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SOME THOUGHTS ON THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE GREAT PLAINS QUARTERLY

CHARLES A. BRAITHWAITE, EDITOR

In the Winter of 1981, Frederick C. Luebke sent out a letter to accompany the first issue of the *Great Plains Quarterly*. In the letter, he stated that the purpose of the new journal was to publish new discoveries and understandings about the Great Plains, and to do so in a language that would appeal to the general reader. For these reasons, Luebke felt that “persons with a lively interest in the Great Plains region will find much to attract them to the *Quarterly*.” Twenty-four volumes later, and after publishing three-hundred and sixty-one original essays, it is safe to say that the creation of the *Great Plains Quarterly* was a good move for the Center for Great Plains Studies, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and the entire region.

To commemorate the 25th anniversary of the *Great Plains Quarterly*, I asked all of the former directors of the Center for Great Plains Studies, and all of the former editors of the *Quarterly*, to reflect upon their experiences and help me address the question of why there is a need for a publication like the *Quarterly*. In doing so, each of these persons, who all left an important imprint upon the *Quarterly*, have

helped me better understand the contributions of an interdisciplinary regional publication.

FREDERICK C. LUEBKE

Frederick C. Luebke is the Charles J. Mach Distinguished Professor of History, Emeritus, at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and served as Director of the Center for Great Plains Studies from 1983 until 1988. He was the founding editor of the *Great Plains Quarterly*, and served in that position until 1984. Although Fred’s vision for the *Quarterly* is very clearly articulated in the editor’s introduction to the first issue of the journal, his responses to my questions add some important background to the decision to create this publication. Fred notes that one impetus was “to transcend the boundaries of University of Nebraska-Lincoln. That is to say, we wished to enhance the reputation of the University of Nebraska as a center of regional interdisciplinary research.” The Center for Great Plains Studies first publications took the form of edited books that emerged from the early symposiums, i.e., *The Great Plains: Environment*

and Culture (1978), and *Ethnicity on the Great Plains* (1980). However, although the symposium and subsequent publications included prominent and distinguished participants, and all work was subjected to rigorous external and anonymous reviews, it was felt that relying on book publications had too many limitations given the mission of the Center. Therefore, the group of professors involved in the planning of the Center proposed to inaugurate the publication of a scholarly journal on a quarterly basis devoted to interdisciplinary research related to the Great Plains. This was easy to propose, but, as Fred describes, "the process required a lead-time of about two years to solicit manuscripts, establish review procedures, create a design, acquire subscriptions, contract printing arrangements, attract advertisers, engage editorial assistants and copy editors, develop book review procedures and the submission of reviews of worthy books, and appoint a panel of advisory editors." One of the reasons this process was so involved, and one of the reasons it still takes considerable time to publish the *Quarterly* today, is the high standards set by Fred and the Center for the quality of work. Fred notes that, "as founding editor, I insisted on recruiting the best possible work being done in the field of Great Plains studies. If this publication was to find its place as a major publication in regional studies, it had to attract the contributions and participation of distinguished scholars. Hence I recruited nationally and internationally to get a well-known board of advisory editors from whom, I hoped, I could also solicit article manuscripts and book reviews. I always aimed high; I was rarely turned down by anyone."

PAUL A. OLSON

Paul Olson is the Kate Foster Regents Professor of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and served as Director of the Center for Great Plains Studies from 1976 until 1979. In the early 1970s Paul's original grant proposal to the National Endowment for the

Humanities, which created the Center for Great Plains Studies, envisioned some sort of scholarly venue for Great Plains publications. As Paul describes it, "I proposed the *Quarterly* to the board because I did not see how we could be a credible scholarly agency without a scholarly outlet. I thought that the *Quarterly* and (publishing) the Lewis and Clark papers would give the Center credibility in the world of scholarship and teaching." For anyone that is familiar with Paul Olson's unique vision of teaching and scholarly activity, it is not surprising to hear that he feels there is a need for a publication like the *Great Plains Quarterly* because, "we are so confined in our disciplinary boxes that we deny the importance of region and we deny research that requires multi-disciplinary research skills. The *Quarterly* is a paradigm for what all of us must do in the next generation."

BRIAN BLOUET

Brian Blouet is the Hubby Professor of Geography and International Education at the College of William and Mary, and served as Director of the Center for Great Plains Studies from 1979 until 1983. Brian was Director at the time Fred Luebke first proposed the creation of a new journal. According to Brian, "there was a great deal of scholarship being undertaken relating to the Great Plains. The *Great Plains Quarterly* provided a sustained, and focused, place of publication for such work and it helped the academic community see that the Great Plains was an exciting region of research." In addition to having a central outlet for scholarship on the Plains, Brian saw the *Quarterly* as being an outlet for new scholars as well as established scholars. Brian notes, "it is impressive to look at the table of contents for the early *Great Plains Quarterly*'s and notice how many well known scholars published in the journal from the very beginning. This was good for *Great Plains Quarterly*, the Center for Great Plains Studies, the University of Nebraska, and the Great Plains region in general."

