



Pen Pictures and Prose Poems: Walt Mason in Nebraska

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Article Summary: At the time of his death in 1939, humorist Walt Mason was considered to be one of the most widely read—if not the most polished—of living poets. Before gaining national fame, Mason spent twenty years in Nebraska writing for the *Daily Nebraska State Journal* and other papers.

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Photographs / Images: “‘Uncle Walt’ on His Favorite Steed,” illustration by John Tinney McCutcheon, from Mason’s *Uncle Walt, the Poet Philosopher* (1911); inset image of a bearded man that appeared, variously identified, in the *Nebraska State Journal* between December 18 and December 22, 1888; *Nebraska State Journal* staff, 1887; *Nebraska State Journal* building; inset ad for the *Beatrice Express*, where Mason began working in 1893; grand opening at the Keeley Institute, Blair, 1892; Beatrice in 1908

Sidebar: a Walt Mason prose poem describing hard times during the 1890s



PEN PICTURES PROSE POEMS:

WALT MASON
IN NEBRASKA

BY PATRICIA C. GASTER

“Since illustrated newspapers are demanded by the reading public in these days,” said the Daily Nebraska State Journal of Lincoln on December 18, 1888, “THE JOURNAL has secured an imported artist whose studies were pursued under the old masters at Rome and Florence, and hereafter pictures of prominent men will appear from day to day.” Lincoln readers in 1888 probably didn’t expect the work of an “imported artist,” although they were becoming accustomed to illustration in news stories. Popular illustrated publications, such as Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper (later Leslie’s Weekly) and Harper’s Weekly, proliferated after the mid-nineteenth century. The elaborate “pen pictures” produced for the newspapers by reporters and columnists were gradually being supplanted by the real thing. continued





"'Uncle Walt' on His Favorite Steed," by John Tinney McCutcheon,
from Mason's Uncle Walt, the Poet Philosopher (1911).

the people. The picture presented this morning is that of Col. Colorow, the famous Indian chief, whose death was reported the other day. It is reasonably certain that Colorow is quite dead. The chances of an Indian uprising on his part are very remote, and consequently the picture is printed without misgivings. He was



cut off in the prime of his manhood, being but eighty years of age when the chill reaper whose family name is Death engaged him as a silent partner. He was a modest, retiring

The face of this bearded man, variously identified, appeared in the *Nebraska State Journal* daily between December 18 and December 22, 1888.

Although the introduction of illustration opened up new vistas for readers, it also presented new opportunities for hoaxes by newspaper humorists such as Walt Mason. The fun such pranks could create, is illustrated by five identical pictures, published December 18, 19, 20, 21, and 22, 1888, in the *Daily State Journal* while Mason was employed there. What made the series unique was that each picture—that of a nondescript man with hair, full beard, and mustache arranged in a contemporary style—was identified as that of a different person. Each appeared as a part of “Topics of the Times,” a daily column of gossipy paragraphs gleaned from exchange newspapers, readers’ contributions, and the fertile imagination of the columnist.

A short paragraph in “Topics” on Tuesday, December 18, introduced the portrait of the bearded man, identified as that of “Col. Colorow, the famous Indian chief whose death was reported the other day.”² The next day, December 19, the *Journal* ran the same picture, this time identified as a well-known “wet,” U.S. Senator Harrison H. Riddleberger of Virginia, lauded tongue-in-cheek for his “efforts to paralyze the rum power.”³

The following day, December 20, the same picture was identified as that of a stranger to Nebraska—Jack the Ripper.⁴ The now familiar picture appeared on December 21 in the *Journal*, identified as the next speaker of the Nebraska House of Representatives, John C. Watson of Nebraska City.⁵ The *Lincoln Call*, however, noted a few days later that Watson was “as bald as a prize squash at a pumpkin show,” which made it highly unlikely that the picture was of Watson.⁶

The climax came on December 22 when the picture appeared in “Topics” for the fifth consecutive day, identified this time as former U.S. senator from Nebraska Charles H. Van Wyck.⁷ However, the smooth-shaven Van Wyck did not seem to resemble the hirsute mystery man to any greater extent than had Colorow, Riddleberger, Jack the Ripper, or Watson.

