Centennial on the Northern Plains: An Introduction

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Although I am now sixty-eight years old, I have thought of myself during the past half century since my eighteenth birthday as a young man. Perhaps that is partly because I have been blessed with good health and personal vigor, but it may also be because I was born and reared in a young State. South Dakota was only thirty-two years old when I first came on the scene at Avon in 1922. My father, a pioneer Dakota clergyman, whom I always thought of as an old man, was born in 1868—twenty-one years before South Dakota achieved statehood. He knew much about South Dakota when it was still part of the Dakota Territory.

My father loved the Great Plains—the farms and small towns, the vast prairies, the lovely skies and marvelous sunsets and sunrises, the dramatically changing seasons, the Black Hills, Yellowstone National Park, the grain fields and the sagebrush, fishing and pheasant hunting, and above all, the sturdy, resourceful, and cooperative people. I have shared that love of the prairie country and its people.

As a student at Dakota Wesleyan University in the early 1940s, I developed a lifelong passion for history and literature that was enhanced by the emphasis of my college professors on the culture of the “Middle Border”: O. E. Rølvaag’s Giants in the Earth, Hamlin Garland’s Son of the Middle Border, Willa Cather’s My Ántonia, John Neihardt’s Black Elk Speaks, Sinclair Lewis’s Main Street, Frederick Jackson Turner’s The Significance of the Frontier in American History, Walter Prescott Webb’s The Great Plains, Fred Shannon’s writings on economic history, and yes, Zane Grey’s Riders of the Purple Sage—all of these and other works quickened my interest in the life of the Great Plains. Once during my teaching days at Dakota Wesleyan, Sinclair Lewis drove up to the campus unexpectedly and asked me for a tour of the Middle Border Museum at the college. We had a fascinating afternoon.

During my student and later teaching years at Dakota Wesleyan, I was able to view life on the Great Plains through the experienced eyes of Dean Matthew D. Smith—a descendant of Jedediah Strong Smith, the frontier pathfinder. Throughout our lives together, my brother-in-law, Professor Robert Pennington, has enriched me beyond measure with his deep insights, vast knowledge, and unfailing lifetime passion for the history and life of the Great Plains.

Dakota Wesleyan has produced three United States Senators—Clinton Anderson, who moved to New Mexico for reasons of health,
Francis Case, and myself. All of us carried a lifetime interest in the culture and life of the prairies. Senator Case’s brother, Leland, devoted a major part of his life to cultivating and advancing interest in the “Middle Border.”

As a graduate student at Northwestern University following World War II, I studied under Ray Allen Billington, whose love of frontier history is legendary. His brilliant student, Martin Ridge, with whom I shared graduate days at Northwestern, continues at Huntington Library in the high tradition of Billington.

I have always been proud of my Dakota heritage and have imagined that there are special virtues of strength and endurance and integrity in the people of the prairies. Nothing made me prouder as a presidential candidate than a Time magazine cover in May of 1972 that carried my photograph with the byline: “Here Comes the Prairie Populist.” That is what I think I am and that, I believe, explains as much as any factor why I was elected to the United States Senate for many years as well as once being nominated for President.

Now come four fascinating essays in this special issue of the Great Plains Quarterly, marking the centennial of Statehood for South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana, and Wyoming.

John E. Miller of South Dakota State University has written a first-rate discussion of the political and social issues that surrounded South Dakota’s achievement of Statehood and the drafting of a Constitution in 1889. The issues fought out by South Dakotans in that historic year included a bitter battle among several cities for the new capital—with Pierre finally winning what had narrowed down to a two-city competition with Huron. Pierre has never been the population center of the State—a spot east and south of the chosen capital site. But it is the geographic center of the State, located on the Missouri River.

South Dakota has always been divided into East River and West River residents. East of the Missouri are the diverse family farming operations, the corn fields and soybeans, and most of the State’s larger cities, with Sioux Falls expected to tally 125,000 people in the 1990 census. West of the River are the great ranches, the grasslands, the Indian reservations, the Badlands and the Black Hills.

A West River resident may be heard referring to us “East River” people with the slight disdain that one reserves either for less well-endowed foreigners or for those believed to be not quite authentic. I have often thought that there is a more noticeable cultural, economic, and topographical demarcation between “East River” and “West River” South Dakotans than there is between, say Pennsylvanians and East River South Dakotans.

In addition to the battle for the new State capital, South Dakotans fought hard in 1889 and beyond over the issues of prohibition, women’s suffrage, agricultural distress, and the opening of the Sioux Indian Reservation for white settlement.

South Dakota adopted prohibition in 1889 but abandoned it as a failure a few years later. In view of this early history it is interesting to note in recent years that as many of the small towns have declined in favor of larger commercial centers, the last businesses to give up are invariably the bars. South Dakotans may sometimes think and even vote “dry,” but they tend to live “wet” with considerable enthusiasm.

Intense battles were waged by and between the advocates of women’s suffrage—especially over the tactical question of whether or not the suffragettes should merge their campaign with the prohibitionists. Susan B. Anthony believed strongly in separating the two issues for fear that the liquor interests would sink the women suffrage movement if it were tied to prohibition. Miss Anthony campaigned for six months in South Dakota during 1890 but she and her suffragette troops failed, largely because neither of the major political parties would endorse the right of women to vote and, except for the Methodists, none of the major churches endorsed the suffrage movement.

A second South Dakota State University professor, Rex C. Myers, traces “The Emergence of Community in Eastern Montana, 1900-1925.” Professor Myers sees the triumph of “co-
operation” over “individualism” as a fundamental drive among homesteaders in the Big Sky country. Such cooperation manifested itself in four ways: formation of school districts, small fourth-class post offices, community clubs, and counties. The loneliness of early life on the Plains and the necessity of “mutuality” for personal and social life were stronger forces than the desire for solitude and the impulse to “go it alone.”

O. E. Rølvaag offers countless word pictures in his marvelous novel *Giants in the Earth* of the loneliness and sense of isolation that gripped the settlers of the northern Plains. They literally hungered for neighbors and “community” and “cooperation.” Their survival and their sanity depended upon cooperation and community.

Janet Schulte of Brandeis University discusses Jewish homesteading in North Dakota. In my boyhood hometown, Mitchell, the most admired and successful businessmen included a group of civic-minded Jewish business firms: D. T. Becker’s men’s clothing store, Frank Winner’s women’s store, Philip Mizel’s autos, Saul Feinstein’s women’s wear—to name a few. I recall no Jewish farmers.

But Ms. Schulte traces the development of a group of 1200 or so Russian-Jewish immigrants homesteading in North Dakota, 1900-1920. She found that “their traditional Jewish culture did not adapt to the environmental and geographic conditions of the prairie.” After proving up their land, Jewish homesteaders tended to sell it and use the proceeds to establish business and professional lives in the towns and cities of the Plains or in other more urban parts of the nation.

Under the Homestead Act, settlers could achieve ownership of 160 acres of public land free by simply paying a modest fee and then working the land for five years. Or the quarter section of land could be purchased for $1.25 an acre after the homesteader had lived on it for nine months.

The final paper, by Leslie T. Whipp of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, deals with the celebrated novelist of Wyoming, Owen Wister. He has had, concludes the author, “an incalculable impact on American culture down to our own time.” Wister, author of the highly successful novel, *The Virginian,* significantly influenced a body of other writers that included Willa Cather. He was a major influence in the emergence of the “western” novel and Hollywood films about the West.

After reading this essay on Owen Wister, I made a note to myself: “Read *The Virginian.*” I intend to do so.

And I commend this issue of the *Great Plains Quarterly* with these four essays to all those interested in the Great Plains.