



Time, Place, and Culture in Nebraska History

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Article Summary: Complex relationships exist between people and the land they live on: people inevitably modify their environment. At the same time the physical characteristics of a place do tend to limit and condition human behavior. Nebraska's history is unique because the state occupies a unique space and has been populated by a unique mix of different cultural groups.

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Photographs / Images: Chase County landscape, 1925; aerial view of the North Platte River near Lewellen; aerial view of Kearney; Omaha, 1868; Lincoln, 1880; plat map of Tecumseh, 1885; Ainsworth, 1885; Perkins county railroad line map, 1953; Nebraska census map showing counties with populations of less than 2,000, 1980; Blaine County Courthouse, Brewster, c. 1885; rural Custer County school, 1891; Nebraska census map showing distribution of German-born inhabitants, 1900; cartoon in favor of the prohibition amendment to the state constitution, *Omaha Bee*, November 4, 1916; Indian reservations in Nebraska and South Dakota, 1988; Church of the Visitation, rural Greeley County, 1958; Samuel R McKelvie, governor of Nebraska, 1919-1923; state capitol under construction in 1928; auction of farm machinery and animals near Elgin, 1932; Kingsley Dam and Lake McConaughy; Norbert Tiemann, governor of Nebraska, 1967-1971; Bruno



The intersection of land and sky in western Nebraska. Chase County, 1925. (NSHS-C488-21)

TIME, PLACE, AND CULTURE IN NEBRASKA HISTORY

By Frederick C. Luebke

More than a decade ago, as the United States was preparing for its bicentennial celebration, the federal agency charged with that commemorative responsibility decided that one appropriate way to celebrate national history would be to commission the publication of histories of each of the fifty states. Despite efforts to impose certain standards of concept and method, the results were on the whole

disappointing. Few of the fifty authors effectively addressed the question of what forces or combination of circumstances made the history of their particular state distinctive. To put the matter plainly: Why should we bother with the history of Nebraska or any other state? What makes its history distinctive or different, let us say, from that of Iowa or Kansas? A skeptic might well argue that while the superficialities of names and events change from Nebraska to its neighbors, truly significant historical trends are not encompassed by the artificial boundaries of a state.

The author of the Nebraska entry in

the bicentennial series attempted to explain the distinctiveness or uniqueness of her state by describing what she called "the Nebraska psyche." In her view, Nebraska was founded by "ordinary men who possessed a vision of freedom, independence, and the chance to make a living for themselves and their families through their own labor." Through the exercise of "imagination, dogged perseverance, and continual optimism" in the frontier period, Nebraskans evolved qualities of determination, friendliness, generosity, stoicism, and daring to create "a breed of forceful, energetic, free-ranging souls." Nebraskans, she wrote,

Frederick C. Luebke is Charles J. Mach Distinguished Professor of History at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and former director of the Center for Great Plains Studies.

are audacious, honest, creative, imaginative, frugal, practical, and so on.¹

Upon reflection one realizes that such charming statements are meaningful only if Missourians, Iowans, Dakotans, and Kansans, among others, do **not** possess these same characteristics, at least in the same order of magnitude. Conversely, if Kansans and South Dakotans do share these heroic qualities equally with Nebraskans, there is nothing special about "the Nebraska psyche," and therefore that which may be distinctive about the history of the state can hardly be attributed to its influence. In the place of such an approach, I suggest that noteworthy or unique aspects of Nebraska's history may be identified and described in terms of the interplay of culture with environment over time, and that distinctiveness is revealed through appropriate comparisons in time and space.

This formula emerges from a desire to coordinate two rich traditions in American historical thought — one that has concentrated on the powerful altering or disrupting influence of physical environments on cultural forms, and conversely another that has emphasized the tenacity, the persistence, or the enduring qualities of cultural forms over many generations and under difficult circumstances. The most celebrated exponent of the first of these two traditions is Frederick Jackson Turner, the father of the frontier thesis, who described an environment that transformed the traditions and behaviors of European culture and stimulated individual strength, ingenuity, inventiveness, practicality, buoyancy, and exuberance — qualities that in his view distinguished the American character and hence American history from the European. But other scholars, among them historians, geographers, folklorists, and linguists, traced the persistence of cultural forms — speech patterns, architectural styles, customs of all kinds, food preferences, agricultural



Figure 1. The North Platte River, looking northwest in the vicinity of Lewellen toward Scottsbluff. The Nile-like character of the Platte is suggested by the lush vegetation of the valley floor and the dry, barren lands on either side. Photo by Frederick C. Luebke.

methods, political behaviors and practices, plus many more — over great distances and many decades. In their books and articles the influence of place or physical environment is all but ignored; their interpretations have tended to slight the influence of unique physiographic features of given regions in much the same way that environmentalists have tended to ignore the persistence of culture in the same place.

It should be obvious, however, that wide variations in culture may exist within one environment, just as surely as physical environments impose certain limits on human activity. Therefore fruitful studies of a state should focus on the complex relationships that exist between people and the land they live on, in order to discover the manifold ways in which men

and women have modified their environment; conversely, they must also analyze the ways in which the physical characteristics of a given place tend to limit and condition human behavior.

It is true, of course, that the land Nebraskans live on is not entirely unique. It is part of the Midwest, even though it has a western character not found in Iowa, Missouri, or even Kansas. It straddles much of the Great Plains with a roughly rectangular space of about 77,500 square miles. Stretching westward from the Missouri River at Omaha for 430 miles, it separates Kansas from South Dakota by another 210. Patterns of rainfall, temperature, soils, and topography in the eastern third, where two-thirds of the people live, resemble those of Iowa. Although

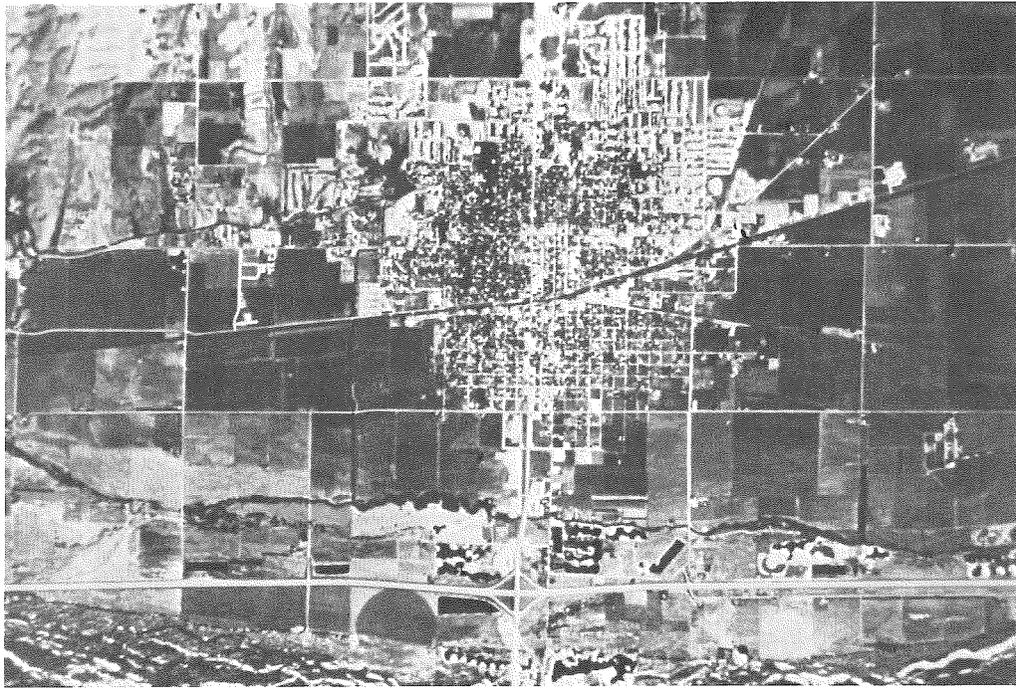


Figure 2. The city of Kearney from the air, showing the spatial relationship of the Platte River to the city, the transcontinental railroad (Union Pacific), U.S. Highway 30, Interstate 80, and secondary roads. Courtesy of Frederick C. Luebke ... (below) Figure 3. Omaha, the metropolis of Nebraska, looking west from Fourteenth and Douglas streets in 1868, when the capital was transferred to Lincoln. The territorial capitol is on the horizon at the right edge of the photo. (NSHS-054-10)



Nebraska is naturally almost treeless and without significant mineral resources, its deep, rich, and humous soil made it highly attractive to both Americans and European immigrants seeking new lands to farm. But as one travels west across the state, the physical environment changes in important ways. Rainfall decreases from thirty-six inches per year in the southeast to fifteen in the northwest and soils begin to vary greatly in quality. They are generally rich in the eastern third and in the southern counties, but the north central portion of the state consists of the grass-covered Sand Hills, an area of 20,000 square miles that is nearly equivalent in size to the state of West Virginia. Almost devoid of human inhabitants (less than one person per square mile), the Sand Hills region is ideal cattle country. It separates the eastern third of the state from the Panhandle, which is a lightly populated, semi-arid area with strong affinities for Wyoming, which it resembles as much as the east resembles Iowa.

