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Article Summary: Nebraska's native grasses define the state, according to George. She traces attitudes toward the land in the works of Nebraska authors.

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# THE PRAIRIE STATE

## Root-bound to Nebraska

By Susanne K. George

About twenty-five years ago, my family built a new home in a cornfield on land that had been “sodbusted” for nearly a century. Walking to the barn to do morning chores several years later, I noticed a little patch of buffalo grass elbowing its way through the immigrant brome. Little by little the curly grass spread, enduring the summer heat and droughts better than its imported competition and reclaiming its right to the land.

It seems that no matter how often developers plot suburban subdivisions or farmers scrape off the virgin topsoil and plant pivots, a patch of big bluestem, switchgrass, or buffalo grass will defy change in some neglected spot. The prairie is impossible to escape in Nebraska.

When Kent Blaser asks, “Where is Nebraska, anyway,” I am reminded of the indomitable buffalo grass and the power of the prairie and its people to survive, despite our “civilizing” behaviors.<sup>1</sup> In his essay, after systematically and thoroughly proffering suggestions to finding our regional label, Blaser concludes his argument by proposing that “the Midwest offers the strongest and most logical regional affiliation for Nebraska.” However, his essay challenges readers to find his or her own regional identity.

“American identities are rooted in places on the national map,” assert Ayers and Onuf in *All Over the Map*. However, they qualify that by adding, “The map that defines where we stand,

is itself an imaginative construction.”<sup>2</sup> One regional construction that Blaser does not explore in depth is the significance of Nebraska’s prairies in our state’s physical, psychological, and cultural development.<sup>3</sup> I believe the essential attribute which binds Nebraska is our inextricable prairie roots that tap deep into the Ogallala aquifer.

First, prairie grasslands physically unite all of Nebraska. The eastern part of the state, the tallgrass prairie, is dominated by big bluestem, little bluestem, Indiangrass, switchgrass, and prairie cordgrass; the western region supports the predominant shortgrass species of buffalo grass and blue grama; south-central Nebraska, a transition zone,



One of the clearest ways to define the land is to break it. Here a muscular tractor pulls an eight-bottom plow, slicing the land into neat, linear ribbons on the Box Butte table in western Nebraska, 1919. Condra Collection-2210

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blends the grasses of the two regions; and the northern-central and western areas, the sand prairies, feature sand bluestem, sandreed, and sandsage.<sup>4</sup>

Grasslands once carpeted the state wall-to-wall. In "Omaha's Suburban Prairies," Gerry Steinauer estimates that the tallgrass prairies that once covered the eastern one-third of Nebraska and extended east to Ohio, south to Texas, and north to Canada, encompassed over 400,000 square miles. Although less than one percent of the tallgrass prairie in Nebraska exists today, the grasslands of the Sand Hills, occupying over 18,000 square miles, remain essentially undisturbed. Although portions have been converted to cropland and some wetlands drained, Steinauer notes that Nebraska's Sand Hills are "among North America's largest remaining tracts of native grassland."<sup>5</sup>

The prairie still survives in all sections of the state, and environmental groups, like the Nebraska Natural Heritage Program and the Nature Conservancy, are joining with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission to protect the remaining virgin grasslands or reinstate natural landscapes. The prairie, with the help of its inhabitants, refuses to become history.<sup>6</sup>

Ties to the prairie also persist within individuals, forming psychological bonds with the land. "We live in two environments: the natural one of plants, animals, soil, water, and air, and the conceptual one of our minds," states Douglas H. Strong in his introduction to Hans Huth's new edition of *Nature and the American*.<sup>7</sup> These environments are interrelated; our physical landscape determines who we become and how we conceptualize that self. "The land sets the limits," believed nineteenth-century California writer Mary Austin, and this is especially true of the Nebraska prairies.<sup>8</sup>

Nebraska can find its historical identity in the "sea of grasses" that explorers and pioneers described over and over in their journals, diaries, and letters. Beginning with the settlement period, Nebraska writers have depicted the power

of the land over the human psyche. Willa Cather in *O Pioneers!* (1913) recognized that on the prairie, "the great fact was the land itself."<sup>9</sup> In a 1921 interview published in the *Omaha World-Herald*, Cather described her own emotional relationship with the land:

My deepest feelings were rooted in this country because one's strongest emotions and one's most vivid mental pictures are acquired before one is fifteen. I had searched for books telling about the beauty of the country I loved, its romance, and heroism and strength and courage of its people that had been plowed into the very furrows of its soil, and I did not find them. And so I wrote *O Pioneers!*<sup>10</sup>

Cather's literature endures today because readers recognize the symbiotic relationship between the environment and its inhabitants in characters such as Antonia Shimerda, Alexandra Bergson, and Thea Kronborg. Cather depicted such prairie/human connections in *The Song of the Lark*:

