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Article Summary: Is Nebraska a desert? No. Was Nebraska a desert? Yes. Viewing perceptions of the "Great American Desert" through local humor provides insight into Nebraska's climatic conditions and the hardships of its settlers.

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Photographs / Images: 1949 view of Middle Loup River in Hooker County, with Sandhills in the background; the Dismal River, 1949, toward grazing land southeast of Mullen, Nebraska

THE MYTH OF THE GREAT AMERICAN DESERT

By ROGER L. WELSCH

FOLKLORE IS a study that is not concerned with facts; that is, the folklorist is interested in traditional concepts and forms whether or not they happen to correspond to “scientific” or historical truth. Did the Nemaha spring from the tears of squaws mourning their dead warriors? Was the McCandles-Hickok battle the gallant battle of a brave hero? The answer is probably “no” in both cases, but the folklorist is interested primarily in the legends as expressions and heritage of their bearers rather than as evidence of some historical event. The same philosophy is true in the areas of folk belief and custom, tales and songs, arts and crafts. Surprisingly, historical and scientific truth frequently come in time to share the position of tradition and in other cases it is possible that the lessons of history can be better learned with the help of folklore. Thus, while the story of Nebraska is outlined in the deeds of soldiers, politicians, chiefs, villains, and heroes—in short, the extraordinary people—the substance of that story lies in the day-to-day, unspectacular lives of the ordinary people who came to Nebraska, struggled against the weather, gave birth, died, retreated.

In addition to this necessity of examining the common man to understand the past, it is also essential to view the past through the eyes of that common man. It is a serious and yet common error to describe nineteenth century events and conditions only in terms of twentieth century concepts. It is

not enough to comprehend how the past compares with today; we must also pursue and capture the feelings that the conditions in question drew from those who looked upon them and lived within them *then*.

The Great American Desert myth is a prime example of historic myopia, and I am using the term "myth" here not in its common sense, that is, that there never was such a desert, but rather to describe the current opinion that there was no desert at all. Educators from primary grades to graduate schools are in the habit of smiling condescendingly at the mention of Zebulon M. Pike's disparaging, naive descriptions of the fertile Nebraska countryside, descriptions that eventually gave rise to the label, The Great American Desert. Proud Nebraskans arch their backs and narrow their eyes at the slur.

Is Nebraska a desert? Of course not. But that is not the question. Instead we must ask, "*Was* Nebraska a desert?" and the answer to that question is yes. This progression implies that there has been change, and I will outline here some evidence of the transformation.

There are at least three components of the general change: linguistics, geography, and sociology. Language has changed: words are conventional—that is, the meaning of a word depends on what people generally hold it to mean, and language is in a continual process of change despite the petrifying effects of education, publication, increased communication, and conscious governmental efforts. In addition to the variable of time, there is also the consideration of space: a word in Maine is not necessarily used the same way it might be used in Arizona. Neither usage is correct or wrong; they are simply different usages. Finally, the Nebraskan himself has changed during his tenure on the plains; as I will show, the men who called Nebraska a desert are not the men who now call it a garden.

Consider first the pioneer himself, the sociological aspect. His concept of "desert" was not formed on the sunbaked plains of the southwest but rather in the woodlands of Illinois, New Hampshire, or Norway. Even today, with manifold communications, highly developed educational

systems, and extensive opportunity for travel, Europeans and Americans from the East miscalculate the size and rigor of the Plains—and we Nebraskans share this cultural blindness in our concepts of the size and nature of other areas of the world. If this can be true today, what ignorance must have prevailed then among nineteenth century pioneers, who were frequently illiterate (sometimes a result of the poverty or oppression that brought them to the new land) or deliberately misinformed by overly effusive promoters and speculators.

These new settlers usually came from woodlands, where trees were weeds, where they struggled all their lives cutting down and burning out trees, hoeing out seedlings, grubbing out stumps. Even today visitors to Nebraska are struck by the lack of trees, while we who are accustomed to the landscape think the condition to be normal. How striking it must have been then to the pioneer! His definition of a desert was perhaps like that listed in even the most recent edition of *Webster's New World Dictionary*: "Desert: an uncultivated region without inhabitants; wilderness; a dry barren region, largely treeless and sandy." And the Nebraska Plains certainly fit that description.

