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THE HEART OF THE PRAIRIE

CULTURE AREAS IN THE CENTRAL AND NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS

JAMES R. SHORTRIDGE

Although the words *Great Plains* imply a physical region, they have been increasingly used to describe a distinctive set of cultural traits and values. The tone was set in 1931 when Walter Prescott Webb argued that attitudes and land uses brought to the Plains from humid lands would fail. Aridity, he said, was the central fact of existence in this place; it demanded a new approach to life.¹

The Webb theory of environmental determinism lies at the core of most studies of the region. Scholars agree on many of its aspects. Certainly agricultural practices and other parts of the plains economy are different from those of the eastern Middle West. Wheat replaces corn, ranching and irrigation become important, and individual land holdings increase vastly in scale. The open question is the extent to which aridity, space, highly variable weather, the ranching and wheat economies, and other physical and economic realities have modified the psyches of plains people. The evidence often

is subjective and thus necessarily obscure, but nearly all interpreters of the region have sensed a considerable degree of cultural distinctiveness for the place.

This article attempts to sketch and regionalize major aspects of plains culture as seen primarily by geographers but also by a variety of other observers. I raise several paradoxes and, especially, try to classify traits in a time-space framework. Six maps arranged in a historical series provide the focus of my argument. I begin by considering questions of settler origins and traditional cultures. Modifications to these largely old stock American cultures began with the influx of various European ethnic groups and the localization of native Indian peoples on reservations. Indian Territory, with its hybrid culture transplanted from the American South, and the Spanish Southwest are special cases. Additional, ongoing modifications to plains culture have accompanied mining activities, urbanization, and tourism. Today's Plains reflect the cumulative effects of history, economy, and physical environment. I conclude by defining the regionalization of this culture, and by identifying a core region, where values and attitudes are most distinctive and homogeneous, plus transition areas and anomalies.

I present objective data where available in this essay, but readers should be forewarned that much of any culture study resists objectification.

Professor of geography at the University of Kansas, James R. Shortridge is well known for his research on the label and concept "Middle West," which has appeared in such journals as the Annals of the Association of American Geographers and Geographical Review.

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The ideas to follow have been voiced by many observers but the emphasis given to each is personal, a reflection of my own encounter with plains literature and life. Another warning concerns the delimitation of the study area. The only obvious boundary is on the west, where I have used county boundaries to approximate the Rocky Mountain front. I have mapped eastward far enough to include the area influenced by cattle culture and southward to include the transition zone between northern and southern cultural influences in Oklahoma and the Texas panhandle. I have arbitrarily excluded the southern Plains, in part because excellent work already exists for this region.²

SETTLEMENT

Initial American conceptions of the Plains were based on the records of exploring and trading missions. Such reports depicted the region as an east-west transit zone, an expanse that had to be crossed to reach good fur waters, the Mexican trade, or mines. The travelers focused on passageways, not on the land itself. One can find negative and positive assessments of its value, but the presence of open lands to the east meant that few people were overly concerned one way or the other. Americans paid little attention to the determination in 1818 that the British outpost of Pembina in the Red River Valley of the North was actually on American soil or to the 1834 decision to use the eastern part of what is now Kansas and Nebraska as an Indian Territory for displaced tribes from the East.

The east-west passageway concept persists as a theme important in regional identity, but was joined in the mid-nineteenth century by other views. The best known of these was the "garden in the grasslands" idea, a typically optimistic American view of the Plains as a new agricultural frontier.³ It was promoted by faith in the general notions of Manifest Destiny and Jeffersonian democracy as implemented through specific policies of railroads and the General Land Office. As a result of this interest in the Plains, the federal government dispatched the Indians to a more southern territory and, by 1855, had surveyed large acreages in Kansas and Nebraska for settlement by Euro-Americans.

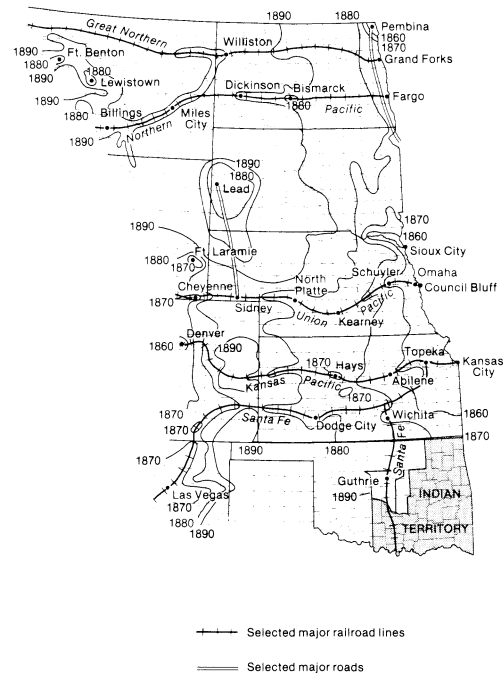


FIG. 1. Expansion of Euro-American settlement, 1860-1890. County boundaries shown here and on other maps are current ones. Principal source: F.J. Marschner, *Land Use and its Patterns in the United States*, U.S. Department of Agriculture Handbook No. 153 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1959), p. 29; with modifications for Kansas and North Dakota based on James R. Shortridge, "The Post Office Frontier in Kansas," *Journal of the West* 13 (1974): 83-97; and Hudson, 1976 (see text note 11).

Lands across the Missouri River from Council Bluffs, Iowa, and Kansas City and St. Joseph, Missouri, were initial foci for migrants and, when the Civil War ended the first wave of settlement expansion, Kansas was a state and Nebraska Territory was on the brink of statehood (Fig. 1). Their general forms, rectangles elongated east and west, reflected the transportation routes they controlled. Their cultural characters also were similar, mixtures of settlers and speculators

generally drawn from Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio stock. They were Lincoln Republicans in politics.

Pro-Southern settlers from Missouri and elsewhere were common in territorial Kansas but had withdrawn once the free state cause there was ascendant. Many moved back into Missouri, but others followed the Texas Trail into Indian Territory and beyond. The result was a sharp political, religious, and general culture line running from St. Joseph southward along Kansas's eastern border and thence southwestward along the frontier of settlement in the Cherokee lands of Indian Territory. This line, coinciding as it did with several traditional "jumping off" points for the West and the old Indian border, soon came to be acknowledged as the eastern border of the "Plains," a term already carrying significant and complex cultural associations.

