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Gumbo Flats and Slim Buttes: Visualizing the “West River” Region in Western South Dakota

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Abstract

When South Dakota and North Dakota became states in 1889, the powers that be split the old Dakota Territory lengthwise a few degrees south of the 46th parallel, creating two states that each spanned roughly 400 miles east to west, and about 230 miles north to south. The Missouri River ran through the central portion of both states, marking the approximate location of the 100th Meridian. Given the stark differences in annual moisture on either side of the Meridian and the inherent contrasts this discrepancy produces, perhaps these states should have been divided north to south instead.

In South Dakota, the “West River” half of the state trailed behind the east in settlement, economic development, and urbanization. While homesteaders and town-builders poured into the “East River” counties in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the west remained largely unsettled. The differences in settlement patterns in the two halves of the state produced two distinct regions—one east of the Missouri, the other west of the river. The “West River” region featured an environment, geography, and topography far different from the east, which contributed to its image as a unique region. This paper will explore the role of environment and settlement in South Dakota’s western half, and demonstrate how these factors helped settlers visualize “West River” as a unique region.



For twenty-first century South Dakotans, the term “West River” carries a host of geographic, cultural, and environmental connotations. It gives insight into where a person lives, what his occupation

might be, and suggests a great deal about his life. Few have to ask where “West River” is or which river the phrase refers to, because that information is understood by the state’s residents. Nonresidents with an appreciation of geography can infer that “West River” refers to the region of South Dakota on the western side of the Missouri River. *The* river runs north to south, roughly along the 100th Meridian, and splits the state into two like-sized halves.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, white settlers and politicians familiar with this area’s environment and geography recognized it as different from the rest of the territory. From the earliest years of Dakota Territory, they noticed that the lands west of the Missouri featured distinctive weather, rainfall totals, soil, topography, flora, and fauna. Later, these environmental variations forced lifestyle alterations in order for residents to survive. Homesteaders in this region settled later than their eastern counterparts and learned to work harder and live with less. Even after South Dakota became a state, the western half trailed behind the east in settlement, economic development, and urbanization. Over time, the ability to remain on the land despite numerous hardships became a source of great pride.¹ The characteristics of the land, as well as the cultural and political environment that emerged, led residents of South Dakota’s western half to visualize themselves as part of a “West River” region.

When South Dakota became a state in 1889, the government followed the guidance of the territory’s residents in determining how Dakota would be divided. Concerns over government agencies, transportation issues, and population were they key reasons for the north-south split, though these considerations were determined by climate and environment. In 1889, the southern half of Dakota Territory had 100,000 more people than the northern half, most of whom lived east of the Missouri river.² The Missouri, which ran through the middle of the territory, marked the approximate location of the 100th Meridian, the standard dividing line between eastern areas with precipitation abundant enough for row crop agriculture and western areas suitable only for grazing. Rainfall east of the river averaged from 16 to more than 24 inches per year, while the “West River” region, excluding the Black Hills, averaged less than

16. In many places, annual precipitation fell to below 14 inches annually.³

The soil and topography differed as well. In the west, most soils were heavy, sticky, and clay-based. These vast areas of gumbo soils, often called gumbo flats, were rock-hard when dry and slick and glue-like when wet. This made them difficult for row crop farming, but ideal for grazing. Soils in what would become eastern South Dakota were loams, not gumbo, and excellent for tillage. Greater rainfall and better soils made the lands east of the Missouri valuable farm ground. The differences also extended to topography. The “West River” country rested almost entirely within the Great Plains physiological region, featuring short grass prairie, while much of the eastern half was considered Prairie Plains, or tall grass prairie. The eastern half featured rolling hills and a generally level terrain, while the west was characterized by tall buttes and steep canyons. This can be explained, in part, because the eastern Prairie Plains were formed by glaciation and stream erosion, while the western Great Plains developed by aggradation, the deposit of sediment. Thus, western South Dakota became, as historian Herbert S. Schell has written, “a region of buttes and badlands separated by wide level uplands cut by deep narrow canyons.”⁴ Because of these differences in topography, soil, and rainfall, eastern lands could support settlers on standard 160 acre claims, while most places “West River” could not.