The well-known face did not appear in the *State Journal*’s Sunday edition on December 23 or during the following Christmas week. The “Topics” columnist had probably tired of his joke and the extended demonstration that in 1888 at least, illustration did not always enlighten the reader, who was still at the mercy of the writer to identify and interpret the images presented.

Who was responsible for this pictorial joke? After J. D. Calhoun, the guiding genius of “Topics of the Times,” left the *Journal* in the summer of 1886, his column was picked up by other staffers. Will

S. Jay was in charge of the column when on June 25, 1887, the *Omaha Bee* referred to him as “the versatile Topics man of the *Lincoln Journal*.” By July, however, humorist Walt Mason, who had come to Lincoln from E. W. Howe’s *Atchison (Kansas) Globe*, was at the head of the column, and was the probable originator of the spoof.⁸

It was hardly a coincidence that the variously identified portraits appeared in the *Journal* about the time that special illustrated holiday editions, consisting of seasonal stories, essays, and poems, were published by several rival Lincoln newspapers, with considerable competition to see which could put out the best. The *Capital City Courier* on December 19 published the most elaborate, a supplement on cream-tinted book paper with heavy, pearl-colored covers, filled with poetry and literary selections. The *Courier*, established in 1885, was one of the journals known in the West as “society papers,” and it covered a wide variety of cultural topics besides politics and current events. Its 1888 Christmas edition featured “[e]legant large engravings” from New York, which made “the pictorial part surpass anything of the kind attempted before in the state,” supplementing literary contributions by local writers and newsmen such as A. B. Hayes, Robert McReynolds, J. D. Calhoun, Al Fairbrother, and Walt Mason, who contributed “A Short Christmas Story.”⁹

The *Journal*, which didn’t publish a holiday edition in 1888, did include an original short story, “Let Nothing You Dismay,” by *Journal* staffer Mason, on December 30, and had kind words for the *Courier*’s lavishly illustrated Christmas issue, calling it a credit to the city.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Mason’s and the *Journal*’s purpose in running a series of identical yet variously labeled pictures shortly after the *Courier*’s Christmas edition, may have been to question the value of newspaper illustration in general, while twitting the well-known men who were deliberately misidentified.

The Canadian-born Mason had worked at various jobs before entering the newspaper field in St. Louis and then moving on to Atchison, Kansas, and Lincoln, Nebraska. He was photographed with other members of the *Journal*’s editorial staff on Thanksgiving Day in 1887 at the Lincoln home of *Journal* editor-in-chief Charles H. Gere. Shortly afterward, he joined Lincoln City Council members on their six-day stay in the Douglas County jail after they were declared to be in contempt of court over their removal of a corrupt police judge. (Mason, it was said, not only reported the event for the *Journal*, but “by his funny sayings” tried to cheer up the dejected councilmen.) Despite unsubstantiated press rumors in January 1889 that Mason and two



others planned to acquire the *Omaha Republican*, his job with the *Journal* as “humorous editor” lasted until July of 1889, when Mason took a short-lived job with the *Lincoln Call*, where he authored the column “Mason’s Mosaics.”¹¹

Mason, who is best known for work on William Allen White’s *Emporia Gazette* from 1907 to 1920, and for his nationally syndicated humorous poetry, in a 1923 interview recalled “conducting a column on the [*Journal*’s] editorial page which had been established by J. D. Calhoun” and his fond memories of Lincoln. In 1933, while living in California, he remembered prominent Nebraskans, including William Jennings Bryan and Willa Cather, whom he had known during his days on the *Journal* before they gained national fame.¹²

Mason’s problems with alcohol hampered him on job after job. He later said of the *Hastings Daily*

Press, which lasted for just sixteen days in November and December of 1889, that he and his two colleagues on the paper did most of their editorial work in local saloons. In the summer of 1890 the staunchly Republican Mason turned up in Greeley as the new editor of the *Greeley Center Democrat*, with one Nebraska newspaper uncharitably noting on July 2: “He [Mason] wanders about the country like a vagabond, and is now a disgusting specimen of humanity.”¹³

In January of 1892 some of Mason’s friends became so alarmed over his deteriorating health and career that they persuaded him to enter the Keeley Institute in Blair, which advertised treatment for alcoholism by injecting patients with bichloride of gold—the so-called “gold cure.” Blair already had a similar institution operated by Dr. M. D. Bedal as the Bedal Gold Cure Company, but the Keeley

The Nebraska State Journal staff, photographed on Thanksgiving Day in 1887 at the home of editor-in-chief Charles H. Gere, included Walt Mason (standing at left), J. C. Seacrest, Charles E. Root, Will Owen Jones, Horace W. Hebbard (seated at left), Gere, and A. B. Hayes.