Incremental westward advance from Missouri and Iowa was the dominant mode of plains settlement but not the only one. In the western part of Minnesota Territory a north-south flow of people and goods along the Red River Valley had existed since early in the century. It connected Winnipeg, an important settlement of 5000 by the mid-1850s, with Ontario via the Red and Minnesota river valleys and old Fort Snelling (St. Paul). Furs moved south and manufactured goods north, first in carts and, after 1858, in steamboats. By 1860 numerous permanent settlers occupied the American part of the Red River Valley. Dakota Territory, created in 1861, extended farther north and south than it did east and west, reflecting that region's dominant settlement orientation.

Territorial shapes and boundaries also are useful indicators of the settlement forces at work in the western Plains. Kansas and Nebraska stretched from the Missouri River completely across the Plains to the crest of the Rockies in 1854, yet when the two territories were admitted as states, their western borders followed the 102nd and 104th meridians. These meridional lines, far from being a natural division of the Plains, symbolize instead the concept of the western Plains as wasteland. The lines were drawn arbitrarily across the most isolated, least desirable section of the region to separate the

westward-advancing farmers from another frontier zone along the base of the Rocky Mountains.

Settlers of this western strip of the Plains had several origins. Hispanic peoples had begun to advance northeastward along the Santa Fe Trail early in the century. Fort Laramie was a major post on the North Platte transportation artery. A series of mining towns, first in Colorado in 1857 and then in Montana by 1862, provided another group of settlers. Between this scattered band and the farming frontier to the east was six hundred miles of land having, at best, somewhat suspect value.

The mining bonanzas of the Rockies and beyond heightened the traditional role of the Plains as transit region. Five major railroads pushed westward beyond the farming frontier to the mountains and the West Coast, drawing settlers farther onto the Plains. Flow along the Northern Pacific, for example, overwhelmed the traditional north-south movement in Dakota territory. These railroads were also partially responsible for initiating the cattle industry, an important new source of people and ideas, into the region.

Texas ranchers saw markets in supplying meat to railroad workers, miners, and even Indian peoples. Shipment to eastern cities represented another, potentially even bigger, market. Ideal business and weather conditions in the 1870s and early 1880s led to an almost immediate realization of this potential. Railroads undercut one another to secure the trade, and new rails across Dakota and Montana opened additional territory. Wyoming Territory, created in 1868 after the construction of the Union Pacific, enjoyed three immediate mild winters favorable to range cattle, and Montana miners also were successful in wintering stock without shelters or supplemental feed. The boom perhaps reached a peak in 1881 when the Northern Pacific line reached Miles City, Montana, and sold its land grant in huge blocks.

The realities of overproduction, farmer encroachment, and climate, most notably a combination of drought and blizzard in 1885-87, abruptly ended the cattle boom, but the western Plains maintains an important cultural legacy from it. This legacy is strongest where ranching

traditions have been maintained: in Wyoming, eastern Montana, western North Dakota, Nebraska's Sandhills, and southwestern Oklahoma, where Texans were the initial Euro-American settlers. It also survives to some extent in eastern Oklahoma, where the Five Civilized Tribes traditionally practiced herding, and as far eastward as the Flint Hills of Kansas, a traditional cattle fattening area, and old cow towns such as Abilene, Kansas, and Schuyler, Nebraska.⁴

As the western plains core was being encroached upon simultaneously from the east, west, and south during the early 1870s, it seemed possible that the Black Hills region of southwestern Dakota Territory and adjacent portions of Nebraska, Montana, and Wyoming might avoid Euro-American culture in any of its forms. This was the heart of Sioux and Crow country. Main transportation routes (the Northern Pacific, the Union Pacific, and the Missouri River) all skirted the region, and Wyoming had no mines to lure an additional railroad. The federal government's agreement to close the Bozeman Trail, linking the Union Pacific route with the Montana mines across northeastern Wyoming, also seemed to promise a permanent land allocation for those Indian nations. A major gold strike in the Black Hills destroyed this promise in 1874. Miners rushed in and transportation links were built. The Sioux justifiably revolted, most notably at the Little Big Horn River, but the ultimate result of smaller reservations and lasting embitterment was predictable. Instead of being the focus of plains isolation, southwestern Dakota became still another center for population expansion.

The 1890 isoline in Figure 1 generally represents the limit of the continuous settlement advance into the Plains that began in the aftermath of the Civil War. Frontier stagnation actually had begun in the late 1880s. Ranching expansion had ceased after the severe winters of 1885-86 and 1886-87, and a long series of droughty years beginning in 1885 had taught plains climatic reality to farmers. Enough stubborn ranchers and farmers remained on the land to prevent wholesale land abandonment, but no major settlement advance came in the northern Plains until 1898. Favorable weather and markets together with a belief in a new cropping technique called dry farming then produced a

"second Dakota boom" and related movements, which together swept wheat farming across the remaining frontier.⁵

A major exception to the frontier stagnation of the late 1880s occurred in Indian Territory. Lands west of those occupied by the Five Civilized Tribes were only sparsely settled by various Indian peoples. As farmers progressively spread across Kansas and Nebraska, many cattlemen found that grazing leases obtained from these Indian groups provided the best way to continue their livelihood. Western Indian Territory gradually became prominent as a cowman's country, occupied by more whites than Indians. Other Americans soon wanted in on the game. Land speculators and farmers mounted pressure to open the land to "a higher level" of civilization than that offered either by the "nomadic" Indians or the "monopolistic cattle barons."⁶ The government first capitulated in 1889, opening to settlement land previously unassigned to any tribe. Twelve other tracts followed in the 1891-1906 period, producing a series of spectacular land runs and instant cities. When all was over, the cowmen had been largely replaced by farmers. Kansans predominated north of the Canadian River; Texans were the major group to the south.⁷

TRADITIONAL CULTURES

Extensions of traditional culture complexes from the east, west, and south created four major regions on the central and northern Plains by the end of the frontier era (Fig. 2). All were essentially rural, though each contained islands where mining and other industrial activity produced a somewhat aberrant cultural picture. A Hispanic area was the most distinctive of the four, a nineteenth-century expansion of peoples from the Rio Grande basin. In the area depicted as Spanish Southwest, Hispanics constituted 50 percent or more of the local population in 1900. Here traditional, self-sufficient villages were the rule, sheep raising a dominant activity, and Spanish the everyday language. Some Hispanic people lived outside of this region, but there they usually were landless and segregated, laborers in an Anglo world.⁸

