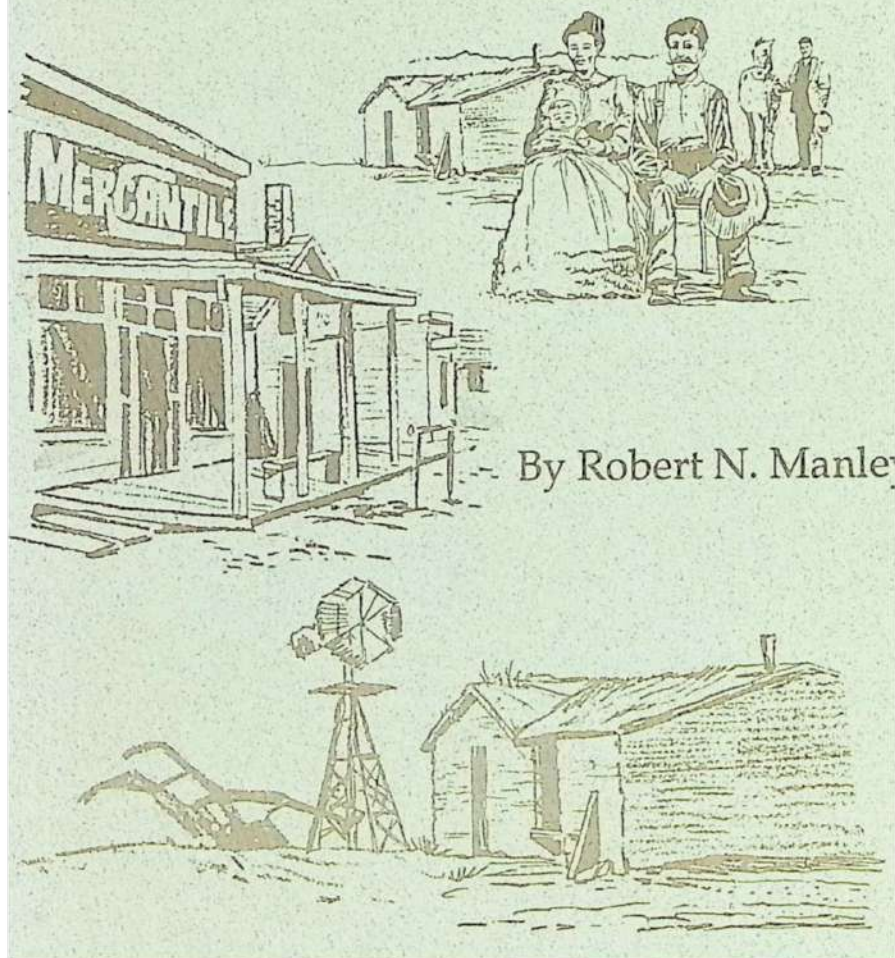
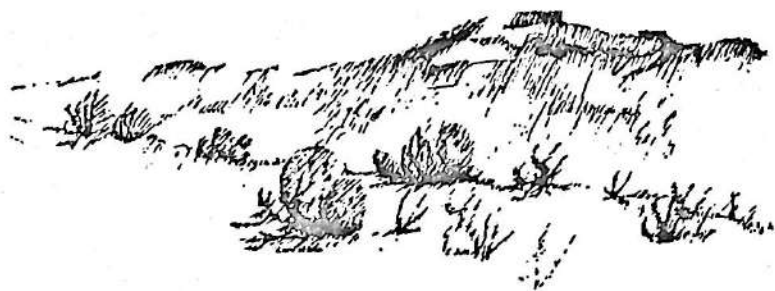


The Meaning of Nebraska





The Meaning of Nebraska

*Nebraska! Scorched by the sun,
Split by the Platte;
Frozen down the middle
And rolled out flat.*

No one ever described Nebraska better than the writer of this pioneer jingle. A climate of scorching and chilling extremes; a more or less flat terrain; and the Platte River, our State's topographical and historical backbone—that's Nebraska.

In 1820 Major Stephen H. Long led a band of soldiers and scientists along the Platte. Long had been sent by his superiors in Washington to examine the mysterious prairie wilderness which lay west of the Missouri River. No one back there yet understood what Mr. Jefferson had purchased in 1803.

Long and his companions were not impressed with the land they crossed. Edwin James, botanist, observed that most of the country was "wholly unfit for cultivation," and was suitable only for buffalo and other wild game.

