

# Part 3: 1917-1966

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During the second half-century of statehood, Nebraskans endured the Great Depression and two world wars, emerging into a more prosperous postwar world. In the 1920s the state made a bold choice for the design of its new capitol, and a decade later voters made an even bolder choice for the unique form of government that would reside there. Developments in transportation and communication changed how Nebraskans did business and how they spent their free time. Across the state, rural populations peaked and began a slow decline, even as cities continued to grow. But agriculture remained crucial to “The Beef State’s” economy and sense of identity.



World War I enlistees on the 100 block of North 13th Street, Lincoln, July 22, 1918. Entering the ongoing war in April 1917, the government of the United States faced the challenges of building up its small army (now led by former Lincoln resident John J. Pershing) and unifying a divided public. The Nebraska Council of Defense became an extra-legal police force monitoring the loyalty and attitudes of Nebraska's citizens, especially those of German heritage. Written threats, inquisition-like panels, violence, and imprisonment were aimed at people who failed to support the war or who spoke the language of the “Hun Baby-Killers.”  
NSHS RG2841-7-2





Red Cross Day in Wahoo, July 4, 1918. "At a celebration that can be heard in Berlin," local residents raised \$60,000 through an auction and fund drives. On the home front, citizens were urged to prove their loyalty by supporting the Red Cross, buying war bonds, and participating in "meatless" and "wheatless" days. NSHS RG2963-11-22



Douglas County sheriffs pose with materials from an illegal still, about 1922. Nebraska's statewide prohibition took effect in May 1917, two years ahead of national prohibition. In cities and small towns alike, the new law did not stop the manufacture and sale of alcohol, but it did create a need for secrecy. In Omaha, many small-time offenders were arrested, even as larger operators thrived under the protection of crime boss Tom Dennison and corrupt local officials. National prohibition ended in December 1933; Nebraskans voted to end statewide prohibition in November 1934. NSHS RG3348-10-11





Lynching of Will Brown, Omaha, September 28, 1919. Accused of raping a white woman, the forty-year-old Brown was “too twisted by rheumatism to attack anyone” according to the doctor who examined him. Nevertheless, a mob of thousands attacked the Douglas County Courthouse where Brown was being held, attempted to hang Mayor Ed Smith when he intervened, burned the building, and finally murdered Brown. The lynching was part of a wave of racial violence during the “Red Summer” of 1919. NSHS RG2281-69



Neligh, 1910s-1920s. As in many northern states, Nebraska's African American population grew during what is known as the Great Migration, in which millions of Southern blacks began moving north in the 1910s. Nebraska's black population grew largely, though not exclusively, in Omaha and Lincoln. Nebraskans of color strove to live normal lives in spite of rampant prejudice against them. NSHS RG2836-410



A Ku Klux Klan color guard rides past the Scotts Bluff County Courthouse in Gering, undated. The Klan flourished as a mainstream organization in the 1920s. According to the Atlanta headquarters, Nebraska membership reached 45,000 by 1923. A 1925 KKK picnic in Lincoln drew an estimated 25,000 people. Not just anti-black, the Klan promoted "Americanism and Christianity," embraced Prohibition, and warned against the influence of "foreign elements," Jews, and the Roman Catholic Church. NSHS RG4909-1-29





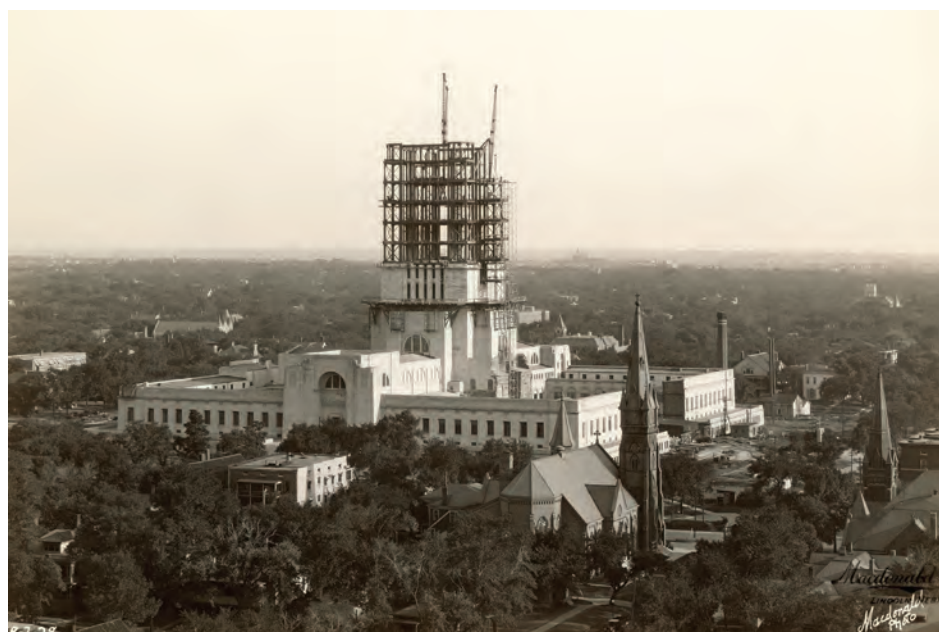
Thirty thousand fans came to Memorial Stadium on November 10, 1923, to watch the Cornhuskers take on rival Notre Dame. The game was the third played at the still-unfinished stadium. The first was a 24-0 win against Oklahoma on October 13. Named in honor of the veterans of the recent war, the stadium was built without state funding and was financed by pledges made by university students, staff, alumni, and boosters. NSHS RG2758-102-105