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**Nebraska State
Journal building.**
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Institute was new, with grand opening ceremonies on January 21 that included a personal appearance by Dr. Keeley himself. Mason read an original poem at the celebration.¹⁴

He later wrote, perhaps with some hyperbole, in his "At Long Range" column for the *Capital City Courier*: "I remained at the institute five weeks in all, taking treatment with charming regularity until the end, and when I emerged, after having taken 140 hypodermic injections of chloride of gold and 245 two ounce doses of internal medicine, I was a constant revelation and study to my friends, who had never expected to see me radically sober until prepared for burial." After leaving the institute, he began work at the *Fremont Tribune*, moving on by October to the *Omaha World-Herald*.¹⁵

A brief foray into East Coast journalism, with a job as "editorial paragrapher" on the newly established *Washington (D.C.) Evening News* in 1893, was less than satisfying. Mason later recalled that William Jennings Bryan persuaded the publishers to hire him despite his flawed employment history. That summer Mason published *The Man Who Sobered Up*, a romantic novel featuring as protagonist

a reformed graduate of a Keeley Institute. Mason's former employers on the *State Journal* praised the book in August despite its lack of illustration: "[W]hile it contains no costly engravings, every chapter abounds in rich, shaded word pictures that more than make up for the lack of evidence of the chalk artist's skill."¹⁶

Mason must not have gained much income from the book. Complaining of being "miserably hard up," he wrote in September to fellow Nebraskan J. Sterling Morton, then in Washington serving as U.S. secretary of agriculture, asking for an introduction to Morton's editorial friends in Chicago and the West so that he could secure a new job and return home. Washington's climate was too cold and damp, his wife (he had married in February) was ill, and the *News* was on the verge of collapse due to the financial panic of 1893.¹⁷

By that fall Mason was back in Nebraska. A. L. Bixby, who then conducted the old "Topics of the Times" column (renamed "Daily Drift") for the *Journal*, welcomed the comic poet home with his own brand of humorous verse.¹⁸ Mason and his wife settled in Beatrice, where he began

writing a column for the *Beatrice Daily Express* called "Too Late to Classify." Along with the "Hot Tamales" column he conducted for the *Lincoln Evening News*, beginning in late 1898, it included the widely reprinted quips and jingles for which he was already noted.¹⁹

As a well-known author of "pen pictures" during his years at the *State Journal* and the *Express*, Mason may have viewed the rise of the real thing in the pages of daily newspapers less than favorably. A "Veteran Joker" complained to the *Omaha Bee* in 1899 that syndicated material, heavily illustrated, was in danger of supplanting newspaper funny men such as Mason: "When you can purchase a whole page, with illustrations, for a couple of dollars," Veteran Joker asked, "what's the use?"²⁰

In March 1904 Mason seemed to join the trend. While living at Beatrice, he began publishing an illustrated weekly, the *Saturday Summary*, a twelve-page paper, 10 1/2 by 14 inches in size, and "printed on good book paper, with numerous halftone illustrations." In January 1906 Mason announced that the *Summary* would thereafter appear as *Walt Mason's Monthly*, a magazine, "because a weekly paper does not afford time enough for good illustrative work"²¹

The new magazine survived less than a year. The May 1906 issue was praised by the *Beatrice Sun* for its profuse illustration, but "[b]ad luck of various kinds came along [including a tussle with U.S. postal authorities over mailing] and the paper failed and I went broke," Mason later recalled. He again worked briefly for the *Express* and the *State Journal* before leaving Beatrice and entering the Keeley Institute in Kansas City in 1907 for another try to deal with his alcohol problems.²²