This was in 1820, remember. In 1987 two Rutgers University professors suggested that it would be best to return portions of the plains country to the buffalo. We don't seem to be making much progress.

Several years ago I became aware of how modern Easterners see Nebraska. I talked to scores of tourists on I-80. I asked them what they thought of Nebraska. Most responded that Nebraska was flat, barren, hot, dry, and boring. One New York City policeman expressed himself succinctly: "How in the world do you people live out here in the middle of nothing?"

So, Nebraska means, first of all, a land that people look upon and notice upfront what we *don't* possess. Every generation of Nebraskans has had to deal with this "deficiency syndrome," for the very name "Nebraska" evokes for many people the image of "that long, hot, dry, flat stretch of ground which lies between where I am and where I want to go."

The Desert: Challenge and Response

An understanding of Nebraska and the plains country starts with Walter Prescott Webb's controversial book, *The Great Plains*, which was published in 1931. Webb asked his readers to imagine that a "cultural fault" ran north and south through the plains along the 98th meridian. East of that fault, he said, civilization was built upon timber, land and water. West of the fault only land remained, so, insisted this crusty Texan, institutions and ideas developed in the East didn't work. This inability to adapt to the plains environment, Webb wrote, "explains" our history.

Westerners were not pleased with Webb's pessimistic appraisal. Could be he was too hard on the plains. Like Major Long, Webb assumed that the plains would remain a stock-raising and farming district. In the 21st century, however, the plains might become a more diversified region, with new towns and cities appearing, with a host of new technologies providing employment for men and women who want to raise their families in a rural environment.

The point is, Nebraska means people responding to a tough environment—seeking solutions, enduring failures, picking themselves up and either going back "to the wife's folks" or making another try. As an old-timer in Cheyenne county once told me, "Nebraska is the best darn 'next year' country there is."

Let me define the historical cycle which Nebraskans deal with. Start with Major Long who said that Nebraska was a desert—treeless, semi-arid and remote. But in the 1850s Long's desert was more or less discredited by town builders and promoters who said that railroads would eliminate remoteness; tree-planters would clothe the prairie with forests; and telegraph wires, railroads and plowed ground would induce rainfall.

In the 1870s, however, some Congressmen hoisted a caution flag. Perhaps, they said, the "desert" was still there. Perhaps it would be best if homesteaders were not permitted to take claims west of the 100th meridian.

You can imagine the howl of protest which arose in Nebraska. The Nebraska State Board of Agriculture hired two scientists, Samuel Aughey and C. D. Wilber, to write a response to this "scurrilous notion" that settlement should be restrained. These men eloquently stated the case for increasing rainfall induced by the "advancing line of civilization." Their argument carried the day. Westerners cheered as Congress backed off. Restrictions were not imposed upon prospective homesteaders, and the farmers' frontier moved west into the "arid lands."

Despite the theories advanced by Nebraska's scientific promoters, it was soon apparent that the "desert" had not been vanquished.

Drought punished the land in the 1890s; disaster came again in the 1930s. There was, however, one figurative and literal bright spot in the "dirty thirties." George W. Norris, a man of particular vision, succeeded in realizing his lifelong dream of bringing electricity to rural America.

The dust bowl and the outward migration of the "Okies" dramatized the plight of the plains. A New Deal committee was formed to study the situation and in 1938 published *The Future of the Great Plains*. The authors concluded that government must take the initiative in restructuring the economic life of the region. The dust bowl should be returned to grass, and residents moved from marginal farms and dying towns to places where they could make a living. Recognize the limits placed by nature upon the plains, insisted the writers, and use government to create a rational plains economy.

Most of this ambitious New Deal program was never implemented, for in 1940 it began to rain, and a year later the United States entered World War II.

Residents of post-war Nebraska were confident that the "desert" had been conquered. During the 1950s, however, that confidence was momentarily shaken by a severe drought. But deep well irrigation came to the rescue. Thousands of wells were drilled and acres upon acres of land put under irrigation. Irrigation companies, chemical dealers and farm equipment stores pumped new economic life into rural communities.

Then came the downturn of the 1970s which was triggered not so much by crop failures as by high energy costs, financial crisis, and falling land values. Concurrently, environmentalists seized the headlines as they fought to stop the ecological disaster they saw on the horizon. There was talk of depleted underground water supplies—and of water contamination. Another "desert" was in the making, this one compounded of uncertainty, disillusionment and fear.

