ago that the first white men (or, as some editors prefer, the first "non-natives" or the first "men of European origin") went west up the Platte River. I refer of course to William Ashley and fellow fur traders bound for the Rocky Mountains to explore beaver country and set up the first of the famous mountain fur trade rendezvous. (The Oregon Trail or Platte River Road was first traversed by Robert Stuart and six other "Returning Astorians" in 1812-1813, and in 1824 Jedediah Smith, James Clyman, and two others rediscovered it, but

both these groups traveled eastward, from South Pass.) To our knowledge, Ashley, accompanied by Hiram Scott of Scotts Bluff fame and others were the first to travel westward up the Platte River Road. The record is fuzzy on this point, but like most of the earliest fur traders he probably went up the north side of the Platte, right past where we are meeting today. At that particular time Fort Atkinson on the Missouri River above present Omaha was the logical place to assemble supplies brought by keelboat from St. Louis before heading overland.

Incidentally, it makes me a little nervous to be too specific today about historic personages, places and dates because this audience is infiltrated with super experts on the Oregon Trail, like Paul Henderson and Charlie Martin. I only ask that if they detect me in error they not interrupt the speech, but give me their opinions privately afterwards!

Of course the great thing to celebrate or commemorate this year is not my career or that of Ashley but the start of the American Revolution Bicentennial! Although all of the famous events of the Revolution occurred on the Atlantic seaboard, this celebration is nation-wide, and there are Bicentennial committees in all fifty states — in thousands of communities, large and small. The aspect of the Bicentennial I happen to be best acquainted with involves the preservation program of the National Park Service — the restoration or reconstruction of dozens of structures and battlefields of the Revolutionary period at such places as Philadelphia, Charleston, Yorktown, Morristown, Saratoga, and Kings Mountain. I have had some exposure to various projects on the state level as a member of the Heritage Council of the Colorado Centennial-Bicentennial Commission; most Americans will experience their Bicentennial at the grass roots community level.

Lexington, Nebraska, has a special incentive to celebrate the Bicentennial because it was named for Lexington, Massachusetts, one of the most famous of all American small towns because of what happened there at dawn on April 19, 1775. There occurred the opening battle of the American War of Independence where “the shot heard round the world” was fired. This clash between Colonial Minuteman and British

Regulars on the village green signalled the first labor pains of a new nation not yet conscious of its existence as a nation, yet destined to become a sovereign world power. This was not just another nation with the usual autocratic ruler or ruling class but a nation dedicated to unfamiliar democratic principles of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" and "freedom and justice for all."

It was my privilege to participate in the first Bicentennial celebration at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, in April. I stayed at the home of friends living in Acton, five miles from Concord. Every year on April 19 uniformed Minutemen commemorate the repulse of the British redcoats; civilian villagers follow the Minuteman companies, hiking from homes to North Bridge for a bit of the fanfare. At 6 a.m. my friends and I started a five-mile hike over winding roads to North Bridge, following in the footsteps not only of the modern Minutemen but of the heroic band of 1775 led by Captain Isaac Davis. Captain Davis occupies a special niche in history as the first American officer to be killed by enemy fire — at North Bridge on April 19, 1775 — and it is reputedly Isaac Davis whom the sculptor had in mind when he created the Minuteman statue at Concord's North Bridge, immortalized by Longfellow's poem.

On this particular April morning, though the sky was overcast and leaden, over 100,000 people converged on North Bridge to listen to the 21-gun Presidential salute fired by Army artillery, to hear President Ford give the first official Bicentennial speech, and to watch a seemingly endless parade of Minutemen units, American Colonials, British and Hessian regiments, U. S. servicemen and women, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, assorted dignitaries, dozens upon dozens of marching bands, fife and drum corps, and — as if to emphasize the unparalleled breadth and meaning of American freedom and tolerance — a ragtag army of scruffy, bearded radicals chanting and displaying anti-establishment slogans! Then, except for the gigantic clean-up, it was over, and we plodded five miles homeward with feet aching but with souls and spirits soaring.