Indian Territory was another culturally distinctive part of the Plains. Late nineteenth-century observers saw it as a hybrid, more

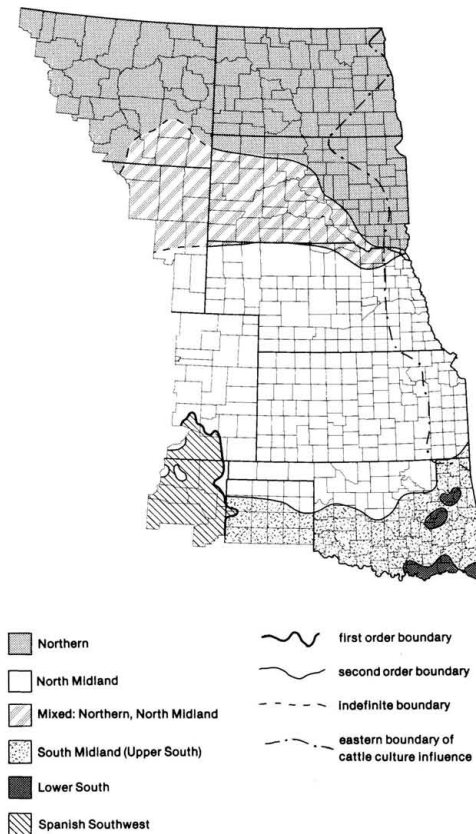


FIG. 2. Extensions of nineteenth century traditional cultures. Principal sources: Allen, 1973, Vol. 1: 125, 134 (see text note 16) for Nebraska, South Dakota, and North Dakota; Stanley A. Arbingast, ed., *Atlas of Texas* (Austin: Bureau of Business Research, University of Texas, 1976), p. 31 for Texas; Doran, 1975-76: 505 (see text note 9), and Roark, 1979 (see text note 7) for Oklahoma; and Nosstrand, 1980: 391 (see text note 8) for Hispanic culture.

Southern than Native American in origin. The process began with acculturation and interracial marriage by the Five Civilized Tribes in their homelands prior to removal and continued in Indian Territory. Resident whites and slaves constituted 18 percent of the total population in 1860 and an amazing 72 percent in 1890.⁹

More than a third of the white population in 1860 had come from the South Midland (Upper South) states of Arkansas, Missouri, Tennessee, and Kentucky, and nearly a quarter from the Lower South. Each group had distinctive settlement and culture patterns. Lower Southerners clustered on Creek and Choctaw holdings in the rich lowlands of the Red and Arkansas Rivers. There they established a plantation economy including major slave holdings, cotton, tobacco, and some dry-field rice. South Midland people dominated elsewhere. They kept slaves, too, but only in moderate numbers. Corn, wheat, and cattle were their major agricultural products.

Indian Territory's Southern identity was solidified by the Civil War and its aftermath. Although only the Choctaw Nation was firmly committed to the Confederate cause, the Territory had to choose sides and elected the South. The Nations were raided repeatedly and, in the end, lost their slaves, were forced to cede western lands, and suffered the trials of Reconstruction. This suffering intensified their Southern mindset. Additional cultural reinforcement occurred when economic recovery began and the tribes hired Confederate veterans as laborers to replace the slaves.¹⁰

North of Indian Territory and the Spanish Southwest, cultural distinctions on the Plains circa 1900 were blurred considerably. Kansas and Nebraska usually were regarded as similar places and different somehow from the Dakotas, but observers sometimes found it difficult to verbalize the perceived differences. Similarly the plains portions of Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado were allied with their eastern neighbors yet somehow apart. Much of this blurring can be attributed to the multiple origins of early settlers. Missouri River traders and Texas cattlemen, bringing with them elements of Southern culture, were the initial Anglo occupants of many parts of the northern Plains.¹¹ Montana's Chouteau County and Fort Benton took their names from prominent St. Louis families, for example, and many of that territory's legal statutes were copied from Missouri examples. Words associated with Southwestern ranching traditions such as *corral* and *range* are still in use throughout most of the northern and central Plains (Fig. 2).

The east to west expansion of people across the Plains transcended early Southern influences in most places, but the new settlers themselves were of varied origins. Even ignoring the foreign born for the moment, considerable mixing had occurred in a broad band across the northern parts of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, and in central Iowa, between peoples of New England-Northern states origins and those from Pennsylvania and other North Midland states. These "mixed" areas, in turn, supplied large numbers of plains settlers. Cultural mixing reached a pinnacle in the Black Hills and other mining sites along the Rocky Mountain fringe.¹²

Contemporary observers of the Plains, although recognizing that cultural mixing was common, nevertheless still saw three primary divisions of the region in 1900. Each was based largely on extensions of culture complexes from the east, and their names were straightforward: Southwest, Middle West, and Northwest. The Southwest (Texas and Indian Territory) was defined almost wholly in cultural terms. Differences between Yankee and Midlander were also acknowledged as a factor in the Northwest-Middle West distinction, but stages of economic development were of equal importance. Kansas and Nebraska, the Middle West, were seen as reasonably mature rural states by the late 1890s. Most parts had been settled for more than a decade; their farmers had survived both a boom and a prolonged depression and had emerged with a well-adjusted perspective on life. Observers saw youthful enthusiasm tempered with maturity, producing something close to a pastoral ideal.¹³ In contrast, the Northwest was still a frontier in 1900. Expectations ran high in the trans-Missouri plains of the Dakotas and Montana, but so did speculation about everything from crop choice to city location. It was classic, capricious "next year country."¹⁴

The coalescence of Northern cultural inheritance and frontier status was strongest in the flatlands of western North Dakota and eastern Montana, although eastern Dakota's widely publicized bonanza farms helped to maintain a frontier-like atmosphere there throughout the 1890s. South Dakota, eastern Wyoming, and Nebraska's Sandhills are best seen as a transition zone. Eastern South Dakota was Northern in culture but no longer a frontier; the Sandhills

was still a frontier but more Midland in settler origin. Pioneers in the Black Hills and Wyoming were from widely varied places.¹⁵ A secondary cultural division complicated matters further, a meridional one separating Southern, ranching traditions from those of eastern farmers. The position of this line had varied through time and was still in flux as of 1900. The boundary shown on Figure 2 represents the extreme eastern limit of ranching ideas as measured by regional vocabulary.¹⁶

