

"Cities and Silos Upon the Plains: The Differing Urban Histories
of Kansas and North Dakota"

by

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Can anyone seriously justify Delaware? That is to say, can the claims of Delaware as a separate state be justified as a matter of logic? After all, Delaware's three counties cover only 2,057 square miles, an area considerably smaller than St. Louis County in Minnesota or San Bernardino County in California. The state comprises only that small segment of land on the eastern part of the peninsula formed by Chesapeake Bay on the west and the Delaware River estuary on the east. In colonial times Delaware was nothing more than the lower counties of Pennsylvania, while in the modern age it is little more than an appendage on Maryland's eastern shore.¹

Perhaps Delaware should not be a separate state as a matter of logic, but it clearly has that status as a result of history. Its existence is only one indication that state building in the United States has often not been an exercise in rationality; rather, the drawing of state lines has frequently frozen into perpetuity the arbitrary political and geographical distinctions of an earlier time--distinctions that otherwise would have shifted with the changing tides of human history. Some of these boundaries seem to make more sense than others. Hawaii, for example, has more logic as a separate political jurisdiction than Delaware. North and South Dakota might have been created as only one state--together they would be smaller in area than Montana--but the compromise under which they entered the Union split the Dakota territory in two. Kansas and Nebraska might also have entered the union as a single state, but the politics and emotions of the 1850s kept them forever distinct.

In seeking to contrast and compare the differing urban developments of Kansas and North Dakota, the historian faces the imperfect and often illogical actions of past generations in drawing boundaries between states. These decisions, once made, took on a life of their own and contributed to the subsequent uniqueness that each state may be said to possess--a uniqueness emphasized by official state histories. A state's boundary lines may have been drawn arbitrarily before there were sufficient communities or human settlements to justify such political map-making, but those lines, once drawn, helped to determine the subsequent economic, political, social, and cultural development of the area.² Accordingly, a study of the urban development of two states with so many apparent similarities rests upon the shaky foundations of state building.

The similarities between the two states are impressive.³ Both have large extents of seemingly vacant lands that in spring and summer are alive with the golden grain of waving wheat. Except along the eastern borders of the two states, most trees are in draws or serve as windbreaks. Both lands experience extreme heat in the summer, while winters are a time of biting and bitter cold. Even though the Missouri River borders part of one and bisects the other, lack of water remains a constant problem for both. The annual rainfall is light, especially in the western elevations, and droughts occur all too frequently. The two states, taken together, are a major part of America's breadbasket; normally Kansas is the nation's leading wheat producer, and North Dakota ranks second.⁴ These two states, seemingly so similar, are--unlike Delaware and Maryland's eastern shore--hundreds of miles apart.

While both states are major agricultural producers, North Dakota stands as one of the most rural of states, while Kansas is much more urban. Determination of urbanization is a matter of definition, and that definition itself, like the drawing of state lines, is not without flaws. In the world today, for example, it is almost impossible to determine what is the largest city on this planet because definitions vary from country to country. Is Shanghai the largest? Or is Tokyo? Or London? One can argue that the urban megalopolis around New York City, encompassing parts of three states and upwards of fifteen counties, is the world's largest metropolitan area, but the point is difficult to sustain because the criteria for making such a claim are elusive.⁵

Since the 1790 census, obscure federal bureaucrats have on the basis of a mass of population data made sometimes very arbitrary decisions about the character of the general population of the United States. Sometimes, their conclusions have had a fundamental impact on national policy, the classic example being the announcement that the 1890 tabulations indicated that a frontier line as such no longer existed in the continental United States. Until a 1902 reform there was no permanent agency to supervise the taking of the census. Instead, in advance of each decennial counting of the population, Congress established a temporary office of the census, usually attached to the Department of State or the Department of Interior.⁶ This mode of operation resulted in a lack of continuity and differing standards from census to census.

