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THERE IS NO PLACE LIKE NEBRASKA

By Michael Farrell

In the spring of 1972 when Katherine Farrell and I first set foot in Nebraska, where I had been lured from post-graduate school unemployment to come to work as a filmmaker for the statewide educational TV network, enterprising individuals were baling hay in the spaces between the runways of the Lincoln Municipal Airport. We knew we were no longer “back East” in Chicago, even though we had yet to discover that the term “back East” referred to anyplace other than New York City, Washington, D.C., or the eastern seaboard.

I had heard a little about Nebraska because my brother had given me a copy of *Black Elk Speaks* by Nebraska author John Neihardt, who we were surprised to discover was still alive and living on Vine Street in 1972. So during our first weeks in Lincoln, when we saw real American Indians roaming the streets, we knew we weren't in the Illinois or Hoosier Midwest of our childhoods anymore even though these Indians wore cowboy hats and ribbon shirts instead of the fringed leather and fur outfits we had seen in the Field Museum.

These indigenous folks were the relatives and descendants of Black Elk and his Lakota contemporaries. They were in town to attend the trial in Judge Warren Urbom's federal court of their fellow tribesmen and tribeswomen who had participated in the second big flareup in less than a century at Wounded Knee just over the line from the northern bor-

der of Nebraska on the Pine Ridge Reservation. History was not so remote out here, we learned.

There were other signs. Some farmers seemed to be having as much trouble with the federal government as the Lakota. We heard lots about the “Posse Comitatus.” And some deranged group was making its obscure point by mutilating cattle in the fields. In subtle and not so subtle ways we were reminded that we weren't “back East” any more even though Nebraskans kept asking us “how we liked it here in the Midwest compared to Chicago.”

With all this talk of “back East,” “out West,” and “here in the Midwest” we be-

gan to wonder, “Where were we, anyhow?” The question persistently loomed. As a self-proclaimed conceptual artist (in addition to my skills as a barely employed twenty-four-year-old filmmaker) I thought that I'd try to create an answer worthy of environmental artists Robert Smithson or Christo.

In the late 1960s or early 1970s satellite images of the earth had offered us the chance to see and portray ourselves in unique ways. But it was hard to tell where various boundaries began and ended unless they were obvious features like rivers. From space one could see the Platte or the Niobrara but not the 43rd parallel. I wrote up a proposal



The invention of the automobile liberated people from the confines of distance. Highways connected towns, and mile roads soon defined Nebraska in a rigid grid pattern. Many roads soon became individually identified as well, as shown by this August 1920 photograph. To the left is a concrete road marker identifying the Davey road as it branches off the Cornhusker Highway, now U.S. 77, north of Lincoln. The telephone pole on the right bears the painted red and white emblem of the Cornhusker Highway. Condra Collection-1687

Michael Farrell is a fourth generation Irish-American Hoosier who emigrated to Nebraska twenty-six years ago. His three-hour PBS history documentary, In Search of the Oregon Trail, has been seen by tens of millions of Americans.



The Platte River near the Plum Creek Massacre site, east of Lexington, February 1992.
© Michael Farrell

to use a phalanx of D-9 Caterpillar bulldozers and an army of road graders and dump trucks filled with crushed stone to carve and draw a dotted line around the circumference of my newly adopted state. A Big Line—so it would be visible from the space satellites, like the Great Wall of China.

Unfortunately the plan came to naught. It might have rivalled Carhenge or the big trail-straddlin' Interstate 80 arch. At least it would have put us on the map. I turned my visual arts career toward smaller scale projects, and Katherine and I got busy with the business of living.

On and off for the next two decades some of those original questions continued to surface. Trying to find the answers drove many of my professional choices.

For what reasons was this state laid out in this shape? Who decided, when, and why? How did it come about? As a maker of history-based TV programs I've asked learned men and women these questions many times and so far I've received only the obvious answers:

