

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

2005

## Book Review: Cities on the Plains: The Evolution of Urban Kansas

James E. Sherow

*Kansas State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Sherow, James E., "Book Review: Cities on the Plains: The Evolution of Urban Kansas" (2005). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 181.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/181>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

*Cities on the Plains: The Evolution of Urban Kansas.* By James R. Shortridge. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004. xiv + 480 pp. Charts, maps, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00.

Great Plains geographer James R. Shortridge has added another soundly researched study to his impressive list of works. He asks some rather simple questions, and, like all simple questions, they demand elaborated, intelligent answers. Shortridge first asks what caused some urban dreamers to realize their goals and others not. Second, he delves into how the current hierarchy of cities emerged in Kansas. Why and how, for example, did Wichita arise as a regional powerhouse when at the same time other cities failed to become dominant even though they may have been better situated at one time? Or, why isn't there a major city of "coalescence" in the western part of the state?

Of more than 4,000 cities established in Kansas since 1854, only a minority have survived and prospered. Shortridge takes the reader through a close examination of 118 of those that persisted. In the end, he shows convincingly that city promoters and planners must be highly adaptable in creating viable urban environments. Reliance upon a solitary industry, or institution such as a university, or a form of transportation is to simplify dangerously the economic and social base upon which a city rests.

Clearly, railroads shaped the urban pattern in the state throughout the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. Automobiles and highways, along with air travel, however, unraveled that older network, cutting off the economic lifelines of several cities like Parsons and Herington. A city like Lawrence has not only relied upon its university as its economic mainstay, but diversified its economy by stressing investments in "quality of life" enhancements that have become invaluable economic magnets drawing people and businesses to the city.

Other cities have relied upon geographical situation and single industries to drive their economies. For example, Dodge City and Garden City flourish as a result of the beef packing industry. Of course, this sort of economic development rests on a precarious base, especially the tangential reliance on the center pivot irrigation of a declining Ogallala Aquifer.

Shortridge pointedly shows that the cities best poised to thrive in the early twenty-first century are those that have strong higher education institutions, fine health services, and varied retail. His excellent scholarly study is suitable for anyone interested in the history of urban development or Great Plains history.

JAMES E. SHEROW  
Department of History  
Kansas State University