In particular, officials had trouble deciding how to deal with the rise of urban America. There were no special tables for cities before 1870, and it was not until 1880--when the United States already had twenty cities in excess of 100,000 in population--that the census recognized the existence of metropolitan districts. A special monographic analysis designated New York City and four surrounding communities as "The Metropolis."⁷ In addition, throughout the nineteenth century the statistical breaking point between urban and rural territory varied from one census to another, with populations of 2,500, 4,000, and 8,000 all being used.⁸ From 1900 through 1980 the Census Bureau has settled upon the 2,500 figure. Starting in the 1910 census, demog-

ographers sought to identify metropolitan districts, using a combination of population statistics and acres of land to indicate metropolitanism. A refinement of that method used since 1950 defines what is now called a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area as an entire county containing a central city of more than 50,000 inhabitants, plus any adjacent counties that meet certain requirements. These include the number of county inhabitants who work in the nearby central city, newspaper circulation figures, credit statistics, and other criteria.⁹ In 1970, 73.5 percent of the nation's population lived in places of 2,500 or more, and 68.6 percent lived in SMSAs.¹⁰

Both the 2,500 and SMSA definitions have flaws, and some people in suburbs or small towns actually find themselves counted as urban by one definition and rural by another. In Kansas, for example, residents of Countryside and Westwood are considered rural under the 2,500 definition, but such a description defies common experience. Both places are, in fact, suburban communities in the Greater Kansas City area. Farms are as alien in this environment as are skyscrapers in Goodland, Kansas, a town of just over 5,000 people. Goodland lies in the heart of Kansas's prime wheat producing area in the northwestern corner of the state, far away from any large city. Yet the 2,500 definition marks it as urban. The urban ethos is as absent in Goodland as the rural is in Countryside or Westwood. The SMSA definition does not apply to Goodland, but it does to all of Johnson County, in which Countryside and Westwood are located.

Johnson County, which has over fifty suburban communities,¹¹ is the principal commuting suburb in the Kansas City SMSA. The southern and western portions of Johnson County, however, contain extensive rural areas. Even so, the people living in them are automatically considered as living in the Kansas City SMSA. At the same time, Hutchinson, a medium-sized city of 36,000 population in central Kansas, is an important commercial town for people living in a several-thousand-square-mile radius. The city has some of the largest grain storage elevators in the world, and Reno County, in which it is located, has a population of 60,700 people. Yet because Hutchinson has under 50,000 people, it does not qualify as the central city of an SMSA. All of this is not to suggest that either definition is without value, although it is to indicate that each is not completely satisfactory. Unfortunately, there are probably no better tools currently available to historians than a judicious intermingling of both definitions to determine the relative urbanization of any of those artificial political divisions that we in America refer to as states.¹³

As we have noted, these definitions classify Kansas as an urban state, while North Dakota is even more clearly marked as rural. Kansas is not an urban giant like California, but it is distinctly more urban than North Dakota.

Geography by itself, does not determine urban location, but

natural and climatic factors facilitate the growth of cities in some regions, while hindering developments elsewhere. An examination of the 1970 statistics for the tier of states from Texas on the Mexican border to North Dakota on the Canadian border suggests a relationship between location and urbanization. From south to north, each state is more urban than its immediate neighbor to the north. Using the 2,500 definition, Texas was 79.7 percent urban, Oklahoma 68 percent, Kansas 66.1 percent, Nebraska 61.5 percent, South Dakota 44.6 percent, and North Dakota 44.3 percent.¹³

Several historical antecedents help explain this phenomenon. Spanish exploration had an enduring impact on the southern plains, because it involved the dispersal of millions of Hispanic people into the region. This migration had no counterpart in the northern tier of states, as the French and English Canadian influence was minimal in the development of North Dakota. Of greater importance, American development west of the 95th meridian was more southerly than northern. The migration into Texas in the 1820s and the removal of the civilized tribes in the 1830s to Oklahoma led to the development of the rural potential of both states. In more recent times, oil booms in the first thirty years of the twentieth century contributed markedly to the rise of both states. After World War Two, the explosion of growth in the Sun Belt led to further urban progress. Although Kansas was part of this western movement, as the Santa Fe, California and Oregon Trails all ran through the state, North Dakota lay on a less traveled path.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which opened Kansas to settlement and the tribulations of sectional conflict, had no counterpart in the North Dakota experience. Large numbers of people entered Kansas for mixed motives, few of which had anything to do with the desirability of the land itself, but the result was to attract migration to the territory. Nothing remotely resembling it happened in North Dakota to focus attention on early settlement.¹⁵