Rivers are crucial to understanding Nebraska, which lies entirely within the drainage basin of the Missouri. Most secondary streams — the Niobrara, the Loup, the Republican, and the Platte — form a ladder of rivers that flow eastward to the Missouri, which, in the pre-railroad era, provided the transportation link to well-settled, older parts of the United States. But only the Platte rises in the Rocky Mountains and has the plenteous flow such origins afford. It alone runs the length of the state from west to east — from Scottsbluff to a few miles south of Omaha — and fixes Nebraska's east-west orientation. The Platte valley provides a ribbon of fertile, irrigated soil and a spinal cord of transportation and communication. It forms a sturdy backbone for the state, offering trade and services; it attracts tourist dollars, a few modest ventures in manufacturing, and people displaced from nearby farms by an agricultural economy in decline. Appropriately enough, the Platte has even provided the state with



Figure 4. Lincoln as it appeared about 1880, looking north from the Capitol up what is today Centennial Mall (formerly Fifteenth Street). University Hall, the first building of the University of Nebraska, is in the distance at the extreme left. (NSHS-L741-31)

its name, for in the Omaha and Oto languages Nebraska means “flat water” [Figure 1].

The Platte valley has always been central to Nebraska history. It was America’s first great highway to the West; in the mid-nineteenth century it funneled several hundred thousand people along its banks across the Great Plains to South Pass in Wyoming and on to new homes in Oregon, California, and Utah. It was the natural route for the first transcontinental railroad. Later, with the advent of the automobile, the first band of concrete to stretch across America paralleled its course, as does much of Interstate 80 in our own times. Even the airlines seem to trace this natural highway as they leave contrails high in the sky, six miles above its shallow and interwoven channels [Figure 2]. Kansas has nothing quite like it; the Arkansas River, similar though it is in many ways, only led pioneers to the impenetrability of the Colorado Rockies; and instead of flowing to the metropolitan northeastern quadrant, it veers off to Oklahoma. South Dakota is divided rather than united by the Missouri, which leads only to North Dakota; no great highways follow its course through the northern plains. But the Platte is Ne-

braska’s Nile. Perhaps that comparison is overdrawn, but it is nonetheless instructive.

The modern character of Nebraska was partially shaped by a fierce political struggle in the territorial and early statehood periods. When Congress created the territory in 1854, the only place bearing any resemblance to a town was Bellevue, located a few miles north of the mouth of the Platte. The first territorial governor, a political hack from South Carolina named Francis Burt, apparently intended that Bellevue should become the capital. But he died suddenly, just two days after he had taken his oath of office. Into his place as acting governor strode the territorial secretary, Thomas Cuming, a young, aggressive Iowan who was determined to make Omaha the capital. Located across the river from Council Bluffs, Omaha was the direct beneficiary of this man’s schemes. Cuming drew legislative districts to overrepresent grossly the country north of the Platte, and he appointed to the territorial council men who shared his views of development in Nebraska.

There were two main consequences of his connivance. The first is that Omaha was destined to become the

metropolis of the state, bearing a relationship to the rest of Nebraska not unlike that of Chicago to Illinois. Possessing a favorable location that gave access to the hinterland tapped by the Platte, Omaha became a major industrial and transportation center with an ethnically diverse population, and like Chicago, it later came to specialize in meat-packing [Figure 3].

The second product of Cuming’s intrigue was unintended. Once statehood was achieved, the long-suffering anti-Omaha factions coalesced sufficiently to remove the capital from Omaha to someplace — any place — south of the Platte. Unable to unite on an existing town as an alternative to Omaha, the founding fathers of the state agreed on an undistinguished rural site south of the Platte that was to be named Lincoln. Rather than distributing the institutional functions of state government among various cities of the now-dominant anti-Omaha coalition (as was customary in the practice of nineteenth century state politics), they put them all — capitol, state university, penitentiary, and the asylum for the insane — on neutral ground, a place where in 1867 there was no town [Figure 4].

Thus today Nebraska has two large

cities — Omaha and a capital like what Madison is to Wisconsin or, for that matter, what Washington is to the nation. This precedent further encouraged Nebraska, again like Wisconsin, to focus its land-grant resources available under the Morrill Act of 1862 in one state university, rather than to diffuse limited strength between two institutions, as did neighboring Iowa, Kansas, South Dakota, and Colorado.

For countless numbers of persons in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Nebraska was merely a transit area — a place to be crossed. Yet many people came to stay, especially in the 1870s and 1880s when the number of inhabitants increased by nearly a thousand percent. But all population groups came to this place from somewhere else.

Even the Indians are relative newcomers. None of the tribes that are traditionally identified with Nebraska, with the possible exception of the Pawnee, inhabited the area before Christopher Columbus set foot on the West Indies in 1492. Others, such as the Teton Sioux, had scarcely begun to cross the Missouri when Washington crossed the Delaware in 1776. As for other Nebraskans, virtually none predate 1854, the year in which the area was opened to settlement. This is not to say that there were no white men in Nebraska before that auspicious date, but rather that their numbers were exceedingly small and their imprint upon the landscape was insignificant.

The people of Nebraska must therefore be thought of as immigrants who brought their culture here from somewhere else in the United States or Europe. In any case, the first groups that effectively settle an area will mark it with their culture more strongly than later, possibly more numerous, groups. Early patterns of settlement therefore must be examined carefully because they establish the essential form and structure of culture, which later groups can only modify.

Most of Nebraska's inhabitants of the 1850s and 1860s arrived by steam-

boat on the Missouri River; others came by ox-drawn wagons across Iowa. They huddled in hastily constructed villages strung along the west bank of the river. Omaha, Nebraska City, and Brownville, among others, were all founded within days or weeks of each other in the summer of 1854, following the enactment by Congress of the law establishing the territorial governments of Kansas and Nebraska. Here as elsewhere, towns were the spearheads of the frontier. In 1860, when the population nudged 30,000, more than sixty percent of the gainfully employed were engaged in urban-type occupations — speculators, entrepreneurs, lawyers, merchants, clerks, construction workers, teamsters, unskilled laborers. Almost everyone hoped to get rich fast and with minimal regard for the niceties of law. Farmers were in a minority and many in that category were not seriously engaged in agricultural pursuits. Most came from states directly east — Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. Some came from slave states such as Missouri, Kentucky, and Arkansas, but relatively few came from New England and upstate New York.

In all of this Nebraska was not much different from Kansas. But because it was farther upstream and hence more distant, Nebraska was settled more slowly. Because Kansas began a mere fifty miles west of a major concentration of slave-based, hemp-producing plantations in Missouri, it attracted a band of abolitionists from New England and elsewhere, small in number but powerful in influence, who bitterly fought the extension of slavery into the territories and who, victorious in the battle for statehood, remained in Kansas to flavor its politics with puritanical values. But Nebraska had no experience that was the equivalent of "Bleeding Kansas." It did not inherit a comparable cadre of politicians whose Yankee moralism and commitment to commonwealth principles led to the enactment of prohibition and other forms of state regulation of per-

sonal behavior in the post-Civil War decades. Kansas thereby acquired an early reputation for political moralism that attracted pietists of all kinds, including Swedes and Germans of such tendencies. But this identity also deflected to Nebraska more numerous immigrants who preferred a place where there was less interference with European traditions, customs, and manners.²

Nebraska, like other Great Plains states, was clearly shaped by its railroads. The territory itself was organized to provide the essentials of government for the area through which the projected transcontinental railroad was to be laid. But a decade passed before serious construction work began in 1864, extending west from Omaha. During the 1850s and 1860s many of the towns of eastern Nebraska, especially the county seats, were founded before the network of railroads was built. Consequently, in their spatial relationships they resemble scores of other midwestern county seats. The courthouse is placed in a square surrounded on all sides by a variety of business enterprises; the railroad and its depot is located as close to the heart of the town as its late arrival permitted [Figure 5].