Despite tremendous differences east to west, the federal government could not reasonably divide the Territory along natural boundaries. Years of debate and attempts to partition the land had created a situation where natural boundaries fell second to political concerns. The lands that would become the “West River” region first joined the United States as part of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. In 1861, more than half a century after Lewis and Clark’s Corps of Discovery returned, President James Buchanan signed the bill organizing Dakota Territory. This new territory included the lands that would become North and South Dakota, as well as much of present-day Montana and Wyoming. Additional bills in 1864 and 1868 trimmed the latter two territories from Dakota, leaving the geographic region that most recognize as Dakota Territory.⁵

The year 1868 proved instrumental in the emergence of the “West River” region. Two key government actions helped establish the political boundaries of what would become western South Dakota. The first came on April 29, when the federal government and Native Americans agreed to the Fort Laramie Treaty. For years, Native American tribes, especially the Lakota Sioux and Northern Cheyenne, had battled the United States over land, overland travel routes, and white encroachment on their hunting grounds. The Fort Laramie Treaty ended the hostilities and established the Great Sioux Reservation in Dakota Territory. In return for concessions by the Sioux, including safe passage for white travelers and no further opposition to the construction of the Union Pacific railroad, the United States “recognized all of present-day South Dakota west of the Missouri, including the Black Hills, as belonging to the Sioux.”⁶ On July 25, three months after the Fort Laramie Treaty, Congress completed a second region-defining action when it enacted the bill organizing Wyoming Territory. By mid-1868, the federal government had established the boundaries of Dakota Territory and set aside its southwestern quarter as the Great Sioux Reservation. The lands in the Great Sioux Reservation, already different from eastern Dakota in climate and geography, now became divided politically as well. In future years, this division would influence how and when homesteaders settled the area.

The government’s actions in 1868 did not prevent further attempts to divide Dakota Territory, however. In February 1872, the Senate Committee on Territories reviewed a bill seeking to divide Dakota along the 46th parallel, creating two new territories. The northern territory, encompassing the area of present-day North Dakota, was to be called Pembina Territory and have its capital at Bismarck, while the southern part would retain the name Dakota and keep its capital at Yankton. The attempt to divide the territory resulted from a number of factors, the most important being the distance to the territorial capital, which rested just across the Missouri river from Nebraska. As the committee report noted, there “being no direct route of travel between these distant settlements, those residing in the region of Pembina, or indeed in any part of the more

northern sections of the Territory, in going to Yankton, the capital . . . are compelled to travel a distance from one thousand to fifteen hundred miles, and this by the nearest practicable route." Although supported by the Committee on Territories, the bill failed in 1872 and again in 1874.⁷

In 1878, the Committee reviewed another appeal to partition Dakota Territory, though instead of splitting the territory north and south, this bill sought to divide it east and west. General George Custer's expedition had discovered gold in the Black Hills in 1876, initiating a rush of miners and fortune-seekers into the sacred territory the Sioux called *Paha Sapa* (hills that are black). The Black Hills were part of the Great Sioux Reservation established in 1868, but the desire for gold far outweighed upholding the Fort Laramie Treaty. This bill sought to establish the "Territory of Lincoln" in the western half of Dakota Territory, which would reach from the 100th Meridian to the 105th, and from Nebraska to Canada. The authors sought to transfer one degree of longitude from the territories of Montana and Wyoming to ensure that the entire Black Hills region became part of Lincoln Territory. This seemed appropriate, for it was "because of the wonderful change produced therein by the discovery of gold and the subsequent rapid settlement of that country, that we are now asking for a new Territory."⁸

Unlike previous bills, this one recognized the differences in flora and ecology of western Dakota. The authors claimed that the Black Hills was "an extremely well-watered and timbered country," and noted that "the winter-grazing country [in] that region surrounding the Black Hills and extending northwardly to the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers is most excellent, and the grasses are of the same character as those found in New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming." In addition, the "numerous tributaries" of the Missouri river produced a "very extensive and fertile country capable of sustaining a large population." Although later residents would have disputed that the grasslands from the Black Hills to the Missouri were "most excellent" and that the entire region was "well-watered", the bill says much about how politicians viewed the region's ecology. Outside of the timbered Black Hills, they noticed the vast

short-grass prairies, which resembled western territories far more than the tall-grass regions of Minnesota or Iowa. Although supporters of Lincoln Territory embellished the region's ability to support white settlement, they nonetheless realized that this region was somewhat different than eastern lands, even those immediately east of the Missouri.⁹

Further, the 1878 document claimed that the territory needed organization to induce settlement in the unpopulated region. Although many Native Americans lived there, the western part of the territory had no homesteaders, and was devoid of white settlement, the bill argued. The boundaries selected for Lincoln Territory included "about one-half of the Territory of Dakota," but "aside from the Black Hills country and that portion on the Missouri River including the city of Bismarck, where about five thousand people reside, no inhabited part of Dakota is included."¹⁰ The western half of Dakota seemed unique in environment, economic opportunities, and settlement, so establishing a new territory seemed logical.