Other features of the botany confirmed his first impression: grass, grass everywhere, choking out the trees and weeds. In one letter I have examined, a settler in western Nebraska wrote to a sister-in-law in Maine requesting a package of dandelion seeds to bring some color to the endless green. Certainly the cacti, Spanish Saber, and scraggly, stunted cedars of the short-grass lands in western Nebraska constituted even more clearly a desert ecology to the new visitor.

The fauna complemented the flora: herds of wild cattle, rattlesnakes, birds not familiar to the woods, lizards, prairie dogs, coyotes, and wolves—all creatures alien to the pioneer's forest home and hence perfectly suited to the "desert" and "wilderness." The sand fleas and clouds of grasshoppers were the contributions from the insect world. Even today the abundance of animal life is in no way a contradiction to the concept of the desert, as any child with a passing acquaintance with Walt Disney's *The Living Desert* will tell you, and there was no such misconception in the mind of the settler



Much of Nebraska was viewed by nineteenth century settlers as "desert" when compared with former homes in the East or in Europe. But by adapting to the environment the land has produced abundantly. This 1949 view, looking to the northwest, is of the Middle Loup River in Hooker County. The Sandhills are in the background.

whose definition rested on a set of far less rigorous characteristics.

While the paucity of moisture may not have met today's statistical definition of the desert, it must have been impressive enough for the settler who simply found himself in a geography of marginal rainfall after growing up perhaps in a country or state where the worst years were like Nebraska's best. He was not concerned with geographers' charts and definitions; he knew only that too often there was not enough rain, and the broad waters of the Platte would only be an obstacle to him for many years to come.

And while grass covered the soil like a felt rug, the soil beneath that mat was sand in enough areas of the state to convince most settlers that the fertile spots were oases in the desert rather than the present conceptualization of the desert islands in a fertile sea. For the doubters an airplane trip from Grand Island to Scottsbluff or Chadron can be instructive. To the east the yellow, gumbo loess proved fertile but was still a long way from the black humus-soils the pioneers had come to regard as prime.

Distances on the Plains have been shortened in reality and in time. Many weeks' journey for the pioneer can now be accomplished in hours and the distances between destinations have grown shorter as ever more communities have been born. To the European, who constituted a substantial percentage of the settlers and who could see from a hill near his homeland village two or three other villages within easy walking distance, the new distances of the prairie were staggering. As I have mentioned above, even today educated Europeans grossly underestimate the size of the United States, and the confusion could scarcely have been less on the frontier. ²

Although the Indian threat was certainly exaggerated—an understandable exaggeration when one again considers how alien the Indian culture was to the settler—the Indian was another facet of the hostile environment. Europe was without aborigines, and nomadic tribes here were as integral a part of the desert image to the pioneer as the nomadic Arab is to us today. The contrast between the hunting-gathering economy of the Indian and the incipient agricultural society of the

frontier was wider than that between our mechanized society and African farming societies that we consider abysmally primitive today.

The weather has been made milder for us with air-conditioning, heating, closed automobiles, insulations, and improvements in clothing design and materials. But again we must also consider the settler's frame-of-reference: it is obvious that his equipment was not so efficient as ours, but in addition to that what was his previous experience and what was he used to before being confronted by Nebraska's weather? In northern Europe temperature ranges over an approximately sixty degree range, while in Nebraska it is more likely to be a span of one hundred degrees. While it rains more in Germany than here, there is nothing to match the drenching deluges of the spring and fall—and even twentieth century travellers from the east and west coasts of this country are impressed by the violence of our lightning and thunder; it snows in Europe, but only in the mountain areas is there anything equivalent to the common plains blizzard. Nebraska hail is consistently larger than that which falls elsewhere in the world, and, in fact, the largest hail stone ever recorded fell in Cheyenne County on July 7, 1928.

Modern immigrants to Nebraska comment again and again about the frequent, powerful winds that sweep across the state, and with even fewer trees and buildings to break their force, they probably seemed even more formidable to the early settler:

On arriving at Ansley I spent the night at the hotel and when I looked out the next morning I saw boxes, barrels and anything else that was loose moving along the street. I had read about Nebraska's winds and cyclones and I felt sure that I was to be an eye witness to one during my first twenty-four hours here.³

Tornadoes are not unknown in Europe and eastern states of America, but their frequency and force is greater on the Plains; certainly the fact that they could be seen passing many miles away, increasing the number that a family might see any one year, made them seem even more common in Nebraska.

