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PARALLEL TRACKS, SAME TERMINUS

THE ROLE OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY NEWSPAPERS AND RAILROADS IN THE SETTLEMENT OF NEBRASKA

CHARLYNE BERENS AND NANCY MITCHELL

Nebraskans of the early twenty-first century have had few encounters with railroads. Passenger trains are nearly extinct, and freights run over only a few main lines. But without the railroads that began to crisscross Nebraska in the 1860s, it may have taken years for significant settlement to reach throughout the

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territory that became a state in 1867. As history unfolded, Nebraska became a state more rapidly than expected.¹ Against a backdrop of threats from competing railroads, extreme weather conditions, and remnants of Civil War politics, two key institutions led settlers into the new state: the railroads and the newspapers. The story of these two enterprises and their impact on the state gives readers insight into how much change has occurred in both railroads and newspapers since the pioneer days of the late 1800s.

Businesses today depend on railroads to transport freight such as coal, chemicals, and food products, and to a lesser extent, passengers, across the continent. But early railroad history reveals a different focus. Though the rails were originally envisioned as a way to supply troops on the frontier,² the early developers scrambled to make it a viable business. The railroads needed to finance their investment by selling the land granted to them by the government and by building a base of customers for their services.

Paralleling that effort were the newspapers of the state, which joined in promoting Nebraska and attracting settlers to its prairies

and towns. While the papers occasionally decried the power and monopolistic tendencies of the railroads, they mostly recognized and even applauded the contributions railroads made to the state. The newspapers also were eager to see their communities grow, both because of the economic benefits and, it seems, from a sheer sense of boosterism. Newspaper publishers on Nebraska's plains in the late 1800s would be amazed by today's journalism with its acclaimed standard of objectivity, an effort not to take sides on public issues. Those early publishers had no problem using their news columns to promote ideas they approved of and bash those they did not. In that sense, the newspapers colluded, albeit subtly and indirectly, with the railroads to promote Nebraska, which had become a state in 1867.

The work of the railroads and the newspapers drew settlers to an expanse as large as nearly all of New England. The railroads provided the essential transportation, and the newspapers added the communication, shouting the praises of both the state and the railroads that were helping to form it. They lured settlers to the farmland and to the towns springing up on the prairie during the last half of the nineteenth century. When it came to settling and developing the new state, the newspapers' efforts complemented those of the railroads. On parallel tracks, the newsmen and the railroad men set out to promote Nebraska's opportunities and lure settlers to its prairies—often with such self-interested enthusiasm that their descriptions of and praise for their state bordered on fantasy.

THE RAILROAD ENTERPRISE

By 1867 the railroad had begun to make its mark; the Union Pacific Railroad's westward drive toward Promontory Point, Utah, and the linking of the transcontinental railroad had reached North Platte, Nebraska, and a bit farther west. Shortly thereafter, the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad began its forays into the southeastern part of the state. Before long, the railroads had founded some

towns, enticed financial support out of others, sold to farmers the land granted them by the government, and had a seminal influence on the settlement of the state.

Even before it became a territory in 1854, Nebraska's fate was tied to the railroads. Talk had begun as early as the 1830s about joining the nation's coasts with a transcontinental rail line, and by 1850 it was apparent to both local and national interests that such a railroad would unite the Union and exponentially expand markets.³

U.S. Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, remembered primarily for his debates with Abraham Lincoln in 1858, wanted to secure Chicago's future as a railroad hub by assuring that the inevitable railroad route to the Pacific would be through his state and the area immediately west of it where he had an interest in land.⁴ He knew the vast prairie west of Iowa would have to be organized before it could become the site for the transcontinental rail line.

With that as one of his primary goals, in 1854 Douglas brokered "An Act to Organize the Territories of Nebraska and Kansas," better known as the Kansas-Nebraska Act, as "part of a larger plan to encourage settlement in the Nebraska and Kansas territories."⁵ Intertwined with Douglas's personal financial interest in the formation of the territories was his interest in currying the favor of the South for his future political ambitions.