So, we've run the cycle several times. We return now to Professors Frank and Deborah Popper of Rutgers University who insist that the settlement of the plains was the "largest, longest-running agricultural and environmental miscalculation in the nation's history." And we Nebraskans live in the middle of the mess, challenged once again to respond to the "desert."

Which reminds me of the Nebraska land agent who greeted an Eastern visitor as he alighted from the train. "Look at this wonderful country!" declared the agent. "Full of promise. Money to be made here, for sure!"

The Easterner was not impressed. He squinted through the dusty haze. "Don't know that it looks so promising to me," he mumbled.

"Sure," replied the agent. "We aren't perfect yet. But all we need is a little water and a good society."

The visitor snorted and mumbled, "Friend, that's all Hell needs."



Into the Desert

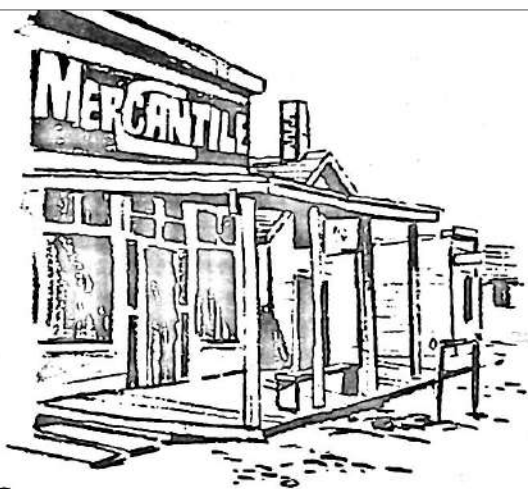
The Platte River didn't have many admirers in the early 1800s. Fur traders cursed the shallow stream because it wouldn't float their fur-laden barges. In 1849 an Army officer looked upon the Platte and declared that the river had absolutely no commercial value.

In the 1840s and 1850s, however, covered wagon pioneers found a use for the Platte River and its broad valley. As trails historian Merrill Mattes has written, the most important thing about the Platte was that it led in the right direction. It provided a superb road west.

What did the overlanders think of Nebraska? Byron M. McKinstry, an Illinois farm lad on his way to California in 1850, camped one night along the Platte. In his diary he wrote that "soil is favorable" for farming, but that there wasn't enough timber "for farming purposes." Farmers in other wagon trains echoed these sentiments.

In the 1850s overland journeys were made easier by the appearance of road ranches along the trails. Operated by opportunistic entrepreneurs, these ranches provided goods and services for the traveling public. Moreover, many road ranchers got into the livestock business because the emigrants always had cattle, horses and mules to trade or sell. These ranchers built up sizeable herds. They hadn't heard that Nebraska wasn't supposed to be a stock-raising country.

These road ranchers discovered that a person could make a living in the "desert." Please note that this pioneer Nebraska industry was tourism—an industry built upon money spent by travelers as they hurried across flat, windswept, boring Nebraska.



Town Builders

When Nebraska was opened to settlers in 1854, the second wave of developers arrived to challenge the desert. These were the town builders, eager, expectant capitalists who had come to make their fortunes by building towns and selling choice corner lots.

They came to lay out and promote what they called "commercial towns," that is, towns that would prosper as steamboat ports, as overland freighting depots and, in a few years, as railroad centers. Maps made at this time have a dotted line drawn in about fifty miles west of the Missouri River. The line marked the "limit of cultivation." That didn't bother the town builders. They had come to sell lots, not plant corn.

Town builders set to work immediately platting and lithographing their new towns. Peter Sarpy, that venerable Missouri River fur trader, was one of them. He formed the Belleview Town Company which proposed to stake out a city "upon a grand scale," which would one day be the capital of Nebraska as well as a commercial "emporium." One day, Sarpy boasted, his city would have a population of 20,000.

John MacMurphy, a resident of New York City, was enthusiastic about Nebraska's prospects. He and several partners purchased an interest in a town site in northeastern Nebraska. They came west to look after their investment confident that in a few years they would be "highly honored citizens of a new realm, perhaps get to be a congressman or even governor" of Nebraska.