In addition to the economic possibilities available due to the land's natural resources—such as mining and ranching—the bill's proponents mirrored the practical considerations of previous attempts at dividing the territory. Like the 1872 and 1874 efforts, the 1878 bill cited distance as a reason to organize Lincoln Territory. It claimed that "the present and usually-traveled route from Deadwood to Yankton . . . is via either Cheyenne [Wyoming] or Sidney [Nebraska] on the Union Pacific Railroad, thence to Omaha, and from the last named place up the Missouri River . . . a distance of between 900 and 1,000 miles."¹¹ The authors gave no opinion on how Deadwood's residents would reach Bismarck, more than 300 miles away, though the city was about 100 miles closer (as the crow flies). Like its predecessors, the 1878 bill failed, as did another attempt the same year to create the Territory of Pembina, which the House of Representatives Committee on Territories failed to support.¹²

The debate over dividing Dakota Territory continued in various bills until North Dakota and South Dakota became states in 1889. These attempts focused on dividing the territory along or near the 46th parallel because that point "is not artificial and adopted for con-

venience only, but results from the natural conditions of the Territory,” as evidenced by “the organizations of the chief religious bodies in the Territory and the duplication of their institutions of learning.”¹³ In 1879, the editor of the *Black Hills Journal* shared these sentiments. “A year ago THE JOURNAL took position in favor of admitting Dakota into the Union as she is—if possible,” he wrote; “if not, then division on the forty-sixth parallel, and the admission as a state of all south of this line.”¹⁴ Although the western and eastern halves of Dakota differed in climate and topography, government organization determined how the territory was parceled out. In this the government simply followed the lead of the territory’s residents, who in the years before statehood referred to their respective parts as North Dakota and South Dakota.

Following the discovery of gold in the Black Hills in 1876, a number of Native American tribes signed treaties ceding land to the United States. Settlers and gold-seekers flooded into the Black Hills and the population in western Dakota swelled. By 1889, statehood seemed imminent and the federal government sought to encourage settlement in Dakota by offering new lands for homesteading. As historian Paul M. Nelson noted in *The Prairie Windows Out Its Own*, “Once again in 1889 the government pressured the Lakota to surrender more of their territory.”¹⁵ Ranchers had established vast spreads in the Great Sioux Reservation, while mines and towns dotted the Black Hills. These scattered settlements seemed too far apart for safety and promoters seeking statehood wanted to establish connections between the “civilized” areas. In February, 1890, President Benjamin Harrison signed the bill that dissolved the Great Sioux Reservation and opened “surplus” land for white settlement.

Even with land available for settlement, few homesteaders found their way to the “West River” country until after the turn of the century. Between 1900 and 1915, however, more than 100,000 people settled on land that once was the Great Sioux Reservation. But unlike in other areas, by the standards of previous frontier homesteaders, these settlers failed. They realized that nature could not be conquered, only dealt with. Many left and never returned, but for those who stayed, the unfamiliar environmental conditions forced adapta-

tion. This process created people with a strong character who soon came to see their land as unique.¹⁶

After the initial hardships, homesteaders and businessmen saw themselves as living in “great range country,” that offered much to those willing to work for it. Even so, life was not easy. In the late fall of 1906, a severe fuel shortage left many people in danger of freezing to death. The *Bad River News* reported that “the country west of the river is without fuel and as the days grow colder and as a siege of severe cold may strike at any time the inhabitants are becoming more alarmed for their safety.” The same Thanksgiving Day issue found something to be thankful for, despite the hardship. The editor wrote, “In this busy rush of immigration, home building and speculation, very few of us find time to be thankful for or realize the everyday and vital blessings that are pouring in upon us. In this part of South Dakota, lying west of the Missouri river . . . we as citizens of this country are receiving free homes as was never before offered to the American citizen, [which] gives us greater reason to be thankful.”¹⁷

In addition to his message of thanks, the editor’s comments offer insight into how homesteaders saw themselves. In a very short time they realized that the country west of the Missouri offered different challenges and rewards, a defining feature of the region’s residents. They understood the challenges of living “West River” and embraced the identity that those hardships created. Many newspapers shared this sentiment. The following summer the *Murdo Coyote* noted the uniqueness of the region. A new railroad had arrived in Philip, about fifty miles west, which “means closer connection in business and social relations between the farming section in the eastern part of the state and the timber and mining region in the western part of the state.” Still, environmental concerns over rainfall and the fertility of the soil often came to the forefront. The gumbo soil proved especially irritating to many newcomers who dismissed livestock grazing and attempted to till the land. In some places, enterprising entrepreneurs sought to capitalize on the land by making bricks out of the clayey soil. Although the venture proved unsuccessful, for residents with a sense of humor, it seemed that “the practical utility of the much despised gumbo has at last been demonstrated. Henceforth we

look not upon our surrounding hills with disdain, nor will we allow the stranger within our gates to curse the gross accumulation which gathereth upon his hind feet in muddy weather.”¹⁸