After much political maneuvering and heated arguments about the extension of slavery into the new territories, Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act on May 30, 1854, creating two separate territories and allowing them to choose by a vote of the residents—"popular sovereignty"—whether they would be slave or free states. Kansas chose to allow slavery and Nebraska to ban it, a decision that was part of the growing sectional crisis of the era. When the South seceded from the Union in 1860, any possibility that the transcontinental line would follow a southern route was suddenly off the table.⁶

President Franklin Pierce signed the Kansas-Nebraska Act into law soon after it passed

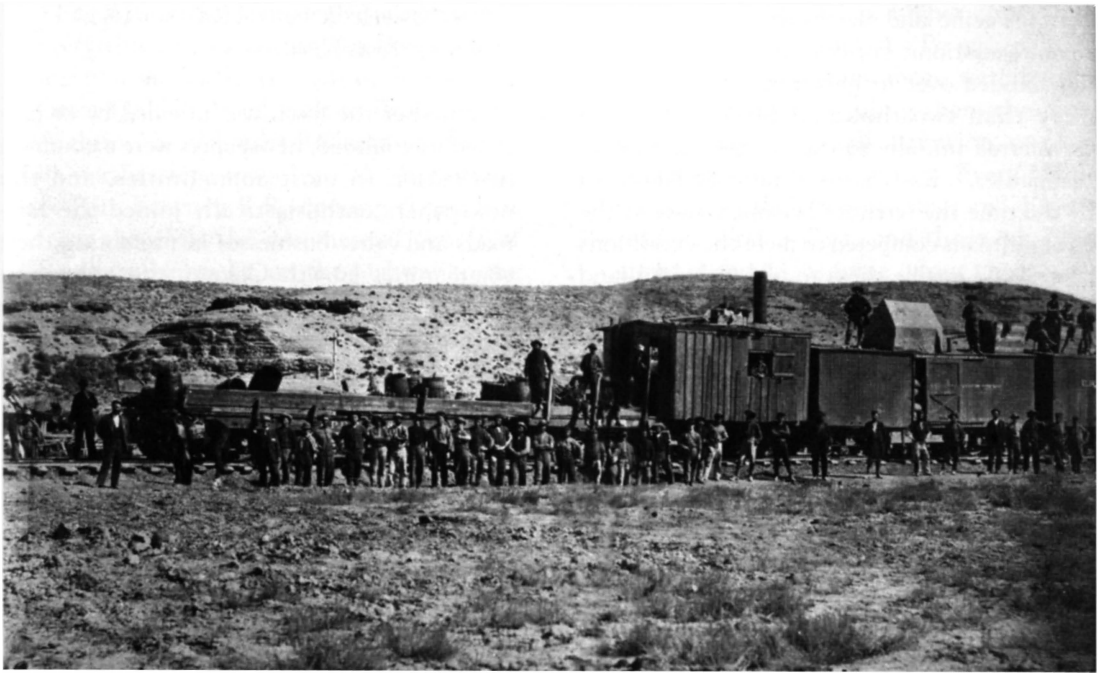


FIG. 1. A Union Pacific construction train extends the railroad's tracks across Nebraska in 1868. Courtesy of the Union Pacific Museum.

in Congress, and the way was cleared for development of a transcontinental railroad. In 1862 Congress passed the Pacific Railroad Bill, endorsing the Central Pacific's efforts to build a California line and chartering a Union Pacific Railroad Company to build west from the Missouri River. The Union Pacific broke ground in Omaha in late 1863.

By that time, settlers were already flowing into the state, many lured by the Homestead Act of 1862, which granted 160 acres of land to anyone who would make certain improvements, pay a small fee, and live on the land for five years. With the settlers came the pioneer towns, and with the towns came the newspapers. Most were weeklies, and most were made up of a hodgepodge of advertising, letters from readers about their travels and experiences elsewhere, some political items, and some editorial commentary.⁷ The publishers were interested primarily in progress and politics, and they felt free to use their news columns to lavish praise on their communities' present and

future, to exhort people to action, and to insult their adversaries.⁸ For example, the *Omaha Arrow* (actually printed in Council Bluffs, Iowa) wrote in 1854 that Nebraska was an ideal place to farm and that rainfall was increasing as settlers came and broke the ground.

Even before Nebraska became a state in 1867—with a population of about 50,000—both railroads and newspapers were major influences. When authorized to build westward in 1862, the Union Pacific had been granted 12 million acres of land adjoining the tracks in alternate sections ten miles deep plus \$27 million in 6 percent thirty-year government bonds.⁹ The few non-Indian residents of Nebraska generally seemed to think it was a fair deal. They saw railroad construction as essential to the rapid development they desired—and, as we demonstrate, the newspapers repeatedly told them so.

But the legislature wanted to be sure the railroads would not misuse the gifts they had been given, so the actual land grants—to both the

Union Pacific and the Burlington—including some regulations. For one thing, the land was not handed over in one transaction. Instead, more than two thousand acres were to be transferred initially to the competing railroad companies.¹⁰ Rails crossed most of Nebraska by the time the territory became a state as the rival railroads competed to meet the conditions that would enable them to add Nebraska land to their holdings.