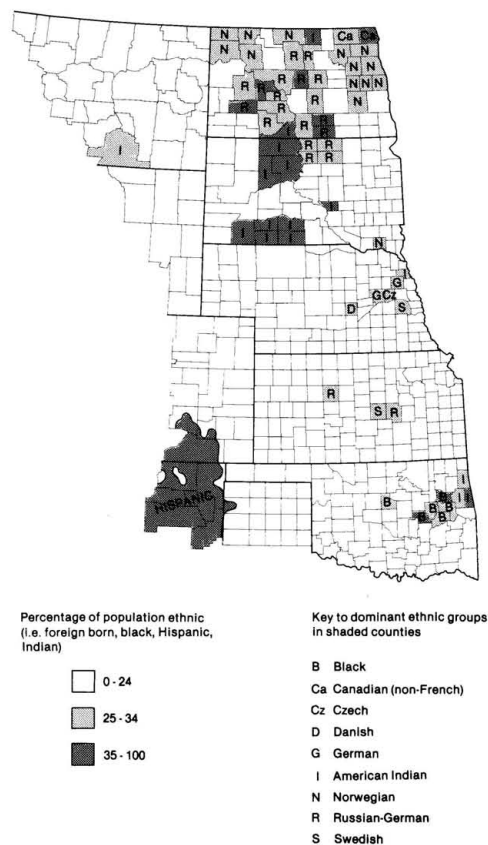


FIG. 3. *Ethnic concentrations at the close of the frontier period.* Sources: Hispanic data are from the 1900 manuscript census schedules (Nostrand, 1980, see text note 8). Other data are from the published population censuses: 1890 for Kansas, 1900 for Nebraska, 1920 for Montana, and 1910 for the remaining states.

ETHNIC GROUPS

Just as an initial veneer of Southern culture in the northern Plains had given way to Yankee immigration, Yankee settlers themselves soon were outnumbered in many counties by European immigrants. Norwegians and ethnic Germans from Russia were the most numerous of this highly varied group of settlers. Their distribution pattern, with heavy concentration in North Dakota, greatly influenced regional culture (Fig. 3). What had been New England extended became a rich, sometimes confusing, mosaic.

Why North Dakota attracted such a concentration of European migrants is not completely clear, but timing is certainly part of the reason. Liberal American land policies after the end of the Civil War and a combination of conditions in Europe started a major flow of people across the Atlantic about 1870. Eastern Kansas and southeastern Nebraska were largely settled by that time, and the central parts of those states were beginning to fill rapidly without elaborate promotional efforts. Promoters were more active in soliciting European settlers on the harsher, more open frontier to the north. Here, too, groups of settlers were more likely to find land in large blocks. Another advantage, especially for Scandinavians, was the area's proximity to ethnic communities in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Studies in North Dakota show that, although Norwegians and German Russians occasionally were pioneers in the areas they now occupy, the more common pattern was to expand outward from core communities, buying farms from Anglo frontiersmen. Spring Grove, Minnesota, was a major hearth for Norwegians coming to eastern North Dakota, and the Yankton, South Dakota, area played a similar role for German Russians bound for Eureka and other settlements in the north-central part of that state.¹⁷ By 1910 North Dakota was dominated by these two ethnic groups. Foreign born people and those born in the United States of foreign parentage constituted an astonishing 71 percent of its total population. An older Yankee culture had named all the towns but no longer controlled the society.

Indians were a second major component of

the ethnic mosaic on the northern Plains. The once extensive holdings of the Sioux and Crow peoples had gradually been diminished during the settlement period, and by 1910 even the remaining reservations sometimes contained more white than Indian occupants. Still, Indians dominated in several counties, particularly in west-central South Dakota, where the Oglala and other Teton Sioux groups constituted about ninety percent of the population. Other significant Indian clusters included Chippewa-Métis in Rolette County, North Dakota; Crows in Big Horn County, Montana; Yankton Sioux in Buffalo County, South Dakota; and Omahas and Winnebagos in Thurston County, Nebraska.

The percentage of the foreign born population on the Plains at the end of the frontier period dropped as one moved south. Occasional clusters existed, but usually ethnic populations were intermixed with Anglo settlers. In addition to the strong Hispanic contingent in the Southwest, only two major ethnic concentrations stood out. Blacks constituted 40 percent of the population of both Okfuskee and Wagoner counties, Oklahoma, in 1910 and were important also in three adjacent counties. All five were part of the old Creek Nation with its slave history. Langston University created an outlier in Logan County. Oklahoma's Indian population, although large, was diffuse. Their percentages were high only in the heart of the Cherokee Nation, especially in the hills of Adair County, where tradition-minded tribesmen tended to isolate themselves.

The dominance of various plains counties by European ethnic groups at the close of the frontier actually was greater than suggested by the percentages given in Figure 3, for the map numbers do not include the American-born children of immigrants. Sheer numbers alone indicate that such groups would greatly modify the regional culture in North Dakota and elsewhere, and local influence might be increased further if a group maintained a sense of exclusivity over time. German Russians and Norwegians have done this to a high degree in North Dakota. Pioneer German-Russian men married within their ethnic group 97 percent of the time, for example, as did 93 percent of Norwegian men. The figures for Swedes and Ontario immigrants

were 62 percent and 55 percent, respectively.¹⁸

Another measure of exclusivity and culture strength is language retention. Figures for 1980 reveal two major centers in this regard: the Hispanic area and the German-Russian heartland in central Dakota, with outliers in Kansas and Montana (Fig. 4). A comparison of the distribution of these groups on Figures 3 and 4 also indicates an expansion of their influence during this century. Spanish American culture traits are well enough known not to require elaboration here, but the continuing German-Russian influence in North Dakota, especially in conjunction with Norwegian ethnicity, deserves some discussion.