Potato harvest near Morrill, 1926. Along with sugar beets, potatoes became an important crop in the North Platte Valley, especially as irrigation developed. The workers shown here appear to be Mexican or possibly Lakota; both groups, plus Germans from Russia, provided much of the labor in the fields, with children toiling alongside adults. NSHS RG1431-65-07



Groundbreaking ceremony for the third (and present) Nebraska State Capitol, April 15, 1922. Governor Samuel McKelvie would have disdained the golden shovels and pre-dug dirt of modern groundbreakings. The press noted with approval that the former editor of the *Nebraska Farmer* plowed a good, straight furrow. NSHS RG1234-19-4



State capitol under construction, September 27, 1928. After two poorly built, lackluster capitols on this site, Nebraska chose a skyscraper design—unprecedented for a state capitol—with art deco styling and thematic unity of symbolism and inscription. Built in four phases over ten years (1922-1932), the building came in just under its \$10 million budget and was paid for completely when finished. NSHS RG1234-40-6





Omaha Legion Airport (today's Eppley Airfield), Omaha, August 8, 1928. The airplane was no longer merely a stunt machine. The 1920s saw the development of commercial aviation, a point made by this photo of a family arriving by night in an Interstate Air Lines Ryan Brougham. The public would have noticed the plane's resemblance to Charles Lindbergh's custom-built Ryan, the *Spirit of St. Louis*, in which he had flown from New York to Paris a year earlier. Nebraskans were proud that Lindbergh, a Minnesotan, had taken his first flying lessons in Lincoln in 1922. NSHS RG3882-17



Grand Island, November 8, 1934. Shantytowns were not new during the Great Depression, but hard times drove people into improvised housing in greater numbers. To the national crises of unemployment and bank failures, the Great Plains added drought and dust storms. For many, the 1930s were desperate times, and Nebraskans responded in a variety of ways.

NSHS RG4290-1707-1



Father Flanagan's Boys Show band, November 28, 1928. Fr. Edward J. Flanagan, right, was an Irish-born Catholic priest who founded what is now known as Boys Town in 1917. Flanagan opposed the usual punitive attitude toward "delinquents," believing that "no boy wants to be bad. There is only bad environment, bad training, bad example, bad thinking." He raised financial support with traveling shows and sports teams, and is shown here with Paul Whiteman (holding baton), America's most popular dance band leader of the day. Dan Desdunes, left, was a local African American bandleader who served as the home's volunteer music teacher. Boys Town Hall of History



Loup City Riot, June 14, 1934. When rumors spread that women poultry workers might strike for higher wages, Ella Reeve "Mother" Bloor of the American Communist Party organized a demonstration of support on the courthouse lawn. Truckloads of demonstrators arrived, but so did a group of local men who opposed them. Both groups denied starting the brawl that involved fists, blackjacks, and rocks. The demonstrators fled. Bloor and her associates were convicted of rioting, and the resulting jail sentences and fines marked the end of the attempt by the Communist Party to organize farmers and workers in Nebraska. NSHS RG2543-4-22





Some Nebraskans feared Communism. Others, like author Mari Sandoz, then living in Lincoln, feared the Midwest would turn to Fascism (the subject of her 1939 novel, *Capital City*). During the Great Depression most Nebraskans simply tried to get by. To a modern eye, the unemployed people in this 1934 photo seem overdressed to sign up for relief benefits. It was a more formal time—people still dressed up to go shopping downtown—but this also looks like an effort to maintain dignity and show that they were not “the poor.”