Dominating the history of Kansas in the post Civil War period was the cowtown environment, which was entirely beyond the North Dakota experience. In fact, when the great Texas tralla led to Kansas, North Dakota was still the scene of bloody Indian conflict. There was a serious Indian problem in Kansas, but none comparable to that posed by the Sioux in North Dakota. Among the Kansas cowtowns, only Wichita advanced to achieve metropolitan status, primarily by shifting its economic base at opportune times. A number of other old cowtowns, including Abilene, Dodge City, and Caldwell, became stable and relatively prosperous farming communities.¹⁶

Promoters of North Dakota failed to break the widely held belief that the place was a remote region that displayed all the characteristics of an ice box. Tracts that extolled the state as a "banana belt" had a false ring about them. Kansas fared much better in its public image. Adroit publicists successfully countered the conception

that Kansas was part of a "Great American Desert" by relabeling it the "Garden of the World," pointing out in grandiose terms its agricultural potential. Promoters of Kansas were perhaps abler than their counterparts in North Dakota, but they also had much better material with which to work.¹⁷

The major drawback to development in North Dakota was its isolation. The westward movement in the United States was well to the south, while the 49th parallel served in most ways to keep the main path of Canadian migration to the north.¹⁸ Canadians coming around the Great Lakes had little motive to go south into North Dakota. By the same token, the 49th parallel deflected the westward movement of Americans to the south and emphasized the natural paths through Colorado and Wyoming approached from western Kansas and Nebraska.

The census returns reflected the situation. In 1880, at the last census before the end of the frontier, there were no cities worthy of the name in North Dakota. The largest incorporated place, Fargo, had only 2,700 people. At that time, there were a number of cities larger than that in Kansas. Four of the twenty-four towns in the American West over 8,000 inhabitants--a breaking point used by the 1880 census to delineate the difference between small and large cities--were in Kansas. None went on to urban greatness, but they helped to form the basis of a Kansas urban network.¹⁹

During its early years, Kansas appeared to have a magnificent urban destiny. Leavenworth, helped by a nearby military base, prospered during the Civil War, and became a commercial and transportation center. In the years following hostilities, outside observers predicted it would become a regional metropolis. Twenty miles up the Missouri River, a town company platted Atchison at a site deemed suitable for commercial activities. Atchison interests started the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad, envisioning their community as a great transportation hub. Lawrence, seemingly ill-starred in its formative period, appeared to have real prospects of being more than just another farm marketing town. Topeka, selected by the voters of Kansas as the state capital, added a thousand people every year during the 1870s, emerging as a governmental and commercial center.²⁰

In 1880 these cities were at the height of their glory. By the standards of the day they had large numbers of people--10,500 in Leavenworth, 15,500 in Topeka, 15,100 in Atchison, and 8,500 in Lawrence. Yet expectations were soon dashed. Leavenworth lost momentum after the failure of local voters to support railroad bond issues. Atchison capitalists never had enough money to support their transportation schemes. Lawrence was unable to attract enough outside business to sustain progress. Topeka leveled off in population after the initial boom. By 1900 these cities had only regional importance. Although specific factors could be pointed to, a larger overshadowing consideration forced a scaling down of aspirations: the rise of Kansas City, Missouri.

