A Myth Takes Wings
by Neil Byer

Nearly everyone knows that Kansas was in a time long ago merely a
stopping place for hunters, trappers, traders, Mormons, miners, and
homeseekers, who thought there was really nothing worth seeking here.
This was in the mid-1800's. Then came a later breed, capable of creating
and perpetuating a myth. That later breed, or rather a product of its
collective mind, is the substance of this issue of the Heritage of Kansas. In
short, this is Kirke Mechem's story of the mythical Jayhawk.

Mechem's article needs little, if any, elucidation. He has told the core
of the story splendidly, with the sharp eye of the historian and the careful
and assuming heart and ear of a man who has lived in the mainstream of
life and has consequently expanded from the experience. Any reader who
has seen his original study concerning "The Story of 'Home on the Range'"
or the reprint done in Volume II, Number 2 of the Heritage will know this
to be true. And he doubtless will want only to move on to the heart of this
issue, which is a facsimile reprint of Mechem's study and concentration on
what is probably the state's most famous product, the Jayhawk.

But I should like to detain the reader momentarily in an attempt to
provide a frame of reference for what follows.

The Jayhawk of course is a myth. And belief in myths, as we all know,
is not legally obligatory. At the same time, belief in the potentially be­
lievable, the possible imaginary, the essence of fairy truth is in many ways
just as much the staff of life as is bread.

One of the important functions of myth is to give value and prestige
to a belief that a group of people think important. What psychological
needs mythical invention fills I would not try to answer. I would only
speculate. Here we were in Kansas. We were a people with deep de­
sires, the same as those of all men everywhere—we were at once fearful,
and hopeful, and passionate; we were sentimental and vigorous and al­
ready tired and we were trying hard to impose an order on a way of life
which was largely without order. We needed a new belief to accompany
the new life; we needed a vortex around which the unaccustomed winds
of life might whirl; we needed an anchor. We gave birth to a Jayhawk.

The notes in the facsimile indicate in a general way the widespread
nature of the acceptance accorded "The Mythical Jayhawk." But the
nature of its acceptance, I think, is made a bit clearer in some of the cor­
respondence to the Kansas Historical Society which resulted from the
various editions. I therefore have appended what I hope will be an inter­
esting sampling of the response. I am, of course, beholden to the author
for this material as well as for the privilege of reprinting his work.

Interestingly enough, in this connection, a young friend of mine,
Patti Wright, of Topeka, read the Mechem study this summer. Now Miss


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Wright is a poet of no mean skill; she had already shown me two beautiful,
sensual, sensitive poems, one of the meadowlark

... A tiny bird, in one climactic note,
Sang more of truth than I can ever know.

and one of the sunflower

... Bronze centers catch on fire from setting sun
And mingle cheering light with prairie green
In golden echoes of an autumn dawn
That live in quiet fields and bloom unseen.

Well, at my request, she wrote to be included here what follows. Capturing in any normal poetic sense that raucous old bird you'll be read-
ing about would give anyone pause. Here is what Miss Wright produced; she
thinks it is bad. I think it is good fun, yet serious, and deserves to be

In a vastness of heritage all of us live
Among legends both many and great,
But none is as bold as the one of the bird
That made Kansas the Jayhawker state.

Perhaps he was born at Quantrill's raid
Like a phoenix arising from flame
Or was hatched from the egg of a thunderbird
And given an Indian name.

While men of great intellect argue still
About whether or not he has foes,
They agree that his feathers are crimson and blue.
But it's only the Jayhawk who knows.

Though the emblems of Kansas are tangible things—
A flower, a bird, and a tree,
With one wing the immortal, incorruptible bird
In his myth can encompass all three.
He can change shades, fly backwards and not lose his way,
And infinitely vary his role;
With unquestioning courage the Jayhawk goes on
Fulfilling his mythical goal.

So reduced to a legend, the Jayhawk persists
In forcing some Kansans to see
That their symbol, pursuing his flight to the stars,
Can be all that men want him to be.

Le voila. Still the great red and blue and yellow bird sails unmolested
and supreme through Kansas skies. He is a king there, yet he is there by
our sufferance. And at the same time we are here by his.

Anyway, here you have "The Mythical Jayhawk." Dream—or is it
vision?—and courage of dream.