NSHS RG4290-535



Starting in 1933, the federal government carried out nationwide “emergency livestock reductions” in response to disastrously low market prices. In Nebraska the government bought, killed, and buried hundreds of thousands of cattle and hogs. The program saved many farmers from bankruptcy, and some of the livestock were starving (as in this 1934 photo), but the program was unpopular. It seemed wasteful to destroy food when people were going hungry. The law was changed so that the government bought agricultural products for distribution to relief agencies.

NSHS RG4290-331





Dust storm approaching Alma, April 7, 1935. The Dust Bowl or "Dirty Thirties" stands as one of the worst environmental disasters in American history, leaving half a million people homeless and leading to a mass migration from the Great Plains. It resulted from widespread deep plowing of semi-arid grassland, followed by severe drought. Centered on the Oklahoma and Texas panhandles, the Dust Bowl region included the southwestern counties of Nebraska. NSHS RG4290-715



Wind erosion in the Sandhills of Holt County, June 8, 1936. While this photo shows the effects of severe drought, the windmill and stock tank point to the land's hidden feature: the Ogallala Aquifer, which underlies most of Nebraska and portions of seven other states. In the coming decades this vast (but not limitless) source of groundwater would become a major factor in Nebraska agriculture. NSHS RG2570-46-2





Industrial Indian School, Genoa, ca. 1930. Founded in 1884, Genoa was the federal government's fourth non-reservation school. At one point the government operated as many as a hundred Indian boarding schools. The idea was to help the students adapt to the dominant culture, but this was done by separating them from their families and forbidding them to speak their native languages or to express their culture. Genoa grew to an enrollment of around 600. Students spent half the day in the classroom and half in vocational training. The school closed in 1934. NSHS RG4422-1-20





Republican River Flood, May 31, 1935. In the midst of drought, torrential rains sent a wall of water down the river valley, killing more than a hundred people. Here, forty men are stranded atop the McCook power plant. A man pulls himself hand over hand toward the building. He is bringing a line so that men can be shuffled to land via a telephone cable car. Two men were thus rescued before the water tower collapsed in the rushing water. The other men were rescued by boat the next day after the water began to recede. This and other floods, plus a desire for irrigation, led the federal government to build a series of dams on the Republican and its tributaries. NSHS RG2442



KOIL Radio, Omaha, August 24, 1937. Radio became a source of news and entertainment starting in the 1920s, and while national networks emerged by the end of that decade, there was still time in the broadcast day for local programming. And no radio play was complete without the sound-effects man. NSHS RG1833-2-3



U.S. Senator George Norris of Nebraska campaigns with President Franklin D. Roosevelt during Roosevelt's visit to Omaha in August 1936. Norris, a Republican turned Independent, was a powerful senator who supported the president's New Deal programs, sponsoring the Tennessee Valley Authority Act and the Rural Electrification Act. Norris also authored and sponsored the Twentieth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which eliminated the "lame duck" sessions of Congress following an election and moved the presidential inauguration from March to January. NSHS RG3298-34-43a





Opening day of Nebraska's first unicameral legislative session, January 5, 1937. The Unicameral was another of Senator Norris's causes, though he didn't originate the idea. He believed that a one-house system would curb abuses of the conference committees that reconciled differences between House and Senate bills. These committees allowed the ruling party to rewrite legislation to favor its own positions. In 1934 Nebraska voters endorsed the idea and in 1937 Nebraska became the first and only state to have a unicameral legislature.

NSHS RG2183-1937-105-1



Construction of the spillway tower at Kingsley Dam, December 21, 1937. The world's second largest hydraulic-fill dam at the time of its construction, Kingsley was built by pumping sand from the riverbed, with loess clay forming the dam's watertight core. The spillway began generating electricity in 1941, and within a few years Lake C. W. McConaughy was providing irrigation water through more than 500 miles of canals and laterals. The project bears the names of two of its early promoters, George P. Kingsley, a Minden banker, and C. W. McConaughy, a grain merchant and mayor of Holdrege. NSHS RG2114-4-162





Woman using an electric washing machine, Kearney, Buffalo County, undated. Among its other benefits, electricity greatly reduced women's daily toil, but town women enjoyed it decades before it was common in rural areas. George Norris's 1936 Rural Electrification Act provided federal support, but local projects took years to develop. Most farms in Buffalo County had REA power by the early 1950s. By 1949, Nebraska became—and remains—the nation's only state to be served entirely by public power. NSHS RG2451-50



Nebraska (in dark jerseys) versus Stanford in the Rose Bowl, January 1, 1941. This top-ten matchup was the Cornhuskers' first bowl game and remained a bright spot in Nebraskans' memory during the two decades of gridiron futility that followed. Fans spoke of it with such pride that Coach Bob Devaney, who came to Nebraska in 1962, used to joke that it took several years before he learned that the Cornhuskers actually lost the game. NSHS RG2758-104-10