J. D. Calhoun wrote of his talented young colleague in 1888 while Mason was still employed at the *Journal*, "Nobody can now tell what he will do with himself. He may go upward on an extended career, or he may go down on a very short one." The upward path ultimately led Mason to William Allen White's *Emporia Gazette*, where he achieved the success that had eluded him in Nebraska. While in the Kansas City Keeley Institute, Mason applied for a job on the *Gazette* and was invited by White to "help out around the paper."²³

Once on the job, Mason's talent with words, particularly evident in the homespun poetry he called "prose poems," attracted widespread attention. With White's encouragement he managed to stay sober in the officially dry town of Emporia. Later Mason recalled, "I was mixing up farming with newspaper work in Nebraska for a good many

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years, and making a failure of both. It took me a good while to discover that pigs and poetry won't mix." His reference to "pigs and poetry" undoubtedly reflects his experiences while living at Beatrice, where an effort to become "beastly rich raising hogs" ended in disaster when most of the animals died of disease. Perhaps adding to his somber memories of Nebraska, Mason's young son died of diphtheria in 1900 while he lived at Beatrice.²⁴

Mason's talent for writing poetry seemed to come naturally. The various newspaper columns he conducted while in Nebraska are filled with his verse, although not all carried his name or were in the style of his distinctive prose poems.²⁵ He could write news stories and even headlines in rhyme, and reportedly once transcribed a legal paper in verse just to prove that it could be done. The prose poems written by "Uncle Walt," as he became known, appeared in a single, undivided paragraph with a drumbeat rhythm and a regular pattern of rhyme. They delighted readers with their homely philosophy of common sense, and while he worked on the *Gazette*, were

Walt Mason moved to Beatrice in 1893, where he worked for the *Beatrice Express*, advertised in the *Nebraska State Gazetteer and Business Directory* for 1893.

The Keeley Institute at Blair during its grand opening in January 1892. *Blair Courier*, January 23, 1892.



THE KEELEY INSTITUTE, BLAIR, NEBRASKA, CORNER FRONT AND SIXTH STREETS.



Walt Mason published the *Saturday Summary* and *Walt Mason's Monthly* in Beatrice, pictured above in 1908, the year after he relocated to Kansas.

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widely syndicated to more than two hundred newspapers in the United States and Canada with a total readership estimated at more than five million. During his years at the *Gazette*, Mason also wrote short stories for the *Chicago Daily News* and conducted a book review page for the *Kansas City Star*. At least half a dozen volumes of his collected verse, the first in 1905, were eventually published.²⁶

Mason's own favorite from among his published verse was a somber celebration of the sacrifice of Civil War soldiers killed in battle entitled "The Little Green Tents." A related poem, "The Eyes of Lincoln," is considered to be among his best.²⁷

Mason wrote in 1919 of his twenty years (1887-1907) in Nebraska, "I had the idea that I could write profound editorials, and draw pictures, and make two bales of hay grow where one grew before . . . but there were countless people who could do such things better than I could."²⁸ A number of Mason's verses written during his Nebraska days were unsigned. One, from the *State Journal's* "Topics of the Times" column, April 30, 1888, that celebrated immigration to Nebraska, was reprinted by many newspapers across the country. Most substituted the names of their home states (Kansas, Missouri, Texas, Washington) or their home towns (Oxford, Iowa) for that of Nebraska in Mason's poem.²⁹

He eventually retired from Kansas to California in 1920. In 1921 *The Writer* magazine noted that although Walt Whitman was widely considered to be the greatest American poet, newspaper readers and the general public were far more familiar with the poetry of Walt Mason. "Not to have read his poems argues oneself absolutely ignorant of newspaper perusal," said a Kansas history.³⁰

Mason lived his last years at La Jolla, where he continued to write his signature prose poems and an occasional article—which wasn't often, he wrote to Nebraska newspaperman Will M. Maupin in 1929, "as I don't need the money." At the time of his death in June 1939, he was considered to be one of the most widely read—if not the most polished—of living poets.³¹

NOTES

¹ "Topics of the Times," *Daily Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), Dec. 18, 1888, 4.

² Ibid.; "Word reached Denver . . .," *Columbus Journal*, Dec. 19, 1888, 2. Colorow, an influential White River Ute leader, died on December 11, 1888, reportedly of pneumonia, just a week before the first portrait was published.

