

# *The Great Plains: The Persistence Of The Frontier Ethos*

by  
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**I**t is instructive to consider the Great Plains frontier that attracted settlers to it. Other frontiers often appealed to the exploitive instincts of white men, and their lure was that nature would provide an affluent life without grueling work and with negligible social responsibility. The Great Plains obviously attracted human beings with acquisitive impulses, eharlatans, degenerates, and psychopaths, but the men and women who formed the region and defined its social content represented another vein of the human species. Nature was generous to the Great Plains, but work, tenacity, and adaptability were required to establish a base of civilization that would subsequently support the society that grew on it. The early inhabitants had the character and vision to construct a strong base.

An interest in the massive grasslands history and society that those early inhabitants transmitted to this generation was responsible for the formation of the Emporia State Great Plains Studies Program. With the assistance of a Pilot Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the program was officially adopted in the spring of 1977. The exceedingly good judgement of NEH to provide the grant to Emporia State enabled the organization of a comprehensive multidisciplinary undergraduate curriculum with a thematic structure to demonstrate the interrelationships between the people, land, and spirit of the Great Plains. There are many dimensions to the Great Plains Studies Program, but this paper will focus upon the rationale for the program, the postulates of the academie curriculum, and the future contours of the program.

An objective of the Great Plains Studies program that is both practical and idealistic is to contribute to the adoption of efficacious

public policy, influenced by humanistic principles through the education of prospective community leaders. Upon graduation, the preponderance of students will reside in the Great Plains, participate in community life, and decisively influence public opinion. An academic background on the region, complemented by familiarity with the humanistic perspective, will markedly increase the value of their involvement in the Great Plains society. The region had indigenous problems, and an informed leadership can help ensure the design and adoption of comprehensive and intelligent public policy in response to the problem.

A responsibility of higher education is to inform citizens about their society and cultural heritage. It is historical consciousness that enables humans to appreciate the ethos of their society and develop personal affinity with it. Human beings are formed in a social and historical context. Without the study of antecedents and their contemporary expression, persons experience an identity crisis from historical amnesia. The Sioux Indians equated peoples without historical consciousness with wind in the buffalo grass: the Sioux were honest. Great Plains Studies is to assist citizens acquire historical perspective, increase their comprehension of contemporary society, and develop values and competence applicable to the future.

The above objectives in themselves provide sufficient rationale for Great Plains Studies, but the region also has history and characteristics that can be adduced in an intellectual justification of the program.

(1) The region has historically elicited ambivalence from Americans, as some see Great Plains history as the symbol of great values in the American past, yet criticize the contemporary plains for the practice of the same values. Although the region has been a salient historical symbol of the American spirit, the perceived insularity of the Great Plains has offended "progressive" Americans. Yet many Americans still subscribe to the Great Plains mythology and visualize the region as a sanctuary from modern life. This view continues to exist at a time when increased urbanization, industrialization, and sophistication have enabled the Great Plains to advance toward dubious equality with the rest of America in crime rates and desecration of the environment. Despite these recent revisions in Great Plains society that bring it into closer conformity with the rest of America, many inhabitants of the region still subscribe to aloofness toward the general society. An investigation of the tensions and affinities that exist between the

Great Plains society and the larger American society will permit original conclusions on the formation of both the regional and American character.

(2) The revolutionary scale and velocity of change in the Great Plains region make it an ideal laboratory to study the various agents which transform society. Institutions, perspectives, and the pattern of life once appeared to be arrested on the Great Plains. The past and present seemed to fuse in a static society. Every phase of Great Plains society now seems to be in rapid and often turbulent change with a fierce clash between the old and the new. The Great Plains residents, closest of all Americans to the frontier philosophy and experience, will be forced to adjust their values and adapt their institutions to meet the changes in their society. The study of the value conflicts and societal adjustments in the transition is an obligatory focus in the Great Plains curriculum.

(3) A region cannot construct a wall, literal or figurative, around itself. External influences penetrate and affect life in the most insular region. Regional autonomy has been impossible in America even when it has been the objective of acute regional consciousness. A region has a series of complex relationships with other regions, the broad American society, and the world. The study of a region, perforce, involves the investigation of those relationships.

The history of the Great Plains forcibly demonstrates the ineluctable relationship of a region to national and international currents. Outside forces were responsible for the original inhabitation of the Great Plains. "Bleeding Kansas" resulted from the transfer of national friction to the Great Plains; it was the Civil War in microcosm before that conflict erupted in the larger war in 1861. After the Civil War, the redefinition of the "Great American Desert," new federal land policy, and the revolutions in transportation, communication, and technology were responsible for the settlement of the Great Plains. The region did not originate in isolation and obviously has not existed thereafter detached from the world.

