# A BRIEF HISTORY OF NEBRASKA

RONALD C. NAUGLE

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Front cover: The Chrisman sisters, Custer County, Nebraska, 1886. Daughters of a local rancher, each woman had her own homestead claim. NSHS RG2608-1053 (digitally colorized)

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#### CHAPTER 1

### The Land

People have been living in the place we call Nebraska for at least 12,000 years. This book is a short treatment of a long history. It focuses mostly on recent centuries simply because that's what we know the most about. It will introduce you to the major characteristics and events which have made this place what it is today.

Land and climate shape events and people, so before we get to what happened let's first talk about the place itself. The name Nebraska means "flat water." It is an Otoe Indian word for the river that French explorers called the Nebraskiér and later the Platte (which also means flat). The Platte is wide, shallow, and "braided" (it has lots of islands and channels) and crosses the state from west to east. It is fed by streams and runoffs east of the Continental Divide. It drains into the Missouri, the river that forms the state's eastern border and the eastern section of its northern border.

So yes, the idea of flatness is right there in the state's name and also in that of its central river. We may as well admit that. (But just so you know, a recent study found that eighteen states in the United States are flatter than Nebraska, with the flattest of all being Florida.) Interstate 80 is mostly to blame for our flat reputation. I-80 follows the Platte River Valley across the state because the valley is broad and flat, perfect for travel. Native American travelers used it, followed by pioneers on the Oregon, California and Mormon trails, then the Pony Express, the transcontinental telegraph and railroad, the Lincoln Highway, and now Interstate 80.

But if that's all you see, you might think Nebraska is pretty much the same throughout. It is not. Nebraska changes steadily from east to west. The elevation rises from less than a thousand feet above sea level to more than a mile high in some places. Rainfall in the west is less than half of that in the east, and the state's human population thins out as well. More than half of Nebraskans live in the metro areas of Omaha, Lincoln, and Sarpy County. Outside of the cities, the eastern part of Nebraska is mostly covered with farms growing corn and soybeans. The west is devoted mainly to cattle ranches.

In north-central Nebraska, the Sandhills sprawl across an area nearly the size of West Virginia. From the air these grass-covered sand dunes look like giant waves on a stormy sea, frozen in place by their covering of grass. Today the Sandhills are home to more than half a million beef cattle, spread out on enormous ranches.

The Panhandle is also unlike any other part of Nebraska. In Nebraska's northwest corner, the Pine Ridge region has rocky buttes and pine forests that make travelers wonder if they are still in Nebraska. Farther south, the North Platte River has carved a deep valley into the ancient high plains, exposing a chain of rocky buttes known as the Wildcat Hills. Some of these buttes became famous landmarks during the overland trail days: Courthouse and Jail Rocks, Scotts Bluff, and especially Chimney Rock. The valley itself contains rich farmland, mostly planted with sugar beets (which are processed into table sugar) and dry edible beans. In addition to being the country's leading producer and exporter of processed beef, Nebraska is also the world's leading producer and exporter of navy and great northern beans. The land's shape and composition contains a record of its ancient past. Each glimpse into Nebraska's natural history is like a trip to another world. A few examples: From 94 to 66 million years ago Nebraska was covered by a shallow inland sea, known today as the Western Interior Seaway. At the time when dinosaurs walked the land elsewhere, ancient sharks and large Loch Ness-style creatures known as plesiosaurus were swimming in the future Cornhusker state.

The sea was long gone by twenty million years ago when Nebraska became a sub-tropical, grass-covered plain with patches of jungle. This time period is known as the Miocene Era, when Nebraska was populated with animals such as little three-toed horses, ponysized rhinoceroses, and bear dogs. You can see all this for yourself at Agate Fossil Beds near Harrison in the Panhandle. Ten million years later at a place now known as Ashfall Fossil Beds, animals such as rhinoceroses, four-tusked elephants, giant camels, and three-toed horses were buried in ash from a massive volcano.

The Miocene Era may seem to be a lost world, but perhaps not entirely lost. A ten-million-year-old crane fossil at Ashfall looks identical to a modern Sandhill crane. Though it might not be exactly the same species, Sandhill cranes have existed for at least 2.5 million years, making them among the most ancient of current birds. These cranes have deep ties to Nebraska. They nest in the Canadian Arctic and winter in New Mexico and along the Gulf Coast, but their spring migratory path narrows to a seventy-mile stretch of the Platte River in Nebraska. Every year nearly half a million of these enormous birds (with wingspans of five-and-a-half to seven-and-a-half feet) stop and rest along the Platte on their way north.

Starting two million years ago, during four separate ice ages, glaciers spread southward from Canada and then retreated. Twice the glaciers covered parts of eastern Nebraska. To a geologist's eye, the rolling hills of Nebraska's eastern counties bear witness to the tracks of these ancient glaciers. Even the path of the Missouri River was shaped by runoff from melting glaciers. During the interglacial periods, strong winds carried sand and silt from the west and formed the Sandhills.

