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Article Summary: Baltensperger considers Nebraska a Midwestern state, first linked to Chicago and other cities by the railroads.

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# LABELS, REGIONS, AND REALITY

By Bradley H. Baltensperger

It's a complicated world. There are nearly six billion people in about two hundred countries speaking several thousand languages and living on individual farmsteads, in small villages, massive metropolitan areas, and suburbs. They are farmers and fishers, manufacturers and bankers, teachers and health care workers. They are surrounded by fields or deserts, mountains or floodplains, hills or valleys. How can we make sense of the amazing variety of our world? Quite simply, we generalize. We reduce complexity by simplifying the world to a manageable level.

When we engage in geographical simplification, we create regions. Their purpose, their *raison d'être*, is to simplify complex reality. But there's a problem with regions—they aren't real! No matter how well we define and delimit their characteristics, they are mental constructs—superficially satisfying and ultimately annoying, even aggravating, generalizations.

Regional labels may be useful in describing differences between clearly contrasting places, but they require boundaries. Sharp lines in the physical environment are rare. The Rocky Mountain front in Colorado is a physiographic example, but few such “natural boundaries” exist in climate, plant communities, or animal ranges, except where continents meet the sea. Distributions of cultural traits and economic patterns are likewise characterized by gradual

transitions rather than “fault lines.”

The fact that we cannot state definitively where the tallgrass prairie gives way to the short prairie grasses does not mean that prior to European settlement Nebraska was a vast uniform sea of medium-height grasses. The frost-free season is shorter in the Panhandle than in the southeastern corner of the state, and the latter receives substantially more precipitation, even though there is no sharp divide between the humid east and semiarid west. There is no abrupt break between the Corn Belt and livestock producing counties of the northeast and the wheat producing areas of the southwest. In the absence of clear lines on the landscape, we draw lines on the map to demonstrate the existence of spatial variation.

That process of regionalization is quite a bit like grading college students. There certainly is a difference between an A paper and a B paper. To give grades, however, “you have to draw a line somewhere.” The student with an 89 has demonstrated nearly the same degree of competence as one with a 90, but when I give the former a B, I “regionalize” her with a student who scored 80. That's hardly fair, which is why we have developed pluses and minuses—evaluative “subregions” that better represent the complexity of the distribution. Like grades, regions are descriptive tools, often unfair, which we use to interpret and categorize reality. But they must not be confused with reality.

For regions to be useful, we must focus on their core characteristics, not on the margins. If only we would bound our regions with zones rather than lines,

we might have more accurate representations of the real world. Nebraska has some of the characteristics of the West, and many midwestern and Plains traits. To insist that we identify the one word that defines the state is to demand that we reduce environmental and human complexity to the simplest terms, and insist that they conform to arbitrary state boundaries, as well.

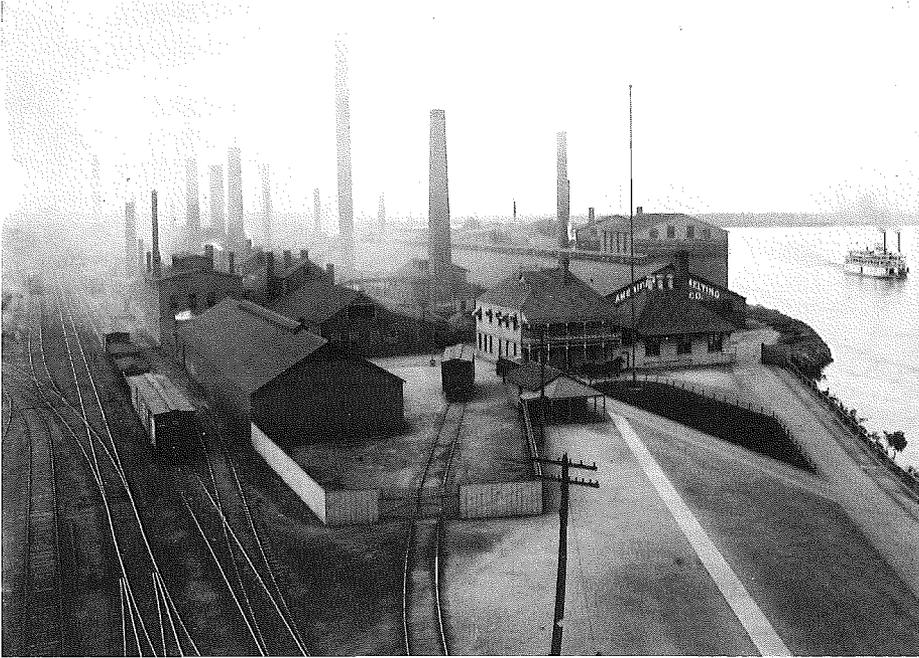
Not that state boundaries are meaningless when it comes to popular understanding of regions. I would guess that *Nebraska History* is far more popular in Sioux County than is *Annals of Wyoming*, even though Lincoln is four hundred miles from Harrison. As a boy, I learned the outlines of Nebraska history and geography from *Know Nebraska*. In eighth grade I received extra credit for learning the names of all of Nebraska's counties (it was either that or memorize “The Village Blacksmith”), but I still can't name the Missouri county that lies six miles east of my family's farm. Through our public and semipublic institutions, through our popular media and our educational system, we develop an identification with a politically bounded entity, and that entity takes on a meaning of its own. And while northwestern Missouri has a physical landscape that greatly resembles that of Otoe County, Nebraska, I developed a much closer identification with such far-flung places as Cedar County and Benkelman.

