

## MUSINGS ABOUT THE CENTER

*John Peterson—Dean Liberal Arts & Sciences, 1971 - 1983*

I have vague early recollections of talking with Pat O'Brien about the grant which set us off on the Center for Great Plains Studies and of doing various administrative things to get it all in operation. My first true memory, however, is of an event after all had been approved and we were in operation. That event was the first friends of the Great Plains dinner.

That first dinner was at what is now the Best Western Regency Gardens Motel. They had a large room on the west side of the complex. The reason we had the dinner there instead of on the campus, I suppose, was because we could not have alcoholic beverages on the campus at that time.

We had a sizeable crowd. Though I do not know how many, it must have been close to a couple of hundred. President John Visser was in attendance, but he was only lukewarm about the entire project. His attitude changed that evening.

Why did it change? It was because many of the big ranchers of the area were there as "friends of the plains." So were many of the bankers from Emporia and surrounding towns. George Neavoll, editor of the *Wichita Eagle*, was our speaker and he was very laudatory about what we had done and what we were going to do in the future.

Big ranchers, lots of bankers, and an enthusiastic editor of a big-city newspaper made a strong impression on John Visser. From that evening on, in his eyes, the Center for Great Plains Studies was more than just another unit on the campus. It was an important one. That is my first real memory of our Great Plains operation.

We soon began using the "Great Plains" name and the designation of our center wherever we could. We had a Great Plains Trio. It was composed of Elaine Edwards on piano, Jim Starr on violin, and Jim Swain on cello. It became very prominent and much used. It was a marvelous group. We had a Great Plains Jazz Camp in the summer. It drew some big-name musicians and student participants from many places. It, too, was a great tribute to our Great

Plains direction.

We made TV programs and radio programs. All carried the name of the Great Plains Center and that of our institution. My recollection is that our TV tapes with Great Plains aspects were sent to many high schools and TV stations all over Kansas and surrounding states. They would ask us for them and we would loan them the tapes.

We made many radio tapes about the Great Plains, all of which carried our name. I have strong memories of this because of a couple of personal involvements. I made about a dozen radio tapes called "The Great Plains: A View From Emporia." Each was 20-30 minutes long and they were regularly run on our local station. One day, I had a call from the Manhattan station. They wanted to know how much it would cost to use my tapes. Of course, I told them it would cost nothing. They were delighted to use them. And they were used on a lot of other stations, too.

We also came up with a myriad of short radio blips about the plains, things of only a minute or two which the station could stick in anywhere. They were just interesting comments about the Great Plains. My memory is that it was my idea and I made several of the first of these and called them "Bits About The Plains." Other people got involved in making them. Somebody – I think it was Dick Keller in English – suggested that we call them "Plains Talk." Nobody ever asked me about it, but it was done and went very well. These things were used on a wide variety of radio stations for a long time.

Another thing we did was to form affiliations with other "plainsy" organizations. We became somewhat official associates.

We formed an association with the Santa Fe Trail Museum in Larned. We sponsored various public events together. We associated with The Land Institute in Salina and worked with the people there in various fashions.

An association with the University of Saskatchewan in Winnipeg, Canada, was formed. I cannot recall that any of our people went up there, though I think some did. I definitely recall that a woman botany professor from there came down here to work with us for a couple of weeks. I recall that because I went to the Topeka airport to pick her up.

I know that Pat O'Brien and I went to the University of Nebraska, at

their request, to help them get their Great Plains program going. I do not think that we ever made a formal association, however.

Sometime in the first few years of our Great Plains Center, I was asked to speak about it to a big, state-wide group. I no longer remember the name of the group, but its purpose was to bring young men together periodically. These were young business and professional people who, it was hoped, would push the merits and qualities of Kansas. Many influential, well-known, and well-established state leaders ran the thing and were present, also.

They met in various places across the state and were on the campus here in Emporia for this meeting. There were over 200 of them and it was a big breakfast-type session. I told them about our program and the things we were doing to publicize and push our Great Plains area of the country.

