

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

2005

The Buffalo Commons: Great Plains Residents' Responses to a Radical Vision

Amanda Rees
Columbus State University

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



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

Rees, Amanda, "The Buffalo Commons: Great Plains Residents' Responses to a Radical Vision" (2005).
Great Plains Quarterly. 188.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/188>

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.

THE BUFFALO COMMONS

GREAT PLAINS RESIDENTS' RESPONSES TO A RADICAL VISION

AMANDA REES

The American Great Plains has gained and shed various regional meanings since Euro-American exploration began. From a desert to a garden to a dust bowl to a breadbasket, this region's identity has shifted radically and dramatically over the last 200 years. In Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas*, he argues that this Plains state can be understood as empty and bare: "The blank landscape prompted dreams of a blank-slate society, a place where institutes might be remade as humans saw fit."¹ Authors such as Jonathan Raban have characterized the Great Plains as a whole in this manner. Raban has used the term *tabula rasa* to characterize the region.² In

the mid-1980s unusual things were happening on the Plains that suggested yet another period of radical shift in thinking. A new *tabula rasa* seemed to offer itself up as the region adjusted to a new set of political, economic, social, and environmental contexts.

In the early 1980s a paradigm shift seemed to be developing in what Stephen E. White has so clearly articulated as a remarkably painful economic period: "The farm recession, which began in 1981, was characterized by overproduction, low crop prices, dramatically increasing interest rates, a decline in exports, and a decrease in land values."³ In that painful time, six distinct utopian visions of the region's future were projected onto this Plains "blank slate." First, Bret Wallach proposed that the Forest Service purchase sections of the Plains and return them to the prairie.⁴ Second, Bob Scott's "Big Open" proposal argued for a large section of eastern Montana to be made into a game preserve.⁵ Third, Thomas Daniels and Mark Lapping suggested that economic triage should be applied to the Plains, with aid being given to larger communities while smaller communities would be allowed to die.⁶ Fourth, the Center for the New West proposed

Key Words: Buffalo Commons, environmentalism, Frank and Deborah Popper, rural communities

Amanda Rees is an assistant professor in the Department of History and Geography at Columbus State University in Columbus, Georgia. She recently edited The Great Plains Region (vol. 1), one of eight regions covered in The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Regional Cultures (8 vol., 2004).

[GPQ 25 (Summer 2005): 161-72]

a new technological region that articulated the Plains as a series of island communities in a sea of grass, threaded together by communications technology.⁷ Fifth, Wes Jackson's Land Institute envisioned a new landscape containing a perennial polyculture and community ecological accounting that would lead to a new culture and agriculture for the region.⁸ Finally, Frank and Deborah Popper's Buffalo Commons proposal argued that large parts of the Plains should be returned to the buffalo.⁹

This last regional vision caught the attention of politicians, residents, and a national and international audience. As Thomas Frank's more recent exploration of a radical schism between Kansas residents' conservative Republicanism and their own political self-interest suggests, this study looks at another interesting mismatch between Plains residents' response to the Poppers and their own sense of their future. In this essay is the story of how that vision was created, the political, economic, and environmental contexts within which it was conceived, and the complex resonance of that proposal in the minds of Plains residents almost a decade after its inception. The importance of this study lies in the fact that the Buffalo Commons is still a powerful image in the minds of many Plains residents, and issues such as tribally controlled land, range management, and sustainable agriculture are more relevant than ever.

EXPLORING RESPONSES

To identify the creation and development of the Buffalo Commons proposal and to capture responses to that proposal, four sources of information were used. First, structured interviews were conducted with Deborah and Frank Popper to see how their vision for a Buffalo Commons has evolved over the years. Second, the Poppers' published and unpublished work related to the proposal were examined with an eye toward the impact on local communities. This also included looking at media coverage of the Poppers' work to see how it was articulated to the general public. Finally, members of one Plains community were interviewed in the

summer of 1996, nine years after the Poppers first articulated their regional vision, and in the same year as the U.S. Congress passed the Freedom to Farm Act that sought to end farm subsidies to the Great Plains and other regions.