³ "Topics of the Times," *Daily Nebraska State Journal*, Dec. 19, 1888, 4.

⁴ Ibid., Dec. 20, 1888, 4.

⁵ Ibid., Dec. 21, 1888, 4.

⁶ "There is one thing, . . ." *Sunday Morning Call* (Lincoln), Dec. 23, 1888, 2.

⁷ "Topics of the Times," *Daily Nebraska State Journal*, Dec. 22, 1888, 4.

⁸ "Will S. Jay . . .," *Omaha Daily Bee*, June 25, 1887, 8; *ibid.*, "Brief Items," July 31, 1887, 5.

⁹ "Topics of the Times," *Daily Nebraska State Journal*, Dec. 22, 1888, 4; "Things Duly Observed," *Capital City Courier* (Lincoln), Dec. 15, 1888, 1; *ibid.*, "Our Christmas Number," Dec. 19, 1888, 2.

¹⁰ "Topics of the Times," *Daily Nebraska State Journal*, Dec. 22, 1888, 4; *ibid.*, Walt Mason, "Let Nothing You Dismay," Dec. 30, 1888, 17-18.

¹¹ Betty Stevens, *A History of the Lincoln Journal* (Henderson: Service Press, 1999), 20; "A Current Rumor," *Omaha Daily Bee*, Jan. 31, 1889, 2; *ibid.*, "The Call Gets Mason," July 6, 1889, 4; *ibid.*, "The Imprisoned Solons," Dec. 1, 1887, 8; John Steven McGroarty, *California of the South* (Chicago, Los Angeles, Indianapolis: Clarke Publ., 1933), 2:171-81; "Mason's Mosaics," *Lincoln Call*, Feb. 10, 1894.

¹² Walt Mason, "Speaking of Myself," *Sunday State Journal*, July 22, 1923, 7B; McGroarty, *California of the South*, 2:171-81.

¹³ "At Long Range," *Capital City Courier*, Apr. 23, 1892, 1; *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Adams, Clay, Webster and Nuckolls Counties, Nebraska* (Chicago: The Goodspeed Publishing Co., 1890), 147; *Lincoln County Tribune* (North Platte), July 2, 1890, 4; "Nebraska Jottings," *Omaha Daily Bee*, July 2, 1890, 4; Will M. Maupin, "Nebraska and Nebraskans," *Kearney Daily Hub*, July 20, 1929, 5.

¹⁴ "Newspaper Drift," *Daily Nebraska State Journal*, Jan. 13, 1892, 4; *ibid.*, Mar. 8, 1892, 4; "Dr. Bedal's Marvelous Cure," *Omaha Daily Bee*, Nov. 15, 1891, 3; "Grand Opening," *Blair Courier*, Jan. 23, 1892, 1.

¹⁵ "Rum Reminiscences," *Capital City Courier*, May 7, 1892, 5; "Walt Mason, . . ." *North Platte Tribune*, Feb. 24, 1892, 2; "Nebraska," *McCook Tribune*, Oct. 7, 1892, 8.

¹⁶ "Daily Drift," *Nebraska State Journal*, Aug. 8, 1893, 4; McGroarty, *California of the South*, 2:171-81.

¹⁷ Walt Mason to J. Sterling Morton, Sept. 14, 1893, J. Sterling Morton Papers, RG1013, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.

¹⁸ "Daily Drift," *Nebraska State Journal*, Sept. 29, 1893, 4.

¹⁹ "Newspaper Columnist Walt Mason," *The Quarterly Express* (November 2002): 2; "Too Late to Classify," *Beatrice Daily Express*, Oct. 10, 1893, 4; "Hot Tamales," *Lincoln Evening News*, Oct. 22, 1898, 4.

²⁰ "Plaint of a Veteran Joker," *Omaha Daily Bee*, Jan. 9, 1899, 3.

²¹ "Walt Mason, Poet of the People," *Beatrice Daily Sun*, Aug. 22, 1952, 7E; *ibid.*, "The Saturday Summary," Jan. 23, 1906, 1.