The railroads soon recognized the need to spread the word about the land they wanted to sell. In 1859 Charles Lowell, head of the Burlington land department, wrote to a friend: “We are beginning to find that he who buildeth a railroad west of the Mississippi must also find a population and build up business.”¹¹

In the early years of statehood, many Nebraskans seemed to be fixated on growth. Whether or not they were founded by the railroad, nearly all the towns were created for the single purpose of serving the trade brought by the farming population that surrounded them,¹² and the towns were eager to increase that population. Farmers who worked the fields became customers for merchants who peopled the towns. The railroads both drew settlers to their routes and were fought for by towns that were founded before the railroads arrived. The trains eventually brought Nebraskans food, grain, clothing, whiskey, lumber, ammunition, apples, turkeys, sheep, and herds of cattle.¹³ And from Nebraska to markets in the East they took the agricultural products and some manufactured goods produced in the state. It seemed generally to be accepted that railroads and growth were inseparable.

Along with the means of transportation, the railroad companies also brought communities, founding towns at intervals along their tracks to connect their roads with the surrounding farms and to create stops where locomotives could be restocked with coal and water. The Burlington and Missouri River Railroad west of Lincoln even named its towns in alphabetical sequence from east to west—Crete, Dorchester, Exeter, Fairmont, Grafton, Harvard, and so on—underscoring the chain nature of the communities.¹⁴

NEWSPAPERS JOIN THE RAILROADS IN PROMOTING NEBRASKA

Whether the town was founded by or preceded the railroad, newspapers were a common institution in most communities, and the newspapers enthusiastically joined the railroads and other businesses in promoting their communities’ growth. Column after column in those early papers was devoted to extolling the virtues of the state and especially the town that was home to the paper. Many were supported by political sources, and “the average editor gave away his space and talent to promotion of the local community, political party and political chief.”¹⁵ Most papers made their money primarily from legal advertising and notices, and many also ran job presses.

Instead of news as we would define it today, the content of those nineteenth-century papers consisted mostly of letters to the editor—often unsigned; pieces that today would be called “advertorials”; letters written by people who had visited the area and wrote to praise its beauty and benefits; and reprints of columns from other papers.

What original “news” the editors and publishers—usually the same person—did write for their papers often seemed to be composed by a community booster. At the root, newspapers of that era saw their roles as community leaders and promoters, not objective observers. While objectivity had begun to take root by this time at larger papers in more settled parts of the nation, the newspapers that followed the frontier westward had no particular compunctions about blatantly “selling” their area, playing up its strengths almost to the point of fantasy at times and glossing over its weaknesses.

Few papers drew the distinctions made today among advertising, opinion, and news. The editors sang the praises of their towns and state in a grand mixture of promotion and actual information. The *Beatrice Express* on March 2, 1871, described its home county:

Well watered, splendidly timbered, high and airy, rich and lasting soil, land from

\$4 to \$10 an acre, unrivaled water power every three miles on the Big Blue traversing it from north west to south east, the Great Gulf Railroad built to Beatrice, the Atchison & Nebraska Railroad pointed to its northeastern townships, the Brownville & Fort Kearney R.R. coming through it from the east, the commercial center of Southern Nebraska, on the highway to the mountains—such is Gage county in brief and in part.

On August 18, 1870, the *Brownville Democrat* praised the land in Nemaha County in southeastern Nebraska:

As we have already said, the land is famed for its richness, and it might be added that ease of cultivation is another point in which it cannot be excelled. A man can plant and properly cultivate one-fourth more ground here than of the stiff prairies of Illinois.¹⁶

Two years later, in May of 1872, the *Nebraska Chronicle* in Nebraska City waxed eloquent about the entire state of Nebraska: "Its surface consists of gently undulating prairie land, vast table lands, and well-drained bottom lands, intersected by numerous clear water and fast-running streams. Climate mild and healthful; atmosphere pure, dry and invigorating."¹⁷ Far from the standard of impartial writing that today's journalists aspire to, these accounts show that newspapers actively promoted the new state.

Nebraska's population more than doubled in two years, growing from 123,000 in 1870 to 250,000 in 1872.¹⁸ Much of that growth can be attributed to the newspapers and railroads that had a vested economic and social interest in seeing the state become populated. Serving the dual purpose of growing the population and increasing their own circulation, newspapers urged residents to send the paper to friends and family living in the East:

The people have a special interest in immigration. Rapid settlement of the state

hastens the time when higher civilization shall be enjoyed here. . . . By writing back to friends and acquaintances, setting forth the facts, and by sending them the local newspapers, they call attention to their neighborhoods and counties. Every family should take their county paper and, having read it, send it East, and those who can afford it should, as some of our citizens are doing, send two or three copies.¹⁹

Newspapers such as the *Beatrice Express* independently promoted their communities and counties and also promoted the railroads that conferred prosperity on a community—or denied it.