Located squarely in the central Plains, the community of Muenster (a pseudonym) was chosen as a case study. Though not located in one of the Poppers' most distressed counties, Muenster's population shares many of the region's concerns. Entry into the community was provided by the kindness of two colleagues, one of whom had grown up in the community and the other had worked at the local college for several years. Twenty-two residents in the community were interviewed in depth (for 45 minutes to three hours) and a focused group discussion was conducted at a local community college. Residents were identified using a snowball sampling technique. In its simplest form, two respondents were identified who in turn offered referrals to other respondents. As Rowland Atkinson and John Flint have recently pointed out, snowball sampling contradicts "many of the assumptions underpinning conventional notions of sampling but has a number of advantages for sampling populations such as the deprived, the socially stigmatized and elites."¹⁰ Turning that logic somewhat on its head, as a foreign, female academic who might be considered socially "unusual," I used snowball sampling to create an informal means of accessing members of the Muenster population.

One of the limitations of the snowballing technique is, as Atkinson and Flint have rightly pointed out, "the nature of similarity within social networks may mean that 'isolates' are ignored."¹¹ But, as Hendricks, Blanken, P. Adriaans, and N. Adriaans have suggested, if snowball sampling is used for explorative, qualitative, and descriptive data, it offers practical advantages that include a quick, inexpensive, and in-depth source of qualitative and descriptive data that other techniques often do not provide.¹² It is challenging to capture the relationship of a radical regional vision to Plains folk; however, the rich and complicated set of responses to the Buffalo Commons vision



FIG. 1. *Photograph of bison herd by Harvey Gunderson. Courtesy of Division of Zoology, University of Nebraska State Museum.*

established by this technique suggests that the Poppers' vision was still part of the regional discourse. Pseudonyms were used for respondents' names, but their roles in the community were not disguised.

RECONSTRUCTING AN EVOLVING VISION OF THE BUFFALO COMMONS

In the mid-1980s Frank and Deborah Popper created a powerful story of the region's future by proposing that its worst-affected areas should become a Buffalo Commons. The federal government would encourage residents to leave, and the land would be used to create a national park. A planner, Frank Popper had first turned his attention to regional planning in the American West in the earlier 1980s, arguing that it should be a safety value to serve in an American crisis.¹³ But to realize the region's

possibilities, he argued, required rigorous public land policy. In 1985 Frank and Deborah traveled to the Great Plains and saw a particularly troubled landscape heading toward complete ecological and social collapse unless, they argued, federal land-use policy could promote efficient water use, soil conservation, and farm buyouts. In particular, the 110 most distressed counties, located primarily in the northern Plains, should be de-privatized, taken out of cultivation, and given over to the buffalo: a Buffalo Commons. The plan merged distinctions between national parks and grasslands, grazing land, Indian lands, and state-owned lands: "[B]y creating the Buffalo Commons, the federal government will, however belatedly, turn the social costs of space—the curse of the shortgrass immensity—to more social benefit than the unsuccessfully privatized Plains have ever offered."¹⁴

A REGIONAL VISION TAKES OFF

The Buffalo Commons proposal unfolded in the middle of a larger political debate about federal land management in the West that had important implications for the ways in which the proposal was received. Political scientist R. McGregor Cawley argued that prior to the 1970s, planning was a local authority issue under the guise of local planning and zoning.¹⁵ The 1970s became a pivotal moment in land-use planning in the American West when reformers sought more regulation at higher levels of government to meet the limitations of small-scale planning. The role of environmentalism played an important part in this shift. Members of the environmental movement had worked hand in hand with regional planners and land-use reformers to reshape the debate in the American West over federal land management, and Frank Popper was part of that movement. However, this made western leaders increasingly defensive about decisions shaping the states they represented. It should be noted that the conflict arose in part in what was called the Sagebrush Rebellion, a collection of loosely and very informally organized groups who sought to reject the environmental movement and federal-level planning. In addition to this set of political-planning-environmentalist tensions, there were a remarkable set of more specific tensions in the 1980s relating to deep environmental concerns over regional drought and an ensuing political battle for federal agricultural support.

Response to the Poppers' vision was phenomenal and moved quickly from the realm of the academic to that of politics. Why was the Poppers' work so powerful? Commentators such as Paul Kay and Mary Umberger have worked to identify the powerful effect of the proposal and have variously pointed to either the Poppers' lack of rational scholarship or the media's poor reportage. Kay argued, "The debate that the Poppers' publications have provided has a most curious form, bringing the rational into uneasy conjunction with the emotional. The Poppers' work was based on dispassionate quantitative

analyses, but the lack of a documented scientific report allowed visceral responses to dominate."¹⁶ Whereas Kay places the "blame" of emotionality at the foot of the Poppers, Umberger's analysis of the print media's coverage of the Buffalo Commons proposal suggested that the media wove a simplistic and bifurcated narrative opposing eastern academics and Plains residents alternatively characterized as "yokel, wise rural, pioneer, or expert."¹⁷ Indeed, Umberger chastised the media on three counts: dismissing the land-use proposal, failing to question the Poppers' statistical analysis, and failing to inform readers by "oversimplifying and overdramatizing the issues."¹⁸ Both Kay's and Umberger's arguments have some merit, but their work needs to be placed in the larger political and environmental contexts of the time.