This festival at North Bridge, following similar pageantry at Lexington, was one of the emotional highlights of my career as a historian, with history suddenly coming alive with all the

*Merrill J. Mattes receiving the 1969
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fiction category for his
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impact of Brutus seeing Caesar's ghost! No one has labelled this phenomenon more eloquently than Abraham Lincoln who, in one of his speeches, referred to "the mystic chords of memory." We can't live in the past; we must live in the present. But without understanding our past we can have no future! History is most meaningful to him who understands that he is himself a part of history, and that he holds the fate of future generations in his hands. Dramatic highlights, the accents of history, must be experienced or emotionally relived to appreciate fully the meaning of our unique heritage.

Certain kinds of music or works of art may evoke "the mystic chords," but nothing equals the associative power of the historic shrine. In the case of Abraham Lincoln, I don't know which place affected me more — New Salem, Illinois, where he courted Ann Rutledge and read the Bible and Shakespeare by firelight, or the majestic Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., where the brooding larger-than-life figure of the Great Emancipator seems to embody the bold American dream of freedom and self-government.

To me the symbolism of Lincoln takes on greater meaning in the context of today's troubled world scene, with nations falling like cards before the monstrous tyranny of Red Communism. At Gettysburg Lincoln said, "Now we are engaged in a Great Civil War, testing whether this nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure." Abraham Lincoln understood that American Democracy is a "noble experiment," forever on trial because forever there are cynical and malignant forces which seek to bring it down, to sweep democracy into the "dustbin of history." Can any intelligent person doubt that our halcyon days of taking our freedom for granted are over, and that we must steel ourselves for testing in ways that Lincoln could never have imagined?

The Bicentennial prompts us to focus again on Thomas Jefferson, another "immortal" whose intellect and creative political imagination makes him look like a colossus among today's pygmies. There are three Jefferson shrines which, in my experience, have the power to inspire us to renew our faith in America. At Monticello we come closest to the great man as a human being who drew strength and inspiration from his beloved Virginia soil. In the beautiful, quiet setting of the Jefferson Memorial on the edge of the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C., we can contemplate the profound meaning of the democratic philosophy which he enunciated, not only in the blazing manifesto of the Declaration of Independence, but in other inspired writings which will ring down the corridors of time while free men, or men longing for freedom, still live.

Being a westerner I am in awe of the enormous role played by Jefferson in the exploration and development of the trans-Mississippi West, even though he never saw the country. How poetic, you might say, that Jefferson's profile is one of the four colossal figures that adorn Mount Rushmore in the Black Hills, gazing out over America as if wondering if America will survive its third hundred years! But I find a more satisfying symbol of Thomas Jefferson in the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial in St. Louis, with its awesome 600-foot high stainless steel parabolic arch, symbolizing the gateway to a continent. When Jefferson's diplomatic masterpiece, the Louisiana Purchase, was consummated in 1803 it was here at this little

French-speaking village at the edge of a vast wilderness that all the unspoken thoughts and energies of the young American republic were focused, and in the following decades through St. Louis poured the pageantry of explorers, traders, missionaries, soldiers, and an unending stream of emigrants, all carrying freedom's banner.

At the head of this procession was Lewis and Clark, transforming Jefferson's dream and the paper promise of the Louisiana Purchase into reality. You can derive inspiration just by looking at a map and contemplating the magnitude of their geographical achievement, but for me Lewis and Clark assumed an almost tangible presence and force when, in 1965, I joined artist Thomas Hart Benton and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in a pilgrimage up the Missouri River by boat, all the way from Omaha to the Three Forks of the Missouri in western Montana. Of course there were a few differences on this once great avenue of exploration. Instead of a keelboat we used a big diesel-powered cabin cruiser. We had to "portage" around a few dams that certainly didn't exist 150 years earlier, and we could only imagine what the original scenery was like in some places where there are now gigantic reservoirs.