It was on the Great Plains that the Populist crusade was instigated in the late nineteenth century and expanded into one of the bitterest political struggles on a national scale in American history. The origins of the Populist revolt against urban, commercial, and industrialized America were international as well as regional and national. The residue of that first clash exists yet today in the American Agricultural Movement, and the participants

are fully conscious of the relationship between agriculture in the region and that in the nation and the world. The subjugation of the Great Plains and agrarian insurgency are major themes in American history, not simply the region's. Even foreign impressions of America are influenced by the cowboy, cattle, and Indian culture of the Great Plains.

The Progressive Era (1900-1920) followed Populism. Although the Great Plains had its own style of Progressivism, politicians from the region were prominent in the national reform movement. The chronic tensions between the Great Plains and America became more acute in the 1920's with agricultural recession and the expanding gulf between rural and urban America. In a cra of political conservatism, it was largely the "sons of the Wild Jackass" who sustained the reform spirit of America.

In the next era the Great Plains was ravaged by nature and the Great Depression. South Dakota had the largest number of residents on relief of any state in the Union. The New Deal and the Great Plains had a mutual influence on each other, and the region followed a generally liberal course until World War II. The background and conduct of World War II demonstrates the influence of the region on United State foreign policy. After World War II, Great Plains society and politics were transformed by familiar currents.

Contemporary examples of the practical relationship of the Great Plains to America and the world are found in the energy crisis and agriculture. About one-half of American coal deposits are in the Great Plains and these contain low sulphur coal which can be surface-mined; the energy, environmental, political, and economic implications are obvious. Great Plains states are also natural gas and oil producers. The political and economic repercussions of struggles over deregulation of natural gas and price levels of "old" and "new" oil demonstrate that the region is meshed with a larger system with consequences for both.

Global maps which adjust the size of political units to reflect the extent of their oil deposits prodigiously inflate the Middle East. A similar map showing the areas of global food production would multiply the Great Plains region to many times its actual size. In a compressed world, the weather on the Great Plains affects the starvation level in countries such as Bangladesh. The global population has doubled in less than a generation in a fertility spiral that threatens humanity. Food may become more decisive than oil in United States diplomacy. America will be forced to make foreign

policy decisions on the use of food that will be a forceful commentary on their conscience and value system. Fundamental value decisions on agriculture must also be made domestically at the national and regional level. The influence on foreign and domestic policy on these value decisions on food can affect all inhabitants of the globe.

An objective of the program is to examine the Great Plains in a broad context, including the relationship of the region with American society and the world, and comparative analysis between the Great Plains and other regions.

This is not a definitive list of rationales, but it represents a sufficient defense to study the Great Plains and the rationales are pronounced in the undergraduate curriculum.

Comprehensive and complementary describe the Great Plains curriculum. There are twelve academic disciplines in the ESU School of Liberal Arts and Sciences that contribute courses to it. Representative courses include The Great Plains in Films; Art History of the Great Plains; Rural Sociology; The Indian in Western American Literature; and Geological Environments of the Great Plains. The identity of academic disciplines is pronounced in the curriculum because of the validity of the disciplinary perspective and the responsibility to make the student conscious of the disparate methodologies and concepts among the fields.

The Great Plains curriculum is comprised of complementary courses, and there are copious examples of parallels between them. The faculty are encouraged to unite with each other to emphasize the compatibility between their disciplines and mutually investigate Great Plains topics and themes. Some faculty regularly lecture in Great Plains courses outside their fields, some faculty use concepts and methodologies adopted from other fields in their courses, and some faculty from different fields teach classes together. Although the opportunity for multidisciplinary activity is provided and encouraged, the faculty practice the level of academic affinity that they consider constructive.

A region is defined by characteristics that provide it with both distinctiveness and integrity. The integrity of a region stems from the confluence of land, people, and spirit in a unified scheme. Within the physical base of the Great Plains, natural and human forces united to produce a region. It is the objective of Great Plains courses to investigate the series of relationships responsible for this integrity of the region.

Both physical and biological characteristics and the

interrelations between man and his environment are included in the theme of the land influence. It is obvious that the land influenced the institutions, aesthetic judgement, and psychology of its inhabitants. The history of the Great Plains include an account of the perennial adaptation of man to nature. The region's physical expansiveness imposed a particular concept of time and space on the residents, its unreliable climate ingrained agrarian stoicism and the acceptance of financial risk, and its physiography formed the aesthetic impression of the inhabitants that flat prairie is the highest ideal of nature.