Frank Popper first found how powerful the commons concept was in 1988 when he spoke to the Western Planning Association in Bismarck, North Dakota. For Frank this was a watershed moment for the Buffalo Commons proposal. As he flew into Bismarck to give his presentation, a major drought had hit the Plains and governors were asking for drought relief. Plains governors found themselves in competition with requests from the Rocky Mountain West for additional funds to fight Yellowstone's fire.

And it also turned out (this was something that I discovered during the spring of 1988) that the governor of North Dakota [George Sinner] had been going around making speeches, the standard agricultural speech, that included a quote "unnamed eastern graduate student" who had written a thesis [Deborah was a graduate student at the time], saying the Great Plains should be entirely depopulated and returned to the buffalo and this was what American agriculture had to face. The incomprehension of the larger nonagricultural population that North Dakota had to face, this is what they were up against in trying to get their rightful money out of Washington.¹⁹

As this regional environmental and fiscal crisis grew, the Poppers were wielded as a political tool to galvanize regional pressure at local, state, and national levels. The Poppers' work gained the attention of two U.S. secretaries of agriculture, four U.S. senators, and all the region's governors, who criticized the Poppers. Plains residents also began communicating with the Poppers; for example, an "eighth-grade class in rural Kansas wrote to say they now observed a weekly Popper Day, dedicated to the study of Plains history and ecosystems."²⁰ Thus, the Poppers were part of both regional political discourse and regional high school classroom discussions, and were shaping the ways in which the region was understood in national and local residents' imaginations.

At that point the Poppers made a conscious decision to travel in the region to talk about their vision. Between 1988 and 1994, they made sixty-three presentations. Frank commented, "I don't think we've turned down an invitation to the Plains yet. I don't think we've turned down an invitation, period, subject to scheduling constraints."²¹ They were clear about the work to establish a strong sense of place through the creation of "vivid regions, giving them meaning and persuading the public to care about them . . . [telling strong stories about the Plains to] produce widespread public awareness and support that allows regional planners to do their work."²² The Poppers believed that such stories were to be powerful planning tools for changing the region's future.

Along with the political and environmental context, we cannot forget the choices the Poppers made about where to perform that vision. Indeed, they chose to speak in a rich and varied set of venues: multiple university presentations (from Kansas to Wyoming), local quasi-public development boards (Mobridge Industrial Development Committee), and commercial groups (North and South Dakota Farm and Ranch Realtors). One particular example is illustrative. The Poppers were asked to provide an evening dinner lecture for the Oklahoma Academy for State Goals, an organization promoting good government.

Chaos ensued as national reporters (*New York Times* and the *New Yorker*), European reporters (*Der Stern*, the *Economist*, and the BBC), and TV camera crews (ABC's *World News Tonight*, NBC's *Today Show*, Italian national television, and Rutgers University television crews) were all in attendance. Thus by 1988 the Buffalo Commons and the Poppers gained incredible levels of attention from a wide variety of audiences.

In the later part of the 1980s almost every public, media, and political debate on the future of the Plains mentioned Frank and Deborah Popper, and in turn those debates began to change the Poppers' work. In Deborah Popper's 1992 dissertation, she compared demographic, socioeconomic, land-use, and central-place pattern data between those Plains counties with a stable population total and those that had lost population.²³ Questioning the usual choices of growth or decline, a common duality in land-use planning, she wanted to reimagine the region in terms of stability and sustainability on the Plains, and she concluded with the observation that when we see the region's population decline we think of it as a negative, but this should not necessarily be our conclusion.

