

A SENSE OF PLACE, A SENSE OF TIME: MEMORIES AND KNOWLEDGE OF PLACE IN THE GREAT PLAINS

by

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I teach the Geography of Kansas and the Great Plains. One of the assignments each semester is an oral history: students interview a person at least 60 years old who has lived in the Great Plains region for at least 40 years. The purpose of the assignment is for the students to learn more about the human history of the Great Plains by interviewing someone who has lived through more of it than they have. Through examination of their respondents' lives, I hope the students gain a greater understanding of the importance of place in everyday life. Their elders look back on the Plains of the past with the benefits of hindsight, through the sometimes rosy, sometimes smoky lens of memory. How does the memory of lived experience reveal knowledge of place, and how does memory of place shape current knowledge?

Our knowledge of place affects how we treat places and how decision-makers set policies for managing places. Understanding how knowledge of place is constructed can inform and shape such decisions. If our images of place are based on the memories of those who now look back with nostalgia to the place of the good old days, what decisions might be made about issues such as the continuing rural depopulation of the plains, about proposals to restore the prairie, or to allocate water and other resources in the region?

The students write with nostalgia about places where, clearly, they would not want to live. The times were difficult economically and life was hard; people were stronger, of hardier stock and more willing to do physical labor. The respondents remember their younger lives as full of hard work, and say that residents of the Plains do not work so hard today. Because the place and the times demanded much of them, they rose to meet the challenges. The students describe their elders' strengths and attributes with admiration often bordering on awe, but express no desire to emulate them.

The respondents say life on the farm was hard work but at the same time, they remember life being simpler and not so fast-paced as now. The

remembered place becomes the stage for the good old days, when people lived simple, moral lives, where neighbor helped neighbor just to survive. Although the students express the image with nostalgia, the place is to be *from*, not to *stay in* or *return to*. The respondents spoke with pride of their survival of tough times: getting up before dawn to milk cows and do other chores, the long walk to school and back, and coming home in the afternoon to do more chores. One student wrote that his grandmother walked two miles to school, and that the stories of walking ten miles in the snow uphill both ways have their roots in the reality of his grandmother's generation. The students do not want this life, although they describe it as remarkable and praiseworthy, but they take pride in the fact that their forebears lived it, survived it, and even prospered through it all.

One student's grandmother described her life in small-town Kansas as being like Mayberry on the Andy Griffith show: life was sweet, safe, friendly, and simple in her memory of the place. How might she characterize the place if the Andy Griffith show was not part of her own history? The small town she describes certainly has the elements of the television town, on the air before the student was born. If the student never saw the Andy Griffith Show, what then would be his image of his grandmother's hometown? If he has seen the television depiction, how close to the reality of his grandmother's life is his image of it based on her memory, using the television show as her point of reference?

Are these memories of place – clouded by years, sharpened by nostalgia, shaped by family stories – what we hope is our legacy? What is created when the memories of the older generation, preserved in photographs and imperfect recollections of a time long-ago, are passed along to the younger generation that views them as amazing and admirable, but not desirable? What does it mean when the memories pass from the generation that experienced the place to children of the next generation who might never feel the dry earth beneath their feet, or hear a chicken clucking in the morning, or walk outside to use the outhouse? In my students' writing for this project, the fondness of the memories has translated into nostalgia for a past in a place that never really existed. Perhaps this is the reality for every memory of every place.