But farther west in Nebraska, in areas penetrated by the railroad before substantial settlement occurred, the transportation system dictated the location and physical layout of the towns. Instead of coming to the people, the railroad caused the people to come to it. The depot, normally placed on land granted to the railroad by the federal government, thus displaced the courthouse square as the center of activity. If grain elevators were on one side of the tracks, then stores, hotels, saloons, livery stables, and the like would line the other side of a street running parallel to the tracks. Other commercial ventures would be placed on a thoroughfare stretching away from the depot and leading to the courthouse. In this arrangement of urban space, the courthouse was usually located, not on

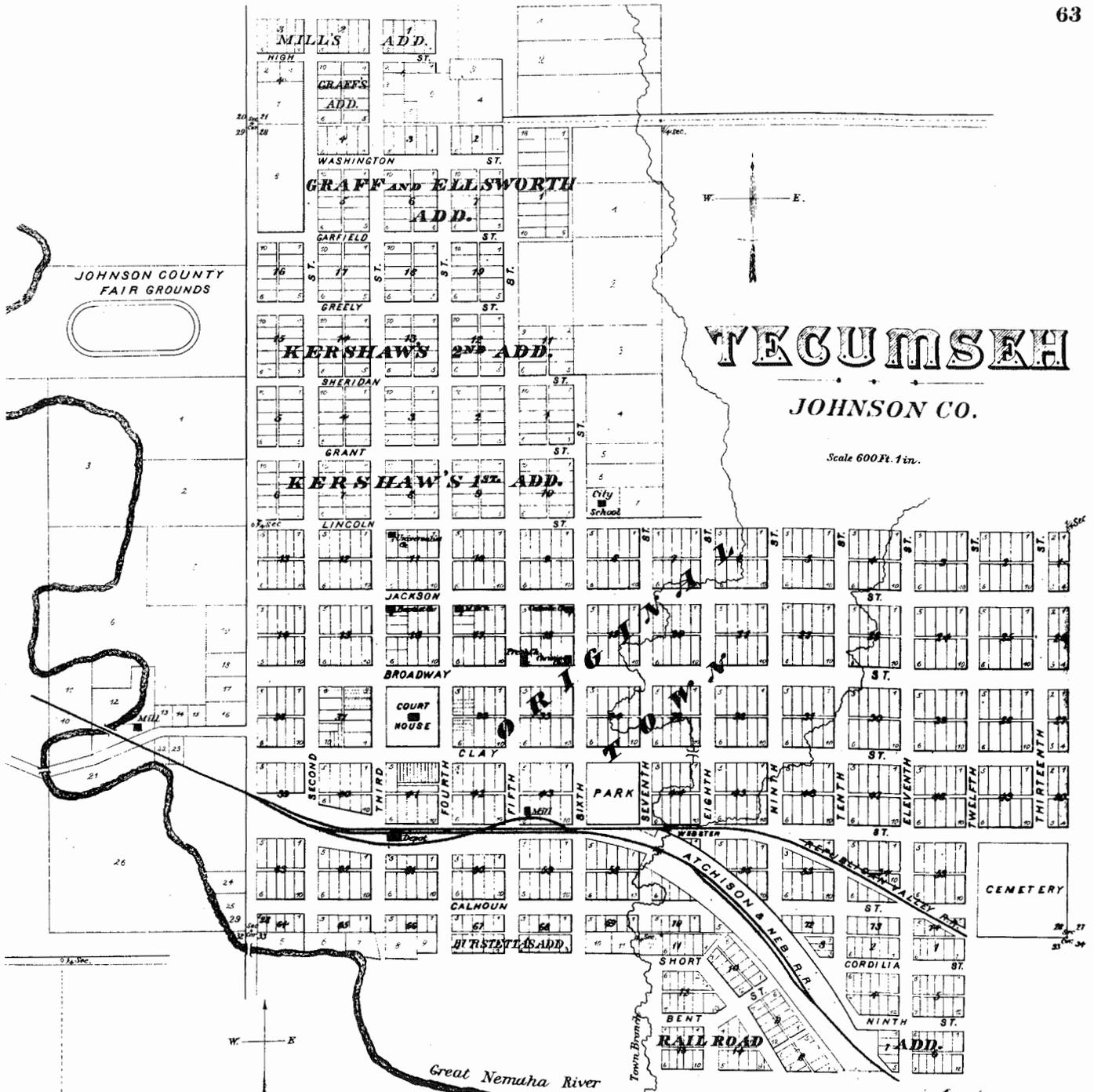


Figure 5. Tecumseh, the seat of Johnson County, illustrates the spatial relationships typical of midwestern towns, with the courthouse square at the center of the business district. Located in the southeastern corner of the state, Tecumseh was first platted in 1856 and designated as county seat a year later, well before the arrival of the railroad. From Official State Atlas of Nebraska (1885).

windmills made of steel became available to homesteaders on the plains. Farm machinery was also evolving at a rapid pace in that decade. To cite only one example, the twine binder used in wheat harvesting was patented in 1874. All these technological advances, plus others too numerous to describe here, combined to stimulate the settlement and early growth of Nebraska in a way that was impossible for midwestern states located farther east.

At the same time that railroads were creating strings of towns across the plains, the state legislature responded to local pressures and began to proliferate counties in central and western Nebraska. Upon the completion of their handiwork, the politicians had created ninety-three counties in a place where less than half that number would have sufficed. But they did most of their work in the 1870s and 1880s, a time when the plains experienced a drought followed by a period of ample rainfall. Speculators called “boomers” endlessly and perhaps mindlessly repeated the slogan that “rain follows the plow,” in the naive belief that the introduction of agriculture in a sub-humid environment would alter the climate favorably for such enterprise. Counties were thus organized on such ill-founded optimism about future growth. Even the Sand Hills region was divided into the standard grid of square or rectangular counties based on the congressional survey system; some even consisted of the standard sixteen townships embracing thirty-six square miles each — and very few people. Today exactly one-third of Nebraska’s counties have fewer than 5,000 inhabitants; nine fall below 1,000 [Figure 8]. McPherson County, with a population of 593 persons, is served by an elected official who, much like Pooh-Bah in Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Mikado*, combines the functions of county clerk, election commissioner, register of deeds, assessor, and clerk of the district court — all for an annual salary of \$13,000. Another county official, the highway superintendent, serves two

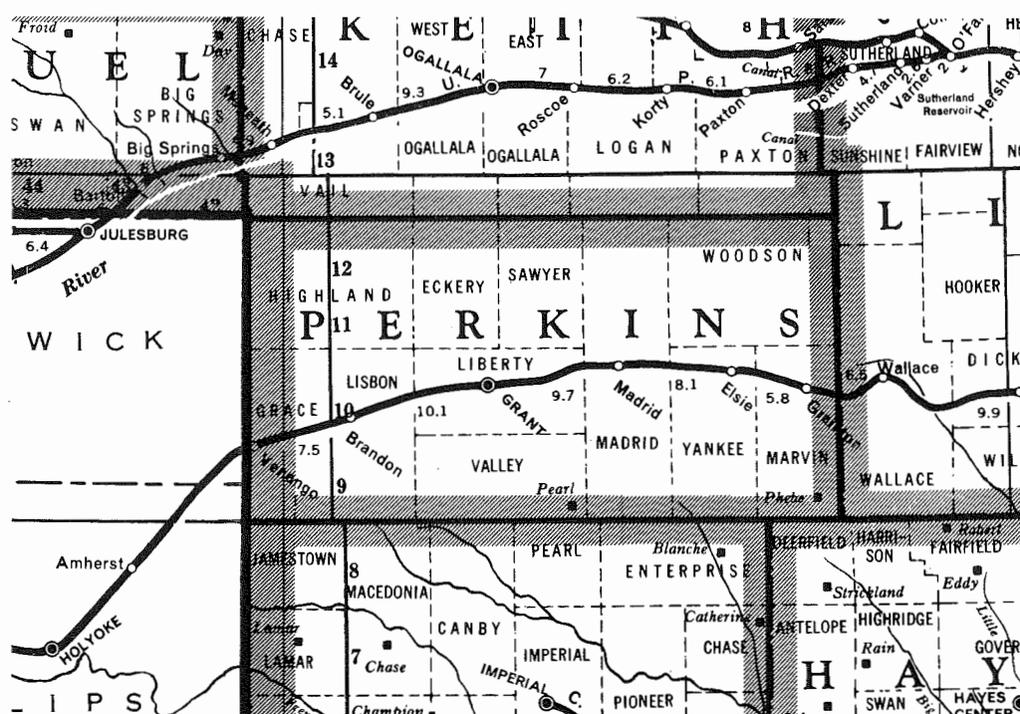


Figure 7. Perkins County, located on the Colorado boundary south of Ogallala, illustrates how the placement of towns in western Nebraska was entirely determined by the railroad. The small numbers near the railroad lines indicate the number of miles between stations or depots. Detail from Nebraska map issued by the Nebraska State Railway Commission, 1953. (NSHS-M782-1953-R13)

neighboring counties in the same capacity.⁴ Loathe to part with the county as a symbol of identity, Nebraskans prefer to retain institutional inefficiency rather than to consolidate or reorganize these relics of frontier optimism [Figure 9].