This earth seemed to her young and fresh and kindly, a place where refugees from old, sad countries were given another chance. The mere absence of rocks gave the soil a kind of amiability and generosity, and the absence of natural boundaries gave the spirit a wider range. . . . She had the sense of going back to a friendly soil, whose friendship was somehow going to strengthen her; a naive, generous country that gave one its joyous force, its large-hearted, childlike power to love, just as it gave one its coarse, brilliant flowers.<sup>11</sup>

Try as she would to escape her prairie heritage—moving from Red Cloud to Lincoln to Pittsburgh to New York City to New Brunswick—Cather could not shake the rich soil of "the Divide" from her roots.

Growing up in the Nebraska Sand Hills in a life full of hardships, Mari Sandoz also narrated the human/nature relationships with the prairie. In *Crazy Horse*, she detailed the generosity of the land to Native Americans:

So the fall moved slowly by, plump and fat as a prairie dog. . . . Not only was the meat plenty but there were parfleches of dried plums and fox grapes and buffalo berries and the turnips, too, from the hills, and many skin sacks hung from the lodge

poles filled with the sacred herbs the women used for hurts and pains that were very little for the medicine men. They had gathered many other things too, the colored earths and the yellow and brown dusts of the puffballs on the prairie for paints, and all those with small children or with new ones coming collected sacks of the brown sticks growing in the marshes for their soft down that would line the inside of the cradleboards. All these things and many more the earth gave the Lakotas.<sup>12</sup>

Although *Old Jules*, the biography of her father, chronicled the destruction of the natural prairie by the homesteaders, especially the Kinkaiders, Sandoz understood how a part of the land always remained rooted within the individual, no matter how "civilized" that person became. Sandoz wrote, "One can go into a wild country and make it tame, but, like a coat and cap and mittens that he can never take off, he must always carry the look of the land as it was . . . he will always look like the grass where the buffalo have eaten and smell of the new ground his feet have walked on." Sandoz, too, did not remain in Nebraska, but everything she wrote was as rooted in the prairie as the sod of the "hard-land table of the upper Niobrara."<sup>13</sup> From it she gained strength, courage, and resiliency.

A new generation of writers continues to value our prairie connections. Some, like Twyla Hansen and Paul Johnsgard, have committed their personal and professional lives to the prairie. Hansen, a horticulturist, visits the prairie often in order "to connect/ with what is almost lost,/ celebrating women, celebrating mothers,/ trying in our very bones to connect/ with mother earth."<sup>14</sup> She and her husband have turned their Lincoln, Nebraska, yard into an urban wildlife habitat, where native trees and prairie grasses thrive beside their neighbors' over-pampered lawns. "In fact," Carolyn Johnson explains in *Wellsprings*, "Hansen makes poetry of the names of plants, birds, and other life of the prairie. She says there's power in naming. Switchgrass, bluestem, groundcherries, *Coleoptera*, Indiangrass, sideoats grama,

## The Prairie State

gayfeather, butterfly milkweed, herons, bluebirds, and bullfrogs are the vocabulary of poetry to her.”<sup>15</sup>

Johnsgard, biologist and ornithologist in his third decade of research in the Nebraska Sand Hills, explains that his work, *This Fragile Land*, “represents a kind of love letter to the Nebraska Sandhills and especially to its inhabitants past and present, including people, plants, and animals.”<sup>16</sup> Appreciating the puissant depths of the grasslands, he observes that “the grasses of true prairie not only stand tall but also have deep and spreading roots,” often two to four times greater than their height. Dense root systems make the grasses drought and invasion resistant, for on the prairie, “the key to success is resilience.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the prairie ecosystem boasts of diversity; as many as 250 plant species may be found in a single square mile of grassland.<sup>18</sup> It is here, Johnsgard believes, “in the fortitude of the people” and the “quiet recesses of our Sandhills,” that the true heart and spirit of Nebraska is to be found.<sup>19</sup>

“We Americans need now more than ever before—indeed more than we know—to imagine who and what we are with respect to the earth and sky,” believes N. Scott Momaday. Patricia Limerick agrees, emphasizing that “the human mind plays the essential role in the creation, construction, and maintenance of regions.”<sup>20</sup>

I would suggest, then, that Nebraska is a “Prairie State,” united geographically by the physical environment of the grasslands and psychologically by the rich interplay between individuals and the land as well as between the cultural past and present. In the Nebraska prairies, which symbolize the hardiness, adaptability, generosity, and diversity of our land and its inhabitants, we can find our regional identity, uniting us across generations and across the map.