When the session broke up, there were the usual “thank you” and other complimentary comments from many people. I had noticed one man standing nearby watching all of the hand-shaking process. When it was about over, he approached me and introduced himself as the state geologist.

He immediately went on to tell me that I was wrong about what the Great Plains were. They were not nearly as extensive as I had described them, he said. We discussed the matter from his geological perspective and from my biological perspective of the great American Grasslands.

I did not agree with his much more restricted view of the plains, nor did he accept my wider view of the Great Plains. In any event, I have never forgotten how my comments had gotten him to thinking and discussing. I like that. To this day, there continue to be disagreements as to where the Great Plains actually start and end. And to what the expression really means.

One final memory, perhaps my favorite one, is this story. Early in our Great Plains adventure and shortly after the Regents had officially approved our Center, the Regents met here on the Emporia campus. I do not recall whose idea it was, but President Visser asked me to speak at the meeting and tell the Regents and presidents about our operation. Of course, I was glad to do that.

After my speaking, as the session was breaking up, each of the presidents of the other five institutions came up to me and told me how great

our program sounded and how we had gotten the jump on them and their institutions with it. The president of Ft. Hays State University, who as I recall, was a botanist, was particularly vehement about how we had really done a thing he wished his institution had done. Some of the Regents came up and said similar things.

None of my memories of the early days of our Center for Great plains Studies can beat that one. That was one of the biggest experiences of my deaning career.

*DeWayne Backhus—interim Dean Liberal Arts & Sciences, 1986 - 1987*

I could regale you considerably with my interactions with Pat O'Brien during my tenure as interim dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (1986-87). Indeed, he and I had some very candid exchanges; yet he sent me a letter near the end of my tenure which was very gratifying. Pat O'Brien, then director of the Center, seemed to loathe the prospect of public speaking and welcoming the Friends of the Plains to the annual dinner (January 23, 1987). I accepted the responsibility. After the usual formalities of a greeting, I commented that the "vastness" of the Webb Lecture Hall of the Memorial Union seemed symbolic of the geographic extent of the Great Plains—from the Permian Basin of Texas to the plains of Saskatchewan, Canada. I then stated the following:

I wish to comment briefly from my perspective of the significance of the "Friends of the Great Plains" to the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and Emporia State University.

The Center is significant for a number of reasons.

- It is an entity that is **unique to ESU**. Most institutions of higher education look alike in many ways. There exist departments and majors in the common disciplines: art, chemistry, or history, for example. ESU can claim the Center for Great Plains Studies as a unique attribute.
- The Center provides an **opportunity for faculty scholarship**. Tom Isern and Jim Hoy are illustrative of two faculty members who have

applied the scholarly tools of their disciplines to aspects of this geographic region that we call the Great Plains. After all, an entire book devoted to “custom combining,” or “cattle guards”?

The Center provides an **opportunity or outreach and to extol the virtues and characteristics of the Great Plains**. This is accomplished through publications such as the “Great Plains Newsletter,” the *Heritage of the Great Plains* and *Tales Out of School*. It is also accomplished through personal visits to communities by ESU faculty with an interest and expertise in some aspect of the Great Plains. I assert that when we have a more complete understanding of or additional insight to something, we may subsequently develop a pride in or affinity for that entity which previously did not exist. Who knows? That may become significant for increased tourism and economic development!

I can personally illustrate this opportunity for scholarship and outreach as a faculty member through an involvement with the “heritage seminars” in the early 1980s. The subject that I was delivering to seminar sites was energy resources of the Great Plains. I think that it is impressive that the Plains’ states provide about fifty percent of the raw energy resources produced in the United States. This fact can cause us to view ourselves differently relative to the rest of the country. To further illustrate, when we think of alternative energy resources, wind energy often comes to mind. Many think of the windmill as a quaint artifact of earlier decades. And yet it is symbolically much greater than that. It represents human resourcefulness, and a willingness (or necessity) to develop a harmony with the natural environment.