A highlight of our journey came when we traversed the Missouri River Breaks in Montana by small boat. Again the illusion was far from perfect because here instead of struggling upriver, we floated gently downstream from Fort Benton, but here was breath-taking canyon scenery in all its primitive splendor and it was here Meriwether Lewis had become lyrical in his descriptions. At Eagle Creek, in the heart of this wonderland, we camped where the explorers camped. Tom Benton and I ascended the bluffs and on their summit he sat down and sketched the wild scene, the "first draft" of a painting which was to become one of his masterpieces. I could almost feel Captain Clark and Sacagawea looking over our shoulders with a critical eye!

History reached out and touched me at a very tender age. The Civil War was certainly the mightiest upheaval in our history — so far. No, I didn't fight in it, but I first became vividly aware of it when I was of pre-school age visiting relatives in Freeport, Illinois, during a Fourth of July celebra-

tion. In those days, celebrating the Fourth meant shooting off fire-crackers, some of them big and explosive enough to lift an out-house right off its foundations. So when I saw a bearded old man with a missing hand I asked my aunt, "Was he holding a fire-cracker?" And she said, "No, he fought in the Civil War. He lost his hand at the Battle of Shiloh." Without having the foggiest notion where Shiloh was, I was still seized with an appalling awareness of what the Civil War meant — young men going out and getting themselves killed or mutilated. For what? Something they had to believe in with terrible assurance to make such sacrifices. Things like being for freedom and against slavery!

Strange how some individuals at random, complete strangers who just happen by, can make such a deep impression. Another such individual was One Bull, a Sioux Indian from the Pine Ridge Reservation; so old he was — and half-blind — that he walked totteringly with a cane. This was back during the war — World War II that is, not the Civil War this time! I was standing in the entrance of the Oregon Trail Museum at Scotts Bluff and here came an old battered pick-up truck with an Indian woman and her son in the cab. Sitting in the flat-bed was this old man with seamed face, folded arms, and broad-brimmed hat with an upright eagle feather. The woman helped the old man up to the door and said to me, "This is One Bull. He is my grandfather. He fought General Custer." Historical innocent that I was, I was tempted to dismiss this as a bit of family folklore, when it suddenly occurred to me that the woman was sincere and her words probably true. He was old enough to have been around during that hot, fatal day June 25, 1876. At that point history reached out and grabbed me with a sense of shock and amazement. I could see young One Bull charging up the hill to polish off the impetuous Custer and his doomed legions.

Later — much later — I learned that One Bull was a nephew of Sitting Bull, that he retreated to Canada with Sitting Bull after the unpleasantness at the Little Big Horn, and then returned with Sitting Bull to surrender at Fort Buford in 1883. An old issue of *National Geographic* contains a magnificent portrait of One Bull in his prime as the classic Indian warrior, and in *American Heritage* Stanley Vestal wrote an article entitled "One Bull, the Warrior who Killed Custer." (I think the editor

got carried away, and that Vestal meant "One Bull, One of Several Hundred Warriors Who Fought the Seventh Cavalry at the Little Big Horn.") Both of these publications reaffirmed my acceptance of the granddaughter's story.

As to the Oregon Trail, I never met a real live "Forty-Niner" or other kind of covered wagon emigrant, but I did meet a real live bull-whacker, one who drove six teams of ornery bulls pulling a freight-wagon over the trail. This was William H. Jackson who showed up in 1936 to help us dedicate the Oregon Trail Museum. He was only ninety-three at the time, slim and wiry, straight as an arrow, with thick gray hair, goatee, and flashing blue eyes. In 1938 he returned to Scotts Bluff with officials of the Oregon Trail Memorial Association and at that time he showed me where, in 1866, he had encamped at the far side of Mitchell Pass. While looking at exhibits in the Oregon Trail Museum, we came to the picture of the "Wedding of the Rails" at Promontory Point, Utah, in 1869. Knowing of his fame as a pioneer photographer I asked him if he was there to photograph the famous event. He said, "No, at that time I was in Omaha attending my own wedding."