Before and after the Civil War, Kansas City and other Missouri River towns had fought for regional dominance. Kansas City's able leaders had presented arguments that emphasized a strategic location at the juncture of the Kansas and Missouri rivers. A small group of men in the Kansas City Chamber of Commerce worked together harmoniously, and there was a general recognition that partisan politics was a luxury that impeded progress. The city's leaders correctly perceived that the key to reaching lucrative Chicago markets lay in gaining the first railroad bridge over the Missouri River. There was a possibility the span would be built at St. Joseph, Missouri, or at either Leavenworth or Atchison, leaving Kansas City off the main stream of transportation. Kansas City interests emerged victorious in 1856 when the Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad (after a whole series of machinations) decided to cross the river at their town. The bridge opened on July 3, 1869, ensuring Kansas City's future.²¹ The town quickly became a railroad and commercial terminal. Packing plants and banks were built, and Kansas City consolidated economic relationships with its Kansas hinterland. While this proved a mutually advantageous relationship in many respects, it precluded the building of major rival centers. By 1900 all the cities in Kansas were tributary to Kansas City.²² In essence the business of the area was done in Kansas City, Missouri, although by the middle of the next century, in a curious quirk, many owners and managers lived in Kansas in the affluent suburbs of Mission Hills, Leawood and Overland Park.

In the twentieth century, Kansas cities fared better than those in North Dakota. The control of North Dakota's economy by the railroads and by interests in Minneapolis-St. Paul hampered the prospect of advancing the almost non-existent urban base of frontier times. Complicating matters were the programs of the North Dakota Nonpartisan League which advocated the state operation of grain elevators, insurance companies, banks, and other business activities. What supporters of the NPL saw as "progressive," others saw as "socialistic."²³ The Great Depression hurt still more, and, while good wheat crops and the opening of oil fields brought some postwar progress, in 1970, Fargo was the only city of more than 50,000 in the state. Conversely, Kansas built upon and added to a solid base established in the nineteenth century. Oil money and airplane assembly plants afforded Wichita a metropolitan dimension. Topeka became a major agribusiness center, and enjoyed steady post-World War Two progress, furthered by the growth of state government. Several other towns, including Lawrence and Manhattan, became important as college towns. Military activities sustained Junction City and Leavenworth. Many additional places were the suburbs of Kansas City. All of these considerations gave definition to the urban mosaic of twentieth century Kansas.

In the final analysis the greater urbanization of Kansas than of North Dakota depended upon five factors exclusive of the logic involved in making states and the problems of census definitions. First, the westward course of empire was south of North Dakota, and the major

trails went through Kansas. Second, "Bleeding Kansas" focused national attention upon the unpopulated land. Third, the boundary between the United States and Canada served to channel migration east-west rather than south-north. Fourth, the impact of modern industrial developments favored Kansas over North Dakota, with the exploitation of oil and other natural resources. Fifth, big cities can encourage the growth of small cities. Kansas City was on the Kansas border; Minneapolis-St. Paul were hundreds of miles from North Dakota. The two states rank number one and two in wheat production, but Kansas throughout its history has always been closer to the pulse of urbanization, and to the dynamics of a changing society.

FOOTNOTES

¹The material in this article was originally presented in slightly different form at the Northern Great Plains History Conference at Duluth, Minnesota, on October 25, 1980. The setting of the Delaware boundaries is a fascinating story. For decades the proprietors of Pennsylvania (the Penns) and of Maryland (the Calverts) had argued over boundary matters. At length they appealed to the Royal Astronomer in Greenwich, England. An agreement was worked out under which the Royal Society appointed Jeremiah Dixon and Charles Mason to set the boundary line. Over a period of several years, the two men and their crews surveyed a 233 mile east-west boundary, finally stopping in the face of Indian hostility. At the start of their survey, they set a twelve mile arch from the Delaware River estuary to downtown New Castle (now Newark, Delaware). This delineated the northern boundary of the three lower counties of Pennsylvania. Mason and Dixon next set the western boundary by dropping a line straight south through the Delmarva Peninsula from downtown New Castle to Cape Henloper. Except in the deep south, where some land was given to Maryland, this procedure set the Delaware boundaries. Journal of Charles Mason, the Survey of the Mason and Dixon Line, November 15, 1763-September 11, 1768, entries from the 19th through the 21st of August 1763 (frames 14 through 16), reproduced as National Archives Microfilm Publication M86 (Washington: NARS, 1972). We wish to thank Dr. Alan Perry of the Kansas City Federal Archives and Records Center for his help in finding this information.