World War II scrap-metal drive, Lincoln, 1943. A steel shortage threatened production during the rapid arms buildup following Pearl Harbor. Early scrap drives failed to gain momentum, but in the summer of 1942 *Omaha World-Herald* publisher Henry Doorly organized a statewide scrap drive in which counties, businesses, and other groups competed against each other. The drive was wildly successful, raising 67,000 tons of scrap in three weeks and inspiring a nationwide movement. NSHS RG2183-1943-811-5



North Platte Canteen, Union Pacific Depot, undated. Volunteers met every troop train from Christmas Day, 1941, to April 1, 1946, serving free food, coffee, cake, and cigarettes to more than six million GIs during their ten- to fifteen-minute stopovers. The canteen was staffed entirely by volunteers from 125 communities, with all expenses paid by donation. The canteen was not exempt from wartime rationing, but donors used their own ration cards to purchase supplies. NSHS RG2154-6-1



Salemade family, near Lyman, ca. 1940. Western Nebraska had a small but growing Japanese immigrant population by World War II, when West Coast states began incarcerating citizens of Japanese ancestry. In July 1942, NSHS Superintendent Addison Sheldon mailed this photo to Governor Dwight Griswold, noting that the family farmed land he owned and that the two older sons had enlisted. Sheldon was writing on behalf of another Scotts Bluff County farm family, the Fukusawas, some of whom had been interned while working in California. Sheldon asked the governor to intervene, promising that the Fukusawas had jobs waiting for them and that they'd live on Sheldon's land. Citing public opinion, the governor declined.

NSHS RG2039-33-3



Cornhusker Ordnance Plant, Grand Island, undated. Built in 1942, the plant sprawled over a twenty-square-mile area west of Grand Island. Hastings, meanwhile, was home to the Naval Ammunition Depot, which produced more than 40 percent of the U.S. Navy's munitions, and the Sioux Army Depot near Sidney stored massive quantities of ammunition and other materiel. Women provided an important labor source, but local labor couldn't fill all the jobs. Towns with plants, air bases, or prisoner-of-war camps saw an influx of workers that boosted local economies and created housing shortages.

NSHS RG825-3-1





A dog and trainer chase a soldier over an obstacle course at Fort Robinson, 1943. The fort's War Dog Reception and Training Area held 1,800 kennels and trained dogs for sentry, scout, messenger, and sled duty for all branches of the military. NSHS RG2731-5-3





B-29 bombers under construction at the Glenn L. Martin Bomber Plant, Bellevue, January 31, 1944. Located at present-day Offutt Air Force Base, the plant produced more than 1,500 B-26 Marauder medium bombers before switching to B-29 Superfortresses by 1944. The more than 500 Superfortresses built here include *Enola Gay* and *Bockscar*, which dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Offutt Field was Nebraska's only army air base at the start of the war, but the state was soon home to eleven other bases at Ainsworth, Alliance, Bruning, Fairmont, Grand Island, Harvard, Kearney, Lincoln, McCook, Scottsbluff, and Scribner. NSHS RG3715-2-13



German prisoners of war on kitchen duty at Fort Robinson, August 1944. Approximately 12,000 prisoners of war were held in camps across the state. Camp Atlanta near Holdrege held as many as 4,000 prisoners. Other major camps were built at Scottsbluff and Fort Robinson, plus satellite camps at twenty locations across the state. Prisoners helped fill a severe farm labor shortage. The vast spaces of Nebraska made escape unlikely, and per Geneva Convention rules, the men were paid for their work. NSHS RG2725-21