Having explained all my concerns and caveats, as well as my distrust of regionalization, I have to confess that I like regions. Artificial and arbitrary as they often may be, they give us comfort.

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## Labels, Regions, and Reality



Perched on the Missouri River at Nebraska's easternmost edge, the smokestacks of Omaha's American Smelting Company become monoliths, and their smoke a testament to the power of technology in this June 12, 1901, image. Condra Collection-2037

They help us to understand places better. So where *is* Nebraska, after all? And where is it *not*?

It is certainly not the West, though I'm not sure there is a West anywhere. Blaser notes that the definitions of the West are simply too expansive to be useful. Indeed! The vague West in the popular mind is largely a fantasy land of gunfights and Marlboro men, dime novels and western movies. That West has about as much connection with the real world as the juxtaposition of Roy Rogers and Trigger with Pat Brady's jeep. A real West, historically conceived, would have to feature miners and mine owners, militant labor unions and foreign railroad construction crews, plus drama-filled events such as suburban sprawl, irrigation ditch construction, and federal grazing policy—all surefire subject matter of blockbuster movies.

And the West of today? Let me add to Blaser's list of key elements the jet set of Aspen, the chic boutiques of Santa Fe, the Utah "Jazz," and the Aryan Nation of northern Idaho. I'll quarrel with his

conflation of country music and the West. Even Garth Brooks, though a native of Oklahoma, is a product of Nashville, and it has been years since the term of choice was "country and western"; the western character of music associated with Bob Wills, Hank Williams, and *Tumbling Tumbleweeds* has been nearly invisible (or, rather, inaudible) since Marty Robbins sang about El Paso. And let's be careful not to attribute to the West characteristics that are multiregional (quick, name all the states that have *no* geometric borders! Answer at end of essay). Like Blaser, I am unwilling to link either the Panhandle dry farmer or the Sand Hills rancher with the confusing melange of fantasy, wealth, and bizarre spectacle that "The West" too often conjures up in the contemporary mind.

Blaser's western characteristics that apply most clearly to Nebraska are all associated with the region as a transit zone. The fur trade, Lewis and Clark, the Oregon Trail, the Pony Express, and the transcontinental railroad all utilized Ne-

braska, not as a resource, but as an obstacle to cross. These were simply nineteenth-century harbingers of Interstate 80—Nebraska as barrier between Chicago and the California dream.

How about the Midwest? Shortridge has made a convincing argument that Kansas and Nebraska were the original Midwest; not because the region was midway between the East and the far West, but because it was between the new Northwest of the Dakotas and Minnesota, on the one hand, and the new Southwest of Texas and Indian Territory, on the other.<sup>1</sup> Eventually the term spread not from east to west, as Blaser suggests, but from Kansas and Nebraska eastward to include the industrial states west of the Appalachians.