²This is made clear by standard state histories. Two recent interpretative histories of the two states are Robert P. Wilkins and Wynona H. Wilkins, North Dakota: A Bicentennial History, The States and Nation Series (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), and Kenneth S. Davis, Kansas: A Bicentennial History, The States and Nation Series (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976). For a discussion of the plains prior to state boundaries see G. Malcolm Lewis, "The Cognition and Communication of Former Ideas about the Great Plains," 27-41, in Brian W. Blouet and Frederick C. Luebke, eds., The Great Plains: Environment and Culture, Center for Great Plains Studies (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979).

³An excellent survey of how scholars have viewed the plains is Frederick C. Luebke, "Introduction," ix-xxviii, in The Great Plains: Environment and Culture. There has been a tendency to slight North Dakota. For example, see the classic Walter Prescott Webb, The Great Plains: A Study in Institutions and Environment (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1931).

⁴Kansas produces mainly hard red winter wheat, which is basic to making bread. North Dakota wheat is primarily hard red spring wheat, also a bread wheat, and durum, used to make pasta. Kansas produced 420 million bushels in 1980, 410 million in 1979, and 300 million in 1978. North Dakota produced 180 million bushels in 1980, 252 million

in 1979, and 286 million in 1978. In 1980, a year in which North Dakota experienced severe drought conditions, it dropped to third, behind Oklahoma, which produced 195 million bushels. Crop Reporting Board, Economics and Statistics Service, United States Department of Agriculture, Small Grains Report for December 23, 1980, B6.

⁵There is an excellent analysis of the problems involved in determining the size of world cities in Tertius Chandler and Gerald Fox, 3,000 Years of Urban Growth, Studies in Population (New York: Academic Press, Inc., 1974), 1-9, 362-364.

⁶See Carroll D. Wright and William C. Hunt, History and Growth of the United States Census, Prepared for the Senate Committee of the Census (Washington, 1900).

⁷"The Metropolis" is defined in George E. Waring, Jr., comp., "The New England and the Middle States," Report on the Social Statistics of Cities, Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, Vol. 19, pt. 1 (Washington, 1886), 531-532.

⁸There is a discussion of this problem and other aspects of census definitions in Charles N. Glaab and A. Theodore Brown (rev. by Charles N. Glaab), A History of Urban America, (1976; rev. ed. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1967), 245-248.

⁹See Executive Office of the President, Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas prepared by the Statistical Policy Division, Office of Management and Budget (rev. ed., Washington: GPO, 1975).

¹⁰Table 4, "Population by Size of Place for the United States: 1970 and 1960," and Table 41, "Population Inside and Outside Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas by Urban and Rural Residents," U. S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Population: 1970, Vol. 1, Characteristics of the Population, Part 1, United States Summary--Section 1 (Washington: GPO, 1973), 1-43, 1-206. Hereinafter cited as Characteristics of the Population, Part 1.

¹¹The Kansas Incorporation laws have been abridged many times since L. 1855, ch. 155 in early territorial days. The current statute dates from amendments L. 1963, ch. 509 and L. 1967, ch. 113, Sec. 2; July 1. There is a good summary of relevant legislation to 1940 in U.S. Work Projects Administration, Inventory of the County Archives of Kansas, no. 6 (Topeka, 1940).

¹²The Census Bureau has been working to provide a better way of separating the urban population. Not yet fully defined, there is a definition for "Urbanized Areas." See "Introduction," Vol. 1, Characteristics of the Population, Part A. Number of Inhabitants, Section 1--United States, Alabama-Mississippi (Washington: GPO, 1972), xlii.