In 1856 Dr. John McPherson, a successful Ohio doctor and businessman, moved to Brownville. He brought with him a printing press and a young man, Robert Furnas, who was to operate the press and edit a weekly newspaper. More than any other man McPherson was responsible for Brownville's rapid growth. In the 1870s, however, he departed for the Republican valley to build a new town which he named Republican City.

Nebraska City "loomed up" as the most successful commercial town in Nebraska territory. It controlled a large share of the overland freighting business; and it was this business which had a ripple effect upon the local economy. Operators of freight lines purchased wheat and corn from local farmers who had to break and plant more ground in order to meet the demand. Investors then had to put up mills to process agricultural products, and factories opened to supply the implements needed by the freighters, farmers and mill operators.

The ripples which emanated from Nebraska City's vigorous economy pushed the "line of cultivation" west; but the "conquest" of the desert awaited new technology, specifically, the railroad. One Nebraska promoter put it this way:

Improvement in Illinois was snail-paced at first, for it came in on ox-carts. It entered Iowa on steamboats, and was therefore confined to the banks of navigable rivers. Its advent into Nebraska was on locomotives, which, plying on iron rivers that render all prairies navigable, leave no corner of the land untouched.

The railroad was hailed as the wonder of the age, the key to future prosperity. But before many years had elapsed, Nebraskans wondered why they had worked so hard to get railroads. The residents of Brownville, for example, voted several hundred thousand dollars in railroad bonds, but the construction company absconded with the money and never built the railroad. Brownville was left with a debt which ruined the promising town.

The bond question was particularly infuriating to settlers who knew, as a Beatrice editor commented, that they must choose between "depopulation and stagnation without railroads and life and prosperity with railroads and bonds."

Moreover, there was no longer a place for private town builders. Most railroads operated their own town building companies which monopolized the business. Factory owners also found themselves under the railroads' thumb. West Point entrepreneurs, led by John Neligh, raised money to build a half dozen factories. For a few years West Point "boomed." Then, without warning, the railroad which served the town revised its rate scale and put the factories out of business. It was clear that the railroads did not want to encourage industries in Nebraska. As far as railroad managers were concerned, it would be best if manufactured goods were brought into the state by rail and raw materials carried out.

The settlers had grounds for another complaint. Railroad construction did not seem to follow a rational scheme. While railroad companies virtually ignored northeastern Nebraska, they overbuilt competing lines in other parts of the State. As a result, lines were built that never turned a profit, resulting in poor service and high rates. The pioneers were willing to "pay for the whistle," but they were never sure that they got their money's worth.

Of course, no town's future was guaranteed. Nebraska City is a case in point. It had been the leading commercial town in the Territory, but it fell behind in the race for railroad connections. Moreover, the town's leaders worked to have the state capital moved from Omaha to Lincoln. They eventually realized that this politically inspired decision created a real problem for Nebraska City. Lincoln's trade area spread east and ate into Nebraska City's economic sphere.

The residents of Nebraska City hoped that Lincoln's economic expansion would be checked in time, for they, along with most Nebraskans, assumed that the capital would be moved to a city in the center of the State. In 1869 George Ainsworth, a well-known railroad builder, passed up a chance to invest in Lincoln real estate because, he said, Lincoln was "out of the way" and had been given the capital "so that time and deliberation could be taken in choosing a permanent site." Lincoln's leaders, however, proved to be adroit politicians and Lincoln retained the capital.

One particular aspect of town building should be noted. Nebraska's first towns were on the Missouri River. Their trade areas lay to the west; and as these trade areas filled up with settlers, men from the Missouri River towns began to build new towns and open businesses in these regions. In this way businessmen of Omaha financed most of the first businesses in Grand Island. Eventually this "growing by giving" web became more intricate, for cities like Grand Island provided the capital for building new towns in its trade area. Grand Island investors helped build Ravenna, Broken Bow and many Sand Hills towns.

Omaha remained, however, the vital center of the process. It was, truly, the "Gateway City" when it came to facilitating Nebraska's economic development.

Yet even this system of support could not overcome the limits imposed upon economic growth by Nebraska's lack of coal. Business leaders insisted that the shortage of cheap fuel, more than any other factor, prevented Nebraska from industrializing. So, in the 1870s, Nebraskans set out to find coal. Professor Samuel Aughey, a scientist at the University in Lincoln, encouraged the search. There was no doubt, he said, that beds of coal lay under the Nebraska prairie.