Since the later part of the 1980s the Poppers have continued to talk to various Plains groups, and in doing so they have modified their once overarching, somewhat homogenized narrative of Plains decline and federal involvement. Deborah and Frank took pains to describe this shift:

We've changed a couple of times, we've tried to be forthcoming about it, I'm not sure we've really been clear. . . . The initial buffalo commons vision, and it's very clear in the 1987 article, is that this population decline and economic difficulty would continue for about a generation more, that is, a generation more after 1987, because the federal government was so incredibly brain dead and unconscious that it would take so long to notice things that had been happening forever in the region. . . . Then, after a passage of a generation, then we'd

get federal government that would jump in clumsily with all two billion feet and would invent something like the Works Progress Administration, the Tennessee Valley Authority, or the Bureau of Land Management. . . . In the years since then we've published a couple of pieces in [which] we've suggested something different—that the private sector, local government, and non-federal government and nonprofits were envisioning the buffalo commons much faster on their own than we anticipated in 1987, and this is by '94. . . . So the scenario in '94 is the buffalo commons gets formed much faster and by groups other than the federal government.²⁴

The Poppers argued that the most distressed places were those farthest from interstates, irrigation projects, large rivers, and big cities and that as the boom-and-bust economy played out in a deep-rural landscape: "Nature and the economy always rebelled. The inexorable result was a retreat of agriculture and a reversion of frontier conditions."²⁵ Indeed, in their 1996 article the Poppers argued that the proposal was more of a metaphor that should be wielded to address and reshape the cultural perspective on regionalism, to shift the ways the region's population thinks about themselves.²⁶

This article marked two radical shifts in the Poppers' beliefs in the role of federal government between 1987 and 1994, when they re-envisioned a major role for public-private sector initiatives with an emerging patchwork of both private and public preservation efforts, including expanded federal and state landholdings. The Poppers concluded their modified vision by arguing that although the Plains population may not be ready to accept a Buffalo Commons proposal, they do seem now to share the notion that Plains sod should not have been broken. The Poppers argued that critics misunderstood their proposal: "Our most extreme critics actually believed that we advocated forced depopulation, seizure of private property, and economic shutdown of most or all of the Plains."²⁷ Finally, in 1996 the Poppers

understood their proposal as a metaphor, a new tool in the hands of planners to help regions reimagine themselves.

PLAINS RESIDENTS RESPOND A DECADE AFTER THE INITIAL BUFFALO COMMONS PROPOSAL

Having established a very powerful initial vision of the future, a vision that captured the attention of the media and Plains organizations and individuals, the question for this study was: How, if at all, was the proposal remembered by residents of one small Kansas community? And, was that vision radically different from those held by Plains residents? In the summer of 1996, nine years after the Poppers first proposed the Buffalo Commons, I visited Muenster to ask residents about what they had heard of the Buffalo Commons idea, and how they responded to the ideas. Responses fell into three major thematic areas: economic, geographical/situational, and cultural.

It should be noted that a front-page article on the Poppers had appeared in the Muenster newspaper a few weeks before I arrived in the summer of 1996. The article updated their predictions of population decline and concluded that they might not have been wrong about the decline. Most of the community members I talked to were familiar with the Buffalo Commons idea though fewer remembered the names Frank and Deborah Popper. When I asked when people had first heard about the Poppers, most said they had known about them for several years. For those who were not familiar with their names, I asked if they knew of the Buffalo Commons idea and still more said they had heard of it. Residents had a rich variety of perspectives on the Poppers' vision, framed by environmental, economic, and cultural concerns. Opinions were mixed on the proposal; some felt the idea was ridiculous, whereas others engaged with the ideas of the proposal more specifically.

Hilda and Bill were blunt in their criticism of the Poppers. Hilda, the town's matriarch and widow of one of its large landowners, accused

the Poppers of not being “up to date.” She argued that “they don’t realize [that] as long as we can do it why shouldn’t we.” This comment was an obvious reference to agricultural production, even as she subsequently commented on the wastefulness in her own family’s use of water in the farming business. Bill, the town’s mayor and a realtor, was equally resistant: “We took great offense at that. I won’t forget their names. . . . I think that’s not going to happen, unless something happened to the water. Then, we are fortunate to be over the aquifer and we’ve never had any problems with water here. Now they are watching it, we are looking.” Bill and Hilda’s comments seem to hold a tension between their rejection of the Poppers’ regional proposal and an acknowledgment that the region’s future revolves around the environmental constraints of water and its proper management.

The economic activity of agriculture and the rural life were defended in several comments. Lillian, the director of the city’s convention and visitor’s bureau, defended farming as a way of life. Though she said that she would love to see some buffalo in the region, “I do not see this whole [country] ever, ever, ever going back to Buffalo Commons. . . . Cities will still be here, our good people will still be here.” Carol, the city’s administrator, commented, “I think it’s silly, totally. Because there are always going to be people who want to live in rural areas. I have no desire to live in a major metropolitan city, I like knowing my neighbors, I like feeling that I can take a walk at night safely. I like open spaces, I like the change in climate.” Kevin, the school administrator, understood that the Poppers had conceived the idea as a joke, but that people took it seriously and now they are “living on it, lecturing on it, and being paid to talk about it because it is an interesting idea.” He saw it as working in some areas, but that there was “no way” a person in Muenster could afford to turn their area into a Buffalo Commons.