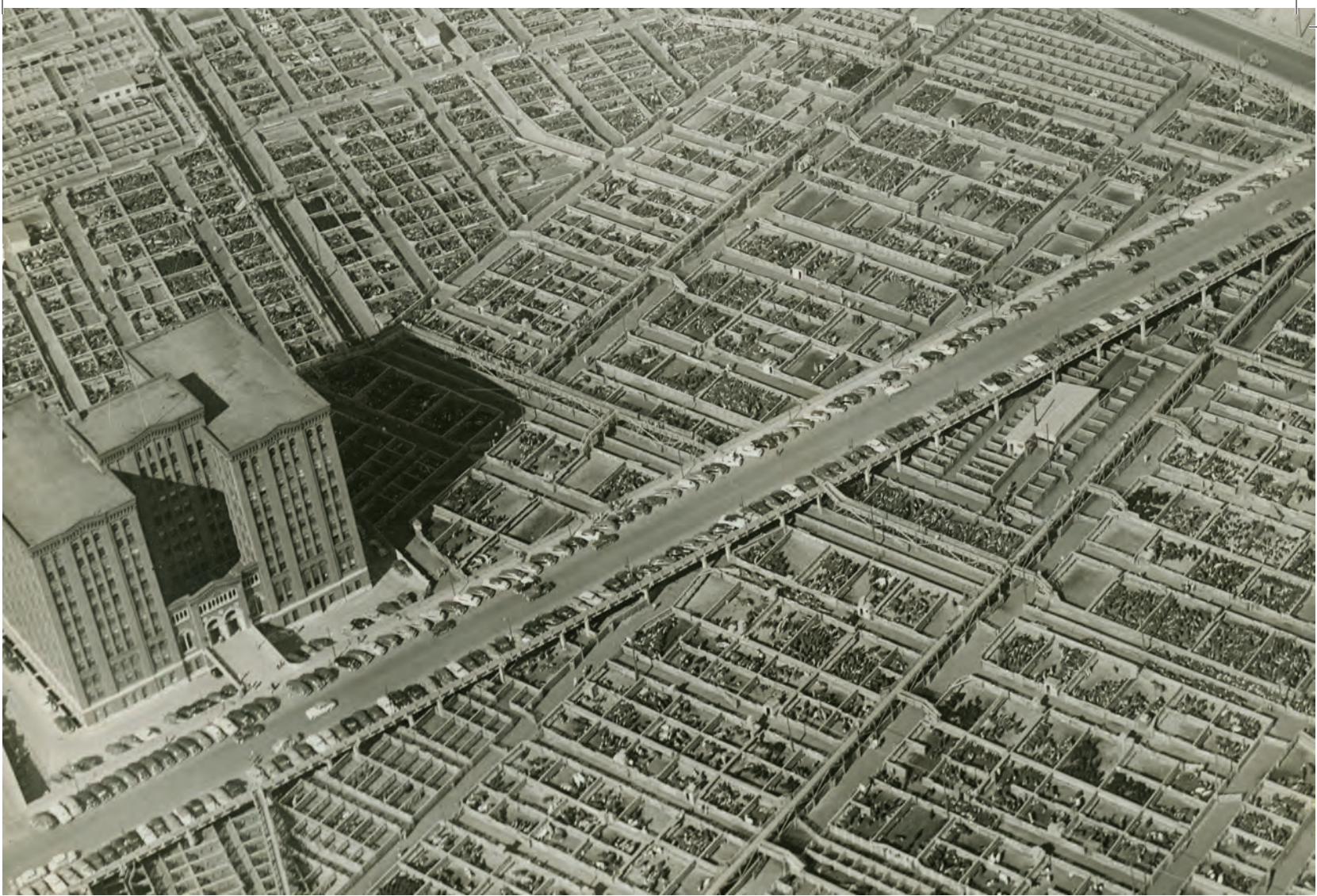


Illustrator John Falter painted this view of his hometown, Falls City, Nebraska at Christmas, for the cover of the December 21, 1946, issue of *The Saturday Evening Post*. After years of economic depression followed by wartime rationing, Nebraskans looked forward to a more prosperous postwar world. NSHS 10645-4562