In turn, human beings have also had an influence upon the natural conditions. They have exploited them, tried to regulate the use of them, and even tried to protect them. Values determine human conception of the land thereby human response to it. Public policy and personal use of the land are concrete expressions of the values that citizens attach to their environment. The Great Plains curriculum provides for a literary, historical, aesthetic, and philosophical inquiry into the values of human adaptation to and subjugation of the region. The theme of human response to nature has proved to be highly attractive; and it has been selected as the theme of the first Great Plains Semester, which will be described later in the narrative.

The history, ethnic, religious, and racial composition, social systems and institutions, political philosophy and behavior, and social dynamics of the region's inhabitants are encompassed in the theme of people of the Great Plains. An affinity exists between members of Great Plains society that is based upon more than propinquity. They are united by social glue. Heritage (authentic or invented), mutual experience, uniformity of institutions, and shared values are the societal adhesives.

Yet pluralism is as descriptive of the Great Plains society as is uniformity. Its polyglot ethnic, racial, and religious composition is often obscured by the stereotype of Middle America. The tension between groups has been a centrifugal force in the Great Plains. The perennial problems of cultural pluralism and assimilation have increased with the rise of Indian militancy and the massive ingress of Spanish-speaking residents into the region. An appreciation of the mosaic character of Great Plains society, the study of social friction and adjustment, and an examination of the contributions of various groups to the region have primacy in the theme of the people. Great Plains ethnicity has proved to be an attractive theme, but even more complex than was originally surmised, and the theme is to be

expanded in the program.

Without being mystical, the Great Plains region is infused with a spirit. It is more than Carl Becker's thoughtful witticism that Kansas was "America twice distilled." The distinctive values, perspectives, and syndromes of the inhabitants are the spirit. It is derivative from the environment, history, and mythos, and it is expressed in all phases of life. The spirit is the natural response to the Great Plains experience. Art, drama, music, folklore, and literature most graphically express the spirit. The theme of spirit has been well developed in the present curriculum, and it will remain a major theme in the next stage of curriculum expansion.

The Great Plains Studies Program enables the student to examine the pieces of the regional mosaic, demonstrates the relationship between the pieces, and provides a framework to synthesize the pieces into a conceptually unified impression of the region. The purpose of the program is to provide information and the framework of relationships between man, society, and nature, and provide a perspective that can be applied to humanity irrespective of spatial and temporal variables.

The world is a complex of regions, and the student's exposure to the Great Plains model will enable him to comprehend the content of society whatever its form and scale. The concepts and methodology entailed in the study of the Great Plains can be applied with efficacy to the investigation of regions anywhere in the world on the scale of city regions to whole continents from historical, contemporary, and futurist perspectives.

The two years that the Great Plains Studies Program has been in existence at ESU has provided sufficient opportunity to ascertain its influence upon the University. It is a representative impression among all the components of ESU that the program has provided the University with an intellectual focus, increased institutional unity, and contributed to the academic milieu of ESU. The Great Plains Studies Program is a pivotal and permanent dimension of ESU, and it will be expanded in the future through: (1) the adoption of a Great Plains graduate curriculum; (2) the institution of the Great Plains Semester; (3) the adoption of the Great Plains Adjunct Professor Program; and (4) the development of a public phase in the Great Plains Studies program. The expansion of the program will be in successive stages.

Of the projected expansions, three of them relate to the ESU resident academic program. Although the undergraduate curriculum is firmly established and no seismic revisions are

anticipated in its content and themes, a Great Plains Semester has been designed to enable both undergraduate students and faculty to concentrate upon the region for a full semester without the constraints of schedule and the present ESU curriculum and administrative structure.

The Great Plains Semester will be an unprecedented departure in pedagogical philosophy and curriculum design at ESU. The Semester will be divided into three sequential units of five weeks each with each unit devoted to an examination of the region through the prism of a specific discipline. Each Semester will have a theme as the focus of study. The first Semester, scheduled for presentation in the 1981-1982 academic year, will be an historical, literary, and anthropological investigation of "Human Adaptation to the Great Plains."

The undergraduate program in Great Plains Studies is to be augmented with a graduate Great Plains curriculum, which is now in the advanced stage of being designed. It will be an organic extension of the undergraduate curriculum with the same thematic structure and complementary courses in the humanities, physical sciences, arts, and social sciences.