The school system presents a similar problem. Before the advent of the automobile and its virtual annihilation of rural space, the one-room country school was a necessity. Such institutions certainly were improvements over no school at all. Like most states, Nebraska had a compulsory school attendance law and had adopted a system of school districts intended to serve the needs of rural children who usually walked to school. By 1883 the law specified that a school district could not be smaller than four square miles in size or have less than fifteen children of school age. Permitting such a small size had the effect of proliferat-

ing school districts until they numbered 5,664 in 1888. This prompted the state superintendent of public instruction to complain that “there are too many small school districts, with the inevitable result of small schools, low standards, low wages and poor teachers, with poor local supervision or none at all.” Corruption was another byproduct. The superintendent reported that, left to the direction of persons with little or no interest in public education, some “school districts were formed for no other reason than to defeat the levying of taxes and the maintaining of a school.”⁵

But such complaints and warnings went unheeded, and the number of school districts continued to increase until 1920, when more than 7,000 had come into existence [Figure 10]. Then the automobile began to have its effect and the consolidation movement began. The number is now reduced to

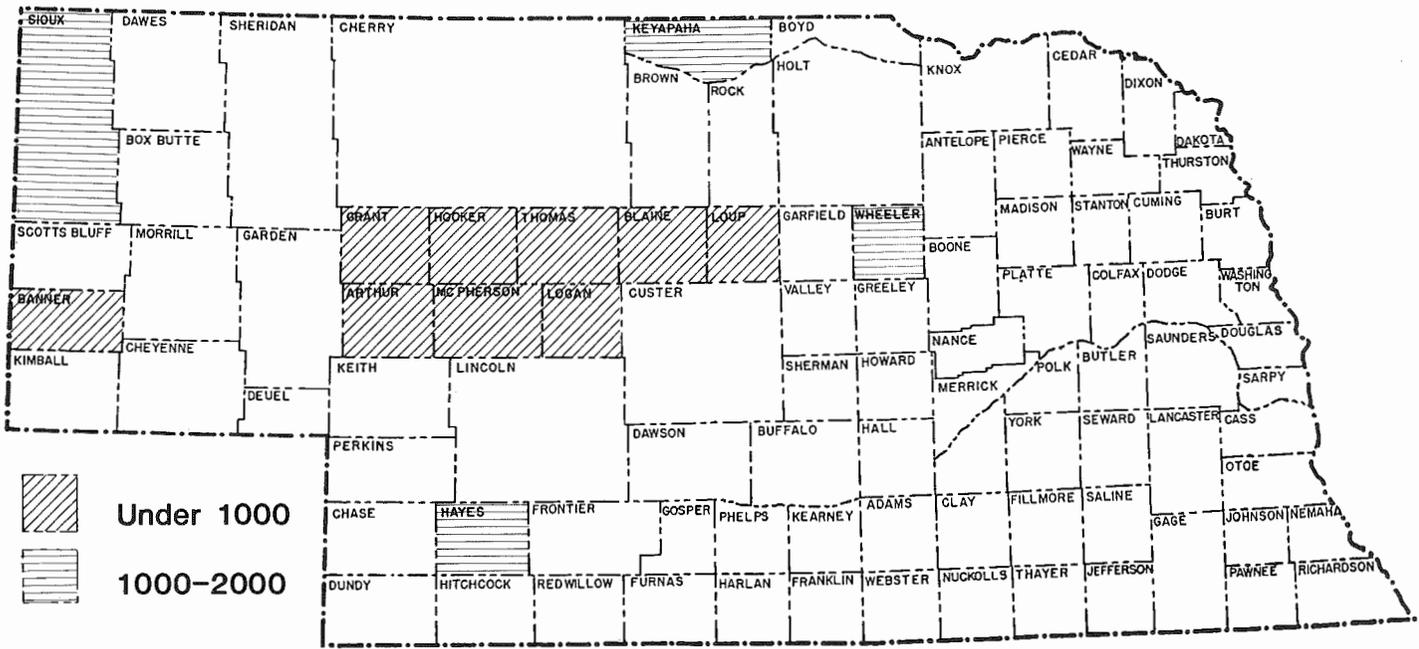


Figure 8. Counties in Nebraska with populations of less than 2,000 according to the U.S. Census of 1980. Map by NSHS.

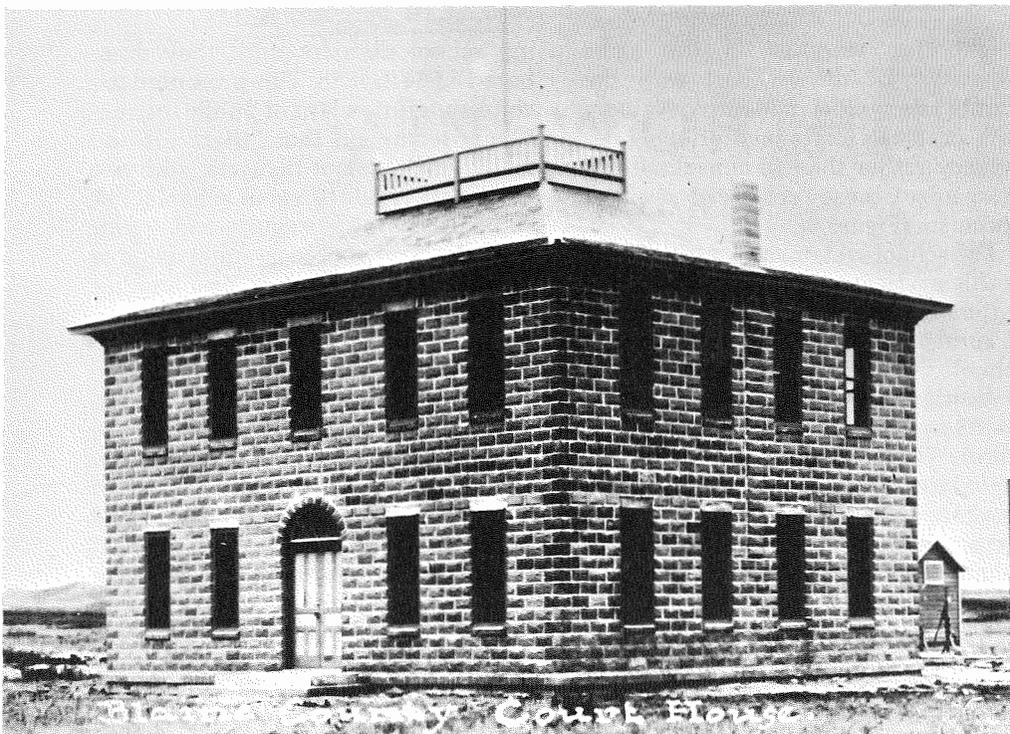


Figure 9. Blaine County Courthouse in Brewster, Nebraska, shortly after its construction. Blaine County was organized in 1885. According to U.S. Census data, its population in 1890 was 1,146; in 1980 it was 867. (NSHS-M281-923)



Figure 10. A rural one-room elementary school in Custer County in 1891. The young female teacher appears with her pupils in front of a sod-house school. (NSHS-B983-5121)

955, but that still is more than any other state has, save heavily populated Texas, California, and Illinois. When the data are expressed in terms of a ratio of school districts to population, Nebraska is solidly in first place. Why Nebraska should so tenaciously retain its inefficient rural schools, in contrast to the neighboring states of Kansas, Iowa, South Dakota, and Colorado, remains a mystery.

The rapid growth of Nebraska's counties and towns was most pronounced in the 1880s. During that decade the population grew from about 450,000 to more than a million persons. This profound increase, which was similarly experienced by other Great

Plains states, was due to a confluence of temporal, environmental (i.e. ample rainfall), and technological forces. The settlement of the plains occurred at the same time that (a) steam-powered trains and transatlantic ships were transforming spatial relationships around the world and (b) agricultural expansion in the Midwest, stimulated by improvements in farm machinery, helped the United States to capture a large share of the world grain market. This development, in turn, had the effect of disrupting agricultural economies in Europe, especially in Sweden, Denmark, and northern Germany, and causing hundreds of thousands of displaced farmers and

agricultural day-laborers to emigrate to the United States. Some of these persons found new homes and farms in Nebraska, at that moment in its period of most dramatic growth.

But the influx of European immigrants was by no means uniform in the plains states. From the time of earliest settlement in the 1850s, Nebraska regularly had twice as high a proportion of foreign-born persons in comparison with Kansas. At the same time, Dakota Territory doubled Nebraska's percentage. By 1900, first and second-generation immigrants constituted forty-five percent of the total population in Nebraska, compared to twenty-six percent in Kansas, fifty-

NEBRASKA



Figure 11. Distribution of German-born inhabitants in Nebraska according to the U.S. Census of 1900. Cuming County recorded the highest percentage (17.6 percent). Reprinted from *Immigrants and Politics* by Frederick C. Luebke. Copyright 1969 by the University of Nebraska Press.

eight percent in South Dakota, and seventy-one percent in North Dakota, the highest proportion of any state in the Union.