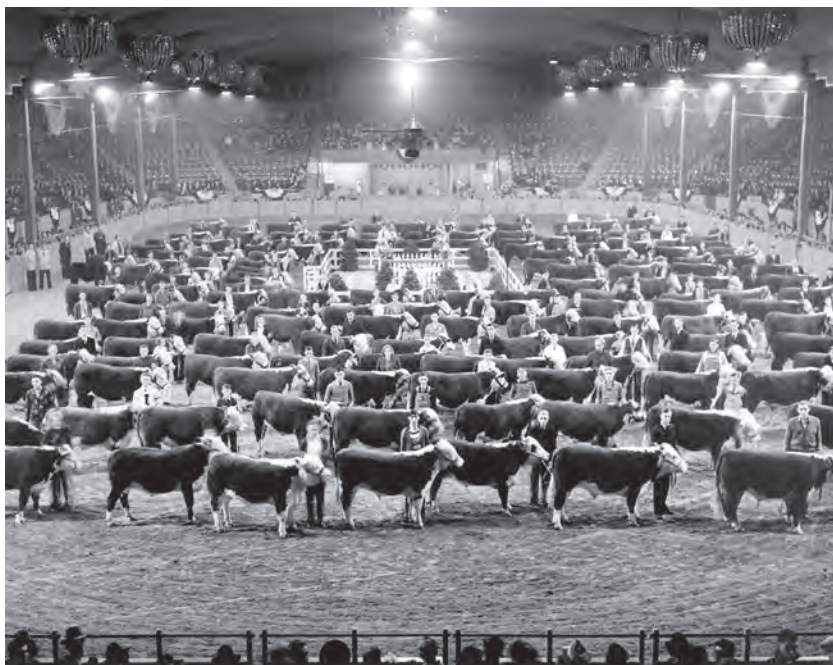


The Blizzard of 1948-49 reigns as the worst Nebraska winter in living memory. Storms from November to February paralyzed transportation and threatened two million head of snowbound livestock. The Nebraska National Guard C-45 shown here—seen through the open cargo door of another plane—was part of the U.S. Air Force's Operation Haylift, which dropped hundreds of tons of hay for stranded herds. In spite of these and other efforts, losses were staggering. Meanwhile, Operation Snowbound, a multi-state project led by the Army Corps of Engineers, became the world's largest bulldozer operation. NSHS RG3139-109





Union Stockyards, Omaha, 1949. Wartime rationing was followed by a postwar boom in demand for beef. In 1956, Omaha eclipsed Chicago to become the world's largest meatpacking center. Starting in the 1960s, however, technological changes began decentralizing meatpacking and reducing its need for skilled laborers. NSHS RG1085-24-7



Ak-Sar-Ben Annual Stock Show, "The World's Largest 4-H Baby Beef Exposition," Omaha, undated. Founded in 1895, the Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben (Nebraska spelled backwards) is a civic and philanthropic organization based in Omaha. Ak-Sar-Ben Coliseum was part of a complex that featured a popular horse racing track, and it hosted Omaha society's fanciest event, the Ak-Sar-Ben Coronation Ball. The annual ball crowned the king and queen of mythical Quivira, selected from Omaha's wealthiest families. Here, the only royalty under the chandeliers are champion feeder calves. NSHS RG2341-113





Steer wrestling or “bulldogging” at Nebraska’s Big Rodeo, Burwell, 1951. Founded thirty years earlier, the Burwell rodeo became known for drawing top talent, such as Texan Vernon “Dude” Smith. Like today, other small-town rodeos across the state drew local and regional competitors—men and women who worked at ranches and feedlots during the week and hitched up their horse trailers on weekends.  
NSHS RG4062-3



Gold’s Food Basket, Lincoln, 1951. The grocery was housed in part of the Gold’s Department Store building downtown. Nationwide, the postwar years saw the growth of ever-larger stores and more centralized retail shopping. Soon, retail would begin moving away from city centers toward suburban shopping centers that offered more space for automobile parking.  
NSHS RG2018-65-46





The flooded Missouri River, looking upstream toward the Asarco Lead Refinery from the Douglas Street Bridge, Omaha, April 16, 1952. The river crested two days later. Some 28,000 volunteers worked to raise existing levees and flood walls. The barriers held, but other river cities were not so fortunate. A chain of enormous dams and reservoirs was already under construction from Montana to northeast Nebraska, but the Army Corps of Engineers' "Pick-Sloan Plan" was not complete before this flood.

NSHS RG2341-343



Ken Eddy's Drive-In, 48th and "O" Streets, Lincoln, July 11, 1952. Why go inside the restaurant when you can eat in your car? Drive-ins weren't new in the 1950s, but became iconic of mid-century automobile culture. Nebraska had its share of home-grown drive-ins with signage designed to lure motorists, from the UFO-inspired signage at Scotty's Drive-In in Scottsbluff, to the neon cowboy above Bronco's Hamburgers in Omaha. Ken Eddy's in Lincoln featured a three-color starburst. Another Lincoln drive-in, Runza, grew into a regional chain serving Volga German sandwiches. NSHS RG2183-1952-711-2





Chief Honest John's curio shop, along U.S. Highway 30 in North Platte, 1958. After returning home from World War II, W. E. John opened a small plastic manufacturing operation and gift shop that soon took on a Wild West theme. John thus took advantage of three postwar trends: automobile tourism, plastic manufacturing, and faux-Western pop culture. Across Nebraska, Highway 30 was dotted with themed gift shops and "tourist traps."