All through the west may be seen the inanimate remains of what were once live, flourishing towns. But they quarreled with the railroads. The companies could not afford to build them up without sharing the profits, and so quietly strangled them.

A town that attempts to fight a great railroad corporation or to prosper when the interest of the railroad is opposed to it, stands about as much chance of success as a bull that gets on the track to fight the locomotive.²⁰

Understandably, subsequent issues of the *Beatrice Express* exhorted the settlers of Gage County to approve railroad bonds to assure the county's growth.

BUILDING THE TOWNS

Towns in early Nebraska were established in much the same way as towns in other Plains states.²¹ Frontier towns came first, followed by communities formed by individuals claiming land from the Homestead Act. The third major push to settle the area came from the railroads. President Abraham Lincoln and the U.S. Congress blessed the Union Pacific's plan to build the transcontinental railroad with both cash and land grants to the company.

The *Central Union Agriculturalist* recognized this in an August 1872 article:

The largest portion of settlers have hitherto been homesteaders and soldiers, while railroad lands have been taken up more gradually; but as the limit for taking up homesteads has now advanced to the west and the best lands left are the railroad lands, these will experience marked activity in disposal.²²

Newspaper articles, as well as a book by Major General Grenville M. Dodge, chief engineer of the Union Pacific Railroad, described and documented the progress of the roads. The transcontinental railway connected East and West coasts, providing not only a road for military transportation but, more importantly, a new lane for commerce.²³ No longer were citizens dependent on a system of rivers far to the east to help them conduct business. The iron horse traversed the land carrying merchandise, products, and people from coast to coast.

It was in the railroads' corporate interest to sell the lands they had been granted and to engage the towns' financial support. Most newspapers found it also to be in their town's best interest. The sales job was twofold. First, the railroads needed to convince the communities that their particular line should connect to that town and that the towns and counties should pass bonds to help pay for that connection. Second, once the tracks' path was set, railroads needed to sell their allotted land, drawing more settlers to the area. More people meant more freight and passengers.

The archives of the Union Pacific Museum in Council Bluffs and the Burlington scrapbooks at the Nebraska State Historical Society contain newspaper articles and pamphlets describing how this took place. Fifteen volumes of scrapbooks include articles from more than a dozen papers in eastern and southeastern Nebraska, including several in Lincoln and Omaha.

As the scrapbook clippings attest, the newspapers—like the railroads themselves—would benefit from growing communities, and

they painted enticing pictures of the land available to settlers. The *Brownville Democrat*, for instance, had this to say on August 18, 1871, about Nemaha County in southeast Nebraska:

Scarcely a county in the west will begin to compare with this for wealth and improvement in proportion to the time elapsed since its settlement. It lies along the west bank of the Missouri river, and has a broad width of bottom land of unsurpassable fertility. . . . It is noted as the most beautiful section of country in Nebraska, and is unequalled for its fertile land and dense population.

And Nebraska City's *Nebraska Chronicle*, in a sort of shorthand, sang the praises of the state as a whole on May 25, 1872:

All malarious diseases unknown; neither extremes of heat nor cold; soil of a rich, black loam and vegetable mould, from two to ten feet in depth, and can be penetrated with a space to a depth of 100 feet if necessary; and yet its natural tenacity renders unnecessary the walling of cellars, cisterns and wells. . . . All kind of vegetables, cereals, and root crops grown in the same latitude, east or west, can be grown in the greatest abundance.

No matter how abundant and productive the land in question, it needed settlers and settlements in order to reach its advertised potential and to make the railroad companies' investment pay off. A railroad's success depended on having a critical mass of people at various points along the route who needed transportation for themselves and their products. Settlers were quick to realize the network of railways benefited them as much as they benefited the railroads. In fact, one writer called the network "key to all commercial situations in Nebraska."²⁴

Another piece from the *Brownville Democrat* on April 19, 1872, shows that the people of Tecumseh recognized the benefit of trains running through their town:

We think there is no doubt but our citizens will give them all the aid in our power consistent with our own welfare, and will do so at our earliest opportunity. We need the Brownville, Ft. Kearney & Pacific railroad as badly as we did the A. & N. (Atchison and Nebraska) and are willing to pay for it a reasonable price.

Dr. J. N. Converse, a representative of the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad, called town meetings in Tecumseh, meetings also attended by Governor David Butler. They both spoke, imploring the citizens to pass a railroad bond and "to not let this golden opportunity pass."²⁵ Interest in the project was keen; the writer also noted that he had never before seen such a large turnout at a railroad meeting in Tecumseh.