Rather than using an economic argument, Julie offers a cultural critique of the Poppers’ proposal, arguing that it was more a reflection

of eastern attitudes toward those who lived in the center of the country. “It’s just so bizarre. It’s like people don’t exist in the middle.” She saw the idea in terms of region, arguing that people in the East would see it as okay to say that the Plains should go back to nature:

No one should disturb it so you can see the real, the way the American West was. But don’t do that to me in Massachusetts or New York or whatever. We have to be progressive, but you folks in the middle, we can absorb you, you don’t need that. Well, it’s like, you know, you haven’t been here.

Julie’s critique was echoed and enlarged upon by Bob, a part-time farmer and local college teacher, who commented that this area was unknown to the Poppers and that they had not consulted people in the region. “I think they are crazy. I don’t think they’ve done what you’ve done [a reference to me]. I don’t think they’ve come out and talked to the people. I think they’ve just looked at the region and I’ve got a map that shows the same thing, that we’re a Great Desert.”

In contrast to the negative reactions from many of those who were aware of the Buffalo Commons idea, Wesley, a water district manager, was more sympathetic. Familiar with the changing nature of the Poppers’ ideas, and having met them at a conference, he commented, “I think, first of all, the [Plains] people reacted properly, and I think subsequent work that the Poppers did eased things down and shifted it a little. If you look at their first work it was pretty stark. Later they changed their tune a little, and they got a little more moderate.” Wesley was one of the few residents aware of the shift in the Poppers’ thinking.

Lydia, who taught about the Plains at the local college, used the Poppers’ ideas in her class. She characterized them as lightning rods that kept the barn from burning: “So you have those lightning rods on top to draw the fire and that’s kind of what the Poppers did.” But she, like Julie, was uncomfortable with the image of the Plains being created outside the

region. Instead, she advocated that local people should be in control of their regional image as much as possible.

Residents of Muenster revealed a number of important themes in the ways in which Plains residents understood their region. The Poppers catalogued reactions to their work into four types of response: "Pioneer Gumption ('Don't underestimate our determination and hard work'); Dollar Potential ('Plains food production can feed the world'); Eastern Ignorance (self-explanatory), and Prairie Zen ('Our landscape is a powerful source of spiritual renewal')." ²⁸ However, Muenster respondents add something more. While some interpreted the proposal as an attack on their sense of the contemporary agricultural economy, others felt the vision was an attack on the culture of their region and the values of rural living. Still others saw the Poppers as an example of non-Plains control of the meaning of their region, a meaning they weren't consulted about. Reactions to the Poppers' work were defensive, either as a general dismissal, or revealing a concern about a lack of understanding and engagement with Plains people. Dramatically articulated, explicitly critical of the region's historical circumstances, and imposed from outside by outsiders, the Buffalo Commons proposal was, at least on the surface, in conflict with a sense of region held by its residents. However, as residents' own visions of the future were articulated, they were ultimately not too dissimilar to those of the Poppers.

RESIDENTS ENVISION THEIR OWN FUTURES

How did Muenster residents see their own future and what relationship did their views have with the Poppers' vision? As Kay, Umberger, and this paper argues, the Poppers' work created a powerful vision of the region. In many ways, residents' own visions were not so different from the prognostications of the Poppers. Most of the Muenster respondents saw a decline and aging of the region's population and a shift in the region's agricultural economy

from small farm operations to larger agribusiness. Several saw their own community becoming a regional hub, and others focused on the region as a whole shrinking in terms of people and economic activity. This complex vision of the region is echoed in Thomas Frank's 2004 analysis of the political complexion of twenty-first-century Kansas. Frank mapped the radical shift of Kansas from a nineteenth-century source of radical leftist utopian visions to conservative Republican bastion. In doing so he drew a powerful picture of the rise in power and influence of big business in the region, and the devastating impact of agribusiness and anti-small-farm agricultural policies that have decimated the region. Residents of Muenster echoed some of these shifts in their sense of the future in 1996.

When he first came to his water district job in the mid-1970s, Wesley's first goal was to project the population of his district fifty years into the future to plan for water use:

I never saw the complete demise of the area by any stretch of the imagination, but I think a [Muenster] that is scaled back to 4,000 or 3,500 and being a service center for a population of 15,000 instead of 24,000 is more the scale I saw it all when everything came to pass. And I don't know if that's bad. It certainly is not the vision that a lot of people would have. There are certain people that have that out there as their ideal vision; they want to go back to the 1940s Kansas in size and scope.

