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I Think I Know Where Nebraska Is

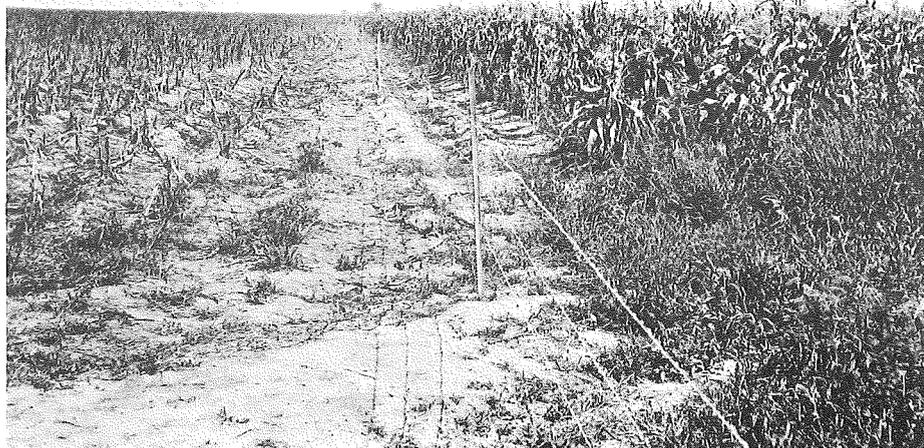
By Robert W. Richmond

Where is Nebraska? For me that is a question easily answered. Nebraska is just north of Kansas. But then I am a Kansan. However, I lived for a time in Lincoln, where I was a graduate student at the University of Nebraska and where I began a professional career in history as a staff member of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

The designation "north of Kansas" was enough for any politically aware American in 1854 when the Kansas and Nebraska territories came into being. Easterners, especially those who read William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* and Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*, were aware of the two territories separated by the 40th parallel, as were certain southerners who concerned themselves with the possible extension of slavery.

Professor Kent Blaser's thoughtful, perceptive, and provocative essay leaves little to criticize, but it does lead me to offer some observations on how Nebraska (and Kansas) have been and are now perceived by both residents and outsiders.

Defining what constitutes the West has been a problem. To Jefferson it stretched from the falls of the Ohio to the Pacific Ocean. To Washington Irving in the 1830s the "immense wilderness of the far west" was the "buffalo prairies" between the Missouri and the Rockies. Eleutheros Cooke, speaking in Ohio in



Nebraska is known as the state where most of its rivers run underground. Here a fence divides irrigated from nonirrigated corn on the W. P. Hearne farm in Buffalo County. Condra Collection-6987

1857, said the West could be defined as "that point where the savage and the white man hold disputed sway." The editor of the *Leavenworth Daily Conservative* expressed himself on February 17, 1864, as a westerner and placed the West's eastern boundary at the Missouri River, which he probably could see from his office window. With a direct reference to Nebraska, George W. Pine in *Beyond the West* (1873) wrote: "It is hard to realize the truth that Chicago is an eastern city, and that Illinois is not even a central, but is an eastern state. Omaha, which has always been regarded as on the western verge of the 'Far West,' is in fact 150 miles east of the center of the Union!" Mr. Pine notwithstanding, I believe that Omaha in 1873

was very much in the West.

I agree that there are parts of Nebraska "more 'west' than others." There is a difference between the eastern sections of the Plains states and the High Plains beyond the 100th meridian, and those differences encompass geographical, social, and political aspects. However, I think perhaps some of those differences may not now be as sharply defined as they once were.

I have no statistics to quote, but I would wager that, in proportion, there now may be as many minivans as there are pickups hauling children to Little League games in North Platte as there are in Omaha. And, in today's political arena, there may be equal numbers—again proportionately—of arguments

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Though often thought of as a flatland state, Nebraska does have monumental geography, as shown by this butte in the Wildcat Ridge of Sioux County, August 1919. Condra Collection-1854

over *Roe vs. Wade*, property taxes, and environmental issues in Scottsbluff and Nebraska City.

While agricultural products and problems may vary as one moves from east to west across the state, the farmer and the rancher still share many of the same concerns in the field, at the bank, and with government policies. Now, and in the future, there should be one constant throughout Nebraska—the football fortunes of the Cornhuskers. Memorial Stadium will continue to be sold out and filled with red on fall Saturdays.

Interestingly, the two great grazing areas of mostly virgin grassland in Nebraska and Kansas lie some distance apart in the east-west geographical scene. The Sand Hills of Nebraska are west of the 100th meridian, while the Kansas Flint Hills are principally between the 96th and 97th meridians. However, the lifestyle and the mindset of the people in those two areas have many similarities, so it would be difficult to decide which area was more “western.” Nebraska, along with the Dakotas and Kansas, is certainly a part of America’s “Breadbasket” and also its meat locker, providing an interesting contrast to the Great American Desert label it wore for more than half of the nineteenth century. I grew up in a Kansas county that usually leads the state in

wheat production and has been labeled locally the “wheat heart of America.” So I would never quarrel with the “Breadbasket” terminology for this part of the country.

Nebraska has had “the Heartland” assigned to it, along with any number of other locations from Ohio to the Rockies. While the term was over-worked following the Oklahoma City tragedy, I have heard and seen it used innumerable times recently as reporters dealt with appearances by nationally prominent politicians.

In May of 1998 an economist at Creighton University released a study on the economy of the Midwest and included in that designation were the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Minnesota, Iowa, and Missouri. I think that probably the majority of Nebraskans would not quarrel with being in the “Midwest” in that context.

I must take issue with Professor Blaser concerning two of his statements. I do not believe Robert Redford should be lumped with the other people Blaser includes in “cowboy chic.” Redford grew up in California, attended the University of Colorado, and has a long association with the Rocky Mountain West. His concerns with realistic portrayals of the West in the relevant motion pictures he has directed and/or produced, most

notably *The Milagro Beanfield War* and *A River Runs Through It*, and his longstanding interest in preserving the environment, sets him apart from others who have “discovered” the West.

My other point of disagreement has to do with the television program *Hee-Haw*. I would not call it midwestern. It is more representative of the middle South and the Ozarks.

To return to the original purpose of this commentary: I remember so well the staff discussions that took place at the Kansas State Historical Society in 1977 as we planned for a format and title change of what had been the *Kansas Historical Quarterly* since 1931. Finally we decided on *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains*. One of our board members commented that it should be “The” journal of the Central Plains, but that might have offended our friends at the Nebraska State Historical Society so the suggestion was tabled. Obviously, I have no problem with labeling Nebraska as a Central Plains state.

As one who was born on the eastern edge of the High Plains and has spent the greater part of his life in the eastern portion of the land beyond the Missouri and who has written and taught the history of the American West in both its broadest and narrowest senses for nearly half a century, I believe Nebraska is a part of the West and the Midwest and the Great Plains. I can use those terms interchangeably and not be bothered. And to those who may consider Nebraska, with which I maintain close ties, and her neighbors as part of the “lowest amenity region,” I can only say they do not know Nebraska’s landscape or her people, her contributions to the arts and literature, or very much about her at all.