A third example of support for the railroad was published in the *Nebraska City Chronicle* on September 14, 1872. The author called lyrically for support of the railroad bonds: "Now is Nebraska City's opportunity. Now is the day, and now the hour for her to move solidly, to strike out boldly, with a will, a vigor which should carry conviction and be in earnest that she means business. Procrastination is dangerous."²⁶

Newspaper accounts explained the issues associated with the railroad as voters in Beatrice were asked to support bonds for \$5,000 per mile to any or all of three railroads to be built from Nebraska City. In the city, the vote was 939 supporting the bonds and three against it.²⁷ Clearly, citizens followed the calls from the railroads and newspapers by supporting them with their votes.

Other towns had to ante up to get the railroads to bless their communities. Hall County offered the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad a whopping \$100,000 in an unsuccessful bid to make Grand Island instead of Kearney its point of junction with the Union Pacific.²⁸ Lincoln pledged \$5,000 to the Burlington and Missouri for the right-of-way through the western part of town. In exchange, the company promised to locate a depot on

grounds it bought from the state commission.²⁹ Lancaster County asked people to approve \$150,000 in bonds for Midland Pacific Railroad to be built to Lincoln.³⁰

Generally, newspapers gave the railroad projects their whole-hearted support. An editorial for the *Omaha Herald* on April 3, 1872, explained this support unapologetically:

This paper is often assailed by the thoughtless, and denounced by the envious and malicious, for the friendly support it gives to the Union Pacific and other railroads in the State. . . . Had this paper yielded to clamor and to the strong undercurrents of hostility to the Company at any time in the last five years, the Union Pacific would not now be fighting the battles, and standing by the interests of the State and of Omaha. . . . But this paper is not merely friendly to the Union Pacific. Its regard for the Burlington is not less. What it can do for the Midland, the Atchison & Nebraska, for the Omaha & Northwestern, and for all other railways, will be done, upon the principle that these enterprises bring enormous power to the work of building up the State in the agricultural interest—the real ground work and foundation of our prosperity and hopes of the future.

Although most of the newspaper clippings in the Burlington scrapbooks feature articles and letters from citizens supporting the railroad's construction, an occasional letter criticizes the railroads such as one headlined "From Palmyra" and signed "Farmer":

[I]f God had intended that our nice land should be spoiled by digging it to pieces, and leaving great unsightly piles of dirt scattered all about, He would either have made the grades and grassed it over when He made the world, or done what would have saved many drops of sweat and precious money, viz: created railroads, as He has the great rivers. . . . While we want railroads, we think that people who make

their money railroading should build them themselves, and not ask our aid, for it is out of our comprehension how railroads help us to pay our taxes. . . . And many of us would not much object if the railroads would run just off our land, or on our next neighbor's, so as to be handy to us; or if these railroad men would pay us our price for our land which they take, and then give us passes, like they do rich folks, we would not complain so much.³¹

An article from the *Brownville Democrat* on January 27, 1872, makes another point in criticism:

Brownville has voted enough already for railroad purposes. . . . More than this we cannot carry. . . . And further, there was no reason for the submission of the last \$18,000. . . . We are ready to fight a new railroad ring on this or any other attempt to swindle the people.

Newspapers did not entirely squelch the voices of those who criticized or questioned the railroads. But, as the publisher of the *Beatrice Express* wrote on June 24, 1871, the paper had weighed the costs and benefits of supporting the railroads and had come down on the side of benefits:

[R]ailroad corporations have the power, and exercise it without stint, to ruin towns and counties and to build others up. It requires large means to build railroads, and companies say if the benefit inures to the people whose towns and farms are enhanced in value, why not aid us in building them? Because the benefit does not fall equally, but the burden of tax does; because it is outside the province of a true representative government to tax its citizens for the benefit of private corporations, or to tax the many for the benefit of the few; and because railroad corporations take advantage of this privilege to exact exorbitant sums from their victims without a corresponding return . . . but under the present state of

affairs the argument is suicidal. Counties and precincts must choose between depopulation and stagnation without good railroads, and life and prosperity with railroads and bonds. We are placed in competition with other localities by the present system of bargaining for railroads, and we must either go in and win or suffer death.

Newspapers clearly understood the power that railroads held over the young communities. The newspapers' role in persuading citizens to accept the railroads' corporate position for construction of the lines was only one aspect of their support. Newspapers also joined with railroads to promote the sale of railroad land to newcomers, not only in their editorial content but also through advertising pamphlets they published.

SELLING THE LAND TO NEW SETTLERS

Newspapers provided multiple functions in their efforts to help attract new residents to their communities and ultimately new subscribers and advertisers for their papers. They ran stories extolling the virtues of the land and letters from correspondents about their experiences, and they printed pamphlets for the railroad land companies (sometimes underwriting the costs) for distribution nationally and internationally.