Germans were by far the largest single group of foreign-born immigrants in Nebraska, where in 1900 they and their children accounted for eighteen percent of the total population [Figure 11]. The Swedes were a distant second at five percent; the Irish third at four percent. Czechs and Danes also formed important colonies in Nebraska; numerically they equalled the totals for these two groups in the entire tier of states from Texas to North Dakota. Germans from Russia were also important, but both Kansas and South Dakota doubled Nebraska's contingent. Today the descendants of German-speaking immigrants constitute more than forty percent of the state's population.

The ethnic composition of the state's

population had important political ramifications. During the late nineteenth century, prohibition became a potent symbol of the cultural clash between a substantial part of the native-born population and many of the newcomers, for whom the use of alcoholic beverages was an integral part of their culture. Throughout the Midwest and much of the Northeast, prohibition and attendant issues of woman suffrage, public school education, and Sabbatarian regulations dominated state and local politics. Nebraska's immigrants included many Catholics of German, Irish, Czech, and Polish origins, plus numerous German Lutherans, all of whom were attracted to the Democratic party as the champion of the fullest measure of personal liberty consistent with law and order. For them, typical Republican tendencies to support prohibition and the other coercive cultural measures

(usually defined in terms of morality, progress, and reform) had to be opposed as intolerable efforts to inject governmental authority into personal and spiritual affairs and to impose Anglo-American Protestant values on a reluctant immigrant population.

Because of the political strength of these ethnocultural groups, the complex of issues symbolized by prohibition did not fare well in Nebraska, compared to Kansas, which was the first state to write prohibition into its constitution. Drawing upon its New England traditions, Kansas achieved that dubious distinction already in 1880 with a four percent margin in a popular vote. Enforcement was difficult, however, even under the best of circumstances, and since the amendment permitted the sale of liquor for medicinal purposes, the proportion of sickly Kansans increased dramatically. Even so, Kansas went on to enact in

1909 what was considered to be the most stringent prohibitory law in the nation. Iowa behaved much like Kansas, but with less success. In 1882 its electorate approved a prohibition amendment fifty-five to forty-five percent, only to have the Iowa Supreme Court declare it unconstitutional on a technicality.

But it was a different story in Nebraska, where in 1881 the prohibition forces could not even get their measure through the legislature, presumably because of the political clout of its ethnoreligious groups. Instead, the so-called advocates of temperance had to be satisfied with the enactment of a high-license law. The next year they sought to strengthen their hand by means of a woman suffrage amendment, which was generally thought of as a half-way house to prohibition. The Nebraska electorate responded by rejecting that measure by a two to one margin; in strongly German precincts the rejection rate spiraled to ten to one. A prohibition amendment finally appeared on the Nebraska ballot in 1890; it failed, fifty-eight to forty-two percent. Not until 1916, when the possibility of war with Germany altered the shape of state politics, did prohibition succeed in Nebraska [Figure 12].

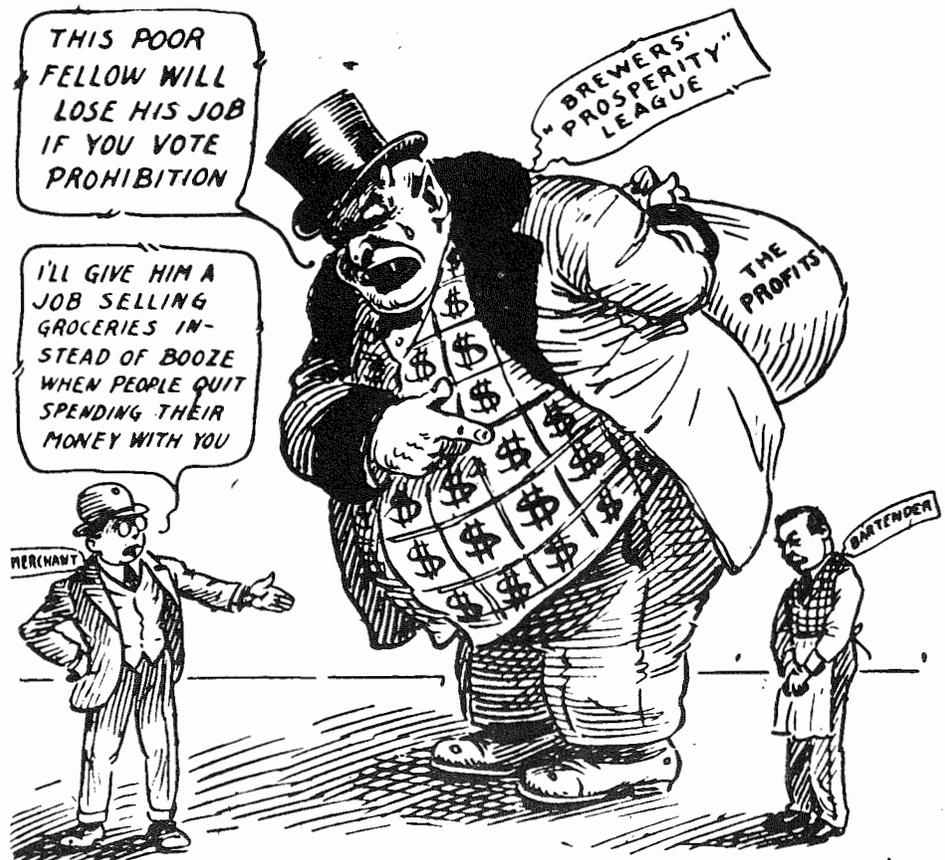
None of this is to suggest that Nebraskans were liberal in their attitudes toward racial and ethnic minorities. A national map showing Indian reservations provides a clue: Nebraska, like Iowa and Kansas, has almost none, whereas South Dakota has one of the largest areas set aside for this purpose in the entire nation. Time relationships provide the explanation: Even as Congress was debating (and finally approving) the admission of Nebraska as a state in 1867, the territorial legislature memorialized Congress to remove the Oto and Missouri Indians so that their lands could be made available to white Nebraskans, who, unlike the Indians, would effectively cultivate the fertile soil. During the next decade, the state legislature repeatedly and successfully demanded that Congress extinguish

Indian titles and remove the Pawnee to Oklahoma and the Sioux agencies to Dakota Territory. By the time the states of North and South Dakota were organized in 1889, the Indian policy of the federal government had long since created the huge Rosebud, Pine Ridge, and Standing Rock reservations, where the environment effectively limits the possibilities for successful farming [Figure 13].

The study of ethnic groups in Nebraska returns us again to the fact that the state's physical environment dictates that small numbers of people be thinly spread over vast spaces. The kinds of personal interactions that

occur and the variety of institutions that can be maintained efficiently are directly related to population density. Concentrations of large numbers of people in relatively small spaces (i.e., cities) obviously permit activities and institutions that are virtually impossible to sustain in sparsely populated areas. If ethnocultural forms are to be sustained over time, they must have the support of institutions such as churches, schools, immigrant-language newspapers and periodicals, social and cultural associations of all kinds, and businesses that cater to the ethnic trade. In the sparsely populated plains of Nebraska, churches were the easiest

Figure 12. Newspaper cartoon in favor of the prohibition amendment to the Nebraska State Constitution, Omaha Bee, November 4, 1916.