NSHS RG1668-8-42



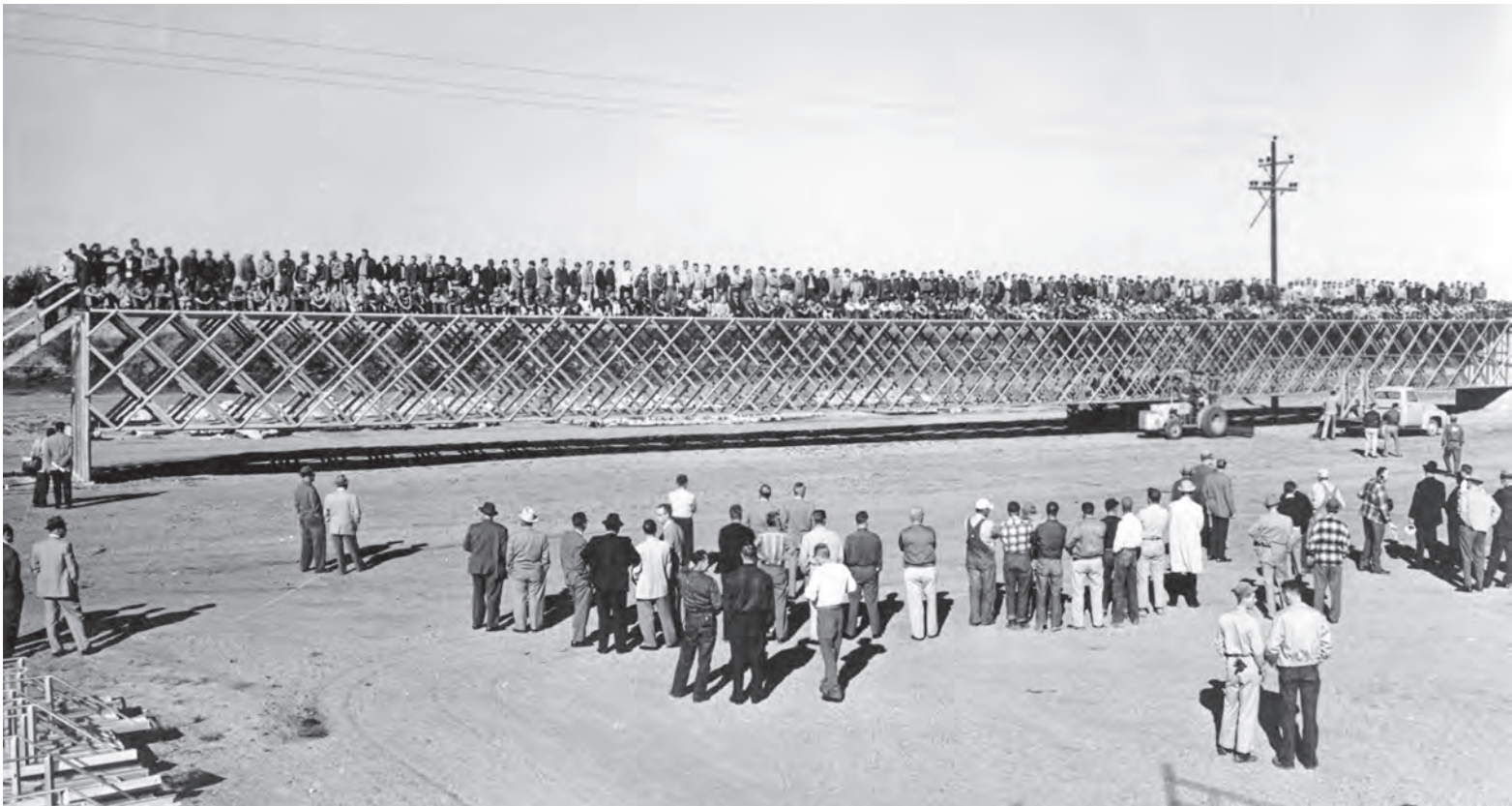
Mari Sandoz at a book signing in Lincoln, 1961. While American pop culture celebrated a mythologized West, Sandoz wrote about its real history, and was ahead of her time in her non-stereotypical portrayals of Native cultures. Born near Hay Springs in 1896, she had an unhappy frontier childhood under her domineering father, "Old Jules" Sandoz, and her early books so offended Nebraskans with their harsh portrayals of local life that she left the state partly to avoid the backlash. Yet she lived long enough to be venerated as one of Nebraska's most important writers.

NSHS RG2097-1961-11024





Charles Starkweather of Lincoln, age nineteen, after his arrest in January 1958 for a murder spree that left eleven people dead. He was executed the following year. The senselessness and randomness of the killings shocked Nebraskans. Nationally, he became an icon both of alienation and of people's fears. Over the decades his story has been fictionalized in numerous books, films, and music. As a boy, author Stephen King kept a scrapbook on Starkweather. "I knew I was looking at the future," King told *The Guardian* in 2000. "His eyes were a double zero. There was just nothing there." NSHS RG809-4-1x