Settlers in eastern South Dakota did not have experience with many aspects of life across the Missouri—including gumbo soil—and “West River” residents took offense when easterners offended them, their land, and their crops. In 1914, the editor of the *Philip Weekly Review and Bad River News* defended farmers west of the Missouri.

“Hear that Stanley county crops are dried up again—all gone,’ is what one of our subscribers in the eastern part of the state writes us. Not that anyone here knows of. The impression of course is pardonable, since this is the season of the year when, in the exuberance of their joy at the prospects of harvesting a bumper crop, the hearts of the farmers down in that section go out in compassion to their Stanley county brethren . . . Necessarily, Stanley county has had the misfortune to number among its people for awhile some who didn’t know what else to turn to, so they tried farming . . . Alfalfa, the dairy cow, hogs—diversified farming as it is popularly known—is coming into its own in this section, as it should . . . The writer has no thought of roasting any individual. He wants only to put the matter in the right light for our eastern subscribers who are hearing the same woeful tales as the one quoted. We have no patience with slipshod methods that some have followed, for that is the source of considerable undesirable advertising.”¹⁹

The editor felt obligated to defend his region against easterners who reaped two harvests while the crops of their western counterparts were “dried up—all gone.” He recognized the mistakes of earlier homesteaders, who used methods unsuitable for the conditions, and praised the region’s recent agricultural diversification. Homesteaders quickly found that in order to keep their land, they needed more than a single crop. By diversifying, if one crop failed, they had others to rely on. Many settlers had arrived, failed, and left the re-

gion before diversification finally became common practice west of the 100th Meridian.

By 1917, the idea of “West River” as a region had embedded itself firmly into the minds of those who lived there. In Lemmon, a small community northeast of the Slim Buttes country in northwestern South Dakota, the *Tribune* billed itself as “The Leading Weekly of Western Dakota.” Its issues contained such titles as “Large Area is Benefited—Entire West River Country Drenched by Much Needed Downpour” and “West of River Country Casts 20,246 Votes.” The latter article included another telling statement about residents’ view of themselves and their importance to the state. As reflected in the *Philip Weekly Review*, the western portion of the state was often considered secondary to the more populated half east of the Missouri. This perception of second class status created a bond between those who lived there, not unlike the American Colonies during the American Revolution or the Confederate States during the Civil War. In western South Dakota, however, this feeling manifested itself in the creation of a “West River” identity. As a result, western newspapers celebrated any event in which their side of the state bested the eastern half (in perception or in reality). For example, the *Lemmon Tribune* noted that “the country west of the Missouri river cast almost as many republican votes as the whole first congressional district [in the eastern part of the state], including all the territory south of the Beadle county line. The west river country cast 20,246 votes.”²⁰

By the early twentieth century, residents in western South Dakota saw themselves as living “West River.” Their home region exhibited a separate set of environmental, topographical, and political characteristics, and residents embraced the notion. Beginning with the establishment of Dakota Territory, through the congressional debates over its division, to its eventual homesteading, politicians, businessmen, town builders, and settlers recognized the area’s uncommon qualities. From the Slim Buttes country in the far northwest corner of the state, to the badlands region south of the Black Hills, to the gumbo flats farther east, residents of “West River” South Dakota visualized their land as a unique region.

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Notes

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4. Herbert S. Schell, *History of South Dakota* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), 4-7.
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9. *Ibid.*, 1-2.
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Committee on Territories. Report to Accompany bill S. 185. 50th Cong., 1st sess., 1888. S. Rept. 75., 1 as examples. The 1888 bill sought to divide the territory north and south, calling the north Lincoln Territory, not Pembina as before. I have been unable to locate any reference to the territory as East Dakota or West Dakota, except as “western Dakota,” “the western part of Dakota,” etc. It appears that the North Dakota-South Dakota designation seemed natural to most Americans, taking North and South Carolina as the precedent.

14. *Black Hills Journal*, 13 December, 1879.
15. Nelson, *The Prairie Winnows Out Its Own*, xv.
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