The North Dakota population today is comprised of about equal proportions of German Russians, Norwegians, and all others (including old stock Americans, Ukrainians, Métis, Sioux, and Canadians). The groups cooperate in economic matters but remain socially discrete. The German Russians, perhaps because they came directly from Europe to Dakota and because of the cohesion they had acquired during their residence in Russia, remain the most apart. Their loyalty is to land, church, and family; they avoided state politics, higher education, urban places, and even the English language almost completely until World War II. In the words of one authority, these people "wanted to be Germans in America," not simply Americans.¹⁹ The tight-knit character of German-Russian communities naturally aroused suspicion from outsiders. It was not long ago that neighbors branded them as greedy, dirty, aloof, and even, for their insistence on retention of the German language, traitorous. Teetotalling Norwegians also looked askance at the Germans' love for wine. Some of these feelings linger.²⁰

The Norwegian ethnic identity is more subtle than the German-Russian one. Norwegians have always valued education and have somehow managed to assimilate easily into the American cultural mainstream while still maintaining ethnic loyalty. Despite their prohibitionist tendencies, however, the Norwegians' most significant traits, at least in terms of influencing regional culture, are ones they share with the German Russians. These include religious devotion, a strong work ethic, a preference for farm (but not ranch) life, and a

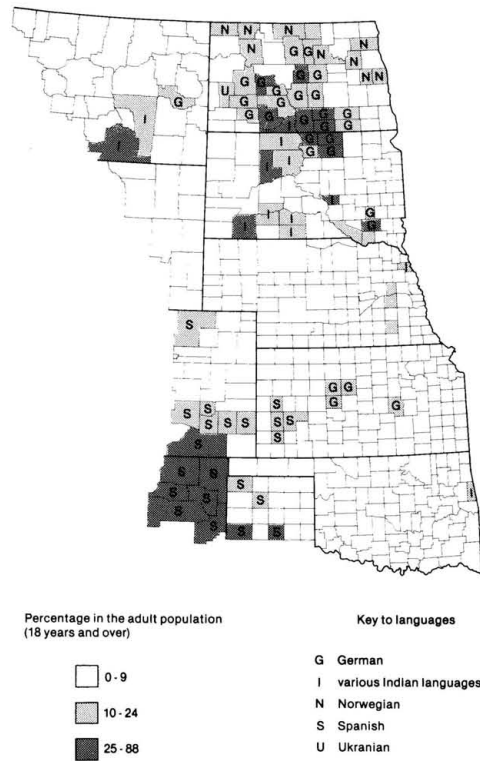


FIG. 4. *Non-English languages spoken regularly at home, 1980.* Source: U.S. Census of Population, 1980. The census lists only selected languages, including German and Spanish, and an "other" category. Judgments for the Norwegian, Ukrainian, and various Indian language counties noted were made via supplemental information. Other shaded counties, lacking precise information, are left without a symbol.

progressive, frequently radical political attitude. Devotion by the two groups to various Lutheran, Catholic, and Mennonite churches has created a northern Bible Belt. Rural radicalism, expressed through the Nonpartisan League and other vehicles, made North Dakota a leader in the longstanding plains protest against control by railroads, grain monopolies, and other agencies plains people assume are owned by urban, eastern businessmen.²¹ The strong work ethic, in combination with what some observers have

called a stubborn, stolid, even unimaginative mindset, probably has also served these peoples well in the harsh northern plains environment. After all, this was and still is a place where "sheer grit and cussedness alone frequently meant the difference between success and failure—or even life and death."²²

URBANIZATION AND OTHER CHANGES

The Great Plains counties often are seen by outsiders as rural America. This usage can be justified in a relative sense, but the region is now more urban than rural, and this urbanization has been responsible for important modifications to and variations in regional cultures. Urban counties usually are the richer ones, for example, and the centers of economic and political power. Such concentration produces rivalries between the haves and the have nots. A map of median family income provides a good basis for assessing the present status of these and related developments (Fig. 5).

Several traditional rural cultures are characterized by relative poverty. For one of these cases, however, the map may exaggerate the true situation. Because German-Russian communities still revere the ideal of self-sufficiency, not all aspects of their economy are on a cash basis to be officially recorded by a census. The same argument holds for Hispanic communities to some degree, although not so much as it did in the past. Hispanic people are becoming a minority in their own heartland. They frequently face a choice between staying in the old villages and foregoing modern conveniences, or entering the Anglo world where they are restricted to menial jobs by barriers of language and formal education. Poverty results in either case; the median family income for Mora County, New Mexico, is the lowest in the Plains.

Most Indian reservations, especially those of the Sioux in South Dakota, form another zone of low incomes. Interpretations of this situation differ. Some Anglo neighbors blame the Sioux themselves, charging them with lack of motivation and overdependence on government aid. Others note language and education problems, decades of cultural deprivation, and overpopulation. Land quality on the reservations certainly is not first rate and the better sections frequently are owned by whites. Most Indian

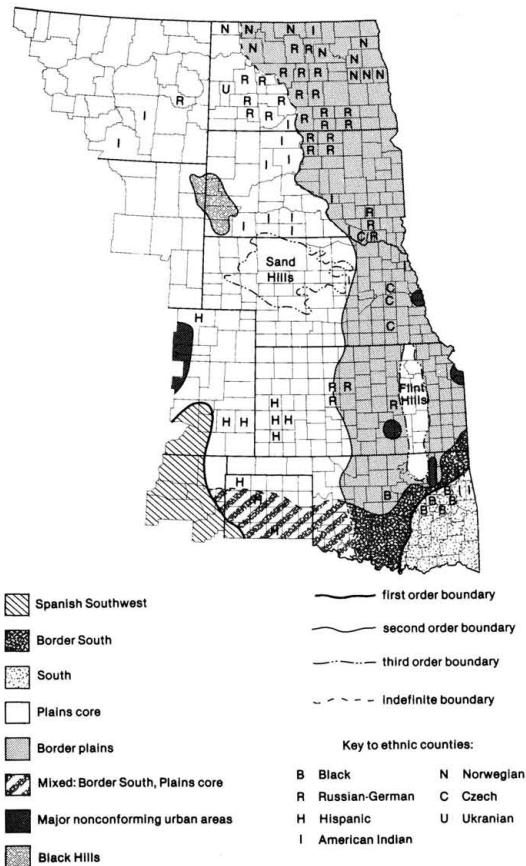


FIG. 5. Median family income, 1979. Source: U.S. Census of Population, 1980.

counties have seen their populations increase in recent years while their industrial and agricultural bases remain static. Rolette County, North Dakota, is an extreme case. Here 15,000 Chippewa-Métis people overflow the two townships of Turtle Mountain Reservation.²³

Parts of southern Oklahoma constitute a discontinuous fourth area of low incomes. The regional names that have evolved, Greer County in the west and Little Dixie in the east, are defined in part by a rural poverty brought about by generations of tenant cotton farming. The situation in the west is exacerbated by sandy soils and precarious rainfall; declining coal mining has contributed to Little Dixie's legendary poverty. This spawned a strong Socialist movement in the 1910s, intensified racism, and

eventually prompted some one hundred thousand residents to emigrate during the Great Depression. Little Dixie, not the Dust Bowl counties of northwestern Oklahoma, was the source of John Steinbeck's *Okies*.