William H. Jackson was an anomaly, a human time machine. Each year, of course, "old-timers" fade away: so few of us anymore will have the privilege of interviewing a living eye-witness to events of the trans-Mississippi frontier. In the novel, *Little Big Man*, Thomas Berger invented a man over 100 years old who wove an epic yarn about his blood-curdling adventures with Cheyenne Indians, Wild Bill Hickok, and George Armstrong Custer. With fiction we can indulge our romantic fantasies, but for factual frontier history we are now largely confined to two kinds of prime evidence — the written word left by eye witnesses and the physical remains, that is topography, sites, buildings, objects, etc. As an Oregon Trail historian and interpreter I discovered an untapped wealth of material evidence which kindled my enthusiasm for the subject and led to a resolve to write a book about the epic overland migrations in a way never before attempted.

The Great Platte River Road, published by your Society in 1969, began formally in 1961 when I received a Woods Fellowship/Nebraska Centennial Grant and began the laborious process

of assembling and collating hundreds of overland journals. But work on the book actually began 25 years before that because it was at Scotts Bluff that I got Oregon Trail fever and knew that there was a subject of fabulous proportions, particularly in relation to Nebraska and the Platte River, which had never been researched and written up on the epic scale it deserved.

Of course the concepts finally embodied in *Great Platte River Road* took many years to mature. At first the height of my ambition was to write something to be called "The Oregon Trail in Western Nebraska," figuring that would be a large subject in itself. But exactly where would my story begin and end? The "terminal facility" was not so difficult to figure out. Fort Bridger or South Pass were too far west to cope with in one volume, but Fort Laramie had to be included for it was the great oasis of the emigrants after their journey through "the Nebraska Sahara." But where to pick up the threads — Ash Hollow? South Platte Crossing? Fort Kearny? Finally I was resigned to the only logical though frightening solution. I had to go clear back to the Missouri River, and not just one place on that river, but all of the major jumping-off places from Independence, Missouri, on up to the Omaha-Council Bluffs vicinity.

I knew there were a lot of emigrant journals, letters, recollections, etc., but it was not until I made a project of it, traveling to archives around the country, that I discovered that there had to be not two or three hundred of these but over one thousand! The number I actually read and collated was around 750 because I skipped two known archival repositories in order to get the book out sometime in my own lifetime! Also, I was able to skip most of the material west of Fort Laramie, so that reduced the average journal reading by two-thirds. But that still left a staggering volume of pages to read and material to abstract and collate in notebooks. In addition I had to follow personally all the trails involved, mile by mile, over 2,000 miles in all, to examine the topographic evidence. (In this I was fortuitously assisted by Paul Henderson and his famous maps.)

The collation process was five-dimensional: (1) accurate bibliographical data, whether published or unpublished, and

source of the original; (2) identity, age, sex, and character of the writer, if ascertainable; (3) the particular year of the overland crossing; (4) the exact route followed and geographical data by major sections and landmarks; and finally (5) data on what I came to call "Covered Wagon Sociology" (equipment, travel schedules, organizations, attitudes, routines, emergencies, moral standards, social customs, social stratification, crime, religion, hardships, accidents, disease, births, deaths, burial services — the whole complex culture of populations moving westward across a wilderness on wagon wheels).