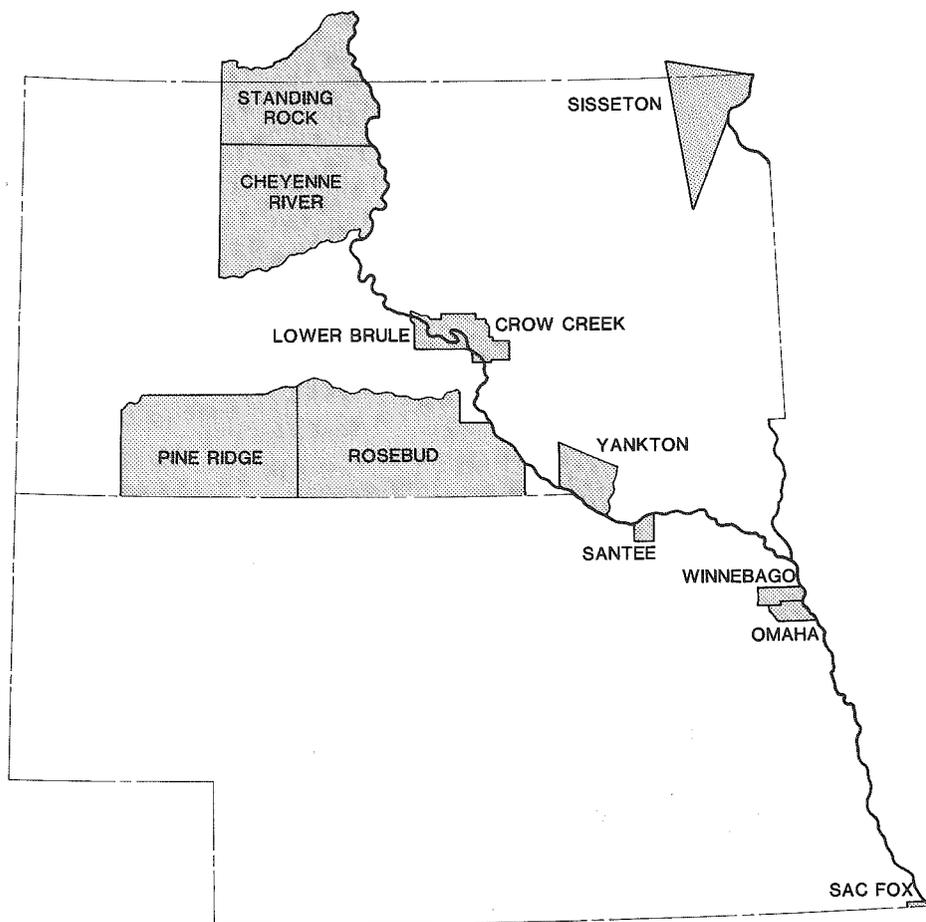
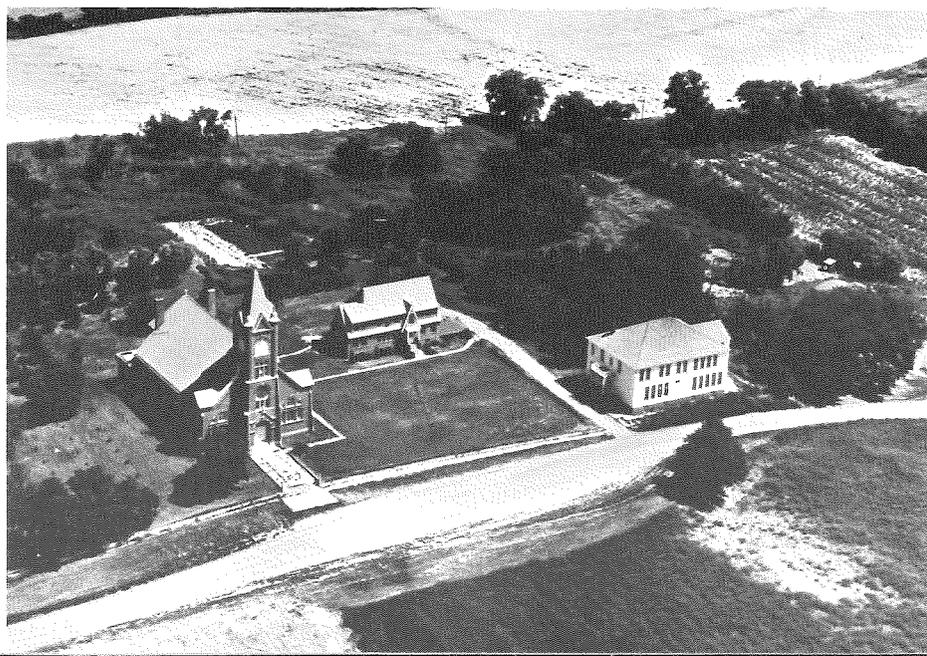


Figure 13. Indian reservations in Nebraska and South Dakota at the present time. Map by NSHS . . . (below) Figure 14. Church of the Visitation, rural Greeley County, which was settled extensively by Irish Catholics. Such rural clusters of church, school, and rectory or parsonage were also common among various Protestant groups, especially German Lutherans. Photo map, 1958, Belleville, Kansas.



of immigrant institutions to create; often they were the only ones to survive the disappearance of the immigrant languages [Figure 14]. Because the churches frequently functioned as substitutes for the array of social and cultural societies that were available in large cities, they assumed special importance in Nebraska for the formation of personal identity.

The level of population density is also related to the internal cohesion of an ethnic group and its homogeneity, or sense of peoplehood. In Nebraska, the clusters of German Mennonites who originally emigrated from Russia have a keen sense of identity. Even though Swedes far outnumber Czechs in Nebraska, they have a weaker sense of cohesion and hence their assimilation has been more rapid. The Germans, by far the largest ethnic group in the state, have today what may be the weakest sense of peoplehood, possibly because of the legacy of two world wars in which Germany was the prime enemy and in which German language and culture were denigrated.

Nebraska has not been without incidents of racial and ethnic conflict. Such disturbances are usually identified with teeming, heterogeneous cities. So it has also been in Nebraska, where Omaha experienced a violent anti-Greek riot in 1909 and, worse, an anti-black disorder that resulted in the lynching and mutilation of an innocent black victim, destruction of property in the black neighborhood, and the burning of Omaha's new county courthouse in 1919. Even smaller cities had occasional problems. For example, in 1929 a racial incident occurred in North Platte in which, following the murder of a white policeman and the subsequent death of his black assailant, the small black community of the town, which numbered about thirty-five persons, fled from the city for fear of their lives. In many Nebraska communities, large and small, fears and suspicions engendered by war with Germany in 1917 and 1918 led to numerous minor acts of prejudice and oppression

against German-American fellow citizens. Although Americans have often suggested that all such outbreaks are manifestations of our heritage of frontier violence, that relationship is tenuous in these cases, unlike the prejudice Nebraskans sometimes have displayed against the state's small Indian minority.

Despite these occasional manifestations of tension, racial and ethnic discord is not a deep-seated characteristic of Nebraska history. Agricultural discontent is. From the earliest times, when railroads received huge subsidies and grants of some of the best land in the state, farmers have tended to see themselves as victims of distant and oppressive economic forces. They naturally turned to politics as a means to relieve their distress. At first they perceived the Greenback party as congenial to their interests. In 1880 and 1882, the Anti-Monopoly party exercised a brief flash of power in some counties. By 1890 agricultural discontent mushroomed into what soon became known as the Populist party. Like the earlier 1870s and the later 1930s, the 1890s were years in which severe drought combined with economic depression to produce much misery in rural areas. Like voters in the other states of the Great Plains but unlike those farther east, many Nebraska farmers and their sympathizers in the towns turned to Populism as a vehicle for radical reform, including government ownership of the banking, transportation, and communication systems. They elected governors, congressmen, judges, and state legislators, but they never gathered enough power to enact their program. Instead the impulse for reform languished until the Progressive era, when, starting in 1907, it had a brief life under the gubernatorial stewardship of Republican George Sheldon, followed by Democrat Ashton Shallenberger. Even though the reform of the Populist and Progressive eras did little for the farmers, the character of politics as practiced in Nebraska was transformed from a



Figure 15. Samuel R. McKelvie, governor of Nebraska, 1919-23. (NSHS-M134)

unidimensional, symbolic system best understood in terms of ethnocultural conflict to a multiple-issue system in which political loyalties were weakened but professional leadership was strengthened.

Agrarian discontent rooted in Populism emerged again in the early 1920s, especially under the banner of the Non-Partisan League, an organization founded on socialistic principles in North Dakota. Roundly denounced as a subversive organization, it found its greatest strength in the northeastern quarter of Nebraska, where German farmers, still chafing from the injustices of World War I, were especially numerous.

But the NPL was unable to dislodge public attention from the progressive reforms of Republican Governor Samuel McKelvie, who was eager to streamline state government in the image of the modern businessman

[Figure 15]. Preoccupied with efficiency through centralized administration, McKelvie sought to strengthen gubernatorial authority through the drafting of a new, "modern" state constitution and the enactment of an "administrative code." Although he technically failed to achieve the first goal, he got much of what he wanted in the form of forty-one constitutional amendments and a series of laws. They remain in force today, though in a much altered form.