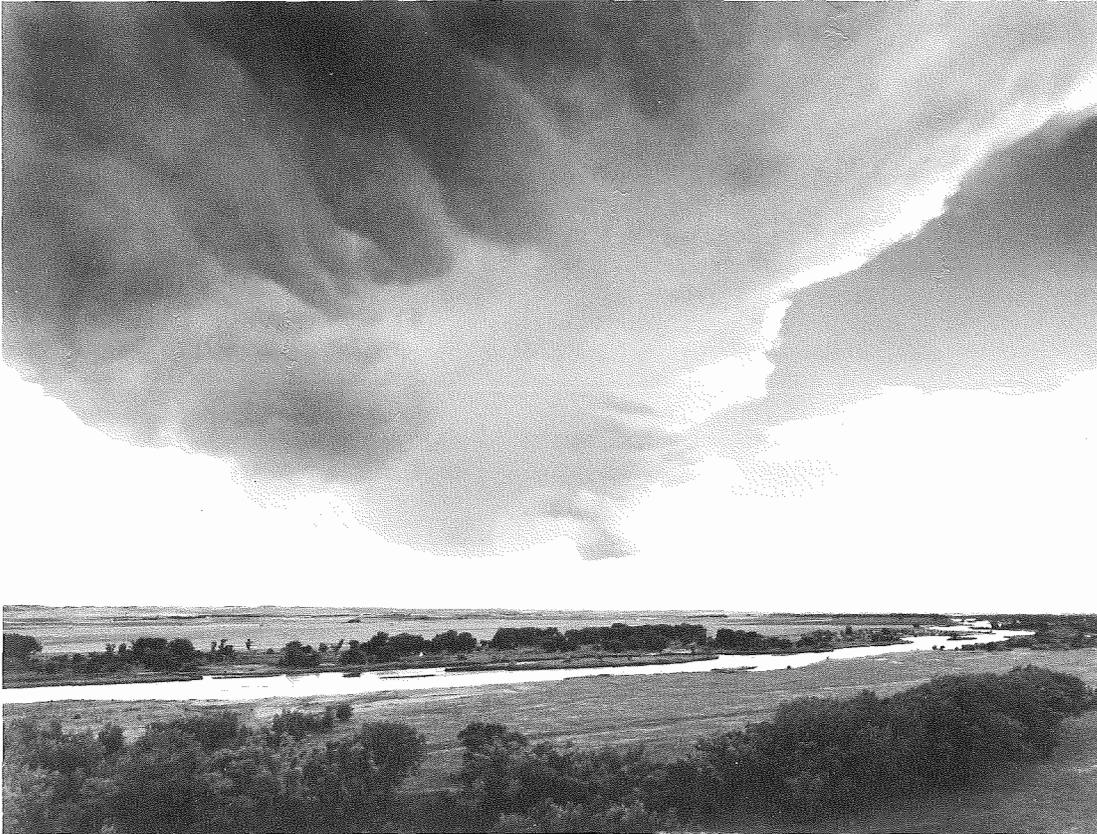
In the early 1850s powerful men back East in Washington drew the boundaries of the proposed Kansas/Nebraska territories with the border between them at the 40th parallel. (Why there?) The original Nebraska Territory covered most of the northern Plains and then some. (Did they expect this whole area to become one state?)

Between the adoption of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 and statehood in 1867, the Civil War was fought. Lakota warrior Red Cloud and his people forced the U.S. Army to withdraw south and east from the Bozeman Trail back to the North Platte near the newly deter-

mined eastern border of Wyoming Territory. The gold miners out West in Colorado carved their state first from what was supposed to be western Kansas and southwestern Nebraska. Abe Lincoln fixed the eastern terminus of the transcontinental Union Pacific Railroad at Council Bluffs, across the wide Missouri back East in Iowa. The Homestead Act opened the region to large scale settlement. Within a decade of statehood Red Cloud's band of Lakota had been confined to Red Cloud Agency up near the Pine Ridge. Their enemies, our allies, the Pawnee, were rewarded for loyalty with removal to Oklahoma. The bison became a thing of the past thanks to "Buffalo" Cody and the taste for tongues and robes back East.

In the last part of the nineteenth century, Thomas Jefferson's plan of geometrically-surveyed township grids was extended from its origin point just out

No Place Like Nebraska



The North Platte Valley from the Narcissa Whitman overlook, east of Broadwater, Morrill County, 1994.
© Michael Farrell

the back door of the White House on the Ellipse, now laying a web of meaning and possibility across the prairie. That grid connected the money, power, and manufactured goods of the East to the system of small towns, farmers and ranchers, roads, and rail lines which comprise the human-imposed physical characteristics of the Great Plains yet today. By 1877 Red Cloud's and Crazy Horse's Oglalas were moved just a bit farther north into the Dakota Territory. Barbed wire made the grid a bit more real to animals and humans alike.