Let me use these latter points concerning opportunities for study of the Great plains region and the opportunity for outreach as a transition to the significance of your presence as “Friends of the Plains.” I wish to offer an observation, one which is not intended to be laden with comparative value judgements nor to be disparaging. Unlike many centers on college and university campuses, the Center for Great Plains Studies through its faculty associates develops insights into a geographic region with unique biological,

climatic, cultural, geological, and historical characteristics. The Center and its faculty associates are concerned with **ideas**. Many other campus-based centers are more entrepreneurial; they serve as an agency to provide services. Often there is a contractual arrangement for paying for services—that makes many centers financially self-sufficient. In contrast, that is frequently not the case where ideas and insights are the “product.” Hence, the University, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and the Center for Great Plains Studies depend on your support—through your presence at Great Plains events and with monetary contributions—to help sustain what we feel is unique and contributing entity to the University and this geographic region. And we acknowledge and thank you for that.

*Kendall Blanchard—Dean Liberal Arts & Sciences, 1987 - 1991*

It pleases me to know that Emporia State University’s Center for Great Plains Studies is celebrating its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. The Center has had a long and illustrious career. I am proud of the fact that I had the opportunity to have served at Emporia State during four years of that career.

All public regional colleges and universities are special. However, some are more special than others. These are the institutions that have that something extra, that special function or focus that sets them apart, gives a special calling dimension to their missions, and provides a distinctive sense of purpose. Here at Fort Lewis College, we have the Center for Southwest Studies. This is our claim to authority in the region. This is one of the first things people think of when they hear our name. This is the heart and soul of some of our finest scholarship.

At Emporia State, you have the Center for Great Plains Studies. This organization and its highly regarded journal (*Heritage of the Great Plains*) have become symbols of academic excellence, sources of pride in the institution, and avenues of some of the finest scholarship to come out of the University.

During my time as Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Emporia State, I had the opportunity on several occasions of speaking at the annual Friends

of the Plains dinner. I always looked forward to that event, in large part because of the enthusiasm, the camaraderie, and the genuine interest in and appreciation for an important part of American geography, economy, and culture: the Great Plains. It also gave me a chance to write something that attempted to combine marginally acceptable poetry and feeble efforts at good humor with tidbits of academic insight and common sense. Even though I am probably by myself on this, I miss those times and those opportunities.

I also miss the people who made the Center of Great Plains Studies work. While I was at Emporia State, I also had the privilege of working with some of the greatest teachers, researchers, editors, and writers in the country. Many of them found their inspiration in the Great Plains and lent their talents and accomplishments to the reputation and outreach of the Center. Among the many names that stand out, in addition to that of Jim Hoy, are Joe Hickey, Tom Isern, Glenn Isaac, Don Coldsmith, Sam Dicks, Tom Eddy, Loren Pennington, Gaylen Neufeld, and Julie Johnson, among others.

However, the name that was practically synonymous with the Center for Great Plains Studies while I was in Kansas was that of Pat O'Brien. As Director of the Center, his devotion and commitment to that operation were unparalleled. Indeed, his passion for the Center at times bordered on fanaticism. On occasion he would roar into my office with a specific request for assistance or with one of his patently Pat O'Brien generic carpings. In all cases, he was intense, direct, and at best moderately tactful. As a result, by the time he had finished, I was either ready to hand him the entire Liberal Arts and Sciences budget or toss him out on his head. There was no in-between with Pat. But, likewise, there was no in-between in his commitment to the Center for Great Plains Studies. He was serious about that organization, and it was that seriousness that kept the Center alive during some of the lean financial times at ESU.

I have been told that Dr. O'Brien is retiring, something that happens to all us sooner or later. However, in Pat's case, he will be both remembered and missed. This is not something that happens to all of us. Indeed, the legacy of what he helped to create and nurture, the Center of Great Plains Studies, will live on long after his retirement. For years to come it will be that special

something that sets the institution apart. It will continue to inspire outstanding scholarship. And, it will help to ensure that Emporia State University remains the distinctively important institution of higher learning that it has become.