McKelvie also realized a second, more monumental, goal — the construction of a new state capitol to house his modernized government. Erected on a pay-as-you-build plan, Nebraska's new capitol, often characterized as an extraordinary architectural achievement, was finally completed in 1932 [Figure 16]. It quickly became the preeminent symbol of the state to its citizens. Now more than a

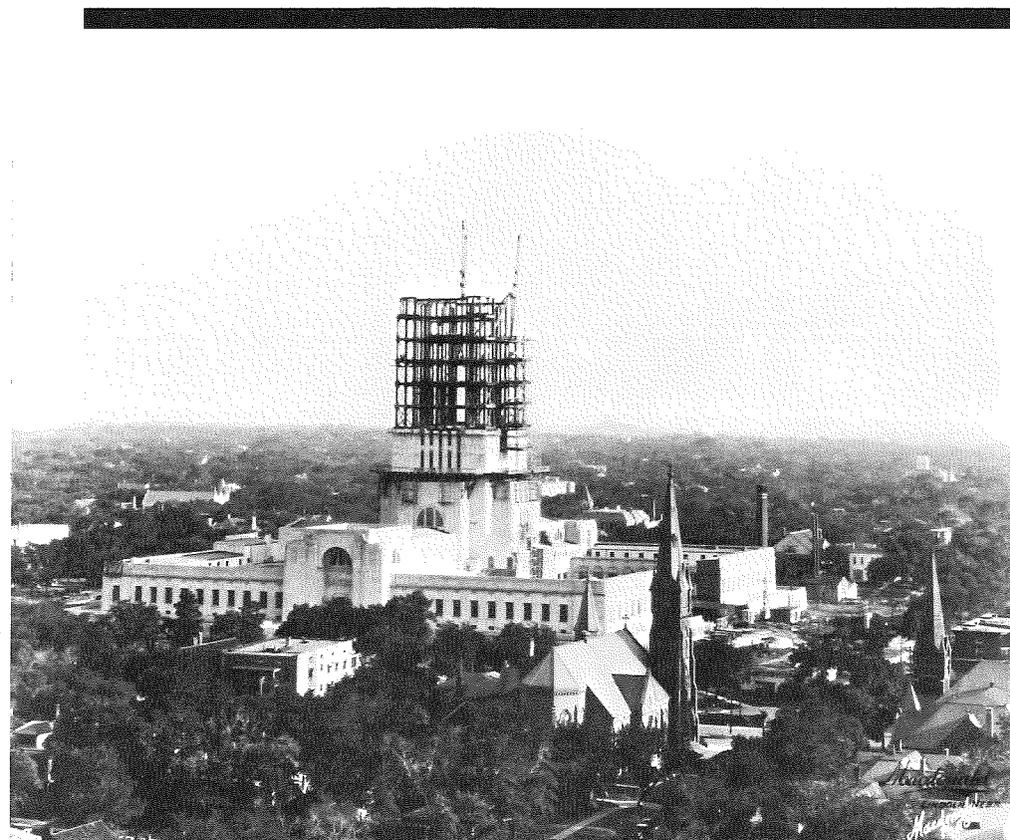


Figure 16. The Nebraska State Capitol under construction in 1928. Ground was broken in 1922, the last year of Governor McKelvie's two terms. The structure was completed in 1932. (NSHS-C244-229) . . . (below) Figure 17. The auction of farm machinery and animals on the Von Bonn farm near Elgin, Nebraska, in 1932. The crowd forced the auctioneer to accept bids of five cents on all items, thereby producing \$5.35 for a mortgage debt of \$449 owed the Elgin State Bank. This was the first of many "penny auctions" held in Nebraska under the leadership of the Farm Holiday Association. (NSHS-F232-6)



half century old, this magnificent structure is perceived by Nebraskans as a symbolic link between the state's pioneer history, a progressive present, and a hopeful future. That the symbol belies an ultraconservative reality is beside the point.

The completion of the capitol was only one of a series of momentous events in the 1930s that fix upon Nebraska certain unique qualities. As in other states of the Midwest, Nebraska suffered severely from the Great Depression and from the Great Drought. The rural exodus, already under way, accelerated as farmers moved to town, if not in Nebraska, then in California, Oregon, or elsewhere. Agricultural discontent flared again and even threatened to burst into violence in some communities, as farm strikes, penny auctions of farms and farm equipment, and a moratorium on mortgages were undertaken. But when real help arrived, it came from the federal government, not the statehouse [Figure 17].

More important for the state's history was the adoption of the nonpartisan, one-house legislature by constitutional amendment in 1934. Usually called the Unicameral by Nebraskans, this unique body, which is a major departure from American political tradition, was approved in the depths of the Depression as a way of reducing the "baneful influence" of lobbyists and the special interests they represent. The idea of a one-house legislature was not new to Nebraskans in 1934; it had been proposed frequently since 1913 but had failed just as often to be placed before the voters of the state. Although it has frequently been described as a liberal or progressive innovation designed to inject a new measure of responsibility and accountability in state government, it was also a conservative device to reduce state expenditures. The proposed amendment to create the Unicameral was linked with two others, one to repeal prohibition in the state and another to legalize

parimutuel betting; both were expected ultimately to revitalize the state's treasury. Regardless of its merits, the amendment probably would not have been adopted without the herculean efforts of its chief sponsor, Senator George Norris, a man of great personal prestige who campaigned tirelessly for it for more than a decade.

In its half-century of operation, the Unicameral has generally proved its worth, even though it has failed utterly to curb the power of lobbies. Its non-partisan character has weakened, rather than strengthened, popular democracy. Partisanship continues, but in a disguised and enervated form, just as party responsibility in the legislature has disappeared. Yet most informed Nebraskans regard the Unicameral highly; they are proud of the fact that their state is the only one to recognize the obvious virtues of such a legislative system. Frequent attempts have been made to remove the nonpartisan feature, but all have failed. The Unicameral has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to reflect the strong conservatism of the people. Nebraskans like it and intend to keep it.

The hard times of the 1930s introduced a second unique feature about Nebraska: It is the only state in the Union with public ownership of its entire capacity to produce electricity commercially. Like the Unicameral, it is part of the legacy of George Norris, its chief sponsor. Although public power is often denounced by its opponents as socialism, Nebraska acquired the ownership of its power plants through a confluence of many economic and political factors, most of them pragmatic if not conservative in character. Ideological questions were never part of the debate; farmers were at the heart of it. Eager to increase their income in the drought-stricken 1930s, farm leaders pushed for the construction of a major irrigation dam to be built on the North Platte River north of Ogallala, in accordance with a federal



Figure 18. Kingsley Dam, the largest such structure in Nebraska, and the reservoir it creates, Lake McConaughy. Constructed in the 1930s, the dam has been essential for the development of both electric power and irrigation in Nebraska. Courtesy of Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

law passed in 1932 permitting the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to make loans to public organizations for hydroelectric and irrigation projects. The legislature thereupon allowed for the organization of public power districts with certain governmental powers, but not including the authority to levy taxes. The project was subsequently approved by the Public Works Administration in 1935 and construction of Kingsley Dam proceeded [Figure 18]. It began the production of electric power in 1941. Meanwhile, four public power districts were created, the last in 1945, which led to the purchase of the final remaining investor-owned utility a year later. Since then the system has been expanded and developed and now includes two major nuclear power plants.

The adoption of the Unicameral and the state-wide system of public power reflect the workings of Nebraska's political culture. Although they appear to be radical innovations, they spring

from conservative, nonideological concerns about economic relationships that date back to the Populist and Progressive struggles against the railroads, banks, and monopolistic tendencies of private enterprise at the turn of the century. They reflect what Daniel Elazar has characterized as the "marketplace orientation" that strongly marks Nebraska's political culture, in contrast to the "commonwealth" conception that is dominant in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and North Dakota. The former, according to Elazar, views public policy as emerging from bargaining among political groups and leaders acting in terms of self-interest; the latter conception refers to the belief that all citizens should cooperate to create and maintain the best possible government on the basis of moral principles. Moreover, the former orientation provides the foundation for "individualistic" politics and calls for efficient government action to enhance economic opportunity and the

pursuit of private goals; the latter holds that government is the means to achieve "the good society" through social and economic programs that are in the public interest generally.⁶

When analyzed in these terms, the western tier of midwestern states reveals a pattern in which North Dakota is clearly the most radical, South Dakota somewhat less so, Nebraska generally conservative but productive of progressive reforms when consonant with private interests, and Kansas like Nebraska but even more conservative. In Elazar's view, the marketplace orientation is the strongest in Nebraska; similarly, it is the only midwestern state west of the Mississippi that mixes individualistic and moralistic tendencies, but with individualistic elements dominant.

How are these differences to be explained? The answer lies in the patterns of migration. Whereas North Dakota, like Minnesota and Wisconsin, was settled by persons with cultural roots in New England and upstate New York, supplemented strongly by streams of pietistic Scandinavians, Nebraska received a large flow of Americans from the "Midlands," as geographer John Hudson has described it,⁷ plus substantial reinforcements of Germans, Irish, Czechs, and other Europeans whose preference for individualistic politics was clear. Highly dependent in its frontier period on its Missouri River connection with the Mississippi and Ohio river valleys, Nebraska received a more heterogeneous population than its immediate neighbors north and south. Thus, while Nebraska's political history has not been without a moralistic flavor, it has been more individualistic, more oriented to the marketplace, than either Kansas or the Dakotas, the states with which it shares a similar physical environment.