FRANCES W. KAYE

Frances W. Kaye is Professor of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and had the longest tenure of any editor of the *Great Plains Quarterly*: from 1984 until the Spring of 1994, and again from the Fall of 1995 until 1998. For Fran, the *Quarterly* makes the most important contribution in being a publication, which recognizes that the Great Plains does not end at the Canadian border. Although regional, the *Quarterly* is also international given our interest in topics related to the Canadian provinces of Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. As someone who influenced the content of the *Quarterly* for so many years, Fran has seen how writers are able to take important topics in history, literature, American Indian studies, etc., and place them in specific regional and geographic contexts. This is especially true of studies related to women on the Plains. The *Great Plains Quarterly* has published thirty essays, which focus on women, and therefore, as Fran notes, provides an outstanding teaching resource for this topic.

JOHN R. WUNDER

John R. Wunder is Professor of History at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and served as Director of the Center for Great Plains Studies from 1988 until 1997. According to John, who has held the longest tenure of any Director, "the Center is only as good as the *Great Plains Quarterly*. . . . because the journal is what makes the academic reputation of the Center." John says the rigorous standards applied in the selection and publishing of articles in the *Quarterly* is what helps to maintain the high regard in which scholars hold the Center for Great Plains Studies. He also points to the willingness of the *Quarterly* to "stretch the boundaries" in terms of new topics and approaches to scholarship on the Plains as another important reason the *Great Plains Quarterly* has been a pacesetter over the last twenty-four years.

GEORGE E. WOLF

George Wolf served as Editor of the *Great Plains Quarterly* from the Summer of 1994 until Summer 1995, and has been the Book Review Editor from 1995 to the present. George sees the *Quarterly* as being a publication that "sets a model for being truly interdisciplinary." By focusing on regionalism — in an interdisciplinary way — topics are made available to a large audience, and an audience that might not normally be exposed to a particular piece of scholarship. This is also true for the book reviews, since we publish the only journal on the Plains that takes such a comprehensive look at books related to the region. The *Quarterly* reviews books regardless of discipline in order to appeal to a broad general audience. Casting such a wide net for books, and publishing reviews for a general audience, means that our readers get the most comprehensive view of Great Plains scholarship.

CHARLENE PORSILD

Charlene Porsild is currently the Research Center Director at the Montana Historical Society, and served as editor of the *Great Plains Quarterly* from 1998 until 2000. Charlene views the contribution of the *Quarterly* in this way: "There is always a need for interdisciplinary journals because scholars often find themselves working on subjects or developing "threads" that are outside their own discipline — a literary critic who treads over into history, an historian faced with anthropological sources, a biologist learning the history of a particular site. Precisely because the work falls outside (or across) disciplinary lines, the articles can be hard to place and this is where *Great Plains Quarterly* is so critical. Scholars who work on regional topics really need to be exposed to *all* of the other work being conducted in that physical area whether it's biology, history, or literature in order to contextualize their subject."

JAMES STUBBENDIECK

James Stubbendieck is Professor of Grassland Ecology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and has served as the Director of the Center for Great Plains Studies since 1997. Jim sees the *Quarterly* being central to the mission of the Center because of the important role the journal plays in education. According to Jim, without the *Quarterly*, "there are people out there that might not normally see some of that information" about the Great Plains. Because the *Quarterly* is not as specialized as some other publications, we get information to a diverse and dispersed audience. Jim also sees how the *Quarterly* contributes to our scholarly dialogues by continuing to address the "so what?" question in the majority of our essays. That is, we always ask authors to explain why a general audience interested in the Great Plains would be interested in the particular topic under discussion.

THE FUTURE

One topic all of the above contributors to the *Quarterly* discussed was what the future should look like for the *Great Plains Quarterly*. The answers were remarkably consistent. All of them said that we need to keep in mind the goal of being an *interdisciplinary* journal, not

just *multidisciplinary*. That is, we should strive to publish essays that truly do address questions from multiple perspectives, and integrate multiple methods, in order to cut across disciplinary lines. We should work on encouraging more collaborative scholarship, and encourage authors to take chances in terms of provocative and even controversial topics. At the same time, there should be a balance of areas covered by the *Quarterly*, so it does not become too focused on one discipline over another. I particularly liked Paul Olson's recommendation in that he would like to see the *Great Plains Quarterly* "publish more comparative articles on semi-arid regions about the world looking at the Great Plains and other regions. The fate of these regions is a worldwide issue."

In looking back at the twenty-four volumes of the *Quarterly*, and the varied contributions of all of those involved in the journal, much more could be said and many more people could be, and should be, thanked for their contribution to the success of this publication. However, I invite our readers to take the time to browse the past tables of contents for themselves, which can be found on our website, to get the best view of the manner in which the *Great Plains Quarterly* has contributed to the scholarly life of the Great Plains.