The decline in population was echoed by Kevin, the local school administrator, in his view of the future. Kevin saw this decline through the prism of the rise in agribusiness: "In the area, twenty families own most of the land and then fifty years from now you are going to have the Prudentials and the big corporations—Coca-Cola and whoever—buying them out."

Some thought the town's population would grow at the expense of the region's smaller towns. Among them was Jim, a local farmer,

who commented, "A lot of the cities within a thirty-mile radius are decreasing population because the jobs aren't there. A lot of people from outlying areas are driving to Muenster, for instance, to work, and I don't see that changing much." The decline of the small farm and the movement of farmers into town led several people to comment on the destruction of farmsteads. College student Chris commented, "You see a lot of the old farmsteads being torn down. Most of the land is going to the few big farmers who are able to progress. . . . There's probably ten to twelve that are continuing to grow, that are the size you would not call them a family farm any more." Chris, whose family had recently lost their farm, was planning to move to the eastern edge of the Plains with his newly widowed mother.

There were several visions for the region's future. Some saw the potential of the area as a retirement mecca, a thriving interstate community, and a rural utopia. Bill, the mayor-realtor, reported inquiries from people who wanted to retire and needed to relocate to a community with a hospital, postsecondary education, and shopping, and was also close to a highway or an airport. "So what we are hearing is that, you know, places like [Muenster] are going to be the retirement mecca." But amid the upbeat tone there were concerns, and occasionally some ironic disconnects between thoughts and actions. For example, Bob argued that the city has a good chance of drawing people from the big cities to retire and send their children to school. But he also noted one of the central environmental constraints of the region, saying, "If we don't have water we could be gone." For Penny, a chamber of commerce employee, Muenster would thrive simply because its location next to the interstate would keep the community healthy, saying, "I think that communities on the interstate are going to survive." The most optimistic resident, Mark, an employee at the local town newspaper, commented that Muenster "may be increasing half a size [50 percent more], [experiencing] steady growth and expansion. . . . There will be tourism, commercial trade, and more businesses

moving to rural farm settings. . . . In twenty years it will be a pleasant, rural hometown atmosphere even if we do grow." But that future was to be empty of Mark himself as he confided that he was planning to leave the community with his family shortly.

When thinking about the future of the region, Muenster residents argued that the desire for small-town values and the power of new technologies would draw families with children as well as retired people. Alternatively, others saw the community providing no economic lures for its young people. Julia, the local library director, argued that technology would liberate small towns from an agricultural economy. "I'm still bent on the idea of technology and all of the advantages we have with communication. . . . I wonder if you are not going to see a lot of people who work in the stock market or the grains or whatever . . . [who will say] I can come back and raise my children." However, Lydia, who had recently been a member of a task force on sanitary codes required by the Clean Water Act, looked at the problems of the increase in nursing homes and compared them with correctional facilities.

The nursing homes, the hospitals—they already have in their plans to provide shelter for these retired people. There is a prison over at Norton, a correctional facility it's called. There's a juvenile correctional facility in WaKeeney. I think where these institutions of federal and state government have maintained some kind of institution in health care or in incarceration, criminal, that might be the only mainstay. I don't think agriculture will be [the thing that] keeps people out here. . . . Out here is just a wasteland in the perception of other people. It may be in some people's minds, so the few people that are out here, the more junk and bad things they put out here. Like prisons and nursing homes. And then you have to have people to staff them. So that might be all that's left of communities, are the workers that maintain the institutions that are out here. So that is a dismal picture, I think.

Perhaps the most dramatic contrast to the optimistic tone of some was the response of Bryn, an alternative agriculturalist. Taking perhaps the most radical perspective of Muenster area residents, he argued that there would be no communities in the area in twenty years. He concluded that that this was not bad because it was what the region's environment dictated.

Finally, when I asked community college students about their future in the region, only two of the seven local students said they were staying, and both were connected to farming. Chris commented, "I think a lot of the young people of the community are moving out. A lot of them that are being raised on the farms right now are continuing to leave because there is no real industry." As Frank Popper's work suggested, the residents of Muenster indicated a complex relationship, a mismatch between their own critical responses to the Poppers and their own sense of their futures in the Plains.