Newspapers reported dozens of coal "strikes," but none of these discoveries produced the genuine article. In 1882 Professor Aughey recanted. There was no coal in Nebraska; hence Nebraskans should set to work harnessing the sun and the wind to provide energy, declared Aughey.

Since solar energy and wind power were not practical solutions for Nebraska's energy problem (will they ever be?), our citizens turned to developing the only energy source they had, and that was water. Kearney led the way. A canal was built to bring Platte River water to the city, there to be used to power factories. In 1888 Kearney adver-

tised itself as "The Minneapolis of the West," with 2500 horsepower available for industrial use. Unfortunately, the Platte didn't carry enough water to provide reliable, year-around power, and the depression of 1893 wiped out the financiers who were backing Kearney's industrial development. A huge brick cotton mill was among the factories which closed down.

These frustrations resulted in a vision—the notion that the development of Nebraska's water resources ought to be under public control. For years coal barons preyed upon Nebraskans. Power company magnates waited to take over Nebraska's water resources. The people eventually said "no." In response to a deficiency—energy—Nebraska came up with an important innovation—public power.



Community Builders

We usually regard a town in economic terms, for no community survives for long without a viable economic base. But a town is more than economics in action. It is a place where families rear children; where schools prepare the next generation for their responsibilities; and where churches pass on the accumulated wisdom of the ages. A town is also a community.

C. W. Giddings, who came to Nebraska in 1857, saw himself as a community builder. A Methodist pastor from Pennsylvania, Giddings led members of his flock to Pawnee County to build "a city on the hill." But a series of disasters overwhelmed the settlers, many of whom finally decided to pull out. Giddings asked John Chivington, the presiding elder of the Nebraska district, to "exhort" the people to stay. Chivington, however, looked into the discouraged faces of the settlers and knew that he could not revive them. He dismissed them with what has been called Nebraska's most famous prayer. "Lord," intoned Chivington, "send us settlers and make them too poor to leave."

A sense of community did not grow overnight. In pioneer days money went into starting businesses, not into building schools, churches and libraries. All of which irritated women who were the principal pioneer community builders. They were the ones who

agitated for schools. They were the ones who held innumerable sociables and bake sales to raise money to pay the salary of a pastor. Women wanted their towns to be more than business centers.

Communities also developed in rural areas. They grew up around schools, churches and post offices. One reason for the 160-acre homestead, said one Nebraska promoter, was so families would be numerous enough to support district schools and "other civilizing institutions."

Since thousands of immigrants came to Nebraska in the 19th century, many communities, especially in rural areas, became ethnic communities. Railroad agents assured immigrants that they would be able to retain their language and Old World customs in Nebraska. Agents then located immigrants in distinct, separate geographical areas. Many Nebraska counties still reveal the pattern—Swedes in one part of the county, Danes in another, Czechs in another, and Germans in their own corner.

Immigrants brought with them an Old World heritage replete with age-old prejudices. They had no desire to mix with other nationalities. In Nebraska's pioneer days a mixed marriage was one between a German and a Czech, with the young couple disowned by both sets of parents.

By the 1890s a strong anti-immigrant sentiment had developed in Nebraska. "Americans" resented immigrants who resisted assimilation; and they held immigrants responsible for the defeat of woman's suffrage and prohibition laws. Education, however, ended up being a major battleground.

Many immigrant parents sent their children to parochial schools which were taught in foreign languages. In the early 1900s the State launched a modest bilingual program designed to lure immigrant children from parochial schools to the public schools where they could be "Americanized." The program was not particularly successful.

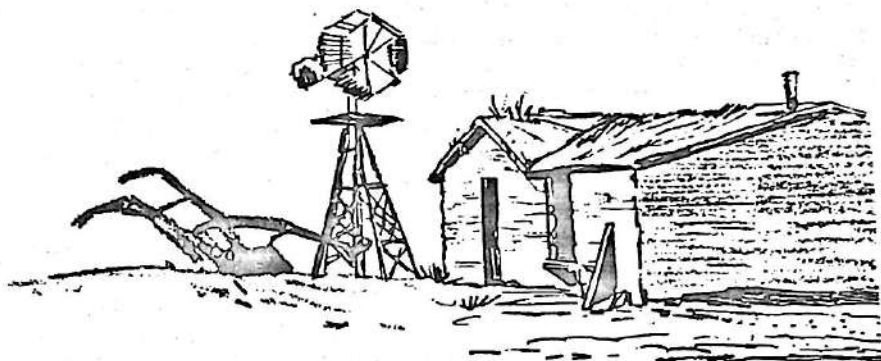
In 1905 the Nebraska State Supreme Court handed down a ruling which exacerbated the quarrel. The Court ruled that Bible reading and prayer were not permissible in public schools. Indignant public school administrators said they would not abide by the ruling. Spokesmen for "Americans" said that the ruling was part of the "conspiracy" then under way to destroy the public schools.