What makes Nebraska midwestern is not simply its characteristics, but its linkages. The whites who settled the state, mostly between about 1865 and 1885, were overwhelmingly from the core of what we now label the Midwest—Illinois and Iowa, in particular. I'll quarrel here with Blaser's attempt to unilaterally divorce the Midwest from Michigan and Ohio. The Midwest developed in two interrelated directions simultaneously. The manufacturing cities of the region (Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis, Milwaukee, Cincinnati) grew as the farm population grew. Factories processed the raw materials of "Breadbasket" farms and fabricated the machines that enabled more and more farmers to move to cities to work in factories. The linkage between city and farm was, of course, the railroad. What makes Nebraska midwestern in this sense is that it was inextricably linked by rail to the midwestern cities, and particularly to Chicago. They might not have liked it, but even those early ranchers needed Chicago just as it needed them.

"Midwest" is a term inextricably linked to agriculture and the cultural traits historically associated with yeoman farmers. As identified by Shortridge, these include "self-reliance/independence, pride, kindness/openness, realism/pragmatism, strength of



Few things have defined the Nebraska landscape so distinctly as have railroads. Here boxcars and tanker cars follow a serpentine path across the land, flanked by telephone lines. The photograph was probably taken between 1925 and 1931. Condra Collection-998

character, thrift, humbleness, industriousness, progressivism/idealism, and morality.”<sup>2</sup> These were the defining traits of the solid, hardworking small farmers of nearly all of Nebraska at the turn of the century.

Nebraskans have always been Corn Belt farmers in terms of both their places of origin and their crop of choice. Pioneer farmers came to Nebraska to raise corn, whether in Washington County in the east or Dundy County in the far southwest. Even when drought devastated crops in the 1890s, farmers clung to that crop and sought ways to continue its production, either through their belief that “rain follows the plow” or by their support for irrigation systems. A century later, thanks to center pivots and the Ogallala aquifer, Nebraska is as much a Corn Belt state as ever; only in the Panhandle is corn acreage substantially less than wheat acreage.

Finally, Nebraskans *believe* they are midwesterners. A survey of college students at Kearney State (now the University of Nebraska at Kearney) centered the Midwest on Nebraska, and drew the region to include, in addition, Iowa, South Dakota, and Kansas.<sup>3</sup> For Nebraskans, the Midwest is not somewhere else, it is here and now.

As a scholar of the Great Plains, I had better defend that ill-defined term. Most agree that if the Great Plains is a valid region its western edge abuts the Rocky Mountain front, but its eastern limit is nebulous, located somewhere between the 100th meridian and the Missouri River. Recently, many students of the Plains have given up on locating that vague border and have used the eastern boundary of Kansas and Nebraska to define the undefinable.

Why doesn’t “Plains” work? My dictionary says that a plain (as a noun) means “an extensive area of level or rolling treeless country” or “something free from artifice, ornament, or extraneous matter.” In other words, flat or simple. As an adjective “plain” can mean obvious, clear, blunt, simple, ordinary, lacking beauty, undecorated, or “lack of anything likely to catch the attention.” These certainly reflect the perception of many Americans whose sole direct contact with Nebraska is a long day in an air-conditioned schooner traveling the unfortunate and mostly uninspiring route of Interstate 80 from Council Bluffs to Cheyenne. In our modern marketing age, “plain” is not a term that will “sell” a landscape. It’s bad enough that the country believes Nebraska is a flat, treeless wasteland; why

trumpet that perspective? Everyone may want to be the “Heartland,” but who wants to be from the Plains?

Truly, Nebraska is the Midwest. But the western section of the Midwest differs from the more humid states farther east. Let’s agree that as one moves west across the state, the nature of the place changes. The climate turns drier. Natural vegetation becomes sparser. Population and farm density decrease; irrigation use increases; corn and soybeans are replaced by wheat and grassland; towns get smaller. This is still the Midwest, but it’s a different Midwest from central Iowa.

In fact, of course, Nebraska is all of these terms. The eastern half of the state is certainly midwestern in its landscape, its crops, its economy, its politics, its ethnicity. The Panhandle and the Sand Hills are exemplars of the West in terms of open spaces and low densities. Much of the western half may satisfy our definition of the Plains, even if few residents identify with or use that name. Nebraska is predominantly midwestern as measured by its population origins, the small farm landscape that covers most of the state, and the fact that the bulk of its population is located in the “midwestern” half. But Nebraska straddles the fluid, ill-defined border between the humid eastern half of the continent and the subhumid western half. Because of its transitional character, no single term can adequately describe the state’s complexity.

(Answer: Hawaii, presumably in the West, is the only state with no geometric boundaries.)

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> James R. Shortridge, “The Vernacular Middle West,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 75(1985): 48–57.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> James R. Shortridge, personal communication.