²² "Mason's Monthly Can Circulate," *Omaha Daily Bee*, Mar. 28, 1906, 2; "Walt Mason's Monthly," *Beatrice Daily Sun*, May 26, 1906, 2; "Story of Walt Mason," *Norfolk Weekly News-Journal*, Dec. 18, 1908, 2; Walter Johnson, "William Allen White, Country Editor, 1897-1914," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, 15 (February 1947): 14-16; "Walt Mason," *The Quarterly Express*, 2; "News of Nebraska," *Omaha Daily Bee*, Dec. 22, 1906, 3.

²³ "Dots and Dashes," *Daily State Democrat* (Lincoln), Feb. 24, 1888, 2; "Walt Mason Dies at La Jolla, Calif.," *Lincoln Star*, June 22, 1939, 1; Johnson, "William Allen White," 14-16.

²⁴ Walt Mason, "Are You a Misfit?" *The American Magazine* 87 (April 1919):120; "Walt Mason," *Kansas: a Cyclopedia of State History* (Chicago: Standard Pub. Co., 1912), 3:104-6; Zoa Ann Worden, *Queen City of the Blue*, *Beatrice, Nebraska* (Beatrice: Gage County Historical Society, 1976), 141-42.

²⁵ "Story of Walt Mason." Mason in 1908 recalled writing poetry in this style in 1885 while on the *Atchison Globe*.

²⁶ "Walt Mason Dies at La Jolla, Calif.," "Walt Mason—A Poet Who Made Money," *Milwaukee Journal*, June 27, 1939, 12; "Columbines," *Columbus Journal*, May 24, 1905, 4; Johnson, "William Allen White," 14-16. Mason did have an earlier agreement with the American Press Association in 1892 to have his work published simultaneously nationwide. See "Newspaper Drift," *Nebraska State Journal*, Aug. 13, 1892, 4.

²⁷ McGroarty, *California of the South*, 2:171-81.

²⁸ Mason, "Are You a Misfit?"

²⁹ "Come to Kansas," *Barton County (Kansas) Democrat*, July 19, 1888, 1; "To Washington and Oregon, A Territorial Editor's Live Epic," *Daily Morning Astorian*, Mar. 20, 1889, 2; "They Are Coming to Missouri," *Annual Report of the State Horticultural Society of Missouri* 34 (1892): 338; *El Paso (Texas) Daily Herald*, Mar. 7, 1900, 7; *Oxford (Iowa) Mirror*, Oct. 3, 1889.

³⁰ *The Writer* 33, no. 5 (Boston: The Writer Publishing Co., 1921): 69; Ralph Tennal, *History of Nemaha County, Kansas* (Lawrence: Standard Publishing Co., 1916), 293.

³¹ Mason, "Are You a Misfit?"; Maupin, "Nebraska and Nebraskans."

A Walt Mason Prose Poem

One of Mason's "prose poems" describing hard economic times during the 1890s appeared in *The Frontier* (O'Neill), March 12, 1896. Several Kansas newspapers, among others, reprinted the poem with the name of Kansas substituted for that of Nebraska. See the *Barton County Democrat* (Great Bend), April 23, 1896; and the *Globe-Republican* (Dodge City), May 21, 1896.

They are going from Nebraska, they are going in the cars; they have hitched their little wagons to the smoothest sort of stars; they sold their smiling homestead in this barren land of drouth, they are going from Nebraska to the wetness of the south. And their pockets now are bulging, for they've sold off all their goods, and they'll blow their little fortunes in the damp and mouldy woods, where the swamps are full of serpents, the mosquitoes full of tunes, and the climate full of ague and the people full of prunes. They are going from Nebraska, they are going off in style; and the immigration agents will absorb their little pile.

They'll be coming to Nebraska when a year or two has flown; we shall know that they're approaching when we hear them weep and groan; they'll be coming to Nebraska, and they'll all be flecked with flies; they'll be coming on the hog train, they'll be coming on the ties; they'll be coming, sore and needy, full of oaths and woe and bile, and they won't look like the farmers who are going now in style; and the fatted calves won't perish to relieve their doleful dumps, for the calves are not intended to refresh a race of chumps. Still the wise men face the music, and they stay right where they are, and they do not hitch their wagon to an "immigration" star; for they know that old Nebraska has a record to maintain; and (we mention this in passing) there are signs of coming rain.

—Walt Mason