Perhaps the best way to understand the effort to attract enough new settlers to inhabit Nebraska's "12,000,000 acres—an area equal in extent to the States of Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Vermont"—was described in an article carried in the *Omaha Herald* June 6, 1872, explaining the Union Pacific Land Department and the "Benefits of Systematic Advertising." The article said that Mr. (O. F.) Davis, land commissioner for Union Pacific, "found by experience that enquiry for lands and actual sales have always been in exact proportion to the extent of his advertising, and he has been guided by this fact." The author continued,

He is now advertising in 2,539 papers, and magazines which are published throughout all

sections of the United States and Canada, in the English, German, French, Scandinavian, Welch, and Bohemian languages. One half of all the newspapers in the United States now contain these terse and truthful descriptions of Nebraska lands. The combined weekly circulation of these publications is 7,250,000 copies, and in three months the circulation of these advertisements of the Union Pacific Land Department equals ninety-four million copies.³²

The railroad's advertising generated inquiries from all parts of the world: "Missouri and Austria, Illinois and Ireland." In reply, the unidentified author said, "The plain truth is sent in every instance. About four bushels of mail matter are sent off every day, besides considerable by express."³³ Newspapers also directed their appeals to potential immigrants from England, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and other parts of western Europe as well as from the eastern part of the United States.³⁴

The state of Nebraska advertised, too, in papers around the world. And it dispatched emigrant agents, armed with books and circulars or handbills. The emigrant agent to Scandinavia, C. B. Nelson, reported that he "distributed in Swedish, Danish and Norwegian languages and whereof 13,000 copies of a book and 6,000 copies of three different large circulars or handbills." He placed advertisements in forty different papers in the three countries, recommending Nebraska "as unquestionably by far the best of the Western States as a home for people with the necessary means for going to farming."³⁵

The promotion brought results. For example, one article from the *Brownville Democrat* described the emigration:

A large number of emigrants left England recently on the steamer Nestoria, bound for Baltimore. They are exclusively English, and a majority of them are from the farming class—that is to say, farmers, their sons, and relatives; not agricultural laborers, but men having practical experience, and the means to apply it. Unable to obtain farms, or farms

large enough, in England, they determined to seek them in the New World. The section of the colony which embarked numbered 123 persons. . . . Nearly all the emigrants have made arrangements for the purchase of land, and their lands are as nearly as possible contiguous, and all are situated at Lincoln, the capitol of Nebraska, and are intersected by the Burlington & Missouri River railroad, whose agents were in the agricultural districts of England during the winter, talking up the advantages of the central western States.³⁶

Closer to home, newspapers recounted experiences of life on the prairie. Some articles in the Burlington scrapbooks indicate that newspapers outside Nebraska picked up and reprinted stories from the local Nebraska press. The line separating advertising from editorial content that today's journalists try not to cross did not exist in the 1870s. News accounts repeated sales points in pamphlets.

Occasionally, articles in Nebraska newspapers defended the state from naysayers. For example, the *Brownville Democrat* on July 12, 1872, reprinted an article that had appeared in the *Omaha Herald* criticizing an article that ran in the *London Standard* on June 24, 1872. The *Standard* questioned an immigration circular that described the advantages Nebraska offered in the way of good and cheap soil and a healthy climate. The anonymous defender of Nebraska countered:

Nebraska, in England, however, despite just such croakers and dirt-slingers as the *Standard* man, is well known as the youngest, largest and most attractive State in the American Union. It is celebrated in England, as well as in America, for the fertility and cheapness of its lands, and the purity of its atmosphere.

ATTRACTING SETTLERS WITH OPTIMISTIC FERVOR

In addition to their sheer enthusiasm for their state and its potential, newspapers may

1869. MAY 10TH 1869.

Great Event!
— RAIL ROAD FROM THE —
ATLANTIC TO THE PACIFIC
GRAND OPENING
OF THE

**UNION
PACIFIC
RAIL-ROAD**

Via Omaha and Platte Valley.

PASSENGER TRAINS LEAVE
OMAHA
ON THE ARRIVAL OF TRAINS FROM THE EAST.

THROUGH TO SAN FRANCISCO IN LESS THAN FOUR DAYS
Avoiding the Dangers of the Sea!

TRAVELERS FOR PLEASURE, HEALTH OR BUSINESS WILL FIND A TRIP OVER THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS HEALTHY & PLEASANT

LUXURIOUS CARS AND EATING HOUSES ON THE UNION PACIFIC R. R.
PULLMANS' PALACE SLEEPING COACHES run with all THROUGH PASSENGER TRAINS

GOLD, SILVER & OTHER MINERS
Now is the time to seek your Fortunes in Nebraska, Wyoming, Arizona, Washington, Dakota, Colorado, Utah, Oregon, Montana, N. Mexico, Idaho, Nevada or

CALIFORNIA!