Whereas the poverty zones in the Plains reinforce and help to define certain traditional, rural cultures, the richer areas are frequently growing, often urban places that diverge sharply in many ways from their surrounding counties. Urban areas are now so influential that they even affect income levels in certain rural counties, perhaps most notably through highway linkages. Places away from the main interstate system, counties such as Baca in Colorado, Elk and Smith in Kansas, Carter in Montana, and Hayes and Pawnee in Nebraska, tend to have low incomes. They are the plains "yonland," isolated, with declining economies and aging populations.²⁴

Prosperity in several counties is tied to the exploitation of oil, natural gas, and coal. Income from such minerals can be ephemeral, but three major areas of the Plains have enjoyed recent mineral-born prosperity: central and northeastern Oklahoma via oil; southwestern Kansas and the Oklahoma-Texas panhandles via natural gas; and Wyoming, southeastern Montana, and western North Dakota via coal.

Oil, which had been discovered in Kansas and Oklahoma in the late nineteenth century, began to boom in the 1920s. Kansas reserves were exploited first and that state thus had refineries established when the bigger Oklahoma fields were tapped. Tulsa, ironically a place with no fields of its own, emerged as the focus of development when city businessmen bridged the Arkansas River to form a link between the Kansas refineries and oil fields to the south. New refineries soon chose to locate in Tulsa as did many of the new oil millionaires. Today the city, together with nearby Bartlesville, is a somewhat self-conscious center of high culture on the Plains. It has passed the stage of parvenu in some ways but still is insecure; in 1985 it threatened to sue over a poor showing in one of the numerous national quality of life surveys.

People with only a passing acquaintance with the Plains are surprised to learn of prosperity in the Dust Bowl counties in and around the Texas panhandle. Some of this wealth comes from the utilization of ground water for irrigation, but

huge natural gas reserves are the major factor. Natural gas money enabled many residents to endure the dry years of the 1930s and since then it has brought real prosperity.²⁵ Wealth here seems to be more understated and more evenly distributed than in eastern Oklahoma. Money from gas frequently is used to supplement farm incomes, and it may be that the gamble of farming in this region keeps even the wealthy humble.

Coal is responsible for the newest boom on the Plains. The Fort Union Formation, extending from the Powder River basin of Wyoming into North Dakota, is thick, low in sulphur, and easily mined by stripping. Isolation kept exploitation low until the Arab oil embargo of 1973. Suddenly everything changed. New power plants and railroad spurs sprang up, as did several boom towns. Williston, North Dakota, and Billings, Montana, grew tremendously, but Gillette, Wyoming, best symbolizes the activity. Gillette has doubled and redoubled its 1960 population. It thrives but is garish. Like the gold rush towns of the last century its vitality is accompanied by vice, rampant speculation, and similar problems.²⁶ Major beneficiaries of the new coal money include the Crow and Northern Cheyenne Indians, whose reservations contain about 30 percent of the reserves in Montana.

Gateway cities to the Plains account for most of the remaining high income counties on Figure 5. A string of these places follows the eastern border: Fargo-Moorhead, Sioux Falls, Sioux City, Omaha-Council Bluffs, Kansas City, and Fort Smith. Each has prospered since the early settlement period and still serves as a transportation focus, an exchange point between East and West. Billings, Cheyenne, and Denver serve a similar function on the western plains border.

Each gateway city, by definition, belongs to the Plains only in part. It may host such traditional regional events as rodeos and livestock shows, but plains people distrust the financial, transportation, and agribusiness operations there. The suspicion that such businesses benefit outside investors more than people of the region has always been a part of plains culture, and the mistrust has increased through time as business centralization has concentrated power in fewer and more distant hands. Modern studies of metropolitan influence measured through

banking linkages, migration fields, and the like reveal that most of the Plains falls within the sphere of somewhat remote Minneapolis-St. Paul and Dallas-Fort Worth. Denver and Kansas City control smaller pieces. At another scale, Chicago dominates nearly the entire region.²⁷ As novelist Wright Morris remembered from his youth in Nebraska, "all of the railroad lines converged on Chicago, the home of Montgomery Ward and Sears and Roebuck."²⁸

PLAINS CULTURE

The preceding discussion highlights the considerable complexity that underlies modern plains culture. Before attempting to depict this complexity on a map, I want to concentrate on the unifying forces for the culture. The central idea, I think, is the concept *Middle West*.

The Plains was the birthplace of the Middle West term. As noted above, it originated in the 1880s to describe the maturing yeoman society of Kansas and Nebraska. By 1912 or so the description and label were being applied to an expanded area, including the northern Plains and a portion of Oklahoma west of the old Indian Territory border and north of the Canadian River.²⁹ This expansion signified a cultural fusion. Differences in stages of development, which formerly had distinguished the northern from the central Plains, gradually had begun to diminish. Accompanying this process, the parallel but always weak distinctions between Northern and Midland culture also disappeared from the popular literature of the time. Yeoman imagery became the controlling symbol for the region. Commentators saw the people as clear-eyed, pragmatic folk who had confidence in their own abilities and respect for the land. This portrait of the plainsman remains remarkably intact in modern literature.³⁰

A financial crisis in the 1890s was a major factor in fostering the cultural fusion of the central and northern Plains and the concurrent break between these places and the East. Eastern capital had financed much early development on the Plains, and defaults on loans created hard feelings on both sides. Easterners saw plainsmen as irresponsible; plainsmen viewed easterners as heartless exploiters. Populists, the political expression of this plains feeling, regularly damned the East for railroad monopolies,

unfavorable tariff policies, and, generally, for treating the Plains as if it were a colony. The validity of such charges can be (and has been) debated, but clearly they were critical in creating a common purpose and identity for the Plains.