Prehistoric Nebraska was home to a variety of elephants and mammoths. You can see many species in Elephant Hall inside the University of Nebraska State Museum in Lincoln. Mammoths were still living when the first humans arrived in North America at least 12,000 years ago.

We don't know what that first generation of Nebraskans thought of the land they discovered. They left no written records. The earliest surviving "first impressions" come thousands of years later from European and American explorers. They reveal some crucial things about the land and how people have reacted to it.

In 1540, Francisco Vasquez Coronado led Spanish soldiers in the first European exploration of the Great Plains. Searching for the rumored seven cities of gold in the kingdom of Quivira, Coronado traveled the Great Plains as far north as present-day Kansas. (Earlier historians thought he made it to Nebraska.) He found no gold, but wrote to the king of Spain about the region's potential as farmland. In this, Coronado was right, although many of the explorers who came later were wrong. People who arrived from Europe or the eastern United States knew that a successful farm needed three things: land, timber, and water. Nebraska, however, was largely treeless and most of the water was underground. When U.S. Army Lt. Zebulon Pike traveled along the Republican River in 1806 he wrote of "barren soil, parched and dried up." In 1820 a report from Stephen Long's expedition described the area between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains as a "Great Desert, uninhabitable by a people dependent upon agriculture for their subsistence."

The idea that Nebraska and the Great Plains were the "Great American Desert" influenced government policy for nearly a generation. Thinking the land was worthless, Congress designated the area as "permanent Indian Territory" in 1830, which was fine with Native residents who knew better. In fact, Indians had been growing corn in Nebraska for a thousand years.

Euro-americans slowly discovered the land's richness for themselves. In 1819 Colonel Henry Atkinson came to Nebraska to build the army's westernmost fort. The location was along the Missouri River north of present-day Omaha. After a terrible first winter in which poor nutrition caused the men to suffer from scurvy, the government ordered western forts to start raising their own vegetables. From 1820 to 1827 the soldiers at Fort Atkinson did just that, demonstrating that there was indeed good farmland west of the Missouri.

When Nebraska opened to Euro-American settlement in 1854 (more about that later), the first pioneers preferred the land that looked like what they were used to—the river bottoms and other places with timber. As the land filled up, new settlers were forced out onto the grassy uplands and ever farther west.

By 1880 it appeared that a strange and wonderful thing was happening. More and more people were farming the great "desert" of the plains, and the rainfall kept increasing. Two University of Nebraska natural science professors thought they saw a connection. They believed that as farmers "broke" the prairie sod with their plows, the land absorbed more of the rain, which then evaporated back into the atmosphere to produce still more rain. Promoters soon put it more simply: "Rain follows the plow." Nebraska began to fill up with farmers and town builders who thought the rain would last.

It didn't. The rainy years were followed by prolonged drought in the 1890s. Everyone learned a valuable (though soon to be forgotten) lesson about Nebraska and the Great Plains: the climate can go to extremes, and it can do so for years at a stretch. So if you want your farm or town to survive, you have to be able to deal with that. "Rain follows the plow" settlers thought their most important task was to get some land. But land itself isn't enough. What matters is land plus water.

Many of the prehistoric tribes on the Plains understood the importance of water. Some even felt water had a spiritual significance. Ancestors of the historic Pawnees, for example, viewed water as the fourth creation after earth, human life, and the tribe; and we know the Pawnees themselves used water in preparing for the bison hunt. They held a "Great Cleansing Ceremony" in which sacred objects were carried to a river and washed. Afterwards the people jumped into the water and then went to their sweat lodge where they were cleansed by steam and smoke.

Such ceremonies helped to remind the people of their dependence on water. Archeologists think that the ancestors of the Pawnees, as well as other prehistoric tribes, also saw their relationship with water as an economic one. For example, changes in precipitation determined when and to where tribal communities moved.

Today's travelers have various opinions about what is Nebraska's most noteworthy physical feature. Some say Chimney Rock, others say the Sandhills or the rugged Pine Ridge region. The feature that's truly remarkable is lying beneath most of the state. The Ogallala or High Plains Aquifer is one of the world's largest sources of ground water. Nearly a third of the 174,000-square-mile aquifer is in Nebraska and altogether it provides nearly a third of the ground water used for irrigation in the United States.

Except for some lakes in the Sandhills, you can't see the aquifer. You can see evidence of it in all those windmills pumping water into stock tanks for cattle. And air travelers see something more: a strange checkerboard pattern of green circles inside of squares. This is the telltale sign of center pivot irrigation. The technological ability to tap the aquifer has transformed the Nebraska landscape and economy. That is a story for a later chapter. For now the lesson is a simple one: as with much of the American West, the history of Nebraska has been shaped by the availability of water.

Now the stage is set and we can introduce the first Nebraskans.

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