The participation of academicians from outside the ESU community in past Great Plains activities has been of appreciable value to faculty and students. An example would be the selection of Joe B. Frantz, Walter Prescott Webb Professor of History at the University of Texas, to present the 1978 Claude E. Arnett Memorial Lecture, which is an annual public lecture presented by a nationally known scholar in the social sciences. Professor Frantz presented original research in a lecture on "The Westward Trail for Cattle," which demonstrated the expansion of the cattle industry from the Great Plains into the western United States. Conferences with faculty and lectures in Great Plains courses were also included in his regimen while on campus. ESU will continue to solicit authoritative contributions from scholars on the Great Plains in activities such as described above.

An Adjunct Professor Program in Great Plains Studies has been practiced on an experimental basis and will be established permanently to supplement the intermittent activities on the campus. At least one Great Plains Adjunct Professor will be appointed during each academic year to teach a course or courses on a phase of the region. The adjunct professor will be a scholar with an academic and research background that cannot be readily attained by ESU faculty. Perennial infusion of originality into Great

Plains Studies is obligatory, and the Adjunct Professor Program will help provide it.

The projection is to adopt the Great Plains Semester, establish the Great Plains graduate curriculum, and institute the Adjunct Professor Program in successive stages in the next three years. These amplifications of the extant Great Plains Studies Program are designed to make ESU the authoritative enclave in the United States for the study of the Great Plains.

A public dimension of the Great Plains Studies Program will be developed concurrently with the expansions in the resident academic program. A regional studies program can validly develop a public extension of the resident program, and its success may be dependent upon a public constituency. The agricultural extension programs of the land grant institutions should be instructive to schools with heritage and local and regional problems. The "aggie" schools have public networks that envelop the state and tie their public constituency to the resident instructional and research programs. Museums, historical societies, and study clubs are the natural public base for regional studies programs. ESU is receptive to affiliations with organizations and institutions whenever assistance can be provided to them. The formal affiliation between ESU and the Sante Fe Trail Center in Larned, Kansas is an ideal example of a constructive fusion where joint commitment of resources in unified activities have been helpful to both participants and the public. ESU, the Sante Fe Trail Center, and the Kansas Committee for the Humanities are now organizing an academic conference on the Great Plains to be scheduled year after next. Consider this an invitation.

The low population density and diffused residence pattern of the region make the use of mass media virtually mandatory in the public phase of Great Plains studies. For six years ESU has used its cablevision channel to present information programs and academic courses to the public. An increase in the technical capacity and production staff of the ESU cablevision center now enables the involvement of ESU in the production of films and programs on the region to be presented on ESU cablevision and distributed to schools, organizations, and cablevision stations in the Great Plains. A substantial cablevision audience of 300,000 persons exists in Kansas alone, and that audience is expanding at a rapid rate. The ESU experience has been that the public is interested in Great Plains topics and that informative and technically refined presentation elicit public response.

ESU will also rely upon radio, which has a potential audience far in excess of cablevision, in the public phase of the program. ESU has been involved in radio productions on a regular basis for the past four years. A series of programs entitled "The Great Plains: A View from Emporia" provided the background for a projected series to be called "The Great Plains: Past and Present" to be broadcast on Kansas radio stations in the next year.

Although academic extension courses and workshops may not have the lure or distribute information on the scale of the projected media activities, they are highly important to the public program. ESU presented three graduate extension courses last year to gauge public interest, and acquire information to identify the prospective constituency for extension courses. Among the most interesting items of information from the survey was that one-half of the class members enrolled exclusively from interest in the topic. The above indicator of public opinion was instrumental in the decision to develop the program on a broader scale, such as a mass workshop on the ESU campus within the next two years on frontier crafts. The media projects and extension and resident activities represent the core of the public phase of the program.

The original myth of the Great American Desert was used to introduce this paper, and it would be symmetrical to conclude on the equally powerful myth of the region's intellectual and cultural aridity that supplanted it. The myth was accepted in the Great Plains and expressed in a defensiveness about its style of life and values. Higher education itself has often and inexcusably contributed to syndrome of regional self-depreciation. Although higher education should eschew narrow parochialism and popular mythology, it has a responsibility to educate the public about itself. A public that is informed about its own past and values is likely to comprehend humanity on a broader scale. The Great Plains Studies Program indicates that ESU considers the region in which it is located as a subject of serious academic study and intellectual investigation, and that the welfare of the constituency that it represents has primacy in its institutional commitments.

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