Although largely unnoticed at the time, forces similar to those splitting the East from the Plains were also creating a new division within the Plains in the 1890s. Populism and related ideas were expressed most intensely in two locations: central Kansas and Nebraska, and North Dakota. Not coincidentally, these areas possessed the most severe climates of the plains areas then settled. Farmers trying to install a corn/hog economy in central Nebraska, for example, experienced greater financial stress than did their neighbors to the east.³¹ North Dakota radicalism ultimately may have been environmentally inspired too, although Norwegian and German-Russian predilections toward this kind of behavior are well documented. The important point is that even in the late 1890s a discerning observer might have detected a core emerging for the new plains culture. Areas around cities such as Sioux City and Omaha, with their longer settlement histories and traditional corn belt economies, were seen as almost "eastern" by frustrated and increasingly radical settlers to the north and west.

Historical relationships between the Plains and the eastern states, especially regional stereotypes, underlie a great deal of the modern personality of the Plains. In particular, these relationships help to explain two major paradoxes: the plainsman as pawn of the East yet somehow still self-reliant and independent, and the plainsman as heroic yeoman yet also backwoods hick. Residents of the Plains wore the yeoman label proudly until the 1920s, reveling in the long list of complimentary traits associated with it; they were living the American dream. The role of myth bearer soon became a mixed blessing, however. When dependency on business and government decisions made in the East became painfully clear during the agricultural depression of the 1920s, what were plainsmen to do? They could complain but thereby expose the falseness of the cherished yeoman values; they could be silent but thereby suffer still greater economic hardship. A parallel dilemma has arisen with the rapid urbanization

of America. Should plainsmen continue to extol their rural virtue or stress that they, too, are part of the new urban scene?

A reading of the literature generated in and about the region convinces me that both dilemmas continue to exist. In fact, the mixed feelings inherent in them lie close to the core of the composite personality of the region.³² Both situations have been cyclic to a degree. The victim idea, sometimes expressed as the "conspiracy theory of history," surfaces most frequently during times of economic depression, when the Plains, as a producer of agricultural and other primary materials, is naturally affected most severely. Other recent examples include anger over deleterious strip mining policies made in the East and the 1985 crisis over farm credit. Challenges to the heroic view of rural life reached a peak during the 1930s. As incarnated by the Okies, plains farmers symbolized failure. Their gaunt faces in photographs suggested to the viewer negative associations of all sorts: poor education, dependency, even laziness. Surveys suggest that college-aged people, at least, continue to view the Plains negatively. The tendency exists even for residents of the region.³³

Despite all the challenges, the yeoman ideal remains the most important single component of plains culture. In a recent national survey, agricultural characteristics were used as regional descriptors twelve times more frequently than were industrial ones. More to the point, pastoral traits continued to dominate the cultural characteristics volunteered, terms such as friendly, easy-going, natural, honest, thoughtful, moral, and modest. Residents of the plains states listed such terms at rates even higher than the national average.³⁴ The wave of urban disillusionment and rural nostalgia now sweeping the nation may be producing a revival of yeoman values.

Observers of plains life in the early twentieth century frequently augmented their pastoral imagery with an analogy of the region to a young adult. This view, contrasted to eastern old age and western youth, heightened regional distinctiveness and produced progressive ideas of all sorts. Examples included the initiative, the referendum, state-owned banks, and many improvements in social justice. The Republican party dominated throughout the region but the

entire political spectrum shared in the idealism.

The progressive spirit of the Plains embodied in the idea of young adulthood faded after the 1920s. The Great Depression again seems to have been a watershed, "aging" the Plains rapidly. Kansas became "the eclipsed state," for example, and conservatism dominated the region.³⁵ Plains residents now even see themselves in this light. On a recent survey they volunteered conservative traits as descriptive of their region more frequently than liberal ones, materialistic terms more than idealistic ones, and even "narrow-minded" more frequently than "broad-minded." The composite regional image is still that of a yeoman farmer, but one who has aged and become set in his ways.³⁶

I have argued in the paragraphs above that historical forces and national myths have shaped much of the value system found on the Plains. Another powerful shaping agent, the plains environment itself, with vast distances, sparse population, and harsh, unpredictable weather, has often lurked between my lines. Linkages between environmental phenomena and such human characteristics as self-reliance and a vigorous, outgoing personality are nearly impossible to establish conclusively, but most writers on the region agree that such linkages are fundamental. Humanists, who perhaps are more able than others to see truths beyond those easily quantified, make the boldest statements.³⁷

The traits listed above are simply variations on those of the yeoman farmer. Yeoman ideals needed good land for incubation, and it seems likely that low population, harsh weather, and great distances have acted to keep the imagery strong in the region. Friendliness, for example, might be expected to flourish where people are spread thin; humility where nature is powerful and capricious; and independence where one is isolated. Coping with life in a severe climate can even produce regional pride. A bumper sticker popular in North Dakota proclaims that "— 43° Keeps Out the Riff-Raff."³⁸

Space itself, the vastness of the Plains, influences behavior in many ways. Combined with a low population density, it makes life expensive. Per capita costs for power, roadway maintenance, and other services are high, along with those for distributing manufactured goods. To enjoy a movie, residents of Jordan, Montana, must add the cost of driving 170 miles to their

ticket prices.³⁹ Space also necessarily isolates plains towns from one another and, on a different scale, the region from the nation. Insular attitudes develop and lead to the half-truths of stereotyping. Tourists, who annually cross the Plains in large numbers, might provide a counter to this isolation but do not. They hurl themselves along the interstate highways to consume the frightening miles as quickly as possible, seeing nearly nothing of the world beyond the guard rails.