CONNECTIONS MADE AT CHEYENNE FOR
DENVER, CENTRAL CITY & SANTA FE.
At Ogden & Corinne for **HELENA, VIRGINIA CITY, S. LAKE CITY** and Arizona.

THROUGH TICKETS for sale at all principal Railroad Offices. Be sure that they read **Via PLATTE VALLEY or OMAHA.**
COMPANY'S OFFICE 72 LA SALLE ST., OPPOSITE CITY HALL AND COURT HOUSE SQUARE, CHICAGO. CHARLES E. NICHOLS, TICKET AG'T.

A. H. COOKE,
Travelling Agent, N. & O. Pacific Station & Co., 100 W. Washington St., Boston

JOHN P. HART,
Gen. Travelling Agent, 72 La Salle St., Chicago.

J. BUDD,
Gen. Ticket Agent, Omaha, Neb.

W. SNYDER,
Gen. Superintendent, Omaha, Neb.

Horton & Leonard, Railroad Printers, 104 and 190 Randolph Street, Chicago.

FIG. 2. Advertising posters like this one helped promote Nebraska land to potential settlers in the eastern U.S. and abroad. Courtesy of Union Pacific Museum, #501964.

have been prompted to promote the railroads by a quid pro quo arrangement. For example, the Burlington Railroad in 1874 offered some newspaper editors a free trip on the line for themselves and one friend or family member in exchange for publishing an occasional article of "general interest" to the state. In fact, the practice became so popular that, the following year, the railroad sent editors a form letter repeating the offer.³⁷

Perhaps for both collective and personal reasons, the newspapers' passionate but hardly objective descriptions of land and life in Nebraska had an enthusiastic fervor. That tone was echoed in the railroad pamphlets intended for emigrant audiences. Messages in pamphlets distributed by the railroad land departments and newspaper articles were often virtually identical. The writers constructed compelling stories, showing an idealized Nebraska through testimonials and demonstrations. Recurring themes were the healthful climate, fertile soil, inexpensive land, abundant natural resources, and advantageous transportation systems. Typical of those written about prairie towns in Nebraska was an article from the *Seward County Reporter* of April 20, 1872, describing Seward's "Advantages, Resources, &c.: A General Description of its Soil, Etc.":

It is not the purpose of this article to set forth advantages that are not real, for the purpose of inducing immigration, but to represent everything as it will be seen by the immigrant when he shall arrive, so that he shall not return to his former home with reports that are damaging in character, but rather to represent our beautiful land, that those who visit it shall be lead [sic] to exclaim, "the truth has not half been told us."³⁸

The author described the climate as

one of the most congenial temperament and its dry, bracing atmosphere renders it beneficial to invalids who may be suffering from any disease whatever, and particularly does

it recommend itself to those who suffer from diseases of the throat, nose or lungs.³⁹

The writer added:

As a fruit growing country, we need only cite the fact that Nebraska fruits excelled all others, at the Pomological Fair at Richmond, Va., and we bore off the prize. . . . As a corn-growing State, we are not excelled by any State in the Union, and we are yet in our infancy in Agriculture. Wheat, oats, rye and barley yield extraordinarily large crops, with comparatively little labor expended in their cultivation. Of vegetables, it is almost unnecessary to speak. Everything of the vegetable kind that can be produced anywhere; can be grown successfully here.⁴⁰

The writer claimed that the soil was "of great depth, and of inexhaustible fertility." Articles like this and pamphlets similar to them typically also described the abundance of fuel in the form of trees and water. Pamphlets often included artists' renderings of the countryside.

The pamphlets headlined railroad land selling for one dollar to eight dollars per acre and offered a premium of 10 percent for improvements, discounts for cash, and short credit purchases. Some roads provided Land Exploring Tickets, presenting rebates for half fare to land buyers and their families and half freight on household goods.⁴¹ The 1870 "Guide to Union Pacific Railroad Lands" advertised 12 million acres of the "best farming and mineral lands in America" for sale by the railroad "in tracts to suit the purchasers and at low prices." The forty-four-page booklet, printed for the railroad by the *Omaha Herald*, described the available land in terms like "unsurpassed," "remarkable," and "widely celebrated for its picturesque scenery, rich productive soil, and mild and healthful climate."⁴² Adding a touch of the dramatic and romantic, the cover featured a quote from a John Greenleaf Whittier poem:

I hear the tread of pioneers,
Of nations yet to be.
The first low wash of waves, where soon
Shall roll a human sea.