CONCLUSION

The Poppers began in the 1980s with a rather pointed, hardheaded, and unrelenting vision of the Plains. Using an environmentally defined region, they told the story of small and dying towns, population decline, a depleted and endangered environment, and regional distress. Using specific quantitative measure, the Buffalo Commons focused on 110 vast, sparsely populated agricultural Plains counties, the counties that did not feel the influence of interstate highways, large, economically buoyant population centers, or new technology. To relieve the region's decline, they proposed that the federal government save the region by re-federalizing the land. As the couple developed their ideas in a very public arena, those sharp edges rounded and the rather specific Buffalo Commons proposal evolved into a more expansive, mature vision of this enormous region that would not embrace a single answer but a mix of public-private initiatives. Indeed, the Buffalo Commons proposal became, according to the Poppers, a metaphor to shift cultural attitudes to the region.

In 1996, eight years after the initial Buffalo Commons idea was proposed, the Poppers' proposal was still a powerful image in the minds of Plains residents, and the power of their vision electrified the region's sense of itself. However, the residents of Muenster did not embrace their vision wholeheartedly; indeed, several were concerned about the imposition of a vision from the outside. Nor was the Buffalo Commons completely rejected. Indeed, Plains residents seemed to echo a number of the ideas and ways of understanding the future put forward by the Poppers, whether they realized it or not. Whether Plains residents embraced the Poppers' vision or ridiculed it, they were for the most part realistic about their past and the possibilities for their futures, and it can be argued that in many ways they remained in conversation with Poppers.

Since the late 1990s the initial Buffalo Commons proposals of the Poppers has been modified as a mix of public and private ventures have developed. Indeed, they are only one set of thinkers among many other entrepreneurial, environmental, and planning players who have more recently worked to stitch a more fragmented and piecemeal regional landscape. The farm depression of the early 1980s that had fueled interest in the Poppers' proposal had abated somewhat, but interest in the Buffalo Commons concept (narrowly and broadly drawn) continued in private, public, and combined initiatives. Private buffalo-related activities include Ted Turner's multiple Great Plains ranches. His extensive holdings make Turner the country's largest bison rancher, raising approximately 27,000 bison²⁹ "with about 10 percent of the buffalo population" on his various operations.³⁰ Turner is not alone. There are many smaller outfits such as Sam Hurst, Dwayne Lammers, and Dan O'Brien's Wild Idea Buffalo Company.³¹

Looking toward the more complex public-private partnerships, commentator Sara Dant Ewert briefly catalogued a shifting landscape of federal, state, and local agencies joining with their Canadian and Mexican counterparts as well as landowners, tribes, and non-

governmental organizations such as the Nature Conservancy.³² Ewert described a rich patchwork of organizations that evolved from the Department of the Interior's Great Plains Partnership (now disbanded), which embraced a variety of groups and from which developed the InterTribal Bison Cooperative in 1990, a group of more than fifty tribes interested in reintroducing buffalo to Native lands, the Northern Plains Bison Education Network of ten tribal colleges to teach bison management, as well as the North American Bison Cooperative. In addition to Ewert's buffalo-focused organizations, the Nature Conservancy Council, World Wildlife Fund, and Great Plains Restoration Council have also emerged. The Nature Conservancy Council purchased the Medano-Zapata Ranch in the San Luis Valley, Colorado, as a biologically significant Coloradan landscape in Colorado and a working bison ranch.³³ The World Wildlife Fund has compared the northern Great Plains grassland to the African Serengeti and has made it one of its priorities.³⁴ The Denver-based Great Plains Restoration Council, established in 1997, specifically focuses on buffalo and giving the animals their home.³⁵ Will all of these changes to the Plains lead to the kind of environment envisioned by the Poppers? Will the small, rural communities embrace or reject the new visions for the land? And how will people like the Muensterites respond? Questions like these still need to be addressed as change continues on the Great Plains.