Don Welch, in his poem “If You Listen Hard,” understands the immanent power of the prairie: “Out here the buffalo are long since gone,/ but the grass remains./ When the rain goes away,/ the grass sleeps in its roots.”<sup>21</sup> Although the

prairie roots of some of Nebraska’s inhabitants may be dormant far below the surface, when the time is right, they, too, like my patch of buffalo grass, will begin to grow. The prairie is perpetual.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), Elliott West explains: “If the environment is always helping shape and limit human understanding, people (and only people) are forever imagining new environments and trying to muscle them into being” (p. xxiv).

<sup>2</sup> Edward L. Ayers et al., *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), vii.

<sup>3</sup> Often the terms “prairies” and “plains” are used interchangeably. The *plains*, as defined by Walter Prescott Webb in *The Great Plains* (1931, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981) are characterized as a treeless, subhumid, “comparatively level surface of great extent” within specific geographical boundaries (p. 3). In *The Prairie World* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1969), David F. Costello describes the *prairies* as encompassing “a remarkable diversity of environments—rolling grasslands, seemingly limitless level plains, bluffs, forested river bottoms, lakes, and ponds . . . inseparably linked with the grasslands around them” (p. xi).



One of Nebraska’s defining features is the vast dune area of the Sand Hills. Here riders follow an arbitrary line traced across the landscape by thin strands of barbed wire.

Condra Collection-519

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I prefer Carol Fairbanks's explanation in *Prairie Women: Images in American and Canadian Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986). Prairie people predominantly "emphasize the temperatures, as well as the distance of the horizon, the flatness or rolling qualities of the landscape, and the intensity of the sky . . . They share specific historical events and political movements" (p. 3).

<sup>4</sup> Craig C. Freeman and Eileen K. Schofield, in *Roadside Wildflowers of the Southern Great Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991) delineate five prairie types: tallgrass, mixed-grass, shortgrass, sand, and sandsage (pp. 2–3).

<sup>5</sup> Gerry Steinauer, "Omaha's Suburban Prairies," *NEBRASKAland Magazine* 73 (April 1995): 38; Steinauer, "Nebraska's Natural Areas," *ibid.*, 68 (December 1990): 16.

<sup>6</sup> Paul J. Johnsgard, in *This Fragile Land: A Natural History of the Nebraska Sandhills* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), presents definitive geological, biological, and ecological perspectives of the Sand Hills prairie.

<sup>7</sup> Hans Huth, *Nature and the American: Three Centuries of Changing Attitudes* (1957, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), xv.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Austin, *Land of Little Rain* (1903, Albu-

querque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974), 3. Frederick C. Luebke writes in "Time, Place, and Culture in Nebraska History," *Nebraska History* 69 (Winter 1988): 151, that Nebraska achieves its unique qualities because of "the interplay of culture with environment over time . . . This formula emerges from a desire to coordinate two rich traditions in American historical thought—one that has concentrated on the powerful altering or disrupting influence of physical environments on cultural forms, and conversely another that has emphasized the tenacity, the persistence, or the enduring qualities of cultural forms over many generations and under difficult circumstances." The determinism of the environment should not be underestimated; witness the many farmers today attempting to return marginal cropland from the nutrient and water devouring corn to the hardy native grasses.

<sup>9</sup> Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (1913, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), 9.

<sup>10</sup> Brent Bohlke, ed., *Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 37.

<sup>11</sup> Willa Cather, *The Song of the Lark* (1915, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 276.

<sup>12</sup> Mari Sandoz, *Crazy Horse: The Strange Man of the Oglalas* (1942, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), 65.

<sup>13</sup> Mari Sandoz, *Old Jules* (1935, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 375 and 59.

<sup>14</sup> "At the Prairie, the Day Before" in Susanne K. George, ed., *Wellsprings: A Collection of Poems from Six Nebraska Poets* (Kearney, Nebr.: University of Nebraska at Kearney, 1995), 9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Johnsgard, *This Fragile Land*, xiv.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 47–48.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>20</sup> N. Scott Momaday, "The Man Made of Words," *Indian Voices: The First Convocation of American Indian Scholars* (San Francisco: Indian Historian Press, 1970), 53; Patricia Nelson Limerick, "Region and Reason," in Ayers, *All Over the Map*, 102.

<sup>21</sup> Don Welch, *A Man in Love with the Wind: Fifteen Friends Select and Comment Upon Poems by Don Welch* (Kearney, Nebr.: N.P. 1997), 3.



Trees provide one of the most obvious signs of human intervention in the Nebraska landscape. In this mostly treeless state, tree-planting became a high moral virtue, celebrated both with an original holiday, Arbor Day, and with a proud nickname, "The Tree Planters' State." Here carefully-planted trees grace the road leading to the site of Fort Kearny, about 1920. Condra Collection-3795