Topics covered in the newspaper articles list the same advantages praised in the Union Pacific Railroad's "Land Guide, 1881," which was printed by the *Omaha Republican* and advertised "Cheap Homes. Farms. Nebraska." The pamphlets' subheadlines named the following topics:

Climate, Healthfulness, Increase of Rainfall, Water Resources, Nebraska Soil, Nebraska's (agricultural) Productions (fruit growing, live-stock raising, good dairy products), Markets (railroads connections), Fences Are Not Necessary, Building Materials, Manufacturing Interests, Schools and Educational Privileges, The General Government and The Tax Laws of Nebraska.

One section of the pamphlet published in 1870 by the State Board of Immigration "for gratuitous circulation" was titled "Nebraska: Its Resources, Prospects, and Advantages for Immigration, Agricultural Facilities, Educational and Religious Privileges, Lands, Homesteads, and Pre-emption Laws Together with Suggestions to Immigrants." Its description of the climate might surprise those who have experienced Nebraska weather:

The climate of Nebraska is the mildest and most delightful of the temperate zone, reaching to neither of the extremes of heat and cold, to which the more northern and southern States are subjected. Its winters are short and mild; snow falls rarely, and remains on the ground but a few days; cattle lie out without shelter during every month of the year; and not unfrequently farmers plough in December and sow their grain in February and early March.⁴³

Optimistic writers attempted to show Nebraska in the best light possible, even when

things were grim, trying to turn even bad news into good.

Kansas, south of Nebraska, probably lost more men by freezing than were lost here; it has been 32 degrees below zero in Chicago, and 25 below in New York City . . . and throughout the country the weather has been almost unprecedented for coldness. Considering these facts, Nebraska will not suffer a jot in comparison with other States.⁴⁴

Brochures like the "Guide to the Union Pacific Railroad Lands 1870," "B. M. Railroad Lands: Brief Description of the South Platte District," "Premiums for Land Improvements," and "B. & M. Railroad Land for Sale" suggested various ways that settlers might finance their land purchases. For example, in 1873 the Burlington and Missouri River's flyer announced "splendid inducements" to settlers who would buy land on ten-year deals. The inducements included a 20 percent reduction from the price if the settler paid cash in full or one-third down and the balance within two years with 10 percent interest. The benefits declined as the amount of cash paid up front declined, but anyone accepting any of the deals was also promised free railroad fares within Nebraska.⁴⁵ The Union Pacific's "Land Guide, 1881" included a table that figured the interest on loans ranging from one to ten years and stating that cash payments would result in a "liberal discount."⁴⁶

The brochures also listed specific harvest yields from various farmers, showing what immigrants might expect:

Brilliant harvest record is a splendid commentary upon the productive resources of the counties named. In Antelope county, Mr. Martin Freeman raised 1,042 1/2 bushels of wheat from forty acres, the whole grading No. 1; John Connell harvested 218 bushels of wheat from eight bushels of seeding.⁴⁷

The "Guide to the Union Pacific Railroad Lands, 1870" pamphlet focused on many of the

same themes reflected later in newspaper articles and brochures and included testimonial letters from Edward Creighton, president, First National Bank of Omaha, and William Myers, brevet brigadier general and chief quartermaster, and others concerning their experiences and the advantages of living in the region. Myers wrote in March 1869:

I am of the opinion that in consequence of the peculiar nutritious grasses, and the lightness of snow falls in all this extent of country, herds of sheep, cattle and horses can be grazed the year round with perfect safety from storms in the winter and with great profit.⁴⁸

Creighton, writing in April 1870, enthusiastically described his experience raising livestock during the previous eleven years. He concluded that "there is no prospective limit to the pasturage west of the Missouri River."⁴⁹

Cornelius Schaller, European commissioner for the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad, summarized the situation in a letter written from Liverpool on February 1, 1872:

We are forcing the great advantages possessed by our State over all the rest of the world slowly but surely upon the minds of the capitalists and intended emigrants of this country—by setting forth through the public press, and more particularly by pamphlets and other printed matter, the fertility of our soil, its readiness for immediate cultivation, the quality of its production, and its easy access to the markets of the world.⁵⁰

Moving relentlessly along their parallel and complementary tracks, both the railroads and the newspapers were instrumental in making the prairie into a state. The messages communicated in Nebraska newspaper articles and in railroads' promotional materials were remarkable for the unified, cohesive story they told as they lured immigrants to the region. The writers' enthusiastic tone generated optimism for the new state among the earliest settlers who

already inhabited the prairie towns and those who followed, drawn by the magnet of the iron horse and the promise of the new land.

NOTES

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26. *Nebraska City Chronicle*, September 14, 1872.
27. *Beatrice Express*, March 30, 1872.
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29. *Plattsmouth Herald*, May 10, 1870.
30. *Ashland Herald*, August 16, 1870.
31. *Nebraska Chronicle*, March 11, 1872.
32. *Omaha Herald*, June 6, 1872.
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