From this welter many interesting facts emerged, sometimes requiring drastic revision of old myths and stereotyped concepts — that, for example, "St. Joe" rather than Independence was the Number One starting point during the early years of the California Gold Rush, while Omaha-Council Bluffs was Number One in the late 1850's and the 1860's; that thousands who despaired of using the rickety St. Joe ferry went north, overland through Iowa, before crossing at the first Fort Kearny at Nebraska City; that women were almost non-existent in '49; that the "Mormon Trail" was rarely referred to as such in historic times, for it was the "Council Bluffs Road"; that famous Windlass Hill at Ash Hollow was never called that by the emigrants because no windlass was ever used (unless by some late arrival during the homestead period); that there were two ways to reach Ash Hollow, "the Royal Road to the North Platte," that by-passed Windlass Hill; and that Robidoux of the Scotts Bluff trading post was not just one man, but a whole tribe related to "Old Joe," the patriarch of St. Joe, Missouri.

But the main new thing to emerge finally with crystal clarity, and which became the central point of the book and its title, was that all Missouri River feeder lines converged in the second Fort Kearny vicinity in central Nebraska and then proceeded westward along the Platte and the North Platte as one great trunkline or mainline — the Great Platte River Road. The complex of trails entering and leaving Nebraska was essentially one unified geographic system which henceforward could be identified with this title instead of the confusing multiplicity of names formerly used. The Oregon Trail, the Independence Road, the St. Joe Road, the Ox-Bow Trail, the Council Bluffs Road, and the Pony Express route were all transitory facets of

one central overland route through Nebraska which was America's great highway westward. There were no other major migration routes, north or south of Nebraska.

So what do we mean by "New Horizons on the Old Oregon Trail"? In part we refer to the new concepts embodied in my book, such as previously referred to. In part also I refer to new horizons of research by scholars and trail enthusiasts. For example, all of the trail routes, cut-offs, and variations have not yet been mapped with scientific precision nor have historians and archeologists firmly identified all of the stage stations, road ranches, fortifications and other ephemeral pre-settlement stopping points. I only scratched the surface on the material culture of the emigrants. One man is limited in his ability to travel the United States and absorb data contained in over 1,000 sources. A worthy project for a tax-exempt foundation would be to set up a team of scholars and provide them with sophisticated equipment like helicopters and computers!

Actually, by "New Horizons" I mean something more than additional research on the nitty-gritty of trail geography, site identification, journal collections, or amassing data on the mechanics and statistics of the migrations. After all, much of this, while it would provide material for new books or articles, verges on antiquarianism and will not radically change our historical concepts. I am looking beyond research to three other dimensions, which I would label (1) Preservation, (2) Interpretation, and (3) Celebration.

Not too much time need be spent on the first two categories. It may seem trite to say that we have not seen to the preservation of all features of the Great Platte River Road that should be preserved. The state and federal governments between them have set aside Scotts Bluff, Chimney Rock, Ash Hollow, Fort Kearny, and the Rock Creek Station which is not a bad record, but there are other sites, landmarks, and trail remains that should be set aside for posterity while there is yet time. I don't mean merely setting up signs, markers, and monuments because that has been done already in great profusion. A survey of historic sites along the Platte River Road which might be suitable for public ownership is being conducted currently.*

*Suggested new state historical properties are identified in a recent unpublished report on a State Historical Resources Management Plan by Merrill Mattes to the State Office of Planning and Programming and the State Historic Planning Advisory Committee.

“Interpretation” is another broad subject which will have to be expanded upon at another time, in another place. Since there is a profusion of books, articles, signs, markers, and monuments, what is left to be done? Suffice it to say here that the art of interpretation has advanced impressively in recent years and those agencies responsible for on-site interpretation of Oregon Trail (Platte River Road) sites have not yet arrived at the zenith of their efforts to interpret these sites in vivid dramatic ways.

So that leaves “Celebration.” What is there to celebrate? By this term I mean something broader than mere preservation and interpretation, let’s say a heightened awareness by management of the meaning of a historic site and an energetic effort to raise public consciousness of this meaning. At any rate I refer to something more profound than interpretation which is often confined to myriad surface details. Not “What happened here?” but “Why is this historic site important enough to be set aside and maintained at public expense?”

