WHAT HAPPENED TO KANSAS?

by

Robert Haywood

From time to time, paid "authors," national humorists, native champions, visiting firemen, and those who simply love the state have taken up pen or typewriter to tell the world what happened to Kansas. Most admit to being considerably mystified by that "geographical expression" and its fate. Words like "dilemma," "ambivalence," "divergent," "strange," and "dichotomy" crop up with predictable frequency. Natives who are exposed to this rhetoric are grateful no one has as yet put a finger on the precise pulse or cleared the air of all mystery. They enjoy the effort, doubt the conclusions, and generally keep their own counsel.

A sampling of five commentaries from the vast array available are offered here in chronological order as being either typical, notorious, or somewhat close to the mark.

The first to attract national attention was William Allen White's now famous, or infamous, editorial of 1896. For White there was no mystery. He knew what the trouble was. Kansas was being made to look the fool by a crop of "shabby, wild-eyed, baffle-brained fanatics" and lecturing "hence . . . telling people that Kansas is raising Hell and letting the corn go to weeds . . . ." This was not an analytical essay; it was a political tirade written in a fit of pique during the height of the McKinley-Kearney campaign. Yet, his name-calling of the Populist opposition (who were clambering the established Republicans at the local polls), fastened an image on Kansas that has been as tenacious as that of the Wizard of Oz, lasting because the editorial was widely circulated, cleverly written, and sounded like what a hick state ought to be.

In calmer moments, White exulted in the excellence of Kansas village life and reflected the true Progressive fear that this utopia might be subverted by industrialism and economic centralization. The public never remembered that side of the Emprise Oracle. Who knows anyone who has read In the Heart of a Fool or A Certain Rich Man?

The most unlikely spokesman for Kansas was a benign Mount Oread college professor, who helped establish his reputation with a whimsical, literary apology for being in Kansas in the first place. Why, Carl L. Becker asks, as an intellectual Eastern observer, would anyone riding a train between Kansas City and Lawrence look out the window at the sunflowers and say with great feeling, "Dear old Kansas"? It was for him a profound mystery, resolved only when he discovered Kansas roots reached deep into his own Puritan New England. Even then, he found Kansans very different from the people back East. Kansans were idealistic, peculiar, distinctive, and individualistic, although marked by "a certain uniformity . . . much after the same pattern." Clearly,
KANSAS?

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Becker was having difficulty coming to grips with the strange folk on the prairies.

He did find many positive attributes. The Kansas pilgrims were blessed by an "instinct to endure" and to joke about the endurance. He marveled at their enthusiasm and their assumption that, destined to succeed, they had the right and obligation to point the way—the morally correct way—to less fortunate people. What saved this self-righteousness from becoming disastrous dogma was an abiding "passion for equality." It was a praiseworthy virtue a New Englander could respect. Although Becker saw Kansans devoted to certain high ideals, as well as concrete principles, what made Kansans different was their being "in touch with a certain cosmic process," not something inherent in the land, but rather, a unique "state of mind."

Since Becker served the state far better than its own journalists, Kansas has frequently called in other outsiders to sort things out and tell the state where it's going. In 1954, Allan Nevins, a New York journalist turned historian, was invited to do the job for the Kansas Centennial Conference and presented several cogent, sometimes tendentious observations to mark the occasion. He found much to praise in the early, pioneer experience, from the bloody days of John Brown through the frenzied era of "Sockless" Jerry Simpson. Those early fighters and Populist hell-raisers did much to preserve liberalism and individual freedoms. In those days, Kansas had been "a cutting force" in the American system.

Now (that is, 1954), after a hundred years, new dilemmas faced the state. The crucial challenge for Kansas, as for the nation, was to preserve the "ancient freedoms while pursuing the inexorable path of consolidation and centralization" under an expanding "militarism." Nevins wasn't very hopeful that the state, which had offered so many solutions early on, was still up to the job. Nevins found that Kansas had become over the years neglectful of the arts and culture, "relatively uneducated, unread, untravelled, and largely unaware of historic fact or current world trends." Kansans simply weren't qualified any longer to point the way.

More recently (1976) an expatriate voiced some of the same concerns over Kansas' diminished capacities. Kenneth S. Davis wrote of the discontent rekindled by the ambivalent emotions he experienced on returning to his home state after an absence of fifteen years. Once he crossed the border into Kansas, he experienced a "... sense of relinking with a particular vitally significant space... a sense of renewing acquaintance with a distinct personality about whom I deeply cared..." and as our tour continued, this sense, this "generalized emotion, was increasingly permeated by those powerful ambivalences of pride and disgust, pleasure and exasperation, even passionate love and hate, which Kansas used to arouse or provoke in men when I lived within the borders." What disturbed Davis most was his awareness of rich promise unfilled—the Puritan conviction turned to petty prohibition, the Populist leadership no longer in the vanguard of social progress, and civic idealism soured into unmitigated self-righteousness. He was dismayed to find "the two most
publicized issues before the legislature... were 'bingo'
and liquor," an irritation shared by many Kansans.