NOTES

1. Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004), 31-32.
2. Jonathan Raban, *Bad Land: An American Romance* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996).
3. Stephen E. White, "Population Change in the High Plains," *Great Plains Research* 2, no. 2 (1992): 181.
4. Bret Wallach, "The Return of the Prairie," *Landscape* 28, no. 3 (1985): 1-6.
5. See Robert Scott, "Wild Bison Restoration: The Suitability of Montana's Big Open," *Restoration and Management Notes* 10, no. 1 (Summer 1992): 51-52, and Robert Scott, "Saving the Big Open: The Case for a Great Plains Wildlife Range" (paper presented at the Institute of the Rockies Forum, Missoula, MT, 1987) unpublished, in the hands of the author.
6. Thomas L. Daniels and Mark Lapping, "Small Town Triage: A Rural Settlement Policy for the Midwest," *Rural Development Perspectives*, no. 3 (1987): 273-80.
7. Center for the New West, *Survey of the Future of the Plains: Part 1 and 2* (Denver: Center for the New West, 1992).
8. Wes Jackson, *New Roots for Agriculture* (San Francisco: Friends of the Earth, 1980).
9. Deborah Epstein Popper and Frank J. Popper, "The Great Plains, from Dust to Dust: A Daring Proposal for Dealing with an Inevitable Disaster," *Planning* 53 (1987): 12.
10. Rowland Atkinson and John Flint, "Accessing Hidden and Hard-to-Reach Populations: Snowball Research Strategies," *Social Research Update*, no. 33 (Summer 2001), <http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/sru/SRU33.html> (accessed April 25, 2005).
11. Ibid. Indeed, a number of my respondents were professional, white-collar respondents in their fifties, sixties, and seventies, including the mayor, a real estate broker, a librarian, and a teacher. Realizing there was an age imbalance, I worked to address that by interviewing members of a local community college class.
12. V. M. Hendricks, P. Blanken, P. Adriaans, and N. Adriaans, *Snowball Sampling: A Pilot Study on Cocaine Use* (Rotterdam: IVO, 1992).
13. Frank J. Popper, "The Surviving American Frontier," *American Land Forum*, vol. 4, no. 3, (Summer 1983): 5-8, and Frank J. Popper, "The Strange Case of the Contemporary American Frontier," *Yale Review* 76, no. 1 (1986), 101-121.
14. Popper and Popper, "The Great Plains," 18.
15. McGregor R. Cawley, *Federal Land, Western Anger: The Sagebrush Rebellion and Environmental Politics* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1993).
16. Paul A. Kay, "Introduction," *Great Plains Research* 2, no. 2 (August 1992): 163.
17. Mary L. Umberger, "Casting the Buffalo Commons: A Rhetorical Analysis of Print Media Coverage of the Buffalo Commons Proposal for the Great Plains," *Great Plains Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 112.
18. Umberger, "Casting the Buffalo Commons," 112.
19. Frank Popper, taped interview with author, September 1996.
20. Anne Matthews, *Where the Buffalo Roam: The Storm over the Revolutionary Plan to Restore America's Great Plains* (New York: Grove Press, 1992), 26.

21. Frank Popper, interview with author.
22. Frank and Deborah Popper, "The New Significance of the Frontier in American History" (paper delivered at the annual meeting of the *Association of American Geographers*, Chicago, March 1995).
23. Deborah Epstein Popper, "Holding Steady on the Great Plains: An Exploration of the Characteristics of the Region's Population-Stable Counties" (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 1992).
24. Frank Popper, interview with author.
25. Frank J. Popper and Deborah E. Popper, "Great Plains: Checkered Past, Hopeful Future," *Forum for Applied Research and Public Policy* 9, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 90.
26. Frank J. Popper and Deborah E. Popper, "Planning Regions by Telling Stories," *Planning* 62 (October 1996): 10.
27. Popper and Popper, "Great Plains: Checkered Past, Hopeful Future," 93.
28. Anne Matthews, "Plain Talk," *Louisville Courier Journal*, July 22, 1990.
29. "Of Bison Men: It's Tasty, It's Safe, and It's Cheap," *Economist*, March 9, 2002, 39.
30. Betsey Streisand, "Buffalo Ted," *U.S. News and World Report*, October 28, 2002, 38-40.
31. Florence Williams, "Making Buffalo Pay," *High Country News*, January 15, 2001, <http://www.hcn.org> (accessed February 9, 2005).
32. Sara Dant Ewert, "Bioregional Politics: The Case for Place," *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, Winter 2002, 439-49.
33. Nature Conservancy Web site, <http://www.nature.org> (accessed February 9, 2005).
34. Pete Letheby, "Thanks, Frank and Deborah Popper, for Pointing the Way," *High Country News*, August 4, 2003, <http://www.hcn.org> (accessed February 9, 2005).
35. The Great Plains Restoration Council's mission specifically focuses upon buffalo: "Great Plains Restoration Council is a 501(c)3 multicultural, multiracial non-profit organization building the Buffalo Commons step-by-step by bringing the wild buffalo back and restoring healthy, sustainable communities to the Great Plains. From the Indian Reservation to the prairie outback to the inner city and beyond, GPRC organizes specifically where the areas of environment, human rights and human health, and animal protection interact in social change." Great Plains Restoration Council Web site, <http://www.gprc.org> (accessed February 9, 2005).