Why celebrate or commemorate the covered wagon migrations? This can be answered by other rhetorical questions. Why preserve the Washington Monument or Independence Hall or the Liberty Bell? Why preserve the battlefields of Gettysburg or the Little Big Horn, or old Fort Laramie or Fort Kearny, or “the First Homestead,” or Thomas Edison’s Laboratory? In most instances where places like this have been set aside we have a right feeling about the “why.” These places are the outward signs and symbols; they are shrines of American history because of some great climax, decision, achievement or movement in our national history. They are important not as physical objects or real estate but for what they represent in our American heritage of democracy and freedom. *We need these reminders and these focal points of inspiration because they give meaning and vitality to our lives.*

Those who think that history is “not relevant,” who think that we are not inheritors of culture and tradition but rather so many ants on a dung-hill or cows in a barnyard, with no meaningful heritage and no purpose other than to perpetuate a mechanical existence, making the best of it while waiting for doomsday — those who think in this vein may judge they are in the wrong meeting, and they may be excused!

Finally we come to the ultimate "New Horizons" or reasons to celebrate or to be inspired by the unique phenomena of the mid-nineteenth century migrations. I believe that the emigrants, through "the mystic chords of memory," are trying to remind us of three things absolutely vital to our survival in an increasingly complex and hostile world: (1) the necessity of self-reliance; (2) the passionate love of freedom; and (3) the desperate need to preserve or restore faith in America and American ideals.

Self-reliance is rooted in faith in ourselves. Without this quality Americans could never have conquered the wilderness. Bear in mind that those who followed the trails westward were not subsidized by the U. S. Government. There was no Social Security or unemployment insurance; if there had been, few people would have been motivated to seek out the "Promised Land." About all that the government did was to station soldiers at Fort Kearny and Fort Laramie in an effort to impress the Indians and keep them peaceful. People were free to stay home or to emigrate; either way they were on their own. We are not necessarily arguing against government welfare measures today; we are suggesting that too much welfare destroys the rugged virtues of self-reliance, without which our survival as a free nation is in grave jeopardy.

Love of freedom requires faith in others as well as ourselves. We hear a lot of windy oratory and hypocrisy today about "freedom" from government interference and regulation, yet we continue to send to Congress men and women who subscribe to the dubious political philosophy that government has to finance and regulate every human activity. We forget, and they forget, that without a sense of individual responsibility for our own lives our freedom and our "sacred rights" are meaningless. The Oregon Trail emigrants and other frontier types were free spirits, certainly, but if they abused their freedom they were apt to pay a prompt and severe penalty, like ostracism or hanging. They also knew that if others abused their freedom in irresponsible and anti-social ways, all of society was endangered and so offenders were also dealt with promptly and harshly. Today this sense of responsibility is lost in a welter of distorted values, confused thinking, and enough government red tape to encircle the globe. Too often our

freedom turns out to be counterfeit. Moral license becomes depravity (dressed up in sly euphonious labels); legal indulgence becomes lawlessness (excused on the grounds that the criminal is a victim of an oppressive society); and the piling up of national indebtedness and inflation is excused as divinely ordained social engineering. In their effort to create their flawed image of Utopia the social engineers are in fact Pied Pipers leading us down the primrose path of Socialism.

Several years ago Ernest Hayek forecast the end result of government philosophy that seeks total bureaucratic control with money borrowed from future generations. His book was called, *The Road to Serfdom*, and the difference between serfdom and downright slavery is but the thickness of a razor's edge. No American wants to lose his freedom, yet he is fixing to do so by his abdication of responsibility to a vast, smothering bureaucracy. So what's a little loss of freedom in exchange for government care and feeding? A century ago Emily Dickinson wrote a poem that exquisitely expressed man's spiritual agony:

Success is counted sweetest
 By those who ne'er succeed.
 To comprehend a nectar
 Requires sorest need.
 Not one of all the purple host
 Who took the flag today
 Can tell the definition
 So clear of victory
 As he defeated – dying –
 On whose forbidden ear
 The distant strains of triumph
 Break agonized and clear.