The same factor of increased visibility must have made the prairie fire danger seem greater than it was; even though a fire might pass many miles away, it could be seen and smelled,

and the fleeing animals would pass by the untouched soddy, communicating the terror of the flame that could race before a driving wind across the dry grass tops faster than a man could flee on horseback. Of course fire is not a prime characteristic of the desert, but its threat and the desolation left behind it contributed to the aspects of wilderness, isolation, and hostility that are so much a part of the desert complex.

Not only was the pioneer's prior experience different from the conditions he encountered, but his reactions to those conditions were also different from what ours are today. As I have mentioned, there is today a blind chauvinism that results in unsatisfying claims, like those implied in the official state song, "Beautiful Nebraska Land," which obviously sets off a series of arguments from those not blinded by passion, which in turn sets off an even more outrageous series of defensive claims. The end result is often tourist "attractions," like some totally inappropriate military structure or the fancy but baseless pageants that sprang up during some Nebraska Centennial celebrations which satisfy no one and anger many.

There is a Nebraska inferiority complex, stemming perhaps from an envy of the glorious scenery of our neighbor-states—Colorado's Rockies, Wyoming's Yellowstone, South Dakota's Black Hills. Nebraska has its spectacular beauty too: Hole-in-the-Rock on the Missouri, Brownville's rich hills, the beautiful Loup River country, Valentine's delicate waterfalls, the overpowering vastness of the Sandhills, but it is hard to tell for those of us who are moved by this beauty how much of our impression is a result of our love for the Plains and how much is an objective appreciation. It is easier for someone who knows and loves Nebraska, who has agonized and laughed with Mari Snadoz, to find beauty in the Gordon Sandhills than it can ever be for someone who drives through them quite by chance on the way from Atlanta, Georgia, to the Tetons. Some of Nebraska's "beauty" then is a result of our own predisposition to find beauty in that which we love and recent dismal attempts to create the magnificent, spectacular, or beautiful.

The pioneer had few of these *a priori* judgements. Like



The Dismal River bisects the Hooker County Sandhills. The view (1949) looks upstream toward the northwest on grazing land southeast of Mullen.

Mari Sandoz, his spokesman, the plains pioneer saw beauty in the land and its spirit, but he also admitted its failings—with pride and humor. When he wrote back to the people he left in his homeland, he did not say, “Nebraska’s not so bad once you get used to it” or “It’s really not as bad as you’ve heard.” Instead he admitted, “Living in Nebraska is absolute hell; no ordinary man can even make a living on these godforsaken wastes; I’m doing just fine.” His pride lay not in his good fortune but rather in his strength and courage. What would Old Jules’ reaction have been to the comment that it was not through his work, suffering, and skill that he planted his orchard but rather through the good luck of having chosen an auspicious site for the trees? In compensating for the implied inferiority of Nebraska scenery it is this very kind of insult that the modern “Nebraska booster” casts at the pioneer.

The homesteader wore no rose-colored glasses; he saw things as they were—and perhaps, at least in his folk humor, a little worse. Did the hotel keeper apologize to E. C. Spooner when he commented on the horrendous prairie winds he experienced during his first hours in Nebraska? Not at all. “I asked him if the wind always blew that way. ‘Oh, no,’ he said, ‘sometimes it blows real hard. This is just a spring zephyr.’ ” And one member of the Blizzard of ’88 Club told me that during that fearsome storm the wind blew so hard that it took four men just to hold a blanket over the keyhole of his father’s soddy door. The winds, in pioneer folklore, were as perverse as they were powerful: one farmer nailed a sack of flour to a farm wall only to find the next day that the wind had blown the sack away and left the flour hanging there.

When the wind stilled, it was not just *calm*; it was said that at one period during the late nineteenth century there was so little of the usual prairie wind that the state legislature had to pass a bill that there could be only one windmill per township because there was too little wind to drive more.