The contention reached terrible dimensions in World War I when the Nebraska State Council of Defense announced that when it came to disloyalty, patriotic Nebraskans were free to operate under a "higher law" than the Constitution. Persons and organizations, judged by public opinion to be unpatriotic, might be attacked with impunity. And they were.

The Americanization campaign continued after the Armistice. The 1920 Constitutional Convention recommended that English be made the official language of the State, and the voters adopted the amendment. The Ku Klux Klan then swaggered onstage, determined to lead the Americanization campaign to a successful conclusion.

The KKK was not a covert operation. It operated publicly. In O'Neill children who attended the Catholic elementary school walked between lines of hooded Klansmen to reach the door. Klan members stationed themselves in front of stores in Wood River owned by Catholics, and in York graduates of the Klan school in that city paraded every Saturday morning around the town square.

So much for the melting pot and the notion that assimilation was a swift and painless process. Descendants of Germans, Swedes, Danes and Czechs who bore the brunt of the anti-immigrant campaign during World War I and the 1920s, ought to have sympathy for recent immigrants who are now going through the fiery furnace of Americanization.



The Desert Shall Blossom

Judging from diaries, letters, editorials and sermons of the day, the pioneers' favorite Scripture was Isaiah 35:1: "The wilderness and solitary place shall be glad for them, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose."

But who would be the agents of God's promised conquest of the desert? Here in Nebraska town builders took first crack at the task, but George Miller, publisher of the *Omaha Herald*, said that town builders could not do the job. Miller declared, "Nebraska's an agricultural state or it is nothing." Farmers were needed to develop Nebraska.

First, though, agricultural settlers had to be brought into the new land. That task was assumed by the State Board of Immigration, local immigration societies and, most importantly, by the railroads. Agents were sent east and to Europe; pamphlets and broadsides were circulated. Every effort was made to "spread the good news" about Nebraska. Serious, hard-working settlers wanted. Croakers, groaners and loafers need not apply.

J. Sterling Morton did not approve the promotional tactics employed by Nebraskans. In 1874, while in the East, he had an opportunity to gauge the effectiveness of Nebraska's advertising

campaign. He told Governor Robert Furnas that pamphlets published by both the railroads and the State were "regarded with suspicion by the public and charged with mendacity generally." Land agents met "with about the same cheerful and cordial reception which generally greets a solicitor of life insurance."

Morton advised Governor Furnas to assign advertising to the State Board of Agriculture whose reports would at least have the air of detachment. To attract settlers, he said, "we must not appear as seeking Emigration by Agents who bear that obnoxious name. We must deodorize the State in that regard. The Board of Agriculture is the only organization which can do any good. It can do good because it has not land to sell or settle."

Since it was land, particularly free land, which drew many settlers to Nebraska, we need to examine the Homestead law, one of the most important—and misunderstood—laws ever passed by Congress.

For years Congressmen talked about a homestead law. The problem was that many lawmakers opposed giving away public land. Free gifts of land, they insisted, would undermine individualism and let loose a dangerous spirit of "paternalism."

In resolving this quandry, the authors of the law which Congress adopted in 1862, accepted the premise that wilderness land was without value. Not until land was "improved" did it assume value. Consequently, the law required persons who took homestead claims to "improve" their claims by building houses, putting down wells. Homesteaders, then, did not receive free land. They earned it by "improving" it.