Because Nebraska has received little in-migration during the past century, the original pattern of ethnic and religious group settlement continues to help explain contemporary political



Figure 19. Norbert Tiemann, governor of Nebraska, 1967-71. Norbert Tiemann Papers, State Archives, NSHS.

behavior. Where German, Swedish, or Czech farmers broke the sod a century ago, there their descendants continue to farm today. Where Democratic voters motivated by ethno-religious issues were concentrated in the late nineteenth century, there Democratic majorities are still to be found. The most recent voter registration lists reveal that counties largely settled by Catholic immigrant groups continue to record Democratic pluralities, if not majorities, as they did in the nineteenth century. In 1986 only twelve of Nebraska's ninety-three counties registered more Democrats than Republicans. Each Democratic county is presently inhabited largely by the descendants of ethnic or religious groups with historic attachments to the Democratic party of the nineteenth century. They include disproportionate numbers of voters of Irish, Polish, Czech, and Italian origins, many of them Catholic in religion, plus Danes and American Indians. Only the German Lutherans have abandoned their nineteenth century ties to the Democratic party as the champion of personal liberty.⁸

Politics on the state level since the

Great Depression have not been distinctive. Nebraska is basically a Republican state, though Democrats are strong enough to win important offices occasionally, provided their candidates are appropriately conservative. Party identification generally does not inhibit cross-over voting. Although the constitutional grant of gubernatorial powers is substantial compared to that in many other states, Nebraska's governors have tended to view themselves primarily as administrators rather than as political leaders with powers to shape public debate and to influence the legislature in the enactment of their policies. The nonpartisan character of the Unicameral makes it difficult for the governor to provide effective, positive leadership, but the example of Republican Norbert Tiemann, who served from 1967 to 1971, demonstrated the possibilities [Figure 19]. Tiemann repeatedly exercised the powers of his office to restructure the state's tax base, to improve higher education, to introduce state aid to local school districts, and to push economic development. As one observer put it, "Tiemann pulled Nebraska kicking and screaming into the twentieth century." He was also dismissed by the voters after one term in favor of a Democratic candidate, J. James Exon, who denounced him as a "blank-check spender."⁹

In any case, political leadership is always difficult in times of retrenchment resulting from structural changes in the economy, such as Nebraska and other midwestern states have experienced in recent years. Agriculture continues as the foundation of the state's economy; and agriculture, long addicted to support programs of the federal government, is suffering severe stress as aid is reduced or withdrawn. Only nine percent of the work force in this agricultural state is still directly employed in agriculture, compared to about two percent nationally. The number of farms in the state has decreased by half in forty years; during the same period the average farm has

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nearly doubled in size to more than 700 acres.¹⁰ The contemporary history of this state is thus influenced profoundly by the federal government and its ever-changing policies. State governments are forced to adapt to such variables just as much as to exigencies imposed by the physical environment.

Inevitably such drastic economic changes have far-reaching demographic consequences. Internal migration is redistributing the population of the state. Seventy percent of the counties lost population in the 1970s; the rate has accelerated in the 1980s, when out-migration has exceeded ten percent in sixteen counties [Figure 20]. The median age exceeded forty years in six counties (compared to the state figure of 29.7 in 1980) as young people fled the farm. Meanwhile, rural poverty has increased dramatically, especially in Sand Hills counties. Almost all population growth in Nebraska is occurring in counties located along Nebraska's Nile, its Interstate 80, or its railroads carrying coal from Wyoming. When, in

1961, President John Kennedy's chief aide, Ted Sorensen, made a bitterly resented speech in McCook that his home state of Nebraska was "a place to come from or a place to die," he was reflecting demographic realities.¹¹

It has been my purpose in this essay to demonstrate that distinctive features of Nebraska's history emerge from the interaction of time, place, and culture. Nebraska is a place that is warmer than the Dakotas, colder than Kansas, drier than Iowa, and wetter than Wyoming. It is a grassland, not forested naturally like Michigan or Wisconsin. Its topography is more varied than that of Illinois, but like Kansas, it has nothing like the Black Hills of South Dakota. Like Iowa and Kansas, Nebraska has great beauty, but little of the kind that appeals to the modern romanticism that idealizes mountains and seashores. One of the state's illustrious sons, Alvin Johnson, wrote that Nebraska's "magnificent plains" would have delighted the classical Romans, who detested the Alps as "horrid and

miserable" but loved verdant fields along "sluggish streams exuberant with harvests."¹² Such an environment, beautiful or not, decrees that Nebraska's economy rest squarely on agriculture — this in an era when fewer farmers can produce more food than an exploding world population can consume.

How a people responds to stress is the stuff of history. Environmental variables merely set the limits for the history that is transacted in a given place; how a society orders its affairs over time is governed more by the culture its members have brought to the land they inhabit. To this place came Americans mostly from states directly east. They were accompanied by immigrants mostly from northern and central Europe — Irish, English, Swedes, Danes, Germans, Czechs, and Poles, plus Germans from Russia, but fewer blacks than any midwestern states save the Dakotas (the place where Nebraska sent its Indians) and still fewer Asians. Religious beliefs have conditioned their political

Figure 20. Bruno, Nebraska, 1980, one of hundreds of small towns in Nebraska that have experienced severe population losses, resulting in vacant buildings and empty streets. (NSHS-8008/40:10)



attitudes and behaviors, even though Nebraska, like every other state, has a large minority of persons who admit no church affiliation. Nebraskans are individualistic, self-reliant, and conservative, but they have been willing to consider the use of radical means to achieve their conservative goals. They cherish their non-partisan, unicameral legislature; they do not hesitate to elect to high political office women, Jews, and members of ethnic minorities. And their football heroes at the University of Nebraska are usually black.

Because Nebraska occupies a unique space and because it has been populated by a unique mixture of different cultural groups, its history is also unique. This history inevitably bears many similarities to that of its neighbors; Nebraskans naturally have conducted their affairs in ways much like those of other midwesterners. But the distinctive qualities of Nebraska's history emerge from the interaction over time between the environment and the culture brought to this place by its people. These differences are most readily discerned through appropriate comparisons with the histories of other states in America's heartland.

NOTES

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¹Dorothy Weyer Creigh, *Nebraska: A Bicentennial History* (New York: Norton, 1977), 6, but see also pp. 5-13.

²This relationship was first impressed upon me by a quotation from that distinguished Kansas journalist and Progressive, William Allan White, who observed that Kansans "still have in [their] veins the blood of the New England settlers who came in with the immigrant societies in the fifties and filled the first eastern tiers of counties. Following the first settlers in the fifties came the young soldiers of the Civil War and their wives seeking free homesteads. They were Union soldiers. They came from the North. They pushed the Yankee blood westward in one great impulse, three hundred miles from the Missouri border. Then being puritanical, Kansas in 1880 adopted prohibition. More than that, Kansas advertised its prohibition, and in advertising its prohibitory law erected a barrier against the beer drinking, liberty loving immigrants from northern Europe which Kansas needed so badly to enrich her blood as these people have enriched the blood of the population of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Nebraska, and the Dakotas." Quoted in Neal R. Peirce, *The Great Plains States of America* (New York: Norton, 1973), 223-24.

³This analysis is developed by John C. Hudson in his article, "The Plains Country Town," in Brian W. Blouet and Frederick C. Luebke, eds., *The Great Plains: Environment and Culture* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 103-5.

⁴[Lincoln, Nebraska] *Sunday Journal-Star*, July 6, 1886, 1D.

⁵*The School Laws of Nebraska, As revised and amended in 1881...* (Lincoln, 1881), 15; *Twentieth Annual Report of the [Nebraska State] Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1888* (Lincoln, 1888), 71, 74.

⁶Daniel J. Elazar, "Political Culture on the Plains," *Western Historical Quarterly* 11 (July 1980): 267-68, 277-79. See also Elazar, *American Federalism: A View from the States* (2nd ed., New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1972), 89-90.

⁷John C. Hudson, "Who Was 'Forest Man'? Sources of Migration to the Plains," *Great Plains Quarterly* 6 (Spring 1986): 74.

⁸The counties, in order of Democratic strength, are as follows: Sherman (Polish), Greeley (Irish), Butler (Czech), Saline (Czech), Thurston (American Indian), Nance (Polish), Cedar (German Catholic), Howard (Poles and Danes), Saunders (Czech), Colfax (Czech), Douglas (metropolitan Omaha with large numbers of Italians, Czechs, blacks, and other minority groups), and Dakota (Sioux City metropolitan area). Data supplied by the office of the Nebraska Secretary of State.

⁹Neal R. Peirce, *The Great Plains States of North America* (New York: Norton, 1973), 205-9.

¹⁰Much of the data in this and the following paragraph is from various issues of *Business in Nebraska*, a publication of the College of Business Administration, University of Nebraska-Lincoln. See the issues for January 1982, March 1982, November 1982, and February 1986.

¹¹The relevant portion of Sorensen's speech is quoted in Peirce, *The Great Plains States*, 198.

¹²Alvin Johnson, *Pioneer's Progress; An Autobiography* (1952, rpt., Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1960), 169.