Although Nebraska's northern boundary was first surveyed in 1874 that border wasn't finally set until 1882 with the addition of a sliver of ground ceded by Dakota Territory between the Keya Paha River and the 43rd parallel. The sliver became Boyd County in 1891. An act of Congress in 1905 finally fixed the state's boundaries as they are today.

In the waning quarter of the nineteenth century the pioneers from farther east and Europe struggled to make market agriculture work in an environment that seemed to be controlled by railroads, banks, and grasshoppers. Those struggles and the stoic character of those common folk inspired the moral and ethical words of Willa Cather, Mari Sandoz, William Jennings Bryan, and George Norris. Their powerful stories and speeches shaped the nation's lasting image of this state in ways that surveyed boundaries never could.

Once Nebraskans thought they knew who and where they were, they began to play serious football. It was the one thing that tied together this disparate lot of farmers, ranchers, small town merchants, packinghouse and rail workers, Sand Hillers, and Lincoln bureaucrats. Through the religion of college football we came to know in our hearts that

“there is no place like Nebraska.” But what manner of place is it?

Our history is very close to the surface here. It is a history that speaks in great measure of displacement and exploitation. Whether we conceive of ourselves as situated in the mythic West, the arid Great Plains, the innocent Midwest or some other artificial academic “zone,” we can usually parse the purported geographic attribute according to the nature of the story being told—and whose ox is being gored. The lines get drawn to keep something or someone in or out.

Ask the Lakota or the Pawnee. Ask the Sandhill crane or the American bison. Ask the Platte River or the Ogallala aquifer. Ask today's small town youth of limited local opportunities or the farmers no longer counted as a separate category in the U.S. Census. Ask the undocumented Hispanic beef packers or

the Santee Sioux casino workers. For every “Nebraska” you can come up with I can find a contrary and conflicting one.

We are more a collection of overlapping circles and interrelated interest and affinity groups than a logical assembly of people situated within a common geographic boundary—a line itself drawn well over a century ago by people who likely never saw the place they were defining.

And how long will the imaginary lines last? Will the Panhandle join Wyoming in the next century? Will issues of water and scarcity force new geopolitical boundaries to be drawn? Will “Buffalo Ted” Turner buy enough land to create his own state?

So where we are depends on who’s talking, where they are standing, and when. The view from Fort Robinson looks a lot different than the view from Rosenblatt Stadium. And both of those certainly stand in contrast to the view from Rutgers or Stanford.

In 1972 when we were trying to decide if we should forsake our urban existence for the opportunity to discover Nebraska, Katherine and I looked in the

western sky above Chicago one night. We saw a crescent moon with a bright star peeking over the edge of the dark rim. We decided to follow that sign west, “to go for an adventure,” she said. We agreed to stay one year in Nebraska. And for many years after when asked where we were from, we’d say “Indiana” or “Illinois,” not really believing that we’d made the commitment.

A decade and a half after that first arrival, while editing a biographical program about John Neihardt, I learned that the buffalo hide shield Black Elk used in his medicine had that same image painted on its surface. Black Elk told Neihardt that the crescent moon and the star in the west were a sign for a spiritual path. We are like cottonwood seeds blown on the wind travelling to a new place to take root. Then we grow from that small bit of fluff into magnificent trees, making a home for all manner of birds and animals.

Like so many who came west before us Katherine and I were two bits of cottonwood seed blown together to take root along the river. After a quarter of a century of life and friendship, after bringing three children into the world, after learning about the spirits and sto-

ries of these places, after living in a house with no door key, we began to feel like we belonged.

Then with no warning in May of 1997 Katherine was struck ill with brain cancer. And after nine months of graceful acceptance she died in the same bed where she had given birth to our three children. In many ways she was a pioneer woman.

She believed fiercely in women’s rights. She devoted her career to issues in women’s health. She believed in the power of words and language to create change. She loved books, art, and music. Last spring during Sandhill crane season, following her wishes, we took her ashes to the Platte River.

The water flows east from the mountains to the Missouri, the birds fly from south to north and back again. Neither have ever needed to know where the imaginary lines were drawn. At the point where those two very real paths cross on the first dawn of spring we bid goodbye to dear Katherine.

Although I agree with the river and the cranes that there is no place like Nebraska, when asked now I say humbly, “Yes, I’m a Nebraskan. My home is in Nebraska.”