For all these reasons, Connie and I wish Pat well in his retirement. And, to you, Pat, and all the other Friends of the Plains, congratulations on the occasion of this 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration. May this be only the first of many more such quarter-century celebrations to come.

*Lendley Black—Dean Liberal Arts & Sciences, 1993 - 2002*

As we celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Emporia State University's Center for Great Plains Studies, we should recognize the Center's outstanding tradition and its promising future. Drs. John Peterson and Patrick O'Brien provided the vision and hard work to establish the Center as a premiere vehicle for facilitating the study of the Great Plains region. Throughout the past 25 years, the Center addressed a number of challenges while maintaining superior academic and public service programs and focusing attention on the Great Plains of North America as one of the four major grassland regions in the world.

The idea for the Center developed from discussions among several ESU faculty members who eventually became known as the first "Great Plains Faculty." Dr. Peterson, the first ESU Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences, provided the leadership to formulate these discussions into a viable organization. He obtained official authorization from the Kansas Board of Regents in 1977 to establish the Center for Great Plains Studies with an exclusive, state-wide mandate to offer academic programs and public service activities. Dr. O'Brien was the Center's first Director and served in this capacity until 1992. In a 1980 chronicle of the Center's early years, Dr. Peterson gave credit to many people who helped establish the Center and stated that Dr. O'Brien was, "the driving force, the focal point, the one individual responsible for what the rest of us have accomplished...Dr. O'Brien deserves most of the credit for the existence of the program and its accomplishments."



Dr. O'Brien also wrote a number of grant applications to state and federal agencies and solicited assistance from private organizations. His efforts resulted in more than \$400,000 to support the Center's activities. He also established Friends of the Plains, a support group made up of ESU faculty and staff and individuals from many parts of Kansas who have an interest in supporting the Center's activities. Without this foundation of financial and public support, it would have been difficult for the Center to have seen its silver anniversary. Over the years the Center has provided many academic and public service experiences for the citizens of Kansas and for the Great Plains region. The Center has facilitated faculty alliances and collaborative projects among faculty members at ESU and with several universities in the United States and Canada.

Many people helped the Center endure difficult financial times and challenges. Several members of the original Great Plains Faculty have continued to lend their support and advice to Center activities and the Friends of the Plains group has remained active. Dr. Ron McCoy served as the Center's Director from 1992 until the summer of 2001. He established several new activities including the Great Plains Summer Institute for Teachers and he helped expand membership in Friends of the Plains. Julie Johnson's ongoing dedication to the Center as Associate Director provides valuable consistency and professionalism to the Center's activities.

Although I am very excited about celebrating the Center's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I am even more excited about its future. With your leadership and a new commitment from ESU faculty and staff, the Center has the potential to reach greater heights. As a founding member of the Great Plains Faculty, you are well aware of the Center's past. You have continued to focus much of your teaching, scholarship and service on Great Plains issues, and you have an excellent vision for the Center. I look forward to helping you and others explore the full potential of ESU's Center for Great Plains Studies.

*George Neavoll—retired editor, Wichita Eagle\**

A purpose of the Center for Great Plains Studies, John Peterson wrote

in the early 1980s, is “to make the terms ‘Great Plains’ and ‘Emporia State’ synonymous.”

He wanted people everywhere, when they say Great Plains, to “automatically think of Emporia State University.”

He wanted them to say, “Emporia State University in Kansas is where they know more about, and do more about, the Great Plains of North America than anywhere else in the world.”

The former dean of ESU’s School of Liberal Arts and Sciences today can savor how far the Center has moved toward that goal in its first twenty-five years of existence. He and Pat O’Brien, Ron McCoy, Jim Hoy, Julie Johnson, Tom Isern and others have made a major imprint on the state that William Allen White called this “slanting slab of prairie sod.” They have, in the process, made Emporia the unofficial capital of the Great Plains region.

The designation - even though it may be challenged at similar centers in Nebraska, Saskatchewan and elsewhere - is important. The Great Plains of North America boast an agricultural bounty and overall richness that distinguish it among the four major grassland regions of the world.