An even more recent evaluation, by Neal R. Pierce and
Jerry Hagstrom, echoed the Davis lament. They found Kansas an
"eclipsed state" living "in the shadows," with its old
"national role... diminished." Indeed, they wrote,
"nowhere on the American continent can the eclipse of a region
or state as a vital force—a focal point of creative change or
exemplar of national life—be felt so strongly and poignantly
as in Kansas." They quote a contemporary professor at Kansas
University, less benign than Becker, who suggested that Kansas
ought to be declared "a national monument, the best source of
quality human talent—most of it for export." What is left,
apparently, is the flat, mediocre center of the nation. "Take
any measure of government policy and performance—from
taxation to services, highways to education—and Kansas will
rank midway in the fifty states."

The rest of the Pierce-Hagstrom piece was given over to a
listing of Kansas assets. Many were found quite tarnished—
such as an agricultural economy blossoming in the old Dust
Bowl, but threatened by inflation, poor markets, and a
deprecated Ogallala Aquifer; and the two largest
municipalities—well-managed but suffering from racial
disorders. Other resources could be bragged about in the old-
dressed Becker manner—aerospace plants, federal and
military prisons, oil and gas wells and plants, Truman
Capote's In Cold Blood, marijuana harvests, and "the largest
area of essentially untouched prairie anywhere on the
continent." Of all these good things, they judged the
"amazing" Menninger Foundation to be the greatest.

You can tell the authors were trying to be kind to the
old state. It's the sort of condescending kindness Kansans
have grown accustomed to ever since Dorothy flew off on the
typical, calm tornadoic day.

All five essayists agree it's been a glorious past.
Kooky sometimes—but entertaining, lovable, and productive.
Nevins, who was especially enamored of those early fighters,
was also aware that Kansas had toyed with "every incoherent
and fantastic dream of social improvement and reform, every
economic delusion that has bewildered the foggy brain of
fanatics, every political fallacy nurtured by the misfortune
of poverty and failure, rejected elsewhere..." There were
two sides to the Kansas coin, he discovered. "If the reformer
 grew passionate, so did the conservative." The good old days
were certainly a mixed bag.

Davis, who was nearest to understanding the Kansas psyche
agreed that Kansans always represented ambivalence. There is
no coaxing uniformity of value out of the complexities of
Kansas emotions and convictions. Kansans are rarely of one
mind. For every virtue, there's a favored vice, for every
asset, a lateral liability.

Why Kansans were, and perhaps still are, a unique bundle
of recognizable contradictions has been hard to understand.
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better. What they are really complaining about is lost youth

And it's true that it's harder to get a good bond scandal

work up these days because of the sophisticated government

checks. It's also true Nancy Kassebaum is following a
different track than Carry Nation, and doesn't grab as many
national headlines. Most Kansans are pretty happy about that.

Bob Dole's national leadership certainly equals William
Peffer's and his one-line sarcasms are about as pungent as

Yelling' Ellen Lease's. The mediocre ranking doesn't always

hold, either. Kansas never climbed to the national average of

unemployment in the last recession, or, for all of her

exported young people, lost a congressman following the 1980
census. If Jefferson's dream of a nation of yeomen farmers
has faded, western Kansas has led in pioneering farming as

big-business entrepreneurs which seems to be the latest in

ordered efficiency.

While Kansas has lost some of its flamboyancy in its
middle age, there still remains something of the old psyche.

Her people are not more of one mind than they ever were. Some
twentieth-century puritans in the state still talk about open
saloons, the evil of bingo spreading beyond church basements,

and the unholy threat of a Greek goddess atop the capital
building. Others believe the millennium will come with pari-

mutual betting, liquor by the drink, and statuesque goddesses

wherever you put them.

The love-hate ambivalence is still much with the natives.
It is fed by history, climate, land, religion, and a mingling
of races. If Kansans don't understand it, they have come to
accept, appreciate, and, just like their grandfathers, brag
about it. Those who stay, in the main, seem to be enjoying

the more dignified pace of mature middle age. What was lost
in mystery and bombast, Kansans believe has been more than
balanced by decorum and the good life.
CITATIONS


Nevins, Alan, Kansas and the Stream of American Destiny (Lawrence, 1954), 3-25.


WEATHER

Tornadoes, blizzards, floods--weather on the Great Plains. Some ingenious pioneers tried to control the weather. One such man was J.B. Alwater of Chicago. After being caught in a tornado in 1885, Alwater invented and patented the Alwater Tornado Killer. It was a box full of dynamite with an outside flap. When the wind reached tornado speed, the flap hit the box, setting off the dynamite, blowing the tornado apart. One day in a southwestern Kansas town, a crow accidentally slapped the flap. The explosion flattened the depot, knocked out all the windows in town, and killed two cows, a mule and the crow. After that, the people decided to take their chances with Mother Nature.

From PLAINS TALK