There were stories of it getting so hot one Nebraska August that popcorn popped right on the stalk (and some tales continued to tell how cows in a neighboring pasture saw that

popcorn, thought it was snow, and froze to death). A settler who had to walk over a mile to get water from a neighbor's well was asked, it is said, why he didn't dig a well, and he answered that it seemed to him altogether likely that it was as far to water in one direction as the other. Even when it did rain, conditions could not be considered "normal":

I went down to the general store and bought a new buckskin harness. I put it on my horses and thought I would go out in the field and haul in a load of hay. Just as I was ready to return to my barn, it began to rain. It simply poured down. When I started up the team to get back, the new harness stretched and left me and the wagon there in the field while the horses went on clear to the barn.

As I was walking back to the barn, the rain stopped and the sun came out very hot. I found my horses standing by the barn with the new harness still stretched from them out to the field. Then as the sun beat down, the harness warped [shrank]—and here come the wagon with the load of hay, finally stopping just right where it belonged, behind the horses.⁴

Far from minimizing the depredations of the grasshoppers, Nebraska pioneers told stories like this:

The grasshoppers came to Dakota County in such numbers in 1873 that they hid the sun. A cornfield would be completely stripped of all vegetation inside of two hours. They tell a story about a man who, when plowing in a field, hung his work jacket with a watch in it on a post. When he came back to his jacket after plowing the field, all that was left was his watch. The grasshoppers had eaten his jacket.

They tell, too, about a man who left his team in the field while he went to his well for a drink of water. When he came back, the grasshoppers had eaten up the team and harness and were playing horseshoes with the iron shoes the horses had left.⁵

The results of these hardships, poverty, and misfortunes could be bigger and more spectacular than anywhere else in the country. Custer County homesteaders liked to tell about the settler who once during hard times came into Broken Bow and bought three hammer handles at the price of one dollar each. The next week he was back to purchase eight more at the same price, and two weeks later twenty more. The hardware dealer, who had not sold more than ten hammer handles in any one year since he had opened business, finally was compelled to ask the farmer what he was doing with the handles. He replied, "Selling 'em."

"Well, I haven't sold that many handles in the past three years," the shopkeeper said in wonder. "How much are you getting for them?"

The farmer answered, "Fifty cents each."

"But that's less than you're paying for them. You're losing fifty cents a hammer handle!"

The farmer shrugged with resignation, "That's a damn-site better than I was doing when I was just a farmer."

Since fact is in the comprehension of the viewer, since definition is based on convention, Nebraska was indeed a desert. Because the conditions then fit the contemporary concept of "desert," it was one; modern concepts and conditions are not even relevant to the question.

Finally, no amount of commercial merchandizing or romantic wishful thinking can change the past or present situation of the Nebraska Plains in history and folklore—and it is hard to understand those who even want to, for there is no great merit in raising corn in an Eden; the pride of the pioneer is found instead in his ability to create a flourishing agricultural economy from a harsh *desert*.

NOTES

1. In 1960 seven counties in Nebraska were still reporting that over one-fourth of their population was of foreign stock. Note page 31 of N. D. Searcy and A. R. Longwell's *Nebraska Atlas* (Kearney: Nebraska Atlas Publishing Company).

2. While touring Europe by bicycle I was surprised again and again at the degree of my own ignorance of the actual size of European countries, they being much smaller than I had anticipated. My feelings of provincialism were lessened somewhat, however, when two German boys told me that the next summer they intended to spend three months touring the United States, bicycling from New York to Chicago to Lincoln to visit us, then to Yellowstone and Seattle, down the coast to San Francisco and Los Angeles, across Texas to New Orleans and Florida, northward to Washington, D. C., and ending again in New York. My protests to the ambitiousness of that itinerary were brushed aside with the confident remark that this summer they had easily toured *two* countries—Denmark and Germany—an area only half again larger than Nebraska, and therefore they anticipated little trouble with only one.

3. L. E. C. Spooner, in Emerson Purcell's, *Pioneer Stories of Custer County* (1936), 83.

4. E. O. Skeidler in Roger Welsch's *Treasury of Nebraska Pioneer Folklore* (1966), 159. Skeidler reports having heard the story from Mike Guninge, "a German pioneer settler in Atkinson."

5. Thomas J. Hartnett of Hubbard, Nebraska, in *Treasury of Nebraska Pioneer Folklore*, 155-156.