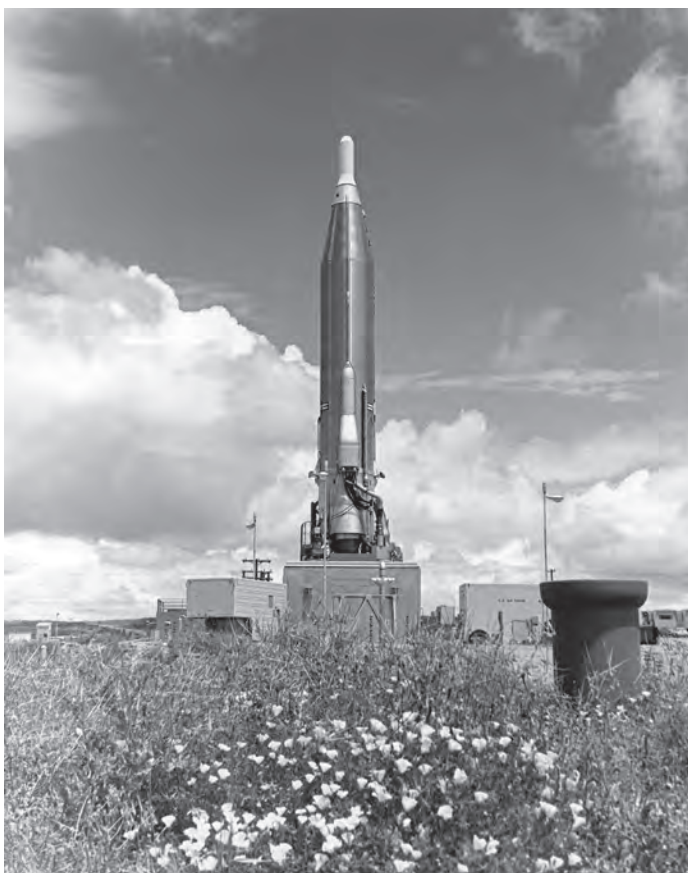


Behlen Manufacturing, Columbus, October 1959. Employees demonstrate the strength of a 200-foot-long Dubl-Panl roof with a live load of 289 people. A classic example of a farmer/inventor, Walt Behlen founded his company in 1936 and expanded it greatly after World War II. Today, Behlen corrugated metal buildings are a common sight, but at first people thought they looked flimsy. With a dash of showmanship, Behlen arranged a variety of demonstrations such as hanging a long row of tractors from the ceiling of one building, or designing another to withstand a nuclear test. NSHS RG1595-0





Brownlee vs. Thedford, ca. 1960. Small schools don't always have enough boys to field an eleven-man football team. The eight-man game has long been popular in Nebraska, but these two Sandhills teams appear to have only seven boys per side. Another version of the game, six-man football, was invented in Chester, Nebraska, in 1935, and is played in the state to this day. An ongoing rural-to-urban population shift resulted in small schools getting smaller, and then to a trend of school consolidation. NSHS RG3314-1-10



Atlas-F missile in launch position, eastern Nebraska, ca. 1962-65. The SM-65 Atlas was America's first intercontinental ballistic missile. Modified versions were used in most of the Project Mercury space flights. Starting in 1958, nuclear-armed Atlas missiles were assigned to several U.S. Air Force bases, including Offutt and Lincoln bases in Nebraska. Shown here, the Atlas-F type was the first to be stored vertically in underground silos designed to withstand blast pressure. With Minuteman missiles deployed in the Panhandle, and Strategic Air Command at Offutt AFB serving as America's nuclear command center, Nebraskans knew their state would be a prime target in the event of nuclear war. NSHS RG1727-2-1





Actor Gary Healy (in mask) on the stage set of the KMTV children's program, *The Hawk*, Omaha, ca. 1960. As with radio, early television relied more on local programming than at present. But in other ways the new medium led to a decline in local entertainment. Dance halls and regional touring bands fell on hard times as more people stayed home in the evenings to watch TV. NSHS RG4628-3



Cinco de Mayo celebration at the Terry Carpenter Center, Terrytown, 1964. Featuring local or visiting mariachi bands, the annual dance drew Mexican-American families from around the North Platte Valley. As many as 400 people attended these events, many wearing traditional dress. Some mariachi bands from this era still perform today, with new members mentored by old members. Courtesy of Chabella Guzman



Civil rights march, Omaha, July 8, 1963. Nationally, this was the year of the Birmingham campaign and the March on Washington. In Omaha, where segregation was less blatant than its Southern counterpart, racial redlining by banks and insurance companies restricted black residents to north Omaha, and many businesses refused to serve or hire blacks. Here, 150 protesters picket a meeting convened by Mayor James Dworak. Across town, meanwhile, Peony Park continued to flout the law with its whites-only swimming pool; picketing by the local NAACP Youth Council pressured the owners into compliance later that month. NSHS RG2467-28