This "improvement" principle was applied in another connection by policy makers. Many of Nebraska's early leaders, such as J. Sterling Morton, used the idea to justify the forcible removal of Native Americans from land coveted by white settlers. Speaking at Nebraska's territorial fair in 1860, Morton expressed this view bluntly:

The American Indian in whom there are none of the elements of thrift held a tenancy upon these fertile plains for centuries, but there was neither labor in his arm nor progression in his spirit. He was an unworthy occupant of so goodly a land, and he has been supplanted.... Their destiny is completed; they are journeying to their fate. They must die and in a few years hence only be known through their history as it was recorded by the Anglo-Saxon while he pushed them before him.... The Anglo-Saxon race are being driven by the hand of God across the continent of America and are to inhabit and have dominion over it all.

Now, to return to that man or woman who had taken a homestead claim. What if the homesteader changed his or her mind about homesteading and wanted to surrender the claim and move on?

What about the improvements? Were claimants to move on, leaving the fruits of their labor for the next occupant of the claim to enjoy?

That made no sense to the settlers, so they worked out a logical, though entirely extra-legal, process. The person who relinquished his or her claim had the "right" to sell the improvements to the next claimant. This "claims business," as it was called, became big business along the frontier. The sale of claims generated considerable capital which was then used to buy store goods, to purchase new machinery or additional land.

It is obvious that for many Nebraska pioneers land was a commodity. Ownership of land did not open the door to some mystical, perfect existence, simply an opportunity to make money by selling improved claims. The "claims business" was no secret. Newspapers carried columns of "claims for sale" advertisements; and well-known promoters, such as James D. Butler, told prospective settlers that their claims would rise continually in value and could be sold at any time, as Butler put it, "for several times the government price."

So, in operation the Homestead law was full of surprises for Eastern theorists. Homesteaders showed little inclination to put down permanent roots, not as long as there was money to make in the claims business. During the 1880s editors acknowledged that farmers were not making money from their crops—their only sure source of income was sale of their claims. As the editor of the *Grand Island Independent* wrote in 1887, the farmer's only hope for making a profit was "in the advancement in price for his homestead, from year to year."

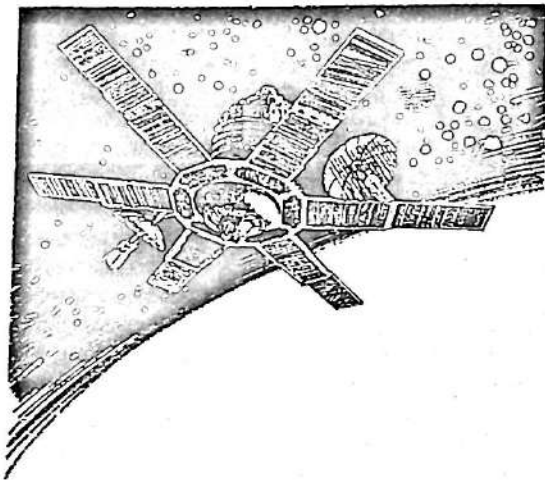
For thousands of homesteaders, however, it really didn't matter, because in the early 1890s their economic world collapsed. Drought and grasshoppers devastated crops, banks closed, mortgage companies closed their doors and farmers left the land in droves. Farmers were unable to pay off the mortgages they had taken out in the 1880s. Populist orators declared that it was time for angry farmers to drive the money-lenders from the temples of rural Nebraska.

Arthur Bentley, a Grand Island resident, was attending John Hopkins University in the early 1890s. For one of his classes in political economy he wrote a paper which described the economic condition of farmers in Harrison township, Hall County, Nebraska.

Bentley's research revealed that farmers who were good managers were weathering the economic storm. They had resisted the temptation to borrow money against the rising value of their land. They had paid off their debts instead of incurring more indebtedness. They were in good shape to ride out the hard years.

Farmers who were fighting to survive, Bentley believed, had learned their lesson. Never again would they borrow money against rising land values.

Arthur Bentley was not much of a prophet.



The Challenge of Change

In 1992, as Nebraskans celebrate the 125th anniversary of Statehood, the "desert" looms again—deserted farms, empty buildings on main streets, contaminated wells, falling underground water tables, the flight of young people.

These are not new problems for Nebraskans. We have dealt with them in one form or another before. It might be some consolation, however, to realize that many of these problems, which we formerly thought were ours alone, are now national in scope.

Nonetheless, Nebraskans must face some vital issues.

First, the need for healing in our State. Distrust nurtured by ethnic and racial animosities must be overcome. Little is gained from cultural diversity which nurtures parochialism and separatism.