Every spring, wrote Rolla Clymer in one of his marvelous Flint Hills essays for the *El Dorado Times*, the hills “welcome the Big Beef Steer back to their fastnesses, waiting to make flesh into food for a hungry world.”

I recently lived in New Mexico, where the yawning Llano Estacado on the eastern edge of the state - my favorite part of the Land of Enchantment - helps comprise the western extremity of the Great Plains. Emporia lies at the eastern extremity.

The plains stretch north from Texas, then, to the Prairie Provinces. It is a vast, biologically rich and culturally diverse region, worthy of the attention the Center for Great Plains Studies gives it.

The Kansas Board of Regents did well in 1977 when, acting on a \$26,000 pilot grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, it authorized Emporia State to create the center. It was the first time the Great Plains had been designated for study as a region.

I am geographically far removed from the Plains now. I sit writing this while watching evening descend on Maine’s Casco Bay on the North Atlantic.

Yet I sat last night watching Cassiopeia rise over the dark waters, just as I watched it so many times rise over the Flint Hills of Kansas.

I am a child of the Plains, as I told the Friends of the Plains annual meeting in 1984. My father sprang from prairie soil, and so, by extension, did I. I left Kansas in 1991, yet Kansas is still a part of me. This adopted son hails those who successfully resolved, 25 years ago, to know more about, and do more about, the Great Plains of North America than anyone else in the world.

\*George Neavoll, former editorial page editor of *The Wichita Eagle*, was member No. 36 of the Friends of the Plains. He retired in 1999 after 30 years in the newspaper business, and now lives in Portland, Maine.

*Julie Johnson—Assistant Director, 1980 - present*

When I began working as assistant director in the Center for Great Plains Studies in November 1980, the Center was located in Pat O'Brien's office on the third floor of Plumb Hall. It barely held the two desks, many book shelves, and a typewriter stand with a manual typewriter. That was the extent of our office equipment. I was to learn that historians (or at least Pat O'Brien) liked to keep stacks of papers and folders all over any horizontal surface (the floor included).

My first assignment was to prepare the December issue of the *Great Plains Newsletter*. After pulling together the items to be included, I took the material to Faith Hickox, secretary to the Dean of Liberal Arts & Sciences. She typed the newsletter material and ran the copies on the Dean's copy machine. I then collated the newsletters, took them, along with the data processing cards to the basement of Plumb Hall so that they could be addressed. I include these details only to remind you of the technology available back in 1980.

In January 1981 Pat entrusted me with job of turning the idea for a series of sixty-second public service announcements for radio into reality. The working title in the grant proposal was "Bits About the Plains." I decided that we needed a catchier title and proposed "Plains Talk." For theme music Pat

suggested that I talk to Stephen Davis, professor of psychology, who collected original folk music. It was in his collection that I found “Lexington,” performed by the Perry County, Tennessee Music Makers. Although Tennessee is not part of the Great Plains, the music seemed appropriate for “Plains Talk.” I asked Dick Keller, professor of English, to record the opening and closing credits and enlisted Ron Frederickson, professor of theater, to record the scripts for about ten original spots. Over the years we produced almost six hundred public service announcements that were distributed to radio stations all over the Great Plains region by the Kansas Information Network. The public response to the announcements was so enthusiastic, that we did a special issue of the journal *Heritage of the Great Plains* using a variety of them.

The Center has been in a converted classroom in Roosevelt Hall (the Liberal Arts & Sciences building), on third floor Plumb Hall in a spacious low-ceilinged area above Albert Taylor Hall, Morse Hall during the Plumb Hall renovation and is now housed in a lovely suite of offices back in Plumb Hall. The manual typewriter is long gone. I started word processing on an Apple IIE, learned WordStar, then the various incarnations of Word Perfect. The Center now has two computers, two telephones, an electric typewriter, a web site, and e-mail capability.

However, the Center’s mission remains the same—to extol the virtues of, to disseminate information about, and to educate students and the public about this vast area of grasslands called the Great Plains.