Space may engender positive human qualities. Writers from the pioneer era frequently stressed how the new land made people ponder life on a grand and utopian scale. Willa Cather said of early Nebraska, for example, that it was "not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made."⁴⁰ Some of this hoped for grandeur necessarily faded over time, but the vast scale of things on the Plains remains. Where land holdings and sky both are large, it seems logical for human aspirations to expand as well. Many writers hold that this enlarged viewpoint is still one of the greatest regional assets. Residents see themselves in proper perspective, and thus possess a certain inner calm and a lessened sense of parochialism. "In the dry places," as Wright Morris put it, "men begin to dream."⁴¹

CULTURAL REGIONALIZATION

As one contemplates the evolution of plains culture, it is natural to think also about its localization. Where are the distinctive values found in purest form? What is core and what periphery for the place? My speculations on these questions have led to Figure 6. The approach essentially was one of elimination. Extensions of Spanish and Southern peoples into the southwestern and southeastern parts of the study area, respectively, have created cultures clearly different from the one sketched here. The Denver, Kansas City, and Tulsa-Bartlesville urban areas are equally separate. Omaha and Wichita, smaller places that I have also set apart, are admittedly more questionable choices. Finally, tourism and mining traditions isolate the Black Hills culturally.

The remainder of the Plains north of Texas, although sharing a common cultural heritage, can be subdivided based on the intensity with

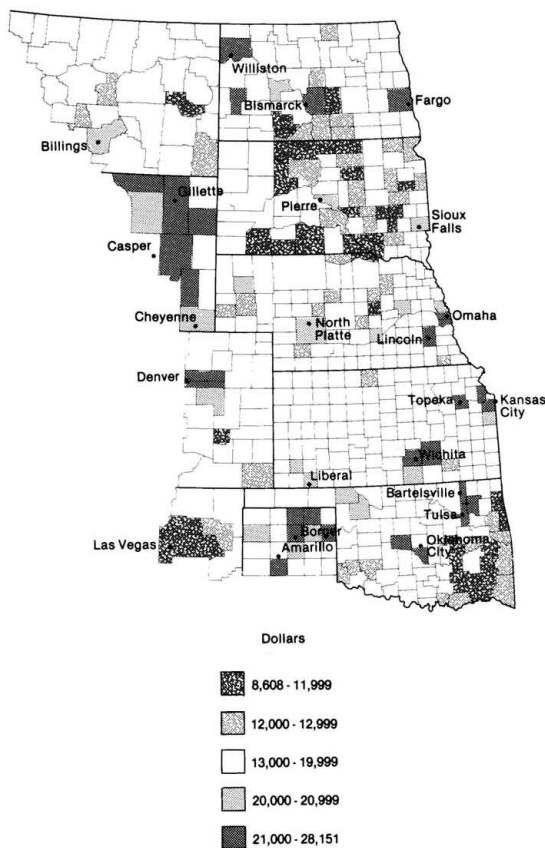


FIG. 6. Culture areas, 1988.

which these values are held. The boundary runs north and south. Dakotans, for example, recognize "East River-West River" as the fundamental split in the northern Plains, not the state boundary tracing the forty-sixth parallel.⁴² For nearly a century, West River people have lived in a harsher, more demanding, less densely peopled environment than the one east of the Missouri River, leading them to choose different livelihoods, and, ultimately, values. The yeoman ideals fit reality better in the West; there, too, are the real and perceived effects of space and sky maximized. Because the West River country has been the location for recent drilling and strip mining activity, it has become a focus for dialogue on regional exploitation and, by extension, on the meaning of plains culture.

People have begun to state, examine, and affirm traditional values whose existence and importance heretofore were grasped only vaguely.

The East River-West River division is clearly defined in South Dakota by massive Lake Oahe and the north-south alignment of Indian reservations. North of Standing Rock Reservation the line is less obvious. German-Russian colonies occupy both sides of the river and the river itself changes direction. The boundary shown (Fig. 6) was drawn to group the mining area around Williston with the other coal centers. The East River-West River terms necessarily disappear south of the Dakotas, but the cultural boundary persists. "Sandhills" in Nebraska refers to a culture world as much as to a physical environment. Kansans use "High Plains" and "Western Kansas" in a similar way, and, for Oklahomans, the analogous terms are "panhandle" and "Greer County."⁴³

It is interesting to speculate on possible focal points for plains culture within the core region. Again, one can begin with an elimination procedure. The Texas panhandle certainly is not a candidate with its anomalous Democratic politics and Southern Baptist churches. Much of the Colorado plains can be excluded because of its proximity to cosmopolitan Denver. Gillette, Wyoming, and Williston, North Dakota, although providing forums for debate on plains values, are nonetheless themselves hybrid places not representative of these values.

A good case for a cultural focus on the state level can be made for Montana and, especially, for Wyoming. Montana, after all, declares itself to be "big sky" country and Wyoming is "the cowboy state." Contrast these terms with the Nebraska "cornhusker" and Kansas "jayhawk" symbols, concepts from the eastern borderlands of these two states. Residents of the Nebraska panhandle threaten to secede and to join Wyoming. They would still live in a panhandle but one attached to a state government that they believe would match their ideas better than the one in Lincoln does. These panhandle people, like the people in Wyoming, are not unlike the Montanans described by a noted regional scholar: "Montanans, probably more than any other people in the West, are convinced that unspoiled space and those who survived the tough process of conquering it handed down a special something of abstract but inestimable value."⁴⁴

If pressed to name specific cities as cultural foci, I would choose Cheyenne, Wyoming, plus Miles City in Montana, an old cattle and railroad town, isolated enough to be forced to think for itself yet near the new mining activity. Most of the other plains states also have candidates for focal cities. Often these are college towns, places with people more likely than most to give voice to the still largely unstated local belief system. Dickinson, North Dakota; Hays, Kansas; and Guymon-Goodwell, Oklahoma, all serve this function. The most serious rival to Miles City and Cheyenne for regional "capital," though, is North Platte, Nebraska. North Platte, on Interstate 80 in the rich Platte valley, is connected with mainstream America yet apart from it. It services a large trade area that contains traditional and modern expressions of plains economies and values. To its south lies big wheat country, in the valley proper is major irrigation agriculture and cattle feedlots, and to its north lie the ranches of the Sandhills. The Sandhills are the key. Cattlemen have controlled most of this vast area from the period of initial settlement. The holdings are large, the grass is good, and the people are secure and self-confident. In this pristine realm one can still sense the wonder, awe, and hope so well expressed in Willa Cather's early novels and so central still to the ultimate human meaning of the Plains.

NOTES

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