Second, the need to revive the "growing by giving" principle. The new communities which will be built in Nebraska will be different from earlier communities. They will not serve agriculture or railroads. These new communities will be technologically-based and be people-centered. In order to build these communities, we must renew the economic connections between urban centers and small towns which provide reciprocal benefits.

Technology will play a central role in Nebraska's new period of growth. The railroad "built" 19th century Nebraska; but the railroad, frequently cited as an example of premature enterprise, brought with it innumerable problems. New technologies can bring Nebraska's economic renaissance only if our citizens and leaders learn some important lessons from the past, the most important being not to expect too much from technology. In addition, we must have a broad, enlightened public participation in the process of charting Nebraska's technological future.

And when it comes to technology, let's not forget local tinkers. Nebraska has always had a plethora of inventive minds, such as the Fuller brothers of Angus, pioneer automobile makers; the Petersons of DeWitt who invented the famous visegrip tool; and Charles Smith, a bank clerk who invented metal index tabs which were manufactured in Exeter. From small shops and businesses come large ideas.

Agricultural trends of the past hundred years are not likely to be arrested in the next century *unless* Congress decides to write programs which reward farmers for *how* they farm, rather than for what they raise or don't raise. These new programs would help farmers find ways to reduce their dependence upon chemicals; they would encourage farmers to reduce their irrigated acres and go into some form of dry-land cropping. Agriculture will undoubtedly remain Nebraska's principal industry, but farmers will accept responsibility for maintaining the quality of the water which they, and all Nebraskans, depend upon.

The 19th century was the century of coal, and pioneer Nebraskans had to pay hard cash for imported coal. The 20th century was the petroleum century. Again, Nebraskans had to import the oil and gasoline they used, at least most of it.

Now, however, we enter the 21st century which will in all likelihood be the "water century". Since Nebraska sits atop billions of gallons of ground water, we are likely to conclude that our future is assured.

Unfortunately, it is not. Those who feel that Nebraska's economic future is in the bag ought to tour the depressed coal mining regions of the east and the decaying oil boom towns of the southwest. Here one sees clearly that extractive industries are by nature temporary and, in the long run, do little to build viable regional economies.

Nebraskans must do better with their water. Just as homesteaders regarded land as a commodity, so modern Nebraskans will eventually see water as a commodity, too. They will find ways to market their precious resource efficiently and profitably, in the process generating investment capital which can be used to build new communities and new industries.

Finally, education. Schools will face an enormous challenge in the future. They will be required to train young people who can function in the high-tech environment. In addition, schools need to become community development centers. Several years ago I interviewed a number of high school valedictorians, all of whom had said publicly that they did not intend to stay in Nebraska. Opportunities, they agreed, lay outside of Nebraska.

I asked them if anyone had ever talked with them about the opportunities which existed in Nebraska. They all had the same response—"No." Nebraska loses too many of its talented young people by default. Our schools must be expected to educate students to the possibilities and advantages of careers in Nebraska.

No problem is unmanageable. All that is needed is the will—and the vision—to deal with the problem. Which brings me to the nay-sayers who are not sure that Nebraska has a future. One example—a business leader whom I talked with recently who remarked that as far as he was concerned Nebraska made “no sense.” Nebraska, he declared, “has got nothing—and it is going nowhere!” That was his personal bottom line.

A few months later I had another interesting experience. I had been asked to take a group of students on a tour of Buffalo County. Majors Cemetery in Cedar Creek valley was one of our stops. I led the group to the graves of Eleazor and Emily Carpenter and told them the story of how Eleazor, a Union veteran of the Civil War, brought his family to this valley in 1873. Here, the Carpenters helped build a community. A post office, a church, a school and a cemetery made up that community where the Carpenters and their neighbors came together.

Only the cemetery remains today. I asked the students if they could think of themselves as builders of future communities. Could they be 21st century Carpenters?

None of the students responded. But from the rear of the group came a man's voice. I hadn't paid much attention to the man who broke the silence. He was a college professor, a native of England. He stepped forward and said that he had recently been in London—crowded, filthy, decaying, a totally depressing city. He gazed out over the valley. “I have a different feeling here,” he said quietly. “I see an office building over there in the corn field—a small factory over there—all linked to the financial and economic centers of the world by telecommunications. I see new, shining towns rising in this beautiful land.”

He paused, looked at us and asked, “Why not?”

Indeed, why not.