What is Emily trying to tell us? She is talking about one of the great ironies of life: that we don't appreciate what we have until we lose it. No one appreciates wealth as much as a man in poverty, unless it be the wealthy man who is suddenly impoverished. A child surfeited with toys is bored; a deprived child longs for the cheapest trinket. A loved one is most fully appreciated when he or she suddenly dies. Food is most appreciated by the starving. And what about freedom? Who can describe it better than a prisoner in a dank cell, bereft of hope?

I'm a historian, not a poet, but I think Emily should have written two more verses, so I'll try to fill in for her as follows:

NEBRASKA HISTORY

Blind to freedom's virtue we
Who bask in its precious sun,
Yet this heavenly radiance was treasured
By the sons of Lexington!

The Liberty Bell tolls not for those
Who bear democracy's cross in pain.
It yet tolls for the world's millions
Still in slavery and chains.

Faith in America requires faith in God. It is not fashionable to refer to God except in church where its okay for "those who still believe in that sort of thing." But this nation was founded by men who were deeply religious; Congress is still opened with a prayer, and the debased coins in my pocket still bear the motto "In God We Trust," despite the agitation of militant atheists. So perhaps its not out of order to say to this audience that I believe that our survival as a free nation depends on a firm belief in the sacredness of our nation's heritage and an equally firm belief that the future of America in recognizably democratic form requires faith in a Divine Providence. I don't mean that "Providence will take care of us, come what may"— I mean that if we bend every effort to maintain our freedom rather than let it be extinguished, we will come closer to following the Divine Plan, even if we can't prove there is one! Theodore Roosevelt referred to American democracy as "the last best hope of man on earth." The question is, are we going to blow this last chance? Or is it already too late? Are we already so far down the road to serfdom that we've already blown it?

Contrary to the new breed of cultural barbarians, history is enormously relevant because it reveals significant trends we should be aware of. It may not be a crystal ball, but it is a rear-vision mirror which tells us where we've been. The happenings of the past may provide clues to where we are going and may also warn us of those who might run over us if we don't take evasive action.

The covered wagon emigrants had faith in God. Their journals are eloquent about their beliefs and their Sabbath observances. Without such faith it is a fair question if they would have made it across the wastelands to California. Captain Isaac Davis had faith in God and gave his life that his countrymen might be free. The thousands who stormed the beaches of Nor-

mandy had to have a lot of faith in *something* to perform heroically as they did; if you love life and family and country enough you've got religion even if you may not request the services of a chaplain. Not all Americans today have that faith. I won't dignify them by name but there are some individuals, taking advantage of America's free speech not available elsewhere, who condemn America for her shortcomings, praise the virtues of Red China and the Viet Cong, the good life in Cuba under Castro, and other aspects of Communism, and they urge that the American way be replaced by a new system — or rather one of the old slave systems with a shiny new name like "the People's Democracy" or "Soviet Socialist Republic."

You say all very well, but the Oregon Trail emigrants look good because they had the challenge of a real frontier which is gone. Well, we have many new frontiers to be conquered — poverty, inflation, mental illness, overpopulation, energy depletion, war, etc., etc. All of these enormous problems must be solved somehow. Our exploration of outer space proves that there is no place "out there" where we can run to and hide, or even get a fresh start. We are confined to "Spaceship Earth" and here are all the frontiers we need to strive against and conquer. To whom do we turn for help?

I submit that our survival as a cultured Christian democratic civilization as opposed to our gradual descent into barbarism and despotism — ultimately depends on the resources of the human spirit, to be found only within ourselves and our God, that same spirit so magnificently exemplified by the covered wagon emigrants. I submit that each one of us — not politicians, and not a benevolent government playing the role of God — each one of us, individually, holds within ourselves the key to the future of America and all mankind!