¹³Table 41, Characteristics of the Population, Part 1, pp. 206-216.

¹⁴Two books have recently been published on Great Plains travel. They are John D. Unruh, Jr., The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), and John Mack Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

¹⁵We discuss North Dakota urban aspirations in our article, "The Story That Never Was: North Dakota's Urban Development," North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains 47 (Fall 1980), 4-7.

¹⁶The basic book on the cowtown experience is Robert Dykstra, The Cattle Towns (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968). For the rise of Wichita see Glenn W. Miller and Jimmy M. Skaggs, ed., Metropolitan Wichita: Past Present, and Future (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1978).

¹⁷The problems of farming on the upper Great Plains are dealt with in Leslie Hewes', "Agricultural Risk in the Great Plains: Promises, Problems, and Prospects," 157-185, in The Great Plains: Environment and Culture. For Kansas see Huber Self, Environment and Man in Kansas: A Geographical Analysis (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1978). North Dakota had no promoter comparable to the colorful William Gilpin, who summed up his arguments of the value of Kansas in The Central Gold Region: The Grain, Pastoral, and Gold Regions of North America, with Some New Views of its Physical, Geography, and Observations on the Pacific Railroad (Philadelphia: Sower, Barnes & Co., 1860). For typical promotional pieces on North Dakota see C. C. Coffin, "Dakota Wheat Fields," Harper's New Monthly Magazine, 60 (March 1880), 529-535, and "The Bonanza Farms of the West," Atlantic Monthly, 45, no. 267 (January 1880), 33-44.

¹⁸The American-Canadian boundary is surveyed in William E. Lass, Minnesota's Boundary with Canada: Its Evolution Since 1783 (St. Paul: Minnesota State Historical Society, 1980).

¹⁹There is excellent material on town promotion and planning in Kansas and North Dakota in John W. Reys, Cities of the American West: A History of Frontier Urban Planning (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 424-454 (Kansas), 535-540 (North Dakota).

²⁰The early hope of Leavenworth, Atchison, Lawrence, and Topeka are analyzed in Lawrence H. Larsen, The Urban West at the End of the Frontier (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1978). See also such old and optimistic local accounts as W. S. Burke and J. L. Rock, The History of Leavenworth, the Metropolis of Kansas and the Chief Commercial Center West of the Missouri River (Leavenworth,

1880): Atchison, The Railroad Center of Kansas: Its Advantages for Commerce and Manufactures (Atchison, 1874); Richard Cordley, A History of Lawrence, Kansas, from the First Settlement to the Close of the Rebellion; and Samuel Ridges, comp., Ridges' Biennial Directory to the Inhabitants, Institutions, Manufacturing Establishments, Business Firms, etc., of the City of Topeka, for 1876-1877 (Topeka, 1875). There is valuable information in George E. Waring, Jr., comp., "The Southern and Western States," Report on the Social Statistics of Cities, Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, vol. 19, pt. 2 (Washington, 1886), 762 (Leavenworth), 751-752 (Atchison), 757-75B (Lawrence). There is no historical sketch of Topeka in the Social Statistics of Cities.

²¹The story of Kansas City's railroad plans unfolds in Charles N. Glaab, Kansas City and the Railroads: Community Policy in the Growth of a Regional Metropolis (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1962). See also A. Theodore Brown, Frontier Community: Kansas City to 1870 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1963).

²²The most recent analytical account of the rise of Kansas City is A. Theodore Brown and Lyle W. Dorsett, K. C.: A History of Kansas City, Missouri, Western Urban History Series, Vol. 2 (Boulder: Pruett Publishing Co., 1978).

²³The best monograph on the rise of the NPL is Robert L. Moran Political Prairie Fire: The National Nonpartisan League, 1915-1922 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955). There is some good theoretical material in Karl Limvere, Economic Democracy for the Northern Plains: Cooperatives and North Dakota (Jamestown: North Dakota Farmers Union, 1980).